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GUEST-EDITED BY: JELENA GUGA & ČEDOMIR MARKOV

ART, MEDIA, AND DEMOCRATIC IMAGINARIES IN THE 2024–2025 PROTESTS IN SERBIA

UMETNOST, MEDIJI I DEMOKRATSKE PREDSTAVE O PROTESTIMA U SRBIJI 2024–2025

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION:

Jelena Guga, Čedomir Markov

On November 1, 2024, at 11:52 in the morning, the concrete canopy of the newly reconstructed central railway station in Novi Sad collapsed, killing sixteen people. The disaster resulted from systemic institutional failures: corruption in public procurement, the absence of effective oversight, and the continued deferral of accountability. What followed became one of the most sustained waves of student-led civic protest in Serbia's post-socialist history. Within weeks, universities across the country entered the blockade. Every day, intersections were halted for sixteen minutes of collective silence commemorating the sixteen people who lost their lives in the collapse. Hundreds of thousands of citizens including students, professors, farmers, lawyers, medical workers, artists, and others gathered in cities across Serbia and within diaspora communities abroad. The movement's demands were concrete: transparency regarding reconstruction documentation, prosecution of those responsible, an end to intimidation of protesters, and increased public funding for higher education. At the same time, the protests evolved into a broader confrontation with the structural conditions that made such a tragedy possible and with a political system in which accountability had long been postponed.

This thematic issue of *Philosophy and Society* examines the 2024–2025 protests in Serbia through two analytical perspectives: art and media. Both played significant roles in the movement, shaping its forms of expression, visibility, and collective action. Serbia's captured media landscape, widely recognized by civil society as a mechanism of authoritarian consolidation, became a direct target of protest action. Artistic practices including collective exhibitions, street performances, sonic rituals, and choreographed marches emerged as integral components of the movement. The decision to frame this thematic issue through these two lenses reflects an editorial interest in the cultural and

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communicative dimensions of protest, which often remain secondary in political analysis focused primarily on institutional actors and formal demands. The articles in this issue examine artistic practices and media environments as forms of political action, showing how art, sound, architecture, movement, images, and mediated communication operate within protest as practices rather than metaphors.

These protests also pose methodological challenges for academic analysis. The movement is ongoing, and the essays were written while events were still unfolding. Any attempt to analyze a protest in real time necessarily operates within a shifting political and social landscape in which meanings, strategies, and forms of collective action continue to evolve. Even so, several characteristics of the movement have already become visible. Among them is a notable degree of formal inventiveness. Silence, collective movement, aesthetic gesture, humor, and collaborative forms of making emerged as central modes of political expression. For us as editors, this formal inventiveness raised a broader question about how protest movements produce their own aesthetic and communicative infrastructures and how these infrastructures shape political demands and the forms through which collective experience becomes visible and shared. In this context, the long-discussed avant-garde aspiration to dissolve the boundary between art and life appeared as a practical condition of political action.

Aesthetic Practices of Protest

Several contributions examine the protests as a field in which aesthetic practices played an active role in shaping collective political action. Rather than approaching art as a symbolic reflection of protest, the authors analyze how architecture, exhibition-making, bodily movement, and sound participated directly in the formation of protest cultures. Drawing on perspectives from architecture, art history, performance studies, and musicology, the articles explore how sensory experience, spatial organization, and performative practices articulated forms of collective resistance.

In her article "The Use of Arts and the Performativity of Architecture within the Culture of Resistance," Sonja Jankov examines the relationship between material environments and protest imaginaries through the case of the Novi Sad railway station. The station emerges as a physical site of protest and a symbolic reference point for protest activity across multiple locations. Drawing on theories of architectural performativity and new materialist approaches to agency, she traces how the station's distinctive zigzag roofline circulated through protest signs, scale models, marionettes, and even an appropriated Monopoly board staged at a Belgrade crossroads. Through these acts of artistic reinterpretation, the architectural form became a shared visual marker that mobilized memory, grief, and collective identity across geographically dispersed protests.

Collective artistic production also emerged as a mode of political organization during the protests. The *stUUdenti* exhibitions, organized by students

from all four faculties of the University of Arts in Belgrade, provide a particularly revealing example. In her article "Our Art Is Our Struggle! Our Works, Our Voice!" Milica Pekić interprets these exhibitions through Jacques Rancière's concept of the distribution of the sensible, as institutional interventions within the protest movement. The collaborative structure and aesthetic strategies of these exhibitions cultivated forms of care, solidarity, and mutual empowerment that reflected the broader democratic aspirations of the movement.

The protests also revealed the performative capacities of bodies in public space. In "Being Moved and Moving, Non-Metaphorically," Nevena Delić and Petra Parčetić examine the choreographic and dramaturgical dimensions of collective protest. Engaging with the work of Hannah Arendt, André Lepecki, Jonas Staal, and Judith Butler, they examine protest as a field in which artistic knowledge and choreographic strategies shape collective action. Practices such as durational marches, traffic blockades, and coordinated moments of silence are thus understood as embodied political acts through which collective freedom takes shape.

Sound formed another important dimension of protest practice. In "Soundtrack of Dissent: Sonic Practices in 2024/25 Serbian Protests," Nikola Vasilijević analyzes the evolving sonic landscape of the movement, from the sixteen-minute commemorative silences that became its defining collective gesture to choral performances, street concerts, viral protest songs, and techno gatherings. His analysis also addresses the alleged use of a military-grade acoustic weapon against protesters by state forces. He argues that sound functioned as a means of generating solidarity and as a terrain of political struggle.

The protests themselves demonstrate that artistic practices formed a central part of the movement's political vocabulary. Architecture, exhibitions, bodily choreography, and sound became ways of organizing protest gatherings, expressing solidarity, and sustaining the movement's public presence. These practices shaped protest beyond slogans and demands, structuring shared gestures, images, and atmospheres through which the movement was experienced and remembered.

Media Arenas of Protest

The media section highlights the struggle for control over messaging during student protests in Serbia's captured media environment. The main themes include the contested role of the media in shaping public perceptions of protest movements, the strategic use of labeling and narrative saturation in pro-government communication, and the emergence of alternative forms of digital expression used by protesters to challenge dominant narratives. Together, the contributions examine how a deeply politicized and polarized information environment shapes competition over the meaning, legitimacy, and stakes of the protests.

In "Mirrors and Messaging: The Role of Media in Serbia's Protests, 2023–2025," Emma Brandt asks how the media became a focal point in recent Serbian

protests, which initially seemed unrelated to the media and instead concerned environmental justice, a culture of violence, and corruption. Her ethnographic research combines interviews, observations, and content analysis of the country's recent major protest movements. She finds a widespread perception of the media as a political actor deeply entangled in the social and political transgressions that mobilized these movements. The article contextualizes the politics of information against ongoing public grievances in Serbia and explains why media blockades within the student protest movement were a near-inevitable outcome.

Ana Jovanović-Harrington's contribution combines qualitative and quantitative content analyses of news on pro-government and independent digital outlets to study control over the narrative in the student protests. Her study, "Digital Authoritarianism and the Politics of Noise: Co-optation and Narrative Flooding in Serbian Protests," focuses on the use of the labels "ćaci" and "blockaders"; the former refers to a misspelled graffiti ridiculed by student protesters and used to denote a corrupt and incompetent ruling elite and their followers, but later co-opted by the government to signal in-group loyalty; the latter is a pejorative term for student protesters used by the government. She finds a hyperproduction of content in pro-government outlets, peaking around key protest events, with increasingly hostile rhetoric equating protesters with "terrorists," "traitors," or "fascists." Independent outlets were more reactive in their attempts to debunk such narratives. The article illustrates how content oversaturation in a captured media environment can obscure the truth without resorting to outright censorship.

The final contribution explores one way in which student protesters are pushing back against the shortcomings of traditional Serbian media through the creation of memes on social media. In "New Face of Memes in Student-led Protests in Serbia and their Ethical Implications," Krisztina Rácz, Mirjana Nećak Gavrilović, and Andrej Ševo analyze different types of pictorial and video memes, both human- and AI-generated. They focus on creativity, affect, humor, and the ethics of memes to discuss how they are deployed to advance social critique and protest mobilization. The article balances the political and creative potential of memes against rising ethical and security concerns in a digital environment, particularly with the proliferation of AI.

Concluding Remarks

The contributions in this thematic issue examine the 2024–2025 protests in Serbia through the aesthetic and communicative practices that accompanied and shaped them. Studies of the artistic and performative dimensions of protest show how architecture, exhibitions, bodily movement, and sound became part of the movement's political repertoire. The Novi Sad railway station, whose collapsed canopy triggered the protests, reappeared across protest signs, models, and performances as a circulating architectural symbol. Student-organized exhibitions transformed artistic production into a collective space of political

articulation, while protest marches, assemblies, and coordinated silences foregrounded the choreographic and sonic dimensions of collective action.

The media-focused analyses shift attention to the environments within which these protests unfolded. They examine the circulation of memes and humor on digital platforms, the discursive strategies used by pro-government media to delegitimize student protesters, and the broader politics of media capture shaping public debate in Serbia in recent years. These analyses show how struggles over information, framing, and visibility became integral to the dynamics of protest.

Examining the protests through these two perspectives reveals how collective action unfolded simultaneously in public space and across contested media environments. In the streets, squares, and campuses where the movement took shape, architecture, bodies, and sound structured forms of collective presence and remembrance. At the same time, digital platforms and media institutions became arenas in which the meaning of the protests was framed, amplified, or distorted. The protests that followed the collapse of the Novi Sad station canopy became a confrontation with state institutions and a struggle over visibility, narrative, and the interpretation of events in the public sphere.

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Sonja Jankov

THE USE OF ARTS AND THE PERFORMATIVITY OF ARCHITECTURE WITHIN THE CULTURE OF RESISTANCE – THE CASE OF CENTRAL STATION IN NOVI SAD

ABSTRACT
The paper focuses on the interconnection between the artistic means used within protests and the architectural performativity of the central station in Novi Sad, following the collapse of its canopy on November 1, 2024, which killed 16 people. It first presents theoretical approaches to the concept of performativity in relation to the commemorative function of architecture, pointing out the limitations of previous research on the topic. It is further argued that the Novi Sad central station expanded these concepts by demonstrating that a single architectural object can be performative beyond its spatial boundaries, in multiple locations simultaneously. For this purpose, the paper analyzes the artistic means used within the massive protests that enabled this – signs, a scale model, large marionettes, and an appropriated *Monopoly* game in which the Novi Sad central station appears as a property. The paper concludes that during the 2024–2025 protests in Serbia and abroad, which had a strong commemorative dimension, the Novi Sad central station became performative in the sense that it acted as a catalyst for social transformation and public engagement. It mobilized the wider public to empathize with the victims, preserve the memory of them, and demand transparency and accountability in political discourse. As such, it became an actant that transformed people, changed their behaviors, and co-created collective identity, knowledge, and meaning, in relation to other non-human and human entities.

KEYWORDS
performativity, performative architecture, protests, art, participation, Novi Sad

Introduction

Continuous mass citizens' protests have taken place in transitioning Serbia on several occasions since the 1990s. The latest have been ongoing for over a year since November 1, 2024, when part of the newly reconstructed central station in Novi Sad collapsed and killed 16 people. As these protests did not take place only in Novi Sad, but also in many other cities in Serbia and abroad where the

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Serbian diaspora lives, several motifs connected participants and communicated their message. One of them is the motif of the station itself, that is, various visual representations of it.

In this paper, the site of the station after the tragedy and its representations at the protests are approached from the theoretical perspective of architectural performativity. Previous research on the performativity of architectural objects has shown that architecture is an active subject in the creation of knowledge, meaning, behaviors, and identities, all of which are also created or communicated within mass protests. Therefore, the main goal of this research is to map the performative aspects of the Novi Sad central station and present their role within the protests. The key thesis of the paper is that the performativity of the Novi Sad central station reached people in other cities and countries, encouraging them to join a united collective with a common cause, while artistic means facilitated this process. For this reason, the paper closely analyzes artistic methods that visually referenced the station, through which protest participants communicated their message, while both architecture and artistic means are recognized as non-human actants that operate together with humans.

The research was conducted using desk and empirical methods, combining systematic material observation, case study analysis, discursive analysis, and comparative analysis. The results are presented in this paper in three segments, followed by a conclusion. After a brief review of the station's history and its alternative uses for cultural events, the paper focuses on theoretical accounts of the terms *performative* and *performativity*, particularly on studies that recognize performativity as an event occurring between an object and a subject. Furthermore, it briefly presents existing research on performative commemorative architecture, arguing that architectural performativity has mostly been approached as something preconceived by the architect. The largest segment is a close analysis of objects and interventions that visually and semantically reference the Novi Sad central station, through which its performativity extended to other places and cities. In particular: 1) large signs referencing the station's zigzag roofline, 2) a scale model used within a public performance in Niš, 3) large marionettes used within protests in Belgrade, 4) an appropriated *Monopoly* game staged at a crossroads in Belgrade that presented the station within a broader context. These chosen examples are approached here in a rather descriptive way because they are not publicly visible and their documentation is difficult to access, leaving their content unknown to people who have not seen them at the protests or encountered images or videos documenting them.

Historical Context of the Studied Case

The central station in Novi Sad was completed in 1964 in the northern part of the city, along with a new modern boulevard and a new bridge over the Danube. The head of the project team was Imre Farkaš; Tomislav Jakšić was in charge of Wing A, Petar Keravica of Wing B, and Julka Majtan of Wing C. Draško Berisavljević was responsible for the structural design, and he constructed the

characteristic zigzag-shaped roof by which the station became recognizable and memorable. It spans the 22 × 55 m central hall, which contains no supporting columns, making the station a unique and extraordinary piece of architecture (Konstantinović, Jović, Bede, Momirov 2017). The building is seen daily by many people, as intercity and international bus stations are located next to it, and numerous city buses pass by.

Over the years, several citizens' associations have initiated cultural events within the station to draw public and institutional attention to its historical and architectural value. In 2014, on the station's 50th anniversary, the Vojvodina Railway Society and the Traveling Haiku Society organized an open poetry and art competition, using one of the waiting rooms as a gallery, while citizens organized a fundraising campaign to restore the station's unique clock, which had been defunct for a decade. In 2016, the station was the main venue for the 20th Salon of Architecture organized by the Association of Architects of Novi Sad. In 2018, architecture students organized the promotion of the international student-led journal *Tristotrojka*, followed by the guided tour *ArchiTour* and the roundtable discussion *ArchiLecture*. In 2019, a unique temporary Design Pavilion was installed in the station's central hall to host the *Swiss Style Now* exhibition and the presentation of Filip Jovanovski's performance *This Building Tells the Truth*, the winner of the 14th Prague Quadrennial of Performance, Design, and Space.

When Novi Sad was awarded the title of European Capital of Culture in 2022, the central station was emphasized as a landmark and entry point to the city. Its front glass façade was covered with the message: "Welcome to Novi Sad, European Capital of Culture." Around the same time, reconstruction work began, based on the project approved in October 2021. The final phase of reconstruction was completed on July 5, 2024. However, four months later, on November 1 at 11:52 CET, the suspended concrete canopy, along with the steel tension elements that anchored the roof to the canopy, collapsed onto the pavement in front of the main entrance. It killed 14 people on the spot and injured many more, two of whom later died from their injuries.

The event sparked continuous peaceful mass gatherings and protests across the country, demanding open access to documents about the reconstruction, investigations into corruption, and the prosecution of those accountable. The most popular form was *Zastani, Srbijo* (Stop, Serbia), during which citizens blocked intersections at 11:52 CET for 16 minutes of silence to commemorate the victims.[1] Such gatherings have taken place in over 500 cities, towns, and villages in Serbia (AJS 2025), as well as abroad, where diasporas and/or citizens

1 Initially 15 minutes for 15 victims: Sara Firić (b. 2018), Valentina Firić (b. 2014), Đorđe Firić (b. 1971), Milica Adamović (b. 2008), Nemanja Komar (b. 2007), Anđela Ruman (b. 2004), Miloš Milosavljević (b. 2003), Stefan Hrka (b. 1997), Sanja Ćirić Arbutina (b. 1989), Goranka Raca (b. 1966), Vukašin Raković (b. 1955), Mileva Karanović (b. 1948), Đuro Švonja (b. 1947), Vasko Sazdovski (b. 1979), Anja Radonjić (b. 2000). On March 21, 2025, Vukašin Crnčević passed away from injuries as the 16th victim.

of other countries joined the action. The *Zastani, Srbijo* gatherings occurred almost daily at certain intersections (e.g., in the center of Pančevo, or near IT companies and the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade), while others took place less frequently. There are recorded cases in which no pedestrians were present to block an intersection, yet drivers spontaneously stopped for 16 minutes.

Additionally, larger protests and marches took place in many cities, as investigations had not begun, authorities ignored brutality against peaceful protesters, and public media services failed to report objectively. These events all included commemorative minutes of silence for the victims.[2] The protests focused not only on the canopy collapse but also on the broader systemic failures of state institutions and corruption, which citizens recognized as issues that must be confronted collectively and in solidarity. The protests therefore addressed not only government representatives but also aimed at mobilizing people who were either unaware of these problems or choosing to ignore them. It is estimated that there have been over 21,600 anti-corruption citizens' gatherings in Serbia since the day of the tragedy.

The protests were connected not only to the causes and aftermath of the collapsed canopy but also to the station itself, which served as a starting or ending point for many of them. Moreover, images of the station or its characteristic zigzag roof appeared at numerous protests both in Novi Sad and elsewhere, serving as a mode of commemoration, support, connection, and the formation of a unified collective identity, as well as a demand for accountability and an end to corruption in the country. For this reason, this paper argues that through the 2024–2025 protests, the central station in Novi Sad became an architectural object that shifted the theoretical boundaries of *performative architecture*.

Theoretical Framework – Performativity of Architecture

When we speak about the term *performative*, it can be understood as an adjective that describes something transformative because it has performance-like characteristics, such as adaptive architecture. However, it can also refer to a word, a sentence, a sign, an artwork, an architectural object, or any other object that *does something*. John L. Austin introduced a new type of statement into the philosophy of language, which he called *performative utterances*, or *performatives* (Austin 1962: 5). They differ from *statements* and *constatives* that merely describe something because their utterance implies the execution of a certain action, that is, an act. Thus, when spoken by an accredited person in

2 Some of them are: *Korupcija ubija* (*Corruption Kills*), Ćutanja *je dosta, 1. 2. na 3 mosta* (Enough of silence, on February 2, on three bridges), *Krvave su im ruke* (Their hands are covered in blood), *Pištaljka je glasnija od TV prenosa* (The whistle is louder than the TV broadcast), *Nema Nove, za staru ste nam još dužni* (There is no New Year, you still owe us for the old one), *Sve mora stati* (Everything must stop), *Probudi se, Srbijo* (Wake up, Serbia), *9 meseci – 0 odgovornih* (9 months – 0 responsible), *Naše pravo da znamo sve* (Our right to know everything).

a specific discourse, the sentence "I pronounce you husband and wife" *does something* – it transforms the status of a couple.

Similarly, objects have a performative aspect because they transform people. Studies of product packaging and marketing have shown that design is actively involved in the production of contents and consumption and, consequently, in the creation of consumers. Packages "can be understood as *actants*, entities that modify the behavior of other entities, therefore making things happen"; they "have the capacity to make others act and contribute to shaping consumer practices, identities, roles, abilities, and dispositions" (Petersson McIntyre 2018: 339-340). Cigarettes, for example – their brand design and marketing – encourage us to smoke and turn us into smokers. Skis turn us into skiers, musical instruments into musicians, and other objects transform us through their instrumentality. Whether as *performative utterances* or as objects, performatives are involved in the transformation of subjects; that is, they are bound to the identities and behaviors of individuals and groups.

Following this, would it be possible to say that architecture also has the capacity to *make us do* certain things and transform us in some ways? Can we speak of architecture as something that *does* things, initiates actions, or changes or unites identities? How does architecture produce users? What modes of activity, behavior, and practice does it enact? In short, how is it *performative*?

According to Laura Weigert, the term *performativity* "refers to a process of interpretation or meaning making that takes place at each exchange between an audience and an event, object, or activity" (Weigert 2012: 63). As such the object may be an artwork, Darshana Jayemanne points out that, since antiquity, there have been "works which seek to incorporate the viewer and guide their gaze through conspicuous techniques of framing – that is, navigable and performative texts" (Jayemanne 2017: 9). For Tawny Andersen, "performativity resides somewhere in the tensions among language, embodiment and action"; it "connotes *relationality*," is processual, and is "implicated in processes of *transposition*, *transgression* and *transformation*" (Andersen 2016: 12). All of these authors indicate that *performativity* is a form of activity that takes place when a person experiences objects or environments. In that process, both objects and subjects become transformed in comparison to what they were before the encounter, since performativity is "about the constitution of subjects" (Cabantous et al 2016: 209).

Performativity, therefore, can occur in encounters between visitors and architectural objects. Architecture is performative because it is "open and mobile, co-produced by the gaze of the observer" (Pavis 2016: 236). It is not a fixed object or merely a container of functions and meanings but is co-created by architects and users – "performative architecture focuses on use rather than form, on dwellers *taken as* participants in space" (Widrich 2016: 268). As a site or location, architecture "is always *being produced*, and so is subject to instability, ephemerality, and temporality" (Kaye 2000: 51). According to David Leatherbarrow, performative architecture is not simply an outcome of technology, because technology only enhances functionality. Instead, "[t]he

significance that buildings possess is granted to them by you and me" (Leatherbarrow 2005: 8), and what a building *is* is defined by what it *does* (Leatherbarrow 2005: 7). Marinus de Ruiter points out how new social media produce the effect of "instagrammification" on murals on buildings: "all visitors seem to want to grab a piece of the art by taking a picture" (de Ruiter 2015: 46), which demonstrates how new media respond to the performativity of architecture.

Apart from this, what makes architecture performative is that it can "take the role of an active, effective, and efficient subject in the processes of the production and creation of knowledge" (Žugić 2017: 9). Any architectural space can become a subject that co-creates new meanings rather than merely presenting them. Due to its performative features, architecture can also co-initiate activities, becoming an *actant* in relation to other entities that act. As a non-human entity, it can become part of a network of humans and non-humans studied by Bruno Latour within the "sociology of associations," or simply "associology," as he called it (Latour 2005: 9), along with other non-human entities such as animals, natural phenomena, tools and technical artifacts, material structures, transportation devices, texts, and economic goods (Sayes 2014: 136).

As most theoretical accounts focus on the performativity of architecture as an activity that takes place between architects and users, it has largely been researched through cases in which performativity was anticipated by architects. Although it is an ancient method found in temples such as the Parthenon (447–432 BC), architects of twenty-first-century memorial museums also use it to make visitors move through buildings and sites in certain ways, perceive the information displayed within or by them, and become transformed in the process.

In the new wing of the Jewish Museum in Berlin (2001), architect Daniel Libeskind used a 150 m long void as an "embodiment of absence" (Libeskind 2001: 28) that "houses" the memory of people who are no longer "at home." The void embodies the "sense of *unheimlichkeit,* or uncanniness, in a medium like architecture" (Young 2001: 179). Symbolizing the negative space created by the Holocaust, the void as an architectural element turns visitors into active witnesses, as it

> requires the user to participate, transforming a passive observer into an "active witness" of the narrative. Through the realization of the negation of explicit meaning, the architectural text functions as a performative – something that "does something" and cannot be "read" passively. Architecture thus evokes an absent presence, confronts "unrepresentable" history, and questions previously adopted expectations of museum space (Žugić 2017: 96).

By confronting visitors with a traumatic past and turning them into "active witnesses," the museum inevitably changes them because "the duty of the museum [is] to be not only a place of memory and history but also empathy that will lead to moral transformation" (Sorado 2018: 172). This is achieved precisely through architecture's performative aspect, activated by the presence and participation of visitors. Another example of performative commemorative

architecture is the National September 11 Memorial Museum (2014), built around the archaeological excavation of the remains after the event. It is "a performative space, in which exhibits are not only meant to tell the story of 9/11 but to spur action and transformation in visitors" (Sorado 2018: 171). The remains of the destroyed buildings and memorials to the victims serve as testimonies that turn memorial museums into *performative museums* (Williams 2007: 97).

In both cases, visitors learn about the victims, and empathy changes them before they leave the museums and continue with their lives. For that reason, both the Jewish Museum and the National September 11 Memorial Museum are examples of architecture whose performativity is directly related to memory and collective identity. Neil Leach even argues that the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York "has had a radical impact on the American psyche, and that it is against the backdrop of the now absent twin towers that a new sense of American national identity seems to have been forged" (Leach 2005: 171). Such events shape the collective gaze, much as "color" frames one's view of the world. To be "'black' is to view the world with a 'black' gaze" (ibid.: 188), while to be American after 9/11 is to see the world from the perspective of a nation whose way of life is under attack.

Performativity of architecture, however, may also contribute to commemoration and collective identity in less formal ways. It is not necessarily bound to visiting a specific commemorative institution, nor does it characterize only those buildings whose architects intentionally designed them with performative effects in mind. Performativity is a latent or explicit feature of architecture. An object may not have a performative effect for decades but may, due to various circumstances, later become anchored in collective identity. This occurs because performativity "is defined in relation to its liminality, i.e., [its] ability to produce activities whose spatial, temporal, and symbolic *liminality* questions and provokes existing social norms" and "opens the possibility of taking emancipatory action" (Stojnić 2015: 104). This is precisely what happened with the central station in Novi Sad on November 1, 2024, after which, for many people, to live in Serbia is to live without knowing when another tragedy caused by corruption will occur. The station itself became a site of memory, mourning, and connection, uniting people to a collective identity. It also became performative beyond its physical location through the use of artistic means at mass commemorative and protest gatherings.

Images of the Novi Sad Central Station within the 2024–2025 Protests in Serbia

The central station in Novi Sad has been closed since the event on November 1, 2024. The collapsed concrete has been cleared, but no other interventions have been made, so the damage remains open and visible to anyone who passes by. Barriers prevent entry, but many people have left flowers, candles, teddy bears, and other signs of compassion for the victims beside them. On many occasions, citizens gathered in front of the station in the hundreds of thousands,

while students from Belgrade, Jagodina, Subotica, and Novi Pazar walked for several days to reach it and place flowers for the victims.

Since the event concerned not only the citizens of Novi Sad or users of railway services, the collapse of the reconstructed station's canopy was immediately recognized as a common concern and a result of broader state politics. The first artistic response was Boris Staiewsky's drawing, which went viral on social media just one day after the tragedy. It depicts the front of the station, but the collapsed concrete canopy is shaped like the country, with the inscription *Serbia* over it. The message was clear and has been repeated many times since: what collapsed on November 1 was not only the canopy but the entire state. The image of the collapsed station thus became an image of the opaque reconstruction process that killed 16 people, and it quickly became a metaphor for the citizens' protests.

In addition to becoming part of artistic interventions in the public space of social networks, the central station also became part of interventions in the urban public space. On November 24, artist Andrej Josifovski Pijanista painted a 48 × 4.8 m black rectangle on Republic Square, the main city square in Belgrade. The dimensions matched those of the collapsed canopy, and the intervention was titled *The Republic's Black Mourning Ribbon*. Referring to the black mourning ribbon, which is usually bent to visually represent a garment torn in sorrow, the straight black rectangle represented not only the collapsed canopy but also the lack of genuine remorse among those most accountable. The work was washed off the same day by municipal services (Zrnić 2024).

The performative aspect of the station was most strongly activated through objects that represented it at mass public protests. On December 12, 2024, students of the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad performed a number of artistic actions during a commemorative walk through the city center. One action involved 16 students, each holding a large red rectangle at a specific angle, so that, standing side-by-side, their installation formed a zigzag shape reminiscent of the railway station's roofline. At the time, students had already begun sit-ins and blockades, and more than 60 faculties across Serbia had suspended classes and exams due to the students' decision that their education was less important than the lives of the victims and their own safety, which they saw as endangered by a corrupt state and dysfunctional institutions.

In relation to the student sit-ins, as well as the continued expression of commemoration, many mass protest marches and gatherings took place, and a large number of citizens joined them. Within these events, the Novi Sad central station was represented on many large signs carried by participants. One of them was a 1.5 × 7 m sign reading *Svi smo ispod nadstrešnice* (We are all under the canopy). Above the inscription, the sign featured the characteristic zigzag line of the station's roof so that the inscription appeared in place of the collapsed canopy. As the material was tarpaulin, the sign could not stand on its own, making the presence of the people carrying it an integral part of the work, as they were literally standing under the canopy – that is, under its artistic representation. The sign appeared at the front of several protests, while

Figure 1: Two large signs *Svi smo ispod nadstrešnice* (We are all under the canopy) during the gathering on December 22, 2024 at Slavija in Belgrade. Courtesy of Jugopress.

at the student protest in Belgrade on December 22, 2024, it was held above the participants' heads like the canopy itself. Drone images also show another, even larger sign with the zigzag roofline, accompanied by beams of light directed toward the sky during the commemorative minutes of silence for the victims (Figure 1).

A day before the large protest on Vidovdan (June 28), a holiday strongly intertwined with Serbian national identity, the sign was held by students on top of a building with a large billboard located at the highly visible intersection of two major boulevards near several large faculties. The sign was visible to anyone passing through the intersection, while photographs of it circulated on social networks to encourage people to join the protest. It was carried again during the protest on August 1, 2025, which emphasized that nine months had passed since the event and that no one had taken responsibility. The protest took place in front of the new central station in Belgrade, which had been found to have structural irregularities and posed potential safety risks that could result in an even greater tragedy than the one in Novi Sad. The protest began with 16 minutes of silence, during which participants held black banners to commemorate the victims in Novi Sad, along with the large sign featuring the zigzag roofline (Figure 2). Citizens could also contribute by leaving a torn piece of black cloth as a symbol of grief and mourning.

The zigzag line of the station's rooftop was included on several other occasions. As part of the support for educational workers on February 5, 2025, in front of the Ministry of Education in Belgrade, pupils of the 10th Belgrade Gymnasium carried a large sign reading *Pozivamo na hrabrost* (We call for courage), in which the rooftop line was intertwined with the name of their school. They also carried the sign during walks in support of Dijana Hrka, the mother

Figure 2: Gathering in front of the Central Station in Belgrade on August 1, 2025. Courtesy of photographer Gavrilo Andrić. Source: https://protesti.pics/devet-meseci

of the victim Stefan Hrka, while she was on a hunger strike demanding justice during the first half of November 2025. The sign *Svi smo ispod nadstrešnice* (We are all under the canopy) was also carried during protests in Novi Sad, most notably by secondary school pupils during their protest walk on September 1, 2025. Their route started at the central station and continued toward the campus. Pupils also carried a large sign reading *Srednjoškolci pamte* (Secondary school pupils remember) which, like the students' sign, featured the zigzag roofline above the inscription.

The zigzag roofline or the image of the station's front also appeared in several calls for the one-year commemorative gathering in Novi Sad, on November 1, 2025. A sign reading *Svi u Novi Sad 1. 11* (Everyone to Novi Sad 1. 11), above which a zigzag line transformed into a heartbeat line, was hung on the pedestrian overpass along the exit route to Novi Sad, but it was taken down by municipal services the following day. Students who walked to Novi Sad from several cities in Serbia for the commemorative gathering carried a sign reading *Koracima sećanja "Da se ne zaboravi – zato idemo"* (Steps of memory "We go so that no one forgets"), which included an image of the station's front. On that day, members of the Serbian diaspora gathered for commemoration in over 60 cities in the USA, Canada, Australia, the UK, Germany, Italy, Spain, France, Greece, Portugal, Belgium, the Netherlands, Ireland, Austria, the Czech Republic, Finland, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Switzerland, New Zealand, and Qatar (UM 2025).

Following the commemorative gathering on the anniversary of the tragedy, Dijana Hrka began her hunger strike, during which the zigzag roofline was transformed on signs into the word MAMA (without horizontal lines), meaning "mom." Signs like these are particularly effective because they communicate that

anyone could have been under the canopy at 11:52 CET, on November 1, that any mother could have lost her child as Dijana Hrka did, and that the collapse is not the only possible dangerous scenario that may result from non-transparent public works carried out with questionable expertise. These signs attracted many citizens to join the public walks and stand behind the unified identity that formed around a critical approach to the causes that led to the tragedy in Novi Sad.

The signs would likely have been effective even without the visual references to the central station, but the image made them more relatable, especially when carried collectively by other people. It also made the station visible in different parts of Novi Sad, as well as in other cities. Among the many other signs carried by participants, those that included the zigzag roofline of the station were particularly relational and immediately evoked empathy for the victims. The act of carrying such a sign also emphasized that anyone could have been under that canopy at the time. Additionally, as the broken zigzag roofline appeared in many online announcements of gatherings in other cities in Serbia and abroad throughout the year, the collapsed station canopy mobilized people nationwide to gather into a unified collective identity. On March 15, 2025, citizens of Chicago, in support of Serbian students, held white V-shaped signs that together formed the zigzag roofline (PSČ 2025), which further demonstrates how the performativity of architecture mobilized people who are far away from the actual architectural object.

Apart from being reproduced in two-dimensional signs, the station was also referenced through a scale model and marionettes, both of which were part of public protests. On January 31, 2025, students of the University of Niš (a city in southern Serbia) performed an action titled *Uzrok zašto je nadstrešnica pala* (The Reason Why the Canopy Fell) using a scale model of the station's façade that they created for the occasion (JuGmedia 2025).[3] The action lasted only a few minutes. Several students held the model, and at a certain moment the canopy fell, releasing banknotes of 50, 100, and 500 euros. The presence of euros, which are not Serbia's national currency, directly referred to the questionable use of EU funds during the reconstruction. The action not only connected corruption to the tragedy but also made visible the implication of human agency in the process that led to it. By manually manipulating the model's elements, the students highlighted the fact that the reconstruction did not happen by itself and that someone must be held accountable for the tragedy that followed.

The zigzag roofline of the Novi Sad central station was also replicated in one of the large marionettes created by students of the Faculty of Applied Arts in Belgrade and first animated at the largest protest in the region's recent history, which took place on March 15, 2025, in Belgrade (Figure 3). Students made four marionettes, approximately four meters high, each representing one of the four demands for which students from more than 60 faculties across Serbia

3 The model used in the performance was later included in the exhibition *100 dana – prava strana* (100 Days – The Right Side) at the University of Niš, on April 4, 2025.

stopped attending classes and taking exams. The first marionette, connected to the first demand to publish the complete reconstruction documentation of the Novi Sad central station, depicted a man in a suit holding the zigzag roof of the station in both outstretched hands, with money in his mouth. A marionette of three figures wearing black hoods represented the second demand to arrest all those responsible for attacks on students. The third, referring to the demand for the release of detained activists, took the form of a student protest guard wearing a vest and holding a large whistle in his mouth. The fourth marionette had a head shaped like a house and the face of an elderly professor; its clothes were covered in photographs of previous protests in front of faculties, referring to the fourth demand for an increased education budget.

Figure 3: One of four marionettes made by students to represent their demands during the gathering on March 15, 2025, in Belgrade. Photo by BETA/Uroš Matović. Courtesy of BETA.

Additionally, students of the Faculty of Fine Arts and the Faculty of Political Sciences made a replica of the Trojan horse and brought it in front of the Constitutional Court. It bore two inscriptions on its sides: a quote from the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia – "Paragraph 2. No state body, political organization, group, or individual can usurp sovereignty from citizens, nor establish power beyond the freely expressed will of citizens"[4] – and the statement "Citizens are the bearers of sovereignty."[5] By bringing large marionettes

4 In original: Ustav Republike Srbije, Stav 2. Nijedan državni organ, politička organizacija, grupa ili pojedinac ne može prisvojiti suverenost od građana, niti uspostaviti vlast mimo slobodno izražene volje građana.

5 The replicas of the Trojan horse and marionettes were later exhibited at *Međuprostor – blokadna izložba svih umetničkih fakulteta u Srbiji* (Interspace – blockade exhibition of all art faculties in Serbia), Cvijeta Zuzorić Art Pavilion, Belgrade, April 15-May 15, 2025.

among the people during protests, the students personified demands that were relevant to the entire population. In this context, the zigzag roofline of the station metaphorically suggests that the reconstruction process was operated like a marionette by the same actors who control public funds. Dividing the roof between both hands of the marionette suggests that it was broken by the pursuit of money positioned between the two parts and symbolically consumed by the figure.

In all four cases – the signs, the performative commemorative action, the model, and the marionettes – the presence of human bodies carrying the objects that depict the station, or physically forming the shape of its roofline, emphasizes the performative aspect of the architectural object that transformed people after its collapse. When seeing someone carry these objects, others can identify with them and begin to see the world through the same lens. By joining the protest walks, participants symbolically carry the sign that states that "we are all under the canopy," meaning that everyone is united within a shared collective identity.

The fourth way in which the Novi Sad central station became performative beyond its physical boundaries was through a large-scale appropriated *Monopoly* board painted during the protest *Pređi na našu stranu* (Come to our side) on July 31, 2025, on Zoran Đinđić Boulevard [6] (Figure 4), and at the intersection near the Government of the Republic of Serbia, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the General Staff building.[7] The board was large enough for people to walk across; it was relational and enabled passersby to understand its meaning through observation or participation. It included all the elements of the original game, including the original color groups: brown (for the least expensive properties), followed by light blue, pink, orange, red, yellow, green, and dark blue (for the most expensive properties). In the original game, these spaces represent avenues on which a player can build houses, upgrade them to hotels, and increase rent at the expense of other players, who may eventually go bankrupt.

The game is based on the progression of property ownership, property trading, the expansion of private property, and, consequently, the accumulation of private income. The students used it to present the state's relationship to publicly owned properties and services.[8] For this purpose, they replaced the

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6 Besides the fact that this is one of the largest boulevards, it is also named after the former prime minister of Serbia who was assassinated in 2003, after only two years at this position. Đinđić was known for progressive, pro-democratic and EU-oriented ideas, and for advocating cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY).

7 This was one of many protests against the Serbian Government's decision on December 2, 2024, to revoke the status of the cultural monument to the General Staff building, so that a luxury hotel and residential complex can be built in its place.

8 A similar appropriation of the *Monopoly* game was carried as a sign by a participant in the protest on February 18, 2025, in front of the Ministry of Culture. The sign also featured the Novi Sad central station, but the other properties were more closely

Figure 4: Appropriated *Monopoly* game painted on Zoran Đinđić Boulevard in Belgrade during the protest *Pređi na našu stranu* (Come to our side) on July 31, 2025. Courtesy of photographer Filip Krainčanić.

original properties in the game with public institutions and assets in Serbia, following the same color scheme and spatial distribution on the board (Figure 5). The lowest-valued properties on their board were municipally funded pharmacies, whose employees had not received their last five salaries, and the university, where teaching staff had been receiving only 13% of their salaries for months due to a government decree issued during the blockades. The decree reduced the number of hours allocated to scientific research from 20 to 5, effectively requiring professors to teach 35 hours per week – an impossible workload while faculties remained under blockade.

Slightly more expensive are the urban public areas Pioneer Park, the Ušće district, and Fruška gora National Park, whose spatial plan has been changed to enable a private investor to build new profitable developments. These properties are followed by public telecommunications and media enterprises, as well as the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM), which is responsible for monitoring whether electronic media report truthfully, completely, and in the public interest, as well as for ensuring equal representation of political actors during election campaigns. REM appoints the management board of public media services, thus directly affecting editorial policy. Students invested significant effort in electing members of REM, since this was required by law and was overdue.

related to culture. They included starlets, the extremely high cost for the new logo for the national post office, and the extremely high cost of urban New Year's Eve decorations, while the most expensive places represented fake diplomas. The board had four jails, while the Community Chests spaces depicted the canopy of the Novi Sad central station, reduced pensions, and stolen elections.

Figure 5: Properties in the standard Monopoly game vs. in the Serbian students' installation

In the standard Monopoly game	In the Serbian students' installation	Color code	Value in Monopoly currency
Mediterranean Avenue	Belgrade Pharmacy chain	brown	60
Baltic Avenue	University	brown	60
Oriental Avenue	Pioneer Park (Belgrade)	light blue	100
Vermont Avenue	Ušće district (Belgrade)	light blue	100
Connecticut Avenue	Fruška gora National Park	light blue	100
St. Charles Place	Telekom	pink	140
States Avenue	The media	pink	150
Virginia Avenue	Regulatory Body for Electronic Media	pink	150
St. James Place	Linglong	orange	180
Tennessee Avenue	Ironworks	orange	180
New York Avenue	PKB (Agro-Industrial Corporation Belgrade)	orange	200
Kentucky Avenue	River Jadar	red	220
Indiana Avenue	Bor Majdanpek (mines)	red	220
Illinois Avenue	Zaječar	red	240
Atlantic Avenue	Belgrade Waterfront	yellow	260
Ventnor Avenue	Hotel Yugoslavia	yellow	260
Marvin Gardens	General Staff building	yellow	280
Pacific Avenue	Kablar viewpoint	green	300
North Carolina Avenue	Pančićev vrh	green	300
Pennsylvania Avenue	Zlatibor	green	320
Park Place	Sava embankment	dark blue	350
Boardwalk	Makiš water source	dark blue	400

More valuable properties include the ironworks in Smederevo and the Agro-Industrial Corporation Belgrade, both sold after bankruptcy to international companies for minimal sums, as well as Linglong in Zrenjanin, the first European factory of the Chinese tire industry. These are followed by the River Jadar, which has become the focus of numerous initiatives to protect it from pollution that would result from the Rio Tinto project, and the mines in Bor and Majdanpek, which went bankrupt and were subsequently sold. Zaječar is included as the city where local elections took place on June 8, 2025, and students invested considerable effort through public events and gatherings to mobilize passive voters to exercise their right to vote in order to change the political climate. The board also includes three real estate investments in Belgrade – the Belgrade Waterfront project, Hotel Yugoslavia, which

was demolished in January 2025, and the General Staff building, which may be demolished in the near future since its status as a cultural monument was revoked in December 2024. Between these two spaces is an image of the Sava Bridge, a Belgrade landmark whose demolition was completed the day before the protest took place.

The most valuable properties are public goods that have already been threatened by excessive and inappropriate development: Mount Kablar; the Serbian section of the Balkan Mountains, defended by local residents against the construction of small hydropower plants; Zlatibor Mountain, endangered by real estate overdevelopment; and the Sava embankment, which has been defended by local citizens against excessive and semi-legal privatization. The most valuable of all is the water source that supplies the entire city of Belgrade whose sanitary protection zone has been narrowed. This zone implies a ban on construction and activities that could threaten the water source, while its reduction resulted from a series of decisions "characterized by non-transparency, contradictions, and public distrust in the work of institutions" (Popović 2023). As a result, the "privatization of sources, seizure of water source zones, rivers, embankments, streams and other water assets has been a trend for several decades, but also something against which many individuals and environmental initiatives and organizations are raising their voices" (Popović 2023).

The Novi Sad central station appears among the railroad and utility properties (Figure 6), which in the original game represent industries exploited to generate money before investing in real estate. Other such properties include the new central station in Belgrade, built since 1977, whose most recent development required structural repairs, raising questions about the safety and sustainability of the entire complex. They also include the Public Enterprise Electric Power Industry of Serbia, which has struggled for years and recently eliminated the option of direct bill payment without a bank commission; the Belgrade metro project, which requires readjustment in order not to endanger the city's water source; the water supply in Zrenjanin, where tap water has been unsafe for drinking for over 20 years, due to very high arsenic levels; as well as heavily indebted municipal public transportation companies.

The action, tax, and corner spaces are least altered. The spaces *Chance*, *Jail/Just Visiting* and *Jail* remain unchanged to emphasize that anyone involved in the non-transparent misuse of public funds, public ownership, or public goods should be prosecuted. Some spaces, however, have been appropriated: one *Community Chest* space is changed to *RTS* (Radio Television Serbia) – the public informative media that citizens are obliged to fund through mandatory monthly payments, yet which fails to report objectively; *Income Tax* is changed to *Racketeering*; *Luxury Tax* is changed to *Money Laundering*, while *Free Parking* is changed to the so-called Ćacilend – the satirical term used for camps of organized supporters of the current political structures.

The installation of the appropriated *Monopoly* game provided the most comprehensive visual presentation of the broader problematic context in which the canopy collapse occurred. It referenced the bankruptcy and/or privatization

Figure 6: Railroad and utility properties in the standard Monopoly game vs. in the Serbian students' installation

In the standard Monopoly game	In the Serbian students' installation	Value in Monopoly currency
Reading railroad	Prokop (new Belgrade Central Station)	200
Electric company	Public Enterprise Electric Power Industry of Serbia	200
Pennsylvanian railroad	Waiting for the metro	200
B. & O. Railroad	Novi Sad Central Station	200
Water works	Water supply in Zrenjanin	150
Short line	City public transportation	200

of many publicly owned enterprises and services; their sale to international owners who provide little benefit to Serbia; the usurpation of national parks and common goods that directly endanger public health; selective and manipulated media coverage; the non-transparent distribution of public funds; the long-term appropriation of public urban spaces for political campaigns; the approval of industrial production not permitted in the EU; and the devaluation of labor and professional expertise. At once ironic and humorous, the installation was, in fact, deeply critical and made visible the privatization and degradation of publicly owned property and public services. In this sense, it resembled *The Landlord's Game*, the precursor to *Monopoly*, invented in 1904 by Elizabeth Magie to educate players about the negative consequences of land privatization. Unlike *Monopoly*, *The Landlord's Game* proposed that rent derived from commons, natural resources, and urban locations should belong to all members of society, while private profit should originate only from one's own production.

Within the game, the performativity of the central station, mediated through its image, perhaps resonated most strongly. It encouraged participants to recognize that the canopy collapse was not an isolated consequence of corrupt state services, but one of many examples of systemic corruption that could produce further victims. Up to that point, the protests had addressed corruption in a more abstract and general way, whereas the game communicated concrete, multiple examples of corruption and the interests that drive it. Through the game, the performativity of the station activated the performativity of other objects represented on the site, co-created knowledge and meaning, and strengthened people's determination to resist corruption.

Conclusion

Since November 1, the central station in Novi Sad has functioned as a *performative* in two ways: (1) as a site and (2) through various artistic means that reproduce its visual elements at citizens' mass gatherings and in online announcements

of those gatherings. As a site whose function has been commemorative since November 1, it has been standing as a space of empathy that, together with victims' memorabilia and the visible aftermath of the collapse, has prompted emotional transformation. It also stands as testimony to the tragedy, demanding accountability and transparency regarding the processes that led to it and shaping a particular gaze through which individuals and collectives perceive the society in which they live.

Since the canopy collapse, the central station has been actively *doing* something – it has evoked empathy in the wider public, turned the population into active witnesses, united them into a common identity, shaped people's ability to publicly express their feelings and views, and co-initiated events that may lead to social transformation. This was possible due to its performativity, which was embraced within mass gatherings that included numerous artistic representations of the station, such as large carried signs featuring the roofline, performances evoking the collapse, marionettes visualizing students' demands, and the appropriated *Monopoly* game that critically presented the broader context of the event. The central station in Novi Sad is therefore not defined solely by its original function, but by what it does – taking an active role in anti-corruption resistance as an actant operating in relation to both human and non-human entities, either as a site or through its representations.

The results of this research are significant for theories of performativity, architecture, and the use of artistic means in citizens' protests. The study shows that the performativity of a single architectural object can be experienced in multiple locations rather than being confined to one place. It also demonstrates that performativity can serve commemoration within bottom-up initiatives, not only within the top-down institutionalization of cultural memory, as in commemorative museums. The case of the Novi Sad central station and the mass protests that followed the tragedy illustrates how human and non-human actants can work together within a culture of resistance and how the performativity of architecture relates to the activities of all involved actors. Moreover, performativity appears to be a prerequisite for architecture to become part of actor-network relations. The topic leaves room for further research, particularly regarding whether commemoration is the key factor that connects the performativity of architecture and citizens' protests.

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Sonja Jankov

Upotreba umetnosti i performativnosti arhitekture u okviru kulture otpora – slučaj železničke stanice u Novom Sadu

Apstrakt:

U radu se fokusira na performativnost arhitekture kroz studiju slučaja urušavanja nadstrešnice renovirane železničke stanice u Novom Sadu 1. 11. 2024, usled čega je poginulo 16 ljudi. Ukazuje se da je arhitektura performativna, u smislu da inicira akcije, podstiče sećanja, izaziva osećanja i transformiše nas u tom procesu. Može delovati kao katalizator društvene transformacije, a njena značenja koprodukuju korisnici i posmatrači, te arhitektura preuzima aktivnu ulogu u proizvodnji značenja i znanja. U radu se daje kraća analiza dosadašnjih istraživanja performativnost arhitekture, te ukazuje kako su memorijalni muzeji poput Nacionalnog memorijalnog muzeja 11. septembra u Njujorku i Jevrejskog muzeja u Berlinu prepoznati ne samo kao mesta sećanja i istorije, već i kao prostori empatije koji mogu dovesti do moralne transformacije, zbog čega su oni performativni. Koristeći teorijska objašnjenja termina performativnosti u kombinaciji sa empirijskim istraživanjem, analiziraju se načini na koje je urušena železnička stanica u Novom Sadu postala performativna kroz brojne masovne proteste koji zahtevaju odgovornost i transparentnost u vezi sa koruptivnim procesima koji su doveli do nesreće. Tvrdi se da je železnička stanica performativna kroz (umetničke) akcije u kojima se ona pojavljuje kroz formu vizuelnih znakova, maketa, marioneta ili adaptirane igre *Monopol*, te se bliže analiziraju ovi postupci. U radu se zaključuje da je železnička stanica u Novom Sadu uvela novi oblik arhitektonske performativnosti koji se razlikuje od ranijih definicija, pokazujući da jedan arhitektonski objekat može biti performativan izvan svojih prostornih granica, na više lokacija istovremeno. Tokom protesta 2024–25. u Srbiji i

inostranstvu, železnička stanica u Novom Sadu postala je performativna u smislu da je mobilisala širu javnost u saosećanju sa žrtvama, očuvanju sećanja na njih i zahtevanju transparentnosti i odgovornosti u političkom diskursu. U tom smislu, ona je ujedinila širu javnost u jedan identitet.

Ključne reči: performativnost, performativna arhitektura, protesti, umetnost, participativnost, Novi Sad

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Milica Pekić

OUR ART IS OUR STRUGGLE! OUR WORKS, OUR VOICE![1] TRANSFORMATIVE ART PRACTICES IN THE CURRENT STUDENT PROTESTS: THE CASE OF THE "STUUDENTI" EXHIBITIONS

ABSTRACT
This article analyzes the transformative role of student-led artistic practices within the ongoing student movement and recent protests in Serbia, focusing on two exhibitions titled "stUUdenti". Drawing on Jacques Rancière's concept of aesthetic experience, the study explores the exhibitions' content, organization, and social context to understand how collective art practices operate as forms of resistance, social critique, and community building. Research findings indicate that these practices disrupt traditional hierarchies within the art system, foster participatory engagement, and produce new social relations through embodied gestures, collective silences, and performative interventions. The exhibitions show how art can function as a tool for social transformation by merging aesthetic experience with activism, emphasizing care, vulnerability, and mutual empowerment. By foregrounding the intersections of art, activism, and social engagement, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of art's role in facilitating societal change and fostering collaborative, community-oriented cultural practices.

KEYWORDS
student art, performative gestures, participatory art, endurance, care, collective art, aesthetic experience, activism, social transformation, student blockades in Serbia

Introduction

At the end of December 2024 and in February 2025, students organized two exhibitions in Belgrade under the title "stUUdenti". Apart from simply indicating that the exhibitions were self-organized and self-authorized by students, the double "U" also indicates the University of Arts in Belgrade (Univerzitet Umetnosti), which is composed of four faculties: the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, the Faculty of Music, the Faculty of Fine Arts, and the Faculty of Applied Arts.

1 The first statement is taken from the introductory text of the first exhibition, while the second represents one of the slogans presented at the second exhibition.

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These two exhibitions constitute not only the first initiatives in three decades to be fully conceptualized, prepared, and realized through the collaboration of students from all four faculties, but also articulate a critique of the still dominant institutional logic and hierarchical relations that shape both the artistic field and the educational system. The aim of this essay is to explore alternative formats of work organization and interdisciplinary collaboration within the art exhibition format, using these two exhibitions as case studies, and to examine the results of such an approach and its influence on the dominant values and criteria of art institutions. Through the modes of production, representation, and relations established, the exhibitions propose alternative frameworks for understanding artistic production, the logic of collaborative and collective practices, potential of self-organized educational process and their respective function within broader social movements. Conceived as a two-part series, the exhibitions form a coherent conceptual continuum, with the second display elaborating and extending the premises established by the first.

It is important to briefly reflect on the social context from which these two exhibitions emerged. After the collapse of the canopy at the newly renovated public train station in Novi Sad, which killed 16 people on November 1, 2024, a significant social movement emerged, led by students across Serbia. Students organized the longest faculty blockades in the country's history, with all major Serbian universities being occupied for over ten months. Through mass protests, nationwide marches, the blockades of key traffic junctions and highways, and collective public commemorative 16-minute silences, students have also initiated a widespread process of social transformation, mobilizing diverse social groups, from university professors and teachers to medical workers, farmers, artists, and many others, to self-organize, identify problems within their respective fields, and articulate possible alternatives. While the main criticism of the movement targets state corruption as well as the lack of responsibility and accountability of public institutions, the student movement itself demonstrates a new logic of organization and decision-making. Faculty forums, the plenums, serve as the main decision-making body within the student movement, where all students can participate and where topics are discussed and analyzed before collective decisions are made.

Students themselves reflect on the plenums as their primary format of organization. Milica Pendić, a student at the Faculty of Philology, stated: "We knew we wanted direct democracy because it proved to be what works best for all of us, since we all have equal rights and we can all participate" (Hronologija pobune 2024). Davud Delimeđac, a student at the Faculty of Political Sciences, described the plenums as a practical lesson in democratic participation, noting that: "students are currently giving a lesson in democracy to those before them and, most likely, to those who will come after. The systems we established at our faculties, plenum-based systems of direct democracy, where all students have the right to participate, where everyone is invited, including those who disagree, those who are for or against, and the discussions and debates that take place in the plenum, as well as the proposals and decisions that are directly

implemented, restore young people's trust in the political process itself" (Utisak nedelje, December 15, 2024). Sanja Milosavljević, a student at the Faculty of Physics, articulated the affective and political significance of this experience, stating that: "this is the first time that all of us feel that we can contribute to change and that our voices are actually being heard" (Hronologija pobude 2024).

The urge for the right to be heard, for a space in which their voices would matter, led students into the field of self-organization. It prompted them to physically occupy their faculties with their own bodies and collectively inhabit the spaces of the blocked institutions. They engaged in the self-organization of communal life, including the coordination of food and donations from citizens, procurement of necessary supplies, management of hygiene and safety, leisure, self-education, and recreation. It also led them into intensive conversations and negotiations, ongoing dialogues, exchanges, and mutual empowerment as the main form of organisation, which subsequently translated into actions in the public sphere. Strengthened and motivated by the experience of togetherness and solidarity, the students took to the streets, organized mass protests and actions in front of the institutions they addressed, demanding justice, truth, accountability, freedom, and security. This sustained act of resistance and transformation is captured within one installation set by the students of the Faculty of Fine Arts in the faculty's Gallery Windows facing the main pedestrian street in Belgrade. (Figure 1)

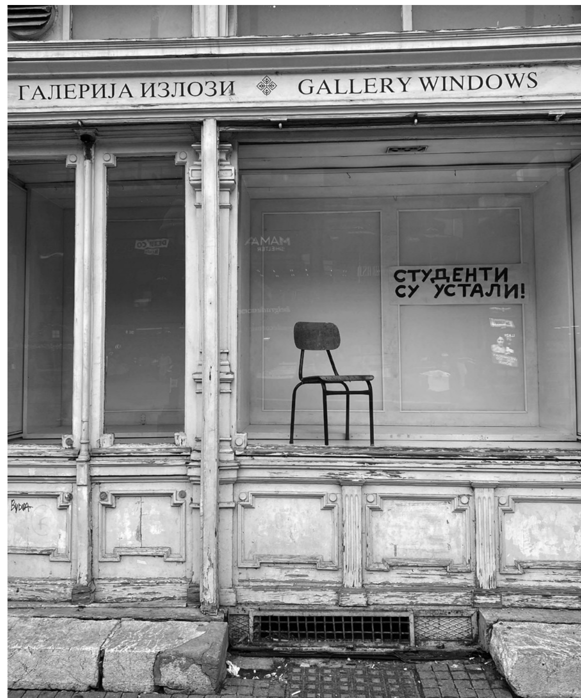

Figure 1. Students Have Risen! 2024. Display in the Gallery Windows of the Faculty of Fine Arts Belgrade. Personal archive.

The gallery window is, in fact, almost entirely empty. Behind the glass stands a single school chair, slightly turned toward the street. On the white backdrop at the rear of the window, the words *STUDENTI SU USTALI!* ("THE STUDENTS HAVE RISEN!") are written in black capital letters. That is all. In natural daylight, the scene further accentuates the material presence of the window itself: its somewhat worn and rustic, dirty-white frame and the familiar, scuffed school chair with a small wooden seat and backrest mounted on a metal structure. What confronts the viewer is the trace of an already performed gesture, an empty chair marking the students' decision to rise. By employing minimal means available, the students construct a situation that succeeds in fixing the gesture of rebellion, recreating and articulating it in the full richness of its movement. The gesture of rising, of taking action, of shifting one's perspective, of stepping beyond the given frame, is thus transformed into an artistic act *par excellence*, one endowed with profound social effects.

Whether we, as citizens, took part in some of the protests, participated in collective commemorative silences on public squares, joined students in their marches across country, prepared food for them and our fellow citizens, hosted students in our homes across country, joined newly formed local self-organized assemblies in our neighborhoods, or we took action within our own professional field together with our colleagues, took part or even just witnessed any of the public actions or protests, we became immersed in an intensive process of social transformation. It came to shape the daily experience of citizens throughout the country, with yet uncertain results. This experience is the main subject of both exhibitions, defined and articulated from the position of self-representation of art students. As indicated in the introductory text printed on the flyers available in the gallery space for the first exhibition: "the works are our testimony to the tragedy and violence that triggered the blockades, as well as our view on why we will not give up the fight for a better tomorrow. Our art is our struggle".

Social transformation as an aesthetic experience

The very statement 'Our art is our struggle' advocates the dissolution of the boundary between art and life, a principle that has been central to the avant-garde throughout history. Art historian Benjamin Buchloh defines avant-garde practice as one characterized by a "continually renewed struggle over the definition of cultural meaning, the discovery and representation of new audiences, and the development of new strategies to counteract and develop resistance against the tendency of the ideological apparatuses of the culture industry to occupy and control all practices and all spaces of representation" (Buchloh 1984: 21).

The struggle against imposed canons and norms through which alternatives to a dominantly constructed reality are articulated, both within the art system and within everyday life, unfolds continuously within artistic practice. These are practices that enter a dynamic arena of contestation, testing their position in direct relation to the phenomena they oppose, whether the critique is

directed at authorities, dominant ideologies, social norms, alienation, established conventions of the art system and art education, or pressures on freedom of expression and action. In the literature, those works of recent history are often described using such terms as relational, dialogical, interventionist, participatory, community-based art, or, more broadly, socially engaged art (Lacy 1994; Bourriaud 2002; Billing, Lind, and Nilsson 2007; Kester 2004; Jackson 2011; Bishop 2012). Art historian Claire Bishop has described this growing artistic interest, emerging since the early 1990s, in the social domain, specifically in collective action, collaboration, and direct engagement, as the 'social turn' in art, contemporary avant-garde within which "artists (are) using social situations to produce dematerialized, anti-market, politically engaged projects that carry on the modernist call to blur art and life" (Bishop, 2006: 179). Art historian Grant H. Kester is emphasizing "sociopolitical relationships" as a new artistic material replacing traditional canvas, paint and marble, moving the focus from "formal conditions of the objects" to aesthetic experience which has a potential to "challenge conventional perceptions" and "systems of knowledge" (Kester 2004: 3).

It is exactly this rupture in the dominant regimes of perception which introduces the aesthetic experience as a crucial notion in defining a new vocabulary and criteria related to the widely expanded field of artistic action, work, and labor. In this context, the work of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière is of exceptional significance. He introduced the concept of the aesthetic regime of art, which allows the category of the aesthetic to extend beyond traditional notions of beauty and taste into the broader field of experience (Rancière 2010). For Rancière, the aesthetic criterion is, on the one hand, linked to the artistic status of the work as an autonomous field of experience, a domain that is not subject to rational or moral judgment. On the other hand, it is also linked to the productive potential of dissensus, which stimulates debate and encourages the continuous reassessment of dominant hierarchical structures. By recognizing the field of experience as a domain of artistic realization, Rancière enables a departure from purely formal analyses of the visual aspects of the work of art, which have often limited interpretations of dematerialized or post-medium artistic practices. Furthermore, the principle of dissensus, which Rancière links to the redistribution of the sensible, challenges dominant frameworks that define the organization of power, the distribution of functions and places, the visible and the invisible, and speech and noise. It thus becomes a crucial element of aesthetic experience, making previously unseen or unheard perspectives perceptible. In contrast to the dominant regime, which he terms the "police", Rancière envisions a politics that, through the principle of dissensus and contestation, opens up new forms of subjectivation within the distribution of the sensible, reshaping the established framework of the police order. In this sense, dissensus constitutes the foundation of politics, and the relationship between art and politics is established precisely through dissensual practice, which reconfigures the sensible and "invents new trajectories between what can be seen, what can be said and what can be done" (Rancière 2010: 149).

Rancière's elaboration of aesthetic experience complements the revolutionary potential of art as developed by Walter Benjamin in his influential essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Benjamin 1968). By analyzing changes in the nature of the work of art induced by technological developments, particularly print, photography, and film, Benjamin challenges traditional canons of authenticity, eternal value, mystery, and genius. The decline of aura and the criterion of authenticity shift the function of art from the domain of ritual to the domain of politics (Benjamin 1968: 239). Moreover, the mass accessibility of art through reproductions and film democratizes perception, producing new habits among what Benjamin calls the "distracted audience". He identifies two modes of mobilizing this new potential: one aims to organize perception through control and spectacle, aestheticizing politics, while the other seeks to induce critical reflection through empowerment and active participation, politicizing art. The latter, which Benjamin associates with communism, aims to reorganize social relations, whereas the former, exemplified by Fascism, leaves the property structure intact. Exhibitions "stUUdenti" perform this role of politicizing art, offering a testing ground for new collaborative ways of art production, empowering active participation, and offering critical reflection. Revisiting Benjamin in the contemporary context of intensified technological development becomes even more relevant.

New digital tools enabled mobilization on an unprecedented scale. It enabled a "boom in cooperation, where the 'tactical media' blending of new technology, art and activism has helped to give political protests a new face" (Lind 2007: 20). It also reaffirmed the questions of the function and role of art, its mode of production, reception and distribution. The 'social turn' (Bishop 2006) or 'collaborative turn' (Lind, 2007) in the artistic practice is once again challenging the structural issues of the dominant hegemonies, property, and social relations, entering the arena of what Chantal Mouffe defines as 'agonistic' struggle within the public space as a "battleground where different hegemonic projects are confronted" (Mouffe 2007: 3). It is exactly on this terrain of agonistic struggle where Mouffe positions critical artistic practice as one which "foments dissent," "makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure or obliterate", "giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony" (Mouffe, 2007: 4-5). Furthermore, through its dissensual practice, art enables the constitution of an alternative.

This transformative potential of contemporary art practice can be connected to the transformative model of resistance defined by theorist Nancy Fraser in her analysis of the condition of postsocialism. The characteristic of this condition by Fraser can be identified by the lack of a credible progressive alternative to the dominant order, the separation of a cultural politics of recognition from a social politics of redistribution, and the consolidation of economic liberalism, which leads to aggressive commercialization and a drastic increase in material inequality (Fraser 1997). The dichotomy between the recognition and acknowledgment of differences as a response to cultural domination on the one hand, and economic redistribution as a response to economic

exploitation on the other, has made cohesive action within struggles for a more just society impossible. In this context, Fraser identifies affirmative and transformative models of resistance. The affirmative model functions as a corrective to the outcomes of unjust social relations and supports the aforementioned dichotomy, while the transformative model entails changing the very framework that generates social relations. It incorporates both the struggle against cultural or symbolic injustice as well as against socioeconomic injustice. As Benjamin would suggest, it affects the property structure and establishes new social relations (Benjamin 1968). In this way, the transformative model unifies both ethical and aesthetic criteria, dismantling existing mechanisms of representation that dominate the logic of identity production, while simultaneously striving to establish new relations of production that would lead to a more just economic distribution.

So how can this transformative measure be translated into the domain of the still dominant art institution and its capitalist logic, which relies on glorifying the figure of the author/artist, mystifying artistic labor, and fetishizing the art object as key tools for maintaining control over artistic production (Praznik 2021). Some of the strategies employed by students and presented within the exhibitions "stUUdenti" offer an insight into recent attempts to disrupt established hierarchies, to claim new arenas of action, to develop alternative modes of production and distribution, to shift the role of the audience, and to foster new forms of collective experience.

Nothing to celebrate

The first exhibition was organized at the Gallery of the Faculty of Fine Arts. It lasted for only a few days at the end of December 2024, just before the New Year holidays, which are traditionally celebrated in the city's streets and squares with various public concerts and open-air markets. Partly hidden by the city's stage for New Year's cover bands and numerous festivities placed right in front of the faculty building, the students installed two large banners on the façade with the message "Nothing to celebrate" (Figure 2).

After making their way past the numerous barriers installed by the city administration to finally step into the gallery, the visitors are welcomed by host students introducing the display carefully shaped for sharing the experience of the first month of the blockades. The series of collages, objects, and installations build a unique environment through which visitors are gradually navigated to engage with different aspects of the social struggle represented by the students.

At the gallery entrance, a collage of posters created within the protests introduces some of the main students' messages. Diverse in design, they reveal the absence of a unified visual identity, reflecting a wide range of approaches. The posters do not indicate which student group created them or their faculty affiliation; the focus remains entirely on the collective messages the students aim to convey:

Figure 2. Nothing To Celebrate, 2024. Front facade of the Faculty of Fine Arts, Belgrade. Personal archive.

freedom but / if not now, when? / new now / one cannot be a great artist without being a humble human / change is now / students against corruption / student – above all a human / crime – and where is the punishment? / say no to the rotten system / the trap / the burden of our actions / blockade / until when / until demands are met / truth cannot wait / art is the highest form of hope / students (Figure 3).

Further on the visitors encounter a series of installations: a metal sculpture resembling a bent spine and displayed on a pedestal in the traditional manner of institutional fetishization of art objects; a map reconstructing numerous protests and events taking place in the period from the fall of the canopy to the start of the exhibition with a small mirror placed at its end; a group of old wooden painter's easels bound together with fine threads and placed in the far corner of the space; an installation recreating a stereotypical domestic environment usually associated with pensioners (Figure 4), with details such as an armchair, old television sets, a wooden chest of drawers, lamps, rugs, newspapers scattered on the floor and a wall display of a series of framed photographs, reminiscent of family portraits or tapestries, jet documenting students' street actions and communal life within the faculty blockades, with one

Figure 3. Exhibition “stUUdenti”, Gallery of the Faculty of Fine Arts, 2024. Exhibition view. Personal archive

of the photographs featuring a student holding banner reading “Don’t lie to my grandfather”; a cardboard silhouette of a human figure composed of front pages, headlines and various articles from regime daily newspapers in Serbia; a two coat racks, one draped in a suit, shirt, tie, and business shoes, the other in a black hoodie, jacket, and running shoes, holding hands with an empty sleeve (Figure 5).

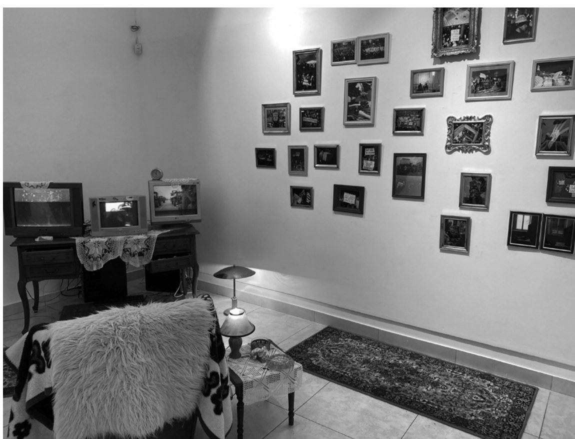

Figure 4. Exhibition “stUUdenti”, Gallery of the Faculty of Fine Arts, 2024. Exhibition view. Personal archive

Figure 5. Exhibition “stUUdenti”, Gallery of the Faculty of Fine Arts, 2024. Exhibition view. Personal archive.

And while one part of the gallery is densely filled with content, the other part is clear with just a few minimal interventions. On a tall, narrow pedestal rest fragments of a broken rod (Figure 6), and on the wall, emphasized by direct lighting, a small segment of hardened mortar in a circular shape is displayed (Figure 7). Constructive elements, evidence material, a murder weapon, aesthetic objects, or a ready-made? Once again, the students leave the space open for interpretation. While the construction material, through its placement and a simple Duchamp-like procedure, is transformed into ready-made art objects, the students' collective technique leaves no signature. So, the authority of decision on what art is, the nomination of object, experience, or situation, the magic of transformation, the skill and power to change perspective, is shared with us: the audience. The aura of the work is displaced from the materiality of the object before us into the experience of the person observing. From the fetishized status of a material object and the authority of an author, to the experience, critical reflection and action of an audience.

Figure 6. Exhibition "stUUdenti", Gallery of the Faculty of Fine Arts, 2024. Exhibition view. Personal archive

Figure 7. Exhibition "stUUdenti", Gallery of the Faculty of Fine Arts, 2024. Exhibition view. Personal archive.

Our position as audience and participants, and our experience, being material shaped by the students' collective public interventions, is further emphasized by a three-channel video and sound installation in the adjacent room. Before entering, we pass through a large canvas dividing the two rooms, on which the students' messages from protest banners are once again recreated, introducing the authentic street aesthetics of the student protests (Figure 8):

/students against corruption / this city is not for sale / the state belongs to the children / when injustice becomes law, resistance becomes duty / if we don't stop, we are done / mom, I'm fine / only the corrupt think anyone can be bought / who if not us? / together we are stronger / ...

Figure 8. Exhibition stUUdenti, Gallery of the Faculty of Fine Arts, 2024. Exhibition view. Personal archive.

Upon entering, the three screens of the video installation immerse us in the experience of collective acts of 15 and later 16 minutes silences, commemorating the victims of the canopy collapse in Novi Sad. The installation depicts the protest of students, farmers, and citizens at Slavija Square on December 22, which gathered an impressive number of people (Figure 9). A drone shot capturing thousands of mobile phone lights held by citizens became an iconic image of the protests. The collection of drone footage soon expanded to include mass protests in front of the Constitutional Court, the National Television, the Ministry of Education, as well as mass protests in Novi Sad, Kragujevac,

Novi Pazar, and Niš, culminating in the largest protest in Belgrade's history on March 15. The installation evokes the experience of embodied presence in shared, prolonged collective silences in public spaces, a distinctive feature of the students' protests. The experience of collective stillness transforms the moment through the simple act of standing together in collective grief, freedom, and silence. This opportunity to pause together, to interrupt routine with our bodies, to cut through the noise, to transform the sonic environment of the city, to be simultaneously 'the one and the many' (Kester 2011), to hear the creak of a window in a nearby building, barking dogs, the buzzing of a drone overhead, birdsong, notifications on mobile phones, distant footsteps, and the breathing of those beside us, the possibility of intervening in reality through collective action, represents an important gesture inducing an experience of change.

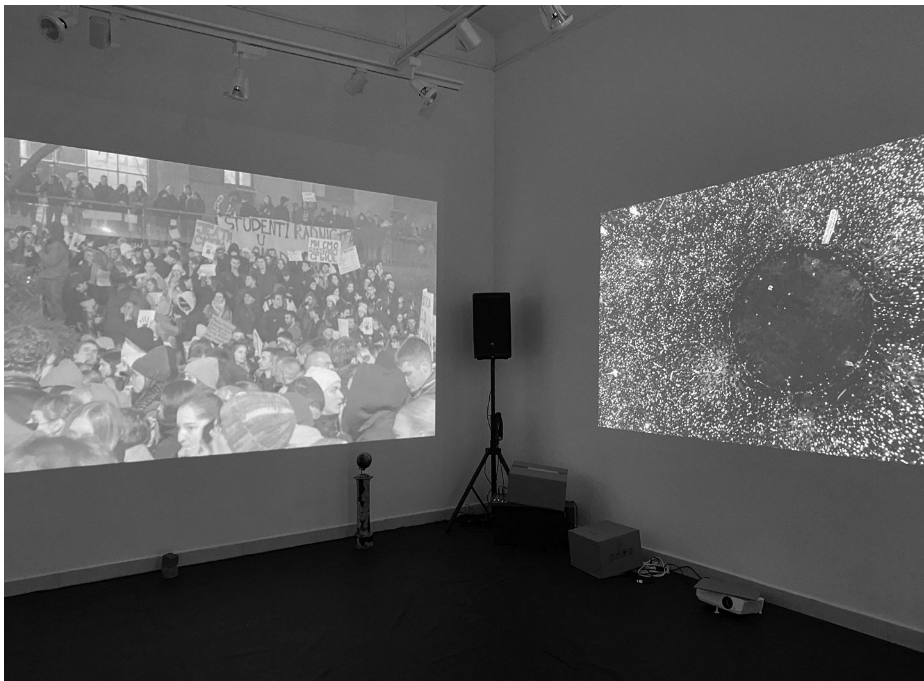

Figure 9. Exhibition "stUUdenti", Gallery of the Faculty of Fine Arts, 2024. Exhibition view. Personal archive

Comparing the collective gestures of the students' protests with performance art tactics of endurance, physical effort, objectification, and radical engagement, art historian Jasmina Čubrilo offers a valuable early contribution toward an understanding of the artistic potential of students' collective public actions: "Protests like the student-led protest in Serbia, with its vulnerable yet persistent bodies in mourning and transformation, are (bare) life itself which, through the repetition of gestures and actions, as well as through images and documentation, critically re-signifies existing relations and concepts, tending

to create new routines as well as new and more immediate agencies" (Čubrilo 2025: 32). These new immediate agencies also evoke new social relations which are being generated through collective experience, the experience of redistribution of power, generating new trajectories of what can be seen, said or done (Rancière 2010: 149). It creates a rupture in the police regime or an interval, as defined by Judith Butler: "in which the assembled bodies articulate a new time and space for the popular will, not a single identical will, not a unitary will, but one that is characterized as an alliance of distinct and adjacent bodies whose action and whose inaction demand a different future" (Butler 2015: 75). In their video installation, students are emphasizing, recalling, repeating, and representing this experience as a collective act and gesture of transformation, shared and experienced by both students and citizens.

The students employed another collective form of engaging the audience: choral singing. The students' choir became a recognizable feature of many public actions and protests, and it was performing both at the opening and closing of the exhibition. Apart from the international student anthem *Gaudeamus Igitur*, the repertoire included a number of Yugoslav children's songs: *Lako je prutu*, *Deca su ukras sveta* (poet Ljubivoje Ršumović), and *Zakleo se bumbar* (composer Mirko Šouc). At first glance, it may seem that the students are asserting their right to youth, to childhood, to naivety and play. The repertoire certainly suggests this, but it also goes a step further. Through a repertoire recognizable across generations, the students demonstrate almost nurturing care for the audience. They claim the space of childhood, freedom, and play equally for themselves and society as a whole. Reflecting on the choir performance at the opening of the exhibition, the author Saša Savanović comments: "They desire a different world, a world of justice, security, peace, a world of freedom, which is also a caring world and a world of clear boundaries (ethical, not territorial). A childlike world and a world for children, for all children. In this regard, they are not alone" (Savanović 2024).

After singing within the gallery space, the choir went out onto the main pedestrian street and, with their student index books raised in their hands, performed again, engaging accidental passers-by (Figure 10). The choir's performance recalls numerous actions of self-organized choirs initiated by the Škart art collective in Serbia over the past two decades (Horkeškart, Proba, Hor-Ruk). Performing in the streets, within various public actions, open rehearsals, protests, and events, these choirs have been reviving a specific anti-fascist and Yugoslav repertoire while at the same time they "advocate singing as a form of activism and its potential to foster people's social and political engagement" (Hofman 2025). The links with a particular artistic tradition, primarily that of self-organized artistic groups and collectives operating within the independent cultural scene in Serbia over the past three decades, become even more evident in the second segment of the exhibition "stUUdenti", organised in February 2025 at the Kula (Tower) Gallery in Belgrade.

Figure 10. Choir of Students in blockade, December 2024. Photo by Luka Knežević Strika

The Way Students Organise

At this point, it is important to introduce the organisational and decision-making logic implemented in the design and production of exhibitions by art students. Through interviews and conversations with students who were members of the exhibition team, I learned more about the practical aspects of exhibition production: how many students took part, how the idea of a collaborative project involving all faculties of the University of Arts emerged, how decisions were made, what challenges were faced during the process, and how these challenges were addressed. Two main elements stand out in the students' reflections. First, and, as it appears, the most significant aspect for those involved, is the fact that these exhibitions offered students an experience of collaboration with peers from other art faculties: an opportunity to share and exchange skills, ideas, and knowledge, and to work collectively.

The idea for the exhibition emerged through the participation of students from all four art faculties at a joint Mega Plenum (as the students refer to it) of the University of Arts in blockade. Artist Vuk Mandušić, a student at the Faculty of Fine Arts, recalls:

"We, at the University of Arts, connected through plenums because we did not have that experience within our studies. We did not feel that we were truly together as part of the University of Arts. It made no sense to me that there was no collaboration between the faculties within the University of Arts. For example, wouldn't it be great if, during our studies, we had the opportunity to take an elective course at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts or the Faculty of Applied

Arts? The possibility of interdisciplinary collaboration is very important for progress in our work".

The production logic of the exhibitions adopted the plenum as the main tool of student organisation and decision-making within the broader student movement. The idea for a collective exhibition was discussed at the Mega Plenum, approved by a majority vote, after which an exhibition working group was formed. Information was then sent to all students at the University of Arts, inviting those interested to join the group and take part in the exhibition-making process. Vuk Mandušić recalls:

"At certain points, the working group reached around 100 members, but most of the time it consisted of about 60 to 70 people. Around 20 people were most actively involved in the preparations, with approximately 40 participating occasionally, but most of us took part in some form. We held in-person meetings. Initially, we brainstormed together, proposing ideas and voting on each one; the ideas that were approved would be implemented. Often, one idea would merge with another, giving rise to a third concept, which happened quite frequently. I am glad that no single person stood behind any individual work, there were always multiple contributors."

Artist Pavle Jakšić, a student at the Faculty of Fine Arts, reflects:

"I don't remember at all who did what, which idea belonged to whom, who intervened where, or who said what; I have absolutely no idea, and I think that is a good thing. I believe a collective has truly emerged. After all this time, what stands out to me is precisely the networking itself, although it has yet to produce tangible or concrete results, it is this very process that, in my view, represents the most significant outcome of the entire endeavour."

Both artists confirm that differences of opinion existed throughout the process, but that the group consistently pursued ideas that were approved through voting. Vuk adds:

"Patience proved essential to the creative process. This was the first time I had worked with so many people simultaneously on a single idea. From this experience, I learned the value of both organisation and patience. It was an undertaking I had not imagined I could be part of, and I was genuinely surprised by how much we were able to achieve together."

The production was supported by numerous in-kind contributions from various organizations, including printing houses providing free printing services, faculties supplying production materials, and support from citizens. This logic of planning, organising, and creating collectively, radically democratised the process of art production, enabling all interested participants to take part on equal terms and engage in decision-making. It functioned as an exercise in collective creativity, in which tolerance, negotiation, discussion, and compromise, together with individual contributions to a collective endeavor, prevailed. Discussions with students made it clear that suspending the need for individual recognition can at times be frustrating. Nevertheless, the decision to act as a collective remained consistent across both exhibitions.

On Endurance and Care

While the first exhibition was organized within the building of the Faculty of Fine Arts, for the second installment the students left their everyday environment, the space they inhabited, occupied, and controlled, and entered one of the city's prominent galleries, claiming mainstream exhibition venues as equally adequate spaces for their specific artistic practice. Once again, acting as an interdisciplinary collective of students from all four faculties of the University of Arts, without individual authorisations or signatures, they shaped the exhibition display using the vertical tower structure of the gallery. A series of site-specific installations and ready-made interventions are intended both to share their experience and to encourage further audience engagement. The exhibition is structured across three floors, with a gradual dramaturgy starting from the first floor, representing the reality of life during the blockades and ongoing protests, toward the second floor which situates the current student protests within a broader historical tradition of student struggle, culminating on the top floor, dedicated entirely to an immersive audience experience.

One of the first works visitors encounter on the first floor is a video installation presenting footage documenting numerous cases of violence which students are exposed to in the streets. Public gatherings of people, pausing the regular movements of the city, are high-risk performative actions. Without police protection, the assembled bodies are exposed to unpredictable acts of aggression, protected solely by students wearing yellow vests and forming a live barrier while stopping traffic. In doing so, they demonstrate vulnerability recognized by Jasmina Čubrilo (2025) as an important feature of performative students' actions. It represents what Judith Butler would call interdependency and vulnerability of the bodies as a form of mobilization, resistance, and political exercise of an alternative. Claiming the right to stop what is supposed to be "normal life" under the dominant oppressive regime, these collective interventions shape the form of collective agency while remaining vulnerable at the same time. As Butler writes, "vulnerability may be a function of openness, that is, of being open to a world that is not fully known or predictable" (Butler 2015: 149). It is precisely the risk of this openness that the students are willing to take, securing the safety for others who take part, and the scenes of their bodies being struck by cars, again and again, unfold in their full disturbing reality. Such raw, unpolished video material requires no editing, aesthetic refinement, or formalization, and all it needs is a video projector, a laptop on the floor, and a cable stretched to the nearest power socket (Figure 11). The very fact that students are projecting this footage as a video piece within the gallery setting instructs us to the territories of their artistic action, which is not within the domain of representation but within the domain of social relations, mobilization and transformation. This form of action implies responsibility, unpredictability, interdependency, vulnerability, and risk.

Figure 11. Exhibition “stUUdenti”, Gallery Kula Cetinjska, 2025. Exhibition view. Personal archive.

In another corner of the room, in contrast to their public function as creators and organizers of the protest events and actions, the students are offering an insight into a space inaccessible to anyone who is not a student, a space reserved only for them, for their daily activities and their shared life. This is the space of blocked faculties, which they recreate employing, once again, a tactic of the ‘ready-made’. Inflatable mattresses, a pump, sleeping bags, crumpled bedding, and personal belongings (water, a toothbrush, deodorant, a laptop,

stickers, small notes) (Figure 12). On the wall above the mattresses hangs a series of photographs of different beddings, like imprints of their sleepers. These empty, multicolored beddings form a kind of morning portrait of the student movement, as if once again declaring: the students have risen!

Figure 12. Exhibition "stUUdenti", Gallery Kula Cetinjska, 2025. Exhibition view. Personal archive.

Placed on the table next to it is a notebook filled with comments, photographs, and records of life during the blockade. We are invited to leaf through it freely and peek into the students' diary entries:

"In situations like this, you realize that there are people who will help you. You understand the importance of community and solidarity, you don't expect it, but you receive it unconditionally, because everyone knows you are doing the right thing."

"Dear diary, we've been working on the new exhibition for a long time. It's really stressful, but also exciting. We're learning to solve problems together, to collaborate, and to trust each other."

"Maybe sleeping at the faculty isn't such a bad idea. In my own bedroom, I don't have such a nice view from the window. December 23."

"It's already the seventh day I wake up at the faculty. I miss my bed. I miss my mom. I miss my dog."

"During this blockade, I've fallen in love seven times already. Maybe the problem is me, but everyone is so cute when they're fighting for our demands" (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Exhibition "stUUdenti", Gallery Kula Cetinjska, 2025. Exhibition view. Personal archive.

The second floor highlights inter-generational connections and relationships, engaging with history, tradition, and continuity while asserting the conscious choice of their own tradition. At its center is a triptych – collage linking three major student movements: the Yugoslav student protests of 1968, the student protests in Serbia in 1996/1997, and the current student movement (Figure 14). Documentary photographs of street actions, student forums, blockades, and protests, along with newspaper clippings from each movement, are collaged

around a central core, within which the demands of each protest are listed. It is within this core that students trace the continuity and tradition of their struggle, as a lineage they inherit, know, and preserve. The history of the fight for democratization, social equality, and institutional accountability unfolds in roughly thirty-year cycles, yielding new articulations and renewed collective sentiment.

Figure 14. Exhibition “stUUdenti”, Gallery Kula Cetinjska, 2025. Exhibition view. Personal archive.

On the floor, in the corner of the room, stands a screen displaying a video of a student’s index book (“certificate of courage” as they call it), whose pages turn in a continuous loop. The “exams” section is filled with a list of the major protest actions the students had organized up to the time of the exhibition. With confidence, they declare self-organization and self-education as the highest principles of learning, requiring no external validation or confirmation.

In the niche of the mezzanine leading to the top level of the tower, students have created a site-specific installation reminiscent of a children’s playground (Figure 15). The floor is covered with sand, with numerous colorful whistles hanging on the treads above. By combining sand as a material associated with play, as well as modeling and construction, with the symbolic sound

of rebellion, the students have created the representation of a gentle social laboratory. Once again, they direct us toward the playful and tender nature of their struggle. Johan Huizinga described play as a voluntary, out of the ordinary and temporary activity, which is free, which creates its own rules and order, its own play-community that sustains the duration of play, that employs imagination, entails tension and uncertainty, and radiates into life outside the play: "to dare, to take risks, to bear uncertainty, to endure tension – these are the essence of the play spirit" (Huizinga 1955: 51). He also points to the generative nature of play as a cultural phenomenon, one that precedes culture and is able to "impart meaning to the action" (Huizinga 1955: 1). As such, play can serve as a testing ground for new cultural practices and institutions. It seems that this playful potential, situated outside normative "seriousness", ironically represented by the hanger dressed in a business suit in the previous exhibition, is precisely what the students seek to provoke in visitors.

Figure 15. Exhibition "stUUdenti", Gallery Kula Cetinjska, 2025. Exhibition view. Personal archive.

After exposing the audience to the daily routine of protests and blockades, the risks students take, the tradition of their struggle, and the potential of playfulness within the collective actions of rebellion, we arrive at the final level, in which we find an immersive environment that occupies all our senses. The sound filling the space resonates through our bodies. White woolen threads hang down from the ceiling, falling over us, on our heads, shoulders, and backs. We touch and move them as we walk, encountering subtly embroidered messages attached to the woolen threads: *you are the heart of Serbia; without you we are nothing, with you we are everything; well-done colleagues; we will not give up; utopia; you are art; we are in this together; bravo, my mom says we nailed it; we are marking history; solidarity; art is struggle* (Figure 16 and Figure 16a).

Figure 16. Exhibition “stUUdenti”, Gallery Kula Cetinjska, 2025. Exhibition view. Personal archive.

Figure 16a. Exhibition “stUUdenti”, Gallery Kula Cetinjska, 2025. Exhibition view. Personal archive.

Artist Katarina Vundać, a student at the Faculty of Applied Arts, offers a further explanation of the origin of the messages: “These messages were written in the guest book at our last exhibition at the Faculty of Fine Arts. This level is dedicated to the future, somewhat utopian” (Janković 2025).

In fact, these are messages of encouragement and support for the students, left by the visitors, which they return to the audience in a new poetic form, crafted through handiwork. The focus on the sensory experience of the audience is further emphasized by several mirrors leaning against the walls, so that as we move through the space, we occasionally see our own reflection or that of other visitors. With accessible materials and minimal interventions, the students create an environment of comfort, care, gentle touch, and subtle

sensory stimulation. Once again, the students guide us to slow down, reflect, contemplate, and experience embodied perception within this safe environment. Just as they protect public collective silences with their exposed, vulnerable bodies, creating a safe space for us to pause in shared grief, within the gallery setting they design a space that nurtures contemplation using different simple means, once again focusing on touch, craft, body and sound, evoking the notion of care.

The care ethic, as implied by artist Elena Cologni, "allows us to step out of the dominant social, political and cultural system of understanding society and relations, and look at the peripheral (not the central) instead: the circular (not the linear) thinking, the quiet (not the loud) voices in society as strengths (not weaknesses). Care Ethics teaches and trains us not to get tempted to compete by adopting the same strategies, which have damaged our society and environment, but to try different avenues instead" (Cologni 2024: 2). This passage on care ethics can be applied to the strategies students employ both within the process of self-organization as well as in the mobilization of citizens to engage, join, support and initiate their own struggle for the transformation of society.

Conclusion

The work on the transformation of society and existing relations is where students of the art faculties situate their practice as a form of art. Through these two exhibitions, and by employing diverse skills, they point to some of the main characteristics of their work from a position of self-representation. Acting together as a collective of art students from all four faculties of the University of Arts, they transcend disciplinary boundaries and challenge the traditional notion of authorship. New relations are demonstrated in the ways students organize art production, replacing the authority of the "genius" author with a collective decision shaped through debate, discussion, and ultimately voting. Furthermore, they open the field of art to fellow students from other faculties, as well as to citizens with whom they share the work of social change.

Consciously or unconsciously, they establish a continuity with a specific experience of artistic practice that has developed over the past decades on the independent scene, one that continuously questions the position of the author and hierarchies within artistic practices and production models; expands the field of artistic work into the realms of community, public space, and social relations; and reintroduces forgotten or neglected skills, tools, and formats such as choirs, handicrafts, workshops, pedagogical practice, processes, research, actions or networking. This is a tradition of radical departure from the still-dominant norms of the art system which assume relations of power, excellence, domination, hierarchy, and exclusivity. It is a radical break from the understanding of artistic work as an isolated activity inspired solely by an individual artist, as well as a radical break from the traditional art curricula still dominating art education in Serbia.

Aesthetic experience is being introduced through the process of mobilization, self-organization, through learning by doing, acting together, engaging in dialog and exchange, and articulating the voices of those previously excluded from public debate. It emerges through practices of mutual empowerment, play, collective creativity, organizing mass public actions and protests and employing distinctive gestures such as collective public silences, blockades, and marches. All of these collective acts presume endurance, risk, care, and togetherness in the process of shaping new communities. They also imply a process with an uncertain outcome, one created in resistance to speed and efficiency as imposed values, while claiming the right to mistakes and to an extended duration of time.

These practices demand hope and what theorists of the avant-garde would call *optimal projections,* as a vision of the future and the choice of possible variants in overcoming imposed perceptions of reality[2] (Sretenović 2020: 52). Finally, with these two exhibitions, students are claiming the field of art as an important aspect of the struggle, one which can offer the tools, strategies, knowledge, and skills for the aesthetic experience of social change to be fully understood and comprehended in its transformative, open, unfinished, unfixed, unpredictable, free and dynamic character.

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2 The term was invented by Aleksandar Flaker and taken from Sretenović (2020: 52).

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Milica Pekić

„Naša umetnost je naša borba! Naša dela, naš glas!"[3] Transformativne umetničke prakse u aktuelnim studentskim protestima: slučaj izložbi 'stUUdenti'

Apstrakt

Tekst istražuje transformativnu ulogu studentskih umetničkih praksi unutar aktuelnog studentskog pokreta i širih protesta u Srbiji, sa fokusom na dve izložbe pod nazivom „stUUdenti". Kroz analizu sadržaja, organizacione strukture i društvenog konteksta izložbi, oslanjajući se na koncept estetskog iskustva Jacquesa Rancièrea, istražuje se potencijal kolektivnih umetničkih praksi kao oblika otpora, društvene kritike i izgradnje zajednice. Studija ukazuje

3 Prva izjava je preuzeta iz uvodnog teksta prve izložbe, dok druga predstavlja jedan od slogana sa druge izložbe.

da ove prakse narušavaju tradicionalne hijerarhije unutar umetničkog sistema, podstiču participaciju i kreiraju nove društvene odnose kroz telesne gestove, kolektivne tišine i druge performativne intervencije. Spajanjem estetskog iskustva i aktivizma, uz naglašavanje brige, ranjivosti i uzajamnog osnaživanja, izložbe demonstriraju ulogu umetnosti u procesu društvene transformacije. Tekst se fokusira na presek umetnosti, aktivizma i društvenog angažmana kako bi doprineo dubljem razumevanju odnosa umetnosti i društvenih promena, kao i potencijala umetnosti u razvoju kolaborativnih kulturnih praksi usmerenih ka izgradnji zajednice.

Ključne reči: studentska umetnost, performativni gestovi, participativna umetnost, izdržljivost, briga, kolektivna umetnost, estetsko iskustvo, aktivizam, društvena transformacija, studentske blokade u Srbiji

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Nevena Delić & Petra Parčetić

BEING MOVED AND MOVING, NON-METAPHORICALLY: THE CASE OF THE PROTEST MOVEMENT IN SERBIA

ABSTRACT
Within the past year, the ongoing student-led protest movement in Serbia has been deeply reshaping the landscape we live and move in. We ask ourselves, as artists and cultural workers, how may we offer our expertise? More specifically, beyond the affective and reflective framework that we operate in, what are the practices and know-hows that could be used to strategize and change the course of social and political movements? By addressing different notions of performativity, and the relationship between kinetic and ideological movement, we reflect on what it takes for a body to move politically and freely. We look into what dynamics come into play when bodies gather, move, and chant, and explore the choreographic and dramaturgical implications of a protest, suggesting how they can be situated outside the predetermined and consensual spaces of artistic expression. Ultimately, we argue for artistic tools, knowledge and the stage offered by public space to be seen not as metaphors, but effective operational strategies that can be integrated in the protest movement and offer a new kind of understanding of the mechanisms needed for enacting change.

KEYWORDS
Assemblism, Corporeality, Social Dramaturgy, Choreopolitics, Protest.

Introduction

Ever since the railway station canopy in Novi Sad (Serbia) collapsed on the 1st of November 2024 as a result of corruption in the railway station renovation processes, and murdered 16 innocent civilians, it is hard to imagine daily life in the country without at least a single element signaling the ongoing protests – adjusted public transport routes, canceled festivals, or periodic inaccessibility to public administrative or legal services. The movement that is entirely student-founded and -led, has over time grown to include different types of civic engagement to reach the whole population. When a public movement

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starts penetrating almost every pore of the system, its presence is detectable in every workplace and every living room, while manifesting itself in various forms of gatherings and street actions across the country – we ask ourselves, as cultural workers, what knowledge and vocabulary can we bring to the table? What might help us grasp the complexity of the movement, its narrative, as well as the lived experience of what it means to "take part" in political action? In times of civil unrest, could insights generated from artistic strategies help mobilize, resist and enact political change, and if yes – how?

In this paper, we set out to situate different types of artistic and culture-related strategies in the currently active protest movement in Serbia. By moving away from analyzing artistic and cultural practices within their already established realms and their prescribed affective frameworks, we attempt to challenge and call for a more engaged set of strategies, through which artistic know-hows serve as effective tools for articulating demands and intervening in the public sphere. We assess the political potentiality of artistic strategies and their applicability outside of artistic production through a variety of theoretical lenses. The paper first explores the notions of symbolic versus kinetic expressions and their mutual relation (Lepecki 2013; Lavender and Peetz 2023), as well as speculates on what it means to "move politically", defined by Hannah Arendt (1993: 13) as the ultimate trajectory of setting change in motion. We then extend the notion of political movement with the concept of "assemblism", which the artist Jonas Staal describes as a social "practice that links domains of art, theater, performance, activism, and politics" (2017: 1), from which we propose what a performative and prefigurative understanding of a protest can offer. The theoretical implications we offer in this paper are demonstrated in the concrete happenings that we have witnessed in the last year – commemorative walks, blocking parts of cities, and durational activities such as hundreds of kilometers long walks. Besides examining the actions which put the body and bodily presence at the forefront, the paper also considers the use of slogans and their embodiment as equally crucial in articulating the message and its prefigurative implications.

The paper is organized in four different sections, each zooming in on a specific set of concepts mainly taken from the artistic discourse, and in turn – how and whether these can be leveraged for the current protest movement in Serbia. In the first section, we delve into the representations of the protest movement from the perspective of bodily presence. Departing from the assertion that we still lack the capability to move politically (Lepecki 2013: 14), we examine how bodily presence within a protest could foster the necessary potential for movement – simultaneously and inseparably political and free. Furthermore, how can different practices of gathering imply a collective political movement? Using Jonas Staal's assemblism as a theoretical pillar, we take concrete examples from the protests to break down and further introduce the inferences the real political actions can teach us. Here, we supplement with Judith Butler's *Notes Toward a Collective Assembly* (2015), where the concept

of precarity in society and its power to assemble crowds and connect bodies present in a space together are helpfully elaborated.

While the first half of this research heavily dwells on the corporeal conditions and bodily performativity of the protest, the second half reflects on the interwoven notions of imagination, action, enactment and freedom to stress the importance of integrating different conceptions of political intervention and going beyond the conventional political mechanisms of attaining change. Here we rely on Hannah Arendt's performative notion of freedom, prefiguration, and more recent perspectives on strategic and social dramaturgy (of different authors), in order to understand the extent this perspective is reflected in the protest movement so far. This paper argues for a non-metaphorical understanding of public space as a stage, not one that seeks to directly conflate politics for art and vice versa – an emulsion that we find neither feasible nor helpful – but rather one that offers a strategic alliance. We examine how artistic strategies can serve as constitutive parts of a protest movement and be usefully deployed outside the predetermined spaces of art production, consumption, and institutionalization.

On Performance and Protest

What does a protest movement consist of? What does it require from us; urging and necessitating our bodily presence? We look at protests as "embodied commitment", which merges "direct and symbolic expression" (Lavender and Peetz 2023: 11) for the sake of voicing political demands. If the very term 'protest movement' implies both a physical movement of gathered bodies, as well as a symbolic movement toward a desired outcome, the question we pose is: How do the kinetic and direct versus symbolic and ideological aspects of movements come together in the form of protest? How does this contribute to our abilities to move politically? Departing from Hannah Arendt's notion of our incapability to move politically (for now), André Lepecki equates the political movement with the free one: "We do not know — at least not yet — how to move *freely* (italics added by the authors of this paper)" (2013: 14). Putting the free and political movement together further ties in with Arendt's (ibid.) warning that "the political vanishes completely from the world" when our actions are not directed at learning how to move freely.

Asking ourselves how to move freely, how to move politically, is relevant for protest movements in general, and in the case of current Serbian protests likewise, as public gatherings that vocalize the public demands addressed to the state authorities further foster political and critical thought. The absence of the capability to move freely is an absence in both kinetic and semantic movement, as well as the relationship between the two (Lepecki 2013: 14). We argue thus that exercising political movement together is necessarily an exercise of sensemaking in the collective and/or an exercise of embodied action. Protest can therefore be conceived as a collective practice in the latter two. Like performance, Lavender and Peetz argue, protest "is an act of manifestation" (2023:

5). Manifestation of a certain political voice and movement, when expressed in a group, brings us to the examination of the significance of the joined physicality and the togetherness of the bodies. Analogically to performance, this notion of movement can be extended using the concept of 'assemblism' termed by artist Jonas Staal, that "the body as the foundation of social architecture" is the prerequisite for the protest, and thereafter – a change (2017: 5).

We use assemblism to examine and further explain the relationship between kinetic and semantic or ideological movement, as we believe that these two – both independently and in a relationship, underlie the foundations for social change. Staal (ibid) explains that the gatherings of the bodies at different places, followed by the simultaneous movements, form a "political choreography that suggests the articulation of some form of collectivity". The presence of the bodies is a significant element towards further political mobilization. As Butler (2015: 129) reminds us – the presence of the bodies means representation. These bodies simultaneously become the ones who mobilize and the mobilized ones, or as Augusto Boal, author of *Theater of the Oppressed* (1979), terms it – the participants are "spect-actor[s]". The line between spectators (audience) and performers or actors (participants) is hence eliminated. An important detail to emphasize here is that the engagement of the audience, or more precisely, the merging of the roles of actors and spectators is not simply to check 'community engagement' off of the list of participatory artistic practices. It is to train the engaged crowd in "social antagonism, or what Boal vividly describes as a 'rehearsal of revolution'" (Bishop 2012: 122). Boal's suggestion of active engagement in practicing realistic scenarios offers a way to learn how to move politically, freely, while resonating with Staal's framework. Staal's questioning of the capability to dismantle the "us/them dichotomy" (2017: 10) that can potentially emerge as an obstacle in public gatherings, such as protests and performances, where the actors are separated from the spectators. 'Assembling meaningfully', in Staal's framework, relies on the successful elimination of this aforementioned dichotomy, through a collective effort (ibid: 5).

To give a concrete example observed throughout the still ongoing protests in Serbia, we will unpack the statement reiterated frequently on banners, in Instagram post captions and other formats, i.e., "Svi smo pod nadstrešnicom" (which translates to English as "We are all under the canopy", referring to the collapsed railway station canopy). The statement implies exactly the removal of the "'us/them' dichotomy", refusing the distance between those present at the accident and the rest of the population that were lucky enough not to stand/walk under that canopy at the time of the accident. Critically, it underlines having a body as the only precondition for this kind of emerging identification with the victims. Both physically and symbolically – "we are all under the canopy". The statement of solidarity thus effectively takes the accident as symbolic of the current political state, transforming and expanding the protest to consider the entire population of a state disrupted by the concerning levels of corruption, media censorship (Reporters Without Borders 2025), and other numerous economic, political, and social problems, as the precariat. Stating that

we are on the verge of being murdered any (time of the) day – hence the protest actions, ensures that these assembling practices are indeed manifestations of collectivity (2017: 8), within which there is no distinction between spectator and actor; thus, the assembling practices are entailed of 'spect-actors'. Furthermore, as Butler (2015: 55) reminds us, "acting in the name of that support, without that support, is the paradox of plural performative action under conditions of precarity". The bodies assembled together at protests show codependency and care towards each other, inherently signaling the lack of protection and support they should receive from a regime or environment they inhabit. We see this case in the example of a collective precarious state or 'being under the canopy' that the Serbian population experiences every day. Therefore, the assembling and simultaneous political movement helps foster the resistance, or at least signal to this precariat the current population has turned into.

In this state of precarity, it is intriguing to see how the protesting, assembled body becomes more unified, making this infrastructure more powerful. In Butler's words, this body collected around different levels and types of precarity functions "as a site of alliance among groups of people who do not otherwise find much in common and between whom there is sometimes even suspicion and antagonism" (ibid: 30). In the case of Serbia, we saw this in every protest and performed collective action, such as the alliance between a Muslim student from Novi Pazar (the major city of Sandžak, the region in Serbia with the majority of Muslim population, and hence the most religiously isolated and frequently discriminated region in the country) and an (Eastern Orthodox by faith) student from Ćuprija wearing a traditional Serbian hat *šajkača*, protested together and kept on meeting at different protest actions across Serbia. Although the differences in religion do not necessarily represent a different type of precarity, or a precarity at all, it is important to emphasize that the Muslim population and the faith of Islam generally are heavily politicized and ostracized in Serbia. The two students from seemingly two 'opposing' groups of society, physically and symbolically come together in, accordingly: a kinetic and semantic movement, an assembly of the different types of precarity for a common goal upon which they are allied.

Using the performativity of rehearsed movement, representation of the group and collective values, but all in practical scenarios leads us to (potentially) imagine the capability of the protest being the ultimate bodily liberation. The performance acted out in real life, both kinetically and symbolically, and offered in the public space are opportunities for rehearsals and practices that might unlock the capability to, in Arendtian terminology – move politically. In a more structural way, Staal (2017: 8) argues that the collective power generated in assembling creates "a morphology (the social form emerging through the practice of assemblism […]) structured – composed, scripted, choreographed – by egalitarian ideals". While not holding the power nor always itself constituting a political action, artistic practices can help rehearse, build, and catalyze political and free movement, as 'we [artists] give form to power' (ibid: 10).

Corporeality: Bodies in Action in Space

In the previous paragraphs, we elaborated many perspectives on the role of movement, both kinetic and symbolic, in protest, and in turn in political action. Although there are numerous cases of lone bodies performing an act of protest, a practice that offers a different kind of framing, dramatization, subjectivation (Rancière 1999), and legal implications, our focus will stay on collective acts of bodily presence – (previously mentioned) assemblism in spaces. Here we further examine bodies as the main bearers of the actions enacted to deliver a message or a demand (Lavender and Peetz 2023: 5). In particular, we elaborate and stress the critical spatial and temporal aspects of such kinetic and symbolic movement, an aspect that is essential for such movement to constitute as collective political action. First, we investigate the role of context in the politicization of a movement. Second, the formation of the public, and thus political, body. The concrete examples seen in the ongoing Serbian protests include (but are not limited to): blocking the bridges and major city crossroads, chanting, and engaging in commemorative walks.

By exposing oneself through bodily presence, hence exposing oneself to the threats of the regime it is protesting against, the body itself becomes a communicator, a message bearer and a symbol of the demands (re)iterated in the protest (Butler 2015: 63-67). Lavender and Peetz further elaborate on the importance of physical presence – "for the most part, protest entails being corporeally present – one's body in a space, engaged in action" (2023: 5). We argue that the spatial element is essentially what gives a political context to collective corporeality. Demonstrating a certain message in an environment that is accessible to the general public (e.g. a street) and is unprotected (considering the body is situated in a space ruled by the repressive authorities it tries to counter through protest or civil disobedience) has a different meaning than a body delivering the same message in a closed (both policy- and space-wise), controlled space (e.g. a gallery). As Butler explains, the body persevering in its exposure is what signals to the political sphere it exists in – and in turn, rises up against; this is all demonstrated through a performativity of the body (2015: 67). For instance, protesters gathering in front of the Generalštab building in Belgrade (Federal Secretariat of People's Defence Building, now partly the headquarters of the Ministry of Defence) in order to signal its potential selling, and consequently demolishment, represent a 'human wall' (see *Figure 1* and *Figure 2*[1]). The bodies expose themselves to a threat of potential involuntary removal from the site, but also speak of their demands and their political stance through their physical presence in this particular space to condemn the potential demolition by the current authorities of this historically, culturally, and architecturally significant structure.

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1 Although the Generalštab building is officially a part of national heritage, its status had been endagered by the newly passed lex specialis, which approves demolishing, selling and/or building a new architectural structure. Bogdanović and Miljuš (2025).

Figure 1. Photo: Safeta Biševac, "Untitled." (Danas 2025, 11 Nov.) Courtesy of the photographer.

Figure 2. Photo: Safeta Biševac, "Untitled." (Danas 2025, 11 Nov.) Courtesy of the photographer.

We focus here on the potentiality of collective power, taking into account interpersonal differences or, in Butlerian terms, the different precarities that all seem to level off when the bodies assemble together (2015: 30); in doing so, they form conditions for (political) action. More precisely, it is the space between the bodies, "a spatial figure for a relation that both binds and differentiates" (ibid: 63). Butler's notion reflects Arendt's position on bodies appearing together in space. It is through this appearance, one in relation to another,

that "we are made available, bodily, for another whose perspective we can neither fully anticipate nor control" (ibid). The aligned bodies exposing and acting together are closer to fulfilling the potential "for affinity and cooperation across sometimes seemingly insurmountable degrees of difference, quite often in shared opposition to conditions of what Butler calls the 'differential distribution of precarity'" (Parry 2022: 33).

As we saw in the example of forming a 'human wall' around the Generalštab complex, once assembled together in the street around the partly-ruined buildings, the protesting bodies become the assemblists. They depend on each other, and their precarity is unified. In her speech at the Occupy Wall Street protest in New York City in 2011, Judith Butler reminded that bodies assembled together act together, and are allied; but they also "suffer, [...] require shelter and food, and require one another. So this is the politics of the public body, its movement and voice" (smabiner 2011). Thus, the body that exists in relation to another is a public body. It exists in a specific time and space, and is thus, the only body that has the capacity to exist as the political. The political body in its movement and voice therefore embodies the demands it is fighting for (Butler 2015: 63). We, therefore, contend that the political movement that Arendt speaks of, is more attainable in such a context. We contend that the previously mentioned relationship between the kinetic and symbolic is strengthened through such acts of staging, not dissimilar to the concept in performance. The physical presence of the assembled bodies in a particular space, at a particular time becomes an ideal proclaimed by that group (e.g. in the given instance of the Generalštab protest, that relationship is seen as the bodies standing together around these buildings to voice their stance for preserving the immobilities of the national history). As Kyle Parry, in his book *A Theory of Assembly* (2022: 33) explains, the collective actions such as protests remain one of the most "historically persistent sites" of enacting a change. The bodies assembled, in spatio-temporal relation to each other, thus, serve to catalyze the movement as a political one. Only when exposed, physically and thus symbolically, in the space where the change is urged to be enacted in the public spaces that we physically inhabit, does a public, political body emerge for collective political action. The public spaces where the protests are performed, as Staal (2017: 5) mentions, can affect the morphology of the gatherings, therefore becoming agents, bodies to be activated – as we will see in the last segment of the paper (e.g. squares, spatial configurations, architectures of state power). Furthermore, the bodies that are often overlooked, when speaking in the context of human bodies, are the ones that are absent. How may we locate the agency of absent human bodies, i.e., those incarcerated, disavowed, deceased, or structurally denied physical access to gathering? In the former case, are non-human bodies isolated from the social and political reality they (physically) exist within? We argue that they are incorporated into the movement, but what this paper tends to unravel is the potentiality of the physically present human bodies, who – as Butler (2011) reminded in her Occupy Wall Street speech – require physical and emotional needs and who, by their

assembled presence in flesh, directly embody the precarious condition, but "a protest against it" (Staal 2017: 3) too. In other words, this paper tends to explore the conditions and potentiality of human bodies to represent the values they are trying to propagate and the regime they are trying to dismantle – all through their physicality. Representing, therefore, comes in with "embodied commitment" (Lavander and Peetz 2023: 11) for those whose voice is silenced, bodies absent or structurally denied.

Action, Enactment and Acting Out

In this section, we aim to examine Hannah Arendt's performative notion of freedom through the imagination-action-freedom trajectory, in order to establish a common or resonant vocabulary between political action and theater studies. The vocabulary in question is not to be understood as simply a space where the two lexicons happen to overlap, but as fertile ground for a nuanced understanding of imagination as a faculty of world-building, as well as the prescriptive and speculative nature of a protest movement. This common vocabulary points toward the necessity of seeing imagination as both a precondition and a constitutive part of emancipatory political action, whereby the emancipation in question is the enactment of freedom through a rupture with what is established, be that through a form of prefiguration or civil disobedience. As a starting point, we take Arendt's framework of imagination and freedom. We then go further into the notions of political imagination and prefiguration, situated somewhere between a rupture within the given and a rehearsal of a desired future.

Our understanding of imagination is based on the ability of seeing beyond the given order as articulating what is not yet there, inseparable from the creative act of intervening, interfering and inscribing. Arendt (1972) ascribes human action to the capacity to imagine outside of and despite what is there, meaning a deliberate denial of factual truth in order to see that things might as well be different from what they are. Imagination, being the source of all human action according to Arendt (1972), is what enables political change within the "vulnerable texture of facts in which we spend our daily life" (ibid: 6). This refusal to take things as they are, the intentional denial of truth as the ability to lie, and the capacity to change things according to one's belief as the ability to act, both stem from imagination. This does not mean that an emancipatory kind of change is brought up whenever imagination enters the political arena to negotiate the frame of the given and the possible. There is no inherent ideological inclination to imagining. Imagination, according to Arendt "can be mobilized for a variety of political projects, whether progressive and emancipatory or violent and exclusionary" (ibid: 4). Freedom is to be understood in relation to this, as freedom from things as they are. We would suggest that such freedom, if not an apparition or fleeting image, is not granted instantly or without a kind of deliberate and collective action. As Arendt argues in *What Is Freedom?* (1961), the field of experience of freedom is action

in itself. Building on Arendt's proposal of freedom as something to be "acted out", we propose to see a protest movement as a rehearsal of freedom, enacted even when the conditions for it are not yet met through systemic change. This notion of freedom is two-fold: on the one hand, it points to the performative aspect, on the other hand, it connects it with the prefigurative dimension of "acting out" something that is not yet there, extending towards and channeling a possible future. And through this, the performative trajectory of imagination, to action, and to freedom is made clear.

Returning to the question of imagination and the role it plays in the sphere of politics, it is only logical to address the term political imagination and ask if it is necessary at all to frame it as such. Political imagination refers to how political alternatives are imagined, practiced and embodied, necessary for different articulations of the social and the political. Much of our inability to change the political state of affairs is often assigned to what is known as corruption of imagination, the lack of visionary thought (Fisher 2009) when dealing with the late-capitalist paradigm. Here, the imagination in question is the ability to imagine otherwise, to imagine an alternative to the given and act upon that. When that imagination is compromised, it reinforces the boundaries and contours of the world it seeks to transcend. This predicament carries a temporal problem, as described by Ana Vujanović and Bojana Cvejić (2022: 13):

> Ruminating on society's decline as a crisis of social imagination, the loss of any long-term perspective impedes a vision of a common world. Here we have a temporal problem: the imagination is invested in a future. But the bitter message of all neoliberal reforms today is: "There is no future." The social mood of "no future" grows against the background of neoliberalism and its hegemonic conception and experience of time in which only the present is "real." [...] It seems that if the present is to pass favorably, it must hijack the near future, i.e. predict it and control it moment by moment. Bereft of living in the present, our time is accelerated to a near future without the distance that is necessary to imagine it otherwise. This hinders the fantasies of a society drastically different from the capitalist democracy regarded as the best possible world.

The idea of rehearsal, as proposed earlier, already alludes to a kind of prefigurative attempt of calling into being. Prefigurative politics refers to political practices in which actors and movements organize themselves according to the social relations, values, and principles they wish to bring about. The idea is to "prefigure" the desired world in the here and now, instead of postponing transformation until after taking power or achieving systemic change. It is bound to its temporality. More than a structural and linear plan, it offers immediacy and a fracture in the present, letting fragments of the desired future slip in, to be understood as testing out possibilities, or even as a rehearsal of the desired future and its possibilities. Prefiguration has a specific lineage in theater and performance studies, overlapping with its political agenda, while at the same time carrying distinct dramaturgical and aesthetic connotations. In Boal's *Theater of the Oppressed* (1979), the stage is formulated as a space of

prefiguration in the political sense, explicitly describing theater as a rehearsal for revolution: audiences, spectators turned protagonists (or, in Boal's terminology, as mentioned in the previous sections – "spect-actors"), prefigure new social relations by acting them out (Boal 1979: 98). The idea is that performance can embody or anticipate alternative modes of being and relating.

Both in theater, as well as in politics, we can perceive tension between representation and prefiguration which seeks to escape it, whereby representation is understood as the already established model of who speaks in the name of which interests. While (political) representation can be understood as mediation of interests, prefiguration means immediacy and performative rupture. It is through this exact tension between the two that, in his book *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (1999), Rancière defines politics in the first place – the instance when those previously not represented enter the arena and challenge it. In this sense, politics always has a prefigurative dimension. Prefiguration, although born out of collective experimentation and situated by necessity, is completed when it expands beyond locality and moves towards building counter-institutions (Vujanović and Cvejić 2022). That is why in the following sections, we address prefigurative practices used in the ongoing movement in Serbia, which enact the principles they desire, such as plurality and collectivity. Rather than treating such relations as the end goals, prefiguration enacts them in the present, whereby the means of struggle mirror and embody the desired future.

This is not a metaphor: From artistic know-hows to counter-strategies

Building on previously laid out notions of assembly, prefiguration and the performative notion of freedom, in this section we attempt to situate the arguments in the unfolding protest movement in Serbia. We propose this as an attempt, as we are aware of the impossibility of fully grasping and integrating the real-time happenings in this research process, bound to its finality. In this attempt, we apply a dramaturgical perspective in analyzing the protest strategies and their afterlives, the use of slogans, bodily configurations, routes, manifestations of duration and other elements of street demonstrations. We look into the choreographic means of articulating social and political intersubjectivity (Hewitt 2005), as well as the dramaturgical arc of transindividuation (Vujanović and Cvejić 2022) that can be applied to the unfolding protest movement. We emphasize that the use of this specific terminology is not yet another venture at using theater as a metaphor, but rather an effective, deliberative and strategic device able to integrate itself into the protest movement. Our understanding of political struggle in relation to its space of appearance – a stage, is an anti-metaphorical one. Much of the discourse on recent protest movements, civil uprisings and resistance has been built around the notion of public space as something to be reclaimed, as if its primordial function has

been contested. Instead, we are inclined to use a more dynamic notion – that of space of appearance (Arendt 1958), to underline the relational, fragile and temporary nature of bodies assembling in public. Space of appearance is to be understood as enacted, brought upon and performed.

The term social dramaturgy, one of the pillars on which we base this writing, has an expanded field of application and a lineage of which we touch upon only certain points. Mainly, we embrace the term as a methodological tool for seeing and articulating relations and affects in social space, dramatically invoking principles, images, symbols and actions. As Vujanović and Cvejić (2022: 181) point out in their elaboration of transindividuality as an "alternative ground upon which the self performs", we have to consider that "social dramaturgy treats art by a way of symptomatology, namely, that art can only reflect social processes". Therefore, social dramaturgy refers to one direction of a two-way process. The aim is not to say that reality operates under dramaturgical principles, but that these principles come from real-life processes and that a dramaturgical lens can be a way of extrapolating and examining them. McAdam (1996) introduces "strategic dramaturgy" to underline how social movements depend on performance to convey messages, demands and encode symbols in movement actions, thus giving attention to the framing and sensemaking function of dramaturgy within social movements. The question we pose is: What kind of dramaturgical thinking is to be found in the unfolding of the protest movement? How can this thinking be used as a strategy for posing demands, mobilizing the public and its discourse, while challenging power structures of representation?

Instead of speaking of the collective body of the crowd-turned-community, merged and solidified by a common interest, we will refer to the notion of transindividuality as proposed by Vujanović and Cvejić (2022). The process of transindividuation is capable of painting this "coming together" not as a moment of crystallization, but as a reflective and dynamic process, mutual constituting and transforming the self and the "we" – that is, the capacity of "we" (Vujanović and Cvejić 2022: 181). The proposed "dramaturgical arch of transindividuation" distinguishes the steps of this process within a social movement and very clearly anticipates the direction of the current happenings in Serbia. Vujanović and Cvejić draw out the following lineage, as a variation on Turner's social drama model (1982) which incorporates the principles of transindividuation. The starting point is a threat, a (violent) event which changes the normal course of things, a lingering possibility of society's fragmentation. In the case we are examining, the threat is both the symbolic and very literal disintegration of social infrastructure. Next, the crisis is socialized and collectivized by those affected. In the case of the ongoing movement in Serbia, what mobilized those affected is the shared condition of having a body, which, as mentioned in the first section, functions as grounds for new alliances based on the emerging identification with the victims. After that comes the more tactical and mediated social expression of solidarity by means of aligning, self-organizing and cooperating, all of which we have seen take place, giving life to

new constituencies, alliances, and support networks. Lastly, the arch finishes with a constitution of both a new transindividual community and a new institutionality based on collective experiences (ibid: 227). Similarly, our employment of the pronoun "we", on which we insist, is a reflection of this. "We" operates here on three levels - as an indication of shared authorship of this paper, "we" as indicative of our position as artists and cultural workers, and "we" as a rhetorical and bodily alignment with the transindividual community of protestors, that is, the same "we" mobilized and performed in slogans, images, and demands. The different instances of "we" are mutually constitutive at the backdrop of the crisis in question.

There are, however, ways of applying the dramaturgical and choreographic lens on a smaller scale, and looking into what constitutes the concrete elements of a protest movement in terms of space, duration and "atmosphere" – understood as an ambiguous struggle to describe the culminating affective quality of a public assembly. When speaking about a protest movement, it is impossible not to mention its spatial configurations, their eloquence and effective potential. Since the beginning of the student-led movement, we have seen numerous transformations and reconfigurations of the protest assembly, from nation-wide sit-ins, decentralized assemblies, simultaneous blocking of three bridges in Novi Sad, over one hundred kilometers-long marches, over one thousand kilometers-long bike rides, synchronized walking over pedestrian crossings, to the already standardized capital city marching routes. Each of these experiences touches differently on manifestations of duration, agency, questions of power and collectivity. If we try to think of the most widespread image of a protest assembly, it is that of a mass gathering using the city as a context-specific stage. Mass citizen protests, both in Novi Sad and Belgrade, have played a key role in negotiating visibility through numbers. Their routes have managed to channel a multivocal message, from commemoration and solidarity to demanding accountability from the responsible state authorities. Routes which lead from a site where the crisis is symbolically located, such as a faculty building, finishing at the High Prosecutorial Council, point to the institution's accountability by bringing the crisis to its doorstep. On the other hand, a decentralized gathering across different junction points of Belgrade, all going in the direction of the National Assembly, speaks directly to the decaying state power, symbolically identified by its official seat. Experience has shown that protests taking place closer to the seat of power are more likely to end with police brutality and abuse of authority by law enforcement. In order to understand how exactly this comes about, how police strategies can be countered and what exactly it is that these events are able to reveal, we will examine it in relation to Arendt's (1970) concepts of violence and power.

Although the two notions are often paired together and seen as two sides of the same coin, a more nuanced understanding of the dialectical relation between them is necessary. Arendt (ibid: 179) defines the relationship between the two phenomena through their distinction and entanglement, as

> Neither violence nor power is a natural phenomenon, that is, a manifestation of the life process; they belong to the political realm of human affairs whose essentially human quality is guaranteed by man's faculty of action, the ability to begin something new (...).

They therefore resonate with the previously discussed notion of freedom. While violence depends on instruments, power, for Arendt (ibid: 140–151), is intrinsic to political communities and does not require external justification. She argues that these concepts are often mistakenly treated as interchangeable – much like obedience and support – yet they function very differently. In her account, power emerges whenever people come together and act collectively. Its legitimacy is grounded in that very coming-together rather than in any subsequent action. When its legitimacy is questioned, power turns to the authority of its origins, whereas justification points toward future aims.

Arendt further clarifies this distinction by noting that pure power would appear as all against one, while pure violence would be a lone individual acting against everyone else. In practice, power and violence often coexist, but they rarely manifest in such isolated, 'pure' forms. This suggests that legitimate power stems from being entrusted by a community to act in its name. Accordingly, Arendt describes political institutions as the solidified expressions of these collective power structures that begin to erode once they are no longer sustained by the active support of the people. Decaying power follows a narrative sequence, as

> Every decrease in power is an open invitation to violence – if only because those who hold power and feel it slipping from their hands, be they the government or be they the governed, have always found it difficult to resist the temptation to substitute violence for it (ibid: 184).

As protests unfold directly in front of the center of the decaying power, such as the assembly building, the state is forced to defend and legitimize its lost power by means of violence. And so the dialectical relationship between the two notions is mobilized and performed by the police for the protest assembly, culminating in a spectacle of brutality and arrests. Protest routes are able to directly address the decaying power, rendering it at the same time visible, tangible, and empirical, furthermore proving that, as Arendt (ibid: 155) points out, violence dismantles power; it is ultimately unable to create or justify it.

Can the dramaturgical or choreographic lens be used to counter police violence and their strategies? In this segment, we mainly draw from *The Oxford Handbook of Politics and Performance* from Rai and colleagues (2021), which proposed a vocabulary for a transversal logic of police strategies and how they are performed. What kept coming about is the importance attributed to the protest atmosphere, understood as an affective quality of a given situation, as "atmospheres focus us on the circulation and sharing of others' affects, whether that is through prediscursive materiality or through a medium of resonance" (Rua Wall 2021: 672). Whenever violence is enacted, it requires an atmospheric

precondition. In the case of widely used police strategies under the common denominator "strategic incapacitation", introduced by Patrick F. Gillham (2013), we see a number of those that can be understood as atmospheric manipulation. Tear gas can be understood as such, since it serves to isolate bodies and confine them to the painful awareness of basic functioning, therefore cutting the relationality with other bodies around (Rua Wall 2021: 672). The process of "kettling", on the other hand, refers to containing protesters in a confined space for prolonged periods of time, increasing tension by forcing the cramped bodies to stay static. This is meant to bring the crowd to a breaking point, bringing some to confront the police line, in which case they are identified as violent elements and instrumentalized for the sake of justifying police brutality which follows. The kettle has to contain the crowd for "just too long" in order to burn the protesters out and ensure that the collective body, or "crowded subjectivities" (ibid: 669) cannot be restored. To summarize, the logic of kettling relies on the intensification of the atmosphere through restraint. If so, could the already standard jumping in place under the slogan "Ko ne skače, taj je *ćaci*!" (which translates from Serbian as "The one who doesn't jump is a *ćaci*![2]) be seen beyond its apparent choreographic outline as a way of countering this police strategy? That is, can synchronized jumping be a means of neutralizing restlessness and tension and thus rendering police strategies ineffective?

Lastly, we assess the protest assemblies in their relation to time as a dramaturgical element. Here, we will take as an example the student-led commemorative marches across Serbia which became one of the most recognizable manifestations of resistance. This practice started in February 2025, with student groups walking to both neighboring and distant cities where demonstrations were announced, followed and greeted by citizens. This durational aspect resonates with what Bojana Kunst calls "a durational search for new political embodiments" (2012: 128), where she claims that the durational aspect established a critical understanding of time as a commodity in dance practices in the 1970s. Manifestations of duration point to both the economically and politically conditioned perception and distribution of time, unlocking their subversive potential. Marching over 230 kilometers, in the case of the Niš-Belgrade route in March 2025, is an exercise in resilience and endurance, not in ableist terms, but as a form of necessity. As Kunst suggests, a community is not united by any representation, but by shared temporality and a "being together, without any strong intensity, but exposed to banality" (ibid: 91-92) that unfolds through duration.

The aim of this paper is to speculate on how artistic know-hows can be used to strategize and analyze a protest movement, therefore ascribing a more integral role to art that goes beyond its affective framework. What we are proposing is therefore a kind of alliance between art and forms of political intervention. In order to do so, we need to avoid falling into the trap of idealizing

2 A term which originated in the context of the Serbian protest movement, used to describe those who side with the government, support the regime, and express disapproval of the movement.

this kind of artistic political agenda and look into the symbolic capital that art claims through this relationship with the political. The relationship between art and politics is by no means something that still needs to be proved, as art has long been considered an ideological apparatus under the umbrella of culture – a superstructure within the topographical paradigm that serves the reproduction of relations of production (Althusser 1971). In this sense, we come close to what Chantal Mouffe would describe as the overall 'politicality of art', due to the fact that "there is an aesthetic dimension in the political and there is a political dimension in art" (Mouffe 2007: 4). Artistic practices always play a role in the constitution, maintenance or challenging of a given symbolic order, or what Gramsci would describe as hegemony – a political force assuming an impossible universality. However, to stop at this and conclude that all art is political a priori only serves to defend the "spontaneous ideology of the field" (Marchant 2019: 13), that is, "to preserve the functionality of the field against disturbances and its supposed autonomy". Here, Marchant refers to the paradoxical condition where art is political, precisely in being not political, i.e., an ideology able to neutralize the need for explicitly political art, while at the same time enabling capitalization on the symbolic value of 'political art'. According to Mouffe, if the ground zero of art's politicality is granted by the fact that it exists within a symbolic order which prescribes its value, the second level refers to art's criticality, as it can either constitute the given order or challenge it. Only the third level is where we start to approach the idea of artistic activism, understood as an alliance between art, in this case proposed as dramaturgical strategies and choreopolitics (Lepecki 2013), and other kinds of political intervention and organization. This kind of exchange between expertise can only happen when art leaves behind its appropriate space, such as an institution or a theater hosting a consensual community.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), Michel de Certeau distinguishes the concepts of strategy and tactics. While strategies represent methods of institutions or structures of power, which have a proper place from which to operate, tactics are everyday maneuvers for those without structural power. Tactics have no place, they are opportunistic, situational, and temporal – they appropriate the spaces defined by strategies. If we were to apply this distinction to artistic practices, which often implement so-called artistic strategies, acting in service of a social movement would mean for these strategies to be translated into tactics. As such, they would be able to leave behind their appropriate spaces, assume an interventionist character, step into the antagonistic and contested public sphere and to lend their expertise to an emancipatory political agenda.

Coda

Within the span of the writing process, numerous events have resonated with our initial intentions, changed them, reframed the questions we pose(d) ourselves and brought us to a series of ethical concerns, relating both to academic research and artistic work in the given climate. Although it was definitely

a more challenging dynamic of work to adapt to, we concluded that working in line with the unfolding events (and their consequences, where applicable) is what made this research more aligned with the reality of the public sphere, pushing us to acquire a more alert, receptive and opportunistic approach to the research process itself. The question of the public sphere is particularly significant, as it means that we accomplished, or at least set some foundations in how to accomplish, what we introduced to be one of our aims of research. That is, to try to call for a more integrated set of tools and strategies, whereby knowledge and expertise from the domain of art are able to operate within and for the sake of a protest movement, rather than taking the role of the commentator or critic from the comfort of their consensual and pre-established spaces.

We have analyzed a various set of theories in relation to the abovementioned, most notably in an attempt to give solutions for establishing the relationship between kinetic or direct and symbolic, semantic movement. By establishing this, to move freely, as Lepecki (2013) translated Arendt's "moving politically" (1993) has been explained by the notions of prefiguration and rehearsal of freedom, change in immediate space-time. In order not to leave these at the level of theoretical suggestions, we delved deeper into borrowing analytical tools from theater and performance studies, i.e. dramaturgy and choreography. By understanding the choreographic means of articulating social and political intersubjectivity and directly addressing the power which is being brought into question, dramaturgical elements that are a constitutive part of protest gatherings, we further argue for their strategic implementation.

By reflecting on these strategies, our main points of conclusion, as cultural workers, direct us towards fostering societal and/or political change through direct engagement. More precisely, when asking ourselves how can we integrate artistic strategies into the movement, and go beyond capitalization on the symbolic value of "political art" which responds to so-called urgencies within a closed and consensual space (gallery, theater, etc.), we sought to give potential solutions for the integration in further protest actions. Coming together (assembling) around the same aim regardless of potential in-group differences, presenting the demands for the change with their own bodily presence (Staal 2017; Butler 2015). Upon the mention of the latter, the point which is also important to emphasize in this section is that this paper strictly focuses on *immediate* human bodies gathered as the "foundation of social architecture" (Staal 2017: 2). It focuses on the bodies' potentiality to enact a change, while taking into account their relationality to the direct surroundings, physical and psychological needs, and thus threats posed by exposure in spaces ruled by regimes they are protesting against. The direct role of bodies in a broader context, e.g. institutions, urban infrastructures, or absent human bodies and art's capacity to apply its strategies in relation to these could be a theme to explore on its own. Later on, prefigurating the desired change even when the structural conditions have not been met, and locating freedom in the field of action (Arendt 1961); repeated durational actions, as well as organized embodied answers against the repressive forces of police – all of these are examples we directly

infer from the ongoing protest movement, and successfully observed through the existing theoretical body in the fields of theater studies, performance research, and other adjacent fields. Therefore, if art (practitioners) left behind its supposed exceptionality and autonomy and offered itself/themselves in favor, they would operate on what Mouffe (2007) understands as the final stage of politicality; or one could argue – the real stage, considering that that is when artistic strategies enter the public arena, allying with the public sphere. In that sense, the notion of public space, which often seems to be speculated in the field of artistic research as a space to be 'reclaimed' turns out not to have this need at all. In the above mentioned sections, we rather argue that public space is a space of appearance. Public space, for art and its practitioners, should represent a space of enactment precisely through their direct engagement, and through the final-level *mouffeian* politicality of art.

Although there has been a great deal of artistic expression and art interventions since the beginning of the protests, they have mostly been operating as a space for reflection on what has been/is happening in the movement (e.g. the exhibition of photographs, installations, video work and similar artistic material recorded, collected and/or created during the protest actions). With this paper, we argue that to establish the direct movement, other than only symbolic (Lavender and Peetz 2023), as well as the relation between these two, art needs to enact the public space. In doing so, artistic practices, which are often even proudly proclaimed to be political just by their existence, could increase the potential of the political movement. The 'political' they are told to exist in by default, we contend, is also something they can easily hide behind. That is, the artistic practices can thus stay criticizing and countering the dominant political regime within their predestined spaces. However, in order to keep the political and critical thought active in the public sphere, we believe it is necessary to directly support the actions that foster the political and free movement (Arendt 1993, Lepecki 2013). Integrating themselves in a protest movement, under the condition of renouncing their exceptionality and lending themselves in favor of a counter-hegemonic struggle, might therefore offer a way of going beyond the conventional political mechanisms of attaining change.

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Nevena Delić, Petra Parčetić

Biti pokrenut i kretati se, nemetaforički: slučaj protestnog pokreta u Srbiji

Apstrakt

U protekloj godini u Srbiji, studentski protestni pokret, Studenti u Blokadi, preoblikovao je okruženje u kojem živimo i krećemo se. Kao umetnice/i i kulturne/i radnice/i, pitamo se kako možemo ponuditi svoju stručnost. Konkretnije, koje su prakse i znanja koja bi se mogla koristiti za strateško osmišljavanje i promenu toka društvenih i političkih pokreta izvan afektivnog i refleksivnog okvira u kojem delujemo? Baveći se različitim pojmovima performativnosti i odnosom između pokreta i pokreta – onog kinetičkog i onog ideološkog, promišljamo šta je potrebno da bi se telo kretalo politički i slobodno. Ispitujemo koja dinamika nastupa kada se tela okupljaju, kreću, skandiraju; istražujemo koreografske i dramaturške implikacije protesta, sugerišući načine na koje se mogu smestiti van predodređenih i konsenzualnih prostora za prikazivanje. Na kraju, zalažemo se za to da se umetnički alati, znanje i scena koje nudi javni prostor ne posmatraju kao metafore, već kao efikasne operativne strategije koje se mogu integrisati u protestni pokret i ponuditi novu vrstu razumevanja mehanizama potrebnih za sprovođenje promena.

Ključne reči: Asemblizam, Korporealnost, Društvena Dramaturgija, Koreopolitika, Protest.

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Nikola Vasilijević

SOUNDTRACK OF DISSENT: SONIC PRACTICES IN THE 2024/25 SERBIAN PROTESTS

ABSTRACT
On November 1, 2024, the collapse of the Novi Sad Railway Station canopy resulted in the death of 16 people. This event catalysed a wave of public outrage which transformed into what is arguably the largest student-led protest movement in Serbia's history. Starting with 15-minute commemorative silent vigils enacted during traffic blockades, the sonic practices of the protests gradually grew in variety and scope across urban and digital spaces—ranging from public musical performances, posts on social media and performance interruptions. Apart from violent obstructions by government supporters, the alleged deployment of a military-grade sound weapon cemented sound as a political instrument in both its metaphorical and physically harmful manifestations. This paper argues that sonic practices, ranging from orchestrated silences to street-level musical performances and viral soundtracks, were crucial to the articulation of the 2024/25 protest movement. While the musical "soundtrack" of protests often draws from already existing pop-cultural material, their immediate sonic identity emerges through performative action and its rapid reproduction by supporters. The goal of the paper is to explore how aesthetic and affective expression via sound functioned as both an organizing and a destabilizing political force. The sonically shaped propensity for public gatherings during the 2024/25 protests is, the paper argues, instead of being an explicit political articulation, embedded in performative assembly and affective mimesis. To examine this, the paper will examine the sound practices of protests and attempt to identify mechanisms of political expression via silence, music and their obstructions.

KEYWORDS
silence, music, sound, sound weapon, mimesis

Exposition

Starting in November 2024 and proceeding well into the winter of 2025, the student protest movement in Serbia facilitated a space for political expression that was, up to that point, profoundly absent. In response to the canopy collapse at the Novi Sad railway station and the death of 16 people, silent commemorations in intersections, collective singing, choral performances,

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viral clips on social networks allowed a sonic delineation of spaces for political imaginaries that gradually mobilized the nation. The culmination of political instrumentalization of sound, however, came with a suspected use of a sound weapon directed against the students and citizens. The goal of the paper is to determine how these sonic practices functioned and resonated within the political discourse of a country in crisis. Sound is therefore evaluated as a relation to modalities of its application by sounding bodies (see LaBelle 2018; Voegelin 2010) or an active negation thereof (see Jungkunz 2013), with the focus on its ritualized importance for generating group cohesion (Nielsen and Cobussen 2012; Eyerman and Jamison 1998) to its capability of attacking an opposing group (Volcler 2013). Furthermore, the paper will argue that the resonance within the public and its sonic modalities was grounded in the mimetic mechanism of impersonation, where a clear ideological background was supplemented with possibilities of affective interpretation (see Hofman 2020).

Ana Hofman has argued that ideology can indeed be the condition for affective political mobilization despite prevailing scepticism towards such a view within trends of sound studies (Hofman 2020). While sound acts a mobilizing factor in its capacity of affective influence (cf. Massumi 2002; Goodman 2010), it carries intrinsic connections to the context and constellation of participants of the event it is taking place in (Born 2012; Feld 2015). Meaning and action go hand in hand and the foundation of both lies in the attractivity of those mechanisms related to sound, silence or music that allow for them to be mimicked or imitated. Any political activity including sound or a negation thereof goes beyond positions of autonomous agency, relying on a degree of imitation of the action of others (Girard 1977; Oughourlian 2010). While underlying mechanisms of mimesis rely on unconscious and violent actions as well, the 2024/25 student movement relied on imitation of affect that galvanized parts of the public both supportive and critical of it.

The analysis proceeds chronologically, following the shift from the initial one-minute vigil in front of the Novi Sad railway station to the regular fifteen- (and later sixteen-) minute commemorations, the subsequent expansion of protests into universities and large urban gatherings in Belgrade and other cities. Several points of emphasis are accounted for: 1) the role of silent vigils; 2) the use of music in live and digital contexts; 3) the weaponization of sound. Source material includes protest performances, digitally circulated songs, journalistic accounts and an investigation report regarding the sound weapon.

Moment(s) of Silence

Several months after its reconstruction, the concrete canopy at the Novi Sad railway station collapsed on November 1, 2024, killing 14 people and badly injuring two more. After the initial attempt by Minister of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure, Goran Vesić, of the ruling SNS party (Serbian progressive party) to deny responsibility, followed by his resignation, the first mass protests occurred on November 5, 2024. The initial gathering included

a one-minute silent vigil in front of the railway station. Violence eventually ensued when groups of protesters attempted to enter the Novi Sad City Hall, resulting in clashes with the armed police. The commemorative silence would in the following days be extended to 14 minutes—one minute for each person killed—and would be extended to 15 minutes after another victim succumbed to their injuries in November 2024. Following the death of another victim in March 2025, the commemoration was extended to 16 minutes, corresponding to the final death toll (AP 2025a).

Silent vigils established themselves as a repeated ritual with a political statement. Victor Turner (1969) and René Girard (1977) had pointed to the performative dimensions of ritual for its collective action and synchronizing potential for coordinating participating bodies. Just the fact that individuals gather for a single, uniform reason detaches the occasion from the everyday. Simultaneous participation through mutually generated noise imposes social cohesion through shouting, singing or playing instruments, the most familiar example of which are perhaps songs by football fans (Nielsen and Cobussen 2012: 99), where cohesion is made explicit through coordinating participating bodies in their multiplicity of possible responses. The sonic space of organized mass participation is by default exclusive of those who are not participating, making the multiplicity singular (ibid: 82). Reconsidering this aspect in the case of music, noise or silence, the sonic landscape delineates spaces of participation that an interpretation of the lyrical content alone fails to adequately account for because it fails to consider mechanisms of this generated exclusivity. A sonically formed space (as in the case of football fans) emerges where the coordination of bodies is directed at the "Other" or enemy group, even if it is momentarily absent. While football fans might present an extreme case, spatial delineation and group cohesion nonetheless constitute the nature of any musical event. What is essential, however, is that the initial gatherings in Serbia were not grounded in coordinated noise or music, but enacted silence that, rather than signalling absence, operated as a performative and political articulation of presence. Schweiger and Tomiak (2023: 857) describe protest silence as a strategic refusal that asserts presence through disruption of communication. In relying on their deliberation via individual dispositions by present subjects, silence is not enacted as an aesthetic performance, but a mimetic rhetorical statement in being "embraced from below" instead of "forced from above;" silences interrupting public life can be even more effective than noise (Jungkunz 2013: 2, 14).

On November 22, 2024, during one silent commemoration, students from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade were attacked by groups of government supporters, including members of the SNS. In response, on November 25, 2024, students backed by faculty and staff announced a blockade of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, demanding prosecution of the assailants. From December 2, 2024, other universities across Serbia followed suit, effectively halting higher education nationwide. Besides the articulated four demands of

accountability formulated by the student movement,[1] all forms of performative action were reducible to the act of enforcing the right to enacted silence. In turn, the attackers defended their action by describing the 15-minute vigils as obstructions of public order, unintentionally exposing the regime's disregard for any forms of assembly exogenous to its own. What the student movement managed was to mobilize the public to align with their willingness to protest, even at a time when no specific ideological articulation was provided, made all the more evident in students continuously avoiding political, ideological, ethnic and national divisions (Knežević 2025).

Commemorations played both a memorial and a mnemonic role. Apart from paying tribute to the 16 victims, the function of these commemorations was a reminder of what the normative order allowed to happen. From the standpoint of each collectively immersed participant acting as individual and part of an integrated "partition" (Nancy 1999), one was required to discipline oneself for the duration of the commemoration. Their public visibility eventually took root as a subject of everyday life amongst the population as a central political act that asserted the right to presence as a fundamental right to exercise one's political position (Butler 2015: 26). The vigils engaged discussions of their right to take place which introduced the prospect of its potential prohibition to the general public that most were willing to oppose. They did so by imitating the students' prerogative to political assembly and, in effect, by a mimetic desire of their desire (see Girard 1977); furthermore, doing so in relation to the "Other" that violently opposes them enforces group cohesion even further (ibid.) Mimetic desire operates through competitive escalation, in which the question becomes not *what* is desired, but who desires *more intensely*, transforming imitation into rivalry (see ibid, Girard 1987). A sonic interruption of everyday life first introduced an enacted division of participants and non-participants which soon translated into a moralized division to supporters and opponents, with both attempting to surpass the assertiveness of one another.

And indeed, the silent vigils did function as social gatherings that disrupted public spaces by imposition which would, normally, be loud protest noise (LaBelle 2010: 82), with cohesion achieved, among other reasons, through general rules of conduct (Collins 2005: 82). With the vigils, however, rules of conduct were still retained, but the sonic imposition was silence, a negation of noise. Disruption of the everyday is obstructive in that it is directed at those exact values the political apparatus would arbitrarily suspend (transparency regarding the canopy collapse), yet continuously claimed to be defending (rule of law and state order). Their subversiveness and the necessity of their violent dissolution by political opponents implies that the uninterrupted continuity of urban life was a property of the ruling party and the state—in disrupting

1 The student movement articulated four demands: publication of the complete documentation relating to the reconstruction of the railway station; prosecution of those responsible for the 22, November attacks; an end to the prosecution of students; and a 20% increase in public spending on higher education.

urban life, students were disrupting the state—in addition, a growing number of people showed the same propensity.

While the silent vigils rapidly grew in size and support, acts of disruption and violent intimidation continued through interruptions by shouting and threatening passers-by. Several incidents involved automobile vehicles ramming into protesters. On January 16, 2025, a car drove into a blockaded intersection in central Belgrade, injuring a young woman (AP 2025b); only eight days later, a similar incident happened at a public student assembly, with a young woman suffering a severe head injury (AP 2025c). The right to enacted subjectivity was perceived as a threat and a disruption of the normative order; what Jacques Attali describes in sonic terms as a signal interference, a disturbance "noise" (Attali 1985: 27). The pro-regime media insistently exculpated the perpetrators of the attacks. Following November 22, various regime pundits repeatedly framed the attackers' actions to be a spontaneous retaliation for the disturbance of everyday life, while president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić continuously downplayed the severity of the attacks (021.rs 2025). The subsequent student blockade was used to support this claim by framing even silent vigils as blockades, and the movement as "blockaders" ("blokaderi"). It was imposed in a climate of overwhelming domination of media close to the SNS, censorship and aggression towards investigative and critical journalism and a monopolized generation of narratives which either simulated political conflict (Janjić and Šovanec 2018) or intimidated its opponents with public accusations or threats (Markov and Đorđević 2023; Tasić 2024). The same principle applied to the attacks on students, portraying them as a reaction to "public disorder," and the students as "terrorists" and "foreign mercenaries" (021.rs 2025). Furthermore, a vague narrative of silent vigils and the university blockade being a "coloured revolution" (European Parliament 2025) became routine.

Similar to the insufficiency of interpreting silent vigils along expressive or aesthetic notions alone, interpreting moves by the regime as an attempt of violent censorship would be unwarranted, since it was not the meaning of the commemoration that was attacked, but the credibility of the students as political agents and the very possibility of enactment of one's political rights (Butler 2015: 83). Exposure to interruptions by violence simultaneously presented the assembly to the public as precarious; as having to contend with life-threatening antagonisms for exposing its political position (ibid: 18, 25). The enactment of precarity in silence asserted the right to its own existence (ibid: 218) as well as the moral authority of the movement. It introduced a mimetic capacity that the SNS failed or refused to acknowledge. As the protests spread beyond major cities, the 15-minute silence remained the core ritual around which all events were organized. With time, the number of participants would increase and silent vigils would garner more spatial authority. Mass protests in cities like Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš or Kragujevac would result in festive parade-like marches with students marching from all over the country. Videos and photos documenting these events would be transmitted via social networks, such as Instagram, Facebook and live streams on YouTube. Silent commemorations

would eventually prove to be effective in mobilizing the mass population and positioning the students as a role model for potential supporters; at times, students would be described by the general public as walking through villages and towns in the country "as liberators" (Beširević 2025).

The most productive achievement of the silent vigils is the emergence of a semiotic nexus of meaning not exclusive to students, but familiar to all dissatisfied members of Serbian society. Political alignment through group constitution by populist means present in much of Serbia's political scene was absent. The fact that the initiators were students did not immediately present itself as advantageous, but eventually revealed them as a precarious political entity whose right to protest was dangerously exposed to violence. It followed that if they are exposed to violence, then everyone is. The right to a performed political assembly required fighting for, even if only by the assertion of being-there. What began with silent commemorations soon grew into a social movement that reached beyond universities. With presenting themselves as precarious subjects, students allowed others to witness the precarity and violence in their immediate vicinity, but also to participate and join, allowing the movement to gradually encompass a wider social bandwidth.

Digital Musical Spaces

The potential of political protests to mobilize and assert visibility is profoundly shaped by social networks. The performed political message and its signalling in the digital domain allow for synchronous activism that interconnects the two political spheres. While protests themselves require the personal participation of protesting bodies, digital and online capabilities of dissemination of information, narrative, organization and the call to action position the two spheres as interconnected and mutually invested (Tufekci 2017). In the case of Serbia 2024/25, the creation of social network accounts by individual Faculties facilitated a medialization of their activism and significantly contributed to the increase in public support. Instagram accounts regularly posted content via stories, video statements, announcements and summaries of student-plenum decisions. This gradually expanded the movement's reach and by early 2025, even students from a number of high schools joined the blockades (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2025).

As with other political movements, their long-term effects remain existent in art objects such as songs, photographs or literature due to immediacy in experiencing collective memory, but also due to the availability of historical material (Eyerman and Jamison 1998, p. 11). Any artistic material related to the event for which it mobilizes assists in attuning the perceiving subject to the current events. Even if using "old" music interprets the present based on social constellations that no longer exist, their familiarity and partial actuality is retained and imagined. Engaging these artistic objects allows for interpretation that accounts for present time contingencies by employing the familiarity of the past. Circulation via digital platforms enabled an assertion of legitimacy

through mobilization of other social and demographic groups. Edited images and recordings from public gatherings accompanied by musical tracks circulated widely with the aim of communicating sentiment and encouraging participation. Rather than being articulated in explicit political narration, political upheaval situates songs as experienced through a sentimentally driven protest narrative instead, or what Papacharissi describes as "affective attunement" (Papacharissi, 2014: 134-135). The role of music was of particular importance as it emphasized the implicit political disposition present throughout the mobilized public, often by referencing well-known musical works from past decades of political turmoil (Danas/BBC Serbian 2025). It would become clear that, from the moment of their mass medialization, the aesthetic and affective coordinates of the protest movement would no longer be under strict control by the students.

Reliance by oppositional protest movements on media for achieving outreach is not new. The political activism of the "Otpor" movement against Milošević in the 2000s is credited with mobilizing the population through visual signs and print media (Aulich 2011: 2). In retrospect, the political agency of "Otpor" remains largely unsubstantiated: while it was at the time perceived as an advocate of a democratic turn, it neither managed to assert proper reform, nor ideological continuity. The efficiency of "Otpor" can be greatly attributed to the exploitation of media for massive appeal, but at the cost of an explicitly articulated political ideology (Aulich 2011). The opposite can be claimed for the role of music throughout the 1990s however, as it was often interpreted as politicized and ideologically polarizing in its institutional and discursive embeddedness (Dragićević-Šešić 1994; Gordy 1999; Momčilović 2024). An example for this is the musical genre of so-called "turbo-folk," which mostly functioned as an ideological coinage rather than a musical one (Đurković 2001), often perceived in terms of semiotic instrumentalization and ideological resonance with the Milošević regime (Nadjivan 2014). It denoted a premise of politicized application of music which often reemerges anytime a "turbo-folk" musician performs in urban areas or becomes associated with the governing regime. However, the protests of 2024/25 dismantled this paradigm due to technological modes of contemporary media dissemination never explicitly ideologizing music nor negating already pre-formed categories. In addition to the expanded oppositional soundtrack of the 1990s, several popular songs of folk music and its twin-genres were also spontaneously sung by students throughout the country.

Nonetheless, a number of defining songs from the 1970s and 1980s were revived, including the children's song "Deca su ukras sveta" ("children are the ornament of the world," 1977), the title track from a popular television series of the same name "Bolji život" ("a better life," 1987) and the Yugoslav Band-Aid contribution "Za milion godina" ("for a million years," 1985). Other songs had already been played in earlier protest movements such as "Zemlja" ("Earth," 1985) by the band Ekatarina Velika, "Šejn" by Haustor (1985) and others, all of whose themes and arrangements aligned the current political struggle with

previous cycles of dissent. Several musical pieces reemerged as dominant in the public gatherings by the assembled students. At the 24-hour blockade of Autokomanda, a major highway interchange on January 27th, as well as that of the Radio Television of Serbia building on April 10th (AP 2025d, Guardian 2025) there were sing-alongs to songs such as "Pada Vlada" ("the government is falling," 2003) by Bajaga & Instruktori, "Živeti slobodno" ("living freely," 2000) by Đorđe Balašević, reintroducing parallels with the Milošević-era protests (Danas/BBC Serbian 2025). These public assemblies often assumed the form of an open-air music festival, incorporating pop, dance and rock'n'roll music as well as various DJ sets. Another more recent song "Vatra u mraku" ("Fire in the dark") by singer Marko Louis and rapper Marčelo—originally written in response to a Belgrade school shooting in 2023—was repurposed and temporarily became the most widely recognizable musical reference on social media. A number of songs explicitly thematizing the 2024/25 protests were also produced by students themselves, most notably "Svi u blokade" ("everyone to the blockades," 2024) by students of the Art Academy in Novi Sad and "Sunce se ponovo rađa" ("the sun rises again") by the collective "P.E.S.M.A" consisting of students from the Belgrade Music Academy who collaborated with the popular folk singer Miloš Topalović "Topalko."

Unlike the period prior to social networks which more vividly materialized a split between consumers and industry (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002), the convergence of products works in more unpredictable ways. "Old" and "new" artistic materials both paved the way for active participation in digital culture by generating content which also implied generating meaning. This converges on the various "do-it-yourself" models via digital media, allowing for a "semiotic democracy" in relation to freely generated meaning, a factor that turned out particularly evident with music (Brusila, Cloonan and Ramstedt 2022). Musical tropes from socialist Yugoslavia, as well as from its rump inheritor, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, are interpreted as at the time of their emergence either having anticipated or openly agitated for a political change that never truly arrived. Employing songs as outdated semiotic and familiar musical tropes utilizes the past to reimagine the political and social reform of present time (Danas/BBC Serbian 2025). If anything, the political imaginary of the student movement was constructed and performed already beyond of the artistic domain—by the students themselves with deliberative plenary sessions (also known as "plenums"), direct democracy and absence of single-figure representation (Beširević 2025). Medializing the protests on social networks and employing musical cues allowed the general public to participate with its own imaginary through "sharing" or "reposting" content.

Performative Musical Spaces

The circulation of songs in contemporary student movements is increasingly dependent on digital platforms and visibility of politics in aestheticized form, as several other cases in the world have shown (Jenzen et al. 2020). The

"diagnostic" framing of the protest requesting responsibility was merged with a "motivational" framing which invited others to join for two distinct reasons (Benford and Snow 2000: 615): rooting out corruption and doing it together for the sake of the entire country. When music was included, a balance was required between its instrumentalization for generating "vitalizing emotions" that precede group constitution on the one hand, but also between new forms of articulation on the other (Danaher 2010). In the digital sphere, its forms of outreach pointed to a highly diverse and heteronomous musical identity, but a uniform application in the performative sphere. While the former is contingent and depends on the repackaging of content by what Prior characterizes as "new amateurs" (2019), namely, individual users on social networks, the music performed live served a different purpose.

What recorded music conveyed in its extra-musical associations, performed music would capture through its ideological positioning. Protests would often include performances by student choirs of the famous piece "Gaudeamus igitur." During the more patriotic-laden commemorative portions of protests, most often preceding speeches and silent vigils, choral performances of patriotic songs would also take place. Protest choirs would perform the Serbian anthem "Bože pravde" at almost every larger protest gathering; the hymn of St. Sava; on March 15, the Blockade Choir of the Student Protest performed the ancillary anthem of Serbia "Vostani Serbie" ("rise up, Serbia") at almost every large protest, thereby dismantling the anti-state narrative insisted upon by the SNS. Other performed works for the choir included an arrangement of the Aleksa Šantić poem "Ostajte ovdje" ("Stay here"), a performance of "Srpkinja" ("Serbian woman") by Isidor Bajić and "Ovo je Srbija" ("This is Serbia") by Nikola Grbić and "Tamo daleko" ("There, Afar") by Đorđe Marinković, as well as the above mentioned "Zemlja." The inclusion of compositions patriotic in character, along with the national anthem "Bože pravde" and its ancillary, "Vostani Serbie" should be understood as an act of reclaiming overtly politicized national symbols. The students, largely Gen-Z, born in the 2000s, were for the most part not alive during any political turmoil in the Milošević era when the country's name, the anthem and the constitution were all contested.[2] For the student generation during 2024/25, all three have existed for some time and accepted as a given. The active use of state symbols removed any link between the statehood of Serbia as a consequence of the democratic changes post-2000 and consequent systemic corruption. By reappropriating and collectively performing the musical symbols of the state, the students effectively (re)claimed the country symbols from corrupt governance itself. Despite

2 Following the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1992, the successor state was constituted as the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), comprising the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Montenegro. In 2003, it was reconstituted as the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, which dissolved after Montenegro declared independence in 2006. Until that dissolution, the FRY/State Union's official anthem remained "Hej, Sloveni", although "Bože pravde" continued to circulate informally as a Serbian national anthem.

the diversity of ideological backgrounds of various factions within the movement, employing national symbols allowed a mobilization on both affective and ideological levels (see Hofman 2020).

Performing music in a group is itself a propositional action attached to the expressivity of the gathered crowd and the success of their statement, as a "dicent index of belonging and social identity" due to the innate musical knowledge being "both a sign and simultaneously a product of shared musical knowledge and experience—shared habits" (Turino 2008: 43). Those present are joined in an embodied, physical and spatial sense organized through participation as a "cognitive praxis" (Eyerman and Jamison 1998: 35). If mediated content provides room for imagination and diversity in interpretation, live musical performance produces uniformity in singular spatiotemporal terms, where all participants are simultaneously present. Thus, a reduction of the performance of the anthem as an expression of ethnonationalism disregards its semiotic importance and its previous political misuse (Turino 2008: 44), but also its mimetic capacity during the performance by a multitude of subjects. Even if individuals would sing or be affected for different reasons, the enacted uniformity would be grounded on the singular multiplicity of subjects acting in similar fashion. Musical space was a rallying ground for all imaginaries and interpretations with the central claim lying in their being-made-present for a community of varied individuals (see Eyerman and Jamison 1998; Nielsen and Cobussen 2012).

A crowd, as Butler points out, constitutes itself through a shared prerogative of asserting its right to appear as a right that precedes any explicit articulation (Butler 2015: 11, 172). This prerogative does not exclude the mechanisms that assist in achieving this but also includes media and music as well (Aulich 2020: 276). The medialization positioned the students as imitable role models whose ideological position was not mimetically familiar because it remained absent. The consequence of the students' performance installed legitimacy in what is conveyed as their credibility of mediation of any political position to begin with which Street explains by using the Kane's notion of "moral capital" (Street 2012: 57; see Kane 2001). The public did not want to be students; it wanted to be *like* the students; to embody their position and political potency. Music served this purpose in the same way silent commemorations did – as reminders of what collective political presence could become.

The students were convincing in performing their right to assembly and were ready to take the punches. It also meant that students were charged with either taking the blame for a disappointing outcome or for successfully continuing further engagement until the regime fulfilled the demands – an interpretation partially present in the popular protest slogan "Pumpaj!," which can mean both 'Pump It!' (Baletić 2025), but also 'Keep Pumping!'. Standing behind the students can both absolve one of one's own political passivity, but also provide a figure to rally behind. Students became both figures of affective mimesis, but also potential scapegoats willing to take the fall. The role of music was to articulate this function into an acceptable sonic image of the protest.

Silencing the Silence

On March 15, 2025, the student movement organized what many described as the largest public gathering in Belgrade's history. Under the slogan "15th for 15," the protest counted over 300,000 people from across the country (Reuters 2025b). The massive number of protesters required crowds to be distributed across converging streets in anticipation of the silent vigil scheduled for 7PM. A report by a Non-Government Organization Earshot analysed 19 videos and measured the ambient level during the vigil at roughly 50 dB—remarkably low given the size of the assembly—resulting in an exceptionally quiet soundscape (Earshot 2025). One witness reported being able to hear sounds from approximately 200 meters away (Earshot: witness 08: 9), while others recalled distinguishing distant noises such as drones and mobile phone notifications (ibid., Witness 13: 9). The silence overpowered all ambient noise, producing an "acute analytical state of sonic attention" (Earshot 2025: 8–9), indicating heightened spatial and auditory awareness.

At approximately 19:10, during the 15-minute silent vigil, a sudden high-intensity sound occurred on Kralja Milana Street, followed by a stampede as civilians attempted to move away from the street further onto the sidewalk. Early speculation, supported by a subsequent report by the Russian intelligence agency FSB, attributed the panic to a conflict between protesters and pro-government supporters in a nearby park (Reuters 2025c) or to "pyrotechnic and incendiary devices." However, several participants noted that the acoustic event preceded any visible disturbance (Le Monde 2025). The character of the sound phenomenon consistently evaded clear identification, being described as "alien" and impossible to reproduce (Earshot, witness 11: 10) or as unusual to witness in that particular position (ibid., witness 02: 10). For the most part, descriptions largely relied on analogies with other invasive sounds—"like a jet," "like a machine," "like a roar" (ibid., witness 7: 11). Comparative audio testing concluded that sounds of pyrotechnical devices, motorcycles, quadcopters, sirens or vortex cannons were all considered mismatches by witnesses (ibid: 8–11). In addition to descriptive analogies of sound, 2335 out of 3244 written statements (72%) describe the experience as somatic, with the sound being accompanied by a physical sensation (ibid. 10). Witnesses described it as having felt the soundwave "in my bones," "in my muscles" (ibid., witness 09: 10). Nearly all witnesses clearly distinguished the event from crowd noise. Earshot ultimately concluded that it was "highly likely the protestors were subjected to a targeted attack using a directional acoustic weapon" (ibid. 4).

Understanding sound weapons as so-called "non-lethal devices" requires attention to both their technical capabilities and intended application. Juliette Volcler distinguishes three basic characteristics of non-lethal devices: the imperative of "neutralizing rather than killing," a blurring of the line between "war and law enforcement or humanitarian operations" and consideration of public opinion and the media in "management of conflict" (Volcler 2013: 127). The permitted application of sound weapons does not include the option of

visible physical harm, but permits deterrence from violent conflict. This situates sound weapons in an ethically ambiguous position: they have the power to cause 'invisible' harm and therefore demand heightened operational responsibility.

Sound weapons do not operate solely within audibility, but extend into what Volcler terms "extra-auditive effects of sound" (Volcler 2013: 11) because their vibrations can exceed perceptual thresholds through bodily resonance. At the right intensity, frequencies below 2 Hz move the entire body, while 5 Hz is among the most discomforting; frequencies between 4 and 6 Hz resonate with abdominal organs and the chest wall (Altmann 2001: 181). Thus, amplifying frequencies that would otherwise remain imperceptible introduces physical repercussions. Additionally, some frequencies are perceived as stronger than others even at identical intensity levels: 1500 Hz, for instance, is perceived as stronger than 15,000 Hz (Volcler 2013: 15–16).

Long-range acoustic devices (LRADs) can be correspondingly tasked with amplifying particular frequencies within a selected sound range. They are most efficient between 2–3 kHz, corresponding to peak human auditory sensitivity, but can also intensify lower frequencies. An example is the sound of a jet engine which occupies a lower frequency range (roughly up to 1 kHz) whose amplification will emit more power, producing soundwaves felt as a physical force in addition to being audible. Ordinary phone microphones may fail to record these acoustic effects adequately, which does not prove their absence during use (Earshot 2025: 11). Moreover, the perceived intensity of sound emitted by an LRAD can diminish due to diffraction taking place when sound reflects off other surfaces or encounters atmospheric interference (Altmann 2001: 195–196). If an LRAD was used on March 15, it would have likely been directed linearly along the Kralja Milana Street.

Innate human responsiveness to sound establishes a foundation for understanding how acoustic technologies acquire political force. Berendt argues that sudden and intense noise triggers reflexes rooted in survival mechanisms as involuntary readiness to potential danger. Loud sound affects everyone in its path as an unconscious call to arms (Berendt 1983: 79). Physiological sensitivity implies loudness as disruptive, unrelenting and requiring defensive action. This provided the reasoning for research of "no-touch torture" with the goal of inflicting pressure and coercing behaviour without leaving visible injuries (McCoy 2006: 28–29, 33–34). From the outset of their development in the United States, they also belonged to a lineage of weapons of "no-touch" torture characterized by the ability to "incapacitate without leaving visible traces" and render the enemy "docile or ineffective" (Volcler 2013: 126–127). Similar techniques were explored with loud music even prior: during the 1989 U.S. intervention in Panama, loud music and noises were continuously played outside the Vatican embassy sheltering Manuel Noriega (ibid: 101). The capability of LRAD however surpassed pure psychological warfare and would be used in US operations for deterring pirates in Somalia and military combat in Fallujah, Iraq (ibid: 104, 112). Its use later expanded to crowd dispersal during lootings following Hurricane Katrina (Goodman 2010: 21). Goodman situates

such weapons as arising out of a strategy of producing fear without material violence (ibid: xiv) capitalizing on uncertainty regarding the nature of what was experienced. The danger is thus not only in its intensity, but in ambiguity as to whether the phenomenon was an actual attack or just a sound event without an identifiable source.

Its potential use on March 15 introduced the possibility of arbitrary reuse at any given moment. It poses a greater problem to explain the phenomenon in question if the LRAD was absent rather than if it was employed, given the consistency of earwitness accounts. If it was truly deployed as all descriptions point to, then its use against silent, non-violent protesters demands a convincing rationale. Even more perplexing is that the event it was used during was a familiar silent vigil enacted for months without exceptions, with the only difference being the amount of people. The expected effect of using an LRAD in such a situation would be either to incite panic and a riot or to disperse the crowd: if the former is the case, then the sound weapon becomes used entirely contrary to its initial intent; if the latter, then the issue concerns the citizens' right to assembly, but also how the justification for disputing these rights is articulated. It introduces the possibility of complete lack of ability to counter the mimetic mechanism of the movement, instead attacking it outright.

Serbian Interior Minister Ivica Dačić denied that any sound weapon was used during the vigil. The government initially denied possessing such devices, later admitting that an LRAD model had been purchased in 2021. An officer confirmed it was "mounted on the hood of our vehicle... to be activated if there is a need" (Earshot 2025: 16; European Western Balkans 2025a; Reuters 2025b). Meanwhile, pro-government media ridiculed the claims. On Informer TV, editor-in-chief Dragan J. Vučićević and SNS MP Vladimir Đukanović mocked the "sound cannon," joking that "the coloured revolution fell apart" because of it (Le Monde 2025). On March 19, 2025, the Interior Ministry acknowledged that an LRAD unit had been present in Belgrade, while maintaining it was not used (European Western Balkans 2025a). Shortly thereafter, on March 26, the European Court of Human Rights opened an inquiry and on April 29–30 issued interim measures ordering Serbia to prevent the use of sonic weapons or similar devices at protests (European Court of Human Rights 2025).

Disorder of the Aftermath

The regime and its supporters would persist in publicly discrediting the scale of the assembly on March 15 by both denying and ridiculing the accusations regarding the sonic weapon. Their response would, however, also entail a sonic component, evident in SNS-organized pro-government counter-rallies in April 2025 in several cities throughout Serbia. Unlike those organized by the student movement, the SNS rallies included staged musical acts, food tents, drinks and organized transportation. Notably, pro-regime groups occupied the boulevard and park in front of the parliament building, effectively blocking traffic in the very centre of the capital until 4 January, 2026. "Ćacilend Camp,"

as it was pejoratively monikered by the public, was installed under the pretext of gathering "students who want to study," in opposition to the students who are protesting. It soon expanded from the park onto the main avenue in front of the parliament building, with tents installed for the planned SNS rally on 12 April, 2025 (Andersson 2025). The camp was predominantly occupied by people who were either of pro-regime affiliations or had criminal records (KRIK 2025). Justifying the imposition on free public space as a response to the university and intersection blockades, one way this space was demarcated was through music. The rally on April 12 featured performances by musicians associated with popular folk-music such as Garavi Sokak, Dejan Petrović Big Band and the ultra-nationalist "turbo-folk" musician Mirko Pajčin, known professionally as Baja Mali Knindža; a performance in Niš also featured another regional music star, Aca Lukas (Nova 2025). This period would also include political activism by individual musicians on both sides of the political divide. In August, the rock festival Zaječarska Gitarijada cancelled the participation of the punk-rock band Goblini, reportedly due to the band's "political views," prompting other bands to boycott the festival, including popular acts such as S.A.R.S., Deca loših muzičara, Električni orgazam, Brkovi, Kerber, Generacija 5 (Vreme 2025). The "turbo-folk" singer Seka Aleksić reported cancellations of several concerts, reportedly due to her support for the student movement. Conversely, the public climate would increasingly shift to support for the students, particularly when musicians critical of the movement and supportive of the government would perform at public venues or city squares.[3]

Following the protests on June 28, 2025, attended by over 140,000 people, a violent stand-off between protesters and pro-government supporters protected by the police took place, sparking a period of several weeks of repeated violent confrontations (Washington Post 2025). This period intensified pressure and polarization within the cultural and education institutions. Some theatres and publishers cancelled performances in solidarity with the protests, while festivals saw artists withdraw or be removed because of their political positions. In numerous cases, teachers in public schools on part-time contracts would either have their contracts terminated or extensions suspended. In several cases, school principals who expressed support for the protests would receive contract terminations and be replaced by pro-government individuals (Martinović 2025). On November 1, 2025, a one-year commemoration of the canopy collapse was held at the station site in Novi Sad with tens of thousands attending (Reuters

3 At a festival in Loznica on July 10, 2025, a pro-regime singer Đorđe David performed before a hostile audience who shouted protest-related slogans to disrupt the performance before eventually turning their backs towards the stage and leaving; a similar incident also occurred in the city of Sombor in October. Performances by the singer Jelena Karleuša would be repeatedly interrupted and booed as a response to numerous public statements against the students containing hate speech and calls to violence (Ilić 2025). Another similar incident on January 13, 2026 included the folk singer Ana Bekuta when the audience interrupted her performance at the Čačak city square by throwing snowballs at her, forcing her and her band to leave the stage.

2025g). The next day, minor demonstrations occurred in Belgrade when Dijana Hrka, the mother of one of the victims, was prevented from initiating a hunger strike in front of the parliament building, in the restricted territory within the so-called "Ćacilend." This resulted in what was likely a spontaneous use of music violence with pro-government groups blasting loud music. The songs in question were selected and used as retaliation against the attempted hunger striker: namely, the lyrics of "Pukni zoro" and "Morem plovi jedna mala barka" thematize a mothers' reunification with her son. Used for their cheerful arrangement and subject matter, they were mockingly sung towards Dijana Hrka by the assembled crowd of pro-government supporters in "Ćacilend."

Coda

In choosing to assemble and to assert their right to political commentary, as well as by being willing to endure violence and by calling for the support of the broader citizenry, the students who blockaded their universities publicly presented themselves as political subjects. This made the precarity of their political position visible in their being physically attacked. The presentation in question was successful due to reconfiguring students into figures endowed with moral capital available for imitation by other like-minded political subjects. The reasoning was that if students could do it while being repeatedly attacked, then they are reliable role models for others as well. The result was a nation-wide mobilization of support that extended to the Serbian diaspora around the world that opposed the SNS regime. The performative act of students transfigured into a mimetically relatable position that would only be further asserted through overt negation of its right to exist by the government and its supporters. An enacted suspension of sound staged the students' political subjectivity as a public performance, whose violent disruptions were not perceived as part of the act, but as attacks on the mimetic potential of the movement.

If suspending sound was an initial political act where incurring violence contributed to a morally charged polarity, it would be music that assisted with inviting people to participate via imitation and relatability. This included popular music from the period of socialist and post-socialist Yugoslavia whose emotional cues did not require, but nonetheless left space for an explicit political interpretation. It was left to individuals to incorporate music into their own political imaginary. Furthermore, music used in public and digital spaces enabled different, pluralistic modes of sonification of the student movement. The digital space in particular was grounded in contextualization and interpretation of the movement itself, while the performed one rested on modes of embodied, living, bodily participation in groups of people. What also mobilized the broader public and denied the political polarization imposed by the regime was the public performance of Serbian patriotic songs and the national anthem, dismantling the notion that protests were directed against the Serbian state.

The response of the regime was nonetheless hostile through public speeches, media appearances, attacks, arrests and police brutality. The credibility of

the political imaginaries was attacked from the beginning of the political crisis, reaching their climactic point with the incident on March 15, 2025, and the suspected use of the sound weapon. Whether the intent was to cause panic and violent backlash, to dissolve the mimetic potency of the movement or to discredit the political power of the silent protest that amassed several hundred thousand people remains unclear. While silent acts of the student movement were attacked all along, the climactic event on March 15 raises suspicion that the performed silence was attacked directly with weaponized sound.

Silence as a suspension of intentional noise served as a remembrance of those killed in Novi Sad, while tacitly pointing the finger at the regime. It was used to enact the right to gather, which reminded the public of systemic corruption. Apart from the use of noise and silence, it would be their use of music that generated the character of assembly through its descriptive soundtrack and embodied character. Public obstructions of the vigils and political rallies organized with staged musical performances aimed to assert presence by showcasing a monopoly to political noise. Yet, there is an obvious performative contrast: while the student movement articulated itself in sonic cues (both through silence and music) during its assemblies for the purpose of inviting people into public spaces, the pro-government faction used music and sound for demarcating their own political space and pre-emptively defending it (with the alleged sound weapon). The mimetic and affective foundation of sound manipulation by the student movement was inherently *expansive*, while its instrumentalization by the pro-government faction was inherently *restrictive*.

Sound acts as a technique for redrawing the line between groups; between citizens and power structures. The students' insistence on commemorative silence, performing music in public, along with the regime's use of violence and noise denote a struggle of two opposed models for asserting political spaces. Both the outcome of the crisis and its subsequent articulations remain unknown, but what has fundamentally changed is the degree of willingness by the two opposing factions to make themselves heard. The student movement sound strategies prove that mobilizing consent and generating "moral capital" requires mimetic mechanisms for achieving correlation among the population critical of the SNS regime. In order to achieve this (at the surface level at least), the student movement renounced any ideological claim, leaving open the spectrum of affective strategies resting on mimetic foundations. In addition, it exposed the absence of mimetic mechanisms by the regime and unveiled its requirement of demarcation and restriction. The sonic practices of the protests by the student movement and the pro-government faction reframed the usual coordinates of politics as polarity between the government and the opposition. Within such a constellation, both the performance of silence and of music that the public found attractive asserted itself as subversive to the existing political order.

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Nikola Vasilijević

Zvučna kulisa pobune: zvučne prakse u protestima u Srbiji 2024/25

Apstrakt

Urušavanje nadstrešnice na Železničkoj stanici u Novom Sadu 1. novembra 2024. godine, koje je rezultiralo smrću šesnaest osoba, pokrenulo je talas javnog ogorčenja koji se razvio u ono što se može smatrati najvećim studentski predvođenim protestnim pokretom u savremenoj istoriji Srbije. Počevši od petnaestominutnih komemorativnih tišina tokom blokada saobraćaja, zvučne prakse protesta postepeno su se širile i umnožavale kroz urbane i digitalne prostore — od javnih muzičkih izvođenja i objava na društvenim mrežama do različitih oblika prekida javnih događaja. Pored nasilnih opstrukcija od strane pristalica vlasti, navodna upotreba vojnog zvučnog oružja dodatno je učvrstila poziciju zvuka kao političkog instrumenta, kako u metaforičkim, tako i u fizički štetnim manifestacijama. Rad polazi od teze da su zvučne prakse — od orkestriranih tišina do uličnih muzičkih performansa i viralnih zvučnih zapisa — imale ključnu ulogu u artikulaciji protestnog pokreta 2024/25. Iako se muzički "soundtrack" protesta često oslanja na već postojeći pop-kulturni materijal, njihov neposredni zvučni identitet formira se kroz performativno delovanje i njegovu brzu reprodukciju među učesnicima i pristalicama pokreta. Cilj rada je da ispita na koji način estetsko i afektivno izražavanje putem zvuka funkcioniše istovremeno kao organizujuća i destabilizujuća politička sila. Rad nastoji da pokaže da je zvukom oblikovana sklonost ka javnom okupljanju tokom protesta 2024/25, umesto da bude eksplicitna politička artikulacija, ugrađena u performativno okupljanje i afektivnu mimetičnost. Kako bi se to ispitalo, rad razmatra zvučne prakse protesta i nastoji da identifikuje mehanizme političkog izražavanja putem tišine, muzike i njihovih opstrukcija.

Ključne reči: tišina, muzika, zvuk, zvučno oružje, mimetičnost

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MIRRORS AND MESSAGING: THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN SERBIA'S PROTESTS, 2023–2025

ABSTRACT
Over the past few years, Serbia has seen several major protest movements, including the Serbia Against Violence protests in 2023 and the 2024-2026 student protests after the collapse of the canopy at Novi Sad Train Station. Over the course of these protests, media have served not only as a way to channel and disseminate information about political protests, but have also themselves become a target of critique. Indeed, through protests targeting otherwise obscure bodies such as REM (the national regulator of electronic media) and the framing of seemingly unrelated issues (such as interpersonal violence) through narratives of media, these protests have highlighted the role of media capture, censorship, and suppression as key tactics of the state in Serbia. Through discussions of media as a "mirror" for society, media is framed as indistinguishable from or even synonymous with politics, corruption, and the problems perceived to exist in Serbian society. Drawing on a year of ethnographic research in Serbia, including interviews, participant observation, and media analysis, this chapter situates the relationship of media to democracy, authoritarianism, and protest in the context of the successive social movements that have taken place in Serbia over the last several years.

KEYWORDS
Serbia, Media, Protest, Metaphor, Television, Youth, Ethnography

Introduction

In March 2025, Serbian student protesters blockaded the offices of RTS (Radio Television Serbia) and RTV (Radio Television Vojvodina), the two largest state-owned television services in the country. Using metal fences, they executed what they called "the liberation of our RTS," symbolically blocking access to these iconic outlets of state media.[1] The first blockade was temporary, designed to last only a day as a symbolic exercise. Students planned to blockade the RTS offices for 22 hours only, as a demonstration of the injustices they

1 Baletic 2025: March 11.

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perceived to be taking place at the national broadcaster. The second blockade, however, lasted two weeks. Students pitched tents outside the offices and worked to prevent station workers from returning to the offices, forcing them to enter through a nearby kebab shop; they were demanding that changes be made at the highest level of the national media regulator.[2] After two weeks, the student protesters achieved their goal: a revised process for selecting members of the REM (Regulatory Body for Electronic Media) the national regulatory body that controls access to TV and digital media, including the RTS and RTV state television channels.[3]

Why were the students protesting outside two major state television stations? This action took place as part of a broader series of protests that emerged in the wake of the collapse of a train station canopy in November 2024, killing 16 people. The protests soon extended beyond Novi Sad, the city where the tragedy had occurred, and became a broader movement against perceived corruption and autocracy in Serbia's current regime, ruled by the Serbian Progressive Party. As I will demonstrate in this article, the protests demonstrate how media is seen as central both to the control that the Serbian Progressive Party and President Aleksandar Vučić hold over Serbia, and as a potential tool and site of resistance.

At first glance, the scale of this particular protest action – a two-week blockade – may seem to be disproportionate to the demand: a legislative change to a seemingly obscure regulatory body, REM. Yet, in the context of the protests Serbia has witnessed over the past five years, this concentration of people power at the national broadcaster speaks to the central role of media within both the Serbian political system and the movements mobilizing in opposition to it. The REM is the body that determines which channels are allowed to broadcast widely, and with what content; in that capacity, it oversees the public broadcasters, such as RTS, as well as the many private broadcasters currently operating in Serbia. RTS, the state-owned television, has been increasingly criticized in the last decade for insufficient coverage of wide-scale protest movements, the implication being that it is following the wishes of President Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party.

Privately owned stations, such as Pink and Happy, have also been a target for protesters due to the tone and content of their coverage, particularly of opposition politicians and protesters. However, RTS's status as a public broadcaster means that it is a symbol of public media in Serbia; it should theoretically be a nonpartisan outlet serving the needs of all citizens. Whereas Pink or Happy can traffic in scandalous content, diatribes against opposition politicians, and direct attacks on political opponents, the state broadcasters are supposed to be officially unbiased. They fulfil this remit, according to their critics, by studiously not addressing topics that those in charge don't want addressed – protests against the government, or critiques of President Aleksandar Vučić and his

2 A. M. 2025.
3 Stojanovic 2025.

reigning Serbian Progressive Party. In occupying and blockading the premises of RTS, the student protesters were symbolically registering a complaint against this elision of reporting on serious topics, and asking them to report more objectively in future; symbolically "taking back" what should belong to the public, and highlighting the ability of the current regime to cement power by maintaining control over news media and the flow of information in the country.

In this article, I argue that media is not just a tool or platform for protesters, but a major focus and venue of political conflict. To do so, I analyze key moments and elements from political protests in Serbia in recent years, focusing on the period from 2023 to 2025 that saw the Serbia Against Violence protests following two mass shootings and the student movement that grew out of the collapse of a canopy at Novi Sad Railway Station. Over the course of these protests, opposition activists have marshalled increasingly sophisticated technologies and rhetorics of resistance, employing social media campaigns, humor, spectacle, and carefully targeted demands to challenge the ruling Serbian Progressive Party. Scholars and mainstream accounts of protest often highlight this dimension of media, particularly digital media and online platforms, as a tool for mass mobilization and circulating a movement's messaging. Yet, alongside these creative ways of channelling and disseminating information about political protests, the protests have also zeroed in on media platforms and institutions as central targets of critique. In this article, I analyze the protests' focus on media and the broader role media plays within these movements by drawing on both the history of Serbia's media ecosystem and my own ethnographic fieldwork on youth media consumption and the politicization of media in Serbia, conducted between 2022 and 2024. Ultimately, I show how the intertwining of media and politics in the Serbian context makes media into a venue and target of large-scale social mobilizations.

That is, in directing actions and demands toward media institutions – rather than just political bodies – recent protests have also highlighted the role of media as a tool of government control, and its relationship to democracy and authoritarianism in the Serbian context. Protesters have not just used media to organize and distribute messages; media institutions, regulators, and discourses have been central foci of protest demands, and both physical and symbolic sites of debate and activism. In thinking through the successive social movements that have taken place in Serbia over the last several years, this research finds that through actions targeting otherwise obscure[4] bodies such as REM (the national regulator of electronic media) and the framing of seemingly unrelated issues (such as interpersonal violence) through narratives of media, these protests have highlighted the role of media capture, censorship, and suppression as key tactics of the state in Serbia.

4 Obviously, electronic media regulators like REM hold significant power in their ability to shape media availability and access; that said, they can be thought of as "obscure" in that they are not a usual topic of citizens' everyday conversations about politics and media.

In focusing on events like the REM blockade, this article turns its attention to how the protests both illuminated and worked to disentangle the deep-rooted links between media channels, information flows, and the state. RTS, as a symbolic nexus of state power, informational control, and wide media reach, was central to the protesters' strategy and rhetoric, highlighting the importance of media in discussions of protest politics. At the same time, broader global discussions of misinformation, press freedom, and increasing polarization frame media as essential to a functioning public sphere, and by extension, democracy.[5] What can the Serbian case contribute to discussions of the global public sphere? The Serbian protests are a vivid demonstration of the intertwining of media and politics and the way this relationship is shaped by historical, social, and political legacies. By unpacking these dynamics, we can shed light not only on the dynamics of the protests in Serbia, but on larger questions of what being a mediated subject – and *citizen* – means in the present day.

Methodology

These observations form part of a larger research project on media consumption, media literacy, and institutional trust among Serbian youth, a project that employed a variety of ethnographic methods, particularly participant observation, interviews, and content analysis. Research for this project was conducted in Serbia over nine months between January and September 2022, with six weeks of follow-up research trips in April/May 2023 and March 2024.[6] The main period of this research was based in Niš, Serbia's third largest city; research also took place in cities including Belgrade, Kragujevac, Novi Pazar, and Novi Sad.

During the main period of my fieldwork, I conducted 55 interviews and focus groups with 76 participants. I allowed respondents to choose to be interviewed in either English or Serbian, and most chose Serbian. I also asked them whether or not I could record; only two opted not to be recorded, in which case I took notes during the interview. Formal participant observation was conducted at public events related to media, culture, and nonprofit organizations, such as panels, workshops, media literacy trainings, festivals, and presentations; these events took place in community venues, such as co-working spaces, NGOs, and bars, as well as online.

Approximately a quarter of respondents were media workers, NGO employees, or other media experts; the rest were a mix of youth, including youth activists, recruited through universities and other connections. In addition, a university professor organized two focus groups for me with their communications students. Because my personal and professional networks were centered

5 See Peruško, Vozab, and Trbojević 2022 and Strömbäck 2005, for example.

6 Research for this project received IRB approval from the Northwestern University IRB; detailed information on ethics protocols and considerations is available upon request.

around universities, this study speaks to a population of largely urban-dwelling, college-educated individuals; while many respondents came from more rural areas, they moved to cities to attend university.

Interview questions asked respondents about their media consumption habits and their views on the importance of media and media literacy in general; probed education, profession, and political and religious views; and asked about their goals and plans for the future. For those whom I was interviewing as representatives of media organizations or NGOs, interview questions focused more on the goals, priorities, and histories of the organizations. When interviewing youth, I would ask them to scroll with me through the public news feed of a social media application that they used regularly; when they accepted, we would look at the posts together, with me asking questions about what things meant, how they chose to follow different accounts, and whether different posts on the feeds were typical or not for them. By employing this "digital walkthrough" method,[7] I sought to account for the fact that media consumption is a practice that increasingly takes place across online and offline worlds. These walkthroughs, moreover, allowed me to see what media consumption looked like for youth in practice, and they prompted discussions of topics such as algorithms and media practices that were shared within social groups. In addition, for a subset of interviews with youth, I would send them links to three articles from three different Serbian publications. I deliberately selected these articles to be from very different sources, and to not be explicitly political but to be able to speak to wider issues if the reader chose to interpret them that way.[8,9] I discussed these articles with respondents, asking them what their impressions were and collecting data on which article they thought they might hypothetically click on first, which article was most like the typical content in Serbian media, and which sources they thought were trustworthy and why. These discussions elicited both helpful media comparisons and also reflections on what constituted a high-quality or relevant piece of news.

For content analysis, I made a point of keeping abreast with Serbian media – primarily online, as my informants did, but also drawing on TV and print publications. I followed as many news sites and political parties as I could find on Instagram and Facebook (creating a new Instagram account specifically for this purpose) and paid special attention to both traditional and social media during major media events. I stored articles and snippets of social media posts that were particularly interesting for later coding and analysis.

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7 Lane 2018.

8 Drawing on methods from Mankekar 1999.

9 For instance, one set of articles included an article from opposition-oriented *N1* about how satisfied Russians were with the rebranded McDonalds dupe launched after the pullout of Western companies from the country, an article from state broadcaster *RTS* about the vandalization of the new flagship "fast train" from Belgrade to Novi Sad, and an article from controversial tabloid *Informer* about the most common names of historical female Serbian royalty.

As such, the empirical data set that this paper draws on dates from early 2022-mid 2024. I did not conduct formal fieldwork during the 2024-2026 student protests, and the parts of the paper that deal with that time period are reflections exploring the conceptual implications of my earlier research, rather than empirical research findings; my focus is on larger trends within the Serbian protest space in the last five years.

Literature Review: State Power and Media Control: The Case of Serbia

To think about the protests in Serbia over the last few years, we must consider Serbia's growing authoritarianism, particularly the ways in which that authoritarianism manifests through media suppression and censorship.[10] Serbia has been described as "a postcommunist country with backsliding democracy and a highly politicized, polarized media system in which media freedoms are in decline"[11] and a "fragile democracy."[12] Kmezic further notes how the decline in media freedom in fact represents a historical norm in Serbia and its antecedent countries; a slight increase in press freedom in the 1980s later became, in the 1990s, a system that was "formally pluralist, but remained government-controlled." In his comprehensive summary of the Serbian media scene, he argues that influences on the media are nowadays more covert, consisting of self-censorship and soft censorship, and rendering Serbia's democracy "an empty shell." "Without the ability to access and exchange information, without fearless fact-finding and exposure of potentially uncomfortable truths, and without debates that allow for critical and diverse points of view, the democratic standing of the country is forfeited," he writes.[13]

The media landscape today is marked by extreme polarization; outlets are sorted into "pro-regime" (TV channels such as Pink and Happy and print/online tabloids such as *Informer*) and "opposition" (the TV channels N1 and Nova, which are only available via a specialty cable provider, as well as numerous local online portals). This polarization is one factor driving young people to disengage from media; as a student I interviewed told me:

> That's why I don't follow the yellow press [tabloids], I don't follow the numerous powerful spins and daily political shots fired that appear in our media. I don't polarize myself like Serbian media generally polarize themselves on different sides. I don't do that. I make a big, big cutoff, I only accept a small amount [of that content].

In other words, this young person was so frustrated by media polarization that they cited it as a reason for severely restricting their media content

10 Higgins 2022.
11 Kleut and Milojevic 2021.
12 Kmezic 2018.
13 Kmezic 2018.

because they felt like media polarization jeopardized their ability to read media effectively.

This polarization is in part driven by post-transition processes of media privatization, which left many outlets in the hands of wealthy businessmen with state connections, as well as informal mechanisms of government influence on media; scholars refer to this as "media capture."[14] As Kleut and Milojević write, "as important tools for gaining popular support, the loyalist media were generously rewarded, while critical media were verbally harassed, and targeted in smear campaigns run by pro-Vučić tabloids."[15] They describe mechanisms of media control including "state ownership of influential media; clientelist relations with major private TV channels; political influence on the appointment of broadcasting regulator and public service media boards; and use of public funds to reward loyal media," which all further drive media polarization. Scholars have also documented the economic problems of local media[16] without powerful foreign partners to support them, and the impact of political pressure on journalists' self-censorship.[17]

The interdependent relationship of media structures and the conditions for democracy has been well-documented in the literature; scholars have described this as certain media conditions being necessary for deliberative democracy to exist.[18] Though what media pluralism looks like may vary depending on the variety of democracy that is being pursued,[19] certain normative standards remain consistent: to provide basic information about society and political processes, to provide factually correct information, and to provide a forum for political discussions; Strömbäck characterizes this with the formulation "media and journalism are under some form of – at least moral – obligation to democracy."[20] In fact, illiberal and authoritarian public rhetoric (as often conveyed through media) has been empirically linked to autocratization, as a kind of "early predictor" of political change.[21]

The Serbian context, therefore, can be theorized, in a Europe-centric context, as a process of "de-Europeanization."[22] It can also, however, be understood in a post-socialist context;

Natalia Roudakova, in her book *Losing Pravda*, argues that the particularities of the socialist public sphere – when colliding with the system of free-market capitalism post-transition – resulted in an erosion of the value of truth itself.[23] Notably, she refuses to consider journalism and propaganda as being the

14 Milojević and Kleut 2023.
15 Kleut and Milojević 2021.
16 Vujović, Pavlović, and Obradović 2019.
17 Mitrović and Milojević 2022.
18 Peruško, Vozab, and Trbojević 2022.
19 Raeijmakers and Maeseele 2015.
20 Strömbäck 2005.
21 Maerz and Schneider 2021.
22 Castaldo and Pinna 2017.
23 Roudakova 2017.

opposite sides of a binary; instead, she traces how media privatization in the Soviet Union severed previously existing moral and social relations, which in turn devalued truth, fostered cynicism, and paved the way for ultra-nationalism. Of course, Serbia is not Russia, and not the Soviet Union; however, it is perhaps more instructive to consider the media situation in the sense of the complicated and much-critiqued "transition" rather than as a failure of a democratic ideal.

These problems and structural factors mean that media production and consumption inevitably becomes a highly and explicitly politicized act. Choices about media – which channels to tune into, one's news consumption habits – are telling decisions that speak to one's political orientation and outlook. Interlocutors told me that journalists were doing political party work or that they saw certain local media as extensions of the government, pressuring them to do what they (the government) wanted. One young person I spoke to, citing the infamous incident where seven major publications all featured a paid ad of Vučić's campaign poster as their title page before the election,[24] said that this proved that they "weren't real media." I asked another interviewee why it was important for him to keep up with current events; he explained "because, to cite my uncle, who I respect greatly: 'If we don't deal with politics, politics will deal with us.'" (*Ako se mi ne bavimo politikom, politika se bavi nama*). In this quote, the difference between media and politics is elided, and they become one and the same. In this article, I examine why that is, and what it means for protests against the media and against the government.

Theoretical Framework: Media As Mirror

This idea, that media is inherently inseparable from politics, was first introduced to me in a conversation with a worker at a pro-democracy NGO in Belgrade. We were having a wide-ranging conversation about the current state of Serbia's media environment and its historical antecedents, and she said:

> We are a country that is now post-conflict. In our society, there is a great deal of influence, from the one side, of global changes in the information sphere, through new technology, the Internet to begin with, and then social media. And on the other hand, we have the local context – the actual breakup of one country 30 years ago, and the creation of new, smaller countries in that post-conflict environment, which, if I may say so, is still not resolved. Everything was just put – I hope not on hold, but stopped. These two big directions, global and local, impacted our whole society, and also the media, because everything that happens in society impacts the media and vice versa, everything that happens in the media impacts society. Because media are always the mirror of society.

Her formulation, which puts the problems of Serbian media in a historical and geopolitical context, raises several questions. What does it mean to talk about the media as a mirror of society?[25] What does it mean to say that political

24 Nenadovic 2017.
25 Krovna Organizacija Mladih Srbije 2022.

and social problems are **reflected** in media? How are understandings of broader dysfunction dependent on **appearances**? Do the media provide an accurate **image** of actual events? The image of the mirror was one that arose several times in my research, and it provides an interesting crystallization of one way of conceptualizing the relationship of media and politics: as reflecting one another.

In other contexts, this metaphor often conveys positive ways that the media might reflect society: as a watchdog, as a forum for democratic debate, or as a kind of useful magnifying glass.[26] This is not, however, what this respondent meant by "media as mirror." Instead, in her mention of the "information sphere," the NGO worker raises an important question regarding the shortcomings of the model of the "public sphere"[27] for conceptualizing political deliberation and participation. Normative conceptions of the relationship between media and politics, drawing on this model, often focus on the ideal of a well-functioning public sphere, in which journalists hold governments to account, or on cases such as the Arab Spring, in which new media technologies facilitate the growth of large protest movements and even revolutions. Accounts of media problems, such as polarization, fake news, and disinformation, often reinscribe the notion of the public sphere as central to political life, highlighting how these phenomena threaten the possibility of a lively public sphere.

But the public sphere model often implies a space of political deliberation and informational exchange as existing outside of the political system; this compartmentalization is suspect anywhere, but breaks down most obviously in a semi-authoritarian context like Serbia's, where media is central to the apparatus of state power. Media as a mirror, as the NGO worker describes it, speaks instead to media as embedded within and intertwined with broader social and political structures. The image of media as mirror here locates the issues of media – whether that issue is fake news or a culture of violence – as inseparable from the society that it is meant to reflect – in its moral values, in its political makeup, in its own particular pathologies. Understanding media as a mirror allows us to examine shared social and moral concerns about media that are tied to cultures of violence and political dysfunction.

Ari Adut, in his book *Reign of Appearances*, argues for bringing the **visual** and the **spectacle** into our understandings of the public sphere and for understanding the citizen's role as one of spectatorship rather than participation.[28] But the image of the mirror offers more than just the visual element: it also hints at the intimate links between the political structure and the media that reflect it. This connection can sometimes be quite literal: one interviewee mentioned to me that Aleksandar Vučić, the current president of Serbia, used to be Minister of Information in the 1990s, "so he knows all the ways to control media."

If we take the media-as-mirror framing as a dominant way through which Serbian citizens understand their media ecosystem, it offers crucial context for

26 Raeijmakers and Maeseele 2015.
27 Habermas 1991.
28 Adut 2018.

how the protests have made media broadcasters and regulators into the targets of their movements. Social movement theorists and other social scientific accounts of protests often focus on the capacity of media to mobilize, to create shared frames, and to disseminate information. However, in the Serbian context, the very channels through which this information ought to be disseminated are suspect, given histories and presents of state media control and manipulation. Media cannot simply be a neutral channel for the dissemination of information, but in themselves become part and parcel of the political solutions these protests are calling for. In the following sections, I highlight moments from recent protests that speak to this mutual imbrication of media and politics, and how it shapes the tactics and political imaginaries of these movements.

Serbia Against Violence Protests

In May 2023, Serbia experienced two mass shootings within the span of 48 hours. The first, in a high school in central Belgrade, was carried out by a 13-year-old student who borrowed his father's handguns and killed nine fellow students and a security guard, as well as injuring six others. The country, which had never experienced a school shooting before, was in shock – schools were closed, three days of national mourning were declared, and concerts and events were cancelled for weeks.

The very next evening, a 22-year-old man who had quarreled with his friends went on a shooting spree from his car in villages near Belgrade, killing nine people and injuring twelve. While the first shooter had turned himself in to the police, a manhunt was required to pursue the second shooter all night, until he was apprehended the next morning near the city of Kragujevac. These events, which are highly unusual in the Serbian context, upended society throughout the country, and were to create a firestorm in response; here we might begin to think about Adut's highlighting of shock, awe, spectacle, and their importance in mobilizing dialogue within the public sphere.

In the days after the shootings, public discourse coalesced around two major narratives explaining why these events had occurred. The right-wing version, embodied in a statement by Education Minister Branko Ružić, blamed "the cancerous, pernicious influence of the Internet, video games, so-called Western values."[29] This narrative, which found evidence in a few TikTok videos and disturbing social media comments making light of the killings, marshalled support among a segment of society that was already concerned about "Western" influence liberalizing Serbia, particularly in terms of hot-button issues such as feminism and LGBT rights.

The other narrative made reference to a broader culture of violence in Serbia, propagated by and through the media. A former student at the school where the first shooting happened, Luka Babić, was quoted as saying, "We can't put the blame on this school or its teachers. (...) It's a tragedy of a society that

29 Gec and Stojanovic 2023: May 3.

promotes violence. We live in the society of violence, and it has been promoted in media, in public spaces, on social media."[30] This second narrative, which was associated with the left-wing opposition to Serbia's current government, eventually formed into a protest movement entitled Serbia Against Violence, which became the largest protest movement in Serbia (at that time) since the downfall of Slobodan Milošević in 2000.[31]

Throughout the rest of the spring and into the summer of 2023, tens of thousands of people would fill the streets weekly, primarily in Belgrade, but also in towns and cities throughout Serbia, demanding government accountability for the violence. Although the protests were organized by several opposition parties, protesters did not carry party signs; instead, they advocated for a list of particular demands, the overwhelming majority of which related specifically to the production and broadcast of media. They wanted the resignation of several government ministers, the removal of the Pink and Happy TV channels from the national frequency,[32] an end to the broadcasting of reality shows, and the sanctioning of tabloid media outlets that did not follow the national code of journalistic ethics. Pictures of the protests circulating online showed protesters holding up signs with such slogans as "Turn on your brain, Turn off Pink." Another sign showed the logos of popular TV channels such as Pink and Happy, as well as popular tabloids, with X's through them. Another sign called REM, the national regulator of electronic media, "evil."[33]

Initially, I was surprised by the direction of the protests; as a citizen of the US, where these kinds of violent events are sadly commonplace, I expected to hear calls for gun control or mental health support. The steps between a mass shooting and the national regulator of electronic media weren't at first clear. But in Serbia, a protest against violence had seamlessly become a broader social movement mobilized around media – media ethics, media governance, and the power of media to promote a culture of poor moral values and violence. To those marching under the banner of Serbia Against Violence, media institutions were not just symbolic of, but reflective of, even constitutive of, a breakdown in Serbia's political, moral, and social system. In this section, I examine how this illuminates the ways in which critiques of the media ecosystem mirror broader moral economies, epistemic practices, and political structures.

At the time of writing, the channels on the national frequency (a package of channels that are broadcast to every household with a television at no

30 Gec and Stojanovic 2023: May 3.

31 Higgins 2023.

32 Five channels available for free to anyone with a television set; a government body controls which companies are awarded these coveted broadcasting spots. RTS, the national broadcaster, takes one of the spots; because there are three RTS channels, some respondents also refer to seven channels on the national frequency.

33 The national regulator of media had also appeared in media literacy trainings – I attended one whose script mentioned looking to regulatory bodies as a tool of media literacy, and the facilitator shrugged, saying a little desperately, 'Well, we know what we can expect from these regulatory bodies now!'

additional cost) are RTS (the state television), B92, Happy, Pink, and Prva. All of them are understood to produce news coverage favorable to the ruling party. The two major opposition channels, N1 and Nova, have been repeatedly denied public broadcasting licenses and are available only on more expensive private cable providers (and not all of them). This means that critical TV news coverage reaches only a small portion of the Serbian population, who are financially disincentivized, or even excluded, given small incomes, from receiving it. The problems that this causes for media pluralism have been reported on by media freedom organizations,[34] protested by the channels themselves,[35] and also became a key demand during the Serbia Against Violence protests.

This particular media ecosystem and the monopolization of channels by political elites led people to conceptualize media and political corruption as mutually reinforcing. One young person narrated the connection between the media environment and the political situation as follows:

> [The media situation in Serbia] is disgusting, but I suppose congratulations, how he [Vučić] gets so many people to believe in him. In general, in Serbia a great number of people live in rural areas, in villages, they don't have access to all the channels. They only have the national frequency, 7 channels, literally, and he chooses these 7 channels. For you [the interviewer, an American], you have BBC, CNN, and you can hear everything – he arranges it nicely and no one else has access. It doesn't matter if they fulfill the regulations, what should be in the program – that's not important. You only have Pink, Happy, RTS1, which should be a national service. We pay for it. It should serve us. And in fact, it only serves those with whom it has an agreement.

Here the respondent describes how government control of media, in her view, is especially effective in rural areas, where people have fewer options for media access; she also critiques the bias of these supposedly "national" public services.

> And what happens is, young people leave Serbia, old people stay, who only have access to these media, young people can't choose and they don't have the will to, they're sick of Serbia, because they plan to leave (...) and that is very logical. He saw that there are a huge number of retirees in Serbia; of 6 million people, 2 million of the voters are retirees, and he controls them, they vote for him in great numbers, he bribes workers with employment, those who are more like 30, 40 years old – 'If you vote for me you'll get a job in this factory' – and that's how it goes. He has half the votes and he generally controls media in Serbia. You can't succeed at all, the only way he would not be in the government any more is that, I don't know, in 2000 they lit the parliament on fire and changed the government that way, but it's the same people these 20 years and no one sees an exit, because people keep voting for him, and probably they're rigging the elections.

34 Moratti 2023.
35 Radosavljevic 2022.

Here she connects this media control explicitly to political control, through elections, and to youth emigration, which she characterizes as being driven by frustration with this system.

> In every city in Serbia are people from the main party, the mayor of Niš is SNS [Serbian Progressive Party], all the cities and towns, so you don't have any opposition government in Serbia (...) . So you don't hear another voice, there's nothing to fight for.

Here she connects the two: government control of media allows political control to tighten, which furthers government control; this is the vicious circle at work.

This quote ties together unequal access to media in rural areas, the problem of brain drain and youth emigration from Serbia, and generational differences in political behavior; this respondent gives a vivid and succinct summary of a narrative I heard many times over. Another summarized it simply as: "On national television, they show it how they want us to see it." These complaints about the political monopoly on major media sources came from across the political spectrum – the ruling party's opposition from the left, but also the opposition from the right.

As people understand it, the biased and corrupt media situation is intimately linked to Serbia's political situation. Channels such as Pink, which I often heard described as showing immoral content and outraging standards of behavior, also prop up an increasingly autocratic government, and are allowed to do so by the biased media regulation of that same government. The corruption of the media, the corruption of the political system, and the corruption of the epistemic system are closely linked and mutually reinforcing. As one interlocutor told me:

> They can do whatever they want, because they literally have, they have a program where for ten hours some people speak against the opposition, against people who rose up, they say that the government is the best and that goes in a circle every day, all day on Pink. We have an expression: a lie said 100 times becomes the truth. The 100th time you hear something, you say, maybe it's really true.

Media corruption, then, led not only to degraded standards of behavior and political dysfunction, but to a degraded value of truth. And political dysfunction led to media dysfunction. It is impossible to identify a cause and effect; one way to describe this would be a vicious circle, but another would be a mirror, or a hall of mirrors, reflecting the same problems back and forth endlessly. The moral problems of reality television were inseparable from the culture of violence that gave rise to the mass shootings, which was itself inseparable from a degraded political situation where the ruling party manipulates the media to serve its own ends. Moral problems and political problems mirrored one another. In this context, it makes perfect sense for political protests to target the media; the media are constitutive of the political problem.

Of course, the "Serbia Against Violence" protests were not the first time that protests had targeted the national regulator of electronic media. During the "Ekološki Ustanak" (Ecological Uprising) protests against the proposed Rio Tinto lithium mine in southern Serbia in 2021, the public broadcaster had aired an advertisement by Rio Tinto promoting the mines; a protest shortly afterwards took place outside the REM offices.[36] These protests, like others in recent years, were also plagued by framing of protests as "disinformation" potentially seeded by bad actors.[37] However, the Serbia Against Violence protests were notable in that they demonstrated a shift towards making media a central target of protest demands; this rhetorical interconnection of media, political, and financial corruption set the stage for the approach to media during the student/train station protests in Serbia from 2024-2026.

Protests Following the Novi Sad Train Station Canopy Collapse

On November 1st, 2024, a canopy at Novi Sad's central train station collapsed, killing 16 people and injuring others. The train station had recently been renovated to "European standards" with Chinese investment, a marquee infrastructural project of Serbia's ruling Progressive Party. Much like the shootings in May 2023, collective grief over this tragedy was to morph into a powerful social movement, this one led by students and centered around institutions of education. Over the coming months (and continuing into the present day) vigils for the victims would morph into critiques of the state that had created the circumstances that allowed the tragedy to happen, bringing together unlikely coalitions to protest government corruption and lack of transparency.

At a remove, the circumstances shaping the inciting incident and subsequent social movement after the Novi Sad train station collapse share several things in common with other recent protest movements in Serbia. Critiques of the process that led to the foreign-led infrastructural development process as colonialist, betraying the interest of local people, echoed the Rio Tinto protests, which targeted the Serbian government's partnership with an Australian mining company. The framing of loss of life as a reason for protest (and the ensuing protest rhetoric of vigils, moments of silence, and other rituals of grief) echoed the Serbia Against Violence protests of 2023, which focused on the responsibility of protesters and citizens towards the lives that had been lost and highlighted collective mourning as a righteous motivation for political action. And, of course, all three protest movements targeted corruption at the federal level, the highest level of Serbian government. Whether that was the corruption of colluding with a foreign mining company to change laws with ecological ramifications, the corruption of allowing poorly performed renovations in the service of outside investors rather than local safety, or the corruption of a media and political system that fostered a culture of violence, all three protest

36 Milovanović 2021.
37 Garcia 2025.

movements framed themselves as against a corrupted system, one that was not looking out for the interests of everyday people.

This sense of pushing back against a corrupted system was shaped by the resistance to commemorations of the disaster that quickly coalesced among pro-regime elements; the first attack on students was on November 22nd, 2024, when students and professors from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, paying homage to the victims, were attacked by pro-government supporters. Later protests were marred by cars driving into them, as well as police brutality against and detention of student movement supporters and organizers. Controversy grew after an incident on March 15th, 2025, when hundreds of thousands of protesters flocked to Belgrade, and a stampede occurred, which the protesters said had been caused by government use of a sonic cannon or weapon.

The social movement that grew out of this event has now been going on for over a year; student protesters have succeeded in blocking various university faculties for long stretches of time, and have been supported by vast swathes of Serbian society, including professional associations of lawyers and teachers, celebrities in music, acting, and sport, and countless everyday people who made food for students or greeted them along their routes. Besides the occupation of university buildings and traditional protest gatherings in city centers and blocking highways, the movement has been marked by several well-publicized journeys on foot and by cycle; students traveling on foot from southern Serbia to Belgrade to attend protests, for example, or the journeys to Strasbourg and Brussels that I will discuss later in this section. Avoiding any overt cooperation with established opposition parties, the student leaders of the protests have focused on their core demands: the publication of the documentation of the renovation of Novi Sad Train Station, the institution of criminal proceedings against those who had attacked student protesters; the end to criminal proceedings against student protesters and activists started since the beginning of the student movement; and an increase of 20% in the funding for state universities. The student movement has also been marked by its use of democratic deliberation to come to decisions, particularly the "plenums," and its focus on media-friendly actions that nonetheless show sincerity.

While several government officials have resigned (and a few even been criminally accused of corruption) as a result of the social movement, the students' demands have not been fulfilled, even as the broader world has taken note. However, the movement has been reshaping the political landscape of Serbia, as well as the political experience of a youth generation often assumed to be apathetic, only in search of emigration or "getting by." Against a backdrop where change is often assumed to be impossible, the student movement, while rhetorically focusing on concrete and achievable changes, as exemplified by the above demands, has managed to rhetorically conjure up an image of a system turned on its head; in the midst of a landscape of resignation and stalled reform, to imagine a context of responsive institutions and democratic participation, even if only by highlighting their absence.

It is in this context that the blockading of the RTS and RTV channels, discussed at the beginning of the chapter, is so significant. Besides achieving the stated goal (in the case of the April protest) of restarting the competition for membership of the REM, this blockading symbolically highlighted control over media as a key source of power of the current regime. By demanding and achieving a change to the key institution through which the government regulates media, the protesters were able to symbolically highlight the role of media capture, suppression, and censorship as key tactics of the increasingly authoritarian state. This is related to but distinct from the critique of the "culture of violence" we saw in the Serbia Against Violence protests in 2023; here, there was a specific pattern of bias and elision in reporting that was being highlighted, critiqued, and linked to broader structural issues. Protesters were highlighting the connection and the inseparability of media and politics.

For another angle on the protests' strategic deployment of media as not just a medium but a mode and target of critique, we might look at the student journeys to Strasbourg and Brussels. In April, 80 students began a "journey of hope" by bicycle to Strasbourg, France, a 12-day, 1200-kilometer journey with the ultimate goal of delivering a letter to the Council of Europe. "That's why we are going to Strasbourg," they wrote. "Not because we expect someone to solve our problems, but to make the world hear the voice of Serbia – for European institutions to exert pressure on the authorities and stand in defence of the rights of all those who are forced to remain silent."[38] Similarly, a relay "ultramarathon" of students from Belgrade to Brussels met with European politicians in May.

From a certain viewpoint, these quests have a quixotic, even fairytale quality in the current day and age – traveling from Serbia to France, or Switzerland, by bike, or on foot? Of course, it is precisely this seeming naïveté that gives these actions their power, drawing on a rhetoric of youth, innocence, and purity of intent. Surely, they seem to say, surely you simply don't know what is happening, and if we travel to deliver you a letter, surely you will do something about it. These actions draw not only on the publicizing effects of social and traditional media but on the public resources of spectacle, narrative, and drama to communicate a message about the wrongness of things as they stand currently in Serbia. Media is no longer simply a tool through which to spread information about protests, to organize, and to build consensus; it is a key target of protest demands and a key resource that can be mobilized for the goal of resistance.

These bike rides also speak to another limitation of the traditional way of viewing the interaction of media and politics in the public sphere. As previously discussed, one of the many demands of the protesters was that domestic Serbian media report differently, covering protests and challenges to state power as carefully as they covered state initiatives. However, the possibilities of making this kind of change are limited in a domestic public sphere; this is

38 Baletic 2025; April 4.

why the rise of social media and the internet have been so consequential for governance structures around the world. Now more than ever, a protest movement in Serbia is not just operating in one public sphere, but embedded within large-scale international media flows through which it has access to other kinds of audiences.

The bike ride to Strasbourg and the ultramarathon to Brussels were not just appeals to a certain idea of "European-ness" – rule of law, functioning of institutions, etc., though that was a central dimension. They were also attempts to circumnavigate the limits of the Serbian public sphere by bringing the protesters' message to a wider, European or even global audience; to break out of the information system where they might otherwise be contained. Media and politics might reflect each other, but there are other places to look besides the mirror.

Conclusion: Mediated Citizenship, Democracy, Public Spheres

This article began by asking the question: why did media become such a central focus of protests against a corrupt and arguably authoritarian or autocratic state? From one angle, the answer seems obvious. There are ways in which the control of information directly enables political control; if people cannot see that others are protesting on the national broadcast television channel, this argument goes, they will not be able to imagine protesting themselves. But this has been true before the present day, under "traditional" media systems and before them.

In contrast, these protests have specifically targeted media institutions; not only using social and traditional media to organize and distribute information about protests, but attempting to make changes in media regulation, media cultures, and modes of reading media. What do protests against government corruption, environmental damage, and colonial foreign control have to do with media?

Besides highlighting the power of media as a tool and locus of protest, I would argue that this focus on media represents the way that citizenship is increasingly mediated; the politics of information having become central to discussions of deliberation and identification in democratic, authoritarian, and hybrid regimes. To see this, we need only look to the endless discussions of conspiracy theories, disinformation, misinformation, civic education, and media literacy that have consumed academic and scholarly discourse over the last decade. As societies (and media systems) become increasingly complex and increasingly globalized, information remains necessary to participate in – or, arguably, to create – a public sphere of civic and political engagement and participation. This creates obvious strains in cases – like the Serbian one – where different generations deploy different media and information habits shaped by different historical experiences, but also in all those where media and information habits are shaped by differences of location, class, education, and gender. And it places greater pressure on media as a determining factor

in the political direction that a given society is going to take, even whether it tends toward democracy or authoritarianism.

This is what the students were highlighting with the blockade of RTS, and what the Serbia Against Violence protesters were highlighting when they displayed signs "x-ing" out the logos of popular media channels, or reading "REM is evil." They were displaying an understanding of media as inseparable from the political situation, even as constitutive of it, as much as it reflects it – media as the mirror of society. Similarly, we might see the pilgrimages by bike and on foot to Strasbourg and Brussels as attempts to escape this hall of mirrors, or to appeal to different circuits of information and politics, to make visible a national struggle on a larger European stage. In each case protesters held up an ideal of the relationship of media and politics – responsive European institutions, fair and balanced media regulation, media outlets that promote a respectful civic and political culture – against its absence, not because they necessarily believed in the ideal, or as the student protesters put it, "because we expect someone to solve all our problems," but to highlight a problem. In doing so, they used deeply imperfect and flawed media as a tool to lodge a protest and to imagine an alternative – perhaps, even to hold up a mirror.

However, while the image of the media as a mirror illuminates the structural issues and political obstacles to a free exchange of information, it does not offer a simple solution. Put simply, if the problems of media are inseparable from the broader social and political structure, a solution requires large-scale political and social change rather than simple media reform. Describing media as a mirror implies that media in itself is not the problem, and, therefore, media cannot be the solution.

This is why I had initially understood the mirror to be a pessimistic analysis of the Serbian political landscape. The solution it implied – an overhaul of the social and political system – seemed to be so broad and ambitious that it seemed almost cynical. My view of the mirror framing, however, shifted as I watched protest engagement with media develop. For instance, in February 2024, when a new decision was handed down in the case of Slavko Ćuruvija, a journalist who was murdered in 1999 during the NATO bombing of Serbia and at the end of the Milošević regime. Ćuruvija was an independent journalist who had been critical of Milošević and his wife, Mira Marković, and his killing was understood to have originated in the government of that time. The case became a wider symbol of media freedom issues and the dangers to independent journalists in Serbia and in the region more broadly, and four state security officials were convicted of the murder in 2021.

Then, in February 2024, that decision was reversed on appeal, and the men acquitted. In response to the ruling, which was widely understood as a miscarriage of justice and as a step in the wrong direction, hundreds of people protested outside the appeals court which had issued the decision. As part of the protest, those assembled brought an array of mirrors – hand mirrors, wall mirrors, cosmetic mirrors – so that the judiciary could see their own reflection. The sight of hundreds of people holding up mirrors to the state speaks not only

to the power of the mirror as a symbol, but to a different way we might understand media as mirror. If media as a mirror reflects the problems of society, it can also be used as an ethical tool to hold that society accountable.

Indeed, another way to approach the idea that media, moral, and political problems are all connected – that if you pull on one thread, you get everything – is that you can start fixing the problem anywhere. On the one hand, this metaphor conceptualizes media as an insurmountable problem – if the issue with media is just an outcome of the issues with society, then one must fix society first, and media should follow suit. However, the work of organizers and protesters speaks to another way in which people take up the media-as-mirror metaphor in their actions. In seeing all of these processes – news, corruption, neglect, and violence – as interconnected and influencing one another, activists could choose any number of entry points to engage political actions and media activism, opening up new and creative ways to organize.

Take, for instance, the blockade of RTS, or the demands for change to REM. By channeling protest actions not just through media, but towards media, activists highlighted the possibilities of changing the information that people had available to them, changes that would have political, social, and cultural ramifications. These actions highlighted not just the mirror effect between media and politics, but the phantom of a set of different possibilities; of protest demands being recognized, of political and structural change, even of a shifting of funding priorities towards the university budget. The mirror does not only reflect the present-day society; it can help imagine a new one.

By making media a central focus of protests for environmental justice, against a culture of violence, and highlighting government corruption, protesters in Serbia over the last 5 years have highlighted the role that media plays in consolidating authoritarian rule and maintaining political dominance. Media is not only a metaphorical space for transmitting information about protests, but a physical location of protests, a target of social movement demands, and a stage on which to deploy the rhetorical resources of humor, spectacle, and narrative. Through their actions, the protesters have demonstrated that media-as-mirror is not only an indictment of a problematic political and information ecosystem, but a tool with which to fight back against it. It is hard to escape the political infrastructure of the media – but it is possible to blockade it.

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Ema E. S. Brant

Ogledala i poruke: Uloga medija u protestima u Srbiji, 2023–2025

Apstrakt

Tokom poslednjih nekoliko godina, Srbija je bila svedok više velikih protestnih pokreta, uključujući proteste „Srbija protiv nasilja" 2023. godine, kao i studentske proteste 2024–2026. nakon urušavanja nadstrešnice na Železničkoj stanici u Novom Sadu. Tokom ovih protesta, mediji nisu služili samo kao kanal za prenošenje i širenje informacija o političkim dešavanjima, već su i sami postali predmet kritike. Naime, kroz proteste usmerene ka inače manje vidljivim telima poput REM-a (Regulatornog tela za elektronske medije), kao i kroz uokviravanje naizgled nepovezanih tema (poput međuljudskog nasilja) kroz medijske narative, ovi protesti su ukazali na ulogu medijske kontrole, cenzure i potiskivanja kao ključnih državnih taktika u Srbiji. Kroz razmatranje medija kao „ogledala" društva, mediji se predstavljaju kao nerazdvojivi od, pa čak i sinonimni sa politikom, korupcijom i problemima za koje se smatra da postoje u srpskom društvu. Oslanjajući se na godinu dana etnografskog istraživanja u Srbiji, uključujući intervjue, participativno posmatranje i analizu medija, ovaj članak smešta odnos medija prema demokratiji, autoritarizmu i protestu u kontekst uzastopnih društvenih pokreta koji su se odvijali u Srbiji tokom poslednjih nekoliko godina.

Ključne reči: Srbija, mediji, protest, metafora, televizija, mladi, etnografija

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Ana Jovanovic-Harrington

DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM AND THE POLITICS OF NOISE: CO-OPTATION AND NARRATIVE FLOODING IN SERBIAN PROTESTS

ABSTRACT
Contemporary electoral autocracies increasingly rely on information abundance rather than censorship to maintain control. This article explores how infotainment has emerged as a key battleground in Serbia’s protest politics (2024–2025), serving both as a tool of resistance and as a mechanism of soft authoritarian control. Utilizing a combined quantitative and qualitative content analysis of six media outlets, three pro-government (*B92*, *Informer*, *Pink*) and three independent (*Danas*, *Južne Vesti*, *N1*), the study traces how the regime constructed a divisive discourse by splitting students into two opposing camps: “ćaci” (a viral misspelling co-opted to represent innocent non-political youth) and “blockaders” (a pejorative for those protesting). The analysis reveals a structural asymmetry: while pro-government outlets aggressively deployed emotive frames and mockery (labeling student protesters as “fascists” or “foreign agents”), independent media were relegated to a reactive role, attempting to debunk these narratives. This discursive aggression is identified as a calculated prelude to the physical violence observed since the summer of 2025. Ultimately, the study concludes that modern authoritarianism thrives not by hiding the truth, but by burying it under layers of irony and manufactured conflict.

KEYWORDS
Digital Authoritarianism, Soft-Censorship, Media Capture, Co-optation, Framing

Introduction

Building upon the institutional vulnerabilities of Serbia’s transition period, the SNS’s (Serbian Progressive Party/*Srpska Napredna Stranka*) solidification of power in 2014, catalyzed a shift from democracy to electoral autocracy, as noted by the country’s downgrading in global indices (Papada et al., 2023: 40). However, a decade later, the regime is a resilient electoral autocracy: one that retains the formal shell of democratic institutions while systematically hollowing out their substance.

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Bieber (2018) and Castaldo and Pinna (2018) pointed out early in the transition that this version of competitive or electoral authoritarianism differs from that of the 1990s, although some actors remain the same. The incumbent authorities do not want to risk isolation (*ibid.*) and draw legitimacy from foreign investments and the stability they allegedly provide to the population (Šterić, 2021). Nevertheless, the consensus is that the media, along with the extraction of public funds for personal gain, is a particularly important pillar supporting the fragile balance of external and internal legitimacy in an autocracy that holds elections (Pavlović, 2019; Castaldo, 2020).

In this sense, democratic backsliding in Serbia is not unique. Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) compared autocratisation in 182 countries from 1900 to 2017 and concluded that contemporary autocracies are, on average, far less violent than their historical counterparts. Modern autocrats combine soft censorship and institutional co-optation that, in most cases, make violence redundant (Schneider and Maerz, 2017: 225–227). However, this is precisely what makes autocracies today more flexible and durable (*ibid.*). Simply put, economic advancements (Maerz et al., 2020) and access to citizens' data (Keremoğlu and Weidmann, 2020), paired with constant propaganda and soft public service co-optation (Heydemann and Leenders, 2011: 650–651; Maerz and Schneider, 2021), sustain contemporary autocracies through several election cycles, scandals, and even months-long protests.

Nevertheless, the ongoing student-led protests in Serbia, which began in November 2024, pose a new threat to the ruling party. This article discusses the ruling party's media response to this challenge through qualitative and quantitative content analysis of over 4,000 articles on the protests across six outlets, including three propaganda mouthpieces (*B92, Informer, Pin*k) and three independent outlets (*Danas, Južne Vesti, N1*) for balance.

Although the 2024–2025 protests were not the first major continuous protests in Serbia to turn into movements, they were the first to be youth-led. Groups of mostly working adults led other protests and focused on specific issues, like "*Ne Davimo Beograd"* against the Belgrade Waterfront project (Wielen, 2019) or the "1 in 5 million" movement (Pešić and Petrović, 2020), against violence towards opposition parties. Although each of these protests raised awareness of widespread corruption and misuse of authority, SNS successfully diverted attention from them through media capture, convincing the rest of the country that the protests were about a single city or person.

However, this wave of protests has now surpassed all previous ones in terms of longevity and citizen engagement. Attendance at some events was even higher than on the 5th of October 2000, when Milošević was toppled (Maksimovic and Popovic, 2025). Therefore, the ruling party in Serbia is now employing new tactics to maintain its legitimacy, which will be discussed in this article: mimicking and co-opting protesters' language. Humor has always been intrinsic to resistance in Serbia (Popović, 2015; Petrović, 2015), but what happens when an autocratic regime tries to be funny?

Humor and wordplay play a significant role in the ongoing student protests in Serbia: (1) to subvert and ridicule political authority, (2) in constructing collective identity, and (3) in fostering solidarity both within the student community and across broader societal divides (Lalić-Krstin and Silaški, 2025: 142). Moreover, during these protests, humor was also used to establish symbolic boundaries between in-groups and out-groups: those who participate in the wordplay and those who are its targets (ibid.: 150). As such, student memes and discourse became a threat to the incumbents for two overlapping reasons: they dismantled the regime's ideological claim to the future, and they disrupted its strategic use of humor to mask authoritarian control.

First, the student resistance directly contradicted the SNS's primary legitimacy narrative. For over a decade, the ruling party has campaigned on slogans such as "For Our Children" and "For the Future" (Obradović and Vujović, 2022; Bogićević, 2025: 56), framing itself as the sole guarantor of a better future for the country's youth (Nedeljković, 2022). Consequently, student mobilization constituted more than a policy disagreement; it represented a fundamental rupture in the regime's hegemonic claim to be the sole architect of the nation's future.

Second, the students' "meme war" disrupted the SNS's strategy of using humor to mask control. For example, during the 2022 election campaign, the president, Aleksandar Vučić, was in an infamous commercial which attempted to reframe his authoritarian hyper-visibility as benevolent care. The joke was that he is everywhere, so much so that he might step out of the fridge, which he does in the commercial, and then proceeds to talk about all the great things he plans to do for young couples. (Nedeljković, 2022: 32–35). However, when the student counter-memes stripped away this relatable facade, the regime faced a tactical dilemma. Standard instruments of repression, such as economic pressure (Freedom House, 2022) and smear campaigns (Vladisavljević et al., 2019), prove ineffective against students; verbally abusing young adults risks alienating the public and shattering the apathy that sustains the regime. Furthermore, because electoral autocracies rely on external legitimacy (Bieber, 2018), the state cannot resort to mass violence against youth without jeopardizing its standing.

Theoretically, this article connects the proliferation of infotainment in post-Yugoslav media (Peruško, Vozab, and Čuvalo, 2020) with the adaptive strategies of third-wave autocratisation (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019). Infotainment, as a combination of information and entertainment in news production, is becoming increasingly popular in online media; however, there are concerns that reducing news to actors and punchlines can have negative implications for democracy by sensationalizing serious topics (Mellado et al., 2023). However, in non-democratic societies, humor is an important tool to disseminate information (Smirnova, 2014), especially when the media is already captured (Dragomir, 2018; Castaldo and Pinna, 2018), and groups opposing the incumbents cannot reach the masses through traditional media. Therefore, I argue that the Serbian regime engages in a specific form of discursive co-optation: rather than simply censoring criticism, the state appropriates the language of the protests, effectively neutralizing it through irony and re-contextualization.

Meme War: Context

The catalyst for the 2024–2025 protests was the tragic collapse of the Novi Sad train station canopy on November 1st, which killed 16 people. Initial demands for accountability quickly escalated into university occupations and widespread blockades by mid-December (Gec, 2024). Tensions peaked when President Vučić dismissed record-breaking turnout, saying that the crowd was so small it did not even require the use of "Cobra" special forces to "throw [students] around" (Bender, 2025). This remark triggered the first wave of student memes, framing the regime's threat as absurd rather than frightening.

However, the official beginning of the meme war is late January 2025, when a pro-regime graffiti appeared, intended to read "Students [back] to school" (*Đaci u školu*), which contained a spelling error, reading "Ćaci" instead of "Đaci." In Serbian, changing "Đ" to "Ć" turns the word into complete nonsense. Lalić-Krstin and Silaški (2025) note that students immediately weaponized this error, adopting "Ćaci" as a symbol of the regime's illiteracy and incompetence. For Lalić-Krstin and Silaški (ibid.: 147–148), the misspelled graffiti is one of the main micro-events that, in a protest setting, gains significance through its recontextualization and repurposing.

Crucially, the regime did not retreat; it adapted. In a strategic act of co-optation, then-Prime Minister, Miloš Vučević, shared "I'm a ćaci too" on his Instagram around mid-March (N1, 2025). This was not the first time an insult aimed at government supporters was used by incumbents as a positive. For example, "bots" and "sandwich-eaters" are two similar insults tied to different micro-events that get reused and recontextualized, but it was the beginning of the widespread use of "ćaci" as positive across propaganda channels, not just a few throwaway remarks and social media posts.

In early April, the president posted a video of himself in a shirt that reads "I'm a ćaci too," endorsing the growing counter-student movement (B92, 2025). This marked a pivotal shift in the information war: the regime began using "Ćaci" as a positive term for good, non-political youth, while rebranding actual student protesters as "blockaders" (violent obstructionists).

Given the regime's shift from ignoring the protests to actively co-opting their language, this article investigates the mechanisms of this discursive struggle. Specifically, the study aims to understand how authoritarian actors utilize infotainment and information overload to reframe political reality. To guide the combined quantitative and qualitative content analysis, this article poses two central research questions:

RQ1: How does the disparity in article volume function as a mechanism of "information flooding" to obscure protest demands and displace traditional censorship?

RQ2: In what ways are the contested identities of "students", "ćaci", and "blockaders" characterized and framed across pro-government and independent media?

Methodology

To investigate the shift from traditional censorship to information abundance and discourse co-optation, this study employs combined quantitative and qualitative content analysis. This dual approach was selected to address the specific challenges of analyzing modern authoritarian discourse: while computational methods are necessary to measure the sheer volume of information overload, they are often insufficient for detecting the nuance of irony and humor (Riloff et al., 2013) used to co-opt protest narratives (Grimmer and Stewart, 2013).

Therefore, the research design proceeds in two stages to answer the central research questions: quantitative content analysis (addressing RQ1) through automated text mining in Python, used to establish the macro-patterns, volume, and visibility across the media landscape, plus a qualitative content analysis (addressing RQ2), a closer reading of the main frames pushed by the incumbents. Although the "memes" are a part of the digital sphere and protest placards, this study is about how the narrative was captured by the incumbents. Therefore, the empirical material for this research consists of online news articles. These articles show how memes, meant to take power away from the regime, were co-opted by it and subverted into something positive. The population for this study includes the textual output of six major Serbian news portals, selected to represent the polarized media spectrum (three pro-government and three independent outlets). The unit of analysis is individual news articles published between late January and mid-November 2025.

Data Collection and Cleaning

Using Python, web scraping was automated to include every article published under the "ćaci" and "blokaderi" tags between late January and mid-November 2025 across six outlets. Initially, the code included all data under these tags, which led to some false positives. For example, if the website did not recognize the difference between the characters ć, č, and c, the tag would inadvertently include news about "dečaci" (English: boys). This resulted in a final corpus of 4,646 articles.

Group 1 (pro-government media): (1) *B92* was a student-led radio founded in the late 1980s that gained prominence in the 1990s, supporting the anti-Milošević protests. After Milošević, the radio expanded to broadcasting and online, becoming one of the most popular commercial news sources in the country. However, in the early 2010s, it was sold and slowly changed all content to pro-government. At some point in 2017, all programs and almost all the staff were changed (Media Ownership Monitor, 2023: B92). (2) *Informer* is a daily newspaper founded in 2012 as a pro-government tabloid (Media Ownership Monitor, 2023: Informer). (3) *Pink* was one of the first entertainment-oriented commercial television stations in Serbia, founded in the 1990s. The owner has strong ties to SNS, both personal and financial, and the channel slowly

switched from pure entertainment to commentary-style news in the 2010s (Media Ownership Monitor, 2023: Pink).

Group 2 (independent media): (1) *Danas* is a daily newspaper founded in the late 1990s. Although I classified it as independent, it is worth acknowledging that it is owned by United Media Group and is known to have a liberal bias (Media Ownership Monitor, 2023: Danas). (2) *N1* started as a commercial 24h news owned by the same media group, United Media (Media Ownership Monitor, 2017: N1). According to the Digital News Report, *N1* was the most used online news source in Serbia weekly (Milivojevic, 2025). Unfortunately, United Media Group's publications are at risk of having their independence compromised, as the majority state-owned *Telekom Srbija* is in the process of acquiring the company's assets (Danas, 2025). Finally, (3) *Južne Vesti* is a digital-native news portal based in South Serbia but has gained national prominence for quality reporting. According to the Digital News Report (Milivojevic, 2025), about 12% of the population reads *Južne Vesti* weekly, making it more popular than *Pink* and *Informer* online. Moreover, as the legacy media faces enormous pressure, these digital-native local news portals might gain greater prominence in the future as perhaps the only remaining independent outlets.

It is important to note that journalism in Serbia has always been commentary-oriented, and this is not just a feature of government mouthpiece media but of the media system (Petrović, 2015; Milosavljević, 2021). Therefore, the label of "independent" in this cultural context does not necessarily mean objective or free of ideology; rather, it indicates that the authorities have not yet compromised the outlet, or that its management is ideologically opposed to the authorities to the extent that there is no financial overlap. Moreover, as the incumbents have captured many industries through friendly private businesses and state funds, the sources of revenue for independent media are severely limited. In this environment, infotainment thrives as a format in Serbia (Milosavljević and Poler, 2018; Peruško, Vozab, and Čuvalo, 2020: 174–188). Often, journalists and editors feel the need to make serious news a little more entertaining to attract an audience and compete in a harsh environment (*ibid.*).

Quantitative Analysis

The final corpus, containing a total of 1,937,873 words, was analyzed using RStudio. This process required several rounds of revisions to isolate the most used words. In the first stage, over 200 common stop words (e.g., "according to", "here", "now") were removed to find adjectives and insults. This initial sweep revealed the hyper-visibility of the ruling party: the terms "Vučić", "Aleksandar", and "President" appeared a total of 10365 times, making the government the dominant subject across all media regardless of the topic ("ćaci" or "blokaderi"). Consequently, to see beyond the main political actors and identify the specific descriptive terms associated with the protests, an additional 350 words were manually removed in a second round of filtering.

The selection of specific thematic frames was driven by an inductive approach, refined by the researcher's contextual knowledge of the Serbian political lexicon. The operationalization of framing here is in the broadest sense: to select an aspect of perceived reality and make it more salient (Entman, 1993; 2007). Moreover, in this sense, a frame defines problems, diagnoses causes, and makes moral judgements (ibid.). The initial reading revealed a wide variety of moral judgements about student protestors, such as: filthy/dirty/pigsty, plenumaši/zboraši (people who participate in plenums and assemblies), idiots/stupid/dumb, Shiptari (derogatory term for Albanians). Three frames stood out as encompassing most insults:

1. **Existential Threat Frame**: Students are not merely protestors, but an existential threat (terrorists).
2. **Fascist Foreign Agents**: A frame used to label students as fascists and traitors. In the local context, Ustaše is the most often used term because it encompasses both foreign interference and fascism. This specific framing is evidenced by the emergence of the regime slogan "Better Ćaci than a Nazi" (appearing 24 times in the dataset), which explicitly positions the regime's supporters as morally superior to the fascist students.
3. **Corrupt Privileged Elite**: This includes terms like "oligarchs" and the local colloquialism "*foteljaši*" (those who "hog the armchair"), implying that students are the children of tycoons who seek to halt Serbia's progress and hoard wealth.

While the three frames above define the protesters' identity, a separate analysis was conducted to assess the predicted consequences of their actions. To gauge the intensity of the alleged threat, the study tracked the specific vocabulary of conflict, distinguishing between "war" and the specific threat of "civil war" to determine the scale of the alleged danger. This analysis showed that pro-government media prefer to vaguely allude to violence rather than specify the kind of conflict students will provoke.

Nevertheless, qualitative interpretation was essential to address the failure of automated sentiment analysis to detect context-specific sarcasm. For example, on the 11th of November 2025, B92 posted "In Kneginje Zorka street, a sign appeared: "The street gives birth to Nobel Prize winners"; "Blockers, who is a ćaci now? PHOTO", and the description was pointing out that a street cannot give birth; therefore, the student blockaders are the illiterate ones, a spin on the misspelled graffiti that started it all. The same story and photo were posted by Pink the next day with the headline "WHO IS ĆACI NOW?! Blockaders showed how illiterate they are, a fierce mob in the center of Belgrade (PHOTO)." In turn, when slogans "Better Ćaci than a Nazi" are mentioned in independent media, it is not an endorsement of the statement, but it is news or commentary. Manual analysis was therefore necessary to identify this as a specific strategy of delegitimization.

Finally, there are two important shortcomings of the corpus that should be acknowledged. First, it is only possible to web scrape from sources that have an online news counterpart or are digital-native. According to the Reuters Digital News Report (Milivojevic, 2025), 85% of people in Serbia consume news online, but mostly through social media. TV remains the second-most-consumed source overall, and news websites and apps are third. Therefore, this type of analysis excludes content produced for television or print, as well as posts shared by citizens and students on social media. As such, online news is only a part of the picture of how intense this battle for the meaning of the words associated with protests is. Nevertheless, online news is where infotainment is most prominent and, therefore, a fitting choice for the topic of the co-optation of memes used against incumbents.

Second, technical barriers (e.g., anti-scraping protocols) necessitate excluding certain high-traffic outlets, such as *Kurir*. Therefore, while this study capture the information flooding and infotainment co-optation in the online news, it does not claim to capture the full multimedia spectrum of the regime's propaganda machine. Overall, the methodology mirrors the dual nature of the regime's strategy: noise/information overload (quantitative), and co-optation of humor to disarm resistance (qualitative).

Quantitative Findings: Information Overload (RQ1)

As shown in Table 1, production volume is heavily skewed toward pro-government outlets. *Pink* alone published 1,757 articles, more than all three independent outlets combined (1,650). Moreover, *Pink* accounts for 37.8% of all articles.

Source Media	blokaderi	caci	Total Articles
pink	1588	169	1757
b92	607	39	646
informer	510	83	593
danas	787	481	1268
n1	18	310	328
juznevesti	36	18	54
TOTAL	3546	1100	4646

Table 1: Number of articles

Source Media	Topic	Peak Week Start Date	Max Weekly Articles
b92	blokaderi	23/06/2025	49
b92	caci	20/10/2025	8
informer	blokaderi	27/10/2025	122
informer	caci	20/10/2025	29
pink	blokaderi	11/08/2025	335
pink	caci	03/11/2025	43
juznevesti	blokaderi	03/11/2025	7
juznevesti	caci	17/03/2025	3
juznevesti	caci	24/03/2025	3
n1	blokaderi	11/08/2025	4
n1	caci	03/11/2025	53
danas	blokaderi	20/10/2025	98
danas	caci	03/11/2025	36

Table 2: Weekly Peaks of Posting per outlet

The week around the 11th of August, when students joined forces with eco movements to protest the lithium mine in Serbia, *Pink* published a whopping 335 articles about blockaders, more than any other outlet published on this topic at its peak, combined across both groups. In traditional autocracies, the goal is to prevent information from reaching the public, but in modern autocracies like Serbia, the goal is censorship through oversaturation and confusion. This is evident in the asymmetry shown in Table 2.

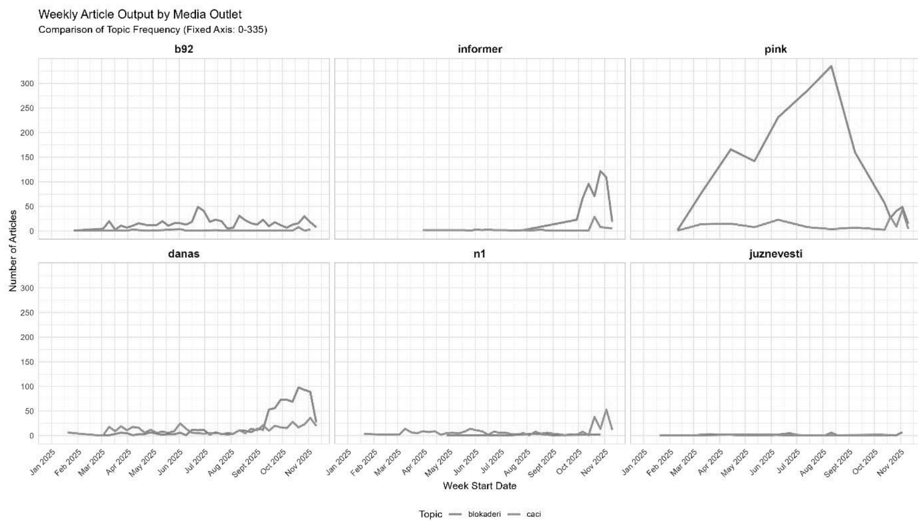
When *Pink* published a staggering 335 articles on "blockaders" in a single week, this was, on average, 48 articles a day on a single topic, effectively two articles every hour, around the clock. Meanwhile, independent outlets are short-staffed, due to a mix of funding constraints (advertising, subscriptions, subsidies) and the general decline in the prestige of the journalism profession. These outlets simply cannot devote the energy and funding to generate 48 articles on something that is not essential. The sheer volume indicates that these articles are not necessarily news, but *Pink* is oversaturating the information space with a dominant government narrative about who the students are (a threat).

Unfortunately, there is no database in Serbia to consult for the average output of the six outlets used in the study, and automating analysis would be too complex because most of these websites do not have sections for all news.[1] On the 21st of January 2026, while revising this article, it was possible to go back two to three days to count the outputs of *B92, Informer*, and *Danas* using the "latest news" tag, which contains only up to 50 pages. Out of the three, *Informer*

1 Instead, most news portals split news into broader categories such as politics, society, and sports.

has the highest output, with around 500 articles a day, followed by *B92* with 233 and *Danas* with 227.

Although data was not available for *Pink*, it is odd that a commercial broadcaster is leading in content output. For example, in the United Kingdom, even the most prolific tabloids, like *The Daily Mail*, would publish close to 1,500 articles a day, compared with *The Guardian's* just over 370, the *BBC*'s average of 200, or *Sky News*'s 127 (Press Gazette, 2023). Therefore, it is expected that tabloids like *Informer* will produce more content than daily papers like *Danas* or television broadcaster portals like *Pink* and *N1*, in line with a global trend. However, this is not the case in Serbia, where an entertainment-based commercial broadcaster is leading. In more democratic systems, like the UK, not even news-oriented, privately owned channels like *Sky News* are as prolific online, and even in Serbia, for a pro-government public broadcaster, like *B92*, 48 articles a day would be over 20% of daily output.



Graph 1: Weekly Article output per media outlet

Conversely, as mentioned, independent media is reacting to these frames rather than using this harsh language to describe student protests. For reference, when generating web scraping code for keywords, there were fewer than 20 pages on *N1* for both "ćaci" and "blokaderi"; meanwhile, the "studenti" tag that was not scraped would be 159 pages of articles as of mid-November 2025. Similarly, on *Južne Vesti,* the two tags had around 20 pages combined, while "studenti" had over 200. Danas is the most prolific outlet in independent media, and yet the two keyword searches combined have as many results as "studenti" (around 700 pages). Therefore, these outlets do report on the protests and their coverage focuses more on the actors than on the insults and memes.

Meanwhile, if we search for the word "student" in the pro-government media, almost all articles are also about blockaders. For example, in January 2026, on *Pink*, there are 68 pages of news about students, and 67 about blockaders, and this is without web scraping and cleaning the data by date, as on their website, one page can contain news from three hours ago, along with news from four months ago.

From the volume and peaks of posting, it is already clear that there is an asymmetry between pro-government and independent media, with one side more proactive in controlling how student protests are received. However, it is not yet clear how bad these blockaders are in the eyes of the pro-SNS media. As briefly mentioned in the methodological section, both sides, the pro-government and independent media, used similar words and, in both, the ruling party and the president were hyper visible.

Initially, I thought it would be possible to pool the most common words to find patterns. However, this approach yielded no fruitful results. Only *B92* showed clear patterns, and only about who the "ćaci" are; among the top 10 words are "students", "want to", "learn", and "work" (see: Table 3 below). Or, for example, on *Informer*, interest in "ćaci" peaked, likely because of a fire in the counter-movement camp, and this aligns with the main words being "Anđelković", the main suspect, "October", and "attack".

Source Media	Topic	Word	Count	Topic	Word	Count
B92	blokaderi	Vučić	1847	caci	Vučić	175
B92	blokaderi	Predsednik [President]	1028	caci	Ćacilend [Ćaci-land]	98
B92	blokaderi	Mediji [Media]	759	caci	Predsednik [President]	94
B92	blokaderi	Studenti [Students]	640	caci	Hoće [Want to]	78
B92	blokaderi	Aleksandar	585	caci	Uče [Learn/Study]	74
B92	blokaderi	Protiv [Against]	580	caci	Rade [Work/Do]	69
B92	blokaderi	Nasilje [Violence]	572	caci	Deca [Children]	65
B92	blokaderi	Žele [Want/Wish]	558	caci	Mnogo [Many/A lot]	62
B92	blokaderi	Novom [New][2]	532	caci	Šatora [Tents]	62
B92	blokaderi	SNS [Ruling Party]	522	caci	Skupštine [Assembly]	58

Table 3: An example of keywords around "ćaci" and "blokaderi" after removing 200 stop words

As explained, the president and the party were over-represented in both camps; however, this is to be expected in autocracies, especially when the leadership is trying to build a cult of personality. Instead, the goal of this paper was to determine what connotations were used to delegitimize students and co-opt the joke that the ruling party and its supporters are illiterate and incompetent.

2 This could also refer to Novi Sad the city.

Therefore, additional data cleaning was necessary to identify exact words and adjectives. Even after cleaning over 350 additional stop words to exclude main places like Novi Sad or Belgrade that are bound to be mentioned, and variations of "president" or "assembly", which dominated the discourse, most media across the board discussed "students", "citizens", "attack", "police", "violence", "government".[3] Therefore, on the surface, there appears to be a consensus regarding the central actors and topics. However, this lexical overlap obscures the divergent framing strategies employed by opposing outlets.

The next step was to analyze the main words in relation to each other, and there was a clearer pattern (See Table 4 below). For pro-government media, mostly *Pink* and *B92*, violence is against citizens. Moreover, of the 3077 times "attack" or "assault" is mentioned, *Pink* and *B92* are in the lead, with over 1000 mentions each. Meanwhile, as mentioned, the data on independent media is skewed because it does not include the student tag. *Juzne Vesti* and *N1* have almost no peaks in usage of the six main words. However, *Danas* used the word "students" the most, close to 5,000 times, more than any other outlet in any other group, followed by "police" and "government", used over 2,000 times, and "faculty", used over 1,000 times. Therefore, although similar words are used, these two groups of outlets do not appear to be discussing these events in the same way.

Outlet	Strongest Connection	Frequency
B92	Citizens and Violence	80
Informer	Citizens and Attack	7
Pink	Citizens and Violence	374
Danas	Citizens and Students	587
N1	Police and Students	36
Juzne Vesti	Police and Students	53

Table 4: Strongest connections between terms, table made by the author

Qualitative Findings: Bad Students and Good Counter-Students (RQ2)

While the quantitative analysis establishes that pro-government media differentiate between "innocent" "ćaci" and hostile "blockaders", it does not fully capture the intensity of the delegitimization directed at the latter. To determine frames, the dataset of over a million words was reduced to a qualitative sub-sample of 300 snippets that contained at least three high-frequency

3 The honourable mention that appears and disappears from the top 10 is "media." For example, on *B92*, *RTS* (PBS) is mentioned in the top 10 at some point; for *Informer*, *N1* is one of the top words; and for *Juzne Vesti*, *BBC*.

keywords (e.g., police, government, violence). For example, a snippet from *Pink*: "AN ACT OF MADNESS, FOR EVERY CONDEMNATION! SNS leader Vučević on the attack on party premises in Novi Sad! He also sent a clear message to the blockaders: Enough of terror and madness, you will never defeat us with violence!" contains three keywords: blockaders, violence, and attack.

As explained in the methodology, the selection of specific thematic frames was driven by an inductive approach, refined by the researcher's knowledge of the Serbian political landscape. Three frames were chosen because they encompassed multiple insults pro-government media hurled at the students. The two most common frames are that students are existential threats (terrorists) and fascist foreign agents, and interestingly, although they are often portrayed as corrupt privileged elites, this is not the most common frame. Furthermore, while pro-government media consistently frame the protesters as instigators of violence and disorder, they are not always portrayed as calling for a war/civil war, but just as prone to violence in general. More importantly, from analyzing the peaks of posting of these insulting frames, it is clearer that pro-government media leads with student delegitimization and co-opting their criticism, while the independent media is reacting.

1. Existential Threat Frame

In total, there were 671 mentions of terrorism, the main word chosen for this frame, but only 394 unique articles, because some articles used the word more than once. *Pink* had 197 articles on the topic, followed by *Danas* with 105, and *Informer* with 34.

Outlet	Date (Week starting)	Number of Articles
Pink	April 13th	24
Pink	May 11th	19
Pink	June 8th	25
Pink	July 13th	35
Pink	August 10th	38
Pink	September 14th	10
Danas	October 19th	19
Pink	October 19th	23
Danas	October 26th	17
Pink	October 26th	13

Table 5: Weekly peaks of posting: Existential Threat, chronological

Some examples of headlines on *Pink* from April 2025 are: "THE TERROR CONTINUES! STUDENT BLOCKADERS STILL IN FRONT OF RTS: For more than 9 hours they block all entrances! RTS said: This is violence!" or "BLOCKADERS' PLAN TO TAKE CONTROL OF THE FLIGHT AND CARRY

OUT A TERRORIST ATTACK HAS FAILED. The guests of the special show agree: We have shown democracy, we should show that we have a state!" Some examples from late October are: "SPECIAL SHOW ON THE OCCASION OF THE TERRORIST ATTACK IN SERBIA! Mrdić: Everything that happened was 'pumped' by the blockaders. Is this a policy that is good for Serbia?!" or "Jovanov for Pink: The attack on the camp of students who want to study is a pure example of terrorism."

Meanwhile, on *Danas*, despite the word "terrorism" and its variations being mentioned, it is not because the students protesting are labelled as a threat; rather, articles offer commentary and context on the overall adversarial politics in Serbia. For example, a snippet about terrorism in April is in an article with the headline "What does Ćaci-Woodstock bring?", where the snippet containing the word is "...to impose the impression that the country is collapsing, near the end of the video, the psycho[4] says that he can't fight terrorists..." Similarly, in April, an article about the new call for members of the commission of the state regulatory body for media (REM), contains a snippet that explains that some candidates are called all professors and deals who participated in the blockade, terrorists. Newer content, from late October, has headlines like "My protest diary: How much Serbia has changed in a year" with the snippet "...numerous accusations of police brutality, which the government denies and largely shifts the blame to the demonstrators, accusing them without evidence of terrorism..." Therefore, this is more of a reaction to the word "terrorist" associated with students than framing them as such.

2. Fascist Foreign Agents

There were 1265 snippets containing words relating to fascism, Nazism, and foreign interference in some way, especially from Croatia and Albania. After cleaning by headlines and dates per outlet, 576 articles remained containing these words. *Pink* had 234 articles, followed by *Danas* (229), and *B92* (58). However, looking at the posting timeline, *Pink* (and SNS) is once again leading the discussion, and Danas is reacting (see Table 6 below).

Outlet	Date (Week starting)	Number of Articles
Pink	April 13th	20
Pink	May 11th	17
Danas	June 1st	21
Pink	June 8th	38
Pink	July 13th	47
Pink	August 10th	48
Pink	September 14th	27

4 In reference to Miloš Pavlović, one of the leading figures of the pro-government student movement Students 2.0, also known as ćaci.

Outlet	Date (Week starting)	Number of Articles
Danas	October 19th	17
Danas	October 26th	18
Danas	November 2nd	23

Table 6: Weekly peaks of posting: Fascist Foreign Agents, chronological

A snippet of some of the first articles in April on *Pink* was summarizing sentiments from one of SNS's high-ranking officials, Ana Brabnić: "Pressure groups from Nova [a United Media channel] keep promoting fascist ideology. They say that all of us are ćacis, and we are all the same: pure fascists. And they are proud of this." Some of the newer snippets from early November are: "Tonight, they continued their fascist celebratory attacks on Pionirski Park Ćaciland, which proved to be an impenetrable barrier in the defense of our Serbia and the dignity of students and citizens."

Meanwhile, on *Danas*, this was a snippet from a June column: "...between desires and possibilities, fueling intolerance, he [Vučić] pushes his followers to shout that it is better to be a Ćaci than a Nazi. He lives in the hope that this social instability that he caused himself will somehow end on its own..." And another more recent one from November: "...he [Vučić] called us cowards and bullies, he said we were nervous because we failed. Imagine, all these people gathering in Novi Sad [for the anniversary of the tragedy] and he thinks that was a fiasco..."

3. Corrupt Privileged Elite

Contrary to my assumption, this framing, even with the inclusion of "foreign mercenaries" and the variations, is the second smallest in volume: only 206 unique articles and 265 mentions overall. However, it is most prevalent in the pro-government media: 118 articles in *Pink*, followed by 39 in *Informer*, 26 in *Danas*, and 21 in *B92*. Moreover, when it comes to spikes in postings, only *Pink* crosses the threshold of at least 10 posts per week on the topic, with the highest spike being on the week of May 11th with 27 articles, followed by the 8th of June with 21 articles, and the 10th of August with 17 articles.

From the first spike in May on *Pink*, there are snippets like: "These two statesmen [Vučić and Vučević] stood as a strong wall against the onslaught of crimes that the opposition, blockaders, taycoon media, haters of Serbia, and all those who want a weak and docile Serbia..." or "...blockaders, "*foteljaši*", attacked people in the streets in the most gruesome way just because they think differently." *Informer* wrote at the end of May: "Vučević visited students who want to study: I hope that normal life will return to Serbia", but most articles are from October, like, "GOSI reports: Foreigners, representatives of embassies and blockaders at a "secret meeting" in Belgrade: see who is among them" or "What's in store for November 1st? The terrifying threats of the blockaders echoed: I'm afraid of what will happen."

4. Civil War vs. War

For "civil war", there are a total of 164 mentions of the term, but 125 articles. *Pink* used this term the most, 73 times, followed by *Danas* (21) and *B92* (14). Since the base is small, the smallest one analyzed, there are only two *Pink* posting peaks: the 8th of June and the 10th of August. In June, Pink wrote: "THEY ARE CALLING FOR MURDER! The special show revealed the preparation of violent actions against Serbia: Blockaders want radicalization and blood on the streets," and in August, a snippet says: "Such an attitude is what the public expects from institutions in the moments when there is a threat of a civil war. However, a picture from Novi Sad, where the greatest violence took place, the premises of SNS were destroyed and members of the elite unit Cobras were injured..." A headline from August says: "BLOCKADERS ANNOUNCE NEW CHAOS: They are bringing balaclavas, they are doing everything to cause a civil war in Serbia." Some more recent snippets from November are: "they won't succeed in breaking Ćacilend, the symbol of resistance. They won't break up our Serbia and start a civil war."

On *Danas*, a snippet in May says: "now they are trying to stir up people by force and spreading the most terrible propaganda according to Goebbels' methods, Janko Veselinović SNS is provoking civil war by sending activists to Novi Sad." Another snippet from August says: "...the revolution is not a horror film, even though it is the only genre that makes sense today. But the revolution is neither a "babaroga"[5] nor a civil war, and after all, only the favorite of the ideologue of the regime, Dragoslav Bokan, calls for it." Again, this is more a reaction to the statements than anything else.

However, the situation is a little different when it comes to "war" alone, a word mentioned 721 times across 421 unique articles. Again, most frequently on *Pink* in 183 articles, followed by *Danas* (141), and *B92* (54). The same pattern persists: *Pink* leads in terms of peaks from mid-April to mid-July, with 15 to 27 posts a week, while *Danas* only has its first peak the week of the 10th of August, with 10 posts, but *Pink* has 28 that same week. *Danas* then has the most articles from late September to early November, with 13 to 14 posts a week.

On the government side, the snippets and headlines are a bit more abstract. For example, this snippet from *Pink* in May says, "Electronics faculty blockaders announce Serbia has always been anti-fascist. One million Serbs died at the hands of the Nazis in the Second World War. Serbs were victims of a genocide in the Independent State of Croatia. The blockaders know that, and they spit on Serbian victims of Nazism." This statement, for example, is entirely nonsensical. The headline also says blockaders spit on the victims, but does not explain how. Another headline from May is how blockaders attacked a man who fought his whole life for Serbia (unclear in which war), but he was saved by war veterans (again, unclear from which war).

Other snippets over the summer are even more vague, like one from June that says: "journalists and journalism were first to be attacked. Whatever happened

5 Scary mythical creature in Serbian folklore, a witch-like figure

in war dramas is still happening today in the colored revolution that is happening now." Or this one from August, where the headline is about blockaders joining forces with Croatians, but the snippet is "… even if Bulgarians joined them, we cannot be blind, similar alliances are being made before a war. We must be aware of the intentions of others; they are not doing this just to eat shrimp." It is unclear what the role of shrimp is in this alliance.

On the side of *Danas*, many articles are calling for accountability, like an article from mid-March that explains that one of the "students who want to learn" is an ex-commander of the gendarmerie who famously participated in the Kosovo war. Similarly, an opinion piece from October recalls Šešelj's contributions to the 1990s war as he becomes a more frequent guest on the *Informer* television program. Nevertheless, on both sides, the memory of the Second World War seems to be a sore spot in different ways. In *Danas*, Niš was mentioned multiple times as an example, once in June, when a swastika appeared on the Fortress along with the sign "Better Ćaci than a Nazi", reminding readers that in no context should the swastika appear anywhere in this city near one of the worst concentration camps in the region. Then again, in August, an article said that Niš deserves a better mayor, one who would not call their compatriots Nazis.

Many of these frames overlap, but the goal of the government and allies goes beyond simple name-calling; it is a process of erasure. Originally, the term "Ćaci" was coined by the protesters as a demand for accountability; it was a critique of the ruling elite's incompetence, illiteracy, and questionable credentials. However, the regime responded not by engaging with this critique, but by burying it under an avalanche of noise. By co-opting the term and flooding the public sphere with hundreds of articles redefining "Ćaci" as humble, patriotic defenders of Serbia, the government effectively hollowed out the word's original meaning.

Meanwhile, independent media is continuously starved of resources. They cannot compete with the output of outlets like *Pink*, whose owner does not have to pay debts owed to the state for managing the media empire (Milivojević, 2020; Tomić, 2022). Ultimately, the government's strategy is twofold: co-optation of language depriving the student movement of their primary means of mobilization: humor and wordplay (Lalić-Krstin and Silaški, 2025), while oversaturating the public space with their version of the story. In this environment, censorship occurs through sheer noise, making it impossible for the average citizen to sift through the distortion without significant investment on their part, namely, time and the skills needed to filter information.

Conclusion

In this article, I examined the role of infotainment and linguistic co-optation in the struggle for narrative control during the 2024–2025 student protests in Serbia. By employing a combined quantitative and qualitative content analysis of over 4,000 articles from pro-government and independent media, I have demonstrated that the ruling SNS party does not rely solely on traditional

censorship. Instead, the regime employs a sophisticated strategy of co-opting infotainment, traditionally used to sustain independent media in a rough economic environment. The goal is for ridicule to flood the information space, neutralize dissent, and legitimize state narratives.

Regarding the evolution of regime strategies, the "meme war" for the meaning of "ćaci" shows this evolution in the regime's response to youth resistance. Initially, the regime utilized a strategy of co-optation, transforming the ridicule of the misspelled graffiti "ćaci" into in-group loyalty. By establishing "Students 2.0" and "Ćacilend", the incumbents successfully muddied the waters, creating a counter-reality where the regime-backed counter-protesters were framed as the true students who are studious, patriotic, and constructive. This effectively displaced the genuine student movement, reframing them in the pro-government media not as young citizens exercising their democratic rights, but as disruptive blockaders who impede the daily lives of ordinary citizens.

However, the findings indicate that this infotainment strategy was merely the first phase of a more dangerous discursive shift. As the protests persisted, the quantitative data showed a marked escalation in aggressive rhetoric within pro-government outlets (*Pink, Informer, B92*). The linguistic transition from "blockaders" to existential threats, notably, terrorists and nazis, marks a critical turning point. As the framing analysis shows, these terms were not used sporadically but systematically during peaks of protest activity to dehumanize the student movement.

This rhetorical escalation serves a dual purpose. First, it empties the signifier "student" of its sympathetic connotations, replacing it with the image of a violent foreign agent. Second, and more ominously, it is a prelude to permission to initiate repression. By framing student blockades as acts of terrorism or fascism, the regime moves from "soft" authoritarian co-optation to justifying the physical violence that has been documented since the summer of 2025. The hyper-visibility of President Vučić in the corpus, alongside the consistent framing of the police as victims of student violence in pro-government media, reinforces the narrative that the state is the sole guarantor of stability against chaotic, radicalized youth.

Moreover, this study showed that *Pink*, a privately owned entertainment-oriented television channel, leads in information overload and framing, warranting further exploration. Most often, the public service broadcaster takes on the propaganda-mouthpiece role, and tabloids are seen as the most brutal in their insults. However, in this instance, the regime speaks through a privately owned business with clear ties to the ruling party but separated from it on paper. There are several avenues future studies can explore here: from how symbiosis with the private sector creates an illusion of pluralism, because on the surface, the conflict is not between the party and citizens, but between different societal groups which co-exist in every democracy to comparing Serbia to other cases of dramatic democratic backsliding, like perhaps the USA, where the incumbent party speaks through Fox News (also tied to an entertainment empire).

Nevertheless, this study was restricted to digital news and online republications of print and broadcast media, and as such, does not cover the full multimedia spectrum of the regime's propaganda, information oversaturation, and narrative flooding. Therefore, in subsequent studies, it would be worth examining the original sources of these frames: on the one hand, social media, where memes are spread, and on the other, the speeches, slogans, and visual propaganda that are merely disseminated or discussed in online news. Moreover, while the study identifies how student protestors are dehumanized as blockaders, terrorists, and fascists in the online news (textually), this does not account for algorithmic amplification of such narratives on social media, or the visual evolution of how they are presented.

Ultimately, the case of the Serbian protests demonstrates that contemporary electoral autocracies are highly adaptable. They engage in humor and memes not only to diffuse tension but to manufacture it. As the line between infotainment and propaganda blurs, and the capacity of independent media to counter these narratives is eroded by resource asymmetry, it is imperative to develop new tools and strategies to counter the growing arsenal of contemporary digital autocracies, such as Serbia.

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Ana Jovanovic-Harrington

Digitalni autoritarizam i politika buke: Kooptacija i narativno preplavljivanje na protestima u Srbiji

Apstrakt

Savremene kompetitivne autokratije se u cilju održavanja kontrole sve više oslanjaju na preplavljivanje informacijama umesto na cenzuru. Ovaj članak istražuje kako je info-zabava (*infotainment*) postala ključno bojno polje u protestnoj politici (2024–2025), služeći istovremeno i kao oruđe otpora i kao mehanizam meke autoritarne kontrole. Koristeći kombinovanu kvantitativnu i kvalitativnu analizu sadržaja šest medija, tri provladina (B92, Informer, Pink) i tri nezavisna (Danas, Južne Vesti, N1), ova studija prati kako je režim konstruisao diskurs podela razdvajajući studente u dva suprotstavljena tabora: „ćaci" (viralna pravopisna greška kooptirana da predstavlja nedužnu, nepolitičku omladinu) i „blokadere" (pežorativni naziv za one koji protestuju). Analiza otkriva strukturnu asimetriju: dok su provladini mediji agresivno koristili emotivno uokviravanje i ismevanje (etiketirajući studente demonstrante kao „fašiste" ili „strane agente"), nezavisni mediji su potisnuti u reaktivnu ulogu, pokušavajući da demantuju ove narative. Ova diskurzivna agresija prepoznata je kao uvod u fizičko nasilje od leta 2025. godine. Na kraju, studija zaključuje da moderni autoritarizam ne opstaje tako što skriva istinu, već tako što je zatrpava slojevima ironije i konstruisanog konflikta.

Ključne reči: digitalni autoritarizam, meka cenzura, zarobljavanje medija, kooptacija, uokviravanje

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Krisztina Rácz, Mirjana Nećak Gavrilović & Andrej Ševo

NEW FACE OF MEMES IN STUDENT-LED PROTESTS IN SERBIA AND THEIR ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

ABSTRACT
The aim of this article is to explore memes created and circulated by students and citizens taking part in the protests in Serbia. Memes from two social media platforms, X and Instagram, were collected and analysed in terms of their visual form and content, with emphasis on recurring themes. Based on these, six types of pictorial and one type of video memes in relation to the Serbian student protest are discussed. The article explores the meanings the memes created and distributed during the protests carried, understanding them as instances of political aims being achieved by non-political means. We further discuss the ethical implications of memes, both pictorial and AI-generated. The general issues the article tackles are those of protest mobilisation, humour, memes, ethics and AI.

KEYWORDS
student protests, Serbia, internet memes, humour, digital activism, protest mobilisation, social media ethics

Introduction

Since November 2024, Serbia has been shaken by what may be the largest anti-corruption protests in its history. Led by students from Serbian universities, these demonstrations are the longest-running political mass movement during more than a decade of rule by Aleksandar Vučić and the Serbian Progressive Party. The longevity and resilience of the protests can be attributed to the fact that they are led by students, an untainted and trustworthy social group, rather than by traditional political parties, which enjoy far less popularity and public trust. The secret of the students' success lies in their organisation, their direct-democratic decision-making procedures and their well-executed public

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communication. Among the communication methods employed by the students at Serbian universities, humour and references to popular culture, expressed through widely shared internet memes, play an important role. This article analyses some of the more popular meme formats utilised by the students and their supporters in the digital space and the potential ethical implications of their usage.

Memes have become a staple of online communication, evolving from simple image-and-text formats into a versatile tool for humour, social commentary and political expression. Despite the ethical issues they carry, as we will unpack in the analysis of protest memes in Serbia, they are a powerful tool of political communication, where they are used to recruit supporters and respond rapidly to current events. Therefore, this article has a twofold aim: firstly, starting out with memes created during the student protests in Serbia, we intend to explore their meanings for the protests and the broader socio-political context. For this aim, a multimodal analysis of the selected memes was conducted, that includes both the analysis of their visual and textual/discursive aspects. Through this, the general goal is to unpack how certain political messages can be articulated in a non-political form and what the function of memes is in the expression of this. Second, we aim to investigate the similarities and differences in the creation and distribution of memes using pictorial templates and video memes generated by artificial intelligence (AI), as well as the ethical implications of their usage.

The research is based on the collection of visual content from the digital field, specifically memes and their theoretically grounded analysis. Through applying theoretical frameworks to the exploration of the selected memes, we approach empirical insights through relevant literature in the fields of popular protests, online humour and memes, as well as the ethical issues of AI.

The empirical component of the research material was collected between early November 2024 and the end of May 2025, with additional revisiting the social media platforms on which the memes were disseminated throughout the summer of 2025. A corpus of memes that use a common visual template was established, and those memes that use templates that have a prominent number of occurrences identified and used for analysis. The primary data sources were two social media platforms – Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) – based on their distinct user demographics and communication modalities. Instagram was chosen as the principal channel for younger generations, primarily members of Generation Z, characterised by its focus on visual content and a streamlined system for sharing short-form media, particularly static images and brief video clips. In contrast, X functions as a microblogging platform with a significant user base among older Millennials and members of Generation X. It is marked by more explicit and articulate textual commentary, often politically charged. Although content about the ongoing protests in Serbia is also available on Facebook, a popular social media in Serbia, it was excluded from the analysis due to modest student presence on the platform and its older user demographic.

In accordance with the distinct characteristics of the platforms we considered, pictorial memes on Instagram were predominantly produced by students participating in campus blockades, with an emphasis on calls for civil disobedience and protest participation. They were all created by humans and share the structure of an image with text. These memes often contain an implicit political dimension, conveyed through humour and irony, yet lacking overt political articulation. On X, by contrast, memes were largely created by a broader pool of users and are marked by an explicit political tone, frequently critical of institutional responses to student activism. Also, on this platform, students occasionally shared existing social media content. However, as time went by, more student-created memes began to emerge, signalling a shift towards more explicit political articulation and a potential change in activist strategy.

Video memes related to the topic of the protests were scarce, and those that were found used videos created by AI. They were created and originally distributed on TikTok, a platform for videos. However, they were frequently shared on the X platform as well. Although this is the smallest pool of material, it is valuable regarding the topic of AI and its ethical considerations.

While video memes were chosen based on availability, the selection of pictorial memes from a much larger pool was based on the following defining criteria: repetition of a single visual template with variations in textual content, use of images modelled after well-known internet meme formats and photographs featuring recurring visual motifs or characters that operate as mimetic anchors in specific contexts. This approach facilitates the understanding of memes not merely as digital cultural products but as dynamic forms of political articulation, rooted in the temporality and specificity of their socio-political context. Conversely, the collection and analysis of memes were organised chronologically and thematically, following the unfolding of real-time developments. A chronology in which the memes have been created and distributed is provided in the following section.

A Chronology of the Protests

On 1 November 2024, the canopy of the railway station in Novi Sad, the city in the north of Serbia, collapsed and killed sixteen people, while one person was left severely injured. The tragedy infuriated many in Serbia, as the railway station was recently reconstructed and opened by politicians with pomp on two occasions, the latter happening in July 2024. The canopy collapse of a seemingly new and modern structure came to symbolise the corruption of the ruling regime and sparked the largest protests in Serbian history.

At first, the protest was limited to the city of Novi Sad, where clashes between the police and protesters happened outside City Hall on 5 November, with several protesters being arrested (Baletić 2025). Consequently, the Minister of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure, Goran Vesić, resigned, as well as Milan Đurić, the mayor of Novi Sad. This did not pacify the protesters, who kept the streets occupied, which culminated on 20 November when

thousands gathered and demanded responsibility, resulting in the resignation of the Minister of Trade and former Minister of Construction, Tomislav Momirović. Simultaneously, silent protests took place in several other cities in Serbia, with citizens standing still and quiet at designated locations for as many minutes as there were victims of the canopy collapse.

At one such protest on 22 November outside the Faculty of Dramatic Arts (FDA) of the University of Arts in Belgrade, vigil participants were attacked by individuals later identified as members of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SPP). The victims of the attacks were mostly FDA students who reacted by announcing the blockade of their faculty until their demands were fulfilled: the documentation of the railway reconstruction made public, the attackers apprehended, their superiors dismissed from public service and protesters arrested by the police freed without charges (Baletić 2025). Faculties of other universities across Serbia soon followed with similar proclamations, and by late January 2025 most of them were blocked by their students.

The students legitimised their decision by organizing a plenary assembly where the faculty blockade was proposed and voted on after a deliberation at *plenum*s. Direct democracy and deliberation became the trademarks of the student movement, with every student who could prove their status being able to speak, vote and propose. By the end of 2024, the students expanded the initial FDA demands, urging the government to publish all the documents relevant to the reconstruction of the Novi Sad railway station. They also demanded that the resources for higher education be increased.

The life of students in the faculties under blockade constituted a novel mode of everyday. University halls and classrooms became makeshift communal rooms where *plenum*s and other meetings concerning the organization and logistics of student movement took place. Rooms and corridors were converted into dormitories with rows of mattresses and personal belongings near them. Food was stored and prepared in improvised kitchens (Knežević 2025). Even pets were allowed at most of the faculties and cared for by students. Free time was filled with social games such as chess, cards and board games. In some situations, students obtained gaming consoles and played video games. For those interested in music, acting and other forms of art, dedicated classes were formed, and famous guests, such as actors, singers and television show hosts were invited to visit the faculties. Other than activities *in situ* in these spaces, everyday activities included a significant virtual component. Students communicated and strategised with peers from other faculties and cities, prepared public announcements and created digital content, including social media posts and humorous memes.

Large student-initiated rallies with tens of thousands of participants were held in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš and Kragujevac. Some students walked hundreds of kilometres to the city where the next large protest is taking place and/or to raise awareness in the countryside (Mašina 2025). Meanwhile, following the silent protests to commemorate the victims of the fall of the canopy of the Novi Sad railway station, then the clashes between protesting citizens

and the police, and finally the blockade of virtually all public and some private universities in the country, the government sought to defuse the situation by making several arrests and criminal charges against the SPP members involved in the railway reconstruction. Prime Minister Miloš Vučević resigned in late January 2025, while the President announced on several occasions that the demanded documents would be published; however, this promise was never fully implemented.

At the same time, President Aleksandar Vučić and the SPP organised their rallies with noticeably smaller attendance. A camp organised near the Presidency of Serbia was set up by students and citizens who oppose the faculty blockades, but it soon grew to something akin to a paramilitary camp for SPP loyalists. Their colloquial name became *ćaci*, and the name of the camp Ćaciland, referring to the first phase of the protests when a graffiti "*Ćaci u školu*" instead of "*Đaci u školu*" (Students to school), confusing the Cyrillic letters "Ђ" ("Đ") and "Ћ"("Ć"), appeared on one of the Novi Sad schools whose students and teachers went on strike.

Student-led protests culminated on 15 March, when the largest public rally in Serbian history took place in Belgrade. The students gathered hundreds of thousands of people. The protest represented a symbolic stand-off between them on one side and hundreds of anonymous, hooded *ćaci* in front of the Presidency who were visibly armed with bats, hammers, rocks and knives. During the silence for the canopy collapse victims, a stampede happened because of a strange sound produced by what is believed to be a sonic weapon or another unspecified sound-emitting device. The government has categorically denied that any such instrument was used. The investigation into what had happened on March 15 became a new, fifth demand by the students (Radenković Jeremić and Owen 2025).

That day marked a turning point in the student-led protests in Serbia. After 15 March, the government became bolder in repressing dissent and civil disobedience. Public-school teachers on strike and university professors were left without income. At the same time, the students were left with a dilemma whether to stick to the initial demands and wait for President Vučić to fulfil them, accept that the current regime is incapable of meeting them or to embrace the political struggle of toppling the current regime in the next elections. The students articulated their demands by asking for extraordinary parliamentary elections. The so-called "student list" was agreed to be formed by plenums and filled by trusted individuals.

Throughout May and June, the regime focused on sowing discord between students and professors. The government conditioned the withholding of professors' salaries on the switch to online teaching, which led to disagreements not only between students and professors but also among the students themselves. However, the direction of the protests changed again after the large student-led rally on 28 June. Clashes between citizens and the police during the protests, an unprecedented level of police brutality and subsequent mass civil disobedience, with roads and streets blocked by garbage containers and other

obstacles across the country, presented a new radical face of the protests in Serbia. The summer that was expected to be protest-free due to the vacation season and heat turned out to be anything but quiet. Standoffs between protesters and members of the ruling party escalated in several towns across Serbia. Members of the SPP fired pyrotechnic devices at the protesters on several occasions, causing physical injuries and with no reaction from the police. This infuriated the citizens and sparked large August and early September protests in Belgrade, Novi Sad and other major cities in Serbia that were dispersed by a large police force, tear gas and armoured vehicles. The police used excessive force and abused arrested individuals mentally and physically, including threats of sexual violence (Zoric and Andric 2025). As of the time of writing this article (early autumn 2025), the summer of 2025 marks the most violent period of the protests in Serbia.

With the demands of the protesters taking a turn to be openly political, their activities at the faculties as well and their virtual communication strategies changed and the production and distribution of memes diminished. However, we believe that memes are an important feature of the student-led protest, that is, in turn, one of, if not the most important events in the past decade in Serbia. Conversely, we hold that memes are not a minor feature of the blockades and the mobilisations, but that they hold explanatory value in analysing them.

Politics, Humour and Memes: From Evolutionary Metaphor to Vernacular Creativity

The meme was defined for the first time by Dawkins (1976) as a replicator of cultural information analogous to genes in biological evolution. Early approaches focused on this evolutionary metaphor. However, with the rise of digital culture and the internet, the definition of memes has shifted from abstract cultural replicators to being used to mean a "unit of information – an idea or a concept – that can spread from person to person through the social network" (Ferrara et al. 2013: 548). Copying and imitation have also become significant concepts that define memes (Denisova 2018), while Shifman (2014) conceptualises them not merely as isolated units but as groups of digital items that share common characteristics, are created with awareness of each other, and are circulated, imitated and transformed by many users. More recently, Dynel (2021) has noted that memes are increasingly multimodal, combining text, image and intertextual references in complex ways, which makes them both adaptable and context-sensitive.

In its narrower usage, a meme has come to mean "any specimen of online humour on the internet, especially if multi-modal" (Dynel 2021: 79), i.e. containing both a visual and a textual element. More recent research also underscores the multimodal, creative and intertextual nature of memes, framing them as dynamic, context-dependent artefacts that facilitate collective identity formation, cultural critique, political expression and online activism (Dynel 2021).

Milner (2016) argues that memes are forms of "vernacular creativity," deeply embedded in participatory media practices, while Denisova (2019) stresses their role as socio-political commentaries that shape and reflect public discourse. This is particularly evident in the Balkan context, where digital folk narrative genres serve as tools for crisis management (Katsadoros and Kardamila 2025). In a similar vein, Guja Dražeta (2024) suggests that memes act as modern vehicles for folk narratives and social commentary in Serbia. Building on these insights, a growing body of research examines internet memes in the Serbian and broader Balkan context, framing them as forms of digital folklore, vernacular creativity and political commentary. These studies highlight memes as hybrid artefacts positioned between folklore and popular culture (Banić Grubišić 2023), as well as key elements of contemporary visual communication shaped by imitation and repetition (Milosavljević 2020). Other authors emphasise the role of memes in identity construction and resistance (Marinkov Pavlović 2016), feminist and activist expression (Davidović 2021) and the amplification of political scandals (Bebić, Dolinar and Boko 2024). Taken together, regional perspectives demonstrate how memes operate as culturally embedded and politically salient communicative practices in moments of crisis and contestation.

Throughout the years of their usage, memes have been connected to the expression of humour (Milner 2016; Denisova 2019), and are an important means of reflecting on current events, especially political. Political humour refers to any form of humour that arises from phenomena, events and figures that can be perceived as political. It can take various forms and serve multiple purposes, such as exposing or critiquing incompetence and immorality in politics. This form of humour is not unique to the modern era, and its first instances can be traced as far back as antiquity. In medieval and early modern times, it was often expressed during carnivals and festive events, where social hierarchies were temporarily suspended, and political dissent was permitted, provided it took a humorous form ('t Hart 2007). In more recent history, political humour has found new platforms through mass media such as print, radio and television, allowing it to reach wider audiences. With the rise of the internet and social media, political humour found a new, fertile ground in the online space, enabling greater public participation in its creation and more importantly, circulation. Internet memes, a common vehicle for such humour, can go viral and achieve high levels of user engagement, sometimes surpassing traditional media in reach and influence and highlighting their potential to inform and shape public opinion (Halversen and Weeks 2024).

What characterizes political humour not only in memes but in general is that such jokes create an in-group of those who understand them, thus serving to induce a feeling of solidarity (Rácz 2016; Dynel 2021; Kallius and Adriaans 2022; Rácz 2024). While such jokes can be polarising, political humour may also defuse tensions and foster cooperation (Bippus 2014). Although meme creators do not see memes as political in nature and usually express humour and entertainment as the main motive of their creativity, they recognise their potential in conveying political messages in an easy, understandable and effortless

way, thus creating a pathway for anyone to start engaging with political topics (Leiser 2022). Therefore, in the context of political protests, memes can play an impactful role as mobilisers of political participation and facilitators of internal dialogue, as observed in the Occupy Wall Street movement (Milner 2013) or strengthening collective identities and internal cohesion within movements such as Black Lives Matter (Leach and Allen 2017).

However, while not denying much of these assessments, some authors notice that the potency of political memes in informing the public, mobilising it and creating a sense of unity is limited. By prioritising humour and wit, meme creators can risk oversimplifying and trivialising serious political issues and contributing to polarisation through an overly satirical or mocking attitude towards opposing viewpoints (Penney 2019; Fernández-Villanueva and Bayarri-Toscano 2021). Memes and digital activism can even be criticised as neutralisers of the political potential of mass movements, as they shift people away from the physical spaces where they are most potent disruptors of the *status quo* into the digital sphere (Hristova 2014).

Furthermore, memes serve as a creative outlet for their creators. The increased sophistication of AI programmes, their growing capacity to generate images based on human prompts and suggesting creative concepts, facilitate the rapid creation of memes by utilising the vast material available across the internet. However, the scientific community warns that these co-created memes introduce significant ethical questions related to the ethical framework of AI (Gal-Or 2025). The reason for this is that, in addition to using all available online material, including content for which they lack copyright permission, AI-generated memes also incorporate deepfake material. This raises a crucial call for discussion on copyright, intellectual property and the need for transparency regarding the sources used in the creation process (Gaykar et al. 2025). Furthermore, Gaba and de Cristofaro (2025) warn that AI-created memes open up the possibility of spreading hate speech. This is because they can evade detection by the very algorithms designed to prevent such offensive materials. This brings up another ethical issue based on the fact that, in addition to Article 17 of the EU Copyright Directive, which directly addresses user-generated content in the digital space (Nećak 2019; Furgal, Kretschmer and Thomas 2020; Sanchez 2021; Akinci 2024), there is a lack of clear legal frameworks for content created by AI. Meme creation is a creative process that captures the subtle, underlying implications of a society or social situation. This is especially true for political memes, which are created for a specific context and aimed at a particular social group. Wu, Weber and Müller (2025) showed that, for now at least, human-made memes are still more effective at conveying messages through humour.

Analysis and Discussion

Visualizing Resistance: Meme Types and their Contexts of Emergence

The Archetypal Confrontation: "Student vs. Progressive"

The first few weeks of the start of the student-led protests, immediately following the Novi Sad railway station tragedy, were profoundly marked by a single iconic meme. While numerous photographs and short video clips were shared daily, this single image stood out and became a defining protest symbol. The image captured a student standing calmly and silently, face-to-face with an aggressively confrontational driver. The photograph went viral on the X platform and was immediately transformed into the "Student vs. Progressive [Party member]" meme. The construction of this meme is notably simple: the original photograph serves as a fixed background for various overlaid texts. The core thematic strategy, however, is consistent: the student is invariably presented through phrases that denote intelligence, composure and dignity, while the "Progressive" figure is characterised as uneducated, vulgar and unintelligent. In one prevalent version of this meme, presented in Figure 1, the Progressive supporter poses the question, "Š*ta ti je to u glavi?"* (What is that in your head?), to which the Student replies simply: "*Mozak"* (A brain). This exchange concisely captures the conflict between brute force (represented by the Progressive) and superior intellect or critical thought (represented by the Student), thus placing emphasis on intellect and dignity as a counter-narrative to political force.

Figure 1: The "Student vs. Progressive" meme illustrating the contrast between the composed student and the confrontational motorist.[1]

1 https://x.com/eeevunkump/status/1866535591460081665

The meme quickly evolved beyond simple humour, establishing a potent counter-narrative of silent, composed resistance against aggressive, repressive impulses. While incorporating classic meme characteristics such as irony and contrast, its power derived from the emotional weight of its represented silence: a form of resistance that stood firm without violence. This public narrative was in sharp contrast to the reaction of state officials and pro-government media, who portrayed the blockades negatively and, through implicit rhetoric, painted the students as destructive elements. The captured incident where the student maintained his composure while being aggressively threatened by a motorist became viral content that fundamentally undermined the official discourse characterising the demonstrations as violent. The meme thus encapsulated the spirit of silent defiance and the conflict between the younger generation and the governing elite.

In a symbolic sense, this meme not only marked the beginning of intensive meme creation surrounding the protest but also coincided with the end of the overtly "non-political" phase of the movement. By the late summer of 2025, the protest was increasingly met with aggressive responses from law enforcement and frequent student arrests. Significantly, the student captured in the original, iconic photograph, Andrej Tanko, as the public learned his name, was among those detained. Tanko was subsequently officially charged with an alleged attack on a police officer. This development further reignited the virality of the meme and intensified its political symbolism, shifting its narrative from one of silent resistance to one of targeted legal repression.

Visual Metaphors and Satirical Reappropriation: The Red Hand

Especially at the beginning of the protests, the most widely used visual symbol became that of a bloody hand. This image appeared on banners, badges, digital platforms and elsewhere, as a red print of a hand usually on a white background with the text "*Ruke su vam krvave*" (Your hands are bloody). This meme articulates a direct critique of political impunity, condensing public sentiment into defiant fragments. One example includes an imagined dialogue on a meme: "*Ruke su vam krvave. / Pa šta??? Može nam se"* meaning "Your hands are bloody," followed by the unapologetic response by the government: "So what??? We can get away with it." This pairing framed the motif of the red middle finger as a symbol of acknowledged corruption and an explicit demonstration of unchecked political power.

Although the motif of the red hand seldom appears as a traditional meme, instead functioning primarily as a symbolic emblem that suggests complicity in recent tragic events, a notable exception has emerged on the X platform. This particular meme, seen in Figure 2, features a captured scene from an official appearance by Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić. The image depicts the Prime Minister placing her hand over her heart, with the resulting visual, upon its removal, of a bloody handprint. This highly contextualised visual rhetoric, absent of any textual overlay, powerfully conveys the public sentiment

of citizens supporting student protests regarding the perceived actions of the current Serbian government. As a meme, therefore, it operates as an eloquent, non-verbal political critique.

Figure 2: The "Ana Brnabić and the red handprint" meme is a visual critique of political accountability featuring the Prime Minister.[2]

For a brief period at the beginning of 2025, the government supporters' short-lived but memorable response to the student-led protests was a visual, also showing a red hand, but without text, exhibiting a middle finger (Mitkovski 2025). Members of the ruling party catalysed this meme cycle by printing the controversial symbol onto a large canvas and prominently displaying it on an overpass above the highly congested *Autokomanda* interchange in Belgrade, a key traffic nexus during peak hours. This choice of location by SPP members maximised the visibility of the banner while also ensuring its immediate entry into public discourse by students and their supporters, illustrating the interplay between physical political stunts and digital capture. Supporters of the student protests subsequently engaged in direct action, successfully removing the canvas; however, it was quickly re-erected, this time accompanied by "guardians"

2 https://x.com/natasha_crimson/status/1879218585710764460

who physically defended the banner to prevent its further removal. This volatile cycle of posting, removal, and defence highlights the intensely contested nature of both public and digital space during the protests, demonstrating the immediate and reciprocal relationship between physical demonstration and digital meme culture. The banner was instantly filmed and photographed by citizens, transforming the physical object into viral meme source material rapidly disseminated across social media platforms. The photographs of the physical banner were initially disseminated on the X platform, accompanied by the caption: *Čuvari kurca u zimskom periodu* (Guardians of the dick in wintertime), a satirical reappropriation of the title of the acclaimed 1976 Yugoslav film, *Čuvar plaže u zimskom periodu* (Guardian of the beach in wintertime). The original film is a black comedy that explores themes of post-educational disillusionment, unemployment and the collapse of ideals for a young protagonist trying to establish a decent life in Yugoslav society. By substituting the title of the film, the meme employs pastiche and parody to critique the current situation, positioning the "guardians" of the political symbol as characters engaged in an absurd and socially fruitless activity: the defence of a vulgar, defiant gesture. This caption subsequently recurred in later memes, particularly when paired with the image of one of the "guardians" who gave a televised interview on national news. In memes, the individual's portrait was circulated either with the aforementioned satirical title or placed alongside a picture of the popular succulent plant known as *čuvarkuća* (houseleek, in which the Serbian name reads as "house guardian"). In this instance, the images were juxtaposed with the corresponding labels *čuvarkuća* (house guardian) and *čuvar kurca* (dick guardian), beneath the person's image, establishing a direct, humorous contrast between a traditional symbol of home and stability and the perceived vulgarity and futility of the political defense of the banner and the regime in general.

Beyond this initial reaction, a type of meme by the protesters emerged that referenced the visual of the red middle finger in another manner: they depicted a hand displaying the middle finger, augmented with added eyeglasses. The frames of the glasses used in the meme clearly alluded to the distinct style worn by President Vučić. Initially, this symbol was created and employed by members of the ruling party, who even utilised it as their social media avatars. However, the motif was quickly reclaimed and repurposed sarcastically by student protesters and their supporters, who began circulating it as meme material on the X platform as a satirical reappropriation of ruling party imagery by student protesters to critique political arrogance.

Other memes of this type included crude overlays that replaced the middle finger with the faces of not only Aleksandar Vučić but also other high-ranking SPP government officials, culminating in highly personalised satire. A notable example involved rendering the middle finger as a literal extension of the body of popular folk singer and television host Jelena Karleuša, a prominent public advocate for the President. This demonstrated the capacity of the meme for granular and culturally specific political criticism.

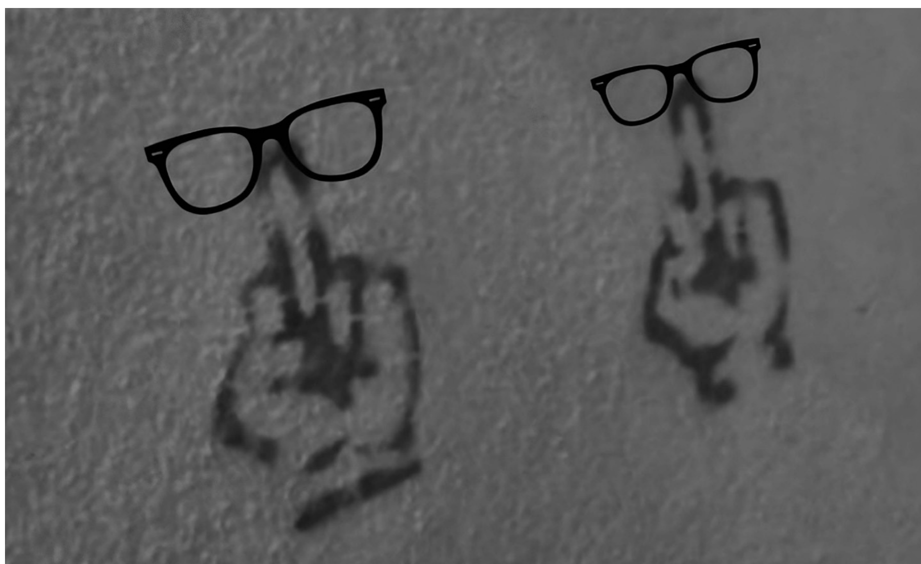

Figure 3: The "Middle finger with glasses" meme, where the iconic frames associated with President Vučić are added to a government-created symbol.[3]

Linguistic Subversion: The "Ćaci" and "Ćirica" Phenomena

Memes featuring various references to *ćaci* are, in a way, similar to the type of memes depicting a middle finger analysed above in that they make fun of the supporters of President Vučić and the regime on account of their vulgarity. While in the type of memes with the red middle finger, the supporters of the regime are presented as corrupt and arrogant, the *ćaci* memes mock the protesters' opponents as being uneducated. As already mentioned, the name *ćaci* originates in the confusion of two letters of the Cyrillic script in the Serbian word denoting "students" on the wall of the school in Novi Sad. Soon after this, another graffiti with misspeled text appeared, also in Cyrillic script, saying "*Piši ćiricom*" instead of "*ćirilicom*," meaning "write in Cyric" instead of "Cyrillic," where *Ćirica* can be read as a male nickname, similarly to Ćaci. These misspellings become an easy target for laughter and mockery. These memes can be read to generally refer to the pro-government camp being ignorant and illiterate, while in their more context-specific reading, the underlying assumption of these and other similar *ćaci* jokes is that the supporters of the regime, who are thought to be prone to nationalism and traditionalism, cannot use the script they themselves propagate.

Some *ćaci* memes joke on the misspelled graffiti directly. Such memes, for instance, show the photograph of the graffitied wall and a makeshift badge made of paper, saying "1st place for the worst knowledge of the Cyrillic script." Other memes make fun not only of the misspelled *ćaci* but also the *ćirica* text,

3 https://x.com/Pedja682/status/1881751518686376111

personifying Ćaci and Ćirica as two boys, one of whom is holding the other in a position as if he were a pen to write with, with the text "Ćaci writes with Ćirica." Another meme of this kind, presented in Figure 4, shows two young men in tracksuits squatting next to each other (as a possible reference to the famous "Squatting Slavs in tracksuits" memes) with their names written above them: Ćaci and Ćirica.

Figure 4: The personification of the "Ćaci" and "Ćirica" linguistic errors, using the "Squatting Slavs in tracksuits" template.[4]

Yet other *ćaci* memes make use of intertextual references to various other media, ranging from films, historical figures, tales, cartoons or internationally circulated mimetic templates. As we have seen in the memes thematising the "guardians," some of these utilise various Serbian cultural references, mainly cinematography in Serbian history. An example of these is Figure 5: a meme whose visual looks like a child's drawing of Saint Sava, a prince and archbishop dedicated to the promotion of education in Medieval Serbia, and a humbled *ćaci*. The archbishop's name and the phrase that means "bugger off" are handwritten in Cyrillic in front of the phrase "to school," with the text making it clear that the educator is sending the young man to obtain some education. The meme thus reappropriates national symbols to frame the student protests as a struggle for enlightenment.

4 https://x.com/frenkywice9/status/1882905225348198658

Figure 5: An intertextual meme featuring a stylised depiction of Saint Sava sending the "Ćaci" figure to school.[5]

Other *ćaci* memes use a wider array of references, not restricted to Serbian ones, like the above-mentioned "Squatting Slavs in tracksuits" template. Another one of these is a meme with a visual template showing Little Red Riding Hood and her mother, who advices her "Don't go through Ćaciland, they are going to steal your pie," referring to the inhabitants of the camp in front of the Presidency who claimed to have received a lot of in-kind presents from sympathising citizens, including home-made pies. Another one shows the commonly used meme template with three frames from the film *Neverland*: the first shows Johnny Depp asking "Whose [son] are you?," the second one the boy answering "I am a *ćaci*, sir," and the third one Depp hugging the boy in an attempt to console him for belonging to that group. What can be said about the *ćaci* memes in general is that the source and target of the humour in them are the government supporters who are portrayed as uneducated, desperate and not living up to the standards they themselves allegedly propagate, thus the memes become a way of unmasking the system.

5 https://x.com/kova_brat/status/1882110603613159855

Digital Personas and Universal Templates: "Brain Before Sleep" and "Doge"

There is another type of memes that makes extensive use of visuals of individuals, most prominently Aleksandar Vučić. This group of memes refers to the first phase of the unrest in the streets and employs the popular template "Brain Before Sleep," where the original character is replaced by the cartoon drawing of the President. The texts of the memes are related to thoughts imagined causing him sleepless nights. Here too, like in the "guardian" and "*ćaci*" memes, intertextual references are abundant, thus in the "Brain Before Sleep" memes the issues that cause anxiety to the President range from political betrayal to social unrest: his followers making grammatical errors (a reference to the misspelling of *ćaci*), the Minister of Internal Affairs and other possible traitors in his cabinet, investigative journalists and the news they may publish, his party's failure at local elections, him losing popularity, being scared to show up in Novi Sad, the student protesters' nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize and the student movement's slogan "*Pumpaj!*" (Pump it!). Figure 6 is an illustration of this type of memes, with the text that reads: "Hey, are you asleep? / Yes, shut up / Who do you think is going to betray you first?" In general, what the "Brain Before Sleep" memes aim to achieve is to show the cracks in the system that cause trouble to the government. Also, these memes present the student protest as a serious threat to the government, which is something not visible from the pro-government media.

Figure 6: An adaptation of the "Brain Before Sleep" meme template featuring a caricature of President Vučić.[6]

6 https://x.com/mrcoslav/status/1883796102555771198

Another widely circulated group of memes that was created during the blockades using a universally recognisable visual template, like the “Brain Before Sleep” and the *Neverland* memes, is the “Small Dog vs. Big Dog” or “Strong Dog vs. Weak Dog” meme. In this format, the face of Kabosu, the Shiba Inu dog behind the iconic “Doge” meme, was placed on an exceptionally muscular body and juxtaposed with a smaller, weaker Shiba Inu that looked sad or confused. The primary function of this meme template was to draw a distinction between the students and protesters on one side and the government on the other.

For instance, in the meme presented in Figure 7, we can see that the thugs of the ruling party, who, even though they are armed with clubs and ready to apply violence with the aim of dispersing the protest, represent an essentially weak and disoriented force compared to the democratic legitimacy and unity of the student movement. Hence, the text on the “Big Dog” reads *Studentska pešadija*, meaning “Student infantry.”

Figure 7: An application of the “Strong Dog vs. Weak Dog” template. The “Big Dog” represents the “Student Infantry.”[7]

On a more abstract level, this group of memes also makes a statement about the low potency of violence and repression against popular will. While the text on this meme template varied across versions, the overall message remained consistent: it portrayed the protesting students as strong, determined and principled (the “big dog”), while the regime was shown as weak, disoriented or threatened (the “small dog”). Beyond communicating a general message, the “Small Dog vs. Big Dog” meme also served as commentary on everyday events, emphasising the students’ adept responses compared to the government’s poorly executed ones.

7 https://x.com/BlokadaFon/status/1884900588510401021

Occasionally, the same meme was used self-reflectively to highlight the changing perception of the opposition public's strength before and during the protests, or before and after the social mobilisation that the protests sparked. One such meme, originating on X, mocked users of the platform prior to the protests as "weak dogs" wasting their energy on trivial arguments, while celebrating the activist spirit that emerged with the student movement as a qualitative and impactful transformation, or the "strong dog," with the popular protest chant "*Pumpaj!*" written across its chest. Conversely, the perceived power of the regime was analysed through the same meme: it was portrayed as confident and dominant before the protests, but ridiculed during them through the image of a small, crying dog, confused and unable to act with the same assurance as before.

In general though, the meaning and message of the "Small Dog vs. Big Dog" meme is similar to the "Student vs. Progressive" shown in Figure 1, which was based on the face-off between the peaceful and self-assured student and an erratic and insecure supporter of the ruling party. This meme format exemplifies the light-hearted and creative spirit that characterised the protests in Serbia during the winter of 2024–2025. Despite being sparked by a tragic event and state-sponsored violence, the protests carried an undercurrent of optimism. The regime appeared shaken, while the peaceful, persistent demonstrations seemed to pressure it towards concessions and possibly even collapse. In these memes, the visual contrast between the students' strength and the fragility of the regime captured the hopeful and confident mood of the early phase of the movement.

The Affective Dimension of Memes: Animal Mascots and Community Building

There is another type of memes that emerged and featured animals, namely pets or sometimes stuffed animals, serving as mascot figures for the faculties under blockade. Although their content differed from other protest materials, their purpose remained the same: to entertain citizens and encourage them to join the movement. Using approachability and humour, the "pet memes" foster community solidarity and encourage public participation in the protests.

The first such example was an Instagram page run by students who had blocked the Rectorate of the University of Belgrade, dedicated to the black cat Đole living in the courtyard of the building. *Đole u blokadi* (Đole in the blockade) featured photos, announcements and various other memes in which Đole was the main character. As an example, in the meme in Figure 8, Đole is standing next to the Constitutional Court of Serbia, inviting people to attend the protests scheduled to take place in front of that institution.

Figure 8: An example of an animal mascot meme featuring Đole, the resident cat of the Rectorate.[8]

Similarly, several other faculties managed Instagram pages featuring their own mascot animals, such as hamsters, dogs or stuffed animal toys. The content of this type of memes was often humorous but at times serious, aiming to draw followers' attention to specific issues, events and needs of the student movement. Unlike the "Small Dog vs. Big Dog" meme, the memes featuring mascot animals were rooted in the specific context of the student blockades and represented an authentic generational expression. Created in a distinctly original way using memes, the animal mascots represented the "cute side" of the student protests, one associated with youthfulness, warmth and approachability. A powerful narrative about "the future of our children," often misused by the regime, was now being reclaimed by the public to describe students themselves or Serbian youth in general, striving for a better future. Such memes served to humanise the student blockades: these mascots and related memes served as a reminder that the students, while a strong and well-organised social force, were still young people, full of emotions and vitality typical for the chapter of their lives they are in. At the same time, the mascot animals conveyed messages of solidarity, inclusivity and care, traits that before the student protests were not usually attributed to a generation that was often seen as individualistic or socially disengaged in Serbian society. It would be inaccurate to say that this was a calculated marketing strategy by the students; rather, the

8 https://www.instagram.com/p/DEp_yLPCyQM/?hl=ru

spontaneous and playful sharing of online mascot content allowed the broader public to connect with a generation they often misunderstood, seeing them through stereotypes or superficial impressions.

AI-Generated Narratives: Multimodal Mimicry in Video Memes

The complexity of video memes was demonstrated during the student protests, where three distinct videos stood out from citizen-shot footage, identified as being created with the assistance of AI. These video clips are inherently mimetic, demonstrating mutual copying of content and structure. The conceptual foundation for their creation was likely derived from the multitude of mobile phone footage showing students marching through the streets carrying their faculty flags. Each of the three videos depicts students processing while carrying signs bearing the bloody handprint motif, as seen in the meme in Figure 9. Central to each video is a towering, famous personality from history or a figure related to the scientific field, symbolically representing the students' respective faculties. Each figure holds a recognizable emblem of their discipline, e.g., sheet music, test tubes, a judge's gavel, etc. The aim of these memes is to establish a sense of historical continuity and professional pride within the protest movement.

Figure 9: A screenshot from an AI-generated video meme depicting a student march. The image features a towering symbolic figure associated with a specific scientific discipline leading the procession.[9]

9 https://www.tiktok.com/@aidreamcraft/video/7451564079291976966

The AI-generated figures are occasionally interspersed with actual footage of the protests. This visual march is underscored by a specific musical accompaniment. For instance, the video primarily featuring the Faculty of Law, is set to *Ne lomite mi bagrenje* (Don't break my locust trees) by the renowned singer and songwriter Đorđe Balašević, containing a line that refers to observing the law. In the video for the Faculty of Pharmacy, students used the song by the rock band Riblja Čorba *Pogledaj dom svoj, anđele* (Look homeward, angel), which is about a devastated homeland and the people who live (t)here. The music of the video of the Faculty of Architecture is *The hanging tree* by James Newton Howard ft. Jennifer Lawrence, from *The Hunger Games* film series, alluding to injustice and rebellion in a dystopian political system.

These AI-generated video memes differ from human-made ones not just in how they are produced, but also in how they create political meaning. While a typical protest video tries to capture the "vibe" of being there, these AI videos use computer-generated precision to build a sense of symbolic authority. Because they look "too perfect" with their massive scale and cinematic style, viewers immediately recognise them as artificial. However, this does not make them less powerful. Instead of being "proof" that someone was there, they act as constructions of legitimacy. They function like digital actors that help define the group's identity, turning a messy, scattered protest into a unified, legendary story that feels bigger than any single person on the street.

To systematically explore the contrast between these AI-generated videos and traditional human-made content, it is essential to look at the difference between the "aesthetic of the real" and "algorithmic monumentalism". While human-made video memes from the protests are often characterised by an unfiltered and shaky camera perspective that emphasises the authenticity of the moment (Highfield 2016), these AI-assisted videos introduce a high level of curation. Human-made content focuses on the horizontal – the mass of people and immediate action, whereas these AI-generated visuals introduce a vertical dimension, placing historical or scientific "giants" above the crowd to provide a sense of legitimacy and permanence.

From the perspective of media power, this shift is politically significant. While traditional protest videos focus on the collective presence and the scale of the crowd, AI-generated memes do something else: they "package" the protesters' demands within famous cultural and historical symbols. Because of this, their success does not depend on the raw emotion of the moment. Instead, they are designed to fit the logic of platforms like TikTok and Instagram. These applications prefer visual clarity, clear symbols and a coherent story. In this sense, AI memes do not just change how the protest looks, but they also translate it into a format that algorithms are more likely to pick up and promote.

Although the sample size of these AI-generated videos is limited to three instances, they highlight a shift from spontaneous "remix culture" towards a more structured "synthetic activism". Unlike human-made memes that often use humour to deconstruct the opponent, these AI videos use synthesis to

construct a professional and historical identity. They function less like a quick satirical jab and more like a digital monument (Sarswat, Saxena, and Pal 2025).

Ethical Issues in Pictorial and Video Memes

While being powerful tools for social critique and protest mobilisation, pictorial memes that feature humans also pose certain challenges regarding the ethical issues of their creation and distribution. While memes are often seen as satire or parody and therefore protected under "fair use" (Patel 2013; Adams 2019; European Commission 2021; Nobre 2024), their content can be harmful (Phillips 2015) and reinforce stereotypes and biases (Drakett et al. 2018). An illustration of this is the "Student vs. Progressive" meme, where both the student and the figure who stands in opposition to him lost their anonymity without consenting to it, though in different ways. As noted, the student Andrej Tanko became known after he was arrested and placed under house arrest for allegedly splashing water from a bottle on police officers during the August protests. The person opposing him, in Serbian independent media referred to as M. M., on the other hand, became known as a "negative character," much like other persons featured on memes that contain photographs as their visual element, featuring *ćaci* or "guardians" who become exposed against their will (Douglas 2016).

This loss of anonymity highlights a central tension in digital activism: the public/private distinction. When individuals engage in confrontation in a public space, they technically forfeit some privacy; however, meme culture transforms a fleeting public moment into a permanent digital legacy. This is exemplified by the *Učinimo ih poznatim* (Let's make them famous) initiative. This campaign represented a form of digital "wall of shame" where images of SPP supporters were shared with the intent of uncovering and publicly disclosing their identity and personal data. By embedding these photographs within popular meme formats, the visibility of what is essentially a doxing campaign was amplified. Doxing, that is, the malicious public disclosure of private information, constitutes a critical ethical issue because the viral nature of memes facilitates targeted harassment and public shaming (Douglas 2019).

Furthermore, the responsibility of social media platforms remains a grey area. Platforms like X and Instagram often fail to distinguish between satirical political commentary and targeted harassment, allowing viral doxing to bypass standard moderation protocols. Other than private individuals who lost their anonymity because they had been portrayed on memes, there is another group of people shown in the visuals whose treatment also poses ethical dilemmas. Namely, as exposed in the case of the memes showing the middle finger, many visuals utilise images of public figures, which are typically taken without permission from their social media accounts or television appearances. Since the photos that serve as the visuals of these memes are taken in public places and at public events, they do not pose legal issues. However, taken together, instances ranging from copyright infringement and the use of private images to the normalisation of vulgar political critique and targeted doxing campaigns

underscore the persistent and complex ethical problems that routinely accompany the creation and dissemination of memes in the digital sphere.

Video memes, defined as mimetic content incorporating text (Shifman 2014) and often referred to as remixes or mashups (Manovich 2015), intensify the ethical dilemmas associated with static memes. The use of highly regulated material like films and music exacerbates copyright infringement (Chateau 2025), while the frequent appropriation of private or unaware individuals' footage heightens privacy violations. Yet, despite the music choices encroaching upon a grey area of copyright infringement, video memes are notable for the possibility of being an exception to typical ethical pitfalls rather than the rule. Namely, while incorporating well-known historical figures, the visual presentation of the protesters themselves, being either AI-generated or filmed in live footage from the back, demonstrates intentional visual distance. This deliberate choice means the videos do not encroach upon the privacy of the students or participants, serving as an effective example of how AI video memes can, at least partially, navigate and avoid certain key ethical and privacy challenges.

Conclusions

Memes produced and disseminated during the Serbian student-led protest demonstrate that digital artefacts can be more than ephemeral jokes or mere artefacts of online humour, but are embedded in moral, political and legal frameworks. The memes created and circulated during the 2024–2025 student protests in Serbia examined in this article reveal how political humour can become an important mode of mobilisation, civic participation and resistance, and how political goals are possible to achieve through not overtly political aims.

Yet, the analysis of protest memes also demonstrates that digital creativity entails issues of ethics and exposes the ethical ambiguities of memes (Gal-Or 2025). Practices such as doxing transform digital communication into a potential instrument of harassment and public shaming, as seen in the "guardian" and in some *ćaci* memes, but even the benevolent showcasing of iconic figures of the protests, like the case of Andrej Tanko shows, are capable of negatively targeting private individuals. On the other hand, as the red hand and middle finger memes, as well as the "Brain Before Sleep" illustrate, public figures, especially politicians, receive even more negative attention through mimetic exposure.

The emergence of AI-generated video memes deepens these dilemmas. Memes replicate the logic of human creativity while detaching it from responsibility and traceability (Gaba and de Cristofaro 2025; Gal-Or 2025). Thus, their reliance on unlicensed material, composite likenesses and algorithmic opacity undermines conventional notions of authorship and copyright. In line with these, but on a smaller scale, the AI-generated protest videos analysed in this article avoided privacy violations by anonymising participants as much as possible.

Ultimately, memes highlight the tension between creative expression and intellectual property rights in the digital age. It is an ethical challenge of meme culture not to reproduce the injustices these digital expressions seek to resist.

Digital expressions like memes, both videos and pictorial ones, should thus be used reflexively and embrace their democratising potential. Their capacity to mobilise for protests and foster solidarity also makes them sites of ethical tension between empowerment and harm, critique and mockery, anonymity and exposure. The Serbian protest memes illustrate that their power to critique authority and mobilise rests on solidarity and creativity. These, however, rest upon the conscientious use of social media content, including memes. While, like other means of political humour, they strive to create an in-group of like-minded people who interpret it in the same manner, equally important is the safeguarding of their identities and precautions against them being targeted.

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Krisztina Rácz, Mirjana Nećak Gavrilović, Andrej Ševo

Novo lice mimova u studentskim protestima u Srbiji i njihove etičke implikacije

Apstrakt

Cilj ovog rada je istraživanje internet mimova, nastalih i deljenih od strane studenata i građana, koji su učestvovali na protestima u Srbiji. Prikupljani su mimovi sa platformi X i Instagram, analizirana je njihova vizuelna forma i sadržaj, sa posebnim osvrtom na teme koje se ponavljaju. Na osnovu te analize, u radu se razmatra šest tipova slikovnih i jedan tip video mima specifičnih za kontekst srpskih studentskih protesta. Rad istražuje značenja koja nose mimovi nastali i distribuirani tokom protesta, tumačeći ih kao primere ostvarivanja političkih ciljeva nepolitičkim sredstvima. Dodatno, rad preispituje etičke implikacije tradicionalnih slikovnih mimova, kao i onih generisanih pomoću veštačke inteligencije. Centralne teme kojima se ovaj rad bavi su protestna mobilizacija, uloga humora, digitalna etika i uticaj veštačke inteligencije.

Ključne reči: studentski protesti, Srbija, internet mimovi, humor, digitalni aktivizam, protestna mobilizacija, etika društvenih medija

II

STUDIES AND ARTICLES

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FOUCAULT AND THE PRISONS INFORMATION GROUP'S COUNTER-SUBJECTIVATION

ABSTRACT
Between February 1971 and December 1972, Michel Foucault co-founded and was an active member of the Prisons Information Group (*Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons*, hereafter GIP). Through demonstrations, direct action, and publications, the GIP sought to intervene in France's carceral regime and the set of systems, ideas, and practices that sustained it, in order to bring about its transformation. The goal of Foucault and the GIP was not simply to improve prison conditions but to disrupt the constitutive conditions of the institution. The archival material that Foucault's involvement with the GIP left to society, alongside his lectures and publications, invites scholars to consider a rearticulation of our understanding of subjectivity. Reading Foucault's tracing of the genealogy of the category "guilty" and the GIP's analyses of prison uprisings facilitates a thicker understanding of "counter-subjectivation." In opposition to the structures of carceral subjectivity wherein incarcerated people could never hope to influence the standards according to which prisons seek to "rehabilitate" them, the GIP calls our attention to a more democratic work of subject formation.

KEYWORDS
Foucault, Prisons Information Group, counter-subjectivation, abolition, subjectification

"They are building new prisons!"
(Victor Hugo)

"We have to imagine and to build up what we could be ..."
(Michel Foucault)

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Introduction

"None of us is sure to escape prison." Michel Foucault (cited in Elden 2013) uttered these words to the world's press outside the Saint-Bernard de Montparnasse Chapel in Paris after the successful end of a hunger strike by Maoist activists. With this opening sentence of the founding statement of the Prisons Information Group (*Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons*, hereafter GIP) in February 8, 1971, Foucault did not only mean to acknowledge that every citizen could potentially be imprisoned. While the Maoist activists did, indeed, experience this first-hand when the French government outlawed their political organization, the *Gauche prolétarienne* (GP), in the aftermath of May '68, the subsequent sentences of Foucault's statement show he aimed elsewhere: "Today less than ever. Police control (*quadrillage*) over day-to-day life is tightening: in city streets and roads; over foreigners and young people; it is once more an offence to express opinions; anti-drug measures increase arbitrarily. We are kept under 'close observation.' [...] They tell us that prisons are over-populated. But what if it was the population that was being over-imprisoned?" (ibid). Foucault, alongside GIP founding members Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Jean-Marie Domenach, and Daniel Defert, told the audience outside the chapel that the prison-form was a symbol for other forms of control that were growing more powerful and affected everyone. Yet, possibly in a certain tension with the Maoists whose successful hunger strike had just improved imprisonment conditions (even if only for those considered "political prisoners"), Foucault's framing of the GIP's activity raises a different question: What does it mean to live a life that resists not only the prison but the prison-form per se? This question is democratic at its core: to resist the prison-form is to refuse carceral subjectivity, wherein incarcerated people can never hope to influence the standards according to which prisons seek to "rehabilitate" them.

Foucault's involvement with the GIP, alongside his Collège de France lectures and *Discipline and Punish*, unpacks this question on three levels: moral, sociopolitical, and that of subjectivity. The GIP texts and Foucault's activities with the GIP offer unusual clarity on the practical dimensions of Foucault's theoretical project. Indeed, Foucault's work with the GIP offers a unique contribution to our theoretical understanding of practices of self-transformation that I discuss through the lens of "counter-subjectivation." I apply this term to refer to the process whereby people transform themselves in a way that is not tied to a transcendental (which would set limits on said transformation). This, then, is the link between carceral subjectivity and counter-subjectivation. As a modality of power in which one can transform oneself in a manner *not* tied to a transcendental, counter-subjectivation offers an antidote to the workings of carceral subjectivity, wherein incarcerated individuals have no influence over the norms that prisons impose to define their "rehabilitation."

The GIP published five booklets and several pieces in the French press before its self-dissolution in December 1972 in favor of a prisoner-led organization (GIP 2021). Together, these texts demonstrate counter-subjectivation and

contain an important reminder, namely, that prisons are not solely intended to *repress* through civil and social death (Defert 2003; Zurn and Dilts 2015). They are also designed to *produce* a certain living subject: disciplined, obedient, civilized, straightened-up, and one that knows its place. For all that a prison might offer better possibilities for incarcerated people to be active, it would, nevertheless, remain merely a more sophisticated form of control (Gortler 2022).

According to Gilles Deleuze, a fellow GIP member, to Foucault, the GIP was "an experiment in thinking" (Deleuze 1986). The question of the prison-form and the practices of self-transformation that would undo it sat at the heart of the GIP experiment. According to Foucault, Jean-Paul Sartre and the Maoists, under Sartre's influence, sought to take over institutions of justice such as courts (and thus to repurpose them from "class justice" to "popular justice"). Yet, to Foucault, from its very inception, the court-form was meant to serve as an instrument of domination: it was set up by the bourgeoisie precisely to further their control in the aftermath of the French Revolution and therefore could never be repurposed. The same could be said of the prison.[1] The GIP did not set out in pursuit of a "people's prison," an "equal prison," or, in sum, an "ideal prison." Rather, the goal of its interventions was "to question the social and moral distinction between the innocent and guilty" (Foucault 1977b: 227). If the creation of our subjectivities according to allegedly objective social and moral categories such as *innocent* and *guilty* is, indeed, an instrument of control, then undoing these subjectivities would afford us greater freedom. Reading about the GIP's interventions through their own words provides pointers for achieving counter-subjectivation. And the group's interventions provide carceral insights into potential practices of freedom outside of prison walls.

The GIP sought to unsettle the structures of subjectification in our daily lives – structures exemplified, inter alia, by the prison-form. The epigraph from Victor Hugo ("They are building new prisons!"), quoted in one of the GIP's booklets, references the building of the notorious Parisian prison La Santé in the 1860s (where, a century later, the hunger strikes by Algerian prisoners were part of the backdrop to the GIP's founding) (GIP 2013: 94). The reference is a reminder that, despite the common imagery of the prison as dark and repressive, it is actually a creation of the Enlightenment. But both the GIP's texts and Foucault's writings serve as a reminder that this specific institution was not created to support equality and can never serve it.

This article is not an attempt to tell the history of prison activism in France in 1971–72. Nor does it seek to arrive at a conclusive abolition theory, or a universal theory or substantive vision of freedom. Rather, it aims to read Foucault's involvement with the GIP as laying clues to counter-subjectivation. Counter-intuitively, the GIP's unique articulations remind us that the prison-form and our modern subjectivities are, themselves, outcomes of abolition.

1 For a contribution that uses the GIP's resources to discuss why feminist approaches should avoid the carceral pitfall, see Terwiel (2019).

Methodologically, my exegesis builds on texts that are a result of archival work at the GIP collection of the Institut Mémoires de l'édition contemporaine (IMEC), the Foucault files at the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF) and the Elie Kagan collection at La Contemporaine (formerly the Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine). In the following sections, I start by reading the GIP texts as a practical endeavor on the part of Foucault to question "the social and moral distinction between the innocent and guilty" in order to move beyond our carceral selves (Foucault 1977b: 227). I then turn to reading the GIP's project and Foucault's lectures to propose that a further-reaching abolition includes the reworking of subjectivities. Thereafter, I briefly outline the difference between counter-subjectivation, the concept I suggest for this process, and Foucault's use of "counter-conduct" and "subjectivation." Finally, in the conclusion, I tie this project to the broader Foucauldian project and the possibilities of reworking the self.

The Prisons Information Group's Counter-subjectivation

The texts that Foucault wrote as part of his involvement with the GIP, as well as other GIP texts, paint a clear picture of the active role that one can play in pursuing processes of counter-subjectivation against carceral logics. By "carceral logics," I mean governmental control (not only of a state apparatus but also of theories, institutions, and practices) achieved through subjectification tied to a transcendental: constituting obedient and civilized subjects who know their place. The different handwritten drafts of the GIP texts enable us – despite the GIP's attempt to challenge regimes of the seeable and say-able by using a collective voice – to attribute most of the GIP texts to specific authors (Luxon 2016). More importantly, the GIP collection also exposes us to the changes made to progressive drafts of the GIP texts and, through these modifications, to the evolving thought process that guided the GIP's work. These texts hint at a counter-subjectivation that is the active possibility of subjects to exercise freedom in resisting various forms of limitations within the carceral setting. Such limitations include being rendered non-agents, treated as slaves, expected to trade freedom for one's sense of self in parole processes, being assigned books in disciplining educational processes, or, in sum, having to tolerate the carceral self.

The first point to note is that the GIP texts remind us that the work of counter-subjectivation begins with an acting subject. The first step toward moving beyond the Western conceptualization of subjectivity, in place since the time of Roman law, is to challenge society's perception that a subject is sovereign when they decide to relinquish, to a sovereign, their right to rule themselves (Foucault 1977b: 221). The changes made by Foucault to one GIP pamphlet stress this point. Jean-Marie Domenach, one of the founders of the GIP and the editor of the leftist–Catholic review *Esprit*, had written the first draft of this pamphlet to accompany a questionnaire that the GIP members distributed in front of prison entrances to gather information. His first draft included the

following sentences: “The situation inside the prisons is intolerable. They treat the prisoners like dogs. What few rights they have are not respected. We want to bring this scandal to the light of day.”[2] However, Foucault’s second draft of this pamphlet replaced the sentence “they treat the prisoners like dogs” with “they render the prisoner’s life a life unworthy of a human being.”[3] Why did Foucault replace the comparison to dogs? Could the reason be that, in this context, a dog has no ability to exercise power or act politically and can neither express nor change its subjectivity? But, while a dog is not able to do so, human beings *are* – and should be – able to change their realities and themselves.[4] Dogs might be over-incarcerated; dogs might be treated with cruelty; but the figure of the dog is not one we would associate with political action that changes reality.[5] As Foucault would later argue: “The problem, you see, is one for the subject who acts – the subject of action through which the real is transformed” (Foucault 2000: 236). The question of subjectivity is not only one of numbers – “we are human beings, not numbers”[6] – and the question of mass incarceration is not the only one we should be asking vis-à-vis the prison.

Second, the GIP texts develop counter-subjectivation as a refusal of both subjection and subjectification. George Jackson – one of the leaders and symbols of the Black Panther Party (BPP) – and his assassination while in prison were the subject of the GIP’s third booklet (GIP 1972). In the preface to this booklet, Jean Genet – playwright, former prisoner, and GIP member – draws the readers’ attention to the carceral attempt to influence Jackson’s behavior.[7] For the crime of stealing 70 dollars, Jackson was imprisoned for “either a year in prison or life” (Genet 1972). It was up to the parole board to decide whether Jackson had been rehabilitated and could be released. According to Genet, Jackson refused to accept the prison’s attempt to “correct” him and influence his subjectivity.[8] Every year of the 11 years he spent in prison for this crime of

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2 In “La Situation dans les prisons est intolérable,” File 2.22, Fonds GIP, IMEC. All translations are my own.

3 “On fait aux détenus une vie indigné d’un être humain” (GIP 2003: 50).

4 For similar examples, see: “we are human beings, not dogs” (...) “we are human beings, not numbers” in “Première victoire: plus d’étables mais des parloirs,” File 2.20, Fonds GIP, IMEC, and “we are not beasts, we are human beings” (GIP 1971: 34).

5 Foucault would return to discuss dogs in his references to Diogenes the Cynic who compared himself, and was compared by others, to a dog. The difference between the two instances is that Diogenes reclaims this comparison himself and remains an active agent. See Foucault 2011a.

6 “Première victoire: plus d’étables mais des parloirs,” File 2.20, Fonds GIP, IMEC.

7 For the broader connections between the BPP and the GIP, see Heiner (2007).

8 Of course, not every aspect of prisons’ attempts to affect one’s subjectivity can be refused. Jackson’s prison letters contain numerous examples of this reality; yet, the following quote is worth repeating also because of its relationship to the previous paragraph’s discussion of dogs: “I know that they will not be satisfied until they push me out of this existence altogether. I’ve been the victim of so many racist attacks that I could never relax again. My reflexes will never be normal again. I’m like a dog that has gone through the K-9 process” (Jackson 1970: 28).

stealing 70 dollars, he would meet with the parole board, and every year they determined he was not sufficiently rehabilitated. This, then, is a vignette of the consequentialist logic of incarceration that operates on the prisoner's subjectivity in order to bring about a transformation from a dangerous individual to a contributing member of society (Tonry 2011). Genet's analysis of Jackson's imprisonment reminds us that prisons attempt to constitute subjects and relationalities. As Jackson's experience proves, death is a central part of the story of the utilization of the prison-form as a mechanism of power (Bennett 2022). Yet, it is not the only part. Other prisoners who accepted the parole board's conditions for freedom *qua* release from prison are not known to us, yet Jackson's refusal to accept this subjectification alerts us to its existence: an existence that he describes as more dangerous than death (Jackson 1972). Modern prisons' declared operating principle, the attempt to affect subjectivity, is not merely theoretical. It has important manifestations in action, as felt by Jackson in their bodily impact. His own attempt to affect subjectivity, counter-subjectivation, was a reaction to the prison-form. To the systems, theories, and practices that attempted to change who he was, Jackson reacted by realizing a political self-transformation.

Counter-subjectivation requires a refusal of subjectification. Hence, the process that Jackson initiated can be understood as counter-subjectivation as he did more than refuse to change in a manner that would please the prison's administration: he deliberately sought to transform himself against such logics. "I, I hope, have completely killed the slave in me" (Genet 1972: 6). Genet quotes Jackson's prison letters: "I was a thug all my life. It was my years in prison that gave me the time and the opportunity for self-reflection and incited me to transform my character" (ibid: 5). Alongside Jackson's self-reported refusal of subjectification, the GIP booklet also describes a process that is specifically different from the process that Foucault would later label as "counter-conduct" and that relied on a transcendental (such as morality, a new man, or a form of knowledge, discussed later in this article). The main difference is that Jackson's actions are specifically discussed as distinct from both Christian and orthodox Marxist transcendentalisms: "[Jackson] no longer refers to the Old Testament. He cites neither the Prophets nor the Apostles" (ibid).

Deleuze defines this approach as a double "unhooking" or "differentiation" [*décrochage*] that arises when the "exercises that enabled one to govern oneself" *become detached* both from power as a relation between forces and from knowledge as a stratified form or "code" of virtue (Deleuze 1988: 100). This process of "unhooking" is not a practice of the self that is performed in isolation but a political and collective practice. Jackson's unhooking is similar to the BPP's relational practices outside prison walls: self-help, self-arming, and consciousness-raising as practices of education (Dorlin 2022). Prison education shows the continuum of possibilities between different modalities of power. In Foucault's reading of the prisoners' refusal of education, what they are rejecting is undemocratic politics, this being hinted-at by the etymological source of the "duc" in "education" – just like the "duke" who governs without

consulting those who are governed. Genet's analysis of Jackson's transformation illustrates the possibilities for action that exist even in the most extreme circumstances. While Jackson was held in prison because he refused the parole board's model of rehabilitation, the practices of self-transformation that he undertook open-up theoretical possibilities for action.

In another instance of the refusal of carceral subjectification, Foucault reads the prisoners' arson attack on the library at the Centrale Ney prison in Toul as an act representing the refusal of our inheritance of Roman law that demands that the subject know their place and defines the individual as a submitted sovereign. Describing the prison takeover of December 9, 1971, Foucault writes: "They burned the library, and with it all the hypocrisy of prison education, moral correction, vocational training" (GIP 2003: 153–54). The library is symbolic of both knowledge and education, and readers might flinch at the thought of a library going up in flames; yet, Foucault's analysis is meant to shed light on a specific kind of education process. This is a process in which prisoners are invited to be active – read, take out books – but the kind of rehabilitated subject that is expected of this educational process is not up to them to choose. It is not a matter of the variety of books to choose from but something more profound. The problem with the hypocrisy of prison education to which Foucault draws our attention is that a *rehabilitated* subjectivity is not a result of the prisoners' choosing.

Setting fire to the library, according to Foucault, was not comparable to calls for "flush toilets" (Foucault 1977b: 227). Nor was it on a par with the call of the Maoist hunger strikers of the *Gauche prolétarienne*, who, in their solidarity with the "common law" incarcerated people, declared: "In our eyes, [the "common-law" prisoners] are the victims of a social system that, after having produced them, refuses to re-educate them and is content with debasing and casting them aside" (Secours-Rouge 1970). Rather, Foucault reads the actions of those incarcerated at Centrale Ney as a struggle against the dispositifs that attempt to "re-educate" them in the sense of reconstituting their subjectivities. Unlike "the hypocrisy of prison education, moral correction, [and] vocational training," Foucault understood this arson attack as an attempt by the incarcerated to counter the corpus of knowledge that was imposed on them, but that had never served them and that, undemocratically, they had no capacity to affect. In other GIP texts, the hypocrisy of prison education is discussed as signifying the false promises made by a system that, on the one hand, pretends to re-educate prisoners and to return them to society but, on the other, continuously marks them as criminals and thus adds further difficulties to former prisoners' struggles to find employment. Foucault's Nietzschean analysis of this event was undoubtedly not the one that the incarcerated people themselves articulated. In fact, an eye-witness report provides a specific reason for the attack on the library:

> … arsonists also set to work and burned the library because they found two hundred pairs of shoes while we had been told that we now had to buy them

> for twenty-eight Francs (subsidies are seventy Francs per month in general; the amount increases with tenure) because subsidies were no longer sufficient, or I do not know what other lie.[9]

Foucault's analysis of the incident thus suggests that the prisoners were working against practices of subjectification. His framing of these prisoners in revolt reminds us that the prison-form is an instrument of control: by refusing their passive role, the Toul prisoners were thus also defying a society that attempted to yoke them to predetermined roles and predetermined truths.

Third, the GIP proposed not only individual acts of self-transformation within prisons but also farther-reaching collective ones both inside and outside of prison walls. Foucault interprets incarcerated people's movements as offering both continuity and change (Foucault 1994: 1311). The continuity can be found in their learning from previous movements – primarily, the Algerian resistance movements, such as the *National Liberation Front* in French prisons (most notably, the Parisian prison La Santé) and the 1960s hunger strikes of these movements. The change is that, for the first time, the prison takeovers were centered around a call to public opinion. The prisoners at Toul were at the vanguard: they climbed up to the roof of the Centrale Ney and, from there, attempted to communicate their conditions to those outside. Foucault analyzes this moment not by concentrating on the content of the appeal but on the nature of the gestures involved – horizontal communication and the turn to political action to change the situation. These gestures work against the subject formation inherited from Roman law, where, to request change, the subject would have to appeal to the governor. Instead, the incarcerated people on the roof practice counter-subjectivation in changing these learned modalities of subjectivity. The GIP endeavored to spread this public appeal by reading incarcerated people's demands in public,[10] by publishing a booklet on these demands, and by writing in the press. It was a moment where the "guilty" refused to be placed outside the political order and the carceral subjectivity to which they were supposed to adhere. The GIP amplified this refusal.

The GIP's proposition for self-transformation was also directed toward those outside prisons. "Let us become intolerant of prisons," it invited its readers (GIP 2003: 52). In its refusal of practices of individualization, the GIP proposed a plural "becoming intolerant" as an act of collective transformation. The intolerance that the GIP proposed was not only targeted at sub-standard imprisonment conditions or at humiliating treatment, but at carceral subjectivities as well. The same pamphlet suggested becoming intolerant toward "the

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9 Un ancien détenu de Toul raconte la révolte du 9 décembre. Dossier no 10, June 26, 1972, APL Lyon, file 3.37, Fonds GIP, IMEC.

10 On January 17, 1972, GIP members stormed the Ministry of Justice building. Once inside, Foucault read out a statement by people incarcerated at Melun Prison. It was the principle of "donner la parole," giving the floor to prisoners themselves by utilizing the position of the intellectuals (as De Gaulle said of Sartre: "One does not arrest Voltaire"). For an analysis of this important GIP demonstration, see Artières (2004).

hospital system, psychiatric practices, military service, etc.," too (ibid). Foucault would also later use the word "intolerance" to describe the public rage manifested toward cruel or unjust public executions – the very intolerance that would contribute to the appearance of the modern prison-form. Here, arguably, the intolerance to which Foucault aspired would have a broader reach, far beyond a rejection of the excessive practices of punishment. For that brand of intolerance might only lead to more sophisticated mechanisms of control that would replace the excessive violence that might provoke a reaction with masked forms of control. Rather, the GIP's intolerance was aimed at exclusionary and inclusionary practices of subjectification, not just violence. It was an intolerance that could be practiced not only within prison walls in opposing the institution's attempts to constitute an obedient, civilized subject but also outside of prisons, where the chains are less visible. This call to become intolerant was the crux of the GIP's political significance. It suggested a vision of freedom for the politics of our selves – to take control of the theories, institutions, and practices that define us.

In the GIP's first public appearance and founding statement – "None of us is sure to escape prison" – the group stressed the relevance of the struggle against the prison-form to broader sets of concerns, beyond those of incarcerated people. To achieve the goal of unsettling the carceral logics of a punitive society, the GIP turned to those most affected by it. Yet, the turn to the prisoners "themselves" was not separate from the "ourselves." This point was illustrated at a press conference held on January 17, 1972, following the tumultuous demonstration in which GIP members had stormed the Ministry of Justice. When Foucault and Sartre addressed the press at the Rue Dussoubs offices of the *Agence de presse Libération* (created by GIP companion Maurice Clavel), the physical backdrop to their words, formed by a series of posters on the walls behind them, reminds us of the different contexts delineated in the post-'68 era. The silent posters, captured in photographs,[11] point to white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, Zionism, xenophobia, and homophobia, among other prevailing issues. Countering the prison is related to a broader spectrum of issues that are both beyond the scope of Marxism and, as Foucault would argue, also have to do with changing the subjects' relation to truth.

In a later exchange with Deleuze, Foucault mentioned that the struggles of "women, prisoners, conscripted soldiers, hospital patients, and homosexuals [are] radical, uncompromising, and non-reformist, and refuse any attempt of arriving at a new disposition of the same power with, at best, a change of masters" (Foucault and Deleuze 1977: 216). It is this refusal that separates the GIP's argument from the analyses that view freedom solely through the lens of

11 For example, one poster cites Angela Davis: "The real criminals in this society are not all the people who populate the prisons across the state but those people who have stolen the wealth of the world from the people." Other posters show calls for protest by African-Americans, feminists, Palestinians, and workers, among others. See photo FD-KAG1688N00082605, Elie Kagan Collection, La Contemporaine.

liberation. In other words, the figures of women, prisoners, soldiers, patients, and homosexuals are not natural configurations but, rather, exist as part of a specific *political* configuration. As prisoners are a modern construct of the deep division separating innocence and guilt that arises from a post-Enlightenment need to control, they demonstrate the possibilities of freedom that emerge from questioning such categories. Understanding that the constructs of innocence and guilt are put in place *to put in place* (that is, to dominate, qualify, limit, and teach a good that is beyond one's reach) is a necessary step en route to the undoing of a carceral subjectivity.

The processes of counter-subjectivation in the GIP's work were posed in juxtaposition to other leftist projects. In line with Foucault's debate with the Maoists in February 1972, they showed that actions such as taking over the court and other institutions cannot serve as practices of freedom because the court itself, along with the distinction between innocence and guilt, was established to work against a popular revolt: "My hypothesis is not so much that the court is the natural expression of popular justice, but rather that its historical function is to ensnare it, to control it, and to strangle it" (Foucault, Lévy, and Glucksmann 1980: 1). Foucault asks: "Is not the setting up of a neutral institution standing between the people and its enemies, capable of establishing the dividing line between the true and the false, the guilty and the innocent, the just and the unjust, is this not a way of resisting popular justice?" (ibid: 2). Unlike the "People's Court" held in Lens in December 1970 as a mock trial to judge those responsible for a mining disaster – with Sartre in the role of Prosecutor – the GIP's actions were not based on taking over an existing institution while keeping the institution itself in place (Sartre 1973: 24). For example, the GIP did not seek to have the Minister of Justice René Pleven incarcerated, even though it considered him highly implicated in the situation in the prisons. Nor did the GIP advocate vengeance as the proper means of serving justice, replacing the prison and reversing or inverting power relations (in contrast to some Paris-based Maoist publications following the April 1972 Bruay-en-Artois affair).[12] Not through vengeful "reversal," not by creating an ideal prison, not by aspiring to a people's prison – the GIP's call to obliterate the deep division that lies between innocence and guilt was built on the understanding that a collective work of unlearning is needed for moving beyond our carceral subjectivities.

12 The murder and rape of working-class 16-year-old Brigitte Dewèvre in the town of Bruay-en-Artois (today, Bruay-la-Buissière) on April 6, 1972. After the suspect – Pierre Leroy, an upper-class lawyer – was released, some Maoist publications called for vengeance by the people. One such publication suggested that lynching the lawyer was justified: "It is the people's way of inverting [*renverser*] the world and its roles." *La Cause du People J'accuse*, no 24 of May 17, 1972, page 12. Behrent observes that, for Foucault, "Bruay reveals, in short, the essential reversibility of power relations." I disagree. The language of "renverser" is, rather, the Maoist language that Foucault opposes as it keeps a structure of unfreedom in place, even if with "new masters." See Behrent (2010: 593); Ewald and Boehme (2017); Wolin (2010).

The undoing of carceral subjectivity as a collective technology of the self

Foucault defines the goal of the GIP as "to obliterate the deep division that lies between innocence and guilt" (Foucault 1977b: 227). This section explores the birth, according to Foucault, of this separation to understand its hold on modern societies. Scholarship tends to read *Discipline and Punish* as running parallel to Foucault's involvement with the GIP: Cecile Brich seeks to show contradictions in Foucault's political practices and both Keith Gandal and Marcello Hoffman have attempted to unpack the relationship between Foucault's involvement with the GIP as practice and *Discipline and Punish* as theory (Brich 2008; Gandal 1986; Hoffman 2014). The analysis presented herein takes a different route. Rather than unpack a dialectic between theory and practice, it takes the GIP's texts as exposing a lacuna in *Discipline and Punish*; rather than "teasing out affinities" (Hoffman 2014: 38) between the GIP texts and *Discipline and Punish*, or regarding the latter as a "vibrant afterlife" (Zurn and Dilts 2015) of the group, I place the focus here on what the GIP texts offer for different analyses of subjectivity and the subjects' potential for action that transforms their carceral selves.[13] In other words, I read *Discipline and Punish* as a story of subjectification and the GIP as a story of counter-subjectivation.[14]

The GIP texts offer an alternative way to consider subjects' actions. Since prisoners who take action are mostly absent from *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault's research notes help us to better grasp the relation between different kinds of action – whether by prisoners, prison reformers, rebels, or execution-site rioters – in a way that highlights the difference between *Discipline* and the GIP, and thus enables scholars to reassess the role of the acting subject in Foucault's *oeuvre*. Foucault's materials held at the BnF show that his research for *Discipline and Punish* focused on prison reformers. Hence, the files are ordered according to the names of different reformers (such as Cesare Beccaria, Jeremy Bentham, and Nikolaus Heinrich Julius), while other files are named after different police inspectors – such as Siméon-Prosper Hardy, who gives the official account of Damiens' execution. As in *Discipline and Punish*, subjects' actions only appear when these individuals are about to be executed or to demonstrate a successful process of subjectification. However, subjects in action – not necessarily prisoners – do appear in the BnF research notes in two instances. The first is concerned with different rebellions such as the va-nu-pieds rebellion,[15] only very briefly mentioned in *Discipline and Punish* yet elaborated upon in the 1972 lectures, and the second is a file on different revolts against the police in times of executions or arrest (Foucault 1977a: 84).

13 Elsewhere, Zurn and Dilts do discuss the difference between *Discipline and Punish* and the GIP texts regarding the absence of prisoners' voices from the former. See Zurn, Dilts, and Wolters (2016).

14 That said, a map of subjectification, as provided in *Discipline and Punish*, can be useful when attempting to undo this subjectification. See Ilot (2023); Vásquez (2020).

15 "Les Nu pieds" and "Mouvements populaires XVIIe siècle." File 7, Box 2, BnF.

Both these instances fit what Foucault would later call "counter-conducts." Foucault regards the execution-site revolts – in which witnesses would lash-out against an especially cruel treatment of a condemned person – as one of the motivations for the *abolition* of the pre-prison methods of punishment and their replacement with the "gentle way in punishment" imagined by the reformers. Hence, the counter-conduct itself is not necessarily always something to aspire to. Similarly, Foucault's discussion of the va-nu-pieds rebellion does not focus on its liberatory aspects. This is not only because it was brutally stifled but also because of two – quite enormous – productive afterlives of the rebellion: an original manifestation of the modern state and the separation between innocence and guilt that is central to how the state begins to conduct the conduct of its subjects.

Foucault's writings, in general, clarify the possibilities for change in carceral subjectivity. At the same time, they complicate the notion that Foucault only turned to ethics and the possibility of self-fashioning in the early 1980s. In his January 12, 1972 lecture, Foucault further unpacked the philosophical meaning and historical context of what he referred to as the birth of this separation between innocence and guilt as being inseparable from the appearance of the body of the state apparatus. Foucault traces the birth of the modern state not back to the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia but, rather, nine years earlier, to the suppression of the rebellion of the va-nu-pieds, in Normandy in 1639–40. Among the factors that combined to trigger the va-nu-pieds rebellion was a rumor that the state was about to take control of the salt-making industry in Normandy.[16] This would hurt the interests of both the poorer workers and the Norman nobles and clergymen who owned the lands that sold wood to this industry. To quell the revolt, Louis XIII and Cardinal Richelieu first sent the military into Normandy, under the command of Colonel Jean de Gassion, and then sent in a civilian figurehead, Chancellor Séguier. Foucault argues that Séguier's entrance into Rouen was a crucial event in the founding of the modern state, where the visible body of the state advanced in the place of the absent king (Foucault 2019: 71). That is, the rebellion was the justification for sending in Séguier as the representative not of the king but – for the first time, according to Foucault – of the state.

Yet, the appearance of the modern state – this defining moment of who we are – is tied to another important innovation: *the instrumentalization of moral categories for the purpose of control*. It is the reworking of this second innovation that the GIP experimented with. Foucault's articulation of how moral distinctions serve as a mechanism of power is presented through the actions of Séguier. After Séguier entered the city of Rouen on January 2, 1640, he declared to the rebels: "The innocent have nothing to fear; only those who have failed will feel the effects of the King's just anger and indignation" (ibid: 49).

16 More specifically, to move districts from the definition of *pays de quart-bouillon* that are taxed one-quarter of their salt to the control of the farm of the *gabelle*, where salt was heavily taxed under a royal monopoly (Mousnier 1970: 96–97).

Foucault also quotes a different source that names the categories of the separation as "good" and "evil" – *bons et méchants* – thus giving this distinction a more pronounced Nietzschean flavor. Séguier's distinction between "the innocent" and "those who have failed" is, to Foucault, a moment of the utmost importance in the emergence of the modern state. It did not merely operate as a tool of external domination; indeed, the act of violent suppression was mostly over by the time Séguier entered Rouen (Davidson 1972: 22–23). The dreadful military commander Gassion, sent by Richelieu (who also gave Gassion the nickname "La Guerre"), had already forcefully crushed the rebellion by then, with the result that "Normans [were] massacred like enemies of the kingdom or traitors." Rather, Séguier's "innocent" versus "failed" distinction is a modern mechanism of control, for it works on the level of subjectivity, not only force. According to Foucault, the expectation was that the statement would cause the people of Rouen to question themselves as to which category they currently belonged to in this binary and how they should act in the future to ensure they belonged to the right group.[17] It is therefore a subject formation-oriented differentiation. At the same time, the leveraging of the two categories was also a mechanism that enabled the nobles, the clergy, and the clerks of the different regions to distinguish themselves from the lower strata, after the rebellion – initially encouraged by them – failed. The construction of the category of "innocent" is that of the subject who knows their place. In more contemporary terms, it is a citizen-subjectivity defined by laws the citizen was not invited to take part in setting and, yet, is expected to adhere to. When this citizen acts in a way that transgresses the laws, they become "guilty" and should thus fear the consequences.

In this case, the creation of the categories of innocence and guilt as instruments of control takes place not in a context of crime but one of rebellion. Moreover, the distinction between the categories operates under a logic of *divide et impera*.[18] Foucault wishes to complicate an Althusserian understanding of repressive "Ideological State Apparatuses" with a notion of the production of carceral subjectivity that goes beyond repression.[19] At the moment of the founding of the modern state and our social relations, Foucault sees not only

17 I thank François Ewald for clarifying the connection between Séguier's statement and the work of subjectivity (personal communication).

18 Foucault would add another layer to this argument a year later in the 1973 Collège de France lectures *The Punitive Society*, where he describes the further coalescence of the punitive society after the French Revolution when the bourgeoisie started to imprison the lower strata in order to enhance their own standing. To them – Foucault imagines – the lower strata said: "Did we not violate the law, plunder wealth together?" and the bourgeoisie replied: "Previously, abuses of power were attacked; now, violating the law displays a lack of morality." In this case as well, Foucault understands the question of the allegedly objective categories of innocence and guilt as entwined with questions of power (Foucault 2015: 156). For the broader context of the ways in which mechanisms of exclusion are related to the bourgeoisie's interest, see Foucault (2003: 32–33).

19 For an analysis of *Penal Theories and Institutions* in relation to Althusser's work, see Étienne Balibar's comments at the Columbia Center for Contemporary Critical

repression (Gassion) but production (Séguier) as well – the production of subjects according to the moral distinction between the "innocent" and "guilty." Foucault here presents us with a specific historical moment where the categories of innocence and guilt come to play an important role in a relationship of power.

Despite the limitations of *Discipline and Punish*'s focus on the period of the birth of the prison, a period where the technologies of power were qualitatively different from our own, Foucault's analysis is helpful in that it presents how the Enlightenment's prison-form itself was built on the abolition of a previous modality of punishment. As he observes, "very soon the public execution became intolerable" (Foucault 1977a: 73). The aforementioned revolts that broke out at execution sites threatened public order and added further reasons to abolish the practice of public displays of justice, thereby contributing to the eventual transformation into the prison. Thus, Foucault reminds us that abolishing that which is intolerable is not, in and of itself, sufficient (Foucault 1977b: 218, 224). The word "intolerable" is so central to the GIP's project that it was chosen as the title of the group's primary publications, but intolerance was a strategy of a different order to the nineteenth-century intolerance to the public execution. Uncomfortably, *Discipline and Punish* reminds us that the prison itself was a project of intolerance. The modern prison was constituted out of Enlightenment thinkers' intolerance of the previous methods of cruel punishment, and "one of their first cries was to demand their abolition" (Foucault 1977a: 63). *Discipline and Punish* reminds us that the genealogy of our current system of punishment is connected to processes of both intolerance to perceived wrongs and of abolition. The GIP texts assist in differentiating between, on the one hand, processes of intolerance that only replace a mechanism of subjection (be it cruel punishment, public executions, or social death) with a process of subjectification (the ideal prison), and, on the other hand, farther-reaching forms of intolerance. The latter are processes that aim at obliterating the deep division that lies between innocence and guilt as allegedly transcendental categories. These more profound processes hinge on relations of subjectivity. Following Foucault's concepts of "counter-conduct" and "subjectivation," the GIP texts facilitate a schematization of "counter-subjectivation."

A schema of counter-subjectivation

It seems to be common wisdom that prisoners should re-enter society. Yet, the subject-positions of incarcerated people and their experience of societal relations of power demonstrate that society should be *changed* rather than merely entered. In other words, instead of re-entry, counter-subjectivation is a search for an exit that will re-work relations of power. It is neither a "best practices" search for a better prison or more efficient subjectification, nor a search for

Thought (Balibar 2015). Additionally, see Balibar's note to editor Bernard E. Harcourt in Foucault (2019: 279–83).

popular justice, revenge, militancy, or even counter-conduct. Most importantly, it is not a global scheme of transformation. The GIP texts enable the concept of "counter-subjectivation" to be developed as the alternative term I use to describe the mode of thought that began to articulate itself in Foucault's analyses in the early 1970s, though Foucault himself never uses it. It connects Foucault's later concepts of counter-conduct (*contre-conduire*) and subjectivation (*subjectivation*), both of which were introduced by Foucault in 1978. The GIP texts demonstrate counter-subjectivation as a transformative, creative, and innovative attempt to rework relations of power that enables one to define the processes to which one is held accountable.

The possibility for a subject or group of subjects to actively participate in the construction of their own subjectivity appears in Foucault's texts of the 1970s. At first, Foucault used the term "desubjectification" (*désassujettissement*) to denote such a process.[20] Later, with his turn to study the history of sexuality, he used the term subjectivation (*subjectivation*), albeit only after the 1976 publication of the first of his three volumes on the topic.[21] In the pivotal year of 1978, Foucault experimented with the possibility of using the concept *counter-conduct* to describe a positive alternative to desubjectification (2007: 194):

> Just as there have been forms of resistance to power as the exercise of political sovereignty, and just as there have been other, equally intentional forms of resistance or refusal that were directed at power in the form of economic exploitation, have there not been forms of resistance to power as conducting?

However, Foucault was skeptical about this concept, and his examples of counter-conduct that arise from political institutions are also forms of resistance that he came to take issue with (Davidson 2011). In *Security, Territory, Population* Foucault gives three such examples: (1) desertion, (2) the PCF (the French Communist Party), and (3) alternative medical knowledges. These examples fall short of the model of resistance Foucault's later work searches for because each one is built on a particular transcendental (Foucault 2007: 194). All three base their resistance to power, their counter-conduct, on the following transcendentals: (1) a morality, (2) a new man and a new social order, or

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20 Foucault first uses desubjectification (*désassujettissement*) in 1971 (Foucault 1977b: 222). The original French version of this important conversation between Foucault and high school students was entitled "Par-delà le bien et le mal" ("Beyond Good and Evil"), the same title as that of Nietzsche's book. Importantly, this is the same conversation in which Foucault mentions that the goal of the GIP is to obliterate the deep division between innocence and guilt.

21 Foucault first uses subjectivation (*subjectivation*) in 1978 to denote the possibility of the subject to construct their own subjectivity. Milchman and Rosenberg argue that "*subjectivation* pertains to the relation of the individual him/herself; to the multiple ways in which a self can be constructed on the basis of what one takes to be the truth." As Samuel Chambers points out, even attentive readers of Foucault such as Judith Butler have mistakenly translated *assujettissement* as subjectivation. (Chambers 2013: 98–101; Milchman and Rosenberg 2007: 55).

(3) a form of knowledge (ibid: 198–200). In addition, as Foucault intentionally limits his discussion to points of resistance "*within* the field of the pastorate," the five forms of counter-conduct he discusses (asceticism, communities, mysticism, Scripture, and eschatological beliefs) are, similarly, all based on a transcendental religious grounding (ibid: 194, 204–14). At the same time, the concept of counter-conduct enables what other concepts, such as dissidence, do not (ibid: 202, my emphasis):

> I fear [dissidence] may even be dangerous, for there is not much sense in saying, for example, that a mad person or a delinquent is a dissident. There is a process of sanctification or hero worship which does not seem to me of much sense. On the other hand, by using the word counter-conduct, and so without having to give a sacred status to this or that person as a dissident, we can no doubt analyze the components in the way in which someone actually acts in the very general field of politics or in the very general field of power relations; it makes it possible to pick out the *dimension or component* of counter-conduct that may well be found in fact in delinquents, mad people, and patients. So, [one could conduct] an analysis of this immense family of what could be called counter-conducts.

Foucault thus understands the contribution of the term *counter-conduct* to refer not only to specific behaviors – the revolts – but to their possible locations in sites such as prisons, asylums, and hospitals. These, according to Foucault's analyses of these institutions, are also sites for the construction of subjectivity.

Prisons are the sites where we find those excluded by humanism, those who feel the brunt of the weight of the current societal arrangement in processes of subjectification. Counter-conduct is supposed to challenge these constructions of subjectivity. However, as the examples that Foucault discusses include those that seek to replace one construction of subjectivity with another fixed subjectivity, the term *counter-conduct* falls short of describing, positively, a process of a continuous challenge to specific constructions of subjectivity. Foucault describes these movements of resistance and insubordination as seeking "to escape direction by others and to define the way for each to conduct himself" (ibid: 195). Yet, this articulation entails a contradiction in terms.

If the escape from a current way of conducting oneself is only possible through a new "self" that would simply set different limits on one's ability to change oneself (such as the "new man" discovered by the PCF or the "healthy body" discovered by alternative medical knowledges), then it is a bounded practice of freedom. For this reason, the term *counter-conduct* is inadequate to describe the undoing of carceral subjectivity. As we have seen, the alternative approach that the GIP texts articulate would rather leave the possibility of the very act of defining in the hands of the subject. In Foucault's later writings on sexuality, it is precisely the possibility of the subject to define their own sexual practices that situate them as practices of freedom (Foucault 1989). And, indeed, Foucault was never to use the concept "counter-conduct" again after his 1978 experiments with it (Lorenzini 2016).

The art of continuous self-definition lies at the core of counter-subjectivation. The context of the quote in the epigraph is the following (Foucault 1982):

> Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine and to build up what we could be to get rid of this kind of political "double bind," which is the simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures.

However, beyond "subjection" as a relation of force and "subjectification" as a relation in which the subject binds themselves to a truth they could never participate in affecting, this third mode that Foucault hints at – this refusal of "what we are" – is not given a name. But it is concerned with altering the relation between the subject and truth, suggesting an undoing of a fixed relation to truth. Unlike the modes of subjectivation that rely on a transcendental, such as in Christian theology, the unnamed third mode does not foreclose a continuous change – hence, Foucault's use of "de-subjectivize" (Foucault 2011b).

The problem that the family of "de-" concepts (de-subjectivize, desubjectification) poses is that it is not possible to differentiate the process they propose – of undoing a specific set of constructions – from an annihilating process. Of the latter, the Nazi desubjectification of Jews is one paradigmatic example. See Agamben's use of the same word Foucault uses in this context – *désassujettissement* (Agamben 1999: 129). Moreover, Foucault does not propose a concept that would differentiate a subjectivation circumscribed by a transcendental from a non-transcendental subjectivation. To both these issues, the concept of "counter-subjectivation" offers a way forward as a process of refusal where we "imagine and (...) build up what we could be."

As the GIP's analyses demonstrate, it is precisely because prisons are sites that, at their core, imagine people otherwise (as "rehabilitated"/"reformed"/"corrected," and so on) that they become useful sites for scholars. Here, they can examine attempts by the prisoners themselves to define who they are – both in line with, and working against, *carceral* attempts to define them. What the GIP texts offer us is an understanding that the "ideal prison" would remain an undemocratic attempt to change people according to patterns they never chose. "Friends of prisoners," as the GIP self-identified, should look for modes of action that resist such co-optation.[22] The GIP's "experiment in thinking" advocated that prisons' subjectification practices be political, not "common-law," in their essence. The GIP texts thus offer valuable hints portraying counter-subjectivation as a process of self-transformation. The prison could never be democratic, for prisoners would never be able to affect the values they are expected to be reformed into. A farther-reaching abolition, one that would not lead to new entrenchments of inequality and domination, would thus strive toward democratic possibilities of self-formation.

22 The language of "friends of prisoners" is from: Ou en est l'action du GIP?, File 1.30, Fonds GIP, IMEC.

Conclusion

The GIP texts stress that the prison-form cannot be repurposed. It was put in place as a mechanism of control against those that threatened the social contract, and, as long as it exists, it will be put to use against those at the margins. Even more provocatively, and beyond the scope of this article, the GIP's approach also counters the new progressive attempts of the twenty-first century to switch to electronic monitoring instead of the prison. In other words, it reminds us that masked incarceration is not the proper solution either. The GIP tells us that re-education, too, is a form of control, and that better subjectification that seeks to discipline, civilize, and make one learn one's place will only intensify our carceral subjectivities.

Foucault's BnF notes and his lectures teach us that our carceral subjectivities are not transcendental but have been formed historically and that the constitution of the categories of "innocent" and "guilty" can also be historicized. Rather than attempt to attack the prison-form because of the people who are hurt by it, we can choose instead to focus on its effects – not only on all who walk through the prison gates but also on those of us who are currently outside of those gates. Foucault's analysis of Séguier's action reminds us that it is not enough to discuss Gassion – for an analysis of power relations should not only discuss force but also the construction of subjectivities. Séguier's categories of "innocent" and "failed" were meant to ensure control and to make each and every citizen of an occupied city question their own relation to this apparent truth, set by others. But there is a possible exit, per Foucault, in the reworking of power relations. As the GIP texts demonstrate, we can, indeed, become intolerant of prisons, but to do so is also to work on ourselves. The politics of our carceral selves requires a recognition that the categories of innocence and guilt are historically constructed instruments of control – a recognition that can be accompanied by creative, innovative, and collective attempts to undo them.

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Šaj Gortler

Fuko i Grupa za informisanje o zatvorima: kontra-subjektivacija

Apstrakt

Između februara 1971. i decembra 1972. godine, Mišel Fuko je bio suosnivač i aktivni član Grupe za informisanje o zatvorima (Groupe d’Information sur les Prisons, u daljem tekstu GIP). Putem demonstracija, direktnih akcija i publikacija, GIP je nastojao da interveniše u francuski zatvorski režim i u skup sistema, ideja i praksi koje su ga održavale, kako bi doprineo njegovoj transformaciji. Cilj Fukoa i GIP-a nije bio samo poboljšanje uslova u zatvorima, već narušavanje konstitutivnih uslova same institucije. Arhivski materijal koji je Fukoovo učešće u GIP-u ostavilo društvu, zajedno sa njegovim predavanjima i publikacijama, poziva istraživače da razmotre ponovnu artikulaciju našeg razumevanja subjektivnosti. Čitanje Fukoovog genealoškog praćenja kategorije „kriv“ i analiza zatvorskih pobuna koje je razvio GIP omogućava dublje razumevanje pojma „kontra-subjektivacije“. Nasuprot strukturama karceralne subjektivnosti, u kojima zatvorene osobe nikada ne mogu da utiču na standarde prema kojima zatvori nastoje da ih „rehabilituju“, GIP nam skreće pažnju na demokratičniji rad formiranja subjekta.

Ključne reči: Fuko, Grupa za informisanje o zatvorima, kontra-subjektivacija, abolicija, subjektivacija.

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Ana Gavran Miloš

CAPABILITARIAN WELL-BEING AND THE LIMITS OF CONTEXTUALISM: AGAINST PLURALISM AND PROCEDURALISM[1]

ABSTRACT
This paper examines recent challenges to traditional philosophical theories of well-being and proposes a revised framework grounded in the capability approach. Classical theories (hedonism, desire-fulfillment, and objective list accounts) have long dominated philosophical discourse on what constitutes a good life. However, these theories have come under increasing criticism for their abstractness and limited applicability to empirical research and policy-making. Anna Alexandrova (2017) argues that philosophical theories of well-being are too general and removed from real-life concerns, advocating instead for a contextual and pluralist understanding of the concept. Ingrid Robeyns (2020) incorporates this critique into the capability approach, claiming that it is particularly suited to reflect pluralism, contextual variation, and interdisciplinary use. In response, this paper accepts the contextual sensitivity of well-being but rejects the idea that it is a fundamentally plural concept. Drawing on Fletcher (2019) and Hawkins (2019), I argue that different applications of the concept still rely on a unified underlying notion of well-being. Thus, the goal should not be to abandon philosophical theorizing but to develop a context-sensitive yet normatively robust account. The capability approach provides a promising structure for this purpose, but it cannot remain procedurally open-ended. I argue for a monistic version of capabilitarian well-being, grounded in a normatively justified set of capabilities. The paper proceeds by reviewing standard theories of well-being, analyzing Alexandrova's contextual critique, assessing Robeyns's proceduralism, and finally defending a unified, normatively grounded version of capabilitarian well-being that retains contextual sensitivity without sacrificing philosophical coherence.

KEYWORDS
well-being, contextualism, pluralism, proceduralism, capabilities, monism

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Introduction

Philosophical debate about well-being has traditionally focused on the question of what makes a life good for the person who lives it. Within this debate, three main theoretical approaches are typically distinguished: hedonism (Feldman 1997; Crisp 2006), desire-fulfilment theories (Griffin 1986; Heathwood 2006), and objective list theories (Parfit 1984; Fletcher 2013; Rice 2013; Nussbaum 2011). While hedonism claims that well-being is determined by the experience of pleasure, desire-fulfilment theories consider fulfilled desires to be constitutive of well-being, and objective list theories offer a set of intrinsically valuable goods. Although these theories have provided important insights, they have recently been criticized for their abstractness and lack of practical applicability (Alexandrova 2017; Robeyns 2017, 2020).

In more recent discussions, scepticism has emerged toward the idea that philosophy can provide a universally valid theory of well-being. Anna Alexandrova (2017) argues that standard philosophical theories of well-being are too abstract and that they offer high-level theories useful only within philosophical discourse, but not in interdisciplinary research or policy-making. Instead, Alexandrova advocates a contextual approach, according to which the definition of well-being depends on the specific domain of research and its practical aims. She also claims that the concept of well-being itself is not monistic, as assumed by most philosophical theories, but rather that its meaning depends on its contextual use. For this reason, she endorses a pluralist view of well-being (Alexandrova 2017; Mitchell and Alexandrova 2021). Ingrid Robeyns (2020) accepts this critique of standard theories and applies it within the framework of the capability approach. She argues that this framework is especially well suited for understanding well-being, as it accommodates pluralism, contextual sensitivity, and applicability in the social sciences and public policy.

In this paper, I accept Alexandrova's thesis that the concept of well-being is context-sensitive, but I reject her scepticism regarding the possibility of a single philosophical normative theory of well-being and a unified concept. I argue that even across different contexts we are operating with the same concept of well-being, which shows only that the concept is context-sensitive, not that it is plural in nature (Fletcher 2019; Hawkins 2019). This further implies that we should not abandon the goal of a single, all-things-considered theory of well-being, but rather aim to develop a sufficiently flexible theoretical framework capable of integrating diverse contextual factors.

For this reason, I turn to Robeyns's proposal that the capability approach should serve as such a framework – one that recognizes the importance of contextual sensitivity and remains open to interdisciplinary and empirical research. However, unlike Robeyns, I argue that the capability approach cannot remain a substantively empty procedural framework. It must instead include a normatively justified list of valuable capabilities that are fundamental to human well-being. Therefore, this paper analyses three central objections to proceduralist versions of the capability approach: (i) the lack of normative and

descriptive adequacy, (ii) the limited capacity for critical evaluation of different constructions of well-being, and (iii) the rejection of universally valuable capabilities and functionings.

The structure of the paper is as follows. I begin by briefly presenting standard philosophical theories of well-being. In the following section, I examine Alexandrova's critique, highlighting its strengths and limitations. I then turn to Robeyns's capabilitarian framework, once again addressing both its strengths and weaknesses as a procedural account of well-being.

Philosophical Theories of Well-Being: The Standard Debate

The philosophical concept of well-being captures a specific type of value – that which is *good for* a person. When we talk about well-being, we are not referring to goodness simpliciter; rather, we aim to grasp what is in a person's interest, what benefits them, or what is good for them (Griffin 1986; Sumner 1996; Kraut 2018). This is also known as prudential value, which differs from moral, aesthetic, or other forms of value. For example, imagine you have a certain amount of money you wish to spend on a long-desired trip abroad, but then you learn that someone close to you is suffering from a rare illness and needs the money for treatment. It is clearly morally good to direct the funds toward their treatment, but that means giving up something that was in your own interest. Prudential value refers to what is good for the individual, and for this reason, the relationship to the subject is key to defining the concept of well-being as something *good for* the person.

In contemporary philosophy, the dominant classification of theories of well-being follows Derek Parfit's (1984) influential tripartite distinction: hedonism, desire-fulfilment theory, and objective list theory.[2] Hedonism holds that pleasure is ultimately good for us, and pain is ultimately bad. According to this view, the good life is one that maximizes pleasurable experiences and minimizes suffering. Hedonists differ over the definition of pleasure, whether it is a mental feeling or a favourable attitude and whether emphasis should be placed on its quantity or quality (Crisp 2006; Feldman 2004). However, they agree that a person's life goes well to the extent that her hedonic balance is positive, meaning she experiences more pleasure than pain over time.

Desire-fulfilment theory claims that well-being consists in the satisfaction of a person's ultimate, non-instrumental desires. Unfulfilled desires reduce well-being. Theories in this camp vary in how they define "ultimate" desires: some accept all desires, while others restrict them to informed or idealized ones. What unifies them is the emphasis on subjective endorsement: what matters is that the individual wants or endorses a certain state. Unlike hedonism, desire-fulfilment theory accommodates diversity in conceptions of the

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2 The philosophical debate still largely builds on Parfit's classification, although it has faced certain criticisms, for instance, in Woodard (2013).

good life and treats individual differences as central (Griffin 1986; Railton 1986; Heathwood 2006).

By contrast, objective list theories hold that some things are prudentially good for a person independently of her subjective attitudes toward them. These theories were developed in response to cases where an individual might lack the relevant desire or not derive pleasure from something that is nonetheless good for her. This implies that there must be some fixed, objective and external standard for what is good for us. They usually provide a list of objectively valuable things among which you can find, for example, knowledge, happiness, friends or achievement (Parfit 1984; Fletcher 2013; Arneson 2003).

In addition to Parfit's threefold scheme, a more recent classification distinguishes subjective from objective theories more broadly (Badhwar 2014; Bradley 2014). Subjective theories define well-being wholly in terms of the subject's mental states (positive feelings, desires, or satisfaction) making a person the final authority on what is good for her. According to these theories, an object O is prudentially good for subject S if and only if S has a positive attitude toward O (e.g., desires it, enjoys it, or finds it pleasurable). Objective theories, in contrast, define well-being by reference to criteria external to the subject's mental states. Something may be good for a person even if she does not recognize or value it. For instance, even if a person does not want to attend school, gaining an education is still prudentially good for her because knowledge is objectively valuable. Within this broader taxonomy, hedonism and desire-fulfilment theory are subjective, while objective list theory, perfectionism, and eudaimonism fall on the objective side.

Other prominent theories that do not feature in Parfit's original classification include: life satisfaction theory (well-being is achieved when a person authentically feels satisfied with her life as a whole; Sumner 1996; Tiberius & Plakias 2010); theories of happiness (identifies well-being with the subjective feeling of happiness; Haybron 2008); value fulfilment theory (defines well-being as the realization of a person's central values, such as parenthood or friendship; Tiberius 2018); perfectionism (grounds well-being in the development of human capacities and excellence in their exercise; Hurka 1996; Kraut 2007); and eudaimonism (holds that well-being consists in developing one's nature through virtue and the excellent use of one's capacities; Russell 2012; Badhwar 2014).

Despite their diversity, these philosophical theories share several key characteristics: (i) essentialism: each theory seeks to identify the essential constituents of well-being whether pleasure, desire satisfaction, knowledge, or virtue. They aim to explain what well-being is, rather than how it may vary across individuals or cultures.

(ii) monism: they typically assume there is a single correct theory or concept of well-being. This commitment to monism rules out the possibility that different conceptions of the good life may be equally valid for different people or contexts.

(iii) unified standard of assessment: all these theories endorse the idea of "well-being all-things-considered", meaning that they aim to provide a

comprehensive evaluation of a person's life (Alexandrova 2017). The focus of the philosophical concept of well-being can be compared to the kind of reflection a person might have at the end of life asking herself: "All things considered, was my life a good one?". This kind of evaluation pertains to life as a whole and does not typically attend to the specificities of life stages or specific circumstances. The ambition of philosophical theories is thus universalist and absolutist: each theory claims to capture the true nature of well-being, offering a general and context-independent standard by which to assess lives.

This approach has recently come under critique, from which alternative contextualist and pluralist approaches to well-being have emerged (Alexandrova 2017; Alexandrova & Mitchell 2020; Robeyns 2017, 2020; Östlund 2024). The critique is primarily aimed at showing that philosophical theories are overly abstract and, as such, of limited use in discussions of well-being in dialogue with empirical sciences. Furthermore, critics argue that currently dominant philosophical theories are inadequate precisely because they are essentialist, monistic, and committed to unified evaluative standard features that make them insensitive to the contextual variability of well-being and incapable of capturing its plural and dynamic nature. As such, they are viewed as unsuitable for interdisciplinary research. Since the most influential critique comes from Anna Alexandrova (2017), I will turn to her argument in the following section.

Contextualism and Pluralism in the Philosophy of Well-Being

In her book *Philosophy for the Science of Well-Being*, Alexandrova offers a critique of philosophical debates on well-being and of existing theories, which she primarily describes as highly abstract, so-called "high-level theories." According to her critique, the fundamental problem of these theories lies in their abstractness, universalism, and lack of practical applicability to scientific research and measurement of well-being. As such, philosophical theories fail to capture the diversity of human lives and the variability of contexts in which the concept of well-being arises. However, Alexandrova argues, once we take contextual diversity into account, we realize that not only does the concept of well-being change, but also the factors considered relevant to its assessment. This, she argues, leads to pluralism regarding both the concept and theories of well-being (2017). She supports this thesis with the following example.

Let us imagine a pregnant woman, Masha, in three different situations. In the first, Masha falls on the street and a Good Samaritan approaches her asking if she is alright. In this context, the assessment of well-being and the very concept relates to basic physical capabilities and fundamental needs; for instance, whether she can walk and whether she needs help reaching a bench. In the second situation, Masha is having dinner with a close friend. When asked "how are you?", she opens up emotionally and shares her anxiety about her partner's precarious job, her dissatisfaction with quitting her PhD and concerns about becoming a stay-at-home mom. In this context, the assessment of her well-being encompasses a much broader range of emotional states, life circumstances,

and interpersonal relationships. Her friend might conclude that Masha is not doing well. In the third case, a social worker visits Masha and asks her about her income and social resources. The worker concludes that Masha is doing fine, since she not only has her partner's salary but also personal savings and supportive family and friends. What does Alexandrova infer from this?

From the example, it is evident that all three individuals make a judgment about Masha's well-being. However, as Alexandrova notes, "yet in each case different standard of well-being is used" (2017: 7). She believes that each scenario involves a different use of the concept of well-being, with both the constitutive elements and the standards of attribution depending on the context. The problem with philosophical theories, according to her, is that none of them can account for such contextual variation. Beyond these practical and everyday examples, Alexandrova also points to disciplinary differences in how well-being is conceptualized (2017: 82):

> Other disciplines that study well-being – sociology, medical and clinical sciences, parts of economics – display a similar dynamic. Some hypotheses are on the face of it value free, but they rarely exhaust the full intent of researchers. Economists learn about happiness in order to have a more faithful account of economic growth; sociologists are interested in dignity and well-being at work; developmental psychologists focus on the processes and risk factors that greatly affect children's future functioning.

In her view, these examples demonstrate that well-being is also used in diverse ways across different scientific disciplines. From this, she derives two key claims, which she terms *threshold dependence* and *constitutive dependence* (2017: 8). The first refers to the idea that what counts as well-being depends on the thresholds set within a specific context. In other words, what will be considered "enough" or "not enough" for well-being depends on the situation and the purpose of the evaluation. For example, for the Good Samaritan it is enough that Masha has no physical injuries, while her friend focuses on her emotional state only because he assumes that she is physically fine, and therefore attends to a different aspect of her well-being. Thresholds are not set arbitrarily; rather, they are determined by the specific goals of the evaluation, i.e., in accordance with the function the theory of well-being serves in a given context (e.g., a doctor evaluates physical well-being, a social worker assesses material security). Constitutive dependence, on the other hand, means that what is considered constitutive of well-being depends on the specific factors relevant in a given context. That is, not only the thresholds for well-being vary from one context to another, but also the very nature and elements that constitute well-being change across contexts. This entails that changes in contextual standards transform the metaphysical content of the well-being concept itself, not merely the evaluative criteria used for its assessment.

Given that different thresholds apply in different contexts and that the constitutive elements of well-being themselves shift, Alexandrova concludes that it is impossible to offer a universal standard, definition or theory. Instead, each

context requires its own context-specific understanding. In other words, we must accept contextualism and pluralism as facts, evident from both ordinary language use and scientific practice. Philosophical theories, she argues, should stop ignoring this fact. Rather than clinging to highly abstract and universalistic "high-level theories" that aim to define a univocal and fixed concept and provide a comprehensive standard, philosophers should embrace pluralism as both inevitable and desirable. Embracing contextualism and pluralism would render philosophical theories more precise, empirically grounded, and open to dialogue with other disciplines. Thus, according to Alexandrova, the proper goal of philosophical theories is to develop so-called "mid-level theories."

Mid-level theories aim to strike a balance between universality and flexibility in practical application, thereby facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration. The model they follow is what Alexandrova calls the "toolbox model," in contrast to the "vending machine model". If a theory functions as a toolbox, it does not offer a single, predetermined answer but instead provides researchers with tools that can be applied in various ways depending on the context and adapted to the needs of a particular research goal. By contrast, the vending machine model consists of theories with fixed normative frameworks and conceptual content, making them insensitive to context, much like all traditional high-level philosophical theories of well-being.

To some extent, Alexandrova is right. Philosophical theories often ignore empirical discussions because of their inherently abstract and universalist orientation, offering a single, all-things-considered standard of well-being. Alexandrova's aim is praiseworthy, and I share her motivation to make philosophical theories less abstract and more sensitive to empirical realities. However, I disagree that this requires abandoning monism and essentialism. On the contrary, I argue that such a move is deeply problematic for philosophical theory, since radical contextualism and pluralism ultimately undermine the very purpose of philosophical inquiry about well-being. In the following section, I will provide a more detailed critique of Alexandrova's position.

A Critique of Contextualism and Pluralism about Well-Being

The existing critique of Alexandrova is primarily directed at her fragmentation of the concept of well-being and her endorsement of radical pluralism. Jennifer Hawkins (2019) argues that while the concept of well-being may indeed have multiple uses, Alexandrova overstates her case in claiming that the concept is so changeable that it lacks a unified core meaning. According to Hawkins, philosophers are well aware that the concept of well-being can be used in different contexts, but this does not mean that there is no stable theoretical foundation that allows for normative discussion about what is good for a person. Guy Fletcher (2019) similarly notes that the fact that different contexts emphasize different aspects of well-being does not entail that they are dealing with metaphysically distinct concepts. For both Hawkins and Fletcher, then, contextualism is acceptable, but it does not follow that contextual sensitivity

entails conceptual pluralism. Fletcher claims that "the use of the term 'doing well' *is* context sensitive," because of which he accepts the idea of threshold dependence (2019: 703). For instance, we might say that someone is doing well a few days after surviving a serious car accident, even though we have in fact significantly lowered the standard of well-being compared to our everyday usage (2019: 703). However, Alexandrova's contextualism does not stop at evaluative thresholds. Her constitutive dependence thesis means that the very content of well-being changes across contexts, which makes her version of contextualism a radical one, as both Hawkins and Fletcher argue.

By introducing this thesis, Alexandrova's contextualism becomes radical because it implies that a change in context results in a metaphysical change in the nature of well-being itself. In the example of Masha, Alexandrova claims that we are dealing with three different entities, three distinct conceptions of well-being, because in each case, a different threshold is applied and different factors are considered as relevant in the assessment. Fletcher's main concern with Alexandrova's argument is the assumption that contextual variation in the evaluation of well-being necessarily implies a change in the concept's very nature. Therefore, Fletcher insists on a precise distinction between evaluative variability and conceptual pluralism. While it is undeniable that evaluations of well-being may vary depending on the context, this does not imply that the very nature of well-being also changes.

A problematic consequence of radical contextualism would be that speakers from different contexts, as well as well-being researchers, would not actually be talking about the same thing. They would fail to understand each other, and their discussions would systematically miss the mark.[3] Furthermore, under the assumption of radical contextualism, claims about well-being would become incomparable, and no universal criteria could exist for discussing what it means to live well. Fletcher emphasizes that this would mean people could not have meaningful disagreements about well-being, since each claim would refer to fundamentally different concepts. A further problematic consequence is that radical contextualism treats statements like "Masha is doing well" and "Masha is not doing well," made by the Good Samaritan and Masha's close friend respectively, as not genuinely in disagreement because they are referring to different concepts. Yet, intuitively, we sense that in such examples there is a rational connection between these uses of the term, which suggests that in both cases we are indeed talking about Masha's well-being. The Good Samaritan captures one aspect or dimension of well-being (physical or hedonic), while the friend captures another, emotional aspect. Hence, Fletcher defends the view of aspectualism: in different contexts, we emphasize different aspects of one and the same well-being, but this does not mean we are talking about different things.

3 This claim concerns theoretical mutual intelligibility across frameworks, not ordinary conversational understanding between individuals, such as in the Masha example. I thank the anonymous reviewer for drawing attention to this point.

A version of aspectualism is also defended by Hawkins (2019), who argues that the lack of clarity about which aspect of the concept is being referred to is precisely what leads to confusion in debate. She also claims that Alexandrova misinterprets the variability of linguistic usage as evidence for deep conceptual fragmentation, whereas in reality, the problem often arises from the polysemy of language, not from the absence of a unified concept of well-being. She emphasizes that the question "How are you?" and the answer "I'm fine" need not be directly connected to the philosophical concept of well-being. Rather, these are phrases used in various normative contexts, from moral to medical, and they can simply signal that a basic threshold has been met (e.g., that the person does not need immediate assistance). In other words, when Masha says she is "fine," this does not mean she is making a normative judgment about her overall well-being, but merely confirming that she is not in immediate danger. Therefore, Hawkins argues that Alexandrova misreads conversational norms as evidence for conceptual pluralism.

Another argument Hawkins raises concerns the importance of epistemological clarity and the preservation of conceptual precision in debates about well-being. Even if we accept that there are different ways of talking about well-being, she argues that philosophers should not simply accept this diversity as proof of the non-existence of a unified concept. On the contrary, we should work to differentiate among various uses and ensure that key philosophical concepts remain precisely defined. Hawkins believes that contextual variability does not justify abandoning clear distinctions between different types of well-being evaluations. This is especially important because philosophical analysis of the concept of well-being provides tools for critiquing and improving existing standards of well-being assessment. If we were to follow Alexandrova's suggestion and accept that the concept of well-being is independently formed in each context, we would lose the ability to critically examine existing social norms and institutional criteria that define what counts as a "good life." In this respect, Hawkins sees Alexandrova's approach as epistemologically too passive, reducing the role of philosophy to merely describing how the term well-being is used.

Let us now further elaborate these criticisms, first Fletcher's concern about the radical nature of contextual pluralism, and then Hawkins' point about the consequences of this position for philosophy's normative role. Fletcher's identification of the radicalism in Alexandrova's thesis of constitutive dependence can be further clarified by comparing it to epistemological contextualism. Although Alexandrova draws on this analogy, she does not acknowledge that in epistemology, contextualism is not necessarily linked to conceptual pluralism. For instance, authors like De Rose (1995) or Lewis (1996) argue that we are not dealing with different concepts of knowledge, but rather with shifts in the criteria for justification and certainty in different contexts.[4] For example, in an

4 A somewhat more radical version of contextualism in epistemology can be found in the work of Michael Williams (2001), who argues that justificatory practices are

everyday context, we are justified in claiming that we know we have hands, whereas this same claim would not hold in a philosophical debate with a sceptic, because the threshold for knowledge is now much higher (we would have to rule out sceptical scenarios that are not relevant in everyday contexts). In other words, epistemological contextualists accept what Alexandrova calls threshold dependence, that is, variability in standards for attributing knowledge, but they reject constitutive dependence.

Secondly, a serious consequence of this kind of radical contextualism is the loss of the possibility of rational comparison and normative evaluation of well-being. If there is no shared concept of well-being, then we lack the criteria to compare different theories and conceptions of well-being. This means we cannot determine whether one conception is normatively superior to another, or whether certain theories are inadequate or even unjust. The role of philosophy is precisely normative: to analyse the nature of well-being and explain why certain forms of life are valuable for individuals. If philosophical theories become merely adaptable to scientific disciplines and stop providing universal criteria for evaluating well-being, then philosophy loses its distinctiveness and becomes a methodological tool of scientists, rather than an autonomous discipline that investigates prudential value and enables critique of prevailing social standards of well-being. The argument is not driven by disciplinary preference, but by the claim that any philosophical theory of well-being must offer criteria that allow us to evaluate, and not merely mirror, local constructions of well-being.

From this critique, I believe we must draw the following conclusion: the concept of well-being should be monistic but context-sensitive. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a philosophical theory that is sensitive to context yet provides a clear normative account of what well-being is and why it matters. Furthermore, a philosophical theory of well-being should also be empirically applicable, i.e., capable of engaging in an interdisciplinary dialogue with other sciences that study well-being. Although highly critical of the existing debate, Alexandrova identifies one theoretical framework – the capability approach – as a potential example of such a theory, but she does not offer a deeper analysis of capabilitarian well-being (2017: 39, 166). This task is undertaken by Ingrid Robeyns (2017, 2020), who constructs a capabilitarian account of well-being grounded in the premises of radical contextualism. In what follows, I argue that the capability approach is indeed a promising framework for developing a flexible theory of well-being, but I reject the version proposed by Robeyns. I claim that her model, which presupposes radical contextualism, faces all of the aforementioned criticisms, and further, that as a purely procedural framework, it fails to fulfil the basic task of a philosophical theory of well-being, namely, to explain the nature of well-being itself.

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historically and discursively situated (inferential contextualism) and rejects epistemological foundationalism. However, even his version would not support what Alexandrova calls constitutive dependence, since Williams does not claim that the very concept of knowledge itself changes across contexts, but rather the criteria for justification.

Capabilitarian Framework for Well-Being: Proceduralist Version

The Capability Approach (CA) is a normative framework for evaluating well-being, quality of life, social justice, and development, grounded in the concepts of functionings and capabilities (Robeyns 2017). Functionings refer to states and activities a person can achieve (e.g., being healthy, educated, politically engaged), while capabilities stand for the real opportunities an individual has to achieve those functionings (for instance, the capability to be healthy includes access to clean water, sufficient food, and medical care). The rationale for introducing these concepts lies in the idea that any inquiry into justice or quality of life must start with the question of what people are actually able to do and to be. This question reveals that it is insufficient to track or measure only achieved well-being; it is equally important to assess the real opportunities individuals have to live valuable lives.

The introduction of the distinction between capabilities and functionings, between potential and achieved well-being, is the first crucial difference between CA and other theories of well-being. It also serves as a key critique of alternative approaches, especially resource-based theories, which presume that merely ensuring people have resources is enough.[5] What matters more, however, is whether individuals can convert those resources into valuable functionings (Robeyns 2017: 45-47). For instance, building schools in a patriarchal community that believes girls do not need education will not lead to higher rates of female education. Despite the provision of resources (schools), what is lacking is familial support or perhaps the infrastructure (such as roads or buses), demonstrating that women in such contexts lack the actual capability to pursue education.

By introducing these two dimensions, CA allows us to more effectively detect both different forms of injustice and potential elements for improving the quality of life. Compared to classical theories of well-being, CA offers a more comprehensive account for these reasons:

1. In contrast to hedonism, CA shows that well-being encompasses additional dimensions, such as autonomy, education, and participation in social life, thereby capturing the complexity of human life. Moreover, utilitarian hedonism, which seeks to maximize the happiness of the greatest number, remains insensitive to individual cases of dissatisfaction and suffering, and fails to differentiate between qualitatively distinct pleasures (e.g., eating vs. helping a friend).

2. Compared to desire-fulfilment theories, CA highlights problems with defining well-being solely through the fulfilment of individual desires, which may be distorted by injustice or social conditioning, as in the case of so-called adaptive preferences. A frequent example, discussed by Martha Nussbaum (2000), involves women raised in societies where they are expected not to

5 For a critique of other theories and the motivation behind the development of the capability approach, see Nussbaum (2011: 46-69).

pursue education, to handle all housework and to eat only after all family members have finished, often going hungry themselves. These women may have no desire for education, employment, or even adequate nourishment. According to desire-fulfilment theory, their well-being is high. CA, by contrast, enables us to identify the problem as lying in the fact that these desires are shaped by structural injustice. When society denies certain goods, people tend to stop wanting them and adapt to live without them. CA allows us to detect such harmful desires and improve individual well-being.

3. CA is perhaps most similar to perfectionism or objective list theories, since it aims to enumerate valuable goods and functionings. Variants of CA differ on whether such a list should be open and democratically determined (as in the Senian tradition) or fixed, as in Nussbaum's list of central human capabilities (Cf. Nussbaum 2000). However, the key difference is that objective list theories do not account for the distinction between potential and achieved well-being. Also, CA offers an explanation for why capabilities are the currency of well-being. It accommodates the pluralism of values and captures multiple dimensions of well-being through the potential/actual distinction and the various valuable capabilities that define what people are able to do and be.

Robeyns (2017, 2020), thus, describes capabilitarian well-being as a theoretical framework that defines well-being along two axes: achieved well-being (the actual beings and doings, such as being educated, healthy, or voting), and well-being freedom (potential well-being), which refers to the set of real options or freedoms from which a person can choose what to realize as valuable functionings:

> Thus, while travelling is a functioning, the real opportunity to travel is the corresponding capability. A person who does not travel may or may not be free and able to travel; the notion of capability seeks to capture precisely the fact of whether the person could travel if she wanted to. (Robeyns 2016: 405-406)

Moreover, this multidimensionality enables value pluralism in the definition of well-being, which allows us to capture the diversity of human lives and the possibility of conflicting dimensions (e.g., a person may be materially secure but face sexist harassment at work). What Robeyns particularly emphasizes is that capabilities and functionings are value-neutral.

The reason for this, according to Robeyns, is that while some functionings are clearly valuable, such as "being in good health," others are clearly negative, like "being raped or being murdered." But some functionings are more complex to evaluate, such as "giving care" or "care work." As she notes, "care work can be positive functioning if done for a limited time, but becomes negative functioning if it is done for many hours" (2017: 43). On these grounds, Robeyns argues that capabilitarian well-being should be understood as an open framework, filled in with context-specific capabilities, which then shapes the theory of well-being relevant to that specific context. This view is entirely consistent with Alexandrova's thesis and Robeyns fully embraces her contextualism and pluralism: each context generates a different capabilitarian well-being theory

and a different conception of well-being. This is why Robeyns' version is also proceduralist: the process of selecting relevant capabilities must be democratic and inclusive, reflecting the specific needs of the community or society in which it is applied (Robeyns 2020).

She concludes that the advantages of the capabilitarian account of well-being include following: (i) it provides a vocabulary that resonates with people's actual experiences; (ii) it enables the identification of different dimensions or aspects of well-being; (iii) it creates a space for policy-making and development initiatives that improve human lives; (iv) it serves as a less abstract philosophical framework for empirical research on well-being, while still being compatible with classical theories (2020).

While I agree with these conclusions regarding the strengths of capabilitarian well-being, I disagree that they can be achieved through a proceduralist version alone. Since it fully relies on Alexandrova's radical contextualism, I believe it inherits all the previously identified criticisms. I will focus on three specific problems confronting Robeyns' version of CA well-being: (1) its failure to satisfy the criteria of normative and descriptive adequacy, (2) its limited capacity to critically evaluate empirical constructs of well-being, and (3) Robeyns' objection to the possibility of identifying universally valuable capabilities and functionings, given that some, such as caregiving, can have both positive and negative consequences. These concerns motivate the need to consider an alternative version of capabilitarian well-being.

A Critique of Proceduralist Capabilitarian Well-Being

Just as it is a fact that philosophers disagree about the nature of well-being, there is nonetheless a broad consensus regarding the criteria that a theory of well-being must satisfy to be considered adequate. These criteria are normative and descriptive adequacy (Sumner 1996; Haybron 2006; Badhwar 2014; Tiberius 2018). A theory is normatively adequate if it explains the nature of well-being and answers the question of why what we identify as non-instrumentally or ultimately good is in fact valuable. Well-being is a normative or value-laden concept that defines what is in a person's interest or what makes her life go well. Normativity is a distinctively philosophical aspect of the analysis of well-being, as opposed to, for example, psychological research, which typically does not pursue an explanation of prudential value but is instead focused primarily on describing individuals' psychological states (Tiberius 2006). Moreover, normativity also provides reasons for action. If we establish that something is prudentially valuable for a person, then she has reason to act in a way that realizes that good (Rodogno 2015; Tiberius 2018). This action is not arbitrary, since evaluative judgments are grounded in a normative theory that provides a criterion for justifying those judgments. If normatively adequate, theory also offers a standard for identifying when a person is mistaken in her assessment of prudential goods, as well as a standard by which we can say that some lives are better than others. In addition, Sumner identifies a second

important criterion that a philosophical theory must meet, descriptive adequacy (Sumner 1996). A theory is descriptively adequate if it preserves our strong intuitions about well-being and aligns with our ordinary understanding of the concept. The concept of well-being must retain intuitive plausibility; in other words, it must clearly correspond to the concept we typically use when assessing our lives as good or bad. This division between normative and descriptive adequacy ensures that a theory of well-being can both describe human experience and offer normative guidance for action.

Overall, the proceduralist account of capabilitarian well-being, as proposed by Robeyns, fails to meet both criteria of normative and descriptive adequacy. When asked what well-being consists in, it refers to capabilities and functionings. However, since these are treated as value-neutral, the account fails to provide the normative guidance we expect from a philosophical theory of well-being. In fact, it does not engage with the value-laden dimension of the concept at all. As a result, it ceases to function as a philosophical theory and becomes merely a formal framework for empirical application.

Robeyns responds by claiming that her version of capabilitarian well-being is an empty, normative framework and that substantive theories with specific content are to be developed within particular contexts of inquiry. She offers three illustrative examples (2017: 125-126):

1. Capabilitarian account used for a first-person perspective on well-being:

> An adolescent contemplating what to do with her life, she may ask herself what she really wants: to study hard and work hard and become a medical doctor? Or does she have a stronger desire to build a family and search for a job that makes it possible to spend enough time with her children? (...) In this personal deliberation, the account of well-being she then uses can be seen as a desire-fulfilment account in which the desires all refer to functionings.

2. Capabilitarian account of well-being used for institutional design:

> There is also often implicitly a desire-fulfilment account, by trying to create valuable options (capabilities) for citizens, but by not forcing them into those outcomes (functionings).

3. Capabilitarian account of well-being used in macro-level poverty analysis:

> The researchers will select a number of functionings that they have reason to believe are good for people, such as their health, educational outcomes, and the kind of shelter in which they can live. The notion of achieved well-being entailed in this normative exercise is an objectively good account, although one could also argue that one has reason to assume that these are dimensions of the quality of life that people would want for themselves (hence their desires).

Thus, in the first case, Robeyns describes a desire-fulfilment theory oriented toward functionings; in the second, also a desire-fulfilment account presupposing certain functionings; and in the third case, an objectively determined

list of functionings, which "researchers have reason to believe are good for people," even if the people in question do not desire them. These examples highlight Robeyns's endorsement of a context-sensitive pluralism, allowing various theoretical interpretations of well-being depending on the practical goals at hand. Although this approach partially satisfies the criteria of normative and descriptive adequacy, since the examples she offers temporarily rely on substantive assumptions about what is valuable, the procedural framework itself remains normatively empty, which generates several further problems.

First, this flexibility relies on an arbitrary combination of existing high-level philosophical theories, such as desire-fulfilment, with no principled justification for selecting that theory. Why, for instance, should we adopt a desire-based account rather than a value-fulfilment theory or objective list theory? Why are functionings prioritized in some contexts but capabilities in others? The criteria for such choices remain unspecified and risk being ad hoc. In addition to the arbitrariness of theoretical selection, there is the more fundamental issue common to all subjectivist theories, namely, that individuals can be mistaken or deluded about what is good for them. Desires can be prudentially bad (e.g., trivial desires like counting blades of grass), crude or poorly cultivated (e.g., a desire for cheap food and drink), or harmful (e.g., wanting to delay a dentist appointment out of fear of pain).[6] Our adolescent may not value education, perhaps because she lives in a society where women are not expected to pursue it. In the capability literature, this issue is addressed through the concept of adaptive preferences; preferences individuals form in response to unjust, oppressive, or limiting social conditions, often by lowering their expectations or desires in order to cope with their circumstances (Sen 1985; Nussbaum 2000; Terlazzo 2014, 2017; Khader 2011).

A further and more pressing concern arises from the problem of adaptive preferences. Even if we set aside the arbitrariness of theoretical selection, Robeyns's framework encounters a deeper difficulty: it lacks the normative tools to critically assess preferences that have been shaped by injustice. Robeyns acknowledges this challenge. She notes that they cannot be ignored, but also warns against overestimating their impact (2017: 137-142). This is a reasonable position, given that adaptive preferences are indeed a serious problem for proceduralist versions of CA. As Robeyns herself notes, procedural methods risk reflecting existing social norms, including unjust ones. They may also overlook cases where individuals possess certain capabilities but refrain from developing them due to internalized oppressive beliefs. Nonetheless, Robeyns insists on retaining a procedural framework for identifying and addressing adaptive

6 In the philosophical literature, trivial desires are often treated as prudentially defective because their satisfaction does not improve a person's life in any meaningful way. Heathwood (2006) argues that some desires are prudentially irrelevant when they concern objects that make no difference to a person's welfare, and Fletcher (2016) points out that such desires crowd out those connected to genuine prudential goods. For these reasons, trivial desires like counting blades of grass are commonly described as prudentially bad or prudentially empty.

preferences through “deliberation and interaction with people of whom one may be worried that their preferences may show a signs of adaptation” (2017: 141). But this raises a fundamental question: On what basis can we determine that someone’s preference is adaptive rather than authentic, or harmful rather than harmless?

Serene Khader emphasizes the need for a substantive normative baseline in order to meaningfully diagnose adaptation:

> If we think of adaptive preferences as distorting people’s understandings of their needs, it is because we believe there is an objective truth about their needs that is capable of being distorted. A concept of human flourishing can provide us with an objective sense of what human beings need. (Khader 2011: 18)

This quote points to the limits of proceduralism. In order to identify adaptive preferences as problematic, we must presuppose a non-adaptive, prior standard of flourishing. Robeyns’s account attempts to sidestep this by letting contextual procedures determine what counts as well-being, but in doing so it forfeits the ability to critically assess distorted preferences, especially in cases where people have internalized unjust conditions. Robeyns’s proposal thus faces a dilemma. Either it allows normative standards to be determined procedurally and risks legitimizing distorted preferences and unjust conditions, or it must appeal to some prior conception of flourishing, thereby departing from strict proceduralism combined with radical contextualism.

This leads to a deeper critique: proceduralism, like radical contextualism, lacks the tools to distinguish between valid and distorted conceptions of well-being across contexts. In a framework that lacks normative constraints, any local judgment risks being legitimated as a valid expression of well-being even if it results from social deprivation, oppression, or indoctrination. This issue parallels critiques of Alexandrova’s contextualism, which similarly neglects substantive criteria for well-being in favour of context-bound constructions. But how are researchers within a specific context making justified judgments about which capabilities or functionings are valuable? Robeyns states, in the quotation above, that in macro-level poverty analyses, researchers select functionings such as health, education, and shelter because they “have reason to believe” that these are good for people. The question remains: on what grounds? Suppose, for example, that in a given society political participation is not considered important for well-being. If the theory lacks an independent normative foundation, it cannot explain why political capabilities should nonetheless be promoted. This raises the justified concern that procedural CA may merely reproduce empirical constructs without any capacity to normatively interrogate their limitations. Robeyns’s solution, thus, reduces capabilitarian well-being to a methodological framework, in which the normative content is left to the discretionary judgment of researchers or institutions. As such, capabilitarian well-being ceases to function as a philosophical theory of well-being and becomes merely a technical tool for empirical research. In contrast, as previously emphasized, a philosophical theory should provide a prior value-justification of

the core assumptions about what constitutes human well-being, assumptions that can then serve as the basis for evaluating empirical constructs in specific contexts. If we want the capability approach to offer more than procedural adaptability and to serve as a philosophical theory with critical and normative force then we must go beyond value-neutral frameworks and affirm that certain capabilities are intrinsically valuable because they enable human flourishing.

As already mentioned, Robeyns's reluctance to endorse a fixed list of valuable capabilities stems from her concerns about value neutrality. Recall that she notes that the same capability, such as caregiving, can be both empowering and oppressive. Caring may enable deep relationships and moral development, but it may also burden women disproportionately in unjust social arrangements. From this, she infers that we cannot determine in advance which capabilities are valuable; instead, such judgments must be left to procedural determination. However, this line of reasoning, in my view, conflates two distinct questions:

(i) Is a capability intrinsically valuable for human well-being?

(ii) Is that capability justly distributed in society?

Justice concerns the fair distribution of resources, responsibilities, and opportunities to convert capabilities into valuable functionings. Well-being, by contrast, concerns what constitutes a good life, i.e., which valuable capabilities are constitutive of human flourishing. The risk of a capability being unjustly distributed does not imply that it is not intrinsically valuable. In fact, recognizing the injustice depends on having already identified the capability as valuable. As Nussbaum rightly notes:

> We have a hard time talking about justice in the family until we know whether the right to seek employment is a basic good, whether political liberties and the opportunity to participate in politics are basic goods, whether the capability for sexual expression is a basic good, and so on. The list gives us somewhere to go in saying whether the treatment of women is or is not exploitative. I don't think the thin procedural approach gives us enough without this. (Nussbaum 2000: 159-160)

The list Nussbaum refers to is her well-known list of central human capabilities (Nussbaum 2000: 78-80), which Robeyns often criticizes as insufficiently inclusive, especially for neurodivergent individuals (Robeyns 2016), and argues that lists should emerge from democratic deliberation. But is there a room for universal values?

A strong argument in favour of selecting universally valuable capabilities stems from the ability to identify what is universally bad. This is the strategy to some extent employed by Nussbaum, who starts from the premise that being beaten, starved, or abused is universally bad (Nussbaum 2000: 34-85).[7] So,

7 Nussbaum's method of "internalist essentialism" can be interpreted as a form of negative heuristic: by identifying what we consider non-human, deficient, or inhuman, such as the emotionally isolated Cyclopes, who lack any sense of belonging or care for others, she reveals the positive features that constitute human life. In this way, her

if social isolation is universally bad, then the capability for affiliation is a universally valuable human capability; if emotional deprivation is always harmful, then the capability for care and emotional connection is likewise universally valuable. This symmetry between what is bad and what is good supports two claims: (i) that it is possible to identify universally valuable capabilities, and (ii) that we can construct a monistic concept of well-being by identifying those dimensions of life that are universally bad, thus transcending contextual variation. In various contexts, we are in fact talking about the same underlying concept, as Fletcher has previously argued. The capabilitarian account enables us to capture multiple dimensions or aspects of well-being understood as flourishing (the development of valuable capabilities) which do not vary from one context to another. In other words, well-being is contextually sensitive, not metaphysically fragmented. Capabilitarianism can therefore preserve descriptive flexibility while maintaining conceptual unity.

Even some contextualists and pluralists in the CA well-being debate acknowledge the existence of universally bad states that cannot be justified through contextual variation. Sebastian Östlund (2024), for example, proposes the so-called disqualification criterion into the discussion. This is a methodological principle intended to help assess theories of well-being by identifying unacceptable views within a pluralist framework. The disqualification criterion sets boundaries for pluralism by ruling out certain forms of life, practices, or social norms that systematically prevent or undermine what is fundamental to human well-being. In other words, even if we accept that different forms of well-being can be contextually determined, there are limits beyond which certain theories or practices become unacceptable, such as systematic discrimination, exploitation, or physical abuse. The disqualification criterion establishes the following threshold: some ways of life and social structures are not merely different expressions of well-being but are incompatible with the very idea of human flourishing. Östlund claims that the disqualification criterion is compatible with radical contextualism and pluralism because it does not require a fixed list of universal goods or capabilities, but only imposes minimal normative boundaries, a form of negative universalism. It does not determine what well-being is, but only what it cannot be.

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method implicitly applies the principle of symmetry between the universally bad and the universally valuable, aligning with the thesis that universally valuable capabilities can be identified through what is universally bad (Nussbaum 1992: 201-221). Even in her later, politically liberal phase, Nussbaum continues to rely on a method of identifying valuable capabilities through what she describes as “central prerequisites of a life worthy of human dignity” (Nussbaum 2008: 361). Although she distances herself from essentialism, the underlying evaluative logic remains: the threshold of dignity is set by identifying what makes a life no longer human. This indicates that her approach still reflects a form of normative asymmetry since valuable capabilities are discerned through the recognition of what is universally harmful or dehumanizing, thereby reinforcing the symmetry between what is bad and what is good. Cf. Nussbaum 2000, 2006.

Although the disqualification criterion does not prescribe a positive list of capabilities, it nevertheless establishes negatively defined *universal* boundaries. This means that radical contextualism is compromised. If we can disqualify certain forms of well-being, then pluralism must operate within certain constraints and, in my view, those constraints are best understood as universally valuable capabilities. To put it differently, if some forms of life are not merely different due to a context variation but unacceptable, then we must assume that some capabilities are non-negotiable. Hence, I argue that Östlund's disqualification criterion does not actually support radical contextualism, but rather points to the necessity of normative universalism.

This appeal to universal harms is not merely a theoretical move, but has a clear empirical function. In practice, identifying states that are universally harmful, such as chronic pain, coercion, social isolation, or extreme dependency, offers a minimal evaluative baseline that can guide interdisciplinary research. It enables researchers to distinguish cases where context merely shapes the form well-being takes from cases where context actively undermines the conditions of human flourishing. For example, even if social norms differ in their expectations regarding family roles, systematic exclusion from education or persistent fear of violence can be empirically recognised as impediments to well-being because they block capabilities whose absence is universally harmful. This baseline does not prescribe a fully specified list of capabilities, but it ensures that empirical constructs of well-being do not normalize deprivation or misclassify adaptive preferences as genuine flourishing. In this sense, universal harms function as a normative filter, enabling the capability approach to remain empirically grounded while avoiding the pitfalls of radical contextualism.

The implication is clear: to maintain a critical, philosophical theory of well-being, we need a monistic, normatively grounded conception of flourishing, one that identifies intrinsically valuable capabilities while allowing for contextual flexibility in their interpretation and application. In my view, that alternative is a monistic capabilitarian theory of well-being.

Towards Conclusion: A Monist Capabilitarian Well-Being

In this paper, I have examined and critically assessed the growing influence of contextualist and pluralist approaches to well-being, particularly as formulated by Anna Alexandrova. Her critique of traditional philosophical theories rests on the claim that these theories are excessively abstract, normatively rigid, and unresponsive to the diversity of well-being contexts. On this basis, Alexandrova concludes that the concept of well-being itself is context-dependent and irreducibly plural. I have interrogated this conclusion and argued that, while context does indeed shape the operationalization of well-being, this does not entail conceptual pluralism. Instead, I contend that the concept of well-being remains unified, though context-sensitive in its application.

Building on this analysis, I turned to the proceduralist version of the capability approach, as developed by Ingrid Robeyns, which attempts to accommodate

contextual pluralism within a normative framework. I identified three core problems with this proceduralist model. First, it fails to satisfy the criteria of normative and descriptive adequacy, as it avoids specifying what well-being consists of and does not preserve our ordinary intuitions about the concept. Second, it lacks the critical resources to evaluate empirical constructs, such as adaptive preferences, since it offers no independent normative standard. Third, I challenged Robeyns's scepticism toward the identification of universally valuable capabilities, arguing that the recognition of universally harmful conditions enables us to specify the normative core of human flourishing. This does not require a rigid or decontextualized universalism, but rather a conceptually robust standard that can guide critical evaluation across contexts.

Together, these objections call for a revised theoretical model: a monistic and normatively grounded version of capabilitarian well-being, one that affirms the importance of universal human capabilities while remaining responsive to contextual variation. Such an approach offers a philosophically defensible alternative that avoids both the rigidity of essentialist abstraction and the indeterminacy of proceduralist relativism.

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Ana Gavran Miloš

Dobrobit u pristupu zasnovanom na sposobnostima i granice kontekstualizma: protiv pluralizma i proceduralizma

Apstrakt

Ovaj rad razmatra novije izazove tradicionalnim filozofskim teorijama dobrobiti te predlaže revidirani okvir utemeljen na pristupu zasnovanom na sposobnostima (*capability approach*). Klasične teorije (hedonizam, teorija ispunjenja želja i teorije objektivne liste) dugo su dominirale filozofskom raspravom o tome što čini dobar život. Međutim, te su teorije sve češće predmet kritika zbog svoje apstraktnosti i ograničene primjenjivosti u empirijskim istraživanjima i oblikovanju javnih politika. Anna Alexandrova (2017) tvrdi da su filozofske teorije dobrobiti preopćenite i previše udaljene od stvarnih životnih problema te zagovara kontekstualno i pluralističko razumijevanje tog pojma. Ingrid Robeyns (2020) uključuje ovu kritiku u pristup zasnovan na sposobnostima, tvrdeći da je upravo taj pristup osobito prikladan za uvažavanje pluralizma, kontekstualnih varijacija i interdisciplinarne primjene. Nasuprot tome, u ovom radu prihvaća se kontekstualna osjetljivost pojma dobrobiti, ali se odbacuje teza da je dobrobit u svojoj osnovi pluralan pojam. Oslanjajući se na radove Guy Fletchera (2019) i Jennifer Hawkins (2019), tvrdim da različite primjene pojma ipak počivaju na jedinstvenom temeljnom pojmu dobrobiti. Stoga cilj ne bi trebao biti napuštanje filozofskog teorijskog promišljanja, nego razvoj kontekstualno osjetljive, ali normativno robusne teorije. Pristup zasnovan na sposobnostima pruža obećavajuću strukturu za takav projekt, no on ne može ostati proceduralno otvoren. U radu stoga zagovaram monističku verziju dobrobiti u okviru pristupa zasnovanog na sposobnostima, utemeljenu na normativno opravdanom skupu sposobnosti. Rad je strukturiran na sljedeći način: najprije se prikazuju standardne teorije dobrobiti, zatim se analizira kontekstualna kritika koju iznosi Alexandrova, potom se razmatra proceduralizam u verziji Robeyns, a naposljetku se brani jedinstvena, normativno utemeljena verzija dobrobiti u okviru pristupa zasnovanog na sposobnostima koja zadržava kontekstualnu osjetljivost bez odustajanja od filozofske koherentnosti.

Ključne riječi: dobrobit, kontekstualizam, pluralizam, proceduralizam, sposobnosti, monizam.

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Gabriele Giacomini

THE RIGHT OF REBELLION IN THE DIGITAL COMMUNICATION AGE

ABSTRACT
In the seventeenth century, John Locke, while laying the foundations of the liberal system, was the first to theorise the right of rebellion. Within his framework, revolt against an oppressive regime was considered a collective right. However, as recent attempts at revolution under authoritarian regimes have demonstrated, the exercise of this right can prove challenging in the context of digital technologies. Compared to Locke's era, there are notable developments concerning the motivations, principal actors, and methods of citizen uprisings. Digital technologies have played a significant role not only in facilitating revolts but also in enabling authoritarian restorations. This has underscored the urgency of safeguarding the right to rebellion by updating counterpowers against authoritarian tendencies to address the challenges of the digital age.

KEYWORDS
Locke, liberalism, authoritarianism, digital technologies, right of rebellion

Introduction

Numerous scholars, particularly in the first decade of the century, were convinced that the Internet would bring significant benefits to grassroots movements. They argued that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) would reduce the costs of participation for citizens, enhance individual autonomy, and increase users' political awareness. This, in turn, would not only stimulate public discourse on politically relevant issues but also give rise to innovative forms of activism and engagement (Dahlgren 2000; Girard and Siochrù 2003; Haerpfer et al. 2009).

All this may be feasible within a liberal context, where access to the Internet is universally guaranteed, where website content is not censored (with certain exceptions, such as child pornography), and where citizens are neither prosecuted for publishing anti-government messages nor arrested and tortured for organising street protests via chat rooms. It is worth considering, however,

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what becomes of the use of digital technologies and media in an illiberal and authoritarian context. The analysis of failed revolutions (or those victorious only in their initial phases) in the digital age, in countries such as Iran, Egypt, Hong Kong, and Belarus, raises doubts about the libertarian potential of digital technologies within a hostile political system. What instead emerges are the extensive and often successful efforts of authoritarian regimes to utilise digital media for surveillance and the suppression of individuals' fundamental rights. The use of digital media by police forces, intelligence agencies, and government bodies in tyrannical states poses repressive risks.

Yet, among the most important liberal principles, at least since John Locke (1690), is the right of rebellion. According to Locke, if the state abuses its powers, seriously threatening the liberty, life, and essential well-being of its citizens, the pact between rulers and the people is dissolved, and the latter may "appeal to heaven," taking justice into their own hands. Three centuries later, we recognise that rebellion against a power deemed abusive can, of course, take various forms: from street demonstrations with chants and banners to outright insurrection, from non-violent protest to armed resistance, from sit-ins and hunger strikes to the symbolic occupation of public buildings.

Whether such efforts can succeed in the digital age is central to the freedom of peoples and the protection of fundamental rights. Viewed from another perspective, the issue lies in whether and how an authoritarian and illiberal drift might today find an ally in digital technologies. Considering the vast amounts of personal data available on the Internet, and the historical reality that humanity has, in the past, identified, arrested, tortured, and barbarically murdered millions of individuals, the concern becomes even more pressing. The ever-present risk of a return to authoritarian rule – a threat from which even long-standing democracies are not inherently immune – highlights the urgency of theorising principles, procedures, and institutions capable of counteracting authoritarian tendencies when they arise, while supporting individuals in their legitimate claims for freedom and justice. The challenge is to innovate liberalism both by implementing institutional architectures and procedures that, drawing on the principle of the separation of powers, prevent the establishment of authoritarian regimes and the suppression of popular expression (including online), and by promoting digital literacy and critical thinking among citizens, particularly within younger generations.

The Right of Rebellion from Locke to the Present Day

In the modern era, the right of resistance is intrinsically linked to the struggle against absolutist tendencies. This issue was first addressed by the liberal philosopher John Locke at the end of the seventeenth century. He developed his doctrine of the people's right to rebellion within the framework of the social contract, as articulated in *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689) and *Two Treatises of Government* (1690). It is particularly in the *Second Treatise* that the

problem of obedience, resistance, and their conditions of legitimacy is systematically examined (Pasquino 1984).

According to Locke, the state is an institution created by mutual agreement among citizens, with its essential purpose being the preservation of liberty, life, and property (Schochet 1971). The achievement of these objectives ensures the legitimacy of the state. When the state fails to uphold the pact that gave rise to its existence, a crisis ensues: in the most extreme cases, this crisis can only be resolved through what Locke, recalling a biblical episode, refers to as an "appeal to heaven," that is, an appeal to God as the ultimate judge (Seliger 1963). This formula embodies the concept of the right of rebellion, which Locke recognises as belonging to citizens under extreme conditions – specifically, when rulers have fundamentally subverted the core objectives of the political body, and the protection of citizens' lives and liberties is no longer assured. In other words, from Locke's perspective, rebellion constitutes the sole possible remedy when there exists no earthly authority to which one can appeal for the restoration of justice (Hasebe 2001).

More than three centuries on, Locke's theory remains an essential point of reference; however, it must be interpreted in a contemporary context. Firstly, while Lockean rebellion was grounded in theological-Christian ethical principles, today it is more commonly framed in secular terms, notably through the lens of human rights. Secondly, whereas Locke's "appeal to heaven" appeared to concern primarily the affluent social classes, history – from the French Revolution to the Arab Spring – has demonstrated that the active role of the masses is central to popular uprisings. Finally, compared to the past, modern forms of rebellion have become more layered, encompassing not only armed resistance but also peaceful methods. Let us explore these points in turn.

a) *Why people rebel*. In Locke's view, the motivations for revolution were rooted in theological foundations and natural law. As society evolved, the motivations behind revolutions became increasingly secularised. The *Declaration of Independence* of the United States (1776) proclaims fundamental rights as "self-evident truths," recognising life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as inalienable rights (Tsesis 2011). Similarly, the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789) abandons references to God, basing rights on rationalist and universal principles such as liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression (Hunt 1996). In contemporary times, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) represents a further secularisation of rights, presenting them as universal and inalienable for all human beings, without any religious reference (Cmiel 2004; Normand and Zaidi 2008). Scholars have debated the foundations of these charters and rights, proposing various explanations. Rorty (1993), for instance, suggests that fundamental rights derive from the evolution of human sentiments and the capacity for empathy. Other approaches, such as Sen's (1999), ground rights in the values they promote, such as freedom from poverty and personal fulfilment. Cultural relativism presents another challenge: some argue that human rights reflect Western values and that other cultures may prioritise collective well-being over individual rights

(Tharoor 1999; Peetush 2003). Nonetheless, the broad international consensus on human rights as moral ideals, even if not always legally binding, lends them significant political weight.

b) *Who rebels*. The "people" to whom Locke referred were limited to affluent citizens with acquired rights, such as the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. Although he acknowledged the possibility of uprisings by the working masses, Locke considered these rare, as labourers, preoccupied with mere subsistence, lacked the time to develop class consciousness. Over the centuries, however, the concept of citizenship has extended far beyond the confines of the wealthy classes. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the popular masses secured citizenship rights, achieved political revolutions, and organised parties that facilitated their political integration (Bendix 1964). Today, the protagonists of revolutions are no longer solely property owners and affluent professionals, but encompass a broad array of wage labourers, factory workers, artisans, farmers, small business owners, teachers, and public officials. Given the popular nature of uprisings, economic inequalities and social injustice are often the spark. Moore (1978) highlights how the deprivation of property rights, stripping the masses of a "dignified" existence, can generate a profound sense of moral injustice among the lower classes. The perception of unjust inequality – where the enrichment of a few fails to benefit the collective – fuels moral outrage. Lastly, note that a revolution has greater chances of success when it involves a broad and diverse coalition of social groups. Huntington (1968) underscores the importance of alliances between intellectuals and the popular masses, while Dix (1984) illustrates how the support of urban middle classes and significant segments of the elite can prove decisive.

c) *How people rebel*. Contemporary mobilisations can take three primary forms. The first centres around civil society organisations – trade unions, professional associations, religious communities, and similar bodies. These structures, embedded in society and relatively stable, can be fundamental in organising resistance against authoritarian power when necessary (Putnam 1995; Diamond 2008). However, their structural rigidity may render them vulnerable to control or repression by oppressive authorities. By contrast, social movements represent more flexible and dynamic responses to perceived injustices. They emerge in reaction to intolerable conditions and aim to profoundly transform political and economic structures (Tilly 1978; Skocpol et al. 2000). Leadership in these movements is often charismatic, and their organisational structures are lightweight, with ambitious, long-term goals (Ganz 2010). Finally, "smart mobs" and episodic protests constitute rapid and spontaneous forms of mobilisation, facilitated by digital technologies. These collective gatherings, organised via the Internet and social media, aim to achieve immediate results and dissolve quickly once their objectives are met (Rheingold 2003). There is also ongoing debate as to whether Locke endorsed a natural right to bear arms for self-defence (Tunik 2014). Certainly, contemporary revolutions oscillate between non-violence and the use of armed force. Peaceful protests, such as those of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, achieved significant

milestones with the *Civil Rights Act* of 1964 and the *Voting Rights Act* of 1965, albeit not without internal tensions between proponents of non-violence like Martin Luther King Jr. and advocates of more radical methods such as Malcolm X (Nimtz 2016). Similarly, in South Africa, Nelson Mandela, initially a supporter of non-violence, endorsed armed struggle against apartheid following the Sharpeville massacre (Lodge 2007).

The ICTs and the Failure of the Revolts against Authoritarian Regimes

We have explored the idea that when a state fails to fulfil its duty to preserve and promote the fundamental rights of its citizens, the people possess the right to exercise their right of rebellion. Furthermore, we have examined some of the contemporary developments in motivations, actors, and methods of uprisings. One of the most significant innovations in the modern era is the role of digital technologies in revolutionary processes. ICTs have transformed the ways in which people organise, communicate, and mobilise against repressive regimes. In today's world, an intriguing question is what digital tools and resources rebels might utilise within a repressive regime to exercise this right (Etling et al. 2010).

However, these tools are not solely available to the rebels: authoritarian governments have also developed sophisticated strategies to monitor, censor, and manipulate digital communications (Dragu and Lupu 2021). Thus, ICTs can function both as catalysts for change and as instruments of repression. The cases of Iran, Egypt, Hong Kong, and Belarus illustrate how digital technologies can, in the initial stages, facilitate the organisation and dissemination of protests, but also highlight how regimes are subsequently able to harness these same technologies to maintain control and suppress dissent. As authoritarian regimes have worked diligently to extend their offline grip on the population into the online sphere, the theoretical revolutionary potential of ICTs has, thus far, not consistently proven to be a reliable means of restoring or preserving democratic structures in repressive contexts. To fully understand the potential and fragility of ICT use for revolutionary purposes, we must, therefore, examine what has happened – and what is currently unfolding – in illiberal countries.

The dynamics of the 2009 Green Revolution in Iran follow a familiar pattern: an initial surge of protest followed by a severe government counter-reaction, with both sides leveraging digital media to further their objectives (Palfrey et al. 2009). The protests erupted in response to the re-election of incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, which demonstrators alleged had been heavily rigged by the government. The ensuing revolutionary attempt was termed "Green" in reference to the colour of Mir-Hossein Mousavi's campaign, who emerged as the protest leader, calling for Ahmadinejad's resignation. However, bolstered by military support and the loyalty of the paramilitary organisation known as the Basij, Ahmadinejad violently suppressed the uprising. In the initial stages of the protest, Twitter and other social media platforms proved

invaluable in disseminating news about political developments. Citizens acted as reporters, documenting the brutal repression by security forces with their mobile phones and sharing these images globally, thereby fuelling international support for the movement (Etling et al. 2010). Shortly after the outbreak of protests, many scholars highlighted the role of digital media in expanding the revolt. However, as Golkar (2011) pointed out, the regime swiftly responded by deploying ICTs to its own advantage: specifically, the government exploited the Internet to extend its political control over society and suppress dissent.

The technological policies adopted by the Iranian regime were both reactive, aiming to intercept and neutralise activists, and proactive, focusing on disseminating pro-government content online. The first strategy heavily relied on reducing bandwidth and Internet connection speeds to prevent mass access to the Web and to make uploading photos and videos extremely difficult. Additionally, the regime engaged in extensive website filtering, employing specialised personnel to monitor and restrict online content. Furthermore, the Iranian Cyber Army conducted digital intelligence operations, including hacking reformist websites, spreading computer viruses, and surveilling citizens to identify and arrest bloggers and activists, dismantle their organisations, and intimidate sympathisers (Rezvaniyeh 2010). The proactive strategy, on the other hand, involved the dissemination of propaganda and fake news to undermine popular support for the rebels, while instilling fear and suspicion within society, thereby fostering a culture of self-censorship among Internet users. It is noteworthy that the regime's efforts to control the virtual world were bolstered by recruiting women and young students from the Basij, who were trained in managing blogs and social networking sites, conducting psychological operations and espionage, and monitoring mobile phones (Esfandiari 2010).

Thus, the Iranian experience raises the question of whether ICTs can play a genuinely positive role in revolutionary attempts, or whether they are merely tools that oppressive regimes can wield to maintain power. While acknowledging that digital technologies possess revolutionary potential, it is evident that they perform best within an open society, whereas they risk proving ineffective – or even counterproductive – in authoritarian contexts. Reflecting once again on the Iranian case, Rahaghi (2012) questions why the popular movement of 1979 succeeded without the Internet, while the Green Revolution failed. Several factors may explain this discrepancy. The Green Revolution may have been more fragile in terms of leadership, organisational foundations, and broad-based participation in a shared programme. As we have seen, in contemporary times – unlike in Locke's era – the contribution of large segments of the population is crucial, without which protests risk implosion. It is also clear that digital technologies alone are insufficient, and under certain conditions may even hinder the success of an anti-authoritarian rebellion.

Another compelling case is the Egyptian uprising, part of the so-called Arab Spring. In this instance, the Internet initially fuelled popular mobilisation, but once the regime gained control over digital technologies, these tools became formidable instruments for maintaining the status quo. Today, it is undeniable

that the Arab Spring in Egypt has devolved into a rigid winter. The protests erupted in January 2011 when citizens began demanding modest measures of social justice, the repeal of the state of emergency, and the introduction of a two-term presidential limit – President Hosni Mubarak had been in power for nearly thirty years. The revolutionary movement effectively utilised the Internet: digital connections, at least in the early stages, helped transform a general strike organised by youth and workers into one of the most significant protests in Egypt's history (Al-Kandari and Hasanen 2012). However, this synergy between online and offline activism lasted only a few days, as the government soon retaliated.

On 28 January 2011, the Egyptian regime disconnected the country from the Internet to suppress the large-scale anti-government demonstrations planned for that day. Major Internet service providers were targeted, and mobile phone services were suspended by operators. This was possible because the government controlled the physical connections to the outside world, such as the fibre-optic cables housed in a Cairo building, and had enacted specific legal provisions to compel foreign providers to shut down their networks (Glanz and Makoff 2011). While the digital blackout compromised the online dimension of the protest within Egypt, many Egyptians and their allies abroad sought to keep the movement alive on Twitter and other platforms by posting information obtained through landline communications – the only remaining mode of contact. However, these efforts reached Egyptian citizens only sporadically, if at all. Furthermore, street activists began discouraging the use of social media and the Internet due to regime surveillance (Madrigal 2011). Ultimately, Mubarak's government was so compromised, and the protest so widespread across society, that digital suppression and repression could not save the regime.

However, post-Mubarak Egypt found itself in a state of turmoil. After deposing Mubarak, the military also ousted the newly elected president, Mohamed Morsi, following his attempts to secure immunity from judicial oversight and other prerogatives, which triggered a new wave of protests. Leadership then passed to Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, the former Minister of Defence, who, with military support, progressively institutionalised a military dictatorship, maintaining tight control over digital communications. What role did ICTs play in this process? As Del Panta (2019) notes, they connected a multitude of anti-hierarchical movements but also fostered a fluid organisation lacking structure and leadership. As previously discussed, the contribution of stable civil society organisations can be decisive. On the other hand, the Egyptian regime continued to strengthen its online repressive apparatus. Specifically, while al-Sisi enacted new cybercrime laws to intensify Internet controls, technical filters and other measures – including restrictions imposed on Egyptian servers – were implemented to block the circulation of alternative narratives and photos or videos documenting government and military actions (Dragoni 2019).

The case of Hong Kong concerns a highly digitalised city struggling against the repressive practices of the government. The protests were triggered in March 2019 by a proposed bill that would have exposed Hong Kong residents

and visitors to the legal system of mainland China. Although the bill was withdrawn in the autumn, tensions reignited in May 2020 following Beijing's decision to enact a national security law for Hong Kong. During the uprising against this law, both peaceful and radical movements operated in parallel, echoing the patterns seen in the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa during the 20th century. The peaceful movement engaged in non-violent protest, while the radical faction adopted black bloc tactics, encouraging protesters to maintain anonymity to avoid prosecution or future retaliation from authorities and employers aligned with the government (Smith, 2019).

Protesters from both sides utilised platforms such as LIHKG, Telegram (an encrypted messaging service), and the Bridgefy app, which allows users to exchange messages offline via Bluetooth on their smartphones (Wakefield 2019). One of the most controversial aspects of this protest was the practice of doxing – the online dissemination of sensitive personal data. Activists used doxing as a form of hacktivism directed against individuals responsible for crimes and injustices, such as police officers and institutional figures, who could not be held accountable by other means. This strategy exerted significant pressure, essentially through intimidation, on their adversaries. However, this tactic soon led to an escalation between the two conflicting sides: 200 citizens perceived as sympathetic to the protests were doxed by a pro-Chinese anonymous website and received death threats (Chan and Bludy 2019). Moreover, Telegram and LIHKG were subjected to multiple Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks and other cyberattacks during critical moments of the protests, while Facebook and Twitter identified large-scale pro-government disinformation campaigns (Kelly 2019). As of now, it cannot be said that the revolution has succeeded.

In Belarus, protests erupted in Minsk in August 2020 in response to the sixth election of President Alexander Lukashenko, who has been in power since 1994. The Belarusian case is noteworthy because, as Asmolov (2020) highlights, the country's IT industry has developed significantly in recent years, providing citizens not only with tools but also with the skills to utilise them effectively. This digital literacy enabled a significant number of people to partially circumvent the Internet blackout imposed by the government, which has full control over the national telecommunications company. Many Belarusian protesters used VPNs, anonymisers, Mesh networks, and apps like Bridgefy to communicate directly and avoid Internet disruptions and surveillance. Additionally, forms of doxing were employed via Telegram channels to de-anonymise agents responsible for acts of brutality. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that the Belarusian uprising achieved its goals: Lukashenko remains in power. The reason may lie in the fact that, in the Belarusian context, the Internet initially created conditions for rapid citizen engagement but over time failed to become a key mechanism for the sustained mobilisation and coordination of protests. Once again, the use of ICTs alone has proven insufficient to transform a political crisis into a successful revolution.

Digital Technologies, but not Only. Defending the Right of Rebellion Today

Achieving a successful revolution under illiberal regimes in the digital age may prove exceedingly difficult. While ICTs provide rebels with tools to gather and articulate their demands in the early stages, they simultaneously equip oppressors with formidable instruments of repression. For this reason, the contemporary right of rebellion must be preserved by updating political systems to be prepared for the challenges posed by new digital technologies. Naturally, finding a viable solution to this problem is extremely challenging, particularly in authoritarian regimes where freedom is already compromised. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify certain conditions that could support the defence of the right to rebel in a digital world.

First and foremost, it is essential to outline a set of fundamental rights within the digital domain (Klang and Murray 2005; Mathiesen 2014). Among these, the right to access the Internet stands out as an increasingly indispensable freedom in democratic contexts. In liberal systems, this right enjoys growing protection, whereas in authoritarian regimes, it is often perceived as a threat to the stability of power and, consequently, is obstructed in various ways. Another cornerstone of digital rights is the right to personal data protection, which aims to safeguard users' sensitive information, preventing it from being misused or accessed without consent. This right is crucial in ensuring that individuals maintain control over their digital footprints and are protected from surveillance and exploitation. Finally, an equally fundamental – yet frequently debated – right is the right to anonymity. This allows users to navigate online without disclosing their identities, facilitated by encryption technologies that shield personal information and digital activities from prying eyes. Though controversial, anonymity represents an invaluable resource for political dissidents, especially in contexts where freedom of expression is suppressed by illiberal or authoritarian regimes. If these rights were robustly recognised by international bodies, they could provide external support to anti-authoritarian movements. By establishing and promoting digital rights on a global scale, international organisations could exert pressure on repressive regimes and create protective frameworks.

Another fundamental element is the separation of powers, one of the most important principles of liberal thought. From the earliest theorisation of liberalism, power was to be divided into distinct principal functions within state sovereignty to prevent abuses. Building on Locke's theorisation, Montesquieu (1748) identified three functions – legislation, administration, and jurisdiction – with each branch exercising oversight over the others through its specific authority and autonomous state bodies. This principle has always played a valuable role as a protective factor against authoritarian shifts: as Walzer (1983) points out, a system constructed on the art of separation supports the defence of liberty because it deeply embeds the value of pluralism within the social system. At this level, moreover, separation defines the boundaries between

spheres in which different social goods and interests are pursued: beyond the power of government, legislation, judges, and courts, we also find the influence of the media, religious charisma, scientific merit, economic power, financial authority, military strength, and so forth. However, the principle of separation must be reinforced in the digital age to prevent authoritarian tendencies facilitated by governments' use of ICTs. Consequently, certain counterpowers should be implemented.

Rodotà (2021) identified three counterpowers in addition to the executive: the traditional legislative and judicial powers, and a technocratic model. With regard to the legislative power, being the only body directly emanating from popular sovereignty, it must undertake the task of establishing a framework of general principles to be observed by all actors involved in processes generated by technological innovation. The judiciary, on the other hand, is tasked with providing reassurance to society: indeed, the courts can prosecute abuses of surveillance committed by the government; furthermore, judicial decisions leave open the possibility for other judges, at different times, to decide otherwise. By adapting decisions to the situation and technological context, judicial intervention helps to dissipate the fear of being caught in the grip of technological innovation. The technocratic power, finally, has a significant limitation in its weak adherence to popular will. However, it is relatively autonomous from political authority, which can render it a protective factor against authoritarian shifts, and it can promote the role of experts and specialists. The work of these experts, in particular, materialises in independent regulatory authorities, tasked with safeguarding public interests in specific areas of social relevance. Each authority is endowed with more or less incisive powers within its area of competence: it may not only issue recommendations but also enforce orders or impose sanctions. Independent authorities, therefore, may have the power to hear complaints from individuals who believe they have been illegally monitored and to conduct investigations in this regard; furthermore, they can prevent the storage of personal data for purposes related to the aggressive surveillance of citizens by the government.

In a liberal system, as Walzer (1983) suggests, power is diffused not only within institutions but also across civil society. Beyond formal responses, the potential for collective action expressed through non-governmental entities such as civil society organisations and social movements is invaluable. These bodies, in particular, can act as "watchdogs" on behalf of citizens: they can engage in the generation of politically relevant information – often through studies and research – and communicate this information using the most effective means, in order to promote reflection on the implications of surveillance. They can also hold institutions and organisations accountable, demanding sanctions for the failure to uphold principles of fairness and formulating policy recommendations. Typically, most members of these organisations are engaged in other activities, such as research and teaching, hardware and software development, journalism, or various forms of artistic expression. Furthermore, they are embedded within transnational activist networks.

Another form of power diffused within civil society is held by corporations. Increasingly, surveillance activities are conducted through private platforms, which is why various governments are attempting to "co-opt" the private sector more effectively. This poses a significant risk. An excessive concentration of media and economic power in a small number of companies can become problematic, especially when these companies maintain close ties with political authorities (for instance, when the head of government owns or controls major telecommunications firms). In such cases, the fate of the public sphere could depend on the will of a few powerful actors. For this reason, some suggest that antitrust regulation – the application of the liberal principle of separation within the private sector – should not be considered merely an economic issue but rather as a safeguard for citizens' freedoms (Wu, 2020).

Liberal innovation must also be implemented at the individual level. In other words, citizens must become as capable as possible of defending their personal sphere in everyday life. As Foucault (1975) emphasizes, power is not only concentrated within institutions but is also diffused through social, linguistic, and technological practices: this implies that resistance must penetrate the everyday mechanisms of surveillance and control. Numerous tactics are available to individuals, particularly those aware of being under surveillance by power structures, to resist abuses committed in the virtual context by governments. Citizens can browse the Internet, send emails, and write blogs using anonymous browsing software and ad-blockers capable of preventing trojan execution and user profiling; they can also favour applications that encrypt communications, encrypt their hard drives, and use removable devices rather than cloud services, while paying attention to creating strong passwords and employing multi-factor authentication (Van Dijkhuizen and Van Ham 2018). These practices are within the reach of many users, who, by adopting certain precautions, can limit the encroachment of power and contribute to a digital environment that better respects individual freedom. While they may not always succeed in evading the surveillance system, their efforts can reduce its effectiveness. This could also represent the last resort to "appeal to heaven" when civil society organisations are stifled, movements are ostracised, and dissent is banned: individual, quotidian and widespread resistance that makes surveillance more time-consuming and costly, thereby loosening the regime's grip.

However, the effectiveness of individual resistance is directly proportional to the level of knowledge of the tools and their potential. In an increasingly technology-permeated world, the citizen-user must attain sufficient knowledge to opt out of the system when necessary. Otherwise, the population risks living under constant surveillance and being deprived of the full enjoyment of fundamental rights. Consequently, for citizens in liberal systems, it is advisable, as a precautionary measure, to pursue updated computer literacy and appropriate media education. A valuable approach, for example, would be the integration of digital literacy programmes into school curricula, equating digital literacy and the ability to use digital tools with reading, writing, and arithmetic. Students should become familiar with the basics of programming, the primary

threats and most common types of cyberattacks, the use of hacking tools, and various cybersecurity best practices – all skills that could prove useful in confronting authoritarian power in the digital age.

Moreover, broader competencies should not be underestimated, such as the critical evaluation of sources when using the Internet or the use of ICTs for collaboration. For a society to respond effectively to any drift in political power, education in critical thinking is also essential, fostering intellectually autonomous individuals capable of recognising both the risks and potential of technical tools in social and political terms. Furthermore, for more conscious use of technology, it is necessary to cultivate individuals' ability to make informed choices, analyse contexts, understand complexity, and reflect without prejudice (Wellman et al. 2003). In summary, an approach aimed at developing personalities capable of facing challenges rationally and autonomously is required.

Today, the potential leaders of a revolution are no longer, as in Locke's time, solely members of the ruling class and owners of the means of production; the leaders of a rebellion often emerge from less privileged social classes. As contemporary history has demonstrated, large numbers of ordinary citizens can unite to achieve political goals. However, without widespread competence in digital tools, it becomes difficult to protect oneself adequately in the modern world, access information regarding government actions, and communicate effectively. Citizens may lose the ability to ensure that the government acts in a non-dominant manner (Haggarty and Ericson 2006). Adequate cognitive tools enable citizens to demand transparency and access to governmental information, actively safeguarding their fundamental freedoms both online and offline. Institutions and social movements will be truly effective when supported by a broad cultural foundation and a conscious citizenry that actively endorses their efforts.

As we have seen, large-scale mobilisation against abuses of power can take various forms: civil society organisations, social movements, smart mobs, and episodic protests. All these organisational forms can be invaluable in supporting resistance against authoritarian tendencies or tyrannical regimes. In a digital world, however, these forms must be implemented in a conducive environment. This environment will be more favourable to the extent that digital power is decentralised and that citizens are capable of asserting their rights through widespread and proficient use of digital technologies.

Nonetheless, it must be emphasised that the use of digital technologies is valuable but not the only important factor. For instance, Gramsci (1948) speaks of a "revolutionary ruling class," capable of formulating new moral standards and condemning oppressive power. Indeed, the anger of a society cannot be transformed into concrete actions without the contribution of an organised political group that promotes new criteria for condemning unjust power, thus constituting the internal identity of the rebellion. This organised minority works to discredit the ideology of the dominant class, facilitating the transfer of power to the new coalition (Tilly, 1978). This group often has a charismatic leader – an individual endowed with moral courage, intellectual prowess, and

moral inventiveness, essential for creating criteria to critique existing cultural traditions. Finally, it is necessary to consider that moral innovators thrive in social spaces where discontent can be channelled, particularly when power fails to be entirely repressive. Therefore, for popular demands to gain traction, a fracture within the ruling classes is necessary. The military and police forces play a particular role in this context: through these actors, the regime holds the means of coercion and can obstruct revolutionary efforts. For this reason, mass revolutionary movements genuinely emerge when at least a partial defection of coercive apparatuses occurs (Skocpol 1979).

Concluding Remarks

Once the right of rebellion, as theorised by Locke, is established, it becomes necessary to consider the conditions for its exercise. The recent histories of Egypt, Iran, Hong Kong, and Belarus suggest that citizens are facilitated in taking to the streets by using digital media to express their dissent, even when they are ignored by traditional media, which are under the control of the regime.

Specific socio-political conditions must occur for a regime to collapse: a large portion of the population must be involved in the uprising, or the ruling class – particularly the military – must fracture, with at least part of it siding with the demonstrators. However, when these conditions do not materialise swiftly, or if the organisations of the protesters are not sufficiently structured and prepared for systemic change, authoritarian power, in its old or new forms, reacts by fostering a climate of surveillance and control, making extensive use of digital technologies. Digital media themselves can quickly become the tools through which authoritarian powers retaliate, by filtering or blocking communications and identifying activists. Citizens then attempt to escape government pressure, but state apparatuses invest even more in technological resources, making repression increasingly sophisticated, sometimes to the extent of creating a national network disconnected from the global Internet, in order to achieve near-total control. In such circumstances, Locke's "appeal to heaven" appears destined to fail.

The failure of revolutionary attempts under authoritarian regimes highlights the urgent need to preserve the possibility of dissent within political systems, as a means to prevent or hinder the authoritarian use of digital technologies. This outcome can be achieved by establishing certain checks and balances to block the initiatives of malicious political actors, thereby preventing them from establishing a permanent illiberal power through the shrewd use of digital media. In other words, there is a need to update the liberal tradition, drawing particularly on the principle of the separation of powers. Furthermore, the promotion of widespread technological capabilities among the population is highly advisable, so that tyrannical regimes can be obstructed as much as possible in their efforts to consolidate their grip on the people.

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Gabrijele Džakomini

Pravo na pobunu u doba digitalne komunikacije

Apstrakt

U sedamnaestom veku, Džon Lok je, postavljajući temelje liberalnog sistema, prvi teoretisao pravo na pobunu. U okviru njegove misli, ustanak protiv represivnog režima smatran je kolektivnim pravom. Međutim, kao što su pokazali nedavni pokušaji revolucije pod autoritarnim režimima, ostvarivanje ovog prava može biti izazovno u kontekstu digitalnih tehnologija. U poređenju sa Lokovim dobom, postoje značajne promene u pogledu motiva, glavnih aktera i metoda građanskih ustanaka. Digitalne tehnologije odigrale su važnu ulogu ne samo u olakšavanju pobuna već i u omogućavanju autoritarnih restauracija. To je istaklo hitnost zaštite prava na pobunu putem ažuriranja kontramoći protiv autoritarnih tendencija kako bi se odgovorilo na izazove digitalnog doba.

Ključne reči: Lok, liberalizam, autoritarizam, digitalne tehnologije, pravo na pobunu

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IS THE EUROPEAN UNION IN CRISIS? THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EU CITIZENSHIP AND DIRECT DEMOCRACY AND ITS IMPACT ON DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY

ABSTRACT
The crisis situation caused by pandemic COVID-19 and the effects of the war between Russia and Ukraine are also affecting the functioning of the European Union. From time to time, voices are raised questioning the existence of democratic legitimacy in the European Union. It is therefore important to examine how the concept of EU citizenship relates to the concept of right to vote, in particular, direct democracy. The institutions of direct democracy, and in particular, referendums, are the most general and most powerful form of direct exercise of power, since they enable the people themselves to decide on a matter directly. When looking at the system in the EU Member States, it is worth examining the issue of referendums at national and local level, in particular the importance of the concept of EU citizenship in determining the voters who participate in the referendum. In this context, it could be asked as a preliminary question whether it would be possible to introduce an EU referendum in which EU citizens could decide on an issue falling within the EU's competence, or whether, similarly, a cross-border regional referendum could be envisaged in which EU citizens living in several countries could decide on a regional issue affecting several countries. It is also necessary, however, to examine an institution that is already in operation: the past, present and future of the European Citizens' Initiative, with a view to whether it could become a kind of European referendum in the future.

KEYWORDS
European Union citizenship, right to vote, democratic legitimacy, direct democracy, referendum, European citizens' initiative

Introduction

The crisis situation caused by pandemic COVID-19 and the effects of the war between Russia and Ukraine are also affecting the functioning of the European Union. These crises have amplified the voices that questioning the existence of democratic legitimacy in the European Union. The decision-making

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mechanisms of some EU bodies have come in for some criticism in recent years. It is therefore important to examine how the concept of EU citizenship relates to the concept of the right to vote, in particular, direct democracy, because EU citizens can influence decision-making mechanisms through these institutions.

Based on the principle of people's sovereignty, the people exercise their power either through their elected representatives or (exceptionally) directly (Kilberg 2014). The primary instrument of the people's exercise of power is representative democracy[1], and direct exercise of power is therefore an exceptional instrument, but it is superior to representative exercise of power when it is implemented.[2] The institutions of direct democracy, and in particular, referendums, are therefore the general and most powerful forms of direct exercise of power, as they allow the people to decide on an issue directly (Csink 2020: 117). There are countless means of direct democracy. These include petitions (Bódi 2018), people's initiatives and referendums. When researching the systems of the European Union (EU) Member States, it is worth examining the issue of referendums at national and local level, and for the purposes of this study, the importance of the concept of EU citizenship[3] in determining the voters who participate in referendums. In this context, a preliminary question is whether it would be possible to introduce an EU referendum in which EU citizens could decide on an issue that falls within the EU's competence, or whether a cross-border regional referendum could be introduced, in which EU citizens could decide on a regional issue that affects several countries. But it is also necessary to look at an institution that is already in operation: the past, present and future of the European Citizens' Initiative, with regard to whether it could become a kind of European referendum in the future.

In order to answer the questions posed in the research, I will primarily use a comparative legal method. In this context, I will analyse the electoral law and referendum rules in the EU Member States and draw on statistical data on referendums in the countries concerned. I will also analyse EU normative rules (regulations and directives) and the practical experience of the European Citizens' Initiative. In addition to the above, I will, of course, draw on secondary, literature-based views in my research.

1 On the dilemmas of representative democracy, see: Ophuls (1997: 6–10).

2 See for example Decision no. 52/1994 (X. 14.) AB. See more: Csink (2021: 139).

3 With regard to the concept of EU citizenship, it is important to point out that while citizenship is one of the most important grouping factors in the definition of a nation state, creating both rights and obligations (such as the obligation to be a public servant or national defence) between the natural person and the state, EU citizenship is an additional corollary of national citizenship, i.e. there is no EU citizenship without national citizenship.

The concept of EU citizenship and the right to vote in a representative democracy

Before examining the role of the instruments of direct democracy in the functioning and decision-making of the EU, it is important to briefly discuss the role of EU citizenship[4] in the field of representative democracy.

On the question of representative democracy and EU citizenship, it is worth looking at how the concept of EU citizenship is reflected in the legislation of individual Member States first. If we look at the legislation in the 27 EU Member States, we can draw the following conclusions: in all EU countries except Ireland, the main grouping factor in parliamentary elections is national citizenship. In Ireland, the Irish Constitution has given the legislature the power to grant active voting rights to persons other than Irish citizens[5], and so to British citizens resident in the UK since 1985 (Beckman 2009: 62–88). On this basis, it can therefore be concluded that the main prerequisite for being eligible to vote in parliamentary elections is the national citizenship (i.e. EU citizenship is not relevant in this respect[6]). National citizenship therefore dominates parliamentary elections. This raises the question in this context, as to which elections in each member state EU citizenship may be relevant.

It should first of all be pointed out that Article 22 Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) guarantees every citizen of the European Union the right to vote and to stand as a candidate in municipal elections in the territory of the Member State in which he or she resides, under the same conditions as nationals of that State. If we compare the legislation of the 27 EU Member States, we can see that, in local elections, the definition of eligibility to vote is linked to residence or domicile in the municipality (if it is in an EU Member State), regardless of national citizenship (Meyer 2017: 4). In the case of local elections, EU citizenship is or can be relevant, but the main grouping factor is not this, but the requirement to live in a given municipality. The other main area where EU citizenship is relevant is, of course, European Parliament (EP) elections. In principle, all EU citizens have the right to vote in EP elections in the Member State where they live. So, it can be concluded in this respect too, that while EU citizenship is undoubtedly important, the main grouping factor is the requirement to live in the country concerned.[7]

All this suggests that EU citizenship is currently of negligible importance in the field of representative democracy.

4 For more on EU citizenship, see: Cygan and Szyszczak (2006: 977–982).

5 In this context, it is worth noting the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, adopted in 1990 under the auspices of the United Nations, Article 41 of which declares the possibility of granting legal migrant workers the right to vote and to stand for election.

6 Several authors have written on this issue. See, among others: Kochenov (2009: 201).

7 For more on this, see: Kurunczi (2023: 93–112).

The institution of the referendum in each EU Member State, with special reference to the question of EU citizenship

Of all the institutions of direct democracy, the referendum is undoubtedly the most important. Referendums give voters the opportunity to make a binding[8] decision on an issue.[9] Therefore, in the following, I will examine how the EU Member States regulate the issue of referendums, the right to vote and whether it would be possible to apply the institution of referendums in the EU (or at least regionally).

Referendum in EU Member States

First of all, it is important to underline that the institution of the referendum is fundamentally different when applied at national level, and again when applied at local level. In the case of a national referendum, the starting point will be the principle of people's sovereignty, as in the case of institutions of representative democracy. In other words, the fact of belonging to the constitutional concept of the people will be the basis of the right to vote.[10] According to this view, the people can be best defined in terms of citizenship, i.e. the community of citizens will be the depository of people's sovereignty (Kurunczi 2020: 19–23). In contrast, a local referendum is a direct decision-making 'forum' for the citizens of a given municipality (Kiss 2009: 531–532). It follows directly that the main grouping criterion for local referendums (as in local elections) is the existence of a place of residence or domicile in the municipality.[11]

On the basis of this, there are two main aspects of the regulation of each EU Member State: firstly, whether it is possible to hold a referendum at national level, and secondly, how each country regulates the issue of eligibility (does it differ in any way from the rules for parliamentary elections)?

The practices of individual EU Member States in relation to national referendums can basically be divided into two groups: in the vast majority of Member States it is possible to hold a referendum at national level,[12] but there

8 It is important to note, however, that in some EU countries there are also non-binding (advisory) referendums.

9 For more dilemmas on the referendum issue, see: Qvortrup (1999: 531–546).

10 From the point of view of the fundamental rights approach to the right to vote, it is clear that if one is subject to people's sovereignty, one must, as a rule, have the right to vote (not including certain cases of exclusion), because only in this way can one fulfil the 'role' of the 'social contract'. The subjects of people's sovereignty are, first and foremost, the citizens. See more: Kurunczi (2023: 96).

11 The constitutions of several EU's Member State provide for the possibility of local referendums. For example, under Article 136 of the Bulgarian Constitution, local residents can decide on issues affecting their municipality by referendum. Similarly, the Slovak Constitution provides for a referendum in Article 67.

12 These include Austria (Article 45-46 of the Constitution of the Republic of Austria), Bulgaria (Article 84(5) of the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria), the Czech Republic (Article 2(2) of the Constitution of the Czech Republic), Denmark (Article 42 of

are also Member States whose legal systems do not recognise this legal instrument.[13] It is also worth highlighting Cyprus, where the constitution does not provide for a national referendum, but there was a referendum in 2004 on the reunification of the island (partly linked to a referendum on EU accession), which was unsuccessful. Also worthy of special mention is Germany, where only two referendums can be held at national level: on the amendment of the borders of the federal states (Bundesländer) and on the adoption of a new constitution.[14] So this means that the institution of national referendums exists in most EU countries.

In Member States where it is possible to hold a national referendum, it is also important to examine the question of how the rules on eligibility are developed. In this respect, it can be generally stated that the definition of the right to vote is in line with the rules of representative democracy, which in many Member States is also reflected at constitutional level.[15] From the above, it can be concluded that national referendums in all EU Member States where they are possible are linked to people's sovereignty, so the main grouping factor is the existence of citizenship of the Member State concerned.

The possibility of an EU referendum

With regard to EU citizenship, the above raises the question of whether it would be conceivable to increase the importance of EU citizenship in the most powerful instrument of direct democracy, namely the referendum. As we have seen above, it is not nearly possible to hold referendums at the national level in all EU Member States. However, where this is allowed, eligibility is determined by national citizenship (except in Ireland). In this respect, in some

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the Constitution of the Kingdom of Denmark), Estonia (see: https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/1045564), Finland (Article 53 of the Constitution of Finland), France (Article 3 of the Constitution of France), Greece (Articles 35(3), 44(2) of the Constitution of Greece), the Netherlands (but since 2018 referendums on the basis of an opinion can no longer be held), Croatia, Ireland (Article 47 of the Constitution of Ireland), Poland (Articles 90(3) and 125 of the Constitution of Poland), Latvia (Article 14 of the Constitution of Latvia), Lithuania (Article 9 of the Constitution of Lithuania), Hungary (Article 8 of the Fundamental Law), Italy (Article 75 of the Constitution of Italy), Portugal (Article 115 of the Constitution of Portugal), Romania (Articles 2, 73(3)(d), 90 of the Constitution of Romania), Spain (Articles 62(c), 92 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Spain), Sweden (see: https://lagen.nu/1979:369), Slovakia (Article 7(1), Article 86(c) of the Constitution of the Slovak Republic) and Slovenia (Article 3/A, Article 90 of the Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia). It is worth noting that Article 2(2) of the Czech Constitution only stipulates that a constitutional law shall regulate the cases and manner in which the people may directly exercise their power.

13 Belgium, Luxembourg and Malta.

14 Article 29, Article 146 of the Fundamental Law of the Federal Republic of Germany.

15 Constitution of the Republic of Austria, Article 46(2); Constitution of the Republic of Ireland, Article 47(3); Constitution of Poland, Article 62(1); Constitution of Italy, Article 75(3); Fundamental Law of Hungary, Article XXIII(7).

countries (such as Hungary), even national residence is not a requirement, so national citizenship is almost the only condition. In the practice of EU Member States, not including Ireland, there are therefore no rules giving citizens of other Member States (i.e. EU citizens in general) the right to vote in national referendums. In this respect, the legal situation of national referendums is essentially the same as that of national parliamentary elections, i.e. it is difficult to imagine a legal situation in which a Member State would allow citizens of other states (even if they are EU citizens) to express their views on an issue in the same way as its own citizens.

This raises the question: if we want to increase the importance of the institution of EU citizenship in the field of direct democracy, would it be possible to create a referendum at EU level, or at least at regional (Euroregional) level?[16] In order to answer this question, it is necessary to start from the premise that the essence of the institution of the referendum is that the depositories of people's sovereignty take back the right to decide on a given matter from the constitutional body (the parliaments) to which they have entrusted the right to legislate in the elections. Therefore, if we were to create the institution of a referendum at EU level (the subjects of which would be EU citizens), then the people (i.e. the community of EU citizens) would have to take back the right of decision from the body empowered to legislate also in this procedure. Under the ordinary legislative procedure, which is the rule in the EU, the European Parliament is only a co-legislator (Crombez 1997, Schulz and Konig 2000). This is of particular importance in this case because, of the two co-legislative bodies (the European Council and the European Parliament), only the EP has legitimacy directly attributable to EU citizens. Therefore, by the very nature of the institution of the referendum, the community of EU citizens could only 'take back' the right to decide on a given matter from the European Parliament in a hypothetical EU referendum. However, since the European Parliament is only a co-legislator, this EU referendum could not, in fact, dogmatically force a binding legislative act.[17] This, of course, does not exclude the possibility that an EU-wide referendum could be introduced after all, by breaking through the dogmatic framework. This is supported by the approach that in those states that currently have national referendums, there is theoretically no obstacle to holding a referendum on whether a national parliament should give the EU legislature a 'yellow card' for breaching the subsidiarity requirement.[18] And a

16 The issue of referendums at EU level and the issue of legitimating policy has been the subject of several studies. See among others: Rakauskas (2002) and Rose (2018: 207–225).

17 In my view (on purely dogmatic grounds), this would not be changed by a regulation that would allow, where appropriate, for an EU referendum on certain EU-wide issues to be held at the same time as the European Parliament elections. Therefore, this would not solve the problems with EU referendums.

18 For more on the 'yellow card', also known as subsidiarity, see for example: https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/law-making-process/adopting-eu-law/relations-national-parliaments/subsidiarity-control-mechanism

referendum on the same issue held at roughly the same time in most EU countries could eventually form the basis for an EU-wide referendum in the future.

In addition to a referendum at EU level, it is also worth saying a few words about the possibility of a referendum at EU regional level. The EU has so-called Euroregions[19], which cover areas that belong to several Member States. This raises the question of whether a kind of regional EU referendum could be held on issues that affect only a particular Euroregion. In this context, however, and without repeating the above, it can be stated that there is no interpretation of the legislative body from which the persons living in the euro-region concerned could 'take back' the right to decide. Either the EU's decision-making bodies, or the national parliaments or governments of the Member States that cover the territory of the Euroregion, have the power to decide on a matter concerning the Euroregion. However, citizens of a given Euroregion do not have a say in the national decision-making of any Member State other than the one of their nationality, and EU citizens living in that region cannot take a decision affecting the whole European Parliament and its co-legislators by referendum. Independently of this, there is no theoretical obstacle to the Member States concerned calling referendums on the same issue at almost the same time, the results of which must be taken into account by all the Member States concerned. However, such a joint referendum would necessarily be binding on the legislative bodies (i.e. national parliaments) of the Member States, and not on the European Parliament as the EU (co-)legislator. And the institution of local referendums, because they are typically held at the municipal (rather than regional) level, may not be suitable in its current form to form the basis for a regional referendum.

The past, present and possible future of the European Citizens' Initiative

Although there is no EU-wide referendum (and, as mentioned above, it is not a reality in the foreseeable future), there is an instrument in EU law for the direct exercise of power, namely the European Citizens' Initiative, the legal framework for which was laid down in Regulation 211/2011 following the Lisbon Treaty. The European Citizens' Initiative was intended by the EU to be the main instrument of direct democracy in the EU, but its functioning still raises a number of questions (Aloisio, Grimaldi, Morelli, and Padoa-Schioppa 2011).

The past and present of the European Citizens' Initiative and its operational experience

Due to the specific nature of EU lawmaking, the European citizens' initiative is essentially linked not to the European Parliament but to the European Commission, which is the almost exclusive initiator of EU legislation. Accordingly,

19 For more on this, see: http://real.mtak.hu/116006/1/EPA02251_Ter_es_tarsadalom1945.pdf

the purpose of a European citizens' initiative is for citizens of the Member States (i.e. EU citizens) to call on the European Commission to propose new EU legislation on a matter covered by the initiative[20], and for the EU to act on that basis (mainly through legislation). To launch a European citizens' initiative, an organisers' group must be set up, made up of at least seven EU citizens representing at least seven different Member States in which they have their permanent residence. They do not have to be citizens of seven different countries, but it is important that they do have to be able to vote in European Parliament elections in their own country on the basis of age. The group must then apply to the European Commission for registration of the initiative. Before registering a proposed initiative, the European Commission checks that it meets the necessary requirements, in particular that it concerns an initiative in the field of the European Commission's competence. Once the initiative is registered by the European Commission, the organising group can start collecting statements of support across the EU. For an initiative to be considered by the European Commission, it must be backed by at least one million EU citizens with the right to vote across the EU in 12 months, and the signatures collected must come from at least seven EU countries (and the number of signatures in each country must reach the minimum required for that country[21]). The affiliation of signatories to a Member State shall be determined on the basis of their residence in that Member State.

It is clear from the above that the success of a European Citizens' Initiative requires coordinated and well-organised action and cooperation. Looking back over the institution's ten-year history, the European Citizens' Initiative is not a success story (Tárnok 2020). Between April 2012 and March 2015, the European Commission applied an overly restrictive interpretation of the preliminary eligibility assessment, and 20 out of 51 initiatives were rejected on grounds of lack of competence. As a result, the number of European Citizens' Initiatives (ECIs) submitted fell from 51 to 19 over the next three-year (2015-2018) cycle (Tárnok 2022).[22]

20 In essence, EU citizens can ask the European Commission to submit a draft EU law, provided that the initiative relates to an area of EU law in which the Commission has powers to do so for the purposes of implementing the EU Treaty. See: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/HU/TXT/HTML/?uri=LEGISSUM:4398779

21 According to Article 3(1)(b) of the current Regulation 2019/788 on the European citizens' initiative, the minimum number of signatories at the time of registration of the initiative is determined by multiplying the number of elected MEPs in each Member State by the total number of MEPs in the European Parliament. For Hungary, this number is 15,771.

22 It is also worth pointing out that between January 2019 and December 2024, the total number of ECIs was 48. See: https://citizens-initiative.europa.eu/

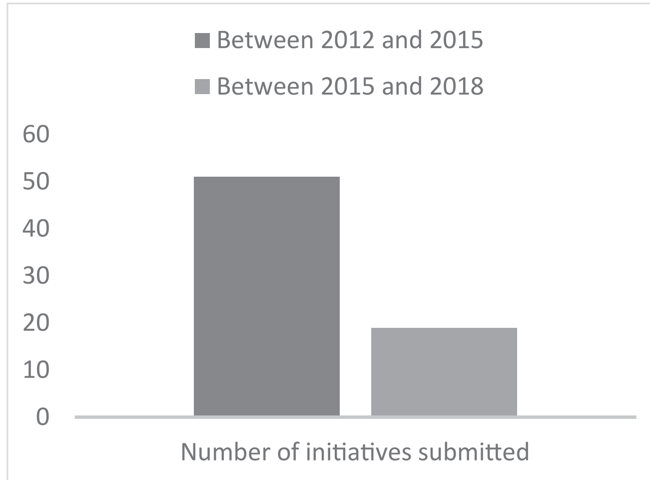

Figure 1. Number of initiatives submitted

By February 2025, a total of 119 initiatives had been submitted to the European Commission, but only seven of these initiatives met the requirements to be presented to the European Commission and the European Parliament (Tárnok 2022, and Tárnok 2021). Even out of this very limited number of initiatives, only two resulted in legislation corresponding to the initiative.[23]

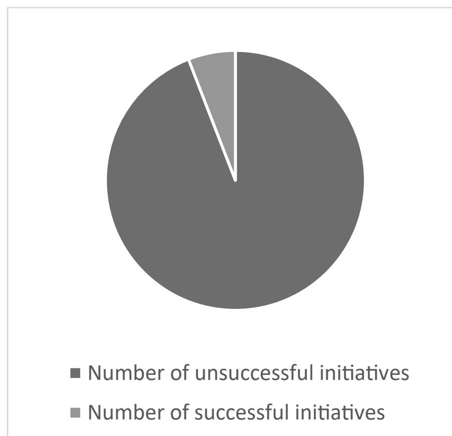

Figure 2. Experience of initiatives submitted until 2025

23 In the case of the Right2Water water initiative, the Commission first rejected a legislative proposal in 2014, and then in 2018 it re-launched the package of proposals, partially responding to the organisers' request, resulting in the adoption of the new Drinking Water Directive by the EU legislator. The Commission reacted positively to the 'End the Cage Age' ECI during the institutional review and decided to launch the legislative procedure in 2023 in its Communication of 30 June 2021.

That is why the European citizens' initiative is nowadays an almost moribund legal institution (Ridard 2018: 2–16): firstly, the conditions for a European Citizens' Initiative are unachievable for an 'ordinary person', as it requires strong infrastructure, language skills and, ultimately, financial support. Secondly, the European Commission appears to have a vested interest in the success of the European Citizens' Initiative, because whenever the Commission drafts legislation at the initiative of EU citizens, we must also conclude that the Commission has not acted 'in its own right' on an issue where the EU has legislative competence and where it is of great importance to EU citizens.[24] A good (or rather sad) example of this attitude of the Commission is the *Minority SafePack* European Citizens' Initiative, where the European Court of Justice had to decide to start collecting signatures, and then, after collecting the necessary number of signatures, the Commission again concluded that the case did not need to be legislated.[25]

Together with the above, it is worth highlighting that the ECI, which has been in place since 2012, has also had an impact on the national rules of Member States. In Finland, for example, since March 2012, its constitution allows citizens' initiatives to be submitted to the Finnish Parliament if at least 50,000 signatures are collected. Citizens' initiatives have been very well received in Finland. In the first six years of the institution, more than 1,000 initiatives have been processed and 37 initiatives have reached the minimum of 50,000 signatures. One initiative led to direct legislative change (on marriage equality), while others had an indirect impact on legislation.[26]

The possible transformation of the European Citizens' Initiative in the light of EU citizenship

It is therefore clear that the effectiveness of the European Citizens' Initiative raises questions (Petrescu 2014: 1000 and Longo 2019: 181–200). That said, the anomalies in its operation are partly due to the difficulty of successfully meeting the administrative hurdles of the initiative (i.e. collecting 1 million signatures

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24 The biggest problem with the European Citizens' Initiative is that, regardless of the success of the initiative (i.e. the 1 million signatures), the European Commission often ignores the initiative in political terms (i.e. no matter how many people have signed the initiative, it says without much justification that it does not consider it necessary to initiate a legislative procedure). It can of course do this from a legislative point of view, but it is questionable how much this attitude 'helps' to increase the importance of the European Citizens' Initiative and thus of EU citizenship. In this context, it would therefore be worth thinking about changing the substantive rules of the European citizens' initiative (for example, by distinguishing between 'expressing an opinion' and 'deciding on a case' – in the latter case, by stipulating that the European Commission must react in some way to the initiative – or by defining the so-called 'prohibited subject areas').

25 Case of T-158/21, 'Minority SafePack v Commission', 9 November 2022, ECLI:EU:T:2022:696.

26 See more: https://www.coe.int/en/web/human-rights-and-biomedicine/-/finland-citizen-s-initiative-to-the-parliament-2012-

from at least seven EU Member States, while meeting the minimum number of signatures per Member State).[27] It is therefore worth examining whether it would be possible to reduce the bureaucratic obstacles behind the initiative, in line with the hypothetical aim of increasing the importance of the legal institution of EU citizenship. Currently, the 1 million signatures required for a European Citizens' Initiative are not only based on the fact that the signatory is an EU citizen, but also on the Member State of residence of the EU citizen supporting the initiative, due to the requirement of support from seven Member States and the minimum number of signatures required for each country. As in the case of the European Citizens' Initiative, residence is therefore more important than EU citizenship. The question to be examined is therefore whether it would be possible to introduce a rule that the signatures of 1 million EU citizens supporting the initiative would be sufficient for it to be successful, irrespective of whether the supporters of an initiative are resident in one or more Member States (while, of course, waiving the minimum number of signatures required for Member States).

To answer this question, two aspects should be examined: *firstly,* the number of signatures required for a successful citizens' initiative in a national referendum in each Member State, and the percentage of the total population that this requires, *secondly*, the percentage of 1 million signatures required for a European Citizens' Initiative in each EU Member State in relation to the population of each Member State. These two aspects can give us an adequate picture to answer the question raised above.

Looking at the constitutions of individual Member States, we see that in the majority of countries, the number of signatures required for citizens to initiate national referendums is around 2% of the total population of the country, but there are examples of significantly higher thresholds, up to 10%.[28] The population of the EU Member States can be rounded up to 450 million people[29], compared to which the 2% threshold would require around 9 million signatures.

27 The administrative obstacles to the ECI may raise the question of why the European Commission expects strict conditions to be met for a successful initiative. The main argument could be that if the ECI could be submitted under lighter conditions, it is feared that the large number of initiatives would paralyse the Commission's work and impose significant costs on the EU.

28 In Hungary, 200,000 signatures of support are needed to initiate a national referendum, which represents approximately 2% of the total population of Hungary. A similar proportion is required in Slovenia (the country of around 2 million requires 40,000 signatures of support). Italy has a considerably less stringent requirement (500,000 signatures in Italy, which has a population of almost 60 million, which is equivalent to around 0.8%). Lithuania, for example, has a much stricter condition (Lithuania, with around 2.6 million people, requires 300,000 signatures, a threshold of around 11.5%). For completeness, Croatia has a 10% signature threshold for referendums to amend the constitution, and Latvia also has a 10% threshold for referendums to dissolve parliament.

29 According to the latest Eurostat figures (2022), the total population of EU Member States is 446.8 million. See: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Population_and_population_change_statistics

The second question is to look at how the current figure of 1 million signatures required for a European Citizens' Initiative compares with the population of each Member State. It is worth reiterating here that the number of signatures required for the European Citizens' Initiative is currently only indirectly related to the population of the Member States: the minimum number of signatures required in each Member State can be determined by multiplying the number of MEPs in that Member State by the total number of MEPs in the European Parliament. And while the composition of the European Parliament takes into account the population of each Member State, if we take the number of representatives per inhabitant of Germany, for example, which is entitled to elect the most representatives, Cyprus, Malta and Luxembourg would have one representative each, rounded up to the nearest whole number (compared to the current six to six MEPs), and vice versa: if we start with the six seats of the smallest population, Malta, Germany would 'deserve' approximately 150 seats in the European Parliament. (Szabó 2021: 201). However, if we were to do away with the requirements for each Member State and allow the necessary number of signatures (currently 1 million) to be collected regardless of geography, we would have an even more unfair system than at present. In fact, 1 million signatures represents just 1.2% of the total in Germany, with around 80 million inhabitants, and 83% in Estonia, with 1.2 million (not to mention the smallest Member States, Cyprus, Luxembourg and Malta).

On this basis, it can be argued that removing the requirement for signatures covering seven Member States from the criteria would completely upset the current relative balance between the citizens of the Member States. Therefore, one can hardly come to any other conclusion than that 'from a procedural point of view' the legal regulation of the European Citizens' Initiative is currently as appropriate as possible considering the current possibilities.

Conclusions

The institutions of direct democracy are of great importance for the functioning of a democratic country. The effectiveness of the EU could also be undoubtedly enhanced if the institutions of direct democracy functioned well in the EU. The only current institution of direct democracy, the European Citizens' Initiative, has mixed conclusions. On the one hand, the content of the legislation on the European Citizens' Initiative can be considered to be basically adequate (in particular the geographical and quantitative conditions for the initiative). On the other hand, the European Citizens' Initiative is in fact a kind of 'toothless lion', mainly because the European Commission, which has a monopoly on initiating EU legislation, can in fact be seen more as a counter-party, since every successful European Citizens' Initiative also shows that the Commission has not initiated legislation on an important issue. And the success rate of the European Citizens' Initiative (if this term makes sense at all, given that there have been only two cases of EU legislation on the basis of

more than 100 initiatives) suggests overall that the European Citizens' Initiative has failed rather than succeeded.

The situation is somewhat different with referendums that do not currently exist at EU or regional level. Given that in EU law the European Parliament is not in essence the sole legislator (but acts as co-legislator with the Council in the ordinary legislative procedures), and that the essence of a referendum is inherently that the people 'take back' the power to decide on an issue from their elected representatives, the institution of a European referendum cannot be interpreted in dogmatic terms. That said, of course, there would hardly be any obstacle to Member States deciding to create the institution of a European referendum, mainly to break the Commission's monopoly on legislative initiative and the European Parliament's dominant role in lawmaking. Theoretically, there is also no longer any obstacle to the fact that in those states where the institution of national referendums exists, referendums on a matter of EU legislation that violates the principle of subsidiarity (i.e. the so-called yellow card procedure) can be held at roughly the same time. Such a referendum, which would be held at approximately the same time in almost all Member States, could in time become a 'European referendum', with all the theoretical and practical difficulties that entails.

The situation is different in the case of referendums at the level of the Euroregions, which could also be considered in theory, as the definition of the framework of the legal institution itself is fraught with practical problems. While a 'European referendum' could be modelled on the national referendums already existing in each Member State, a regional referendum would have to take place at the level between the national and local referendums, but in a way that would involve several Member States. However, creating the institution of a referendum at regional level would represent a 'real market demand', a classic example of which is the case of environmentally damaging investments in a river area, where a referendum would be a much stronger instrument than the public hearings that may be held as part of the environmental impact assessment procedure. So, while the creation of such an institution could be justified, it could also be dangerous from the point of view of national governments. It is because, by their very nature, referendums can be used not only to get the legislator to do something, but also to prevent the adoption of certain acts.

For all these reasons, it can be said that a strengthening of the institution of direct democracy in the context of EU citizenship would be absolutely justified, but in the current framework, which can be traced back to EU primary law in particular, it is unlikely to be achieved in the near future.

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Gabor Kurunci

Da li je Evropska unija u krizi? Odnos između građanstva EU i direktne demokratije i njen uticaj na demokratski legitimitet

Apstrakt

Kriza izazvana pandemijom kovida-19 i posledice rata između Rusije i Ukrajine utiču i na funkcionisanje Evropske unije. Povremeno se javljaju glasovi koji dovode u pitanje postojanje demokratskog legitimiteta u Evropskoj uniji. Stoga je važno razmotriti na koji način se pojam građanstva EU odnosi prema pojmu biračkog prava, a naročito prema direktnoj demokratiji. Institucije direktne demokratije, a posebno referendum, predstavljaju najopštiji i najsnažniji oblik neposrednog vršenja vlasti, jer omogućavaju da narod sam neposredno odlučuje o nekom pitanju. Posmatrajući sisteme država članica EU, vredno je ispitati pitanje referenduma na nacionalnom i lokalnom nivou, posebno značaj pojma građanstva EU u određivanju birača koji učestvuju u referendumu. U tom kontekstu, kao preliminarno pitanje, može se postaviti da li bi bilo moguće uvesti referendum na nivou EU, na kome bi građani EU odlučivali o pitanju iz nadležnosti Unije, ili, slično tome, zamisliti prekogranični regionalni referendum, na kome bi građani EU koji žive u više država odlučivali o regionalnom pitanju koje se tiče više država. Neophodno je, međutim, razmotriti i jednu instituciju koja već postoji: prošlost, sadašnjost i budućnost Evropske građanske inicijative, sa stanovišta mogućnosti da ona u budućnosti preraste u neku vrstu evropskog referenduma.

Ključne reči: građanstvo Evropske unije, biračko pravo, demokratski legitimitet, direktna demokratija, referendum, Evropska građanska inicijativa

III

REVIEWS

PRIKAZI

PERFORMING POWER, MARCUS MORGAN, POLITY, 2025

Milica Resanović, Research Fellow, Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade

Marcus Morgan's book *Performing Power* (2025) represents an important contribution to understanding the symbolic and affective dimensions of political life. While performance has long served as a productive metaphor in social and political theory, Morgan offers the most systematic and ambitious attempt to develop a theory of social performance, drawing on Jeffrey Alexander's cultural sociology. At the same time, he shows how material structures and power relations shape the emergence, enactment, reception and interpretation of performance. The book offers a nuanced theory of social performance, foregrounding the enabling and constraining force of cultural structures while integrating the material conditions that shape its production and consumption. The result is a rich and analytically rigorous framework for understanding how power is structured, exercised and contested in contemporary societies.

The book is divided into three parts: conceptual clarification, analysis of performative structures, and development of a new theoretical model. The first part offers a critical engagement with theories of power and performance, the two foundational concepts of the study, and explores their points of intersection, connections that are neither immediately obvious nor intuitively grasped. The opening chapter (Chapter 1) provides a systematic overview of major conceptualizations of power in sociological and, more broadly, social theory. Following a critical review of complementary and competing approaches, Morgan turns to Isaac Reed's typology of power to argue that the performative–pragmatic dimension has received comparatively less attention than the realist–relational and discursive dimensions. Thus, from the outset, the importance of performance in the production, transmission, and legitimation of power is clearly signaled. Subsequent sections further examine the symbolic and expressive force of performance in political contexts. Before doing so in depth, however, Chapter 2 turns to the concept of performance itself, as well as the related notion of performativity. Morgan delineates the distinction between artistic and social performance, while also tracing the connections between what is conventionally recognized as performance and what may be understood as such. Although the differences are significant, the book maintains that the two phenomena are not fully separable but relationally constituted.

Social performance, which is the primary focus here, "borrows" implicit rhetorical structures and aesthetic properties from the theatrical realm, shaping its efficacy, its capacity to generate meaning, and ultimately the impressions audience form. Acknowledging that the term performance often carries connotations of artificiality and deception, the book argues for a broader understanding of performance as a mode of meaning-making oriented toward achieving particular ends.

For Morgan, the concept of performance makes it possible to avoid privileging either structure or agency, and instead taking social reality in a synthetic manner. The second part of the book (Chapters 3 and 4) is devoted precisely to examining the cultural structures in which performance is grounded and analyzing their character. Drawing on the conceptual apparatus developed through Goffman's dramaturgical sociology and cultural sociology, Morgan offers a well-structured and systematic reconstruction of the cultural grammar of performance, placing particular emphasis on binary codes, narratives, genres, and characters and their modalities, as well as on the process of casting characters. Through the lens of civil sphere theory (CST), the book highlights the role of binary oppositions, most notably the Durkheimian sacred/profane distinction, in power struggles within the civil sphere. Yet, performance succeeds not simply through the coding of actors, motives, and institutions as democratic or anti-democratic, but through persuasive and often affectively charged narratives that bind these binaries into meaningful stories. The author then turns to rhetoric as a structured means of producing persuasive speech and performance, with particular attention to its capacity to mobilize audiences. Beyond argumentation, rhetorical efficacy depends on the nonverbal dimensions of performance, which shape persuasion and foster audience identification, facilitating specific ways of feeling, thinking and acting. The final performative structure Morgan turns to is ritual. Drawing on Émile Durkheim and his intellectual heirs, while incorporating key innovations introduced by Victor Turner, he conceptualizes ritual not simply as a stabilizing mechanism of social integration, but as a dynamic force capable of generating social transformation.

The third part develops Morgan's new theoretical model of performative success (Chapters 5, 6, and 7). Drawing heavily on Jeffrey Alexander's cultural sociology, he begins with the model of social performance articulated within cultural pragmatics. For Alexander, social performance entails the mobilization of a background system of collective representations, actors capable of bringing these codes and scripts alive, specific spatial and temporal settings, particular audiences who interpret the meanings of the performance, and relations of power. Success is emergent rather than guaranteed: it depends on the effective fusion of the performance elements in ways that secure audience identification, emotional engagement and orientation toward action. In the following chapters, Morgan builds a systemic framework for modeling social performance by drawing on, but also, significantly revising Alexander's theoretical system. He retains the Strong program's commitment to treating culture as relatively autonomous and to viewing performative acts as mobilizations of existing cultural structures. However, he offers a different conceptualization of power. By distinguishing among its various dimensions, he maps the power relations that shape the context in which performance emerges and unfolds, as well as the forms of power generated through performance itself. In doing so, he moves beyond treating power as merely one element among others and develops a more complex

account of performative success. Rather than locating success in the fusion of elements, as in Alexander's approach, Morgan argues that it hinges on resonance: the capacity of skillful actors to mobilize shared cultural structures, recombine them in innovative ways, and frame perceived problems so that the audience experiences the performance as offering solutions or a resolution of emotional tensions. This shift from fusion to resonance constitutes one of the book's most original theoretical interventions.

The book's value lies in its analytical framework, which uses a Marxist-sounding vocabulary to illuminate the complexity of symbolic action and public struggles over power. Symbolic production (or performance itself) presupposes means of production that are both symbolic (codes, narratives, genres, rituals) and material (stages, studios, platforms), as well as the labor involved in their deployment. Opposed to this stands symbolic consumption, which likewise depends on symbolic competences (familiarity with performative conventions), material access (media, tickets, transport), and interpretive labor. At the same time, Morgan reconceptualizes power as shaping the context within which performances unfold, while performances may in turn reinforce or subvert existing power relations. For Morgan, context refers not only to forms of domination embedded in language and culture, but also to differential access to the material means that render performances persuasive and shape audiences' interpretive capacities. In doing so, he avoids the common critique that culturalist approaches neglect material resources and remain overly idealist.

One question that remains open concerns the extent to which actors are strategically oriented. The book distances itself from conceptions of culture as a "tool kit," rejecting the view that actors consciously and instrumentally select performative structures. Instead, these structures are presented as deeply internalized, shaping dispositions and perceptions, particularly when they draw on seemingly universal cultural forms such as binary oppositions. At the same time, it is evident that those involved in the production of performance do make choices, selecting narratives and symbolic resources in ways that increase the likelihood of conveying a desired message and orienting audiences toward particular ways of thinking or acting. A tension thus emerges between viewing social performance actors as either strategically oriented or guided by largely tacit, semi-reflexive engagements with deeply embedded cultural structures.

A second question that arises, particularly in relation to the analysis of social movements, including the one examined in this special issue, is whether this approach can adequately account for protest and activism in authoritarian contexts. A difficulty occurs when state authorities monopolize the material means of symbolic production and restrict critics' ability to reach an audience. Control over the media, for instance, often prevents critics from staging performances through which they might articulate criticism of the regime or advance alternative visions of social life and responses to pressing problems, thereby limiting both the reach of their message and the scale of their mobilization. In this light, the absence of an explicit institutional dimension within the theoretical model, particularly an analysis of the dynamics of regulatory and communicative institutions, so central to civil sphere theory, on which Morgan explicitly draws, may narrow the explanatory scope of his approach, as this institutional component remains underdeveloped in his account. Nevertheless, the theoretical model undoubtedly helps explain how, even under such conditions, certain actors succeed in

winning hearts and minds, triggering mass mobilization and articulating resistance despite significant structural and institutional constraints.

The issues raised above in no way diminish the book's value, which lies above all in its development of an innovative approach grounded in a skillful synthesis of diverse theoretical traditions. Although theoretically ambitious, the book is written with remarkable clarity and accessibility. It offers a conceptual apparatus capable of inspiring new research across a wide range of political contexts, whether contemporary or historical. The work represents a careful and rigorous effort to illuminate the symbolic and affective dimensions of political mobilization, dimensions that are often treated superficially, yet may be more crucial than ever for understanding the social realities in which we live and for interpreting events that can otherwise be hard to grasp. Given its theoretical foundations and the vocabulary it adopts, it comes as no surprise then that the book will be of primary interest to sociologists, while its conceptual innovation extends its relevance well beyond that discipline.

IV

FROM THE ACTIVITIES OF THE INSTITUTE

IZ RADA INSTITUTA

PREGLED TRIBINA I KONFERENCIJA U INSTITUTU ZA FILOZOFIJU I DRUŠTVENU TEORIJU ZA 2025. GODINU

Maja Pupovac i Tijana Uzelac

PREDAVANJA, SEMINARI, PANEL DISKUSIJE I PROMOCIJE KNJIGA

JANUAR:

17.01. Projekcija dokumentarnog filma *The Making of Corona Plaza, Queens* i razgovor sa autorom Miodragom Mitrašinovićem (PerspectLab)

30.01. Promocija zbornika *Diskursi rodne pravde: Analiza pravnih okvira i sudske prakse u Bosni i Hercegovini, Hrvatskoj i Srbiji* (GenLab)

- Učesnice: Darija Mrljak, Dragana Pejović, Martina Primorac, Barbara Herceg-Pakšič; moderatorka: Krisztina Racz

SEPTEMBAR:

15.09. Okrugli sto *Contesting Beauty* (Khōrein)

- Učesnici: Paul Guyer, Alexander Nehamas, Kurt Brandle, Carolyn Korsmeyer, Gordon Graham, David Leatherbarrow

24.09. Predavanje Danijela Hejda: “Svet kao sakrament: Evharistijska kosmologija Svetog Maksima Ispovednika” (Grupa za religijske studije)

OKTOBAR:

03.10. Otvoreni razgovor: “Šta nam 5. oktobar znači danas?” (Active lab)

- U razgovoru učestvovali studenti i studentkinje univerziteta u Srbiji (Beograd, Novi Sad, Niš), učesnici studentskog protesnog pokreta; moderatorka: Tara Tepavac

15.10. Predavanje Ane Ilievske: “Etika trećeg puta za doba veštačke inteligencije? Lekcije iz jugoslovenskog Praksisa i Mediterana” (CriticLab)

17.10. Predstavljanje knjige urednika Anastasa Vangelija i Dragana Pavlićevića, *Jugoslavija i Kina: istorije, nasleđa, prežici* (Yugolab)

- Učesnici: Dragan Pavlićević, Anastas Vangeli, Jovan Čavoški, Jelena Gledić i Dejan Bursać; moderator: Aleksandar Pavlović

27–28.10. Radionica “Od znanja do uticaja: Demokratske inovacije između istraživanja, prakse i politike” (ActiveLab)

- 27.10.
  - Uvodno predavanje: Art O'Liri, "Nova vizija demokratije – osluškivanje autentičnog glasa građana u svetu punom buke"
  - Panel 1: Inovativne procedure u demokratskom odlučivanju
    - Učesnici: Melisa Ross, Jovana Timotijević, Nemanja Anđelković, Dorotea Vasić; moderatorka: Gazela Pudar Draško
- 28.10.
  - Panel 2: Demokratske inovacije zasnovane na dokazima
    - Učesnice: Paulina Pospieszna, Ceri Davies-Tyrie, Nabila Abbas, Camille Dobler; moderatorka: Irena Fiket
  - Panel 3: Primena znanja u praksi
    - Učesnici: Elisenda Ballesté Buxó, Vladimir Erceg, Leda Sutlović; moderatorka: Tara Tepavac

NOVEMBAR:

5.11. Razgovor o knjizi Sanje Iguman Glušac *O čemu govorimo kad govorimo o nasleđu u krizi* (PerspectLab)

- Učesnici: Ljiljana Gavrilović, Predrag Krstić, Miloš Ničić, Vesna Marjanović; moderator: Miloš Ćipranić

18.11. Forum EMERGE 2025: Razgovori o veštačkoj inteligenciji (DigiLab)

- Učesnici: Ana Toskić Cvetinović, Ivana Uspenski, Tanja Maksić, Mihajlo Popesku, Vanja Subotić; moderatorka: Tijana Uzelac

19.11. Otvorena diskusija: "Šta smo naučili o demokratiji sa studentima? Lekcije i putevi napred" (ActiveLab)

- Učesnici: Florian Bieber, Vujo Ilić, Maja Stojanović, Aleksandra Kuzmanović; moderatorka: Gazela Pudar Draško

19–20.11. Workshop: "Protests and New Democratic Imaginaries in Serbia" (ActiveLab)

- 19.11.
  - Panel 1: Infrastructures of Care and Collective Emotions
    - Bojana Radovanović, Sara Nikolić and Marija Radovanović, University of Belgrade: "Infrastructures of Care: Mutual Aid and the Civic Fabric of the 2024–2025 Serbian Student Uprising"
    - Tatjana Aleksić, University of Michigan: "Social Evolution, not a Revolution: Empathy, Inclusion, and Responsibility as Resistance"
    - Danijela Jerotijević, Comenius University: "Fueling Resistance: Collective and Moral Emotions in the Serbian Student Protest"
    - Milica Manojlović, Marija Branković, Vojin Simunović, Matija Gvozden, Ljiljana B. Lazarevic and Iris Žeželj, University of Belgrade, "Emergence of an Identity through Collective Action – the Case of Protesting Students in Serbia 2024/25"
  - Panel 2: Sovereignty, Representation, and Legitimacy
    - Stefan Surlić and Andrijana Lazarević, University of Belgrade: "We the State: Student Protest and the Redefinition of Sovereignty in the Serbian Hybrid Regime"
    - Ivan Rajković and Srđan Đurović, University of Vienna, University of Belgrade: "The Non-Political Novum: Student Protests in Serbia at the Limits of Representation"
    - Jelena Lončar, University of Belgrade: "Fear Has Changed Sides:

    Reclaiming Legitimacy through Student Activism in Serbia"
    - Cameron A. Howie and Milica Mijailović, University of Amsterdam: "Perceptions of Plenary Structures among Serbian Student Protesters: Organising Democracy from Below"
  - Panel 3: Ideological Matrices and Historical Frames
    - Dijana Vukomanović, Institute of Social Sciences: "Ideological Matrices of the Student Movement 2024–2025 in Serbia"
    - Ivica Mladenović, University of Belgrade, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne: "'Ćacilend' as a Phenomenon of Ideological Crisis: Naming Class Function in the 2024–2025 Student Protests"
    - Olga Manojlović Pintar and Dimitrije Matić, Institute for Recent History of Serbia: "History as a Battleground: The (Ab) use of Historical Narratives in the 2024–2025 Student Protests in Serbia"
    - Daniela Simon and Danica Trifunjagić, University of Tübingen, "Threatened Orders, Contested Frames: A Comparative Media Analysis of Student Protests in Serbia 1996–1997 and 2024–2025"
    - Smiljka Tomanović, Dragan Stanojević, Milica Vlajić, University of Belgrade: "New Political Generation's View on Current and Past Protests: Between the Political Protest and the Social Movement"
- 20.11.
  - Panel 1: Europe, and External Frames
    - Ioan Suhov and Ana Jovanovic-Harrington, Dublin City University: "Stabilitocracy in the Headlines: How European Media Frame Serbia's Protest Movement"
    - Natasza Styczyńska and Haris Dajč, Jagiellonian University | University of Belgrade: "Diverse European Perspectives in the 2024–2025 Serbian Student Protests: A Study of Varied Attitudes Toward EU Integration"
    - Boris Kaličanin and Aleksandar Ivković, University of Belgrade, Centre for Contemporary Politics: "The EU Response Toward Serbia's Democratic Decline: Have Student Protests Changed Anything?"
  - Panel 2: Language, Play, and Cultural Codes of Protest
    - Valentina Bošković Marković and Marija Mandić, Singidunum University | University of Belgrade: "Rebellion in Words: Neologisms, Language Play, and Sociolinguistic Attitudes in the 2024–2025 Serbian Students' Protests"
    - Sonja Stojanović Gajić and Dušan Stanković, University of Rijeka | Malmö University: "Gaming Security during Serbian Student Protests"
    - Dragan Popović, Policy Center: "Whose Flags Are Flying – The Value Orientation of the Student Protest in Serbia 2024/25"
    - Aida Kapetanović, University of Rijeka, University of Belgrade: "From Environmental Struggles to Student-Led Protests: Continuities and Discontinuities in Movement Framing in Serbia"

21.11. Seminar sa Patrikom Šumaherom: "U doba monopolskog kapitalizma" (Khorein)

25.11. Istraživačka platforma "Zeleni ekstraktivizam na (polu)periferiji: Projekat Jadar" (PerspectLab, CriticLab, SolidCareLab)
- Učesnici: Sofija Stefanović, Ana Vilenica, Vladimir Mentus, Nina Đukanović, Mina Petrović, Jelena Pešić; moderatorke: Sara Nikolić, Dušanka Milosavljević, Ana Vilenica

27.11. Predavanje Vukašina Milićevića: "Od đakonise do matrijarha – Jedna (ne)moguća (r)evolucija ili pravoslavni feminizam" (Grupa za religijske studije)

DECEMBAR:

9.12. Okrugli sto: "Karijera i mama – ravnoteža između privatnog i poslovnog života" (GenLab)
- Učesnice: Zilka Spahić Šiljak, Ljiljana Pantović, Marija Radovanović

12.12. Razgovor o knjizi Erika Gordija, Alene Ledeneve i Predraga Cvetičanina, *Zarobljena društva u Jugoistočnoj Evropi: Mreže poverenja i kontrole* (Active Lab/Critic Lab)
- Učesnici: Eric Gordy, Predrag Cvetičanin, Miloš Janković; moderatorka: Irena Fiket

12.12. Predavanje Anje Šifrin: "Zarobljeni mediji, novinarstvo javnog interesa i demokratska otpornost"

13.12. Seminar sa Džozefom Stiglicom
- Učesnici: Gordana Matković, Aleksandra Kanjuo Mrčela, Sonja Avlijaš, Sara Dragišić, Ivan Lakićević, Srđan Đurović; moderatorka: Bojana Radovanović

13.12. Dodela nagrade "Miladin Životić" Džozefu Stiglicu i javno predavanje "Sloboda, akademska zajednica i društveni i ekonomski napredak"

17.12. Predavanje Alona Segeva: "Masovna ubistva, genocid i etika rata: istorijske, pravne i savremene perspektive" (ShoahLab)

18.12. Panel diskusija: "Gaza: Misliti i delati u vreme genocida" (Critic Lab/Yugo Lab)
- Učesnici: Ivan Ejub Kostić, Milan Urošević, Filip Balunović, Vera Mevorah, Marjan Ivković, Predrag Krstić, Adriana Zaharijević, Andrea Perunović, Aleksandra Knežević

KONFERENCIJE, SIMPOZIJUMI I LETNJE ŠKOLE:

JANUAR:

29.01. Manifestacija "Holokaust: nasleđe fašizma 7 – Kultura i/ili industrija sećanja" Međunarodni dan sećanja na žrtve holokausta u muzeju "21. oktobar" – Kragujevac (ShoahLab/IFDT)
- Blok 1: Holokaust i mladi
  - Brane Popović: Oni koji su preživeli Holokaust (Lično svedočenje o užasima Holokausta)
  - Nada Banjanin Đurčić: "Izazovi obrade sećanja u nastavi i kultura i industrija"
- Blok 2: (Re)konstrukcija sećanja
  - Ružica Marjanović: "Kako danas o Ani Frank?"
  - Dragan Bulatović: "Nostalgija kao resurs u muzejskom sećanju"
  - Predrag Todorov: "Perspektive razvoja mračnog turizma u Srbiji kao održivog turističkog proizvoda"
  - Nevena Daković: "Kriza vizuelnog sećanja Holokausta"
- Blok 3: Aproije i memorijalizacije
  - Razgovor učesnika programa i posetilaca povodom knjige "Industrija Holokausta (Američka) debata o instrumentalizaciji Šoe"; moderator: Predrag Krstić

- Uvodničarke u razgovor: Vera Mevorah, Marija Velinov, Marija Ratković

APRIL:

24–25.04. Conference: Deleuze and Guattari Studies Balkans 2025 (CriticLab)

- 24.04.
  - Keynote Lecture I: Deleuze and Guattari in Greece, a Balkanian Cartography (Chloe Kolyri and Rigas Ioannis, Athens, Greece)
  - Session I (Chair: Andrea Perunović)
    - Gyorgy Czetany, Dharma Gate Buddhist College and Pazmany Peter Catholic University, Budapest: "The Meaning of Synthesis and Immanence in Difference and Repetition and Anti-Oedipus"
    - Darin Tenev, Sofia University: "The Three Concepts of Phantasm in Deleuze's Philosophy"
    - Enyo Stoyanov, Sofia University: "Transcendental Illusion and Mimesis in Deleuze Philosophical Project"
  - Keynote Lecture II: The Concept of Control in the Age of Intelligent Machines (Jovan Čekić, The Faculty of Media and Communications, Belgrade)
  - Session II (Chair: Milan Urošević)
    - Irena Javorski Dedić, The Faculty of Media and Communications: "Thinking change? The Problem of Detention if the Materialist Philosophy of Karen Barad and Brian Massumi"
    - Marina Simić, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade: "Anthropology as a minor science: Deleuze, Guattari and the anthropology of Viverios de Castros"
- 25.04.
  - Keynote Lecture III: Deleuze and Ordinary Psychosis (Alex Teak-Gwang Lee, Kyung Hee University, South Korea)
  - Session III (Chair: George Hristov)
    - Imogen Lambert, University of Nottingham: "Beyond Revolution: Making Sense of Counter-revolutionary Resonance with Deleuze I"
    - Alpar Losoncz, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts and Mark Losoncz, University of Belgrade, Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory: "Urstaat and Neoliberalism: Eternal Return of the State?"
    - Todor Hristov, Sofia University: "Nervous Infinitives: Neoliberalism Therapy and the Politics of Desire"
  - Session IV (Chair: Mark Losoncz)
    - Jernej Kaluža, University of Ljubljana: "Alien Epistemology: Cultural Studies and Pop Music"
  - Session V (Chair: Natascha Schmelz)
    - Andrija Filipović, The Faculty of Media and Communications: "Intensive contortionists: Rethinking the Plastics with a Thousand Plateaus"
    - George Hristov, Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory: "To Believe or Not to Believe – Deleuze, Guattari, Belief and the Protest Movement in Serbia"
    - Andrea Perunović, Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory: "Becoming-Revolutionary of the Balkans"

MAJ:

08.05. Konferencija "Bol, patnja i diskriminacija: pojedinac, zajednica, institucije" (SolidCareLab)

- Panel 1: Između prava i patnje – medicinski, društveni i istorijski tragovi diskriminacije
  - Anđelija Tasić, Pravni fakultet u Nišu: "Bol i diskriminacija – pravni mehanizmi (ne)zaštite marginalizovanih grupa"
  - Sunčana Roksandić, Pravni fakultet Sveučilišta u Zagrebu: "Bol, pravo na lečenje i psihijatrijski izazovi – između medicinskog prava i viktimološke pravde"
  - Marijana Jurić, Pravni fakultet Sveučilišta u Zagrebu: "Bol, pravo na lečenje i psihijatrijski izazovi – između medicinskog prava i viktimološke pravde"
  - Nada Sekulić, Filozofski fakultet, Univerzitet u Beogradu: "Društveno nevidljivi bol"
  - Monika Milosavljević i Nenad Andrić, Filozofski fakultet, Univerzitet u Beogradu: "Bol kroz istoriju – arheološki tragovi patnje i marginalizacije"
  - Moderator: Predrag Krstić, Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju, Univerzitet u Beogradu
- Panel 2: Tri lica bola
  - Vukašin Milićević, Fondacija Ljuba Davidović: "Bol i smisao – religijske interpretacije patnje"
  - Aleksandra Bulatović, Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju, Univerzitet u Beogradu: „Bol i ekološka (ne)pravda – klimatske promene, siromaštvo i institucionalna nebriga"
  - Zona Zarić, Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju, Univerzitet u Beogradu: „Bol, patnja i žensko telo: istorijski, filozofski i psihoanalitički pristup"
  - Moderatorka: Milica Sekulović, Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju, Univerzitet u Beogradu

SEPTEMBAR:

22–26.09. Šesta letnja škola društvene angažovanosti i demokratije (ANDEM) (Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju Univerziteta u Beogradu)

- 22.09.
  - Srđan Prodanović, "Opšte dobro, javno dobro, zajedničko dobro"
  - Irena Fiket (IFDT), "Deliberativna demokratija u teoriji i praksi"
- 23.09.
  - Dejan Bursać (IFDT), "Od manjkave demokratije, preko hibridnog režima, do autokratije – Otkud mi ovde i kako da se izvučemo?"
  - Vukan Marković (IFDT), "Krize demokratija i Nasilje"
- 24.09.
  - Feđa Pavlović (UCG), "Tri koncepta slobode"
  - Marjan Ivković (IFDT), "Angažman i radikalna društvena promena"
  - Aleksandra Knežević (IFDT), "Ima li mesta za aktivizam u naučnom istraživanju?"
- 25.09.
  - Bojana Šolaja (UCG), radionica "Pozorište kao politički agens – od teorije do društvene akcije"
  - Jovana Zafirović (IDN), "Bauk nesigurnosti? Trendovi u nesigurnosti posla"
  - Milica Resanović (IFDT), "Rod – na raskršću između ideologije i ravnopravnosti"
- 26.09.
  - Nemanja Anđelković i Andrej Ševo (IFDT), "Od deliberativnih skupština/plenuma do protesta:

inkluzivnost kroz deliberativne i agonističke prakse u grassroots aktivizmu”
    - Luka Glušac (IFDT), “Građanski protesti i državna represija”
    - Diskusija o protestima u Srbiji (moderatori: Andrej Ševo, Nemanja Anđelković); zatvaranje Letnje škole

29.09–02.10. Konferencija: Razgovori o Kini, Evropi i budućnosti socijalizma (CriticLab, YugoLab)
- 29.09.
  Diskusija: Zajednički interesi kineskog društva. Marksizam i budućnost socijalizma
  Uvodno predavanje: Tong Šidžun, “Zašto su Kinezi izabrali marksizam?”
- 30.09.

Predavanje 2: Žang Džunhua, “Razvoj Kine: koji su ključni faktori? Marksistička analiza”
- 01.10.
  Predavanje 3: Jan Fangđe, “Na koji je način Kina ostvarila teorijske inovacije u marksizmu?”
  Predavanje 4: Aleksandar Stojanović, “Socijalizam, kapitalizam i finansije: kineski sistem iz marksističke perspektive”
- 02.10.
  Predavanje 5: Tong Šidžun, “Šta socijalizam znači danas?”

OKTOBAR:

17–19.10. Konferencija “Od fašizma do antifašizma – i nazad? Ideologije, pokreti, nasleđa” (Yugolab)
- 17.10.
  - Panel 1: Ženska strana antifašizma
    - Tijana Matijević (IFDT): “Rizična čitanja: NOB kao antifašistička i ljubavna poezija”
    - Ivana Pantelić (Institut za savremenu istoriju, Beograd): “Ženska strana rata. Drugi svetski rat u Srbiji viđen kroz ego-dokumenta partizanki i ravnogorki”
    - Stanislava Barać (Institut za književnost i umetnost, Beograd): “Biografski roman-intervju La Pasionarija (1980): internacionalistički antifašizam, Jugoslavija i ženski aktivizam”
    - Zorana Simić (Institut za književnost i umetnost, Beograd): “Feminizam i/kao antifašizam: Tri gvineje Virdžinije Vulf i časopis Žena danas u komparativnoj vizuri”
    - Moderator: Petar Žarković
  - Panel 2: Fašizam i antifašizam: istorijski ogledi i tumačenja
    - Veljko Stanić, “Rat i revolucija Milovana Đilasa: od učesnika do pisca”
    - Ivan Lakićević (IFDT): “Privrede fašističkih država u međuratnoj Evropi”
    - Milivoj Bešlin (IFDT): “Dva antifašistička pokreta: istorija ili mit postsocijalističke Srbije”
    - Petar Žarković (IFDT): “U ime sela i slobode: seljački socijalizam kao antifašistički idiom Dragoljuba Jovanovića”
    - Moderatorka: Tijana Matijević
  - Panel 3: Izazovi savremenosti
    - Nevena Mijatović (IFDT): “Dijaloška analiza desničarskog populizma zarobljene države: slučaj pada nadstrešnice u Srbiji”
    - Vjeran Pavlaković (Univerzitet u Rijeci, Hrvatska): “Politika sjećanja u suvremenoj Hrvatskoj: od socijalističkih spomenika do muralizacija rata”
    - Adnan Prekić (Filozofski fakultet, Crna Gora): “Dekonstrukcija antifašističkog nasleđa

Crne Gore: revizionistički narativi o Drugom svetskom ratu"
    - Moderator: Milivoj Bešlin
- 18.10.
  - Panel 1: Antifašizam danas – izazovi, povodi, efekti
    - Zoran Pusić: "Vrijednosni antifašizam nasuprot sumraku demokracije"
    - Zlatoje Martinov: "Svetu je potreban antifašizam: nacionalizam, populizam, suverenizam - tri izraza jedne suštine: neofašizam"
    - Jovan Komšić: "U ponovnom zagrljaju sa đavolom – integralizam, ekskluzivizam, belicizam"
    - Vehid Šehić: "Da li živimo fašizam?"
    - Nenad Petrović: "Antievropa i varvarska 'regenerišuća' energija u 20. i 21. Veku"
    - Nikola Krstić: "Propast liberalno-demokratske bajke kakvu poznajemo: svet između Gaze i Ukrajine"
    - Moderator: Rade Veljanovski
  - Panel 2: Aktuelnost antifašizma u Srbiji i regionu Balkana
    - Rade Veljanovski: "Indikatori prepoznavanja fašizma nekada i danas"
    - Olga Manojlović Pintar: "Antifašizam – stvarnost ili zaborav"
    - Dragan Đukanović: "Antifašizam danas: između nestanka SFRJ i negiranja antifašističkih tradicija"
    - Duško Radosavljević: "Vojvodina i (anti)fašizam u 21. veku.
    - Marijana Stojčić, Srbija je (opet) svet – istorijski revizionizam i preoznačavanje antifašizma u Srbiji"
    - Aleksandar Sekulović: "Deset godina srpske sramote – rehabilitacija četništva kao šamar antifašističkoj tradiciji"
    - Moderator: Zlatoje Martinov
  - Panel 3: Savez antifašista Srbije i ostali oblici antifašističkog delovanja – problemi, otpori, aktivizam, uključivanje mladih
    - Aleksandar Saša Popov: "Organizacija civilnog društva i antifašizam"
    - Aleksandar Kraus: "Otpori fašizaciji Srbije – SAFS 2008-2025"
    - Ljubiša Vuković: "Antifašizam u borbi protiv revizionizma – primeri iz srednjeg Polimlja"
    - Nađa Bobičić: "Antifašistički pokret žena Jugoslavije - 80 godina kasnije"
    - Marija Srdić: "Antifašizam i studentski protesti 2024/25."
    - Moderatorka: Marijana Stojčić
- 19.10.
  - Javni panel: Na godišnjicu oslobođenja - od fašizma do antifašizma i nazad?
    - Adriana Zaharijević, Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju Univerziteta u Beogradu
    - Olga Manojlović Pintar, Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, Beograd
    - Davud Dalimeđac, Fakultet političkih nauka Univerziteta u Beogradu
    - Vukašin Milićević, Fondacija "Ljuba Davidović"
    - Moderator: Milivoj Bešlin

20–22.10. Conference: "Lives Worth Living: The Untold Stories" (ShoahLab)
- 20.10.
  - Keynote lecture: Milovan Pisarri, Research Fellow, Claims Confer-

    ence University Partnership in Holocaust Studies Lecturer, "The Liberation of Belgrade"
  - Panel I: Gendered Violence
    - Lily Halpert Zamir, David Yellin College, Israel, WHISC: "Enemy or Ally? The Female Body: Gendered Violence – From Scripture to the Holocaust and October Seventh"
    - Larissa-Marie Lömpel, University of Haifa, Israel: "Gendered Dimensions of Sexualized Violence in Auschwitz: A Comparative Analysis of Male and Female Experiences"
    - Jovana Savić, University of Belgrade, Serbia: "The Voice of Silence: The Novels of Aleksandar Tišma as Testimonies to the Trauma of Forced Prostitution during the Holocaust"
    - Chair: Batya Brutin
  - Panel II: Women as Doctors
    - Naomi Kojen, Moshe David Gaon Center for Ladino Culture, Belgrade, Serbia: "Honor the Doctor for Her Service: Life and Legacy of Dr. Roza Papo"
    - Victoria Van Orden Martínez, Lund University, Sweden: "'Being a physician was my gun against the Germans' – Three Jewish Women Doctors During the Holocaust"
    - Yoel Yaari, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel: "A Doctor in Hell: Enna Weiss and the Ethics of Survival in Auschwitz"
    - Chair: Dragana Stojanović
- 21.10.
  - Seminar: Women's Stories I
    - Francis-Romeo Behnemann, Friedrich-Schiller-University Jena, Germany: "Noemi Munkacsi – An Educator dedicated to the survival of Jewish Cultures"
    - Tamir Hod, Tel Hai – University on A Rise, Israel: "Miriam Radiwker and the Israeli Police Unit for Investigating Nazi Crimes"
    - Katarzyna Taczyńska, Institute of Slavic Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, Poland: "'Why is this night different from all other nights?' Miriam Steiner Aviezer Between Yugoslavia and Israel"
    - Chair: Lily Halpert Zamir
  - Seminar: Women's Stories II
    - Marija Ratković, PhD Candidate at the University of Arts, Belgrade, Serbia: "Zeugin aus der Hölle and Gorke trave by Frida Filipović: Écriture féminine as a Strategy for Speaking the Unspeakable"
    - Natalija Perišić, University of Belgrade, Serbia: "Olga Alkalaj – Screams and Whispers of a Jewish Woman's Resistance"
    - Gideon Greif, Ono Academic Center, Israel, ECPD Belgrade, Serbia: "'Francesca' – A Courageous Woman"
    - Chair: Verena Meier
  - Panel III: Resistance
    - Avishag Ben Shalom, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel: "Between Identity and Memory: World War II, Two Sephardic Women in the Resistance Movement and Two Nations Remembering Them – The Cases of Olga Alkalaj and Rena Abarbanel"
    - Verena Meier, University of Heidelberg, Germany: "Letters to the Nazi-Regime Between Resistance and 'Madness'"

    - Alessandro Matta, Association Memorial of the Shoah, Sardegna: "Sardinian Saviors' Women During the Holocaust, Between Resistance and Genocide"
    - Galyna Kutsovska, Uppsala University, Sweden: "Endurance, Defiance, Resilience, or Resistance: Survival Strategies of Jewish Women During the Holocaust in Kharkiv"
    - Miri Nehari, Independent Researcher, Israel: "Women Trailblazers in the Bricha Movement"
    - Chair: Krinka Vidaković Petrov
- 22.10.
  - Panel IV: Women in Captivity
    - Boris Czerny, University of Caen, France: "Jewish Women in Brest-Litovsk: An Attempt to Reconstruct Daily Life in the Ghetto (1941-1942)"
    - Eileen Groth Lyon, The State University of New York, Fredonia, USA: "Life Lived in Honor of Jehovah Witnesses at Ravensbrück"
    - Michelle Damm, Justus-Liebig-Universität Giessen, Germany: "Researching Forced Labor in the Ziegenhain Women's Prison: A Preliminary Report"
    - Chair: Andrija Mihajlov
  - Panel V: Art and Culture
    - Batya Brutin, Beit Berl Academic College and WHISC: "Female Artists Depict Women and Femininity in the Holocaust"
    - Yvonne Kozlovsky Golan, University of Haifa, Israel: "Screening Trauma: Representations of Young Female Sexual Abuse during the Holocaust in Israeli Media Culture between Reality and Myth"
    - Ivana Drenjanin Soppe, Akademy Ateneum Gdansk, Poland: "Writing Against Oblivion: Women's Literary Testimonies of the Holocaust"
    - Dragana Stojanović, University of Belgrade, Serbia: "(Un)covering Women's Lives in Holocaust Memorial Monuments in Serbia: an (In)visible Heritage"
    - Chair: Milica Damjanović

NOVEMBAR:

25–26.11. Conference "Critical Social Theory from the (Semi)periphery" (CriticLab)

- 25.11.
  - Panel 1: Beyond Canonical Critical Theory
    - Andrea Perunović: "The Universal and the Semi-peripheral: Notes Toward a Peninsular Thinking"
    - David F. L. Gomes: "Peripheral Voices in Critical Theorizing: Towards a Universalism from the South"
    - Vanja Grujic: "Peripheral Experiences (De)constructing Universalisms: A Postcolonial Critique"
- 26.11.
  - Panel 2: Other Critical Traditions: Praxis of Theorizing (part 1)
    - Marjan Ivković: "Post-socialist Semi-periphery: A Fertile Ground for Counterhegemony?"
    - Gabriel Rezende: "Populism and Institucionalidad: Two Peripheral Concepts"
    - Milan Urošević: "Always Striving, Never Achieving: Doing Theory in the Balkans Between Nativism and Universality"

- Panel 3: Other Critical Traditions: Praxis of Theorizing (part 2)
  - Mariana Fischer: “Neoliberalism and Extremism in Brazil Today: Beyond Foucault”
  - Sara Dragišić: “Peripheral Rationality: Forms of Subjectivation between Law and Governability”
  - Tijana Matijević: “Comparable Universalisms: Literary Criticism of the São Paulo and Praxis Schools”
  - Srđan Đurović: “Living Verum Factum on the Semiperiphery: Lessons from the Yugoslav Praxis Philosophy”

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