Notes towards the Political Culture of Engagement

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The aim of this paper is to offer an analytical sketch of the *political culture of engagement* as different from, but nonetheless complementary to, what is usually known as participatory political culture (Almond and Verba, 1963). I will start from an understanding of political culture as a content which fills the empty shell of the social structure of (local, national, global) society in its political domain – evolving around political institutions and political organizing. Then, I will try to show that there are several layers that need to be properly explained, from the most abstract to those linked to the everyday action of citizens. My intention here is to bridge the subjectivist/psychological approach (focused on individual actors and their behaviour), structural approach (focused on institutions) and practice approach (focused on the relational production of social meaning in the everyday life of citizens). Bridging these approaches could help us avoid an ecological fallacy which happens when we generalize about political culture by using overly simplistic understandings of culture(s). This was particularly the case with the psychological approach based on individual beliefs that dominated the political culture research for a long time, drawing on the very important and unavoidable

contribution of Almond and Verba with their capital work *Civic Culture*.

This article should be understood as an attempt to offer a heuristically potent sketch that could guide us in mapping those aspects of political life that foster citizens' engagement in the public sphere. Recognizing the complexity implied in the notion of political culture, I will try to grasp its components that delineate the political culture of engagement.

Background to the Political Culture Research

Political culture comes with different meanings and definitions. It is understood as the pattern of orientations to political institutions, conventions and traditions (Almond and Verba 1963), the sum of fundamental values, sentiments and knowledge that give form and substance to political processes (Pye 1995), the set of discourses or symbolic practices (Baker 1990), socially constructed normative systems deriving from social and psychological influences (Wilson 2000) or beliefs about the purpose of governance, common good and frontiers of political activity (Elazar 1972), to name just a few. The notion of political culture could be loosely linked to Max Weber's notion of elective affinity that connects Protestantism and its ethics to capitalism and its ethos (Weber 1905 [1989])[1]. However, its firm roots are situated in the Parsonian understanding of society as a tripartite structure entailing the social, the cultural and the individual (psychological) system (Parsons 1965). While Parsons understood culture as coherent sets of norms, values, and attitudes and emphasized socialization as a key process in sustaining institutions and

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1   For more on the concept of "elective affinity" see Howe 1978 and McKinnon 2010.

hence what we name political culture, he was heavily crit-
icized for setting these cultural elements as prerequisites
that are not subjected to empirical research.

Echoes of Parsons' overly structural theory can be found in
the dominant approaches developed in the decades follow-
ing his major works in the 1950s. In an almost immediate
reaction, the behaviouralist approach strived to empirically
found Parsons' grand system theory and concept of culture.
Almond's and Verba's work (1963) had a major impact in
such endeavour:

> When we speak of the political culture of a society, we
> refer to the political system as internalized in the cogni-
> tions, feelings, and evaluations of its population. People
> are induced into it just as they are socialized into nonpo-
> litical roles and social systems" (Almond and Verba 1963:
> 14).

Understanding political culture as a realm between micro
and macro politics, they formulated a conceptual model
that, unlike the Parsonian highly theoretical one, could be
tested empirically through individual political orientations
and self-reported behaviours (Almond 1980). Assuming
that political culture is dependent on individual cognitions,
feelings, and evaluations, they put citizens into the focus as
political actors with their agency. However, they were heav-
ily criticized for generalizing based on data which reflected
individual attitudes which was overly simplistic and ignored
the complexities of societies in the search for comparative
conclusions. Their concept of national political culture was
an extrapolation of minor inter-state variations in individ-
ual responses to entire populations (Newman 2002: 608).
Also, their theory was circular as it is not clear whether a
stable democratic political system leads to a participatory
civic culture or vice versa (Alexander 2000: 20).

The subjective approach became popular in the 1960s, after the end of the dominance of structuralism which was difficult to apply, measure and compare in order to build a testable theory. Such development led to the "third way" in theory – the middle range theories that made efforts to bridge the individual and highly structural approaches of previous decades. While dealing with path dependences and modernization processes in Third World countries, many of these authors emphasized specific aspects of political culture. One of the most influential theories comes from Ronald Inglehart (see Inglehart 1977, 1997, 2018), whose work on (post)modernist values marked a significant portion of political culture literature in the last decades of the XX century. Inglehart also grounded his theory in the materialist, mixed, and post-materialist values which were explored among individuals. However, he makes a step further and changes his units of analysis from individuals to generational cohorts which allows him to generalize on state populations (Inglehart and Welzel 2003; Newman 2002). This move helps Inglehart to answer the critics that claim that his twelve-item index of post-materialism on the individual level is insufficiently coherent. Inglehart understands socialization as the key factor of possessing (post)materialist values which resonates completely with Parsons. In spite of having introduced socialization that is socio-economically determined, Inglehart never captured the institutional framework that affects personal choices, values and agency.

Institutions also play a role in demarcating political culture. In parallel with the modernization theories and Inglehart's work, the institutionalist approach has been revived to bring back the neglected structures of political life. The followers drew on the reaction against behavioural models that saw politics as sometimes conditioned by political culture, but largely unmediated by institutional structures (Steinmo et

al 1992). This approach entails a view on culture as *the institutional limits on decisions that influence individual choice*. As Steinmo and Thelen emphasize: "A critical body of work in the mid to late 1970s and early 1980s pointed to intermediate-level institutional factors – corporatist agreements, policy networks linking economic groups to the state bureaucracy, party structures – and the role they play in defining the constellations of incentives and constraints faced by political actors in different national contexts" (Steinmo and Thelen 1992: 6). The structure and performance of political institutions affects the political culture in an interdependent relation where institutions are reversely affected by the political culture (understood as individual values and beliefs) as legitimization provider (Lepsius 1982).

The renewed interest in institutional factors has resulted in two influential approaches – the new historical institutionalism and rational choice institutionalism. While the latter emphasizes the role of institutions in shaping actors' strategies, it is rather the historical version of institutionalism which is relevant for this exploration of political culture since its authors see the actors' goals and preferences as also shaped by institutions. Consequently, institutional aspects, that is, the enduring formal and informal rules of political institutions and organizing influence not only the stability of political life, but also its changes. While engagement introduces political (and social) changes, I will try to show that it is also instructive to include the analysis of institutional influence on engagement in the public sphere as one of the key pillars of political culture (of engagement). In his latest book, *Cultural Evolution*, Inglehart comes to a similar conclusion when he says that the political institutions and the citizens' value orientations must have mutually coherent values in order to have legitimacy and be durable (Inglehart 2018).

Finally, the practice approach theories in political science are derived from general theories of culture (i.e. Sewell 1999). Within this stream, the political culture is usually understood as:

> The set of discourses or symbolic practices" through which "individuals and groups in any society articulate, negotiate, implement, and enforce competing claims they make upon one another and upon the whole (Baker 1990: 4).

By emphasizing the cultural aspects within the political culture concept, this approach delineates this term as a relatively autonomous and temporal realm with its own internal rules, dynamics and relations from other domains of social life throughout time. Within this realm, the process of the meaning-making of specific practices shapes the political culture[2]. "In sum", claims Somers, "the most dramatic distinguishing quality of the rejuvenated political culture concept is definitional: rather than a collection of internalized expressions of subjective values or externalized expressions of social interests, a political culture is now defined as a *configuration of representations and practices* that exists as a contentious structural social phenomenon in its own right" (Somers 1995: 133; emphasis added). The focus here is on analyzing the relations between practices like habits, everyday life patterns of social actors related to political system and the meaning, signification they assign to them (Weeden 2002). If we assume that these meanings are different in different contexts, the problems with using popular surveys for measuring the prevalence of certain values and opinions is even more problematic. Therefore, careful reading of the processes that change ongoing practices and systems of meaning, generating multiple significations within social groups is highly significant[3].

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2   An excellent study on meaning-making and engagement could be found in Lee and Chan 2008.

3   We can find a very interesting study of political culture in Russia

Understanding Political Culture

What is then a political culture? Situated in-between the macro and micro levels, individuals, practices and institutions, it is close to the notion of the public sphere, also potent with different meanings. Manifestations of political culture emerge in a public sphere as "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (Habermas 1974: 49) building "a zone of civic life oriented toward political issues and public life but free of the direct control of the official state and its coercive mechanisms" (Somers 1995: 124).

In order to formulate an initial model of political culture that reflects its complexity, I will try to outline a diagram which captures and presents different relevant aspects and levels of political culture to be taken into account. In my elaboration of the model I see political cultures as inherently plural, without limiting its meaning and scope to the usual national (nation state) framework. This understanding of political cultures can thus be diversified on the more macro levels of geopolitical regions, but also on the more micro levels of diverse smaller regions within the states or cross-bordering them.

authored by Nikolai Petro, who claims that political culture research was too narrowly focused on searching for elements of "civic culture" development, while failing to grasp the complex political cultural symbols in society (Petro 1995).
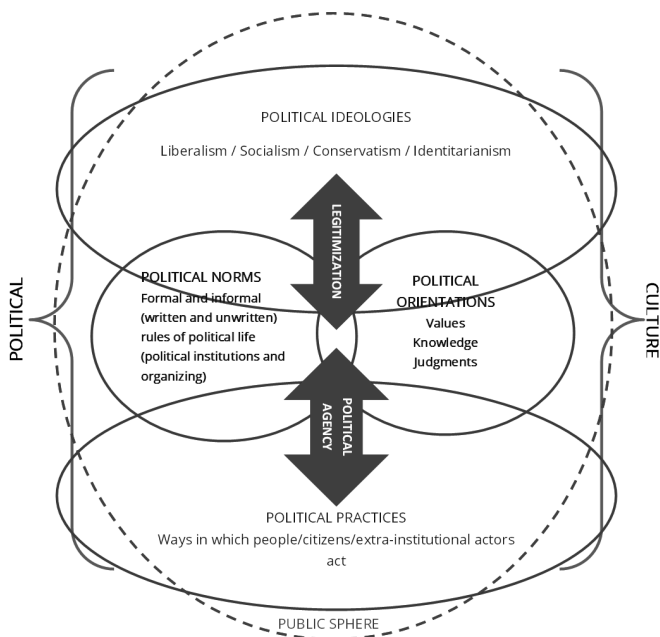
Figure 1. Political culture model diagram

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The most abstract, macro level of political ideologies (Hey-wood 1998; Freeden 1996, 2003; Vincent 1992) must be tak-en into account when discussing political cultures. Each of these major ideologies is a "complex of doctrines" (Geuss 2002) and their specific mixtures represent a base of any particular political culture. Ideologies lie at the foundation of political norms and political orientations, and especially of values and judgments. They legitimize structural and in-stitutional rules, but also individual beliefs that build into political cultures. Following Mannheim's political theory (Mannheim 1954; Breiner 2013), I consider the ideological influx into political cultures extremely important. His the-

ory allows us to be "sensitive to the contingent historical development and the durable elements of politics and to the specific constellation of political ideologies whose adherents use political means in the struggle for pre-eminence" (Breiner 2013: 39). However, Mannheim's key contribution, also known as Mannheim's paradox (Geertz 1973) states that every analysis of political ideologies is always done from the perspective of another ideology. The fluidity of the ideological components and their shifting from one to another ideology, together with the setting of different priorities in the "complex of doctrines" is what can later be identified in Freeden's (de)contesting concept of political ideology (Freeden 1996). Next to the three major ideologies – liberalism, conservatism and socialism – and several "minor" ideologies which are not explicitly named here, I included also identitarianism as a reference to all identity-based ideologies (i.e. nation, religion, gender) that cannot be reduced to any of these major three, but can substantially shape political cultures. Ideologies as "explicit, articulated, highly organized meaning systems" are especially important during times of change, or as Swidler (1996) argues during unsettled periods, when ideologies are used to establish new strategies of action and specific demands in particular areas of life, leading gradually to – cultural change.

Within the mezzo level, political cultures encompass two major components that are usually identified with political culture as a whole. The interplay of the political norms that are reflected in political institutions and organizing (institutionalism) and political orientations (behavioralism) give a specific character to political cultures and none of these can be separated as solely determinant. Institutional factors as well as informality, the grey zone behind rules and norms that define institutional and organizational functioning,

set boundaries for the possible in politics. They inform the knowledge of citizens and they are the object of citizens' judgments. With the political values of citizens that derive its content from political ideologies, the concept of political orientation, as described by Almond and Verba, is fully incorporated into the diagram, but is here only one of the components of political culture. Both political norms and political orientations are prerequisites for the political agency that stands behind political practices.

Finally, on the lowest, micro level, we need to take into consideration these political practices as particular manifestations of political action borne by different political actors – from the individual level of citizens to the level of citizens organizing *beyond* and *outside of* political organizations and institutions. Among all aspects defined in this model, this one is probably the most difficult to grasp, as it is mostly connected with the everyday life of citizens and the meanings they attribute to different practices. Its focus lies in the extra-institutional realm in order to avoid heavy overlapping with political practices that are clearly the result of the institutional and party systems with their norms and rules already captured at the mezzo level. However, these institutionalized practices shouldn't be neglected, including i.e. voting, petitions or deliberative arenas.

Political Culture of Engagement

After drafting the model that potentially allows me to grasp social engagement as a distinct characteristic of a particular political culture, a few words could be said about the notion of the political culture of engagement.

The concept is based on the understanding of social engagement as a collective practice that exposes a double movement constitutive of the engagement itself – reflection

on the existing social norms and rules, and consequently, acting upon or against their modification or change (Loson-cz and Cvejic, forthcoming). Following this, the political culture of engagement entails a twofold action – participation of political actors (from citizens to group actors) which is based on the reflected insufficiencies of current political life and the subsequent moving beyond the current state of affairs.

Departing from the above sketched diagram, we could identify political cultures of engagement by investigating three relevant factors: political norms that set incentives for engagement, political orientations that value engagement as important and political practices in the ordinary life of political actors (again individuals and group actors) that bring engagement into life.

Political norms can be designed in such a way that encourage the engagement of political actors to reflect on the insufficiencies of current political life and act to remove them. Empirically, this aspect could be researched through the analysis of rules of political institutions that refer to decision making, participation and instruments of changing the policies and rules themselves[4]. Obviously, those communities that give voice to the citizens using legal tools could score better in this aspect. Another important aspect of analysing political norms that encourage engagement would be the examination of the internal norms of political parties as key forms of political organizing.

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4   I.e. In the case of Serbia, the normative framework in political institutions and organizations that would pursue and encourage engagement exists with some deficiencies. The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia (2006), together with the Law on Local Self-Government (2007) and Law on Referendum and People's Initiative (1994) regulates the instruments (of direct democracy) for the citizens' influence on political elites, beside the classical tools of political participation in elections. However, the Law on Local Self-Government leaves to the local self-governments to define through their statutes specifically how these instruments will be used on the local level. Such mechanism is under strong influence of the dominant parties that have a possibility to limit the scope of citizens' participation through lower-level acts (CRCD 2008). To which extent this is the case demands further investigation.

Political orientations that reveal a high value of social engagement and political and interpersonal trust are the second relevant factor. In Almond's and Verba's words, there is a high reserve of influence among citizens that affects their agency. This is typically researched through cross-national surveys of values and beliefs expressed in citizens' attitudes within Eurobarometer, World Value Survey and similar[5]. The self-reflection of citizens on their political efficacy is important for the political culture of engagement, as the citizens' feeling that they are able to initiate changes has proven to boost political agency and encourage engagement (for more on internalization of efficacy see Pateman 1971).

Finally, we have to take into account political practices that show evidence of engagement as a series of realized social acts oriented towards bringing change into the political realm. Depending on the recorded characteristic of the modes of citizens' action, a certain engaged political culture could be potentially characterized as a *dissentious* or *reformist* one. Dissentious cultures channel engagement using the dominantly extra-institutional modes of political action, while those reformist ones are dominated by institutionalized modes of action[6]. This component is sometimes referred to as political activism (Dalton and Welzel 2014) or "repertoire of contention" (Tilly 2004).

5   Taking again the Serbian political culture as a showcase, we could say that it is characterized by a lack of trust towards institutions in general, and especially trust towards political institutions and organizations, which nowadays stands at the lowest level in Europe (Bešić 2014; Fiket et al. 2017). Interpersonal trust is also declining, being among the lowest in Europe (Bešić 2014: 185). There is no direct evidence about the orientation towards social engagement, but it can be indirectly extrapolated from the data that show an utter lack of agency and belief that citizens can bring about any changes (Pavlović 2008; Fiket et al. 2017). This apathy is strongly linked with the perception of politics as a "dirty business" and with refraining from any form of engagement that wouldn't have immediate and direct effects on the personal lives of individuals at stake. Citizens in Serbia don't recognize or acknowledge their own agency, which deprives them of any reserve of influence in Almond's and Verba's terms.

6   Again, data from Serbia show that 85% of respondents never participate in the work of local authorities/self-government, 37% has no interest in politics and an additional 51% is not active for different reasons (CESID 2017).

Political cultures of engagement are to be differentiated from cultures of disengagement, characterized by apathy, alienation and cynicism (Dasgupta 2011). Also, they are not to be equated with democratic political culture, as we could imagine a highly engaged political culture that does not give voice equally to all its citizens, but discriminates certain groups (based on race, caste, wealth, health etc). This concept also differs from civic or participatory culture, where the emphasis is clearly on the behaviour and beliefs of individual citizens and participatory value-orientation is strongly intertwined with the rational choice approach. Contemporary studies of social movements and other forms of social engagement often neglect affective or emotionally driven behaviour (see Vasiljević in this study) which fits well into the third factor of political practices in the model presented here. The triangle of *political norms, orientations and practices* defines the three-dimensional continuum with three axes along which we can situate all particular political cultures observed through the lenses of engagement through time. High score on all three dimensions will, most probably, be found in developed democracies, as I assume that it is not likely to identify political norms encouraging engagement in autocratic environments, even if practices and orientation might exacerbate the importance of engagement. But we might find that it is exactly engaged practices and orientations that help in sustaining ruling elites in power in countries where i.e. identitarian ideologies prevail as a cultural base, providing a mighty tool for preventing the development of embedded democracies (Merkel 2004).

The model, as it is here drafted, does not allow us to make conclusions about the durability and changes of the political cultures, but captures them in the moment. Any reflections on change and its indicators as well as impetuses should encompass a much wider picture, in which socio-economic factors and historical and geopolitical contextualization all

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figure. Also, we have to bear in mind that the history of the past engaged political practices of citizens strongly influences political culture. However, this is a discussion far beyond the scope of this article and remains to be developed in further work, as the model presented above needs to get empirical testing for us to be able to say more on political cultures of engagement.

Conclusion

In the above section I attempted to sketch a model of the political culture of engagement that could be further utilized and could be beneficial for understanding, among other, how it is possible that certain regressive and counter-democratic changes occur. The model represents a possible corrective to the widely spread notions that engagement, participation and political activism necessarily lead towards more democracy and more inclusive societies. It is necessary to develop a wider perspective and put into focus not only the orientations of citizens, but also structural constraints and incentives, as well as political practices voiced in actions that are manifestations of the possible and realizations of agency. This model might prove useful in exploring specific indicators influencing the political cultures in societies where popular dissent is significant, but at the same time political changes are minimal. By acknowledging the political norms and institutions as relevant factors together with political practices that bring into life very specific forms of engagement, we could be able to set up a comparative overview – a map that will tell us more on the backsliding of democracy in the twenty first century and possible paths to counter this development.

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