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Anti-politics as 'culture of rejection': the case of Serbia

IRENA FIKET ⓘ , **GAZELA PUDAR DRAŠKO** ⓘ **AND MILAN UROŠEVIĆ** ⓘ

ABSTRACT   In this article, Fiket, Pudar Draško and Uroševic situate the notion of 'anti-politics' within a broader theory of 'cultures of rejection', redefining it as a specific culture of rejection in the political sphere. They describe the lack of participation of Serbian citizens in political life, their lack of trust in political actors, institutions, democratic procedures and, in the end, in democracy itself. They show how political elites constantly demonstrate the impotence of institutions through various examples of 'institutional silence', which leads to the further rejection of political engagement. The authors' aim was to show that *rejection of politics* is a concept that offers an adequate theoretical framework for our empirical analyses and deeper understanding of the social phenomena reflected in the withdrawal from political life. They present the data from their qualitative research, based on interviews with the retail and logistics workers in Serbia as well as an ethnographic study of digital spaces that those workers often visit, where politics and culture meet in the discursive practices of everyday life.

The widespread abstention by Serbian citizens from any kind of political participation is well documented in previous empirical research.[1] Serbian elections are perceived by citizens as a sort of yearly ritual. And

1   Irena Fiket, Zoran Pavlović and Gazela Pudar Draško, 'Cartography of political perceptions', Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Belgrade report (online), December 2017, available at   https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belgrad/14006.pdf   (viewed 13 September 2023); Jelena Pešić, Tamara Petrović Trifunović and Ana Birešev, 'Politička kompetencija i konsolidacija kapitalizma u Srbiji: analiza (ne) davanja odgovora na stavove o poželjnom političkom i ekonomskom poretku', in Mladen Lazić and Slobodan Cvejić (eds), *Stratifikacijske promene u periodu konsolidacije kapitalizma u Srbiji* (Belgrade: Univerzitet u Beogradu, Institut za sociološka istraživanja 2019), 247–74; Jelena Pešić, Ana Birešev, and Tamara Petrović Trifunović, 'Political disaffection and disengagement in Serbia', *Sociologija*, vol. 63, no. 2, 2021, 355–80.

overall political life in Serbia is seen as an endless cycle of political campaigns in which citizen participation seems meaningless,[2] not least due to the many controversies and irregularities surrounding the electoral process,[3] as documented in Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE) observation mission reports.[4] The internal and external political efficacy of Serbian citizens is at very low levels—they don't feel that they adequately understand political life, and therefore don't participate in it[5]—while at the same time they don't trust that the government will respond to their demands.[6] Paradoxically, there is a high level of involvement of citizens in political parties, which in the previous decade comprised over 10 per cent of the Serbian population.[7] This *formal* participation, however, does not provide any kind of socialization for political participation: that is, citizens' engagement in political parties is not genuine political engagement directed towards the public interest. Rather, political parties function as organizations through which citizens might achieve specific personal benefits, such as relatively stable employment.[8] This kind of clientelism also heavily influences

2   Fiket, Pavlović and Pudar Draško, 'Cartography of political perceptions'; Vujo Ilić and Darko Stojilović, *Stavovi građana Srbije o učešću u demokratskim procesima 2020* (Belgrade: Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability 2020)

3   Besides procedural irregularities, observation missions have warned about constant government-directed negative campaigns against other political actors, heavily state-controlled media and the pressures put on voters and stakeholders by the ruling party in the election process.

4   Slaviša Orlović and Despot Kovačević (eds), *Trideset godina obnovljenog višepartizma u Srbiji: (Ne)naučene lekcije,* (Belgrade: Univerzitet u Beogradu, Fakultet političkih nauka Univerziteta i Centar za demokratiju Hanns Seidel Stiftung 2020).

5   Zoran Stojiljković, 'Politički kapital i kultura (ne)poverenja: slučaj Srbija', in Milan Podunavac (ed.), *Ustav i demokratija u procesu transformacije* (Belgrade: Univerzitet u Beogradu, Fakultet političkih nauka Udruženje za političke nauke Srbije 2011), 161–81 (164).

6   Irena Fiket and Gazela Pudar Draško, 'Mogućnost vaninstitucionalne političke participacije unutar neresponsivnog sistema Srbije: uticaj (ne)poverenja i interne političke efikasnosti', *Sociologija*, vol. 63, no. 2, 2021, 400–18.

7   'Membership of the ruling SNS [Srpska napredna stranka, Serbian Progressive Party] has grown to 730,000 members, making it the biggest party in Europe by far. In comparison, Germany's CDU [Christlich Demokratische Union, Christian Democratic Union] party has 'only' 407,000 members, despite Germany being eleven times bigger than Serbia': Maarten Lemstra, 'The destructive effects of state capture in the Western Balkans: EU enlargement undermined', Clingendael Institute Policy Brief, September 2020, 3, available at www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/Policy_brief_Undermining_EU_enlargement_Western_Balkans_September_2020.pdf (viewed 13 September 2023).

8   Slobodan Cvejić, 'On inevitability of political clientelism in contemporary Serbia', *Sociologija*, vol. 58, no. 2, 2016, 239–52; Branislav Radejić and Vladimir Đorđević, 'Clientelism and the abuse of power in the Western Balkans', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 22, no. 5, 2020, 597–612; Dragan Stanojević, Dragana Gundogan and Marija Babović, 'Clientelistic relations between political elite and entrepreneurs in Serbia', *Sociologija,* vol. 58, no. 2, 2016, 220–38.

widespread political passivity.[9] In fact, the majority of citizens believe that those who are politically active are motivated by personal and not public interest.[10] On the other hand, trust in institutions, political representatives and political organizations is very low,[11] and support for democracy is constantly in decline.[12] Politicians are perceived as a primary cause of all social problems and hardships, and therefore as harmful and immoral.[13]

In addition, there is a lack of experience of participation in democratic civic practices, and the overall extra-institutional participation of Serbian citizens is rare.[14] Practically the only form of unconventional political participation in the last decade has been anti-regime demonstrations that have occasionally drawn massive support, but that have only strengthened citizens' mistrust of politicians.[15] Conventional political actors such as political parties were not allowed to assume leadership of these protests, although some of them tried.[16] These protests showed what we already knew from research focused on the general population: there is a lack of trust in political elites; politics is seen as an activity oriented towards the achievement of personal gain; and political participation is perceived as an activity that cannot lead to the articulation of political demands that could be achieved through institutions.

However, despite a strong consensus in the literature about the lack of participation of Serbian citizens in political life, their lack of trust in political

9   Jelisaveta Petrović and Dragan Stanojević, 'Political activism in Serbia', *Comparative Southeast European Studies*, vol. 68, no. 3, 2020, 365–85.

10 CeSID, 'Javno mnenje Srbije: Politički aktivizam građana Srbije', CeSID (Center for Free Elections and Democracy) Report, June 2017, available at www.cesid.rs/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/POLITI%C4%8CKI-AKTIVIZAM-GRA%C4%90ANA-SRBIJE-2017.pdf (viewed 13 September 2023).

11 Stojiljković, 'Politički kapital i kultura (ne)poverenja: slučaj Srbija'.

12 Bojan Todosijević and Zoran Pavlović, 'Nepoverenje u demokratske institucije i podrška nedemokratskim sistemima vladavine: Populistički mehanizam', in Zoran Lutovac (ed.), *Populizam* (Belgrade: Univerzitet u Beogradu, Institut društvenih nauka, Centar za politikološka istraživanja i javno mnjenje 2017), 67–85; Zoran Pavlović, 'Prihvatanje demokratije i demokratske orijentacije u Srbiji u kontekstu društvenih promena', *Psihološka istraživanja*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2010, 35–58; Zoran Pavlović, 'Demokratska politicka kultura u Srbiji pre i posle demokratskih promena', *Nova srpska politička misao*, vol. 16, no. 3–4, 2008, 157–76.

13 Ivana Spasić, 'Političari kao apsolutni drugi: kako građani Srbije opisuju profesionalne političke delatnike', in Podunavac (ed.), *Ustav i demokratija u procesu transformacije*, 181–93 (185–9).

14 Fiket and Pudar Draško, 'Mogućnost vaninstitucionalne političke participacije unutar neresponsivnog sistema Srbije'.

15 Benjamin Opratko, Manuela Bojadžijev, Sanja M. Bojanić, Irena Fiket, Alexander Harder, Stefan Jonsson, Mirjana Nećak, Anders Neegaard, Celina Ortega Soto, Gazela Pudar Draško, Birgit Sauer and Kristina Stojanović Čehajić, 'Cultures of rejection in the Covid-19 crisis', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 44, no. 5, 2021, 893–905.

16 Aleksandar Miladinović, 'Protesti u Srbiji: Do kad se može na ulicu bez strategije', *BBC News* (online), 13 July 2020, available at www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-53391679 (viewed 13 September 2020.)

actors, institutions, democratic procedures and, in the end, in democracy itself, we still do not have a consistent explanation for the main causes of these phenomena. Contextual factors can probably bring us closer to understanding. The Yugoslav wars, followed by a delayed post-socialist transition, led to the structural usurpation of institutions, producing a captured state.[17] Efforts to build liberal-democratic institutions ceased a decade after the fall of Slobodan Milošević in 2000. Political elites constantly demonstrate the impotence of the institutions through various examples of 'institutional silence' that lead to further rejection of political engagement.[18]

In our view, all those aspects briefly listed above, and for which we still don't have a robust explanation, could be seen as indicators of the phenomenon we have termed the (culture of) rejection of politics. In conceptualizing and exploring Serbian citizens' rejection of politics, we start from the literature on anti-politics,[19] something that has been researched empirically for a long time and is usually loosely defined as a set of negative attitudes towards formal political activities.[20] Although we start our research with an academic discussion of *anti-politics*, we aim to show that the *rejection of politics* is a concept that offers a more adequate theoretical framework for our empirical analyses and a deeper understanding of the social phenomena we are exploring. We also want to emphasize that rejection of politics is not intrinsically linked to right-wing attitudes, as the studies already cited report anti-political behaviour in citizens belonging to all points on the left–right political spectrum. At the same time, it is important to state that leftist opinion in Serbia is very weak, both in size and in its capacity to influence citizens, while the right-wing of the spectrum heavily dominates the political scene.[21]

The goals of our paper are therefore two-fold. First, we aim to situate the notion of anti-politics within a broader theory of cultures of rejection, thereby redefining it as a specific culture of rejection in the political sphere.

17 Mladen Lazić, *Čekajući kapitalizam: Nastanak novih klasnih odnosa u Srbiji* (Belgrade: Službeni glasnik 2011).

18 Srđan Prodanović, Gazela Pudar Draško and Marija Velinov (eds), *Otete institucije u Srbiji: Teorija i praksa* (Belgrade: Univerzitet u Beogradu, Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriu 2019).

19 Gerry Stoker and Mark Evans, 'The "democracy-politics paradox": the dynamics of political alienation', *Democratic Theory*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2014, 26–36; David Easton, 'A reassessment of the concept of political support', *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1975, 435–57; David Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (New York: John Wiley 1965); Nick Clarke, Will Jennings, Jonathan Moss and Gerry Stoker, *The Good Politician: Folk Theories, Political Interaction, and the Rise of Anti-Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2018); John Boswell and Jack Corbett, 'Stoic democrats? Anti-politics, élite cynicism and the policy process', *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 22, no. 10, 2015, 1388–1405.

20 Bernard Crick, *In Defense of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1962).

21 Zoran Stojiljković and Dušan Spasojević, 'Populistički Zeitgeist u "proevropskoj" Srbiji', *Politička misao: časopis za politologiju*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2018, 104–28.

The added value of our research is related to our focus on places of social interaction that cut across different spheres of social 'totality', like politics, culture or the economy.[22] Unlike previous research on anti-politics in Serbia, in our empirical research our points of departure are the workplaces of Serbian retail and logistics workers, as well as the digital spaces that those workers usually visit and where politics and culture meet in discursive practices of everyday life. However, our methods allow us only to analyse the discursive element of these phenomena, while additional research is necessary to bring to light norms and practices, and solve the puzzle of anti-politics as a culture of rejection.

It is important to emphasize that our research is affected by the 'historical conjuncture' that emerged in the midst of our fieldwork: namely, the COVID-19 pandemic that allowed executive powers to gain the upper hand over parliamentary and judicial procedures. The decision-making power of parliaments was suspended in many countries, allowing for rule by executive decrees. In Serbia, parliament did not even declare a state of emergency, as the assembly did not meet under the pretext that large group meetings were forbidden.[23] The pandemic-related politics changed after summer 2020: no new curfews were introduced, and measures to fight the pandemic were reduced to the closing of schools, restaurants and entertainment venues, and encouraging citizens to work from home. From the beginning of 2021, vaccination became the main topic with regard to the pandemic. For this reason, the data used in our analysis will be complemented with empirical material gathered at the beginning of 2021 while researching online anti-vaccine discourses in Serbia.

The article is structured as follows. In the following section we discuss the theoretical background of our research, the third section focuses on methodology, and the fourth presents the results of our analysis. The relevance of our findings is discussed in the fifth, concluding, section of our paper.

Anti-politics as a culture of rejection

Anti-politics remains an under-theorized concept, typically used to designate a negative relation citizens have with political objects like leaders, institutions and the electoral process.[24] It is primarily seen as a negative

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22 Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume I: Introduction*, trans. from the French by John Moore (London and New York: Verso 1991), 42.

23 Vanja Dolapčev, 'A lack of transparency: the COVID-19 pandemic in Serbia' (blog), 25 April 2020, available on the *European Policy Centre* website at https://cep.org.rs/en/blog/a-lack-of-transparency-the-covid-19-pandemic-in-serbia (viewed 13 September 2023).

24 Stoker and Evans, 'The "democracy-politics paradox"'; Easton, 'A re-assessment of the concept of political support'; Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*; Clarke, Jennings, Moss and Stoker, *The Good Politician*; Boswell and Corbett, 'Stoic democrats?'.

orientation towards politics and the political sphere, involving a process in which the political sphere is constituted as an 'outside', a domain of *undesirable* forms of (political) subjectivity: that is, the Other as opposed to 'us ordinary citizens'.

Anti-politics is now used to label everything that threatens politics as a domain of activity necessary for democratic governance in plural societies.[25] It has been linked to the 'crisis of democracy' since the mid-1970s and various concepts can be derived from or merged into anti-politics. The World Values and Eurobarometer survey results have urged scholars to think about citizens' withdrawal of political support, as together with a growing mistrust of leaders, the electoral process and institutions.[26] Under the heading of 'political disaffection', Mariano Torcal and José Ramón Montero have studied critical attitudes towards politics and representative institutions, estrangement from politics and the public sphere, and critical evaluations of political institutions, their representatives and the democratic political process.[27] Some have gone so far as to write about 'post-democracy',[28] and 'post-politics',[29] in which anti-politics can be spotted as an important element of societal diagnosis. The nature, functions and qualities attributed to anti-politics differ throughout the relevant literature and research, ranging from distrust and disengagement, the delegitimation of politics and existing political authority, anti-parliamentarism, anti-electoral parties and anti-establishment attitudes, to outright anti-democratic sentiment,[30] as well as its perception as a democratic malaise threatening democratic legitimacy.[31]

By situating anti-politics within a broader theory of cultures of rejection, we aim to overcome the under-theorization that has plagued it so far. Cultures of rejection are seen as modes of living that are constituted by antagonisms: 'attitudes, values, norms and affects that reject a set of socio-

25 Crick, *In Defense of Politics.*
26 Joseph S. Nye Jr, Philip D. Zelikow and David C. King (eds), *Why People Don't Trust Government* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1997).
27 Torcal Mariano and José Ramón Montero, *Political Disaffection in Contemporary Democracies: Social Capital, Institutions, and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge 2006).
28 See Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy,* trans. from the French by Steve Corcoran (London and New York: Verso 2006); and Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2004).
29 See Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* (London: Verso Books 1999); and Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge 2005).
30 Matteo Truffelli and Lorenzo Zambernardi, 'Taking modernity to extremes: on the roots of anti-politics', *Political Studies Review*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2021, 96–110.
31 Vittorio Mete, 'Four types of anti-politics: insights from the Italian case', *Modern Italy*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2010, 37–61; Keith Popple, 'Peter Somerville (2011), *Understanding Community: Politics, Policy and Practice*', *Journal of Social Policy*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2011, 442–44; Colin Hay and Gerry Stoker, 'Revitalising politics: have we lost the plot?', *Representation*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2009, 225–36; Truffelli and Zambernardi, 'Taking modernity to extremes'.

cultural objects'.[32] Anti-politics is here not only defined through *politics as an object of rejection*, but it emerges as the *intersectional regime* of the attitudes, practices and affects that bring about citizens' withdrawal from politics. This specific 'regime of practice' consists of intertwined and mutually structured discursive and non-discursive elements.[33] Such a mode of living is constantly renegotiated, rearticulated and reinforced, facing local, national and global challenges, be they pervasive clientelism in the case of Serbian society, a migrant crisis 'imposed' on European societies from outside, or a global threat like the COVID-19 pandemic. It persists even when facing a rising citizens' political mobilization or, paradoxically, it survives as *a part* of this mobilization *in discursive elements*, which is why we focus on this discursive aspect in our analysis below. We will, therefore, show how these discursive elements are reproduced in everyday life or, more precisely, in the social spaces defined as arrangements of individuals and their interactions:[34] the work places of Serbian workers and the digital spaces they usually visit, as well as where they congregate.

Conceptualizing anti-politics as a specific culture of rejection of the political sphere enables us to understand the resilience and endurance of this phenomenon over time, even in the face of certain objective improvements within the system of institutional politics, such as, for example, the appearance, over the last decade, of new political actors within electoral politics who have enjoyed greater legitimacy in the eyes of ordinary social actors due to their grassroots origins or their transformative political agendas: Syriza, Podemos, Jeremy Corbyn, Bernie Sanders or the 'We Won't Let Belgrade D(r)own' movement in Serbia.[35] If we conceptualize rejection of politics in terms of an *intersectional social structure* of the attitudes, practices and affects that guide an individual's experience rather than as simply a reactive attitude, we can perhaps get a better grasp of the factors that might contribute to overcoming this condition within the citizenries of representative democracies. From our perspective, even though rejection of politics has emerged as a response to the processes of deterioration of representative democracy over the past decades, it has, over time,

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32 Alexander Harder and Benjamin Opratko, 'Cultures of rejection at work: investigating the acceptability of authoritarian populism', *Ethnicities*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2021, 425–45 (429).

33 Michel Foucault, 'Questions of method', in James D. Faubion (ed.), *Power: The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, trans. from the French by Robert Hurley (New York: New Press 2001), 223–39 (225).

34 Martina Löw, *The Sociology of Space: Materiality, Social Structures, and Action*, trans. from the German by Donald Goodwin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2016), 188.

35 Peter J. S. Duncan, 'Political alternatives on the western left: Podemos, Syriza, Sanders and Corbin', in Peter J. S. Duncan and Elisabeth Schimpfössl (eds), *Socialism, Capitalism and Alternatives: Area Studies and Global Theories* (London: UCL Press 2019), 181–212.

evolved into a fully fledged 'form of life' that structures citizens' everyday experiences.

Methodology

Our analysis of the cultures of rejection in Serbia is based on two different types of data. The empirical material comprises nineteen semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted from May to September 2019, 253 postings collected through digital ethnography (observation without participation) carried out in July 2020, and seventy-one postings also collected through digital ethnography in February and March 2021.

Interviews were conducted with employees in the logistics and retail sectors, occupying non-administrative positions in the Serbian cities of Belgrade and Kraljevo. The purpose of the interviews was to identify elements of cultures of rejection in individual, biographical narratives and to learn about everyday practices that can lead to experiences of Othering and exclusion. Our intention was also to map the everyday digital spaces where respondents can observe, experience and reproduce rejection. However, our respondents claimed not to have active digital engagement, as they emphasized only *Facebook* in general as their usual digital space and that they followed very few specific open groups or webpages. We have, hence, focused on specific *Facebook* pages mentioned in interviews, selecting for our sample those pages with a high degree of user interaction (such as comments) and public and current activity.

Digital data included all the postings that generated comments in the period from 22 June 2020 to 26 July 2020 on the *Facebook* page of the newspaper *Blic*, as well as the *Facebook* page of the 'Odbranimo reke Stare planine' ('Defend the Rivers of Old Mountain'). *Blic* has one of the largest readerships of all the newspapers in Serbia, and their *Facebook* postings are frequently commented on. The 'Odbranimo reke Stare planine' *Facebook* page belongs to the social movement that, at the time, managed to successfully mobilize citizens of different political orientations around the common goal of stopping the construction of mini-hydropower plants on the rivers of southeastern Serbia.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) was employed in the analysis, given that CDA aims to reveal assumptions in discourse and 'orders of discourse' that are seen by speakers as common sense. The 'order of discourse' can be seen as an underlying structure that develops into discursive formations, such as anti-politics. We used a theoretical lens—in our case, the lens of cultures of rejection—as an instrument for mapping the elements of anti-politics built into what we have named 'rejection of politics'. This kind of reading allowed us to locate consistencies within the discursive elements we were analysing and to see how they matched our theoretical model of cultures

of rejection. We have identified 'utterances' as the smallest unit of discourse that has meaning in our material.

Rejecting politics: from the political system to ordinary citizens

The data we gathered has yielded two discursive types of rejection of politics. The first refers to negative attitudes *towards political elites* and the second towards *political institutions and the political process in general*. The Othering of *political elites* constructs them as corrupt, as directing politics for their own selfish interests, thus provoking disgust and anger. This form of Othering is accompanied by a feeling of normlessness in citizens who believe that they know what is right but feel that political actors knowingly flout the rules. The Othering of *the political system* constructs it as an entity beyond citizens' control, and builds on our previous findings on citizens' despair and resentment.[36] Their participation is not seen as something that can meaningfully influence political outcomes, and is hence often accompanied by a feeling of impotence. These two discursive elements are easily linked to Andreas Schedler's two perspectives on anti-politics: anti-politics as the attempt 'to dethrone and banish politics' as useless may be easily equated to the Othering of the political system in general, while the attempt 'to conquest [*sic*, i.e. conquer] and colonize politics' might be seen as a rejection of *these* political actors and a call for their replacement.[37]

Rejection of politics does not only function on the vertical axis, which stretches from the rejection of political actors to the rejection of the political system. We have also identified a horizontal axis, in which rejection is directed towards citizens who support decisions made by political actors. The vertical aspect has been articulated by the interviewees, while our analysis of material from digital ethnography has revealed both aspects.

Even though we did not specifically emphasize the political system in the guidelines for the interviews conducted in the first phase of our research, collected data revealed a significant rejection of the political system: feelings that political elites are unresponsive, mistrust in institutions and an overall rejection of politics and the political establishment. In fact, interviewees described politics and politicians as 'directly damaging citizens' lives'. The perception that, 'in our society, the biggest problem is politics' (male, retail

36 Spasić, 'Političari kao apsolutni drugi', 188–9.
37 Andreas Schedler, 'Introduction: Antipolitics—closing and colonizing the public sphere', in Andreas Schedler (ed.), *The End of Politics? Explorations into Antipolitics* (Basingstoke: Macmillan/ New York: St Martin's Press 1997), 1–20 (2). See also Easton, 'A re-assessment of the concept of political support'; Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*; Clarke, Jennings, Moss and Stoker, *The Good Politician*; and Crick, *In Defense of Politics*.

worker, Belgrade) was expressed in interviews by all of our male respondents and the majority of female respondents.

> I don't trust anyone [i.e. political representatives]. They have to be morally corrupt in order to get there. (female, retail worker, Belgrade)

> [They are] appointing people who are unprofessional, uneducated, unprepared . . . that is, let me say, they run our country, they run our city, they run our village . . . but they are incompetent and untouchable, and now they are in power and they want to give it away, you understand. You and I can't do anything from this position; they appointed their people and that's it. (male, logistics worker, Kraljevo)

Rejection of politics is primarily introduced as mistrust of political elites. This mistrust is not only related to the perception of political elites as morally corrupt and not engaged in pursuing the public interest, but also to their incompetence. Building on the mistrust of political representatives, respondents expand rejection to take in political institutions and the political process. This expansion goes even further, to the rejection of any kind of representative organization, beyond parties and political institutions. Interviewed workers reject trade unions and their representatives in the same manner as unresponsive political elites, claiming they are focused primarily on personal interest and not workers' interests. This finding is not surprising for Serbia, where trust in civil society organizations is among the lowest in Europe.[38]

> I don't trust them at all . . . our trade union, the general secretary, [the shop steward] who is now one of the strongest people in Serbia, in a way he contributed to the passivity of the people. I'm telling you a story in the sense that there are no more meetings to gather workers to say 'people we have to do this, we don't have to do that, we have pressures from the management, bosses and directors, we must organize . . .' He just doesn't care. (male, logistics worker, Kraljevo)

These leading political and social actors occupy the system that brings about our respondents' lack of political efficacy; they construct the entire political system to be inaccessible to citizens and hence beyond their control. Citizen participation in institutions and procedures that have no transparency, and are focused on private interests and detached from the needs of citizens—and thus 'rejected'—is not seen as activity that can meaningfully influence political decisions or overall political life.

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38 Sladjana Danković and Paula M. Pickering, 'Public scepticism of internationally supported civil society organisations: norms, citizen priorities, and local groups in post-socialist Serbia', *East European Politics*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2017, 210–32.

However, even if most of our respondents do not take part in unconventional forms of political participation like supporting local political campaigns or specific kinds of activism, they do vote, notwithstanding the fact that they believe it has no impact on politics. 'I don't trust political procedures and institutions but I do vote to change them [governing elites] . . . you know how, if you don't vote for good, that's the end of the story. You choose the lesser evil, that's what you do' (female, retail worker, Belgrade). If the institutions and political process represent the Other that citizens strongly desire to change, they still lack the tools to do so given that the institutions are in the hands of the political elites.[39]

Our analyses also revealed another aspect of political rejection. Most of the respondents did not actively follow politics in the news. They informed themselves mostly through headlines in the print and online media, and they used this information to discuss political issues within close circles of friends and family where they feel safe. This finding further contributed to the perception of politics as a realm of the *Other*, where openly stating one's own political opinion could have negative consequences for one's life. There is, in fact, a contradictory element in this perception of politics, in which political issues are discussed only with close circle of friends and there is no belief that political or social engagement could bring change. In the first interviewing phase of our study, respondents made nominal complaints about political representatives and unresponsive institutions, and claimed not to use any forum or social media to exchange opinions on everyday political issues, apart from the few who named the *Facebook* pages of *Blic* and 'Odbranimo reke Stare planine'. This finding contributed to the conclusion that political discussion only took place in closed circles, which social media are certainly not.

The second phase of our study, however, is based on analysing data gathered through digital ethnography. This phase intersected with the COVID-19 pandemic in a Serbian context that had its own peculiarities, related both to the global crisis and the local environment. The digital ethnographic research was conducted in the same period that mass protests erupted in Belgrade against the new anti-COVID measures announced by the government in July 2020. From March 2020 to the beginning of May 2020, the Serbian government introduced extremely restrictive measures to fight the pandemic. Those measures went so far as to introduce curfews lasting from 5.00 p.m. on Fridays to 5.00 a.m. on Mondays. During this time all movement outside the home was prohibited, except for extreme cases. Those restrictions were abolished prematurely and completely, which led to a rise in the number of infections at the end of June. The abolition of restrictions was seen as a political decision, since the government held

39 Prodanović, Pudar Draško and Velinov, *Otete institucije u Srbiji*.

parliamentary elections on 21 June 2020. Citizens therefore saw the introduction of new restrictions as arbitrary and made under the influence of political actors, and not in the public interest, since the government initially loosened them to get re-elected.[40] When it came to vaccination, Serbia also had some specific measures. The Serbian government acquired a large stockpile of various kinds of vaccines (Pfizer, Sputnik, Sinopharm and AstraZeneca).[41] During February and March 2021, a large number of Serbian citizens got vaccinated but, after April, the demand for vaccination died down and it became obvious that at least 50 per cent of the population refused to get vaccinated.[42] This low rate of vaccination was linked by some to the relatively strong influence of anti-vaccine discourses that were propagated both online and at protests against the anti-COVID measures and vaccinations in Belgrade.[43]

The comments we have analysed offer constancy and coherence, allowing us to conclude that they are not random, but a structured discursive element of the rejection of politics. Adding to what we have identified in the quotations from the interviews, citizens in the online environment express their rejection of the specific actors that occupy positions in the system. They are the Other that corrupts the whole system and causes the rejection of politics. Some commentators even propose extreme measures in order to rectify the failings of political actors, which testifies to their emotional charge on this matter.

> Most people are AGAINST ALL POLITICIANS. (male, comment on *Blic*'s *Facebook* page)

> Ban all political parties that were a part of any government from 1990 onward as criminal organizations. Take their members' passive and active right to vote. . . . Obligatory mental health exam for their functionaries. Then let's see who they could find to lead us. (male, comment on *Blic*'s *Facebook* page)

40 Marija Pantelic, 'What were the protests in Serbia really about?', *Aljazeera Opinion* (online), 21 July 2020, available at www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/7/21/what-were-the-protests-in-serbia-really-about (viewed 14 September 2023).
41 'Mass vaccination in Serbia starts today', government press release, Belgrade, 19 January 2021, available at www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/166398/mass-vaccination-in-serbia-starts-today.php (viewed 14 September 2023).
42 Lejla Biogradlija Aksan and Furkan Abdula, 'Low vaccination rates recorded in Western Balkan countries', *Anadolou Agency* (online), 21 October 2021, available at www.aa.com.tr/en/latest-on-coronavirus-outbreak/low-vaccination-rates-recorded-in-western-balkan-countries/2397799#countries (viewed 14 September 2023).
43 Marija Vucic, 'Hate, lies and vigilantes: Serbian "anti-vaxxer" brigade plays with fire: how vaccine doubts have put the handbrake on Serbia's rapid rollout', *Balkan Insight* (online), Belgrade, 21 September 2021, available at https://balkaninsight.com/2021/09/21/hate-lies-and-vigilantes-serbian-anti-vaxxer-brigade-plays-with-fire (viewed 14 September 2023).

Figure 1   Meme with the ruling party slogan 'For Our Children', showing prominent politicians and their children (all promoted to public positions)

Obviously, the anonymity that digital space offers makes it fertile ground for free and creative expression. Besides statements, we have identified a number of memes that visually speak about the rejection of politics and focus mostly on leading figures, such as the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, and his party.

The analysis of the digital material revealed close links between the perception of political actors and the perception of experts. More precisely, immunologists and doctors were given great latitude by the Serbian government over the response to the pandemic. These experts were often described as *political* since they were affiliated with political actors in the government as members of the COVID-19 Crisis Committee (see, for example, the meme in Figure 3 depicts an immunologist, who was a member of the Committee, and who was blamed for shameful claims that elections were safe, and then advocating a lockdown). Their decisions were said to be made in the interests of politicians, and they were accused of using their scientific authority to hide that fact. The commentators, hence, characterize medical professionals as incompetent, false experts and 'servants' of the government. We can see that the affiliation of the

Figure 2   Meme with the ruling party slogan 'For Our Children', showing the president at a mass protest, in which excessive force was used on young protestors, holding the instruments used by police

experts with political figures constructs rejection, leaving them open to labelling as corrupt and dishonest.

> These Vučić experts have schizophrenic episodes. They don't even know what they're talking about. (male, comment on *Blic*'s *Facebook* page)

> People in Serbia must stand against this. It is a political and not an expert decision. The whole of Serbia must stand against this. We are not going to listen to charlatans. Vučić is even talking about forming a government; he isn't meant to be the president but should be in prison. (male, comment on *Blic*'s *Facebook* page)

> They don't know anything. They haven't known anything for months and they aren't doing anything to find out. (male, comment on *Blic*'s *Facebook* page)

The objects of the rejection of politics were clearly not limited to politicians but extended also to actors, even when coming from expert

Figure 3 'Shameful expertise' (rhymes in Serbian), 26 June 2020
21 June (Vučić's elections)   22 June
'There is no danger from corona'   'Corona is back, we're all gonna die'

communities, who took part in political life. Any affiliation with the corrupt and captured institutions automatically provoked mistrust. This went so far as to reject 'ordinary' citizens who supported political elites or dared to oppose commentators in digital spaces. We have named this element of rejection as the *horizontal* aspect, identified in discussions between various commentators or as answers to other comments. Frequent examples of such attitudes were belittling comments such as 'shut up you bot' or 'go eat a sandwich'. 'Bot' is a term that referred to sympathizers and members of political parties that were given the task of writing comments

in support of the party on social media by higher-ranked party members. The notion of a 'sandwich' came from the fact that the ruling political party in Serbia often handed out sandwiches to its members and sympathizers who attended political rallies. These kinds of comments were often used to signify dishonesty, since members of political parties who acted as bots and attended political rallies were seen as trying to secure clientelistic services, jobs or positions from the party.

This kind of labelling expanded to delegitimize any opponent, adding strongly to the polarization in online spaces. Citizens who supported the decisions of the government (even those reasonably justified) in the comments are seen to be affiliated with political actors and therefore also characterized as dishonest and corrupt. Their comments are not seen as genuine but posted with ulterior motives, constructing them as morally questionable figures. In other words, as in the case of experts, their siding with the government's decisions places them on the Other side, among rejected politicians.

Restoring faith in Serbian democracy

Our research only shows the latest phase in the development of the culture of rejection of politics among Serbian citizens. This negative relation to politics runs parallel to the mistrust of political actors and institutions and the sense of political inefficacy, whereby citizens are unwilling to participate in political life. Such a political culture has been nurtured by the state of permanent crisis existing in Serbia from the late 1980s until today.[44] The only exception was a period of state building after the 2000 ousting of Slobodan Milosević, which was promptly stopped by a new take-over of the political process and institutions. Clientelism, corruption and a lack of transparency in the political process, together with economic privatization and the rise of precarious working conditions, contributed greatly to the disappointment of citizens.

This disappointment with politics has been also intentionally fostered by politicians themselves who, paradoxically, have been using an anti-political discourse. That is, the current prime minister,[45] and even the president himself,[46] have been discrediting the opposition, labelling them negatively as 'politicians' and anti-government protests as 'political'. In their

44 Ivana Spasić, 'Promene u Srbiji u perspektivi socijalnog učenja: retrospektiva jedne ideje', *Filozofija i društvo / Philosophy and Society,* vol. 19, no. 37, 2008, 89–109.
45 'Brnabić o protestima: Ovo nema veze sa ekologijom', *Danas* (online), 4 December 2021, available at www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/brnabic-o-protestima-ovo-nema-veze-sa-ekologijom (viewed 15 September 2023).
46 'Vučić: Protesti su politički, ali građani na njima zavređuju pažnju', *RTS* (online), 29 December 2018, available at www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/politika/3372817/vucic-protesti-su-politicki-ali-gradjani-na-njima-zavredjuju-paznju.html` (viewed 15 September 2023).

discourse, these terms have a negative connotation and provoke public distrust by pointing to oppositional politicians and protesters supposedly having ulterior motives. Therefore, government actors use the notion of 'politics' in order to distance themselves from their opponents, which clearly points to the negativity of the label 'political'. The same understanding of politics can be seen in those who practise unconventional forms of political participation, like activists in some local movements.[47] Such findings tell us that anti-politics has deep roots and creates a paradoxical contrast between de facto political engagement and rejection of politics in personal narratives.

The culture of rejection of politics, in our view, seriously endangers the prospects for democratic development in Serbia. Political actors that seek to contribute to social and political changes will have to tackle this phenomenon and find a way to fight its reproduction and effects. What gives us hope is that, in the last few years, various openly democratic local movements and initiatives have been founded, and citizens' support for them has been increasing. Some examples are 'Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own', a local movement formed with the intention of fighting against the building of 'Belgrade Waterfront', which has since grown and is participating in city elections. Another example is 'Ecological Uprising', a movement initiated by citizens looking to fight a significant rise in air pollution and other ecological problems in Serbia. It remains our hope that these and similar local movements will find a way to win the trust of Serbian citizens, following the path of other countries in the region, and thereby restore faith in the democratic system as the only one that can meet the needs of citizens.

Irena Fiket is Senior Research Fellow and academic coordinator at the Laboratory for Active Citizenship at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade. Her current research interests are deliberative democracy, democratization, citizens' participation, democratic innovation, social movements and the Western Balkans. She has published in journals such as *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, *Italian Political Science Review*, *Javnost—The Public* and *European Union Politics*. She is currently serving as academic coordinator of the Jean Monnet Network 'Active Citizenship: Promoting and Advancing Innovative Democratic Practices in the Western Balkans'm and principal investigator of the Serbian team for the Horizon 2020 project EnTrust. Email: irena.fiket@ifdt.bg.ac.rs   http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3939-4089

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47 Fiket and Pudar Draško, 'Mogućnost vaninstitucionalne političke participacije unutar neresponsivnog sistema Srbije'; Miroslava Pudar, 'Savo Manojlović: Pravnik u pokretu', *Danas* (online), 30 November 2021 available at www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/savo-manojlovic-pravnik-u-pokretu (viewed 15 September 2023).

Gazela Pudar Draško is a political sociologist, and director of the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory at the University of Belgrade. Her fields of interest are deliberative democracy, participatory democratic innovations, social movements and gender. Email: gazela.pudar@instifdt.bg.ac.rs http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8361-4144

Milan Urošević is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade and Professor of Sociology of Culture in the Faculty for Musical Arts at the University of Arts in Belgrade. He received his Ph.D. in Sociology from the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Belgrade. The topic of his dissertation was 'Self-help Culture as a Technology of the Self: The Discourse Analysis of Contemporary Self-Help Manuals'. Email: milan.urosevic@ifdt.bg.ac.rs http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9754-0454