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I'd Rather Bite My Tongue Off Than Stand with Them: Paralysis of Political Engagement in Serbia[*]

Abstract: The text analyses how the discursive paralysis of political engagement in Serbia is triggered and manifested, as well as how the elements connected with this paralysis are reproduced and reinforced. We begin with the premise that the discursive paralysis of political engagement interacts with two elements: understanding politics as an inherently immoral field of activity, and the importance placed upon personal moral integrity as an essential personal resource for citizens of Serbia. Based on the empirical data from Facebook comments made on a Serbian news portal, the text analyses and presents two types of strategies used to trigger paralysis, as well as how these comments reproduce and reinforce the very perception of politics as a field of immorality and the significance of moral integrity as a personal resource. Finally, we show how these elements are reproduced independently of one another, outside their particular context of "defence" from attack and "precaution."

Keywords: antipolitics, moral integrity, paralysis of political engagement, social networks, protests

Introduction

One of the numerous dictionary definitions describes politics as an activity in which various actors "try to influence the way a country is governed."[1] Following such a definition, every protest, as a public act that appeals to a specific decision, must be considered political. On the one hand, since the Serbian Progressive Party came to power, protests in Serbia have become a regular occurrence. While the motives, causes, demands, organizers, locations, numbers, and levels of violence constantly change, one aspect remains almost constant. The struggle over labeling protests as (non)political is an inherent element of every public uprising in the last couple of decades. Indeed, there is something repulsive about that word to the extent that one of the fundamental strategies of disqualification is to declare a protest as political, while simultaneously, the first step in defending its legitimacy begins with distancing it from politics.

As active participants in almost all protests over the past decade and activists and supporters of various social movements, we have started to feel tired from constantly explaining to our friends, acquaintances, and relatives that every public uprising must simply be seen as a political act and that there is nothing inherently negative about that. Some of us have even publicly written and spoken about it. However, at one point, the activists within us fell silent, giving rise to a genuine research curiosity. Coming from three different disciplinary backgrounds – anthropology, political science, and sociology – we believed that the first step toward resolving this somewhat personal frustration is understanding why the word "politics" is so stigmatized among the citizens of Serbia.

One of the persuasive explanations was found in the book "*Kultura na delu*" by sociologist Ivana Spasić (Spasić 2013). Subsequently, by utilizing our own empirical findings, this paper attempts to elucidate how the mechanisms described by Spasić operate in practice. Finally, it should be noted that we do not claim this explanation to be the only possible one. Therefore, we see our work not only as an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of her theory but also as an invitation for other researchers to engage in this debate and offer alternative answers to why red lines are drawn above politics.

Spasić is interested in exploring the contents of banal, everyday, common-sense discourse about politics in Serbian society. Her research, which is in its conclusions in line with other literature, shows that the citizens of Serbia came to consider the political sphere as a place of immorality, and while politicians are characterized, regardless of their differences, as necessarily evil (Gilbert et al. 2008; Spasić 2013; Ilić 2014; Simić 2016; Fiket, Pavlović, Pudar Draško 2017; Lutovac 2017; Rajković 2017). This view of the political field is

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[1] Cambridge Dictionary, s.v. "Politics", accessed January 10, 2024, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/politics

unsurprising, considering the disappointment with the failures of the new democratic elites. Citizens began to see politics as a crime-ridden playground of the rich and corrupted (Greenberg 2010, 56–57). In addition to the fact that politics is seen as a sphere of immorality, upon Yugoslavia's dissolution and the widespread privatization process, moral integrity became one of the most valuable personal resources of the impoverished citizenry (Spasić 2013). The value of moral integrity became very high, and any misstep that might call it into question is avoided.

As Torcal (2006) has noted, political dissatisfaction in recent democracies is frequently the result of failure, manipulation, instability, use and abuse of institutional structures, and the piling up of bad results. The dissolution of Yugoslavia brought with it a staggering plunge in the standard of living for the majority of the former country's citizens. Wars, sanctions, mass destruction, and waves of "necessary" privatization of formerly publicly owned material resources are the major sources of pauperization for a large majority of the people. Only very few were able to profit, setting themselves up as the new capitalist class. Running counter to the (at least) declared values and principles of equality and solidarity of the former Yugoslav society (Pešić 2017b), this new capitalist class ensured for itself significant resources through so-called *primitive accumulation* (Marks 1979, 632). They also came from the ranks of politicians and their circles (Lazić 2011), a process we can observe in other Eastern European countries as well (Eyal 2000; Eyal, Szelenyi, Townsley 2001). The political and economic "transition" did not fulfill citizens' expectations (Spasić 2005; 2007; 2013; Jarić 2005; Golubović 2007; Mihailović 2010; Pudar Draško, Fiket, Vasiljević 2019). All the more, hopes were dashed, and the impoverished population was left with its own morality as a pledge for how things ought to be and once were.

Spasić notes that while we can't be sure of the effect or the size of said effect, this type of discourse connected with the significance that is placed upon moral integrity "encourages some practices or engagement, while making others less probable" (Spasić 2013, 100). She concludes that the common sense understanding of politics and politicians, expressed and reproduced through the discourse of morality, can't be an encouraging sign for the future of democracy in Serbia, as it can end up in the paralysis of political engagement (*delatna blokada*, srb.) (Spasić 2013, 131).

The phenomenon of paralysis of political engagement, which resonates with the discourse mentioned above on politics and that we heavily rely on in this paper, signifies "an absence of the idea of political mobilization" (Spasić 2013, 128). As such, there is no acceptable arena in which people can, on a collective level, articulate and affect social change. Thus, the possibility of social change is only viewed in "individualistic and psychological frames" (Spasić 2013, 128).

Finally, it is worth noting at the very beginning of this text that in the meantime, during the ten years since Ivana Spasić's study was published, there has been a partial breakthrough of the "paralysis." The passage of time is not the only thing that connects the mentioned period, but the convincing dominance of the ruling party in the political landscape of Serbia. During that period, according to the Freedom House 2020 Report, Serbia has lost its status as a partially consolidated democracy, and is – for the first time since 2003 – included among hybrid regime countries (Kmezić, Bieber 2017; Kapidžić 2020; Freedom House 2022). For that reason, or in spite of it, the partial breakthrough of the paralysis manifested in numerous examples of collective public engagement that became a regular occurrence (Jarić, Živadinović 2012a; 2012b; Pešić 2017a; Pudar Draško, Fiket, Vasiljević 2019; Delibašić, Nikolić, Vasiljević 2019; Fiket et al. 2019; Fiket, Pudar Draško 2021). However, even in changed circumstances, some elements of the paralysis of political engagement remained intact. The political field is still viewed as immoral, and politicians are still perceived as corrupt and inherently evil and as such, they are not welcomed during protests. This has often led to a paralysis, not of political engagement in a broader sense (since protests are undoubtedly a form of political engagement), but to a paralysis of institutional engagement in politics, primarily through political parties or through the support of politicians. With that in mind, we understand the paralysis of political engagement after the Serbian Progressive Party came to power as a discursive rejection of any connection to all oppositional political parties and politicians and a refusal to be recognized as belonging to the institutional political field in any capacity. In our paper, when addressing the paralysis of political engagement, we will utilize this narrower and adjusted definition.

This paper aims to elucidate how this form of discursive paralysis in political engagement manifests, activates, and reproduces itself. To achieve this, we will exemplify it by analyzing Facebook comments on posts from the portal "Blic" regarding the July protests in Belgrade in 2020. In this context, we will illustrate, using the data mentioned above, instances of statements distancing individuals from political actors as manifestations of discursive paralysis of political engagement. Additionally, we will elucidate the strategies employed by pro-government commentators to induce paralysis among citizens supportive of the protests. Lastly, we will highlight various types of defensive strategies that effectively reproduce the two elements as mentioned earlier (perception of politics as a field of immorality and the significance of moral integrity as a personal resource), which, according to Spasić (2013), are closely associated with the paralysis of political engagement. Before the analysis, we will provide a comprehensive contextual framework and outline the methodological framework and interpretative strategy.

Contextual framework

The protests focused on in this paper commenced on July 7, 2020. Their immediate trigger was the announcement of a new curfew made that day by the President of the Republic, Aleksandar Vučić.[2] To comprehend why this announcement provoked such a vehement and violent reaction from citizens, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of events and political decisions from the beginning of the pandemic to the moment of the uprising.

The state's initial response to the virus's appearance was rather lax. A member of the government's expert team, Dr. Branimir Nestorović, stated at a press conference held in February 2020 that COVID-19 was the "funniest virus" and that people could continue to live their lives completely normally. The government did not implement any measures and seemed unprepared. However, on March 15, just 18 days after this statement by Dr. Nestorović, a curfew was imposed. Thus, "in a very short period, there was a shift from one extreme to another" (Orlović 2020, 85).

That spring, regular parliamentary elections were also announced.[3] The initial mild response of the authorities could be associated precisely with this fact. Namely, here was suspicion that during the collection of signatures for the election lists, information about individuals already infected with the Coronavirus was concealed. These suspicions were fueled by the statement of Crisis Staff member Darija Kisić Tepavčević that the first infected person was registered on 01.03, only to retract and interpret it as a slip of the tongue the next day, stating that the first person infected with the Coronavirus was recorded on 06.03.2020" (Orlović 2020, 85). Election activities were later halted, and measures were significantly tightened. Nevertheless, there remained a fear among citizens that the state's decisions were made according to the political interests of the ruling party rather than the population's health needs. This fear was further deepened by the decision to lift the state of emergency on 06.05.2020 to hold elections, considering that "the profession was not convincing in explaining whether the decision was influenced by epidemiological or political (state) reasons" (Orlović 2020, 86).

The elections, boycotted by major opposition parties, were still held. The new measures were introduced with the ruling coalition securing a convincing victory. One of the controversial measures that caused resistance and dissatisfaction was the eviction of students from dormitories. On July 2, students took to the

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[2] Protest ispred Skupštine Srbije: Sukobi, suzavac i hapšenja. *Radio Slobodna Evropa.* July 7, 2020. Available at: https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30712926.html.

[3] The elections were announced on March 4, 2020 and were initially scheduled for April 26 of the same year. After the lifting of the state of emergency on May 6, elections are scheduled for June 21.

streets to oppose this decision. The eviction was eventually abandoned, but just a few days later, the president announced the reintroduction of a curfew, which proved to be the last straw. On the same day, people spontaneously gathered in front of the National Assembly. Anger and dissatisfaction were significant and evident, leading quickly to violence and escalating conflicts between citizens and the police. Following the initial burst of violence, the protests gradually became more peaceful, and after seven days, they effectively extinguished. In the first two days of the protest, "dozens of civilians and 118 police officers were injured due to violent incidents and police brutality. There were 28 documented attacks on media workers" (Đorđević 2020, 3). The state's response to the demonstrators' anger was so forceful that "at least 26 cases of police brutality have been documented" (Đorđević 2020, 3). Police officers "during the protests, struck individuals with official batons on the head and back, kicked, stomped on faces with their feet, targeted bodies with pepper spray, and knocked people off bicycles" (Đorđević 2020, 3). In addition to the riot police, who often came to the protest in official vehicles but also "camouflaged" in ambulances, the demonstrators were also attacked by the mounted police, SWAT teams and plainclothes police. On the other hand, the protesters self-organized medical teams for first aid, washed each other's eyes with saline solution and sprayed clothes with vinegar, while some of the braver (or angrier) ones tried to throw the fired tear gas shells back to the police cordons using oven and welding gloves. When it comes to protest signs, banners could be seen from both sides of the political spectrum but, interestingly, the presence of opposition politicians was met with bitter dissatisfaction, as evidenced by several incidents during which they were booed, punched, and chased away from the protest with shouts like "thieves." These events resonate with the situation in Italy, where various anti-political movements have garnered substantial public backing, as the common thread among these events lies in the refusal to accept mainstream politicians as corrupt, unrepresentative, and indifferent to authentic public concerns (Mete 2010).

As authors such as Simendić noted, the July protests are "primarily characterized by the absence of certain features, such as clear articulation of demands, ideological uniformity, or involvement in regular political currents. The demonstrators were united in dissatisfaction with how state authorities responded to the Covid-19 pandemic. Still, they did not share common political views, nor did they have a conception of how the protests should be organized and conducted" (Simendić 2022, 249). Additionally, "their goal certainly was not to assist a particular political option in coming to power, and resistance (at least to some) of the demonstrators towards the presence or participation of opposition politicians could be observed" (Simendić 2022, 249). Simendić further compares these protests to the French "yellow vests" of 2018, the protests in Turkey in 2013, and the protests in the United Kingdom in 2011 (Simendić

2022, 250). Drawing on Rancière's (2019) description of French rebels, he outlines the demonstrators from Belgrade "as individuals 1) who usually do not participate in political life; 2) whose living conditions are such that *they usually have neither the time nor the strength for rebellion*; 3) as fragmented individuals not connected by any political articulation or any *common expression*. Their unifying characteristic is exclusion from the political decision-making process" (Simendić 2022, 250).

In light of the aforementioned considerations, the July 2020 protests present a highly suitable framework for the analysis of the phenomenon central to our research. Two reasons substantiate this choice. Firstly, the period of the protests witnessed heightened political tension, as evidenced by sharp and analytically valuable comments and a highly polarized online debate. Secondly, the protest itself constitutes a political act, indicating a partial breakthrough in the paralysis of political engagement in a broader sense. It is precisely for this reason that the context of the protest is conducive to the analysis of discursive paralysis in the narrower sense as defined in this study, which can be identified even behind the façade of ostensibly non-partisan political involvement.

Methods

This research has an exploratory character. The ethnographic material was selected to represent a theoretical sample (Glaser, Strauss 2012 based on its potential to answer the theoretical problem that is at the center of this research: what are the discursive strategies that citizens use on social media, which may contribute to the reproduction of the paralysis of the political engagement? In that sense, the empirical backbone of this article[4] consists of a digital ethnography based on structured observations and reflections (Androutsopoulos 2008, Emerson, Fretz, Shaw 2011) of comments on the Facebook page of the news portal *Blic*, collected during protests of June 2020 in Belgrade.

For the purposes of this paper, we limited the collected material to individual comments and discussions on the posts on the Facebook page of the *Blic* news portal. This portal was selected as the most-read daily media, followed by a large number of Facebook users from the Serbian and mutually understandable language area. We selected comments on Facebook (rather than those under the news on the newspaper website) based on the fact that Facebook is (still) the

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[4] This article synthesizes insights gained through one of the research phases conducted within the research project *Cultures of Rejection: Conditions of Acceptability in Digital and Socio-Spatial Environments* (CuRe) in July 2020. More details on this research project and its findings are available at: http://culturesofrejection.net/ (Accessed: September 1, 2023).

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most popular social network in Serbia and on the assumption that for this rea-son, on this very social network, we can expect more confrontation of views that are important to us since we are interested in the discursive strategies employed by citizens.

The comments that make up the ethnographic corpus of material on which we base this study were collected during the period from July 7 to 12, 2020. Al-though the period in which the material was collected is extremely short – which represents one of the fundamental limitations of this study – we have selected it because in this period the most violent protests took place since the Serbian Progressive Party was in power. To analyze the impact of the protest itself on the (re)construction of existing discourses, it would be necessary to compare the comments analyzed here with the comments made in calmer times before and after the protest.

In the mentioned period, we selected 42 posts on the *Blic* Facebook page. The majority of the posts, 33 of them, were articles that dealt with news, events, and happenings from the protests themselves, while the other 9 were news ar-ticles that were thematically linked with the protests, expanding on its context, police brutality, arrests, as well as statements of the politicians about the protest. Posts, or news, were saved together with all comments available at the time of recording. The number of individual comments on posts is not uniform, as some garnered much larger attention. Finally, the total corpus of analyzed data consists of 15,671 individual comments on theoretically sampled 42 posts on the *Blic* Facebook page.

In accordance with the principles of digital ethnography focused on discur-sive analysis, systematic observations formed the basis for the selection of ma-terial (Androutsopoulos 2008, 7), as well as for a more detailed analysis of the content. As a result of such a setup, the selection itself was guided by purposive sampling, which was not done automatically[5] (by the software) but manually (by the researchers). According to the same principles, the final verdict on the relevance of individual posts or comments was also made by the researchers (Skågeby 2011, 415) themselves, that is, the authors of this text.

Our analytical strategy employed an interpretive approach that aligns with the principles of digital ethnography and emphasizes systematic observations, purposive sampling, and researchers' involvement in evaluating the relevance of the data. Thematic coding was employed initially to categorize comments systematically, identifying recurring themes and discursive patterns related to government response, police actions, political statements, and broader socio-po-

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[5] Automatic collection or "scrapping" implies the use of a program for automati-cally visiting a website, collecting, extracting, and saving its content. Both research ethics and Facebook's "Terms for Automatic Data Collection" prohibit automatic data collection without permission.

litical concerns. After the initial thematic coding, we delved into persuasive language, framing, and rhetorical devices used by commenters, examining the construction of arguments and emotional appeals. Furthermore, we paid close attention to the power dynamics within the comments, emphasizing how certain voices may dominate or marginalize others. We concluded the analytical process by synthesizing key findings and overarching discursive strategies that contribute to the research's central inquiry into the reproduction of political disengagement.

Interpretation

Our analysis comprises three parts. In the first, we look through the collected material to examine the way in which paralysis is triggered. More specifically, we will show two types of comments that trigger it: we have designated the first type as *marking* and the second as a *call to determination*. In the second part, we examine the way paralysis of political engagement manifests at the same time as it is reproduced and reinforced. We have noted two types of comments that express such paralysis, designating them as *defense* and *precaution*. This kind of comments are usually made by critics of the current government in Serbia. Finally, in the third part, we show how each of the elements, whose interplay results in paralysis, can also be reproduced separately.

Before we go further into the analysis of the material, we would like to briefly illustrate the way political dissatisfaction is expressed in the collected comments. Namely, the government is described as "dictatorial", "thieving", "fascist", and "incompetent". It stands accused of "seeking to fleece the country, protect the mafia, lie, cheat at elections, buy off voters using taxpayer money, oppresses peaceful citizens." One comment reads, "It's awful what's going on! We can't work or survive." Another adds that they wish to have "a better future. No offense, but something's wrong with you if you're ok with this whole situation in Serbia." Speaking of the July 2020 protests, one of the comments says that people "have had enough shit from this government!" Some comments underscore that "THE PEOPLE HAVE A RIGHT TO BE UNHAPPY, PERIOD."

Already in these few comments, we can see that the dissatisfaction with the current regime is rather strong. However, the paralysis of (further) political engagement that resonates with a moral understanding of politics and morality as an important personal resource, lowers the potency of dissatisfaction, which remains unarticulated as a concrete political alternative. Furthermore, Aleksandar Vučić, the President of Serbia and of the parliamentary majority party – in other words, the man with the greatest amount of power and who personifies the regime (Orlović 2017) – is described as a "moral and personal monstrosity." Already, in this criticism, we can glean the understanding of politics as immoral.

Although the citizens of Serbia agree that politics is indeed the way to conduct change, political field is also perceived as a space of immorality where corrupt actors accomplish narrowly selfish interests at the cost of the quality of life of "ordinary citizens" (Jovanović, Vučićević 2021). Politics is closed off to "ordinary" people and is not seen as a "place where a person seeking to engage publicly could express themselves, to contribute to making society better, in accordance with their beliefs and values" (Spasić 2013, 130). From the perspective of citizens, moral beliefs and values can be followed only within a narrow and isolated private sphere. Any step into the public or political sphere necessarily corrupts a person who certainly becomes immoral (Spasić 2013; Fiket, Pavlović, Pudar Draško 2017; Lutovac 2017). Those who cross this border are considered "moral monstrosities". The view of politicians as people unworthy of respect has become self-evident. It is something all agree upon as a matter of course and "is not something in need of particular proof" (Spasić 2013, 123).

On the other side, high significance ascribed to citizens' own moral integrity is a critical feature of anti-political discourse we observed in the corpus of analyzed comments. It is a feature that, along with the view of politics as an immoral activity, contributes to the reproduction of the paralysis of political engagement. Sociologists, such as Ivana Spasić, already noted this feature, interpreting it as a result of disappointment with the democratic changes. As this author claims: "personal moral integrity became a resource in the true sense of the term: people seek to acquire something, the more, the better, and try to preserve and advance it, are invested in this, and are ready to sacrifice for it" (Spasić 2013, 102).

The same conclusions were reached by other researchers, such as Stef Jansen (Jansen 2015), Larisa Kurtović (Kurtović 2015; 2019; 2021), and Heleen Touquet (Touquet 2015) looking at the attitudes of citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina towards politics. Although the political systems are significantly different from one another, citizens of both post-Yugoslav states are similarly disaffected by the results of the so-called transition and the role of politicians. The latter is seen as the major cause of failure, while citizens spend their leisure time, usually "over coffee," in "'barking' [*lajati*] at politicians" (Jansen 2015, 192). Jansen's interlocutors considered politicians as "cynical, power-hungry, greedy schemers, liars and thieves" (Jansen 2015, 192) who are charged with wantonness, laziness, and negligence (Jansen 2015, 192).

Such attitudes towards politicians in public discourse spill over into attitudes about the political field in a broader sense and resonate with Kolind's anthropological analysis of the various meanings of politics (Kolind 2008, 123–34). The first meaning he discerns corresponds with our observations that politics (*Politika*, srb.) is perceived as a moral category or, how Heleen Touquet phrased it: "a separate universe of (immoral) values, of people who pursue power for the

sake of it, who are egotistical and untrustworthy" (Touquete 2015, 398–399). Other authors, such as Schmitt (2007), see *depoliticization* not only as the disappearance of the distinction between friend and enemy but also the diffusion of the political into economics and ethics (Schmitt 2007, 26–35). In a similar line, according to Arda Bilgen, who researched economization and anti-political discourses regarding developmental projects in Turkey, "when the political is defined in economic and ethical terms, political entities are regarded as economic competitors and debating adversaries" (Bilgen 2019, 408). In the comments we processed, the citizens of Serbia express their resistance to exactly this meaning or understanding of politics as immoral, egoistical and economized.

Triggering the Paralysis of Political Engagement

Given that politics is seen as immoral and that citizens put a lot of stock in moral integrity (Kolind 2008; Spasić 2013; Touquete 2015; Fiket, Pudar Draško, Urošević 2022), political determination (usually as oppositional) or insistence on it, almost as a rule triggers paralysis in critics of the regime. In what follows, we will present two types of comments that trigger the paralysis.

1. MARKING

We have called the first type *marking*. Comments posted by persons sympathetic to the current ruling regime in Serbia *mark* critics of the government as supporters of other political parties and their leaders. They stand accused of being on the payroll of Dragan Đilas.[6] One comment thus states: "well, my dear Desa, if you think the previous government was good, something is wrong with you." Another is more explicit, "Đilas's clowns! Lock these crazies up!". Yet a third marks not only people commenting, but all participants of the protest: "Đilas's stooges couldn't wait to create mayhem in town." A fourth also refers to the protesters: "Tell Đilas to bring out his own kids onto the street, not to sacrifice others' children, and tell Boško Obradović that this is the 21st century and women cannot be slapped around."

Such comments put forward the idea that protesters, especially the ones who attacked the government buildings, were paid agents of political parties. As Larisa Kurtović argues for the case of the violent protests in Tuzla in 2014, within the Serbian context too "such doubts did not originate in unfounded paranoia, but in the lessons learned through dealings with the post-war political elites, which in their effort to maintain power routinely resort to violence, bribes, blackmail and threats" (Kurtović 2015, 647). Given the normalization of ter-

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[6] As the leader of the largest opposition party, Dragan Đilas represents a symbol of the entire opposition. Other opposition leaders are mentioned less frequently.

ror-related incidents, some commentors were distrustful of the idea of authenthic righteous anger of citizens, and voiced their opinion that protestors were co-opted by a political plot, *marking* the critics of the regime and delegitimizing the protests altogether.

Comments of this nature were almost always followed by critics of the regime distancing themselves from opposition politicians and politics entirely, and that counter-strategies will be covered in the next section. Finally, we recognize *marking* as a type of comment that labels critics of the government as politically biased which, in circumstances of seeing politics as immoral, implies a risk of loss of moral integrity as an important personal resource. As morality as a resource is too important (Spasić 2013), and the immorality of politics is grounded in common sense (Spasić 2013), the expected result is paralysis, expressed through withdrawal and distancing from the further online debate.

2. CALL TO DETERMINATION

The second discursive strategy to trigger paralysis of political engagement in online discourse we titled *call to determination*. Comments that employ this strategy do not label critics of the regime as advocates of opposition parties, but put them in a spotlight and call them upon to elaborate their alternative to the current regime in Serbia.

This discursive strategy is similar to *marking* in a way that criticism of the government is possible up to the point of political determination. However, such name-calling and invitations to propose an alternative in an online discussion were more difficult to avoid and redirect the flow of the debate. As such, this discursive strategy more often led to discussion dying down. By clearly siding with an alternative, the threshold into immoral politics would have been crossed, risking the loss of moral integrity. So, to avoid the latter, critics withdraw or disengage from further online discussion.

Counter-strategies and Reproduction of Perception of Politics as Immoral

In the previous section, we have outlined two discursive strategies or types of online comments that trigger paralysis of political engagement within the social media discourse in Serbia. In this section, we will show how the paralysis manifests through the comments of the critics of the government. The first type of manifestation of paralysis is reactive one – a response to a *call to determination* and *marking*.

Commenters critical of the regime most often responded to the discursive strategy of *marking* in the following way:

Marking 1: “Well my dear Desa, if you thought the previous government was good, then there is something wrong with you.”
Defense 1: “The previous one was not good either. It goes from bad to worse.”

Marking 2: “What people? Đilas’s clowns! Lock up these crazies!”
Defense 2: “Screw both Đilas and Vučić. Do you even have a family, you sell-out for a sandwich!”

Marking 3: “Đilas’s stooges couldn’t wait to create mayhem in town.”
Defense 3: “What are you talking about? You’ve been so brainwashed that you just cluck away Đilas, Đilas, Đilas...screw your PinkTV and watching those morons. These [protesters] are ordinary people, not some political parties...turn off that TV of yours.”

Marking 4: “Tell Đilas to bring out his own kids, not to sacrifice others’ children, and tell Boško Obradović that this is the 21st century and women cannot be slapped around.”
Defense 4: “I would only spit on all of them. I’d rather bite my tongue off than speak to them, vote for them, or stand with them.”

The last *defense* comment (4) is a good illustration of how the paralysis operates in an online discourse. The critic wishes to leave no doubt in the public comment section that they have nothing to do with any politician or political party. Their need to morally distance themselves from politics means that the criticism of the government simply turns into a criticism of the opposition. The commentor symbolically states (“biting one’s tongue off”) that they would rather disavow the possibility of criticism entirely than support any political option – because it is political.

Jessica Greenberg underscores the dilemma that occurs when politics is regarded as an inherently immoral field of activity, while morality becomes an important personal resource: “how to be a Serbian citizen, a democratic participant, *and* a moral subject” (Greenberg 2010, 63). In other words, “if emerging from the narrow circle of friends and family requires the abnegation of (as they say) everything people care about, is not paralysis the inevitable result” (Spasić 2013, 122)?

Furthermore, this example (Defense 4) illustrates that the given dilemma is resolved to the advantage of moral integrity. Not only does this result in ending the political discusion and paralysis of online political engagement, but it reproduces and strengthens the perception of political field as inherently immoral. Moral integrity is further buttressed as a highly important resource, while politics is cemented as immoral, and its actors are justifiably “spat upon.” Similarly, yet somewhat less explicitly, these elements are reproduced and strengthened in the paralysis of political engagement in the first three examples of counter strategies or defenses.

However, even though much less often, it is worth mentioning that some commentators critical of the regime responded to the *marking* comments by pointing out that the dynamics of the protests was a direct response to the fact that the government has systematically ignored numerous past peaceful, humorous and "politically correct" protests. By simply ignoring the accusations and the moralist discourse of *marking* althogether, such commenters returned the focus of the debate to righteous indignation and reasons for protest, often pointing to police brutality. As Kurtović insightfully points out in the case of violent protests in Tuzla in 2014, and that we find applicable in case of Belgrade in 2020 too, such "political hooligans" were "an updated, radicalized version of the protestor, a product of a lesson-learned that political elites operate exclusively – and therefore can only be addressed – through the language of violence" (Kurtović 2015, 649). Finally such scarce comments are not the subject of our further analysis since commentators do not fall for the traps and discursive strategies that lure them into narrowing the political field and political engagement on parliamentary politics and moralist discourses.

When it comes to discursive strategy, or the "attack" by *calling to determination*, these comments frequently took form of "Yeah, what is your option if you've got one," or "So, who would you put in power? Đilas? Sergej? Šešelj?". In response, counter strategies were predominantly formulated in the following manner:

> "Personally, the ones in power now are awful, and I'm not even sure that there's anyone better, it's all the same sh*t, I did not vote, nor will I."
> "People are sick and tired and I get them, they're 100% right. It's a pity there is not a single normal person to be head of the state. We're facing a catastrophe."
> "We don't even have an opposition, that's the biggest problem, the people themselves have to rise up..."

It is to be expected for the *call to determination* to elicit a less vehement defense than *marking*, but we nevertheless still see the triggering of paralysis of (further) political engagement in the comment section. Showcased examples illustrate that commentators more or less explicitly distance themselves from the opposition, but also from political engagement through political parties. The reproduction of the understanding of politics as immoral is less conspicuous, but can implicitly be gleaned through the differentiation constantly made between "the people" and "the politicians".

In addition to the *defense* as the first type of discursive counter-strategy that perpetuates the paralysis of engagement and reproduction of its constitutive elements in online discourse, we have recognized another type of frequent reply. The second type of counter-strategy we observed we label as *precaution*. Namely, comentors critical of the current government in Serbia often take the

precaution to distance and disavow political parties in general. Such criticism is already positioned within the discourse of paralysis of political engagement. Some of the comments which succinctly illustrate this discursive mechanism are as follows:

> "I don't support any party, but what is happening is awful! We can't work or survive."
>
> "I don't want to be in power, but I do want a better future. No offense, but something's wrong with you if you're ok with this whole situation in Serbia."
>
> "SERBIA CANNOT BE DIVIDED INTO VUČIĆ'S AND ĐILAS'S, NOR AM I EITHER OF THEIR SON, I HAVE A FATHER AND MOTHER AND I'M THEIRS, THE PEOPLE HAVE A RIGHT TO BE UNHAPPY, PERIOD."

In these comments critical of the regime, paralysis of political engagement manifests through foreclosing any political option, as a precaution, from the start. If we look closer into the third comment, we see it displays a paradigmatic distancing from the public, corrupted, and immoral sphere of politics, into the pure haven of private life (Spasić 2013) – "(...) nor am I etiher of their son, I have a father and mother and I'm theirs (...)". By withdrawing to the proverbial moral purity and superiority of the family and the private sphere, the understanding of politics as immoral is further reproduced and reinforced in the online discourse.

Finally, one of the counter-strategies to "call to determination" that we observed was denouncing commenters as "trolls" and "bots". However, the gathered empirical data does not allow us to consider whether the comments sympathetic to the regime deploy such strategies in a planned and organized manner with the purpose of astroturfing and triggering paralysis of political engagement, thus reducing the potency of dissatisfaction. However, since organized internet warfare is not uncharacteristic of the current government (Petrović 2018; Bush 2020; Kleut 2020) the possibility cannot be ruled out either. Astroturfing aside, the reason we will not delve into further interpretation of such comments is because they don't reproduce the paralysis of political engagement in online debate. Although the mobilizing and political potential of such comments, which potentially further polarize the already polarized public, is debatable, the discussion about political attitudes and preferences on social networks does not die down with such comments, but is further ignited. However, such comments – unproductive, full of ad hominem arguments and contrary to the values of democratic discussion as they can get – still bypass the most obvious pitfalls of discursive strategies that provoke the silencing of expressions of dissatisfaction and political discussion on social media.

Examples of Independent Reproduction
of Perception of Politics as Inherently Immoral

In this section we will present four examples of paralysis of political engagement in online discourse that can be reproduced and reinforced independently, and not exclusively as reactive counter-strategies.

Comments referencing the protest serve as illustrations of the reproduction of two elements (perception of politics as a field of immorality and the significance of moral integrity) that Spasić (2013) contends are closely associated with the paralysis of political engagement. In the observed Facebook comment section, the protest is mostly framed as "the people's, not political". Majority of such comments insist that the participants are "ordinary, normal people," that the "people have arisen, not the opposition," and that "there is no room for any politician, any party, absolutely none."

The protest has been cleansed of politics and politicians, which temporarily suspended the paralysis of the political engagement in broader sense. Nevertheless, this also reinforced the perception of politics as inherently immoral and corrupted that contributes to the paralysis of political engagement. As Heleen Touquet observes in the case of Sarajevo 2008 protests (Touquet 2015) such apolitical frame comprises two identities. On one side, the organisers and protesters publicly present themselves as apolitical. On the other side, simultaneously, they "relegate politicians and politics to the realm of the amoral and irresponsible" (Touquet 2015,398).

Such a view of politics as unacceptable is not only reinforced, but even surpasses the reasoning behind the struggle, is concisely illustrated by the following comment: "If I see a single politician here, I'm going home."

Another comment that gained lot of validation and support (both verbal and in form of likes) stated that "politicians step even over the dead." This comment describes politicians in strictly moral categories. By doing so, such comments reproduce and reinforce the perception of politics as contaminated, immoral, dirty, and so on.

The third example is perhaps the most paradigmatic illustration of the reproduction of the importance of moral integrity and the immorality of politics: "woe be the country where the children study politics." The comment nearly Biblically prophesied catastrophe due to the fusion of incompatible elements: child innocence and politics' uncleanliness. In other words, the comment warns of the deleterious effects of breaching the line between the public and private spheres, and implicitly calling for its reinforcing.

Finally, the fourth common discursive example in which characterization of the political field as immoral is perpetuated is by using the terms politics, politician, and political as synonymous with morally unacceptable and damaging

activity. This strategy was overrepresented in comments that were critical of the Covid-19 crisis team (Brujić 2020, Pišev, Žikić, Stajić 2020). Such comments bitterly stated that "all your decisions are entirely political" while one crisis team member, the epidemiologist, Darija Kisić Tepavčević[7] was advised to "stop doing politics and listening to politicians, and do your job."

Concluding Remarks

In the first part of our text, we contextualized and defined the understanding of politics as immoral, and moral integrity as an essential personal resource. We built on the thesis of Ivana Spasić that the interaction of these two elements can lead to a paralysis of political engagement. The impossible dilemma between one's own morality and political agency usually resolves in favour of the preservation of personal moral integrity. In this way, it further strenghtens the perception of political field as inherently immoral and perpetuates the possibility of paralysis of political engagement. Our text inquired about how this process unfolds.

We recognized two types of comments that trigger the paralysis, terming them *marking* and *call to determination*. We further identified two types of comments through which the paralysis manifests. The first type we call *defense*, and the second is *precaution*. We showed that paralysis manifests reactivley: as a *defense* to *a call to determination* and *marking* but also as a *precaution*. Finally, we showed how these reactive strategies lead back to the reproduction and reinforcement of the premise of the immorality of politics, that is, of moral integrity as an important resource, foreclosing any potential germ of articulated political action.

In the concluding segment of our analysis, we identified the existence of comments wherein the elements associated with paralysis are replicated independently. These comments do not manifest as responses to specific attacks; hence, they maintain a certain degree of independence in that regard. Within these comments, politicians are depicted as undesirable and inherently immoral and the amalgamation of purity and innocence with the political sphere is perceived as accursed, and mere involvement in politics becomes synonymous with something unfavorable.

This study is subject to several methodological limitations that warrant consideration when interpreting its findings. Firstly, the sample size of the re-

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[7] Darija Kisić Tepavčević is an epidemiologist and politician. During 2020 she was a member of COVID-19 crisis team. She served as minister of labour, employment, veteran and social policy from 2020 to 2022 and as minister of family welfare and demography since 2022. Kisić Tepavčević joinined the Serbian Progressive Party in 2021.

searched posts, totaling 42, may limit the generalizability of the results to a broader context. However, the total number of analyzed comments on these posts is 15,671, which we consider a sufficient number to derive theoretical interpretations from. In any case, a larger and more diverse dataset could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation. On the other hand, the exclusive focus on a single media source, namely a news portal *Blic*, introduces a potential bias in the selection of content. Different media outlets may present information in distinct ways, influencing the nature of the discourse analyzed. To enhance the study's robustness, future research should incorporate a variety of media channels to capture a more comprehensive range of perspectives. Additionally, the temporal scope of the study, restricted to the purposefully selected albeit relatively brief period from July 7 to July 12, 2020, may limit the ability to discern long-term trends or changes in public discourse. A more extended time frame would enable a more nuanced analysis of the evolving nature of the discourse over time. Despite these limitations, the current study provides valuable insights on discursive strategies that perpetuate the perception of political field as inherently immoral, possibly triggering the paralysis of political engagement among Serbian citizens. However, the caution should be exercised when extrapolating these findings beyond the specified constraints.

Another significant limitation of this study is of contextual nature and refers to the process of "digital astroturfing" (Kovic et al. 2018; Santini et al. 2018; Kleut 2020). Furthermore, it is imperative to acknowledge a notable limitation pertaining to the study's inability to discern whether the interpreted comments were influenced by astroturfing. This research disclaims any ambitions or instruments aimed at identifying astroturfing activities within the analyzed material. Despite increasing cases cited of manipulation in the local (digital) public sphere (Petrović 2018), in the words of Jelena Kleut, there is "still not enough research about what the public already knows very well: that there is an organized network of people that pollutes the public sphere, 'astroturfing' and 'planting' false seeds of support for the ruling party" (Kleut 2020, 151). Our research had no ambitions, nor instruments, to determine whether interpreted comments were the result of astroturfing. Bearing in mind that "Serbia's online public sphere is one of the most polluted, if not the most polluted, in the world" (Petrović 2018, 20), the pervasiveness of this technique of digital manipulation of the public, and the lack of trust it carries certainly contribute to the further polarization of the public (Keller et al. 2019), increasing the public's reticence to engage in politics. The absence of mechanisms to detect astroturfing undermines the study's capacity to differentiate between genuine public opinion and strategically orchestrated campaigns. However, we believe that this shortcoming does not compromise the insights on different discursive mechanisms that potentially trigger and reproduce the paralysis of political engagement. Never-

theless, future research endeavors in this domain would benefit from incorporating methodologies or tools designed to recognize astroturfing efforts, ensuring a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the dynamics influencing online discourse. Acknowledging this limitation is crucial for maintaining transparency and contextualizing the study's outcomes within the scope of its deliberate investigative boundaries.

In this article we have noted that strong emphasis on morality as personal resource, coupled with perception of politics as immoral leads to social atomization and withdrawal of citizens into the safety of the personal sphere. It would be tempting to see morality as the factor putting the brakes on the consolidation of democracy, but this would not be entirely correct. Our intention is only to show one aspect, an important one in our view, in why that is the case. That said, a new research is needed to explore other possible factors at play which help reproduce and strengthen the paralysis of political engagement. Even though previous research suggests that a similar phenomenon could be observed in other post-Yugoslav societies, a new research is needed to ensure that is the case.

The perception of politics as intrinsically corrupt and morally questionable often results in a passive attitude towards political involvement, the proliferation of anti-political sentiments, and a general reluctance to take political action. To address the paralysis of political engagement and encourage active participation among citizens, one potential approach is to shift the discourse from moral considerations to values of solidarity and empathy, as suggested by Vasiljević (2021) and Ilić (2014). Conversely, maintaining moral integrity and motivation would not inherently deter political involvement if the perception of politics as inherently immoral could be overcome. In essence, dissociating politics as an activity from the historical actions of its participants – viewing it as a means for organizing communal life – would eliminate the concern over moral integrity as a personal resource. These considerations provide avenues for further exploration in researching this topic.

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Radije bih sebi odgrizao jezik nego da ih podržim:
paraliza političkog aktivizma u Srbiji

U tekstu se analizira kako se pokreće i manifestuje diskurzivna paraliza političkog aktivizma u Srbiji, kao i kako se reprodukuju i pojačavaju elementi povezani sa ovom paralizom. Počinjemo sa pretpostavkom da diskurzivna paraliza političkog aktivizma stupa u interakciju sa dva elementa: razumevanjem politike kao inherentno nemoralnog polja delovanja i važnošću koja se daje ličnom moralnom integritetu kao najvažnijem ličnom resursu za građane Srbije. Na osnovu empirijskih podataka Facebook komentara na srpskom novinskom portalu, u tekstu se analiziraju i predstavljaju dve vrste strategija koje se koriste za pokretanje paralize, kao i kako ti komentari reprodukuju i pojačavaju samu percepciju politike kao oblasti nemorala i važnost moralnog integriteta kao ličnog resursa. Konačno, pokazujemo kako se ovi elementi reprodukuju nezavisno jedan od drugog, izvan njihovog specifičnog konteksta „odbrane" od napada i „predostrožnosti".

Ključne reči: antipolitika, moralni integritet, paraliza političkog aktivizma, društveni mediji, protesti

Je préférerais me faire couper la langue que de les soutenir:
Paralysie de l'activisme politique en Serbie

Dans le texte est analysé de quelle manière apparaît et se manifeste une paralysie discursive de l'activisme politique en Serbie, puis comment se reproduisent et accentuent les éléments liés à cette paralysie. Nous commençons par l'hypothèse que la paralysie discursive de l'activisme politique entre en interaction avec deux éléments: l'appréhension de la politique comme d'un champ d'action intrinsèquement immoral et l'importance donnée à l'intégrité personnelle morale comme ressource personnelle la plus importante pour les citoyens de Serbie. À partir des données empiriques tirées des commentaires Facebook

sur le portail d'un journal serbe, dans le texte sont analysées et présentées deux sortes de stratégies utilisées pour la mise en marche de la paralysie, puis comment ces commentaires reproduisent et accentuent la perception même de la politique comme d'un domaine d'immoralité et l'importance de l'intégrité morale comme ressource personnelle. Enfin, nous montrons comment ces éléments se reproduisent indépendamment l'un de l'autre, en dehors de leur contexte particulier de « défense » des attaques et de « précaution ».