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Political Activism in Serbia

Abstract. The authors examine the characteristics and factors shaping political activism in Serbia. Their analysis is based on a national representative sample (N = 2,211). Their research findings show that in general, Serbian citizens are more inclined to pursue certain unconventional or newer forms of political activism such as ethical and political consumption and petition-signing than older forms of political participation. Certain traditional political activities are still practised, such as membership of political parties and making direct contact with politicians, while newer ones like occupation of public spaces and protest activities are relatively rare. The analyses demonstrate that participation in both traditional and newer forms of politics becomes more likely as resources available to individuals increase, both economic and educational. Traditional forms of political participation tend to be increasingly preferred as people become older, while the unconventional forms are more popular among the younger generation.

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Introduction

Over the past half century the interest of social scientists in political activism has waxed and waned, largely under the influence of changes to the dominant patterns of civic engagement in politics. Whereas during the 1950s and 1960s the focus of scholars was on electoral behaviour, during the 1970s their attention turned to protest activism. The eighties breathed new life into voluntary engagement within the ‘third sector’, which directed research towards civil society, with the emphasis on various voluntary associations.¹ In the West, in the final decade of the 20th century there were marked declines in both citizen engagement through conventional mechanisms of political participation and

¹ Jan W. van Deth, A Conceptual Map of Political Participation, *Acta Politica* 49 (2014), 349–367, DOI: 10.1057/ap.2014.6. All internet references were accessed on 4 August 2020.

social capital, which encouraged scholars to focus their attention on the factors contributing to what they saw as an erosion of participatory democracy.²

Responding to the notion of a crisis of democracy at the start of the new millennium, political scientists began instead to suggest that what was happening amounted not to a decline in political engagement but merely a transformation in how it manifested itself. The change was characterised by falling interest in conventional forms of engagement in public life, above all voting for and membership of political parties, but also by the parallel development of new forms of activism. A type of personalised activism has been made possible by new information and communication technologies operating beyond the traditional political sphere, and new mechanisms have been developed for participation in public life.³

Such new trends in the development of political activism have been grafted onto the experience of Western democratic societies, for beyond that setting the trajectory of political activism has followed a somewhat different arc. The topic itself became prevalent only with the processes of democratisation in the final decade of the 20th century, when assistance was most pressingly needed with development of democratic institutions, strengthening of civil society and fostering of civic participation. Democratisation also meant new governance models were needed for which leadership was required from governments of more developed countries, primarily the United States (US) and European Union (EU), but including development agencies and various non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The recipients were of course the former socialist countries and former colonies.⁴ Given the changes in civic action occurring in the West and the emergence of new forms of activism such as ethical/political consumption, lifestyle politics, and online activism which have blurred the relatively clear understanding of what political participation (or activism) is and what it is not, our aim here is to examine the prevalence of various forms of political activism in Serbia, both new and old, as well as the factors that influence them.

² Rusell Dalton, *Citizen Politics in Western Democracies*, New Jersey 2006; Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone. The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York 2000.

³ Lance W. Bennett, *Civic Life Online. Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth*, Cambridge 2008; Lance W. Bennett, *The Uncivic Culture. Communication, Identity, and the Rise of Lifestyle Politics*, *Political Science and Politics* 31, no. 4 (1998), 741–761, DOI: 10.1017/S1049096500053270.

⁴ Peter Burnell, ed, *Democracy Assistance. International Cooperation for Democratization*, London 2000.

Political Activism

Democracy theorists generally agree that political participation is an essential precondition for the development of democracy⁵—more participation being generally believed to mean more democracy. However, among the proponents of participatory democracy and democratic realism there has never been consensus on how much participation is necessary for democracy to develop unhindered.⁶ According to the champions of participatory democracy, the involvement of citizens in the political process can allow democratic legitimacy to be enhanced. They consider that it narrows the gap between people and government, increases society's problem-solving capacities and secures public support, which at once ensures better decisions and the ability to implement them more smoothly.⁷ Democratic realists, on the other hand, assume that democratic vitality depends on conventional political participation, and in their research they focus on electoral behaviour.⁸

Political activism as a type of participation can be broadly defined as a set of varied activities that influence political decision-making and the actions of those in power.⁹ To this day one of the most commonly used definitions of political activism is that of Sidney Verba and Norman Nie, developed in the 1970s. According to Verba and Nie, 'Political participation refers to those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of government personnel and/or the actions they take.'¹⁰

⁵ van Deth, A Conceptual Map of Political Participation, 350; Sidney Verba / Norman Nie, *Participation in America*, New York 1972; Sidney Verba / Kay Lehman Schlozman / Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality. Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*, Cambridge 1995; Jan W. van Deth, *What is Political Participation?*, Oxford Research Encyclopedias, November 2016, DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.68; Carol Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, Cambridge 1970.

⁶ Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*; Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, New York 2003; Giovanni Sartori, *The Theory of Democracy Revisited*, Vol. 2, Chatham 1987.

⁷ Ank Michels, *Citizen Participation in Local Policy Making. Design and Democracy*, *International Journal of Public Administration* 35, no. 4 (2012), 285–292, 286, DOI: 10.1080/01900692.2012.661301.

⁸ Pippa Norris, *Democratic Phoenix. Reinventing Political Activism*, New York 2002.

⁹ Verba / Nie, *Participation in America*, 2; Verba / Lehman Schlozman / Brady, *Voice and Equality*; van Deth, *A Conceptual Map of Political Participation*; Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*.

¹⁰ Verba / Nie, *Participation in America*, 2; cf. Jan W. van Deth, *Studying Political Participation. Towards a Theory of Everything?*, Paper presented at the Joint Session of Workshops of the European Consortium for Political Research, Grenoble 6–11 April 2001, <https://ecpr.eu/Filestore/PaperProposal/c8b57aab-51d9-4aca-b65d-4510ccfc19a3.pdf>; Jan Teorell, *Political Participation and Three Theories of Democracy. A Research Inventory and Agenda*, *European Journal of Political Research* 45, no. 5 (2006), 787–810, DOI: 10.1111/j.1475-6765.2006.00636.x.

Before we embark on further deliberations on political activism it is important to emphasise that the understanding of political participation that has established itself most firmly in the political scientific literature on democracy is one that centres on public involvement in decision making, with the implicit assumption that there is broad support for the existing political order which is considered democratic. On the other hand and significantly influenced by the study of social movements, the literature of sociology is more inclined to use the term 'activism' with the connotation of challenging the existing order. The distinction aligns somewhat with what Ronald Inglehart sees as 'elite directed activities', which include voting in elections, membership of political parties and so forth, and as 'elite directing activities', which can take place beyond the institutional setting and can include, among other things, participation in social movements and the occupation of public space.¹¹ For our purposes here, we decided to use both terms—activism and participation—while keeping in mind that the term 'participation' implies involvement in a system that is, in principle at least, accepted, whereas 'activism' includes forms of action intended to challenge the existing political system. Our reasoning for our decision arose from our awareness of the broadening of what is considered political. In fact, with the emergence of lifestyle politics, which differ significantly from more conventional forms of political participation such as voting and membership of political parties, it has become impossible to observe the diversity of political activity without using both terms.

Personalised politics, variously referred to in the literature as 'life politics' (Anthony Giddens¹²), 'subpolitics' (Ulrich Beck¹³), 'lifestyle politics' (Lance Bennett¹⁴) refers primarily to forms of political activity that go beyond traditional distinctions between the public and private spheres. The point is that activities in the private sphere can have political significance when they pertain to public matters, just as the private can become a subject for public engagement. We might define lifestyle politics as an individual's conscious decision to use the private sphere to take responsibility for broader social matters. A private position then becomes a political stance; a project and mode of action. Lifestyle politics presupposes a commitment to live and behave

¹¹ Ronald Inglehart, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*, Princeton 1990 as cited in Marko Kovačić / Danijela Dolenec, *Youth Participation in Eastern Europe in the Age of the Austerity*, in: Sarah Pickars / Judith Bessant, eds, *Young People Regenerating Politics in Times of Crisis*, London 2017, 375–394, 381.

¹² Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Stanford 1991.

¹³ Ulrich Beck, *What Is Globalization?*, Cambridge 2000.

¹⁴ Lance W. Bennett, *The UnCivic Culture. Communication, Identity, and the Rise of Lifestyle Politics*, Ithiel de Sola Pool Lecture, American Political Science Association, *P. S.: Political Science and Politics* 31, no. 4 (1998), 41–61.

consistently and in accordance with specific principles, and to do so both privately and in public.¹⁵

Types and Modalities of Political Activism

We find many attempts in the literature to classify the various types of political activism. Sydney Verba and Norman Nie come to mind again as the proponents of one of the first typologies. They drew distinctions among four forms of participation, identifying voting, campaigning—primarily through membership of political parties and donating money for their activities—contacting of public officials, and being active locally.¹⁶

In the West, as representative democracy matured and suffrage extended, from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s various types of electoral behaviour emerged, among them voting, membership of political parties, participation in political campaigns, and direct contact with politicians. Such participation is still referred to as ‘conventional participation’ and is characterised by engagement with the existing political system using the legal means designed for the purpose. However, the typology of forms of political action has expanded significantly since Verba and Nie. With the rise of new social movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s, political activism took on a dimension of conflict as protest became one of the modes of public participation in politics. Because protest did not follow the norms of the day, such activities came to be known as ‘unconventional participation’, a qualification which, though somewhat out-dated, remains in use in the literature even today.

During the 1980s, with the steady advance of neoliberalism the concept of the welfare state became weakened, with the result that various civil society associations took over provision of a significant number of social services. A form of ‘civic’ activism therefore developed, requiring primarily the engagement of volunteers for humanitarian and charitable work. The 1990s were then characterised by a surge in new forms of individualised collective action and the profusion of lifestyle politics,¹⁷ which, in the 21st century, colonised the world of online social media where they took on new forms, such as ‘connective action’.¹⁸ Also unfolding, in parallel with the gradual growth of the repertoire of

¹⁵ Michele Micheletti / Dietlind Stolle, *Vegetarianism. A Lifestyle Politics?*, in: Michele Micheletti / Andrew McFarland, eds, *Creative Participation. Responsibility-Taking in the Political World*, London 2012, 125–145, 126–128.

¹⁶ Verba / Nie, *Participation in America*, 56–63.

¹⁷ Michele Micheletti, *Why Political Consumerism?*, in: Michele Micheletti, ed, *Political Virtue and Shopping. Individuals, Consumerism and Collective Action*, New York 2003, 1–36.

¹⁸ Lance W. Bennet / Alexandra Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action*, *Information, Communication and Society* 15, no. 5 (2012), 739–768, DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661.

Table 1. The Growing Repertoire of Political Activism

<i>Period</i>	<i>Forms of Political Engagement</i>	<i>Commonly Accepted Designation</i>
1940–1950 Expanding suffrage	Participation in elections, membership of political parties	Political participation (conventional)
1950–1960 Development of political campaigning	+ participation in political campaigns, contacting government representatives	
1960–1970 Emergence of new social movements	+ protest activities	Political activism (unconventional, new)
1980s Weakening welfare state, development of the third sector	+ civic participation (civil society and volunteer engagement)	Civic participation
1990s Personalised and flexible political activity	+ new forms of individualised collective action and the politics of everyday life	Lifestyle politics (everyday) life micropolitics infrapolitics ethical/political consumption
21 st century Development of information and communication technologies	+ digitally-mediated activism, connective action	Digital/online activism

Source: Adapted and supplemented from Jan W. van Deth, *Studying Political Participation. Towards a Theory of Everything?* Paper presented at the Joint Session of Workshops of the European Consortium for Political Research, Grenoble 6–11 April 2001, <https://ecpr.eu/Filestore/PaperProposal/c8b57aab-51d9-4aca-b65d-4510ccfc19a3.pdf>, 14.

civic engagement, was a process that saw the political sphere itself expanding. It was now possible for all dimensions of social reality to become politicised, so that the concept of political activism can no longer be confined to the narrowly understood space of institutionalised politics. With an eye on the plethora of forms of civic action, Jan W. van Deth has highlighted the problem of demarcation—that is, determining what is and what is not political activism—in an attempt to develop a set of criteria to prevent the study of political activism becoming a ‘theory of everything’ (Table 1).¹⁹

For social scientists these latest, non-institutionalised and informal forms of political action are difficult to pin down conceptually, particularly if they try to rely on the standard apparatus of political participation theory. This chapter therefore seeks to shed fresh light on the new forms of political activism that have been taking shape to change civic participation in politics in Serbia, as elsewhere.

¹⁹ van Deth, *Studying Political Participation*; van Deth, *A Conceptual Map of Political Participation*; van Deth, *What Is Political Participation?*

Factors Affecting Political Participation and Activism

Scholarship to date recognises the importance of various factors to explain why individuals become involved in politics. Certain of those factors are psychological and stem from feelings of deprivation, discontent and frustration, others are structural and stem from the economic, social, educational or organisational resources possessed by individuals or groups; while the third group of factors pertain to the life courses of individuals and are linked to the age group in which they find themselves.

The topic of discontent as a driver of political activism has been extensively covered in the literature, from classical theories of collective behaviour²⁰ to more recent social movement theory.²¹ The scholarship shows that a one trigger for political protest activity is discontent resulting from relative deprivation—that is the perception rather than any objective measurement of being worse off than before either in comparison to others or to one's expectations.²² On the other hand, resource mobilisation theory (RMT) highlights the importance of possessing various resources that offer the wherewithal to initiate collective action.²³ This is not to say that the RMT approach negates the relevance of discontent but that it highlights the structural conditions that facilitate or hinder its expression. Proponents of RTM infer that possession of the relevant resources is essential for political activity, which means among other things that those social groups who possess the fewest resources and are objectively most likely to have reason to be dissatisfied are also the worst placed to take steps to realise their goals.²⁴ The political opportunity approach developed as something of an upgrade to the resource mobility theory, which focused on the internal resources available to actors. Unlike RMT, the political opportunity approach stresses external factors, the socio-political characteristics of the system itself, and the opportunities for and barriers to action it engenders.²⁵ The structure

²⁰ Samuel Barnes / Barbara Farah / Felix Heunks, Personal Dissatisfaction, in: Samuel Barnes et al., eds, *Political Action. Mass Participation in Five Western Democracies*, Beverly Hills, London 1977, 381–407; Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, Princeton 1970.

²¹ Karl Dieter Opp, *Theories of Political Protest and Social Movements. A Multidisciplinary Introduction, Critique, and Synthesis*, London 2009.

²² Jacqueliën van Stekelenburg / Bert Klandermans, The Social Psychology of Protest, *Current Sociology* 61, no. 5 (2013), 886–905, DOI: 10.1177/0011392113479314; Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*; Bert Klandermans / Marlene Roefs / Johan Olivier, Grievance Formation in a Country in Transition: South Africa, 1994–1998, *Social Psychology Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2001), 41–54, DOI: 10.2307/3090149.

²³ John D. McCarthy / Mayer N. Zald, Resource Mobilization and Social Movements. A Partial Theory, *American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 6 (1977), 1212–1241.

²⁴ McCarthy / Zald, *Resource Mobilization and Social Movements*.

²⁵ Peter Eisinger, The Conditions of Protest Behavior in American Cities, *American Political Science Review* 67, no. 1 (1973), 11–28, DOI: 10.2307/1958525.

of political opportunity comprises a specific configuration of resources, institutional arrangements and historical preconditions for social mobilisation that, in certain cases, ease the emergence of collective action while in others hinder it.²⁶

The structure of political opportunity should be understood as a specific landscape in which political activism is realised. The final outcome of initiated actions also depends heavily on the characteristics of that landscape. According to the proponents of the political opportunity approach, the more open are political institutions to extra-institutional actors and their demands, the more likely their actors will be successful.²⁷ Despite differences in how various models of democratic political order respond to activism, it is indisputable that compared to undemocratic political systems a democratic milieu offers greater opportunities to express political views and interests, mobilise support and act through conventional political channels. Democratic rules enable a relatively free exchange of ideas and imply the existence of institutional mechanisms by which criticism of established politics may be expressed.

Exploring civic action at the micro level, scholars of political participation have drawn attention to the impact of the socio-economic status of individuals, known as the SES model.²⁸ Socio-economic status is said to be one of the key factors influencing variation in the degree of political participation, in that individuals with access to greater socio-economic resources, in the forms of education as well as income, are more likely to participate in the political process.²⁹ Individuals of higher social standing are more likely to engage in political life because they have developed skills which enable them to understand the political arena and navigate within it. They also have better access to the economic resources necessary for sustained engagement in the political sphere. Other scholars point out the importance of factors such as an interest in politics, political efficacy, trust of institutions, civic responsibility, democratic values.³⁰ In other words, political activism does not attract the people who are

²⁶ Herbert Kitschelt, Political Opportunity Structures and Political Protest, *British Journal of Political Science* 16, no. 1 (1986), 57–95, 58.

²⁷ Doug McAdam, Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970, Chicago 1982.

²⁸ Verba / Nie, Participation in America; Verba / Lehman Schlozman / Brady, Voice and Equality; Martyn Barrett, An Integrative Model of Political and Civic Participation. Linking the Macro, Social and Psychological Levels of Explanation, in: Martyn Barrett / Bruna Zani, eds, Political and Civic Engagement. Multidisciplinary Perspectives, New York 2015, 162–187.

²⁹ Verba / Nie, Participation in America; Verba / Lehman Schlozman / Brady, Voice and Equality.

³⁰ Paul Abramson / John Aldrich, The Decline of Electoral Participation in America, *American Political Science Review* 76, no. 3 (1982), 502–521; John Aldrich, Rational Choice and Turnout, *American Journal of Political Science* 37, no. 1 (1993), 246–278; Pippa Norris, Political Activism. New Challenges, New Opportunities, in: Charles Boix / Susan Stokes, eds, The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics, Oxford 2009, 628–652.

the least satisfied and objectively the most vulnerable, but rather those who have the means needed for it.

Age emerged as an important factor in political activism, emerging as relevant in two ways to political activism, first as a generation-specific component and secondly as it affects political practice. By that we mean that certain activities are typical of certain age groups. For example, young people are less likely to become involved in politics through conventional channels, such as voting or working for labour unions, but are more likely to engage through flexible and informal forms such as, say, protests or sit-ins.³¹ In the second case, we mean that, because of the specific sociohistorical context in which they grew up, members of any particular generation develop different practices from those of preceding generations. People born in or who grew up during the internet age are more present in the virtual sphere. They more readily opt for unconventional forms of political expression and are less likely to be involved in traditional political organisations like political parties and trade unions. They are also less likely to be ideologically steadfast.³² However, it should be noted that the significance of generational experience in politics depends greatly on social context, so caution is imperative in interpreting findings.

The Contextual Framework

Studies focused on differences in the modalities and degree of political activism in different social contexts have shown that certain patterns exist and that, in general, postsocialist countries are characterised by less political activism and a resulting democratic deficit.³³ The findings of studies conducted in Serbia during the first decade of the 21st century confirm the point, indicating that a relatively small number of people participate actively in politics and that to do so they use the available mechanisms for political participation.³⁴ In the local literature on the subject, a number of factors stand out as leading to low political participation, including an underdeveloped participatory political culture, acceptance of

³¹ Norris, Political Activism.

³² Bennett, Civic Life Online.

³³ Norris, Democratic Phoenix; Katerina Vráblíková, How Context Matters? Mobilization, Political Opportunity Structures, and Nonelectoral Political Participation in Old and New Democracies, *Comparative Political Studies* 47, no. 22 (2013), 203–229, DOI: 10.1177/0010414013488538.

³⁴ Slobodan Cvejić, Građanski pokret, socijalni kapital i institucionalna transformacija u post-socijalističkoj Srbiji, *Sociologija* 46, no. 3 (2004), 269–282; Jelisaveta Vukelić, Neposredno učešće građana u donošenju odluka na lokalnom nivou vlasti u Srbiji, *Sociologija* 51, no. 3 (2009), 291–312, DOI: 10.2298/SOC0903291V; Miloš Mojsilović et al., Neposredno učešće građana u upravljanju lokalnom zajednicom. Problemi, izazovi i preporuke za unapređenje procesa, Belgrade 2011, <http://www.osce.org/sr/serbia/82794?download=true>.

authoritarian values, a centralised political system, weak institutions, low levels of trust of institutions and an underdeveloped civil sector.³⁵ Relatively high levels of membership of political parties, which has remained constant at around 10 % of the population over the past twenty years, are explained by clientelism and the significant role that political parties play in the distribution of resources, particularly in controlling public sector employment.³⁶ As reasons given by individuals for staying out of politics, the literature documents lack of interest, feeling insufficiently informed, and lacking faith that civic action, whether collective or individual, will have the desired effect.³⁷

More recent studies indicate that the relatively unfavourable image of political activism in Serbia has been gradually changing. Apart from at the very beginning, the processes of transition and European integration in the postsocialist countries were accompanied by relatively low levels of active protest, but in recent years the waves of protest that have engulfed the region have indicated the revival of a politics of protest, which has coincided with the prolonged negative impact of the global financial crisis and accompanying austerity measures. All have led to something of a crisis for democratic institutions.³⁸ Various grassroots initiatives and social movements stand out as the bringers of new forms of activism,³⁹ most of them located in large urban centres.⁴⁰ Supporting the notion that in the wider region a reawakening of oppositional politics is under way, it

³⁵ Stjepan Gredelj, *Politička kultura građana Srbije, Filozofija i društvo* 16 (2000), 93–112; Bojan Klačar, *Nepoverenje u političke stranke – prolazni izazov ili problem za izbornu participaciju u Srbiji?*, *Godišnjak Fakulteta političkih nauka* 9, no. 14 (2015), 185–199; Vukelić, *Neposredno učešće građana*; Danilo Vuković, *Uloga građanskog društva u uspostavljanju odgovorne vlasti u savremenoj Srbiji. O granicama depolitizovanog građanskog aktivizma*, *Sociologija* 57, no. 4 (2016), 637–661, DOI: 10.2298/SOC1504637V; Miloš Bešić, *Poverenje u institucije u bivšim jugoslovenskim republikama*, *Sociologija* 58, no. 2 (2016), 302–318, DOI: 10.2298/SOC1602302B; Dragan Stanojević / Dragana Stokanić, *Između Sicilije i Lombardije odnos poverenja, građanskih normi i društvene participacije među građanima Srbije*, *Sociologija* 56, no. 2 (2014), 181–200, DOI: 10.2298/SOC1402181S.

³⁶ Slobodan Cvejić, ed, *Informal Power Networks, Political Patronage and Clientelism in Serbia and Kosovo**, Belgrade 2016.

³⁷ Vukelić, *Neposredno učešće građana*; Mojsilović et al., *Neposredno učešće građana u upravljanju lokalnom zajednicom*.

³⁸ Marius Ioan Tătar, *Are the Balkans Different? Mapping Protest Politics in Post-Communist Southeast Europe*, in: Florian Bieber / Dario Brentin, eds, *Social Movements in the Balkans. Rebellion and Protest from Maribor to Taksim*, London 2018, 131–157, 131; Ivan Krastev, *Ometena demokratija*, Belgrade 2017.

³⁹ Roberto Stefan Foa / Grzegorz Ekiert, *The Weakness of Postcommunist Civil Society Reassessed*, *European Journal of Political Research* 56, no. 2 (2017), 419–439; Aleksandar Matković / Marjan Ivković, *Neoliberal Instrumentalism and the Fight Against It. The 'We Won't Let Belgrade D(r)own' Movement*, *East European Politics* 34, no. 1 (2018), 27–38, DOI: 10.1080/21599165.2018.1423965.

⁴⁰ Kirsten Jacobsson, ed, *Urban Grassroots Movements in Central and Eastern Europe*, Furham 2015.

is worth mentioning the 2016 initiative, 'Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own' (*Ne Da(vi)mo Beograd*), the 'Against Dictatorship' (*Protiv diktature*) protest from 2017 and the protests, still in progress at the time of writing, known as '1 in 5 Million' (*Jedan od pet miliona*) that began in 2018. Also worthy of mention are the good number of smaller protests organised by various civic groups opposing.⁴¹ Despite the fact that the overall effect of the protests was limited, numerous studies⁴² point to a promising reawakening of what has come to be known in Serbia and neighbouring countries as 'activist citizenship'.⁴³

Research Findings

In the first part of our analysis we indicate the extent to which certain forms of activism are represented in Serbia, and in the second we identify the links between various forms of activism as well as individual sociological characteristics that might help explain the phenomena. The study is founded on survey data gathered in 2018 by a team of researchers from the Institute for Sociological Research at the Faculty of Philosophy in the University of Belgrade. The survey targeted Serbian citizens aged 18–75 and the sample was representative of the population of Serbia (N = 2,211).

⁴¹ For example, the construction of mini-hydroelectric plants ('No to MHE', *Ne za MHE*), legislation adversely affecting maternity leave benefits ('Mums are the Law', *Mame su zakon*), and improper deployment of bailiffs ('Roof Over Head', *Krov nad glavom*). There was also discontent expressed by those with loans in Swiss francs ('CHF Serbia', *CHF Srbija*), and there were workers' protests (*FOM Goša*). Even police and military unions protested, as did students opposing the Bologna higher education reforms, and many others. Jelena Pešić, *Protesti u doba postdemokratije*, MONS. Monitoring Socijalne Strukture Srbije, 21 March 2019, <https://mons.rs/protesti-u-doba-postdemokratije>.

⁴² Alen Toplišek / Lasse Thomassen, From Protest to Party. Horizontality and Verticality on the Slovenian Left, *Europe-Asia Studies* 69, no. 9 (2017), 1383–1400, DOI: 10.1080/09668136.2017.1385727; Adam Fagan / Indraneel Sircar, Activist Citizenship in South-east Europe, *Europe-Asia Studies* 69, no. 9 (2017), 1337–1345, DOI: 10.1080/09668136.2017.1390196; Chiara Milan, Reshaping Citizenship through Collective Action. Performative and Prefigurative Practices in the 2013–2014 Cycle of Contention in Bosnia and Hercegovina, *Europe-Asia Studies* 69, no. 9 (2017), 1346–1361, DOI: 10.1080/09668136.2017.1388358; Danijela Dolenec / Karin Doolan / Tomislav Tomašević, Contesting Neoliberal Urbanism on the European Semi-Periphery. The Right to the City Movement in Croatia, *Europe-Asia Studies* 69, no. 9 (2017), 1401–1429; Astrid Reinprecht, Between Europe and the Past. Collective Identification and Diffusion of Student Contention to and from Serbia, *Europe-Asia Studies* 69, no. 9 (2017), 1362–1382.

⁴³ Engin F. Isin, Citizenship in Flux. The Figure of the Activist Citizen, *Subjectivity* 29 (2009), 367–388, DOI: 10.1057/sub.2009.25. Isin distinguishes between 'active citizenship', which implies that individuals carry out their civic duties by voting, paying tax and obeying the law, and 'activist citizenship', by which he means a break with established and dominant social practices with the aim of creating new political subjects making new demands for social justice and the overall order of the political community.

Forms of Political Activism in Serbia

Existing forms of political activism in Serbia can be classified into two groups. First there are the conventional types, including things like voting, directly contacting politicians, donating money to political causes, membership of or volunteering for political parties, and union membership. Then there are the unconventional types, activities which seek to redirect elites. This second type of activity implies membership of civic organisation, enthusiasm for signing petitions, participation in protests and occupation of public spaces.⁴⁴ As a separate subcategory of the new unconventional activism, this study also explores various forms of ethical/political consumption, such as goods boycotts, and their spiritual counterpart, *buycotts*—consumption of goods chosen deliberately for political and ethical reasons. These are forms of activity taking place primarily in the economic sphere but which have political implications.

The prevalence of various conventional forms of political activity in Serbia is shown in Figure 1. On the basis of these data it can be shown that of these older more conventional forms of activism the most prevalent among citizens of Serbia are membership of political parties and, to a similar degree, direct contacting of politicians. Approximately 7 % of respondents participated in the more traditional practice of joining trade unions, while donation to political causes remains relatively underdeveloped.

Certain unconventional forms of political action are more common than various conventional forms—signing petitions for example (Figure 2). In the three years preceding the study 20 % of the citizens of Serbia surveyed had signed at least one petitions. That so relatively a high proportion of citizens had signed petitions can in part be explained by the recent rapid rise in online petitions presented on social media platforms, which obviously require very little time or effort to sign.

Serbian citizens are also relatively active in the boycotting of certain goods and deliberate consumption of others. One in four of the respondents had boycotted at least one product in the three years prior to the survey, either because of its country of origin or because it was not produced in accordance with environmental standards. Almost a third of respondents had in at least one instance purchased a product for expressly environmental reasons, while nearly half (46.7 %) had made a purchase because a particular product had been produced in Serbia. Nearly one in five of the respondents had purchased or declined to purchase items for ethical reasons (Figures 3a and 3b).

⁴⁴ Marko Kovačić / Danijela Dolenec, Youth Participation in Eastern Europe in the Age of the Austerity, in: Sarah Pickars / Judith Bessant, eds, *Young People Regenerating Politics in Times of Crisis*, London 2017, 375–394, 377.

Figure 1. Conventional Activism (Participation) in percent

Figure 2. Unconventional Activism in percent

The findings suggest little trust in institutions, organizations or activities that could be used to articulate citizens' interests, and, as such, constitute inputs for the political system and mediate political field.

However, beyond political consumption, forms of unconventional activism, although with the exception of petition-signing, are not particularly widespread. For example, in the three years prior to the survey 3.3 % of respondents were members of an environmental organisation, 5 % were members of other kinds of non-governmental organisation, 3.6 % had participated in a sit-in or occupation of public space, while 7.7 % had participated in a protest. In other words, activities that take place in the private sphere but have political

Figure 3a. Consumer Boycott

The question was: ‘How many times over the past three years have you boycotted (declined or avoided to use or buy) a particular product: 1. because it represented values with which you do not agree; 2. because of mistreatment of workers by the producer; 3. because of how it was marketed; 4. because of its country of origin; 5. because it was not produced in an environmentally friendly manner?

Figure 3b. Buycott

The question was: Have you, in the past three years, purchased a product: 1. because it expressed your values; 2. because it was made in a particular country (other than Serbia); 3. because it was made in Serbia; 4. because you wanted to support that particular producer; 5. because the producer is known for treating their workers well; 6. because it is produced in an environmentally friendly manner?

implications are the commonest form of political activism in Serbia, while activities requiring time, significant financial resources or commitment to more direct physical forms of confrontation are less common.

Factors Affecting Political Activism and Participation

On the basis of the theoretical elaborations explained above, we tested the following hypotheses:

1. Conventional politics is associated with socio-economic status (SES) and age, in that activism increases as available resources increase, making activism more widespread among the older generations;
2. Unconventional politics is associated with SES and age, in that activism increases as available resources (including education) increase and is more widespread among younger people;
3. Boycott and *buycott* are associated with SES, in that both increase as resources increase and are more common among younger age groups.

For the purposes of this analysis, we generated the following composite indices of political participation and activism:

- (1) The Participation in Conventional Politics Index, compiled on the basis of the following variables:
 1. Contacting politicians,
 2. Donating money to political parties,
 3. Membership of a political party,
 4. Membership of a trade union;
- (2) The Participation in Unconventional Activism Index, compiled on the basis of the following variables:
 1. Membership of civic organisations,
 2. Activity in environmental initiatives,
 3. Signing petitions,
 4. Participation in protests, and
 5. Participation in occupations of public space;
- (3) The Boycott Index, compiled on the basis of whether the respondents had declined to purchase a product in the last three years because:
 1. It is a symbol of values of which they disapprove,
 2. The company producing it mistreats its workers,
 3. The respondent disapproved of how the product was marketed,
 4. It was made in a particular country, and
 5. It was not produced in an environmentally friendly manner;

- (4) The *Boycott Index*, compiled on the basis of deliberate consumption of a product in the past three years because:
1. It expresses the respondent's values,
 2. It was produced in Serbia,
 3. The respondent wishes to support that particular producer,
 4. The producer is known to treat their workers well, and
 5. It was produced in an environmentally friendly manner.

On that basis we formed four models to test our hypotheses. In all four models the dependent variables are composed of participation in various forms of political action. In the first two models the dependent variables represent the level of participation in conventional and unconventional politics, while in the second two they represent the level of participation in boycotts and *boycotts* of certain products. The independent variables used were:

1. Gender;
2. Rural or urban habitation;
3. Economic status (a composite index derived from wealth, income and consumption);
4. Education (a three-level scale, with higher education used as the reference category);
5. Age group (which we divided into young people aged 18 to 29 as the reference category, and older people aged 30–44, 45–64, and 65 or over).

For conventional politics the results show that men are more engaged than women, which is to say that men are more likely to participate in traditional politics. With increasing economic resources there is a corresponding increase in participation in conventional political activities. Respondents who had completed further education were more likely to participate than respondents who had completed only primary or secondary education. Age groups 30–44 and 45–64 stand out as noticeably more active in conventional politics than those aged 18–29 (Table 2). Therefore, our first hypothesis was proved correct, that conventional politics is associated with socio-economic status and that activism increases as available resources increase and as people age; this form of participation is more common among older generations.

The second model points to the association between the characteristics of individuals and their participation in unconventional forms of politics. Differences between men and women are on the verge of statistical significance, leaving the question of gender differences unanswered. Urban locations stand out as the places where participation in unconventional politics is likeliest, indicating the significance of an urban milieu for non-traditional forms of political feeling. Respondents' economic status too is associated with their level of unconventional activism, as is their level of education. Easier access to economic and educational resources leads to a corresponding rise in the level of activism,

Table 2. Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) Regression Models – Linking the Socio-Demographic Standing of Respondents with Forms of Political Activism

	<i>Conventional Activism</i>			<i>Unconventional Activism</i>		
	<i>B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Gender (ref. female)	0.118	0.088	0.000	0.063	0.039	0.057
Habitation (ref. urban)	−0.040	−0.028	0.213	−0.177	−0.102	0.000
Economic Standing	0.084	0.131	0.000	0.123	0.158	0.000
Ref. Higher Education						
Secondary School	−0.166	−0.102	0.000	−0.256	−0.131	0.000
Primary School	−0.197	−0.146	0.000	−0.189	−0.117	0.000
Ref. 15–29						
30–44	0.131	0.077	0.007	−0.180	−0.088	0.002
45–64	0.237	0.170	0.000	−0.356	−0.213	0.000
65+	0.063	0.042	0.173	−0.421	−0.234	0.000
Constant	0.017		0.842	0.690		0.000
Adjusted R ²	0.074			0.132		

but the key difference here is generational. People under 30 are more active than any of the older age groups, which indicates the specificity of the younger generations, who are more likely to practise new forms of politics (Table 2). Our second hypothesis too was therefore proved correct, that unconventional politics is associated both with SES and age, in that activism increases as available resources increase—both economic and in the sense of cultural capital—and is more widespread among younger people.

The following two models reveal associations between the degree to which people are ready to participate in boycotts or *buycotts* of certain goods and their socio-demographic or SES standing (Table 3). Gender differences proved irrelevant, while place of residence appears relevant only for boycotts of goods, in that urban dwellers are more likely to resort to boycotting. Economic status and educational attainment are linked to these practices in the sense that an increase in both corresponds with an increase in these forms of activism.

Our findings here highlight the importance of resources but are equally revealing of attitudes to these forms of activism, which correspond to higher levels of education. However, the relationship between age and ethical or political consumption raises the question of how to interpret differences. Namely, only those aged 45–64 differed significantly from the youngest age group in that they were more likely to boycott certain types of goods. For *buycotts*, a disparity is evident between the youngest age group (18–29) and the next two (30–44 and 45–64), with the older generations more likely to choose that method to

Table 3. Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) Regression Models – Linking Socio-Demographic Standing of Respondents and SES with Forms of Consumer Strategy

	<i>boycotts</i>			<i>buycotts</i>		
	<i>B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Gender (ref. female)	0.042	0.011	0.615	−0.082	−0.017	0.428
Habitation (ref. urban)	−0.198	−0.047	0.035	−0.049	−0.009	0.678
Economic Standing	0.226	0.119	0.000	0.309	0.132	0.000
Ref. Higher Education						
Secondary School	−0.428	−0.109	0.000	−0.618	−0.126	0.000
Primary School	−0.734	−0.154	0.000	−0.981	−0.167	0.000
Ref. 15–29						
30–44	0.217	0.044	0.127	0.504	0.082	0.004
45–64	0.250	0.062	0.048	0.433	0.086	0.006
65+	0.042	0.010	0.756	0.150	0.027	0.373
Constant	1.226		0.000	1.625		0.000
Adjusted R ²	0.059			0.065		

express their political values and preferences. Bearing in mind that the younger generations are still moving from education to employment and that their consumer habits are constrained by their level of disposable income, it seems reasonable to conclude that only stabilisation of income offers opportunities for this form of activism. Our third hypothesis too is therefore proved sound, since both boycott and *buycott* are associated with SES, in that these forms of activism increase as financial and cultural capital increase and are more common among the older people.

Conclusion

The political landscape in Serbia is characterised by a wide range of activities, from traditional forms of participation to new and unconventional forms. The findings of this study show that on the whole, Serbians are more inclined to engage in certain unconventional, that is new, forms of political activism such as ethical or political consumption and to agree to sign petitions. Such forms of activism in fact require the least engagement, so that it is to be expected that relatively more people will participate in them. Certain of the ‘older’ forms of political engagement, such as membership of political parties and direct contacting of politicians, have found themselves overtaken by new forms of activity, although sit-ins and the occupation of public space are certainly rarer, as are protest activities.

Putting to one side consumption-based activities, our findings show that the infrastructure of conventional forms of participation remains the most common channel for involvement in politics. However, given that other studies indicate the presence of clientelism in this channel of engagement, these conclusions should not be understood in absolute terms. In fact they raise questions about the democratic character of this form of participation in that it can be understood as more of an economic strategy, and—where instrumentality predominates—there are similar doubts about the motivations of party members and activists.⁴⁵ Indeed in many cases participation through conventional channels is not genuinely political but rather the result of economic motivation such as finding or keeping a job controlled by the government in the public sector. Moreover, ruling parties secure votes and citizen support during election campaigns using the mechanisms of conventional participation intertwined with economic gains for participants.

On the other hand, newer forms of organised activism are slow to establish themselves as patterns of action, while a relatively underdeveloped infrastructure has created a division within the population between those who have the opportunities and resources such as time, skills, knowledge to participate, and those who do not. Participation in direct forms of confrontation like street protests and occupation of public space is hampered by the risks of job loss, social targeting, media targeting, even physical violence—certainly in the context of Serbia's semi-authoritarian political system. Although in the last few years there has been more protest against the government's authoritarian tendencies, they are still limited both in the number of participants and in their overall scope. The dangers, real and perceived, of being politically active in Serbia might then explain why a significant share of activism takes place within the safe zone of consumerism.

Our analysis of the findings further indicates that the likelihood of participation in conventional and unconventional politics increases with a corresponding increase in the quantity of relevant resources available to citizens, in the sense that those with a higher level of educational attainment and more economic resources are more likely to become politically engaged. These findings are consistent with existing theoretical approaches, which emphasise the significance of SES for both political participation and activism. Moreover, the findings raise the question of the possibility of social stratification-based interest articulation, as well as the possibility of access to certain public resources. The same set of factors is linked to consumption-induced political attitudes,

⁴⁵ Dragan Stanojević / Jelisaveta Petrović, *Socijalne biografije mladih aktivista političkih partija u Srbiji*, in: Jelena Pešić / Vera Backović / Anđelka Mirkov, eds, *Srbija u uslovima globalne krize neoliberalnog oblika kapitalističke regulacije*, Belgrade 2018, 147–170.

since the prevalence of political consumption increases with greater access to economic resources and level of educational attainment.

Our findings indicate that within both conventional and unconventional politics, those with more economic and cultural capital—in other words members of the middle class—are more likely to articulate and pursue their personal and or collective interests. In the case of conventional forms of activism, that group's available social capital provides them with more opportunities to gain access to institutional resources through informal networks. As such forms of capital tend to accumulate over the years, older citizens may be expected to make more use of it. Meanwhile, unconventional forms of activism, the growing number of social movements, protests and initiatives may be understood as responses to the challenges facing younger members of the urban middle class. Topics such as environmentalism, human and minority rights, are related to identity politics, which appear especially important to new generations. On the other hand, working class problems remain largely unarticulated, mainly because of the collapse of trade union infrastructure and concomitant lack of personal and institutional resources that would enable the working class to act collectively.

The final important factor, namely the respondent age group, indicates that use of traditional channels of traditional participation tends to prevail as age increases, while unconventional channels are more attractive to younger respondents. Bearing in mind that our analysis does not allow differentiation between age group and generation effects, the observed trends remain open to interpretation. The former emphasises the importance of progression as people age, while the latter suggests the importance of age group itself, as characterised by certain experiences and, consequently, response to political challenges. In the former case, interpretation of the findings shows that people are more likely while they are young to opt for unconventional, flexible channels to participation and activism but that as time passes they leave behind unconventional politics and participate in the political sphere through more traditional means—particularly given that the Serbian party system represents a significant channel for social mobility and the realisation of personal instrumental goals. In such cases, for a number of citizens the transition to adulthood brings with it a political transition from unconventional to conventional participation that might lead to employment or social advancement.

The second avenue for interpretation would be to point to the significance of new 'digital' generations who are coming of age at a time of crisis for democratic institutions. Those young adults have no faith in traditional forms of democracy, which they seek to influence through new, deliberative forms. They generally demonstrate lower levels of trust of institutions and of organizational conformism, and they tend to articulate their interests in individualized ways

on a small scale. Further research will be necessary for a more detailed appraisal of the significance of age group and generation.

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