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Authoritarian trajectories of (de)alienation: political affect, invoking the state and humanist-Marxist legacies

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ABSTRACT

This article works with the concept of (de)alienation to zoom in on the experiences and accounts of a new political affect articulated in the unfolding student-led antiauthoritarian protests in Serbia. It seeks to understand why the protests are seen and felt as a turning point that restores people's ability to relate to their society and reclaim a sense of the political. Apart from its main focus on an ethnographic-analytical account of the particular a(party)political character of the protest claims and practices, the article comparatively explores resonances between the present-day protest and the humanist-Marxist legacy of student protests of 1968. The article concludes by looking at Europe and the world from the vantage point of student protests in Serbia as a perspective to think about contemporary ways of invoking the state and (re)claiming the political.

KEYWORDS

(De)alienation; authoritarianism; populism; political affect; students; protests

Introduction

On 1 November 2024 at 11h52 the ceiling of the railway station in Novi Sad, Serbia's second largest city, collapsed, killing 14 people.[1] At that moment of public shock, it was impossible to foresee that this tragic event would ultimately become a turning point in Serbian political culture. It sparked the largest and most widespread protests since the fall of the Milošević regime in October 2000,[2] radiating throughout the region of "Post-Yugoslavia" and internationally. What started with citizens' commemorations in Novi Sad, soon developed into large-scale protests led and coordinated by students through direct-democratic decision-making processes in "plenums" held at their respective universities. From the start, the protesters foregrounded the ceiling's collapse as a direct consequence of the current regime's corruption.

A red palm, representing "the blood on the hands" of the regime, figures as the core symbol of the protests. A key element of the new protest practices is the 16-minute silent commemoration of the victims of Novi Sad (usually at 11h52 when the ceiling collapsed) in front of institutions, but also in spontaneous commemorations on the streets (e.g. drivers getting out of their cars to commemorate, often joined by passers-by). Furthermore, new mobile forms of protest are emerging, such as collective walks across Serbia, as well as running and cycling to Strasbourg and Brussels to raise awareness within European institutions regarding the situation in Serbia. These practices figure alongside common forms of protest such as strikes (e.g. at universities, schools, the Bar Association) and blockades

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at important traffic junctions, as well as protests in front of government buildings or at the state television (RTS) headquarters. The biggest protests took place in Belgrade on 22 December 2024 and 15 March 2025.[3] The latter gathered several hundred thousand people from across Serbia but is overshadowed by an ongoing investigation into the police's alleged use of a sonic weapon. However, the regime's response to the protests primarily takes covert forms such as attacks on protesting students by hooligans believed to be close to the regime, or the latter's mimicking of student protests through the installation of an encampment of "students who want to learn" across from the Parliament.[4]

From the outset, student-led protests have drawn a sharp boundary to party politics and have instead called for functioning state institutions. They have articulated four (initial) demands: (1) publication of all documentation relating to the renovation of the Novi Sad railway station; (2) criminal investigations into attacks against students; (3) the suspension of criminal proceedings against protesting students; and (4) a 20 percent budget increase for higher education institutions. Even when on 5 May 2025 the students publicly called for early parliamentary elections since their demands had not been fulfilled after six months of protests, the boundary to party politics remained intact. Namely, the students appealed to the population to join them in supporting a list of candidates who are neither members of the regime nor of opposition political parties. As will be argued in more detail below, this particular "a(party)political" orientation acts as a society-wide catalyst for diverse claims and has mobilized large-scale support among the population (in cities, rural areas and the diaspora) and representatives of institutions and interest groups (e.g. workers' unions, schools, universities, opposition politicians, lawyers, journalists, rural workers, miners, medical workers, etc.). Furthermore, it has motivated citizens to adopt direct-democratic practices and self-organize through "plenums" at the communal-district level to address, for example, infrastructural challenges in their districts in open public voting meetings.

In this article I am writing literally as the protests are unfolding. Hence, in my account the fragmentary and processual nature of ethnographic knowledge is productively enhanced, as new developments and interpretations of the protests (and their potential outcomes) continuously (re)produce the protests as I am trying to write about them. Most of my interlocutors do not support the current regime, or have even emigrated for this reason, and perceive the unfolding protests as a turning point (with no option for turning back). As will be elaborated below, in this text I am working with the notion of (de)alienation to grasp the everyday perception and experience of the protests as an unexpected and deep transformation of a society many citizens feel disconnected from and have sometimes literally left behind. "I left the country because I did not feel that this was my society any more. For the first time in years, even though this time I am following the protests from abroad, I feel hope and enthusiasm." This comment by a Belgrade friend (who recently moved to Austria) on my impressions of the first large-scale student-led protest at the Belgrade Slavija Square on 22 December 2024, from which I had just returned, reflects (de)alienation quite well. It encompasses both the experience of estrangement from one's society (which in this case resulted in emigration) and a sense of dealienation through the ongoing student-led protests, which appears as an affective reconnection to society, even if from abroad. I understand (de)alienation as a crucial aspect of a new political affect (Slaby and Bens 2019) emerging in a (protest-)exhausted society marked by authoritarian populism, no viable political opposition and a deep distrust of (party) politics. Reading (de)alienation through the notion of political affect enables me to explore the meaning of "the political" in the protests beyond "a definitive articulation of the meaning of politics, but rather (…) as a means for reflection on the nature of the political" (349).

The focus of the protests is the state. The protest symbols and banners, as well as the everyday accounts of protest supporters and participants, reveal not only a multilayered sense of

meaningfulness and reconnection through mourning, care and justice beyond party politics. Moreover, the current protests

> simply invoke institutions to do their work so that the state can finally start functioning (…) Every day for 15 minutes[5] a generation of students reminds us that our society should be based on empathy, solidarity, dignity and professionalism, and in this way gives us back the faith that this is possible in the first place. (A. Pavlović 2025, translation JT)

This commentary by Aleksandar Pavlović, a senior researcher at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory in Belgrade, resembles many others on the unfolding protests I have been collecting that portray them as a completely new articulation of political affect and claims that bypass (party) political figures. This refers primarily to President Aleksandar Vučić,[6] (whose repeated meeting invitations have not been accepted by the students), but also to the opposition parties and leaders who, even though they often join the protests, never appear as protest co-organizers. This novel combination of commemoration and going beyond party politics also manifests in an intentional lack of leadership within the student protests. Instead, different students address the public and give statements to the media not only in their own name but primarily representing self-organized student plenums. "It concerns us," "There are no statists here," "We are staying here," read some of the continuously evolving protest banners expressing a shared affect of concern for and commitment to society (also in terms of not emigrating) beyond ideological differences and the party-political framework.[7]

As mentioned above, in this article I want to use (de)alienation as a conceptual tool to understand and zoom in on the experiences and accounts of a new political affect articulated in the unfolding student-coordinated protests in Serbia. I aim to understand why the protests are seen and felt as a turning point that restores people's ability to relate to their society. The bracketed term "(de)alienation" permits a combined perspective on alienating experiences and the sociopolitical conditions they relate to, as well as on ways citizens reject those in reclaiming a sense of meaningful and livable society. At the same time, conceptualizing (de)alienation as a crucial aspect of a new political affect allows for grasping both different namable feelings, as well as bodily sentiments and practices articulated within the collective large-scale protests and commemorations without anticipating their effects and outcomes. The concept of political affect is especially interesting to me since, speaking with Sluby and Bens, it enables us to "look more closely into the fine-grained intricacies of political interaction that all too often shift out of focus: the intimate, the everyday, that which is only possible, yet not realized" (2019, 348).

Thinking (de)alienation in connection to political affect in this way not only makes it possible to work through the often-implicit binary between collective-political and personal-embodied aspects of alienation. Moreover, its focus on practice, meaning and open-endedness also strongly resonates with recent interventions to reclaim alienation as a concept without embracing or disregarding its potential for essentialization. In that sense, rather than thinking about the political affect of the unfolding protests in Serbia through (de)alienation in terms of a "return" to some kind of essence of being or feeling political in the "right way," I am building on Jaeggi's proposition to think with and about alienation by focusing on the "how" and not on the "what" of it. Jaeggi's (2016) philosophical account forms synergies with an ethnographic approach—reflexive and critically attentive to essentialisms—because she understands alienation as an "impeded relation of appropriation" (36), the latter being perceived as "having oneself and the world at one's command" (36). In this sense when thinking through the notion of (de)alienation I am interested in *how* protesters try to reappropriate society and make it "their own" (again, or for the first time) through specific

practices and claims. This perspective relates well to the Special Issue Editors' interest in the "question of why and when experiences of alienation emerge or accumulate" (Lems, Leitenberg, and Xiang 2025).

In this article I furthermore aim to contribute to the Special Issue's goal of assembling an "anthropological repository of contemporary experiences of alienation" (Lems, Leitenberg, and Xiang 2025) by providing a provisional, almost "real-time," account of the "how" of experiences and practices of the unfolding protests in Serbia. While focusing on the how, I want to build on and extend Jaeggi's intervention by also considering the "how not" of the protests. In other words, I am also looking at practices, actors and claims which are purposefully not addressed and are thus being disempowered and delegitimized. As mentioned above, this refers primarily to the clear boundary drawn with party politics and core political figures. This specific a(party)political character of the protests is repeatedly stressed as their main strength in bringing citizens together across myriads of differences (ideological, social status, age, gender, religion etc.). At the same time this is also often seen as the most fragile aspect of the protests, which, as stressed in countless expert and (inter)national media commentaries, cannot go on as such forever, but rather need to find a "political form." Demanding parliamentary elections and suggesting an a(party)political list of independent (and non-student) candidates can be seen as entering the hegemonic political space, with the boundary to party politics nevertheless intact.

The a(party)political character of the protests is interesting in several regards, especially when thinking about alienation. Namely it shows how experiences and practices of dealienation can play out as political affect through transcending political ideologies[8] and actors in favor of making basic claims for a society resting on (constitutionally bound) functioning institutions as well as mutual care and respect among all citizens and for human life. In other words, the Serbian case helps us think in what kind of situations (in this case, an authoritarian populist context) the boundary making toward hegemonic political forms and practices (party politics) is seen as reclaiming a feeling of (actually) being a member of society, or speaking with Jaeggi, of having one's society "at one's command" again.

That for many citizens in Serbia the return to themselves and their society is unfolding via an affectively laden rejection of prioritizing a particular political ideology and force invites a particular diachronic perspective on protests during another very different authoritarian historical moment, which was, one could say, "hyper-political" and "-ideological": large-scale student protest in former Yugoslavia in 1968 and the related humanist-Marxist critique calling for ideological consistency in realizing a non-alienated (socialist) society. Instead of focusing on more obvious and recent (student) protests in (Post-)Yugoslavia, I choose the comparison with student protests of 1968 because precisely claims of dealienation were at their core. Furthermore, putting the complexities of the present and past anti-authoritarian protests in relation through the lens of (de)alienation is an interesting vantage point from which to think about "the nature of the political" (Sluby and Bens 2019, 349) in present times of deepening sociopolitical divisions and the consolidation of right-wing populist post-truth politics.

The article will unfold as follows. This introduction is followed by a portrait of Serbia as an alienated society struggling with authoritarian (media) populism; a politics- and protest-fatigue; emigration and brain-drain; as well as a specific form of disconnection from the (real-)socialist past. The latter will be addressed in a brief account of the humanist-Marxist legacy and related student protests of 1968. A longer ethnographic section will zoom in on the protests as they unfold, capturing different practices and articulations of political affect and dealienation. The article will conclude with some notes on the resonance between the 1968 and present-day student protests and by

looking at Europe and the world from the vantage point of student protests in Serbia and practices and claims of invoking the state and (re)claiming of the political.

Sketches of an alienated society

As Aleksandar Vučić's presidential election campaign video appears on a young couple's TV screen, the young man comments in a bored tone: "Oh, here's this guy again." His heavily pregnant partner slowly gets off the sofa and heads toward the kitchen, talking to herself in a low voice: "Oh, yeah, the only thing that hasn't happened yet is that he has stepped out of the fridge." To her great surprise, as she opens the refrigerator Aleksandar Vučić steps out and hands her a canned drink, smiling. The stunned young woman only manages to say: "You really did step out of the fridge!" at which point Vučić politely unfolds his election narrative in this expectant young couple's kitchen. "I know, I am sorry, but it is important for me to reach every citizen in Serbia. There is much left to be done. We need more roads, railways, factories. If I am not wrong, you have also received a subvention for your flat?[9]"

This 2022 election video,[10] which went viral on social media, is a good example of what scholars have, in intersecting ways, theorized as populism or/and authoritarianism. Apart from providing rich historical accounts of populism in Serbia (Stojanović 2017), scholars have embedded the Serbian case in the wider regional political context of the Western Balkans through the notion of competitive authoritarianism (Bieber 2018). The regime of Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has been theorized as "competitive authoritarianism and populism" (e.g. Vladisavljević and Krstić 2023), as it is marked by "regular competitive but unfree and/or unfair elections" (1431)[11] combined with a strong ideological use of (primarily tabloid) media (1446) framing Vučić as the country's paternal figure and savior as opposed to the "criminal" (and even "fascist") opposition. The 2022 election video is a good illustration of the bizarre omnipresence of the figure of Aleksandar Vučić in a, by and large, regime-controlled media landscape, where the President appears on a daily basis in widely watched (including in the diaspora) state and tabloid media.[12] In regular and seemingly endless "post-truth" (see also Kulić 2020) narratives, commentaries and press conferences Vučić tirelessly frames public opinion on events, political figures, big state projects (opening roads, Expo Belgrade 2027 plans) as well as alleged anti-regime plots or plans for his assassination, thereby seeking to turn public attention away from dubious networks and projects as well as allegations of corruption toward the regime.[13] Apart from media control, the "Vučić system" (Jovanović 2021) rests on Aleksandar Vučić's strategy of conducting politics

> as if he is in a continuous election campaign, creating an impression of constant change, high energy and commitment to work. Periodic changes in the composition of the Government, the announcements of large investment and infrastructure projects, opening new production facilities, the seemingly relentless fight against corruption and organized crime, as well as frequent early elections have also contributed to creating this image. (Jovanović 2021, 17)

Framing himself as a "statesman well-respected by world leaders" (17) across global political cleavages (Russia, US, China, as well as the EU) has furthermore contributed to a (self-)image of Vučić-Serbia as a "stabilocracy," that is, an authoritarian regime based on an illusion of stability and prosperity, while being acknowledged as such internationally (for a thorough analysis see: Rekść 2022).

The 2022 election video is especially interesting since it is an example of how populist leaders can make critique and ridicule of their media over-exposure work in their favor by directly addressing it, thereby turning the political strategy of media control and personality cult into something

humorous and benign, and again plant their political message. Thus, when trying to grasp the dynamics of societal alienation, one way of theorizing the Serbian case I find particularly meaningful is to see it as a case of "media populism" (e.g. Dragićević Šešić and Nikolić 2019; Kulić 2020), which rests not only on the regime's above-mentioned media control, but also on its heavy use of social media (e.g. X, Instagram, etc.) "erasing boundaries and shortening the connection between politicians and voters" (Kulić 2020, 40). The use of X (formerly Twitter) and the over-presence in the media of Vučić (and other SNS officials) has not only led to a media-divided society where different segments of the population live in "parallel" (media) worlds; it has also led to an alienation from the political sphere among large segments of the population who do not support the regime and who are either consuming alternative media outlets (e.g. N1, Nova S), with a significantly smaller reach, or have disconnected from politics altogether.

As the student protests were reaching one of their peaks on 22 December, I met Bojan, a former school friend, in his physiotherapy practice in the morning before the large-scale protest at Belgrade's Slavija Square. While I was getting treatment for a pulled ligament, expressing the hope that I would be able to walk pain-free when joining the protests later that same day, I was surprised by Bojan's question and subsequent narrative: "Which protest?," he said, puzzled, revealing that he had no idea about the planned protest that afternoon, which eventually ended up being the largest in Serbia since the fall of the Milošević regime in October 2000. "Honestly, I stopped watching television and following the news quite a while ago. This criminal is a total catastrophe for the country, but the others were stealing too. I am not in favor of any of the options. I always think to myself, every nation (*narod*) gets the politicians it deserves, so there is simply no hope for this nation (*narod*)". After having left Bojan's practice and realizing that he never gave me an invoice, his "disconnection" from the "beyond hope" political space in Serbia illuminated another structural aspect of alienation: As a successful medical practitioner Bojan is an example of an entrepreneur living "alienated from," but extremely well in, a dysfunctional state under a corrupt authoritarian regime (he is not in favor of) because he is liable to pay taxes on only a fraction of his income. This political economic aspect of alienation puts into focus those segments of society indirectly profiting from a dysfunctional state and a corrupt regime without supporting it through voting or party membership, but rather through disconnecting from the political sphere and thus from potentially holding the regime accountable. This vignette also offers a link to conceptual genealogies of authoritarian populism (e.g. Hall 1979), which more recent political studies accounts mentioned above leave unaddressed. Namely, Bojan's example can be also read in terms of evading the (fiscal) grasp of and disconnecting from an authoritarian populist and interventionist state that is retreating from welfare as one of its core features.

What Bojan's case furthermore exemplifies with particular clarity is a crucial facet of Serbia's portrait as an alienated society, namely a pronounced protest-fatigue that goes hand in hand with political alienation due to the over-politicization of the media and the everyday. My own experience of growing up and living in Serbia (and [Post-]Yugoslavia) since the 1980s includes witnessing and potentially attending an endless series of diverse anti-regime protests, in some of which, such as in 1991, 1996/1997 or 2009, students played a central part. This biographical experience includes roller-coaster-like political affective cycles of euphoria over (almost) political change and, in most cases, the eventual disappointment of not having reached the protest goals. As has been addressed in ethnographies of post-Milošević Serbia from different perspectives (e.g. Greenberg 2014; Mikuš 2018; Tošić 2009; Vetta 2019), a crucial component of citizens' disappointment and political alienation in Serbia is the realization that the downfall of the Milošević regime did not ultimately lead to sustainable sociopolitical democratization (see also Bilić 2008; Jovanović 2021).

Rather it was followed by failed attempts to curtail organized crime (eventually resulting in the assassination in 2003 of a core figure of the democratic movement, PM Zoran Djindjić), an inefficient democratic regime caught up in neoliberal capitalist "transition" (see e.g. Štiks and Horvat 2015; Tošić 2009) and eventually the return of authoritarian populism in the form of the "Vučić system" (Jovanović 2021). Emerging "radical" politics relating to the Yugoslav legacy, which are attempting to frame ideological claims beyond the neoliberal dynamics of "transition" (Štiks and Horvat 2015) and in solidarity with global transversal political claims for social justice, have been struggling with the pervasive, simplistic image of the (real-)socialist Yugoslav past (see below).

Two recent large-scale protests have an affective quality that resonates with the current student-led protests, since they also articulate care and mourning. First, in May 2023 a 13-year-old gunned down nine schoolmates and the school janitor in a primary school in central Belgrade; this tragic event sparked a citizens' revolt against violence, which the protesters claimed had become the normal state of society. Second, recent waves of protest against lithium extraction by Rio Tinto[14] can also be interpreted in terms of protection and care for nature and the population. Even though mobilizing large numbers of citizens, these protests, like many others before them, did not draw such a clear boundary with politics. Opposition politicians figured prominently and drew on the political affect the protests generated. Moreover, prominent activists eventually appeared as candidates at the heavily contested Presidential elections in 2024, boycotted by sections of the opposition due to unfair electoral conditions.

In my long-term participant observation of different protests and Serbia, since 2023 I have noticed how friends who were active protesters for many years, even decades, increasingly started disconnecting from any kind of protest. Apart from protest-fatigue and loss of hope due to the fact that every protest eventually faded out, many were wary of the political character of the protests. Their disappointment at the political opposition not being able to form a strong coalition and articulate a common political program beyond being against the Vučić regime plays a crucial role in this form of alienation. Bojana, an architect, once told me: "There is just no alternative. The tragic thing is that all those opposition figures have been using the protests to further their own political goals." She has been an active protester for many years and, due to her profession, articulated her knowledge and opposition especially toward diverse regime-led infrastructural and construction projects. Unlike Bojana, who views the ongoing student protests with considerable skepticism (she could never really explain, but instead described her feelings of unease), other interlocutors see them as a turning point. As we were standing on Slavija Square on 22 December, stunned by the scale and powerful affective quality of the protests, Tijana, a freelance consultant in her late 40s, shared:

> I lost my youth and my health on the streets of Belgrade. When I stand in the streets with the students now, on the one hand I feel devastated because it seems like 30 years have passed and we have not moved from the spot. At the same time, I see these young people opening up a new chapter. Something completely new is happening here that no one saw coming.

The prolonged labor of protesting throughout her youth (long periods of standing, walking in heat, snow and rain, running and hiding from the police, etc.) has inscribed itself in Tijana's body, but now seemed meaningful again.

Both Bojana and Tijana are middle-aged professionals and returnees to Serbia after several years abroad for private and professional reasons. They are members of a small but growing population of returnees (see e.g. Langović et al. 2024) who—due to their profession and home ownership—can have a secure livelihood in Serbia despite skyrocketing prices and decreasing living standards. For

the majority, however, emigration has for a long time been a crucial livelihood and survival strategy and remains an important option.[15] Apart from the key (forced) migration factors (Yugoslav-succession wars, potential conscription, repression, the declining socioeconomic situation), the liberalization that came in 2009 with the Schengen agreement enabled Serbian citizens to travel visa-free, and enhanced emigration, with a yearly rate of 49,000 (Jovanović 2021, 6). Even for those Serbian citizens who have not (yet) opted to emigrate or made concrete plans this possibility serves as a way to avoid completely engaging with societal questions, a situation in which relying on relatives and friends from the diaspora is also a crucial factor. In this way (potential) emigration and diasporic connections can be seen as a further facet of Serbia's inhabitants' alienation in terms of either having lost any hope of socioeconomic and political improvement or not needing to engage with the society one lives in, because one's livelihood is (co-)ensured by transnational networks. Against this background, as will be elaborated below, it is important to note that a crucial element of the protesting students' message is that they want to live in a country which they do not have to emigrate from,[16] thereby directly addressing the long-term problems that emigration can imply on different scales (e.g. brain-drain, feelings of nostalgia).

Finally, an important element of this sketch of Serbia as an alienated society are common patterns of perceiving the Yugoslav socialist past. As Zagorka Golubović and her collaborators noted in their large-scale study on post-Milošević Serbia in 2003 (Golubović, Spasić, and Pavicević 2003), the perception of Yugoslav socialism consisted of, on the one hand, an "experiential-participatory" mode (100–101) articulated through nostalgia for being part of a society offering a "good life" comprising e.g. social security and freedom of movement (as well as a perception of being at the world's center as a founding country of the Non-Aligned Movement, see e.g. Stubbs 2023); and simultaneously an "apolitical" perception of the socialist past (104). In other words, this mnemonic "disconnection" from the ideological-political sphere and the "possibility of an apolitical existence" were seen as an actual aspect of the image of a "good life" (100–101). At the same time, as I could gather in my ethnographic work on post-Milošević Serbia (Tošić 2009), many of my young interlocutors in the 2000s, who were children in the last phase of socialist Yugoslavia in the 1980s, viewed the Yugoslav past primarily through the lens of its authoritarian dimensions and the ultimately unsustainable socioeconomic arrangement rather than socioeconomic rights and "good life" as well as internal critiques of Tito-Yugoslavia.

These contradictory imaginaries of the Yugoslav-socialist past can be read as "alienated" as they reveal a differential (generational) disconnection between the experiential and the political, resulting in either an absence of a critical take on the Yugoslav (real-)socialist regime and the party-state, or a one-sided picture of Yugoslavia as an authoritarian society including a lack of knowledge about its ideological-political complexity. Against this background, in the next section I want to expand my perspective on (de)alienation and political affect in the ongoing protests by briefly reconnecting to ways in which (de)alienation was thought, claimed and practiced in former Yugoslavia. I am building on scholarship which has (re)engaged with the Yugoslav legacy of humanist-Marxist thought and related student protests culminating in 1968. Even though these events and lines of thought are not an explicit reference point for the student protesters today, I find the legacy of system-critique and (student) protest in socialist Yugoslavia beneficial as a contrastive comparison to explore resonances between student protests in different authoritarian contexts. Even if not the most obvious, I am proposing this comparison between these two particular cases of student protest in Serbia because in both (de)alienation represents a crucial aspect, albeit in different ways. Furthermore, this comparison unsettles the above-mentioned simplistic hegemonic view on the (real-)socialist legacy.

Legacies of claiming (de)alienation

Ideas and claims of (de)alienation have been at the core of humanist-Marxist critique of Yugoslav (real-)socialism. A key focal point of this critique was the philosophy journal *Praxis* (1964–1974) and the Korčula summer school (1963–1974). The journal and the summer school, as "two complementary phenomena of international format" (Lešaja 2014), were a central platform for articulating both the critique of the implementation of Yugoslav socialism as well as different strands of Marxist thought and beyond, with its strong international resonance.[17] In a nutshell: the critique of Yugoslav socialism was formulated especially in reference to the early writings of Karl Marx and the idea of the human as a "being of praxis" (*biće prakse*) and "being of freedom" (*biće slobode*). Furthermore, the related (dialectic) idea of "ruthless criticism of all that exists" (*kritika svega postojećeg*)[18] as the basis of dealienation represented a crucial part of the claim of continuously (re)establishing and developing further a free (socialist) society (see also Lešaja 2014; Popov 2012). Following Nebojša Popov, a member of the *Praxis* circle, this is how this approach thus "opened the door for a critique of different forms of alienation, not only in capitalism, but also in socialism" (Popov 2012, 14, translation JT).

An important element of the critique of alienation articulated in *Praxis* focused on the system of workers' self-management, which was a central ideological and policy element of Yugoslav socialism that foregrounded dealienated labor through participative economic governance.[19] As Zagorka Golubović, a *Praxis*/Korčula author and participant, writes in one of her early *Praxis* papers,

> the system of self-management does not in itself represent the dealienation of the human being and its labor. Such a system offers possibilities that form a basis on which principles of a much more complex liberation of labor and emancipation of personality ought to be further developed. (Golubović 1965, 10, translation JT)

Apart from the workers' strikes that ran in parallel with the introduction of the system of self-governance, revealing the paradox of workers opposing their own rule (see Popov 2012, 13), the largest protests were those by students between 2 and 9 June 1968. An unexpected turn of events in Belgrade on 2 June 1968 had sparked large-scale student protests that were forcefully suppressed by the police: An indoor relocation of a cultural event in Belgrade (due to unfavorable weather conditions) revealed social hierarchies as many students were prevented from attending due to limited seats (as opposed to members of the military). In a matter of hours students occupied universities and self-organized through councils, developments which eventually became a university-wide strike of around 50,000 students and 10,000 university workers, sparking further solidarity protests in Sarajevo and Zagreb (Popov 2012, 14). On public stages and in nightlong debates hundreds of students (joined by their professors, citizens, artists, etc.) sought "their own dealienation and self-determination" by criticizing "a disconnection between norms and practice, the proclaimed and realized socialism" (14, translation JT). According to Unkovčki-Korica:

> Articulating their demands in the language of humanist Marxism, much influenced by both the international New Left and the domestic Praxis school of philosophy, the students denounced the rise of technocracy and nationalism as aberrations from true self Management and the fault of the "Red Bourgeoisie." (Unkovski-Korica 2015, 35–36)

The protests came to a rapid end when on 9 June Tito himself in a much-cited TV-broadcast speech[20] "proved the students' claims right" and dismissed interpretations of student protests as a reflection of "what is going on in France, Germany or Czechoslovakia," and even asked the students for help in addressing "our weaknesses, which have accumulated" in socialist Yugoslavia. These "weaknesses," Tito highlighted, most notably consisted of "having been blinded by

investments" rather than focusing on "care for the human being." These remarks, seemingly resonating with humanist-Marxist claims, were followed not only by the "victorious" end of the student protests, but soon thereafter by repressive measures (e.g. arrests), and ultimately the demise of both the *Praxis* journal and the Korčula summer school (in 1974) as well as the exclusion of eight professors from the University of Belgrade in 1975 through a lex specialis (for a detailed account see Popov 2003).[21]

A first comparative glance, of course, reveals huge historical-contextual differences and a stark contrast between the 1968 and presently ongoing student protests. The former appear as strongly political, having demanded the ideological-political consistency of the (socialist) state, while the latter articulate as "apolitical" by drawing a clear boundary with (party) politics and "simply" instead invoking the state institutions to do their job. Before I explore the interesting question of resonance between these two student protests through the notion of (de)alienation in the conclusion of this article, in the next section I will offer an ethnographic account of the ongoing protests in Serbia and explore some facets of their particularly "apolitical" nature.

The power of the a(party)political—dealienation and a new political affect

Inspired by Jaeggi's (2016) take on alienation and Slaby's and Bens' (2019) thoughts on political affect, in this section I will zoom in on some practices and claims of the protesters. My account rests on a blend of on-site fieldwork in Belgrade, continuously following the protest live broadcast (via N1 Serbia) and representations of the protests across different (social) media as well as a number of conversations and interviews conducted in Belgrade and across the diaspora. In my account I will focus on three facets of the specific "apolitical" articulation of the student protests and their dealienating effects, which result in a strong response from the population and the impressive endurance of the protests: new affective practices, such as, most notably, the silent commemoration; border-making toward party politics; and invoking the state (institutions).

"It is not just silence, it is an active state of being silent," specified my school friend Dragana as we were trying to "pin down" the particular power of the core affective practice of the protests—the silent commemoration of the victims of the Novi Sad tragedy. The first time I experienced the silent commemoration was when I attended the Slavija Square protest on 22 December 2024. While standing with Dragana and a group of friends, surrounded by a seemingly endless number of fellow-protesters, our conversation suddenly faded: There was no speech, no announcement. Instead, it felt like a soft breeze of silence was spreading all around us, prompting us to stop talking and just listen, feel and commemorate. During the next 15 min (which felt much longer) the only sounds I could hear were occasional cell-phone messages, whispers and coughs and the drones tirelessly flying above our heads and documenting the bird's-eye view of these unexpectedly large-scale protests, which gathered more than 100,000 people. Seen by many of my interlocutors as the only human response to the constant "populist blabber," the collective silent commemoration—the act of just being speechless in the face of (preventable and innocent) deaths—became an affective practice of human reconnection in a (violent) society where people often lament having lost the ability to see and listen to one another. Standing in prolonged silence with (un)known others was a very intense experience. I remember looking at people's faces and seeing smiles, resoluteness, thoughtfulness and also tears. What I did not see, however, was fear. Indeed, both the protesters and many commentators in Serbia and the region highlight the core dealienation effect of the protests as being that large parts of the population are no longer afraid and thus are not intimidated any more either by the populist politics of fear or the many violent provocations toward the

protests.[22] In an Al Jazeera interview, political scientist Zoran Stojiljković from the University of Belgrade commented on protest incidents and their prevention by the protesters: "People are massively freeing themselves from fear and (…) repression is not possible anymore."[23] On 15 February 2025 in Aleksandrovac, a small municipality in south Serbia (ca. 5500 inhabitants), students used the slogan "Where there is no fear, freedom begins" to organize a protest in their hometown that mobilized many fellow citizens to join them in the streets.[24] Indeed, another crucial novelty of the protests is that they unfold beyond merely Belgrade, Novi Sad and other larger cities, but also in small-scale municipalities, such as Aleksandrovac. Furthermore, rather than only protesting in larger or home municipalities, a new protest practice has emerged which (re)connects citizens beyond urban/rural and social divides, acting as a catalyst for accumulated emotions of hope, care and enthusiasm (as well as occasional rage and provocation): long-distance mobile protests in which students walk (or cycle) for days and are greeted by citizens along the way with food and drinks, as well as tears and hugs. Even though there are no references to it, as I follow the N1 Serbia live broadcast of the student walks, I cannot help making an association with the "torch-relay,"[25] in the sense of young people performing the (re)connection of the population across the country and socioeconomic differences through bodily movement, thereby being celebrated and affectively framed as the country's future and hope.

However, the difference is clear: Not only is there no political figure at the end of the walks, rather it is precisely the stark boundary-making toward the sphere of (party) politics which crucially marks the students' framing of the protests as "apolitical." In this way they directly dismiss attempts by regime representatives to delegitimize student protests as "actually" organized by the opposition or "from abroad." This particular "a(party)political" character and practice of the protests is by and large respected by representatives of the fragmented political opposition, who—even when attending the protests—themselves state that they are merely joining student-led protests.

During the first student guest appearance on the renowned critical TV show *The Impression of the Week*[26] on 15 December 2024, one of the students, Luka Vuksanović,[27] aptly described the reclaimed "feeling for the political" based on his experience with the collective direct-democratic decision-making process in student plenums:

> We have introduced the differentiation that being political is something other than being "party political" (*stranačnost*). (…) [W]e understood that politics can be in our hands, it's not far out of our reach, we could somehow feel the political again. We have the plenums where you can really say something, and your voice counts, and is respected. (Translation JT)

The insight that student protests actually de-alienate by (affectively and practically) re-actualizing the "nature of the political" (Sluby and Bens 2019, 349) as something meaningful that citizens can relate to and have "at one's command" (Jaeggi 2016, 36) resonates with many commentaries. In an interview for the daily *Danas*[28] the feminist philosopher Jelisaveta Blagojević highlighted:

> Student protests are certainly political. To be more precise—they are politics in its actual sense (*dogadjanje politike*). (…) I understand the students' boundary making toward the claim that the protests are political as their (legitimate) need to set themselves apart from the narrative imposed on them, namely reducing politics to the mere struggle for power. (Translation JT)

Building on Jaeggi's (2016) approach, one can also read the students' a(party)political stance in terms of a "how not" of dealienation. Namely, by not being political in the sense of a party politics-based struggle for power, the students directly speak to political alienation of large segments of the population, thereby achieving great resonance.

The last related, and most intriguing, dealienating dimension of the ongoing student protests, which I would like to engage with in terms of a "how (not)" of (de)alienation, is the students' constant invoking of state (institutions), rather than political figures in power. Most notably this refers to the omnipresent figure of President Aleksandar Vučić, whose continual highlighting that student demands "have been fulfilled" as well as his repeated invitations to a meeting are dismissed by the students. Meanwhile well-known protests banners such as "You are not in charge" (*Nisi nadležan*) or "No one asked you for your opinion" (*Niko te nije pitao*) express a completely novel dimension of dealienation of state institutions by reminding the public and state representatives of the actual constitutionally grounded responsibilities and powers of state institutions and figures. In response to the question of how he has perceived the President's invitation David Delimedjac, another student in the above-mentioned episode of *The Impression of the Week* on 15 December, highlighted that "this invitation was of no interest to us, because we haven't directed our demands to the President of the Republic (…). Our demands, which we agreed on in our plenums, were directed toward the institutions responsible" (translation JT). By insisting on the constitutionally defined presidential powers, the students reveal the obvious—namely that the President indeed is simply "not in charge" of state institutions (e.g. Courts, the Public Prosecutor, State Television). The invoking of state institutions and the constitution hence directly delegitimizes the authoritarian regime by revealing the unconstitutional appropriation of institutions in the service of the regime and the extent to which large parts of the population are made to accept this as "common sense." One of the students' central demands—opening an investigation into the collapse of the Novi Sad railway station's ceiling and publishing the complete documentation of the station's reconstruction—was articulated toward the Supreme Public Prosecutor, Zagorka Dolovac, asking her to finally start doing her job and step out publicly. Apart from reading out from one of their "1,000 letters to Dolovac"—in which the students stated that they "expect [Dolovac] to fight for law and justice, without any political or corrupt abuses"—the protest in front of the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade on 25 December is a good illustration of the everyday cultural and affective dimensions essential for long-term protests.[29] Invoking Dolovac to finally "appear," at one point the students started singing the refrain[30] of the well-known song "Izadji mala" (Come out girl) by the Bosnian folk singer Ferid Avdić. In this way demanding the ultimate proof of the independence of the Supreme Public Prosecutor—an essential element of a democratic state—was also made fun.

By way of conclusion: resonating pasts, (de)alienated youth and (re)establishing the political

Despite the stark contrast between the student protests in 1968 and those today, if we think them through their respective claims of dealienation, resonances between them appear and point to a better understanding of the force and endurance of the ongoing student protests. A diachronic-comparative perspective shows that despite its strong ideological elements—when focusing on practices and experiences—the notion of (de)alienation can figure as a lens which enables insight across particular political ideologies, cases and epochs. In that sense, it can be said that both protests invoke the institutions to function in an "unalienated" way: in 1968 in the sense of a "truly" socialist state (workers' self-management) as opposed to an authoritarian and non-egalitarian society; and today, in terms of constitutional democracy freeing institutions from the grip of an authoritarian populist regime. Furthermore, as philosopher and activist Srećko Horvat highlights, the ongoing student protests in Serbia can be seen as having "reawakened something which used to exist in the region, which is, solidarity, self-organisation, and maybe even, self-management."[31]

With my fragmentary and "real-time" account of developments in Serbia I seek to unsettle perspectives on student protests as an example of Serbia's "catching up" with "democratic Europe" as well as those that, in an equally Balkanizing manner, idealize the protests as a "unique" democratic impulse. Rather, as the protests unfold, I (and many others) are trying to conceptualize them as an important contemporary instance of the struggle to find new ways to reclaim the political sphere in the face of the consolidation of neoliberal, authoritarian-populist and fascist political forces, which is a common concern in Europe and on a global scale. Speaking with (Jaeggi 2016) student protest can be read as a timely and transnationally resonant practice aimed at having their society "at their command" again. Turning once again to Blagojević's apt perspective on the protests:

> In the context of the capitalist right-wing and openly fascist counter-revolution in the world, resting on an even stronger connection and safeguarding of power and money, student protests in Serbia can be interpreted as a timely and correct response. Concepts of resistance, critique, togetherness, solidarity, justice, responsibility, etc. again are at center stage of thinking and are becoming an important aspect of social life in Serbia. Their existence has a healing effect for society in Serbia.[32]

Even though it is not clear if and how they will lead to a long-term institutional-political change and in spite of the fact that "no major international actor supports them" (Cvijić 2025)—the student protests in Serbia represent a good vantage point from which we can gain insights (and maybe tools) regarding which kind of political affect and practice moves (young) people to engage with their societies. In this context the protests unsettle "common-sense" and scholarly diagnoses of contemporary youth in Serbia as by and large "entrepreneurial," consumption-oriented, apolitical and socially alienated (digital) citizens. This resonates with recent insights on the political character of Gen Z as indeed political and favoring political articulation through social movements and media (e.g. Rice and Moffet 2022). In her account on striking schools and pupils (as potential future university students) solidarizing with the students and protesting across Serbia, Ana Dimitrijević, a Belgrade Gymnasium professor, self-critically highlights her own stereotypes about young people in the "Impression of the week" on 23 December 2024.[33] Despite teachers' critical perception of their pupils' constant immersion in their cell-phones and consumption of enormous amounts of information in a superficial manner, the younger generations can, when interested, also grasp issues in depth and "think strategically and very fast," highlights Dimitrijević. Members of these "gaming generations," when encountering an obstacle, "reset and recombine very fast." Furthermore, as opposed to her perception of her students as "disinterested" and planning to go abroad as soon as they obtain a bachelor's degree, Dimitrijević experienced their commitment to stay in Serbia as "absolutely the most beautiful surprise they could have given to me."

Precisely this issue of (non)migration is another novel leitmotiv the protests have introduced into the public (political) space in Serbia and beyond. Namely, student protests disrupt the hegemonic West European imagery of (young) East Europeans as "emigrants per default." The theme of (non)migration figures prominently in protests' public messages and banners: "We are staying, you will leave," "Either we change the state, or we change the state." Even though the students' commitment to—rather than alienation from—society by not emigrating (for good), can be seen as the privileged stance of an "educated elite" (despite differential social backgrounds), the claim of (re)creating a society by invoking a democratic state one does not need to abandon potentially implies beneficial changes for the population at large.

In terms of scaling up further to think about both the particular political-economic embeddedness and global relevance of student protests in Serbia, my account of the students', one could say, "labor of dealienation," also echoes Dzenovska and Kurtović's (2018) deliberations on potential lessons Liberalism could take from the "illiberal East" (then referring to developments such as Brexit and the first

election of Donald Trump as US President). As we are witnessing—looking, for example, at current developments in the US—how the governance architecture of democratic states can be cracked and partly decomposed with impressive speed, calls for continuous and repeated "invocations" of democratic state institutions, as currently practiced by students in Serbia, can resonate and inspire well beyond the particular authoritarian-populist context in which they are framing their struggles.

Notes

1. The 15th and 16th victims passed away later, while one person is still in a critical condition. The ceiling collapsed shortly after the renovated railway station had been ceremonially opened (5 July 2024).
2. On 5 October 2000 protest against irregular elections culminated in the act of storming the Parliament building in Belgrade, which marked the end of the rule of Slobodan Milošević.
3. This paper focusses on the protests before the large-scale gathering on 28 June 2025, which included both a considerable nationalist rhetoric by some protest speakers (see also note 8) and ended with police violence, which is continuing ever since.
4. In protest-slang this camp is referred to as "Ćaciland." The newly emerged notion "*Ćaci*" stems from anti-protest graffiti which wrongly spelled the word pupils ("*djaci*") and came to denote the "fakeness" of the "students who want to learn," a group comprising many individuals incentivized by the regime to impersonate students.
5. At the time of the commentary was published, the 16th victim was still alive.
6. A former junior member of the far-right Serbian Radical Party, Aleksandar Vučić co-founded the "Serbian Progressive Party" (SNS) in 2008, which is in power since 2012 (for a detailed account of the "Vučić-system" see Jovanović 2021).
7. The "a(party)political" orientation of the student protests both resonates with and goes beyond the mysogynic Post-Yugoslav stereotype of "politics as a whore" (see e.g. Jalušić 1994 in Helms 2007, 236).
8. However, the large-scale protest on 28 June went far beyond ideological inclusiveness by also featuring (ultra)nationalist tones (and even clero-fascist references). I join activist Aida Ćorović (2025) in her fiercly critical and yet optimistic commentary on the 28 June protest as the opportunity for students and citizens of Serbia to strenghten even more the civic character of their claims.
9. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ec8hKwM6LNo&t=28s.
10. In general elections (presidential and parliamentary) on 3 April 2022 the Serbian Progressive Party won (while losing the absolute majority) and Aleksandar Vučić won the presidential elections.
11. Election irregularities included: parallel voter lists, secret ballot irregularities, voting incentives, etc.
12. For more on the role of those media in the demise of democracy in Serbia (see e.g. D. Pavlović 2020).
13. Serbia keeps falling in Transparency International's corruption perception index. (https://seenews.com/news/serbia-keeps-falling-on-corruption-perceptions-index-transparency-intl-1270634).
14. The protests against lithium extraction have been ongoing since 2021, as a reaction to a new Law on Expropriation passed by the government as well as Rio Tinto's plans for corporate investment in a lithium mine close to the Jadar valley (Project Jadar).
15. Serbia is primarily an emigration country (incl. the highest readiness to emigrate by citizens below 30 years of age, see Rašević 2019). Even though the data are meagre, novel immigration trends are noticeable (irregular / circular migration from Serbia to the EU, new forms of immigration from the Global South / East).
16. This has also been explored in the case of anti-government protests in 2017 (see Petrović 2018).
17. Founded by Philosophers at the University of Zagreb, the journal and the summer school gathered many scholars in Yugoslavia (Gajo Petrović, Predrag Vranicki, Milan Kangrga, Zagorka Golubović, Nebojša Popov, etc.) and internationally (Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen Habermas, Ernst Bloch, etc.) (see Popov 2003; 2012; Lešaja 2014). Recent takes on Praxis-Philosophy stress its role also as a "loyal critique of socialism" (e.g. Žitko 2019).
18. "*[R]ücksichtslose Kritik alles Bestehenden*" (MEW 1 1976, 344).
19. From the 1950s on, as a crucial element of the boundary making in relation to the Soviet Union after Tito's "break" with Stalin (in 1948), the model of workers' self-management (*radničko samoupravljanje*)

was developed as an alternative to central planning and key element of Yugoslav "market socialism." The core of the new self-management system, which resonated beyond the borders of socialist Yugoslavia (see Zaccaria 2018), were workers' councils (*radnički saveti*), deciding on production plans, income, etc. The actual implementation of workers' self-management was also critiqued and was accompanied by workers' strikes (for more see Unkovski-Korica 2015).

20. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nne2feNUEu8.
21. Among them also Nebojša Popov and Zagorka Golubović, cited in this article.
22. There was violence against the protesters on many occasions, e.g. drivers driving directly into protesters at full speed, groups of regime-close hooligans attacking and badly injuring students with baseball bats (whereafter the Prime Minister Miloš Vučević resigned end of January 2025).
23. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNnKQlVWiGA (translation JT).
24. https://vreme.com/drustvo/protest-u-aleksandrovcu-straha-vise-nema/.
25. A core "ideological ritual" in Tito Yugoslavia, in which young athletes carried a torch across the whole country, in order to ultimately hand it over to Tito himself at his large-scale birthday event. Apart from an annual re-actualization of the multiethnic state, this political ritual foregrounded the role of the youth as the central ideological element in Titoism.
26. *Utisak nedelje* is a critical political talk show hosted by TV journalist and actress Olja Bećković since 1991. It airs on Sunday evenings recapping events of the week in a conversation with (usually) three guests.
27. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A88QqXsRvPM (starting at 57:55).
28. https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/intervju-jelisaveta-blagojevic-fmk/.
29. https://www.bbc.com/serbian/articles/c1590epj8nqo/lat.
30. "Izadji mala, izadji mala izadji bar na cas hoću da te vidim, hoću da te ljubim, hoću da ti čujem glas" (Come out girl, come out at least for a moment, I want to see you, I want to kiss you, I want to hear your voice, translation JT, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cy_DNTERRRI).
31. https://n1info.rs/vesti/srecko-horvat-studenti-u-srbiji-pokazuju-smer-u-kojem-evropa-treba-da-ide-imaju-podrsku-u-celom-regionu/.
32. Translation JT. For the reference see note 28.
33. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2P8aZqE0AYg.

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