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**‘DIRTY POLITICS’ AND THE FAILURE OF DEMOCRATIC PROMISE:  
CITIZENS’ ALIENATION FROM POLITICS IN SERBIA**

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**Introduction**

When a society is undergoing profound social, political, and cultural change, its collective identities are being redefined, the political community reconceived, new rules of the political game established and routinized. In such periods the status of the political sphere, professional politicians and political institutions is of utmost importance. This includes not just the objective role and place of politics in social life but also the prestige and reputation of political actors: how do rank-and-file citizens view them, how much are they esteemed? It is the job of politicians to govern the country and make decisions affecting everybody. These decisions are often difficult and painful, and not all citizens approve of them at all times. For these reasons, professional politicians must maintain a twofold relationship towards their social base: to represent it as best they can, but also to be able to resist the passions of majority when the common interest and political wisdom so require. If governmental decisions, including unpopular ones, are to be acknowledged and implemented, politicians must enjoy some genuine authority in the eyes of citizenry. This holds regardless of the fact that active democratic citizenship and civil society always presume healthy criticism of those in power.

Serbia, as a postsocialist country, is precisely in such a turbulent period of political reconstitution. Even more than that: unlike many other postsocialist countries with stabilized liberal democratic political regimes, capitalist economies and membership in the EU, Serbia has been in a significant delay. Its path out of real-existing socialism has been highly specific. After 1990, a modified socialist regime led by Slobodan Milošević remained in power, having already substituted nation for class as its legitimacy basis back in the late 1980s. Some reforms were launched in the early 1990s, such as the introduction of political pluralism and competitive elections, as well as limited privatization in the economy. Nevertheless, the extremely unfavorable circumstances of wars in former Yugoslavia, international sanctions provoked by Serbia's involvement in these, and the authoritarian nature of the ruling regime produced a stalemate that Serbian sociologists have termed "blocked transformation" (Lazić /ed./ 2000, Lazić 2011).

The process of social development was unblocked only in 2000, after an entire decade of criminalization of state and economy, another war in Kosovo in 1998-99 including NATO bombing, and intensely escalating social conflicts and cleavages. It came as a surprise to many observers, both outside and inside the country, that the change of regime in 2000 took a bloodless and markedly democratic form, through Milošević's electoral defeat and mass civic mobilization in defense of popular vote in late September and early October 2000. It was only after October 5, 2000 and the election of the new republic Assembly and Government in December of that year that Serbia returned to the community of nations and resumed its movement towards liberal democracy. The difficult legacy of the 1990s is still felt though.

Given Serbia's delay in democratic transformation, and the fact that it began pursuing true reforms in an altered, less favorable international economic and political environment, it becomes even more important for its political elite to perform well and maintain a functional, two-way communicative relationship with the citizens. The reality is, however, far from this desirable condition. The profession of politician is the most denigrated social role currently in Serbia, a target of bitter jokes and utmost contempt by ordinary people. The established institutions of the political system, from the president of the republic to the parliament, are distrusted and poorly respected. Political apathy is pervasive, with ordinary people believing nothing can be done to change the bad situation in society via the regular institutional channels, while at the same time being unwilling to engage in a more spontaneous, informal political action beyond the party system.

It is the aim of this paper<sup>134</sup> to present and discuss the extremely low prestige that the political sphere and its main actors currently enjoy in the eyes of Serbian citizens, as well as to examine some implications of this state of affairs for Serbia's further democratic development. In the first part of the paper, the image of politics as a dirty business, far removed from ordinary people and unconnected with their concerns and interests, will be illustrated on the basis of an empirical study of social classifications. In the second section, the recent history of Serbia's democratic trajectory will be briefly sketched, starting from the "democratic promise" of 2000 through progressive disillusionment and disaffection to the present-day wide gap between what the society sees should be represented and representative capacities of the established party system. Here again, the analysis will draw on empirical data collected in various sociological studies undertaken during the 2000s. In the concluding section, offering a more general view of the issue, it is argued that the failure of democratic political forces after 2000 to take seriously civic mobilization and the highly set „democratic threshold“ of the anti-Milošević movement in the year 2000 has generated profound political alienation and cynicism of citizens, which in turn contributed to the victory of right-wing populists in both presidential and parliamentary elections of 2012.

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## Politics as a Dirty Word

This part of the paper will provide illustrations of the bleak colors in which ordinary people in Serbia today depict the world of professionalized politics. The evidence derives from the sociological study “Social and Cultural Capital in Serbia“, specifically, a set of focus-group interviews implemented within this multi-segment research project. The project as a whole aimed at identifying elements of social and cultural capital that individuals and social groups in Serbian society have at their disposal. Capitals were investigated both in terms of quantity and composition, as their objective characteristics, and in terms of their values on various social markets. This latter level includes necessarily also respondents’ subjective perceptions and judgments, as well as (open or suppressed) conflict between these various perceptions. In theoretical terms, the project drew on Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological approach, especially his notion of social classifications (Bourdieu 1979, 1997), Michele Lamont’s study of symbolic boundaries and boundary work (Lamont 1992), and Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thevenot’s sociology of critical capacity (Boltanski and Thevenot 2006). The methodology included a combination of quantitative (survey) and qualitative methods (interviews, focus groups).<sup>135</sup> In this paper only the data collected by the focus group research technique will be used.

For a clear understanding of the findings that follow, a brief description of the general research context is necessary. Firstly, it must be stressed that the project was *not* focused on politics at all; research objectives did not include discussing or evaluating political life in Serbia, or recommendations how to improve it. Accordingly, the questions included in the focus group protocol were not formulated to that end. Instead, the topics broached were sociological in the narrow sense of the term: social classifications, how social groups and the boundaries dividing them are perceived, definitions of „Us“ and „Them“, etc. Against this backdrop, it is all the more striking to what extent political topics, that is, quite specifically, *politicians* as a social category, imposed themselves and fought their way to the forefront of analysis, much beyond what had been anticipated in the beginning.

Focus group interviews that provide the basis for the present discussion were organized in spring 2011 in four Serbian cities and towns.<sup>136</sup> The aim was to identify discourses of social differentiation and classification operative nowadays in

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135 The project was run by the Center for Empirical Cultural Studies of Southeast Europe, Niš, Serbia, in the framework of the Regional Research Promotion Program in the Western Balkans (RRPP) coordinated by the University of Fribourg. Its main results are presented in the collective volume: Cvetičanin (ed.) 2012.

136 There were eight focus groups altogether, two per site. One was composed by participants with secondary education or less, and the other with college degrees. The participants were coming from diverse social, professional, ethnic and generational backgrounds. The sites were selected to reflect regional variation (Novi Sad, Beograd, Novi Pazar and Niš). The total number of participants was 57 (29 men and 28 women).

Serbia, to examine how crystallized and consistent these discourses are, to reconstruct how the respondents see, evaluate and rank themselves and others, and which criteria are applied in this process. Positive and negative qualifications of types of people were elicited by rather direct questions, such as „What kind of people you would never collaborate with?“, „What is the type of people you wouldn't want to be your friends?“, „What is the kind of people you like, and why?“ Additionally, more responses were obtained in other sections of group discussion, apparently quite unrelated to the main topic (questions like „What is it that you'd never do to achieve your goals?“ or „What is valued in Serbia today?“). This dispersion of discourses of social classification, which almost invariably also included the mention of the figure of „politician“, is the first thing to be noted.

Overall, the boundaries the respondents drew were moral rather than sociological: contrary to what was found by both Bourdieu and Lamont, people did not make distinctions between „Us“ and „Them“ on the basis of some social characteristics (wealth, education, profession, ethnicity, rural/urban residence etc) but rather on the basis of a set of moral values.<sup>137</sup> As a matter of fact, they often found it necessary to explicitly deny the relevance of social criteria of differentiation, pointing out that they select their friends and acquaintances from among the „good and honest“ rather than according to some external characteristics.<sup>138</sup> Both the „own“ and the „Other“ were described in predominantly moral categories. What we ended up with were not really any recognizable social groups transplanted to the symbolic plane but rather aggregates of individuals brought together only by virtue of their shared personal traits. There was the pole of “honest, consistent, correct, open, frank, warm, friendly” people, opposing the pole of the “insincere, hypocritical, inconsiderate, money-grabbing, cold-hearted, egotistic, spineless” persons. There is, however, a notable asymmetry: while at the positive pole no realistic sociological referent could be recognized, at the negative side there emerged a definite social group: the *politicians*.

In virtually every focus group, regardless of the research site or participant features, politicians were the one social group explicitly named as someone against whom a clear social distance is to be made. They are followed by two more groups, cited somewhat less frequently: *tycoons* and *showbiz stars*. This is a surprising kind of company for politicians to find themselves among; what is more, the respondents

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137 This thorough moralization of classification discourses that we found is explained at length in: Spasić and Birešev (2012).

138 To bar any possible misunderstanding: by this we are not claiming that ethnic, cultural, racial, or class differences are irrelevant in Serbia, and that people (perhaps even these same people who took part in our study) do not choose their partners and friends on such basis. The finding only indicates that there is no publicly accepted language of the legitimacy of such boundaries. In other words, people avoid talking about and arguing in favor of classifying others along these lines, although this may stand in contrast with what they actually do.

sometimes made explicit connections between these social types, implying that they all fall somehow together, forming a universe of their own.<sup>139</sup>

In the discussions politicians were described in rather drastic ways. To remind: neither was politics explicitly brought up by the protocol questions, nor did the moderators mention politicians as such. The descriptions that follow thus emerged spontaneously, without any specific prompting on the part of the researchers. Moreover, such disparaging portrayals were given in such a tone as this was the most natural thing to do – something self-understandable, ordinary and “normal”, something that needed no further proof or argument, something that “everybody knows”. The few dissonant opinions, on the contrary, required extensive justification and elaboration, as they generally encountered much resistance from the group. I’ll return to this. Let us first sample some of the most picturesque statements arising from focus group discussions:

“[Politicians] have devastated this country, and they multiply like parasites. They are spreading everywhere, like cancer.”

“I think if a person gets involved actively in politics, his or her human criteria get so distorted that this person loses the last gram of soul. Whatever is done in politics, it goes beyond some human, moral principles. It’s only reaching a goal that counts.”

“Politicians... it’s a never-ending catastrophe.”

“What is valued in our society? I’d rather turn the question around, let’s talk about those people we shouldn’t value, and they are ruling Serbia.”

“Come on, show me an uncorrupt politician? They are so few. And if there is such a person in politics, they surely sent him away to put up posters in the streets.”

“A person who is unable to lie to you, to promise the sun and the moon, and then do nothing – such a person won’t go into politics.”

According to research participants, the politicians are the only Serbians who are making it nowadays. To the question “Who is well off in today’s Serbia?” these were the most frequent answers:

“Only politicians and those around them.”

“Politicians, of course.”

“Only politics, politicians, only them, no one else.”

“Politicians, thieves, tycoons.”

“Both political position and opposition are well off.”

“The ruling oligarchy, political and financial.”

“In order to gain anything, to get anywhere, you must get involved in politics, or become member of mafia.”

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139 Let us note in passing: in none of the previous studies of social classifications, the best known examples being Bourdieu’s *Distinction*, studying French society of the early 1970s, and Lamont’s *Money, Morals, and Manners*, focusing on French and American upper middle classes in the mid-1980s, did politicians stick out as a separate group worthy of special attention. Groups such as the rich and the poor, Blacks and Whites, provincials and metropolitans, the primitives and the cultivated were differentiated by the respondents, but never the “politicians” as a separate group.

As may be seen, politicians are routinely classified together with tycoons and thieves, and sometimes also with celebrities – folk singers, entertainers, reality show participants:

“Nowadays, very young kids, when you tell them that education matters, they point out your material status and they compare you with, say, starlets or politicians. And you just shut up, because there’s nothing you can say.”

“I can be friends with most people. But not with the tycoons and the politicians.”

“One could either join a party, or sign up for the *Grand Stars* TV contest...”

Engaging in politics is described as antipode to good quality:

“If you’ve earned a degree, a doctorate, you won’t engage in shady dealings, in politics, in such things.”

“Being a good politician, this is what it means: I’ve given a statement today, and then five minutes later I denied it. And I’ve convinced everybody that I never gave it at all.”

“Authoritarian submissives – such types fare the best in politics. And people who advance thanks to their worth, education, skills, they are very rare.”

“Politicians, it’s horrible, God forbid!”

When asked who is the type of people they would rather avoid collaborating with if they could, focus group participants often mentioned politicians as their first choice:

“With politicians in general. I’d have a hard time working with them.”

“I wouldn’t with... politicians.”

Entering politics and joining a party is described as the greatest sin a person can commit. Although some participants admit that they would accept membership in a party if that meant securing a job, the majority mood is well expressed by a woman who, asked „What is it that you’d never do to achieve your goals?” answered *first* that “the party option is ruled out because in this way I’d lose myself”, with the rest of the group approving loudly.

Politicians are not seen as working towards the benefit of society and state:

“How did we come to this distorted value system? Because the political elite needed this kind of state and this kind of people. They don’t need well educated, self-assured, financially independent people.”

“We should take up sticks and rout those idiots in Belgrade who are making circus in the Parliament.”

On the contrary, they are an obstacle to achieving valuable collective, and even personal goals:

“Well, politicians, it’s them alone [an obstacle in my life]. Otherwise nothing stands in my way.”

“Obstacles frustrating my goals? Politicians, the system.”

Political parties are not initiators of change:

“If I knew I could change society through a party, I’d join it.”

“Parties operate as interest groups, as mafia syndicates... It all boils down for you to play the role of their party soldier.”

“Our politicians have no desire to get things into motion. .. They ought to be our reflection, so that we express our expectations through them, but it doesn’t work that way.”

During the 1990s, the participants argued, politicians did mean something – citizens identified with representatives of one political option, hated the other one, and generally, politicians were important to people. But now it's all gone. This observation indicates the mood of political disappointment, to which I will return:

“There was a period when people held politicians in high esteem, which is not the case today. Some people appreciated advocates of the national interest, the others appreciated advocates of social change or human rights or anti-war activists. And for some years, these things really mattered. But later on it all eroded gradually to end up where we are now.”

Although the dissatisfaction with the condition of Serbian society was consensual, no participant suggested founding a new political party, or even a social movement, as a means to express and operationalize this sentiment. Any idea of political mobilization was completely absent, while personal involvement towards social change, if recommended, was always framed individually and psychologically: “we should all work more”, “each one should be good at his or her job”, “let's not be pessimists”, “let's see what we can do in our own little worlds and so the society will improve too” etc.

Furthermore, no distinction was made among political parties. On the contrary, the idea that “they are all the same” was expressed many times, in various forms:

“It's like two attorneys in the court – they apparently fight, but afterwards they go for a drink. This was just a show for the populace because they actually get along quite well.”

“The typical politicians' approach is – I won't prosecute you, because when you come to power, you won't prosecute me, because you'll be doing the same things I'm doing now.”

“Ordinary people usually don't say they are against this or that party, they are against all parties. Because people increasingly realize what's really going on here.”

“Regardless of the party, they're all the same. They only mind their political interests, they don't care at all for the public interest.”

“Sometimes we are told that there exist a “First” and an “Other” Serbia, but that's not true. They are all together one Serbia, and you and I are the other.”

These excerpts from the data point in one and the same direction. They demonstrate a strong desire of Serbian citizens to mark, explain, and vividly depict their distance towards professional political actors. The term “politician” functions as a slur, almost a swearword. Research participants perceive politicians as an alienated “class” apart, with its own interests that are sharply distinct from those of the people, rather than as specialized protagonists of an important social sphere with the purpose to articulate various worldviews and represent the interests of particular segments of society. They, the politicians, are “all the same”, and they, as a group, are sharply different from “us”. Tellingly, no participant positioned him/herself, or another individual he/she talked about, in party political terms: they did sometimes express preferences in ideology or worldviews, but no party was ever singled out as

a bearer of any meaningful political position – not even negatively, in order to oppose it.

In democracies, political parties are indispensable as they serve to orient and aggregate electoral choices made by citizens and channel them into policies. They are supposed to reflect the diversity and nonviolent competition of various interests, commitments, values and desires occurring in a society. Perhaps most significantly, as Cohen and Lampe (2011: 223-224) remind, parties should provide the connective tissue between citizens and civil society on the one side, and state institutions on the other. In Serbia, however, they are not seen in this way at all. They are summarily written off as organizations based on naked self-interest, composed of cliques and clans. And contrary to their very definition, they are decidedly *not* seen as places where a person willing to get actively involved in public affairs and contribute to changing society for the better, in accordance with one's own beliefs and values, could find an arena for this ambition. If you want to improve society, our respondents say, you must stay in the private realm: love your family, nurture your friendship network and do your job well. Joining a party can only ruin your noble intentions.

Politicians as a group are targets of intense distrust. They are perceived less as performers of a useful social function and more as a class apart, a coterie, even a peculiar human *type*, divided by an abyss from the ordinary person. This demarcation is described in a very emphatic vocabulary: for example, the process of becoming a politician is presented as a sort of personal transformation, when a person, who up to that point was a “human being”, turns into something else. Phrases such as “to lose oneself”, “to lose one's soul”, “absence of morality”, “God forbid” etc. go far beyond the normal civic criticism of government.

What does all this tell us about the condition of Serbian democratic transition, at this moment, more than a decade after the removal of Milošević's regime?

### **The Forgotten Democratic Promise**

If we are to understand these findings properly, some background is necessary. It is not only that Serbian postsocialist transformation has been belated, distorted, and thwarted in various ways; in addition, its “unblocking” moment, that is, the ousting of Slobodan Milošević from power in 2000, had a very specific course that has had lasting effects. As already noted in the opening sections, contrary to most expectations, after a decade of violence, political repression and despair, all under the mask of a facade democracy, the removal of the authoritarian regime took the form of a peaceful but resolute mass mobilization of Serbian citizens who stood up for change, democracy and return to the international community.

This mobilization attracted unprecedented numbers of people from all social strata, and was geared towards an unprecedented goal. Rather than purely economic, survival-based interest in a better life (although this motive was of course also



present), the main driving force behind the mass protests that followed the elections of September 24, 2000 was a desire to defend something utterly immaterial, namely, one's vote, which Milošević had tried to forge. In this way Serbian citizens proved they had learned some important lessons about democracy, in spite of all the efforts of the Milošević regime to render democratic institutions empty and meaningless. This mass basis provided the necessary support to and bestowed democratic legitimacy on the actions of the united anti-Milošević opposition, generously assisted by the West. Thanks to this democratic awakening the citizens of Serbia felt the victory of October 5, 2000 to be *their* victory. Surely, the victory was achieved in common struggle with the opposition politicians but did not "belong" to the latter. This meant that the new, post-Milošević political leaders were faced with a new kind of attitude on the part of the democratically matured citizens: instead of fear, awe, love or hate, they were felt to be "our", popular representatives with a mandate to implement what "all of us" – opposition parties and "the people" alike – agreed was necessary to drive Serbia forward. This new, higher normative standard that was put in place at this crucial moment meant a new opening, a new and strong democratic promise – but by the same token made possible a correspondingly deep disappointment.

This dynamics was well captured by the longitudinal qualitative research project "Politics and Everyday Life", based on interviews with ordinary people in Serbia. The first of its three research waves was undertaken at the very beginning of postauthoritarian transformation in 2001-02 (Golubović, Spasić and Pavićević /eds./ 2003). At that point, a cluster of what we termed "normative expectations" was identified. In addition to simpler, economic demands related to the standard of living and economic recovery of the country, the citizenry was confronting the new government with a series of normatively grounded claims that aimed at clearly marking the break with the old regime and making the transition irreversible. The revolution of October 5, 2000 was seen as a democratic threshold after which some things were never to be done again, and some ways of doing things in politics were to be abandoned forever. Such normative demands included, for example, *equality before the law and legal security* (no impunity for anyone, a functioning legal system, protection of rights); *institutional rules* (eliminating corruption, general regularization of procedures in state institutions); *depoliticization of life chances* (political preferences or activities must not influence a person's well-being, as it had been customary all the time since 1945); and *caring for the common good* instead of partisanship. It is important to stress that, unlike distributional claims, these demands did not require substantial financial expenditures, and hence failure to meet them could not be excused by lack of money. On the contrary, most of these ideas/ideals referred to symbolic, cultural things, matters of language, style and attitude, of how politicians treat citizens, or how they understand their own responsibilities.<sup>140</sup> Yet, the new political forces, once in power, did not heed these

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140 Public opinion polls, using quantitative methodology, registered identical trends. In a December 2000 survey on a representative sample, respondents expressed trust in the new democratic government and strong belief that it would behave differently from their predecessors: 54% said that

appeals, and in this way missed the chance to put the profession of politician on a totally new footing.

In our first research report already (Golubović, Spasić and Pavićević 2003: 287-293) we anticipated that, if politicians did not take seriously the fragile pact they had struck with the citizens through their joint struggle, the capital of “October 5” as a symbolic moment would be wasted away, while the alienation of politicians from their base, and citizens from politics, would continue to grow. At this beginning of the “unblocked transformation” stage, an interesting paradox concerning political activism could be discerned. On one hand, citizens wanted to be “left alone” by politics – to be able to live their own lives “normally”, as they saw them lived in what they took as “normal” parts of the world (like Western Europe, or, ironically, real-existing socialism of former Yugoslavia). Yet at the same time they were equipped with a newly obtained insight that those in power must not be left unattended: they have to be constantly monitored because the damage they can inflict by carelessness or wicked design is enormous. The tension between the two – politics as something to be get rid of, and politics as something too important to be relegated to politicians alone – amounts to what may be termed the “paradox of (non)involvement” (Spasić 2008). In view of this paradox, it was extremely important for the formerly oppositional politicians, now turned professionals in public office, not to forget how they came to power in the first place, and to stay in tune with their constituency. In this way they could have continued the collaborative process of collective learning of democratic conduct that had proceeded quite successfully at both sides of the politicians/citizens divide during the late 1990s. Nevertheless, they chose a different path. In too many areas, they behaved in ways remarkably similar to the Milošević political elite. True enough, they did not bring the “old times” really back, and significant progress has undoubtedly been made in many respects – especially if viewed from the outside. But from a perspective within the society itself, in the eyes of those who took to the streets in October 2000, this progress has not been sufficiently visible at the level that mattered so much – the normative one.

In the later stages of the “Politics and Everyday Life” project the fruits of this process were already visible, in the form of disappointment and growing pessimism. The first shift from readiness to be patient and wait until the new democratic government is consolidated, to disheartenment and apathy, was detected in 2005

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the once-oppositional coalition government would be much more resistant to corruption than the Milošević one, while only 6% believed the reverse. At the same time, citizens stressed the necessity for mechanisms for checking power: 57% ranked “consequent division of power into legislative, judiciary and executive” as their first or second choice of best instrument to ensure such control; 42% chose regular elections; and 32% free and independent media. Even more importantly, citizens strongly supported the idea that public officials be subject to special scrutiny in order to reduce chances for corruption: state officials should declare their property at the beginning and end of their term (supported by as many as 87% respondents), should be banned from running private or state firms (77%), should not be members of managing boards in companies (71%), and should put their offices in parties, unions and NGOs on hold (64%) (Mihailović 2010: 21-22).

(Golubović 2005; Spasić 2005). Two years later, it was confirmed and exacerbated (Golubović /ed./ 2007). Unlike the optimistic, sometimes euphoric mood that dominated our first interviews, what prevailed in 2005 and, especially, 2007 is the gloomy tone of disillusionment. When talking about how they felt, and how people around them felt, interviewees said that hopes were dashed, that there was nothing to be expected any more. Back in 2002, people were saying they knew that change could not happen overnight and they were ready to wait. Three years later, they were still in principle patient, though stating that they no longer knew how much longer it would take. And in 2007, they stopped waiting altogether – there was nothing to wait for, they said. Or, as Golubović (2007a: 71) summarized it: in the first years following 2000, people were dissatisfied with the *pace* of changes; from 2005 on, they were no longer sure as to the *direction* of changes. The most frequent phrase was “I'm not sure where Serbia is going”.

Disappointment of the democratic electorate can explain the fact that today, twelve years after 2000, the value of the popular revolution of October 5, 2000 has faded almost to the point of unrecognizability. Those who were at the other side in 2000 have increasingly managed to press a different reading of the event – as the beginning of deterioration rather than improvement. The preposterous claims that all evils in Serbia, from poverty and unemployment to hurt national pride and international powerlessness, started in 2000 strike surprisingly many chords. Sadly, many participants in the movement of 2000 are among those who have come to think this way. The democratic forces contributed to this curious outcome by their own neglect for the symbolic side of politics. The watershed event of October 5 should have been institutionalized into a sort of national holiday, a great date in recent Serbian history when citizens undertook their own collective political subjectivation. This symbolic crystallization could have channeled a portion of popular emotional energies away from celebrating aggressive nationalist symbols into celebrating democracy. This opportunity was not used, and the symbolism of October 5 was quickly devalued by quarrels and mutual accusations within the anti-Milošević coalition. The way was opened for later radical reinterpretations. What initially seemed to be clear to everyone – that the Milošević era was one of the worst periods in modern Serbian history – is no longer self-evident. In our interviews, this process is reflected in the changing way our respondents talked about the meanings of “October 5”: in 2002, it was for them a day that made history, Serbia's new dawn etc. In 2005, it began to sink down into the indistinguishable morass of »politics«. In 2007, its mention made people angry rather than proud, because they felt it to be the symbol of failed hopes and cheated promises.

### **Was Disappointment Inevitable?**

The findings based on focus group interviews quoted above concur with available quantitative data. Indices on (dis)trust of Serbian citizens in political and state institutions have for years been consistently discouraging. Parties are routinely

listed among institutions perceived to be the most corrupt sector of the political system. In spite of the widespread awareness that politics has a strong impact on people's everyday life, as little as 6% said in a 2010 survey that politics was important for them (Gavrilović and Jovanović 2011: 140, data from the Gallup Balkan Monitor).<sup>141</sup> This figure is arguably a reflection of people's feeling of resentment against and rejection of politics, their desire to keep it away from their lives as much as they could. Another survey taken in the same year, 2010, used a different set of measures to show the same trends. While distrust was higher than trust for all the institutions included in the questionnaire, by far the worst ranked on the 1-5 scale (where 1 stands for "total distrust") were political parties (2.17), followed by National Assembly (2.35), labor unions (2.46), Government (2.48) and the media (2.52) (Slavujević 2010: 63, 66). Citizens' trust having thus reached the lowest point since the introduction of political pluralism in 1990, the author of the cited paper concludes bitterly: „The institutions of the political system are facing their deepest legitimacy crisis to date“ (Slavujević 2010: 62). In her research carried out in the latter half of the decade, the anthropologist Jessica Greenberg (2010) similarly reveals ubiquitous, habitual political apathy in Serbia, with depoliticization coming close to a consciously adopted strategy especially among young people.

Without doubt, unfavorable opinion of professional politicians and established politics is not peculiar of Serbia. Political disenchantment was routinely registered in all post-communist countries, after the brief period of initial euphoria following the great rupture of 1989/90. Distrust in political institutions is pervasive throughout the postsocialist world, although with variations due to both historical legacies and specific paths out of communism (Dimitrova-Grajzl and Simon 2010). Rising levels of electoral abstention threaten the once-solid legitimacy of postcommunist governments (Cześniak 2006). The region of South East Europe seems to be even more than the post-socialist average prey to developing a rift between the party system and constituency. According to studies, in 2007 more than two-thirds of the respondents in every Western Balkan state, except Montenegro, distrusted political parties (Cohen and Lampe 2011: 234-35).<sup>142</sup> Kajsui's (2010) analysis of the entrenched "antipolitical" discourse in Albania closely parallels the one presented here.<sup>143</sup>

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141 In the same poll, high levels of distrust in institutions were registered: the most trusted was the military with 77%, followed by the Serbian Orthodox Church with 66%, and the police with 59.6%. All other institutions fell below the 50 percent line: the media (41.6%), the judiciary (38%), and the government (33%).

142 The figures are: in Albania, 16% of respondents expressed "some distrust" and 57% "complete distrust"; in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 21% and 46%, respectively; Croatia, 27% and 44%; Macedonia, 13% and 56%; Serbia, 20% and 51%; Montenegro, 21% and 32% (data from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development). Further data on electoral abstention and distancing from the party system may be found in another chapter of the same book by Cohen and Lampe (2011: 279-287).

143 Compare the remarkable similarities: „The president of the republic called Albanian politics 'dirty'... Ismail Kadare noted that he was not aware 'of another country in Europe where the political class is in opposition with its own country and against it.' A well-known political analyst noted that

Moreover, disaffection, depoliticization and alienation from the existing system of representative democracy have been on the rise in the developed West as well. Expressed in, for example, low voter turnout, diminishing party membership, growing distrust of major parties and recourse to forms of direct action, they have been the objects of extensive theoretical and policy debate (see e.g. Alonso, Keane and Merkel /eds./ 2011). The prevalence of dissatisfaction with the established solutions to political problems should not, however, blind us to the specificities of the local situations in each particular country. In the societies with weak and poorly grounded democratic institutions, burdened by difficult pasts, disparagement of politicians and cynicism regarding the existing political system may have more profound consequences, because the system cannot be trusted to run “by itself”, so to speak, but rather requires the involvement and support of the broad strata of the population.

In the Serbian case, the depth of political disappointment wrought by the post-Milošević democratic parties in power after 2000 affected most heavily precisely their own constituency. Having failed to uphold some of their most important promises, including departization of social life and dignity of public office, the democratic forces have lost the support of significant segments of their electorate. Their voters have increasingly opted for other parties or, more often, turned away from elections altogether, while some initiated a “white ballot” campaign (deliberately invalidating the ballot paper to show dissatisfaction) which did have some success.<sup>144</sup> This resulted in the apparently surprising electoral defeat in 2012, when both presidential and parliamentary elections were lost to the Democratic Party’s main opponent, the Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska napredna stranka).<sup>145</sup>

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politicians are willing to become ‘deceivers, cheaters, bastards, male whores, bandits, servile, chameleons, clowns, idiots, quarrelsome, etc. etc.’ Politics was now seen as corrupt by nature... a threat to society ... against [which] society should remain united. Politics and politicians thus gradually became the ultimate evil, pure negativity, against which Albanian society was constituted“ (Kajsiu 2010: 244-245).

144 The number of invalid ballots was over 4 percent in the 2012 elections. The census for entering Parliament is set at 5% of the vote, and some commentators joked that white ballots almost made it to the National Assembly.

145 In the contest for presidency, in the second round held on May 20, 2012 Serbian Progressive Party’s candidate Tomislav Nikolić beat DS’s Boris Tadić by 49.54 : 47.31 percent. In parliamentary elections of May 6, the coalition led by the Serbian Progressive Party won 24.04 % of the vote (that is, 73 seats in Parliament), while the coalition headed by Democratic Party, previously the strongest party in several consequent elections in the 2000-2008 period, dropped to 22.06 percent (67 seats). A few additional parties managed to enter the National Assembly: Socialist Party of Serbia 14.51% (44), Democratic Party of Serbia 6.99% (21), Liberal Democratic Party 6.53% (19), United Regions of Serbia 5.51% (16), and ethnic minority parties (data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia,

[http://webzrzs.stat.gov.rs/WebSite/userFiles/file/Izbori/Izbori2012/parlamentarni/Tabela1\\_PARLAMENT\\_KONACNA.pdf](http://webzrzs.stat.gov.rs/WebSite/userFiles/file/Izbori/Izbori2012/parlamentarni/Tabela1_PARLAMENT_KONACNA.pdf)). The Democratic Party tried unsuccessfully to reach an agreement with smaller parties to put together a Government with sufficient parliamentary support, so the Progressives took over and a new postelectoral coalition led by them was announced in July 2012.

This party, a revamped version of the ultranationalist Serbian Radical Party from which it split three years ago, abandoned the aggressive nationalist language of its progenitor and embraced, at least rhetorically, the “European way” for Serbia. Yet it remains strongly populist, often playing the anti-elite, anti-intellectual, egalitarian card that tries to reach the impoverished broad strata by promising them quick and unrealistic solutions to the many problems Serbia is facing. Flirting with a populist authoritarian idea of a strong state that will “take care” of all citizen needs, attacking the banks and the rich in public, stressing the necessity to promote national authenticity in culture and education, and other age-old ingredients of a populist political position, the new ruling party has given rise to fears that the next few years will mean a step back in Serbia’s democratization. These anxieties are further nurtured by the personal composition of the new Government and its appointees in state institutions. We are witnessing the return into political life of some of the gravely compromised public figures from the infamous proto-totalitarian period of Milošević’s rule, towards the end of 1990s, when the Serbian Radical Party participated in power.

To be fair, the new incumbents are trying hard to alleviate these doubts and to balance the populist-nationalist side of their political image with the newly adopted pro-European and tolerant one. They are also striving to convince the public that democracy is their highest value and that they have no intention of imperiling the attained level of democratic development in Serbia. They claim, on the contrary, that a change in power after a long period of domination of Democratic Party at all levels of government will contribute to upgrading Serbia’s democracy. They may be right. Whether this party’s democratic transformation has been genuine, and whether a new political constellation will benefit Serbia and the region, remains to be seen. After all, it is not unusual in our part of the world that conservative, moderately nationalist governments take some of the hardest, politically riskiest but necessary steps on their country’s path away from the past and into a new stage of societal transformation. Croatia is a case in point. Serbia may well turn out to be another example of the same paradox.

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