



**Partecipazione e Conflitto**

\* *The Open Journal of Sociopolitical Studies*

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

**PACO, Issue 12(3) 2019: 898-918**

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v12i3p898

Published in November 15, 2019

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# THE DISCOURSE OF ANTI-INSTRUMENTALISM: EXPLORING A CONCEPTUAL MODEL THROUGH THE CASE STUDY OF THE *WE WON'T LET BELGRADE D(R)OWN* INITIATIVE

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**ABSTRACT:** The main focus of our paper is on a specific form of democratic discourse, used in different types of social engagement actions (petitions, speeches, intellectual engagement, ad hoc citizens' protests, social movements etc.), that attempts to politicize a certain issue by challenging the neoliberal principle of instrumentalism which argues that democratic procedures can legitimately be abandoned in the name of the greater efficiency of socio-economic development. Therefore, we start from identifying the discourse of "neoliberal instrumentalism" and its relative success in delegitimizing the welfare state and mechanisms of democratic decision making and we formulate a conceptual model of a democratic counter-narrative named "anti-instrumentalist discourse". Through empirical analyses of discourse used by We Won't Let Belgrade D(r)own initiative, that mobilized against the Serbian government's urban project Belgrade Waterfront we try to illustrate the applicability and the heuristic value of the proposed model. The data for the analyses were collected through 1) desk analysis of available secondary data on the Belgrade Water-

front project, 2) official statements and proclamations of the We Won't Let Belgrade D(r)own initiative, 3) semi-structured interviews with four core members of the initiative.

**KEYWORDS:** Anti-instrumentalist discourse, deliberative democracy, neoliberal instrumentalism, social engagement, *We Won't let Belgrade D(r)own* initiative.

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## 1. Introduction

Our intention in this paper is twofold. First, we wish to offer a conceptual model of a specific type of discourse that we define as 'anti-instrumentalist', and that, we argue, has the potential to challenge the discursive strategy of neoliberalism that we term "instrumentalism". Second, we analyse one example of social engagement that makes use of the discourse of anti-instrumentalism – the contemporary Serbian initiative "We Won't Let Belgrade D(r)own". The principal aim of our analysis is to illustrate the applicability and the heuristic value of the proposed model.

We start from recognizing the success of neoliberalism, especially in delegitimizing the welfare state and mechanisms of democratic decision making, which leaves us with the question of the reasons behind this success. We find (one of) the answers in the notion of "neoliberal instrumentalism" as a discourse embodying the neoliberal principle of justification which argues that democratic procedures can legitimately be abandoned in the name of the greater efficiency of socio-economic development. We define "anti-instrumentalist discourse" as an emerging democratic counter-narrative that attempts to politicize a certain issue by challenging neoliberal instrumentalism. "Anti-instrumentalist" discourse should be understood as one, albeit very important, dimension of a particular instance of democratic social engagement that complements other vocabularies of critique.

We are principally concerned with *discourses* – of neoliberal instrumentalism and reactive anti-instrumentalism, as will be discussed in the next chapters – and ways in which they could be put to use in *different types* of social actions that we name "social engagement" (petitions, speeches, intellectual engagement, ad hoc citizens' protests, social movements etc.). Social engagement can be understood as a subtype of a broader concept of value-rational social action – action characterized by the following or questioning of norms and rules of conduct – which involves all forms of action directed towards social change, but also the attempts at preventing change, i.e. stabilizing existing societal structures through the legitimation of existing institutional arrangements (Vasiljević and Zaharijević, 2017). In this respect, the social engagement perspective does not run contrary to similar, yet distinct perspectives favouring notions like social

movements, protest movements or civic engagement. Rather, it enables us to retain the focus on discourses and discursive practices of different actors. Therefore, our case study – the Initiative 'We Won't Let Belgrade D(r)own' – has been analysed within this broader framework of social engagement. Additionally, one reason that we treat our object of analysis – the We Won't Let Belgrade D(r)own Initiative – as a form of social engagement is that it 'overflows' the conceptual boundaries between a *social movement* and a more loosely integrated and porous 'network'.<sup>1</sup>

The following chapter brings our detailed understanding of the discourse of neoliberal instrumentalism as the principle tool enabling the legitimization and political success of different forms of neoliberal ideology. In the third part, we will elaborate the conceptual model of anti-instrumentalist discourse, while the fourth section presents the case study of the Belgrade initiative.

## **2. Neoliberal Instrumentalism: Legitimizing the Dismantling of Democracy**

Our initial interest in discourses and social engagement challenging and criticizing neoliberalism starts from the appreciation of how strikingly successful the legitimizing of neoliberalization has been. The success of technocratic austerity politics in the European Union and the continuous dismantling of social rights and welfare institutions are unencumbered by democratic control mechanisms. Neoliberalism seems to have managed to delegitimize, not only social democracy and the Keynesian welfare state, but, arguably *democracy as such* (Ferrara, 2014; Merkel and Kneip, 2018), thus opening the space for the rise of new authoritarianism. The primary question of our analysis was: where does this extraordinary capacity come from? The successful delegitimization of Keynesianism and the “bureaucratized” welfare state may be comprehended – and has been accounted for by authors such as Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) – in terms of the ingenuous synthesis of elements of classical liberalism with the “incorporated” critique of Fordism epitomized by the 1968 movement. However, far less theoretical consideration has been given to the apparent success of neoliberalism in delegitimizing democracy in general. An initial answer should be looked for in the domain of the *discursive*

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1 Besides, '[N]ot all networks between likeminded people necessarily reflect social movement processes: for example, the international Zapatista support network is not regarded by many analysts as a social movement because of the lack of a focused identity and the resulting bonds, even though resources of solidarity certainly circulate through it' (Della Porta and Diani, 2006, 22). It is also for this reason that we rely on the concept of 'social engagement' rather than 'movement' in our conceptualization of the general characteristics of anti-instrumentalist democratic political action and their application to the empirical case of the Belgrade initiative.

power of neoliberalism, in a particular discursive strategy that we term the principle of *instrumentalism*. Authors such as Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant, Norman Fairclough and Simon Springer have emphasized the fundamentally “discursive” nature of neoliberalism (Springer 2016; Fairclough, 2005; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2001). These authors focus on the capability of the neoliberal discourse to “produce” a new social reality:

“Neoliberalism is a discourse (...) Like all discourses, neoliberalism does not simply float above the Earth as a disconnected theory that remains detached from everyday life. Its policies affect our relationships to each other, its programmes shape our behaviours, and its projects implicate themselves in our lived experiences” (Springer, 2016: 1)

Assuming an even stronger “constructionist” perspective with respect to the power of neoliberal discourse to shape social reality, Bourdieu and Wacquant have defined neoliberal discourse as a “double discourse” that naturalizes a certain particularistic (neoliberal) worldview by giving it an appearance of “reason” and that “is used as an instrument of construction of public and private policies and at the same time to evaluate those very policies” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2001: 4).

As can be observed, analysts of neoliberalism as a discourse have focused for the most part on the “naturalization” or “universalization” of the fundamental neoliberal values: “the ‘efficiency’ of the (free) market” and the “celebratory reassertion of (individual) ‘responsibility’” (ibid: 3), or on the universalization of “neoliberalism’s utopian goal: [that] all social transactions should be market transactions” (Fairclough, 2005: 24). These discursive strategies of naturalization could be seen as the means for delegitimizing (and ultimately dismantling) social democracy and the Keynesian welfare state in the contemporary West and beyond. In fact, the biggest obstacle to the utopian goal that “all social transactions should be market transactions” is to be found in democracy itself: in the (however limited) capacity of the wider social strata in functional democracies to formulate, in Karl Polanyi’s famous terms, a “countermovement” to marketization through mechanisms of popular sovereignty (Polanyi, 2001).

The project of neoliberalization finds itself in a paradoxical position. The process of neoliberalization needs, on the one hand, to remove democratic procedures and the threat of popular sovereignty as obstacles to marketization. However, the discourse of neoliberalism retains, on the other hand, a normative claim to anti-authoritarianism, especially in the critique of social democracy. Neoliberalism thus becomes, in Wendy Brown’s terms, an ideological “Frankenstein”, at once in favour of freedom and its curtailment (Brown, 2018).

A key neoliberal discursive strategy for overcoming this paradox, we argue, can be found in the principle of *instrumentalism*. This principle symbolically juxtaposes the petrified world of democratic proceduralism and the world of economic dynamism, supposedly suffocating under such proceduralism.

The instrumentalist principle within the neoliberal discourse is founded on the supposition that democratic institutional arrangements and procedures are too slow and time consuming. This is especially emphasized in situations of “crisis” (the post-2008 constellation), but also more generally, in the sense that these institutional arrangements are the enemies of much-needed “change” and “innovation”. Ultimately, the vocabulary of “change” itself is anchored in the “highest value” of economic growth which constitutes the *telos* of the political community within the neoliberal discourse. The democratic arrangements are perceived within instrumentalism as being of secondary importance compared to the goal of creating a dynamic, competitive, efficient and sustainable market-based economic system claimed to contribute to “the benefit of the citizens” (Matković and Ivković, 2018). In other words, instrumentalism argues that the “throughput” of societal reproduction (democratic procedures of decision-making) stands in the way of optimizing the 'output' of the process – individual wealth, economic growth, redistribution, etc.

As Matković and Ivković (2018) argue, neoliberal 'instrumentalism' postulates an antithesis of democracy and the effectiveness of social reproduction – the more democratic a society, the less efficient the process of reproduction. Within neoliberal instrumentalism, the notion of the 'reduction of complexity' is a norm, a regulative idea and not simply a functional necessity. This imperative of the 'reduction of complexity' underpins the neoliberal vision of the good society from education and healthcare, where it appears in the form of 'market-rationalization', to the political system. It is mobilized against the “overly complex” democratic institutional system in the discourse of instrumentalism. Instrumentalism anchors itself both in the normative vocabulary of classical liberalism and in the Romanticist ideal of individual “authenticity”. It argues that the “reduction of the complexity” of the democratic political system, presented in the form of “dismantling bureaucracy”, opens up space for greater individual freedom and initiative, as well as for personal self-realization (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007: 28-29).

Also, a rudimentary theory of the human subject complements the ideal of self-realization in the assumption that the primary sources of human motivation for social action are the prospects of maximizing the actors' material wealth and societal status. This leads to the argument that people will lose motivation to work if these prospects are systematically constrained by institutional arrangements that aim at maximizing

the democratic legitimacy of a given political system. The above described discursive double logic of de/legitimization can be adequately challenged only with an equally complex discursive (counter) strategy. Such a strategy, in a form of criticism that tackles both dimensions simultaneously (the normative foundations and explanatory claims of neoliberal instrumentalism) is what we term the 'anti-instrumentalist' discourse. In the following chapter we shall explain in more detail how we conceptualize it, and what are its three main narrative formations.

### 3. Conceptualizing the 'anti-instrumentalist' discourse

Following Matković and Ivković (2018), who introduced a preliminary formulation of this concept, we define anti-instrumentalist discourse as a specific type of discourse employed by actors of democratic social engagement.<sup>2</sup> Anti-instrumentalist discourse challenges the neoliberal justification of the reduction of complexity and the abandoning of democratic procedures in the name of the greater efficiency of socio-economic development. This is done through the politicization of citizens' everyday experiences of social injustice that are based on the micro level, but effectively serve to draw attention to the (mis)use of power on the macro level.

By conceptualization we refer to efforts to develop the general idea of what anti-instrumentalist discourse is that goes beyond the specificities of various vocabularies of critique which different types of social engagement (protests, movements, civic activism, public intellectual engagement, etc.) use in their activities. We argue that the application of *anti-instrumentalist discourse* as an interpretative framework can be an added value to the study of already existing narratives of the critique of neoliberalism, like the call for greater inclusiveness of decision-making processes, strengthening of democratic institutions, etc. Our conceptual model of anti-instrumentalist discourse is theorized as a response to neoliberal instrumentalism. In developing the model, we were guided by the question of which components are indispensable for a critique of instrumentalism's logic of (de)legitimation. The model encompasses three main narrative formations that should feature in a developed form of anti-instrumentalist discourse: *democratic anti-reductionism*, *democratic (experimental) proceduralism* and *politicization of everyday experience from micro to macro level*. Such conceptual model will then, further in the text, be applied to one contemporary form of democratic so-

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2 Democratic social engagement is every social engagement for democracy, and as such it should be distinguished from those types of social engagement which promote discriminative practices that can limit citizens' rights and freedoms (extreme rightist, neo-fascist, etc.).

cial engagement – the *We Won't Let Belgrade D(r)own Initiative* in Serbia – with the aim of examining its heuristic fruitfulness and providing it with an illustrative empirical anchoring. The narrative formations are as follows:

### 3.1. *Democratic anti-reductionism*

'Anti-instrumentalist' discourse opposes the reduction of the complexity of the democratic political system followed by the strengthening of the executive power in the name of the *greater efficiency* of socio-economic development, typically found in neoliberal instrumentalism (e.g. Bourdieu, 1998). Contrary to neoliberal reason, anti-instrumentalist discourse claims that efficiency is, in the long run, a variable strongly dependant on the democratic exercise of control over the executive power. In fact, the efficiency of socio-economic development has to be observed in the framework of the maximization of public welfare instead of the short-term gains of power elites. As McCluskey (2003) excellently points out, using the concept of social citizenship to define citizens' rights to economic security and general wellbeing: "This fundamental – and fundamentally flawed – division between redistribution and efficiency is the linchpin that enables neoliberals to turn social citizenship from a public benefit to a public threat" (McCluskey, 2003, 787).

Even if one could claim that the reduction of complexity is not reserved for neoliberal instrumentalism only, there is a specificity of neoliberal reduction that is important here. We argue that the principle of the reduction of complexity *within neoliberal instrumentalism* always takes the direction of strengthening executive power and limiting the chances of citizens' participation and deliberation. Anti-instrumentalist discourse, on the other side, challenges this approach which confines the 'steering' of society to a narrow view of the state protagonists or experts. Instead, what is favoured is a relational perspective that calls for a non-reductive approach in explaining the overall dynamics of problem-solving (and crisis-regulating) tasks in any specific society in general.

This does not mean that reduction of complexity is not desirable and possible. However, its implementation has to be in the direction of dismantling the legal obstacles to the greater participation of citizenry in decision-making processes and revising the indicators of socio-economic development to favour the common welfare.

### 3.2. *Democratic (experimental) proceduralism*

'Anti-instrumentalist' discourse opposes the abandoning of democratic procedures invoking the decrease of citizens' participation and deliberation. It advocates for non-discriminative inclusion of citizens into different (often experimental) arenas that have

a participatory and deliberative character that does not have to come at the expense of procedural complexity. We assume that this narrative could be found in contemporary social movements and bottom-up initiatives asking for more consensual maximization of public welfare.

Democratic social engagement with 'anti-instrumentalist' discourse can be situated within the broader current of contemporary forms of political action that aim at enhancing and radicalizing parliamentary liberal democracy. There is a whole spectrum of new social movements, deliberative initiatives etc, that focus on the need to further democratize democracy through deliberative or other means (Della Porta, 2013; Rossi and della Porta, 2009; Della Porta and Rucht, 2013), but may or may not include aspects of anti-instrumentalist discourse.

'Anti-instrumentalist' discourse argues for keeping the efficient procedural aspect of the democratic state functioning, in a similar way as the deliberative approach to democracy insists on an increase in the number of voices participating in the discussion of socio-political issues in order to formulate "better" decisions and policies (Bobbio, 2010, 2012; Karpowitz and Raphael, 2014; Neblo, 2015). The anti-instrumentalist discourse asserts a *strong intrinsic connection between the intensification of democracy* (in particular its deliberative aspects) and *the growth of a society's capacity to solve its problems*.

In this regard, coherently with the deliberative approach to democracy, anti-instrumentalist discourse posits that the appropriate answer to problematic situations in democratic societies should be the deepening and strengthening of democratic elements within the political system (Parkinson and Mansbridge, 2012; Florida, 2013).<sup>3</sup> The opening of space for various non-institutionalized and institutionalized arenas of deliberation within the system of parliamentary democracy is directly, not inversely, correlated to the growth of a society's capacity to overcome its problems. Moreover, the embeddedness of new spaces for democratic deliberation that could spark a process of collective reflection and democratic 'experimentation' within the existing institutional arrangements might allow for the articulation of more effective solutions, closer to citizens' needs, and thus improve the quality of democracy (Geissel and Joas, 2013).

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3 Particularly within the systemic approach, legitimacy is generated through the interaction and mutual dependence between different institutional and *non-institutional actors* and their (inter)actions. It is therefore possible to consider all political practices and discourses that aim to create actions or instances that could improve *the quality of public discussion* (even if only through the inclusion of new perspectives or arguments) as an attempt to improve the democratic deliberative quality of the political system (Florida, 2013).



### 3.3. Politicization of everyday experience from micro to macro level

'Anti-instrumentalist' discourse politicizes concrete societal issues, making therefore efforts to induce macro social changes starting from micro issues and actions. This discourse centres around *societal issues close to the ordinary actors' everyday experience*. In this regard, the anti-instrumentalist discourse does not only *normatively* challenge certain state policies or courses of action (from the point of view of justness, legality or democratic legitimacy) but is deeply enrooted in micro aspects, in the actual problems of citizens in their neighbourhoods and their cities. Based in community experience and drawing from concrete examples close to everyday life, 'anti-instrumentalist' discourse assists in shaping the boundaries of the public sphere (Guidry, 2003) pinpointing the crucial challenges like effective abuses of power, misuse of commons, corruption and malversation of elites on the state or macro level, etc. The social engagement organized around the *Right to the City* movements is exemplary for this aspect (Jacobsson, 2015; Nicholls, 2008; Jezierska and Polanska, 2017). Such forms of social engagement differ also from those emblematic, traditional (class/labour) movements and the so-called new social movements that focus on "cultural and symbolic issues that are linked with issues of identity" (Johnston, Laraña, and Gusfield, 1994: 7). The focus on this micro-to-macro aspect is what distinguishes anti-instrumentalist discourse from the one employed in various democratic experimentations stemming mostly from deliberative theories of democracy, like deliberative mini-public (Goodin and Dryzek, 2006; Fung, 2003; Gastil et al. 2008) which run the risk of remaining isolated from a wider political and social system – the scale problem – since their effects could stay limited only to the population involved in the specific deliberative democratic practice (Parkinson, 2003; Di Mauro and Fiket, 2017). We assume that such tendency is avoided in enrooting the 'anti-instrumentalist' discourse in local/micro issues while connecting them to macro issues.

## 4. Analysis of *We won't let Belgrade D(r)own*

This section presents a case study of the *We Won't Let Belgrade D(r)own (Ne da(vi)mo Beograd)* initiative against the Serbian government's urban project *Belgrade Waterfront (Beograd na vodi)*. The purpose of the analysis is to see if and how the discourse of *Ne da(vi)mo Beograd (NDBG)* fits into the proposed model, but also to examine the initiative's internal deliberative and democratizing capacities.

The data for this case study were collected through 1) desk analysis of available secondary data on the *Belgrade Waterfront* project, 2) official statements and proclamations of the *We Won't Let Belgrade D(r)own* initiative (some of which can be found on their website), 3) semi-structured interviews with four core members of the initiative.

### ***Context, Causes, Purpose***

The Serbian government investment *Belgrade Waterfront*, together with the alleged funds from United Arab Emirates, has been the principal target of the NDBG initiative's actions in the past years. The value of the entire investment was estimated to be \$3.1 billion, with a prospect to reach \$4 billion by the final stage (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2014). The *Belgrade Waterfront* project is a project of expensive hotels, offices, condominiums, retail and a tall glass tower. It does not comply with the extant urban law and planning procedures, which have in the meantime been amended with the sole purpose to sustain the project. Generally, it ignores the voices of the relevant expert community arguing that the *Belgrade Waterfront* project does not take into account the urban and economic reality of Belgrade (Lalović, Radosavljević and Đukanović, 2015). In addition, there has been little transparency in the decision making and funding of the project. According to the government officials, the legitimation for the accelerated implementation of the project at the cost of the neglect of existing laws and the critical voices of the expert community lies in the need for fast economic development. A clear example of neoliberal instrumentalism at work is a statement from the national broadcasting company: "As the Prime Minister has stated, the *Belgrade Waterfront* Project will result in the growth of the national GDP, the growth in employment rate and, in ten years' time, the Serbian capital will have more tourists than Budapest" (Radio Television Serbia, website, 13.12.2018).

In April 2015, The National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia adopted by urgent procedure the *Law establishing the public interest and special procedures of expropriation and issuance of the construction permit for the realization of the project "Belgrade Waterfront"* (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, 2015, no. 34). Before this step, the Government of the Republic of Serbia declared the project *Belgrade Waterfront* of special significance for the Republic of Serbia and the City of Belgrade. In addition, the adoption of the Master Plan of Belgrade 2021 was accompanied by a general neglect of a variety of objections to the amendments that were submitted by citizens and experts, particularly the Association of Serbian Architects and the Association of Belgrade Architects (Sekretarijat za urbanizam i gradjevske-poslove, 2015).

During the same month, the Government of Serbia entered into a contract with the company *Belgrade Waterfront Capital Investment* from Abu Dhabi, owned by the Eagle

Hills Company (Eagle Hills, 2015). The investor from Abu Dhabi became the owner of 68% of Belgrade Waterfront, while the Serbian Government owned the remaining 32%. Contrary to the initially announced billion figures, Eagle Hills committed to secure 300 million EUR, out of which 150 million in equity and an additional 150 million as a loan from the company founder. At the same time, the Serbian state has committed itself to infrastructurally prepare the whole terrain for building.

Soon after the launching of the project in 2014, the initiative *We Won't Let Belgrade D(r)own* was founded, bringing together organizations and individuals interested in urban and cultural policies and urban management of the city. The civil society organisations that pre-existed the initiative were *The Ministry of Space* and *Who Builds the City?*. Although their principles drew on general socio-political ideas (social justice and wide participation of citizens in the formulation of public policies), their actions were aimed at local, municipal levels, against the idea that projects concerning the quality of everyday lives of citizens could be implemented exclusively through top-down mechanisms.

In the beginning, the core members of the Initiative were few, and, although their number grew in time, they are still a small group of around 20 people. They have an active Facebook page and newsletter they use to spread information about their actions and to mobilize people: they have organized eight protests so far, gathering several thousand citizens<sup>4</sup>. They work on voluntary basis and the realization of their actions is fully dependant on financial donations by their supporters, fellow citizens.

### ***The anti-instrumentalism of We Won't Let Belgrade D(r)own***

As stated, the initiative was launched in 2014 as a reaction to the legally dubious ways in which the Belgrade Waterfront project had started to be implemented. In the self-description of its purpose and aims, the movement states:

*"We are a group of people of various profiles, interests and beliefs, gathered around a common goal: putting an end to the degradation and plunder of Belgrade on behalf of megalomaniacal urban and architectural projects, primarily the "Belgrade Water-*

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4 At the beginning, the protests they organised were modest in numbers, but the protests started to grow after the incident in Hercegovačka street. On the evening of the 25 April 2016 - the day parliamentary elections were held - several masked men came with a bulldozer to clear the place designated for Belgrade Waterfront, where some private objects still stood. They tied up the guard and prevented passers-by to come near, after which they conducted an unauthorized clearance of the terrain. To this day the Serbian public does not know who the perpetrators were and on whose orders they acted.

*front” project. We are determined to fight against the appropriation of parts of our city for the private interests of non-transparent actors, for whose expenditures, once again, we, the citizens of this country, would have to allocate vast amounts of money. We refuse the constant disregard and contempt for citizens’ voices and opinions in the face of the private interests of individuals and shady deals between investors and politicians in which, ultimately, the public good and public funds always end up as collateral damage” (Ne da(vi)mo Beograd, 2015).*

From the very beginning, the Initiative’s aim was not only to react to what was seen as illegal and harmful to citizens’ interests in general, but also to promote an idea that all major urban projects should involve the participation and opinions of all affected citizens. In this respect, it is significant to note that when the Initiative had to be registered as a legal entity – in order to file legal complaints regarding the project – our interviewees stated that the Initiative decided to name their association of citizens *The right to the city*<sup>5</sup>. This indicates how an ad hoc initiative, formed as a protest against a concrete urban and economic project, inscribes itself into a larger notion of how citizens should organize and position themselves as active subjects acting for their interests.

As our interlocutors explained, they believe in action on the local scale, as an enforcement of “radical democracy on the local level”. Describing why “reclaiming politics on the local level” is their principle motivation, our interviewees stressed that the local is where most people feel the immediate effects of the national politics; it is also a space where they feel they can make a change, describing the national politics as heavily affected by global interests where they feel they can do little to effect change.

In the specific case of Belgrade Waterfront, not only were local citizens excluded from any decision-making processes regarding the project, but the local municipalities of Savski venac and New Belgrade, which are supposed to host the project itself, were left out from the process as well. Lalović and al. supports this in explaining that Belgrade Waterfront was placed on a higher level of decision-making, “while the City of Belgrade was assigned a facilitating role in providing planning documents and building permits” (Lalović et al. 2015, 42). Therefore, further in its statements, the initiative elaborates on the lack of citizens’ participation and the need to collectively address the public interest, while enforcing democratic procedures instead of cancelling them:

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5 It is useful to note that many initiatives in the region (following the similar model of the other *Right to the city* movements) use this syntagm as well: the most notable case being the vocal and very active group from Zagreb, Croatia, bearing the same name.

“The project of (proclaimed but never demonstrated) national importance is characterized by non-transparent processes, potentially huge risks, and the evasion and distortion of legal and legislative mechanisms. Existing documents related to planning are expressly deregulated and adopted contrary to the law, in *a non-democratic procedure in which the participation of citizens is reduced to nothing more than a formality* (italic added)” (Ne da(vi)mo Beograd, 2015b, 2). “To change this situation we must *collectively create a new social architecture that will treat housing as a basic common good* (italic added), and not as basis for enrichment” (Ne da(vi)mo Beograd, 2015b, 11).

“We have to show that *no one must be above the law, that law must not justify the plunder of public goods for the profit of few, but needs to enable just and equal distribution of resources and equal chances for decent life* (italic added) where we will not be afraid that our family or home will be the next in their way of violence demonstration” (Ne da(vi)mo Beograd, 2016).

The principal value that the Initiative stands for is defined through the interview as the “struggle for a dignified life” – which in concrete urban struggles gets translated into a right of all citizens to participate in political decisions and to exert control over urban and living resources.

The NDBG representatives highlighted several aspects of their strategy, which we have analysed in light of our model of anti-instrumentalist discourse. First, they clearly emphasize that NDBG identified and publicized the breaking of the procedures in the case of the designation of Belgrade Waterfront as a project of national significance. However, they keenly believe that bottom-up movements such as theirs need to question not only the breach of the procedures, but also the very outcomes of projects. They have a deeply rooted belief that political elites are able to find a way to overcome procedural obstacles through legal processes of their changing. However, if we add to the proceduralist aspect of the initiative's discourse the questions of justification and legitimacy, the real interests of the “powerful” and the neglected interests of citizens become visible. It is exactly this sidelining of the citizens at the cost of these interests that constitutes the core concern of the NDBG efforts.

The initiative therefore employs a parliamentary democratic criticism of the government's violation of legal and constitutional procedures, which corresponds to the first aspect of our conceptual model – the narrative formation of *democratic anti-reductionism*. The Initiative takes a very nuanced approach to the issue of complexity reduction – namely, it opposes the form of complexity reduction that neoliberal instrumentalism promotes, but it might be prepared to endorse certain simplifications of complicated legal mechanisms that in fact obstruct the participation of citizens in democratic decision-making processes. One might say, in the spirit of Niklas Luhmann's

systems theory (Luhmann, 1995), that the Initiative is in certain cases prepared to “reduce” certain forms of (democracy-obstructing) complexity precisely in order to “increase” another kind of complexity (democratization of decision-making procedures).

This complex standpoint of the Initiative is clarified in the interview, as the representatives of NDBG explain that their struggle is aimed at increasing the citizens’ participation and deliberation, and at advocating for the citizens’ right to take part in defining the common good together. They also insist that the problems concerning the *Belgrade Waterfront* project are complex and cannot be reduced to issues of urban rejuvenation. At the same time, the Initiative opposes the further increasing of the complexity of procedures and administrative obstacles that are frequently used for preventing citizens from participation. “A significant part of democracy’s dysfunctions emerged from too many procedures” claims one of the interviewees. The initiative itself is dedicated to using very inclusive and carefully selected wording in order not to alienate any possible ally in its struggle against the governmental monopoly over urban common goods. The central argument in the initiative’s discourse that challenges the logic of instrumentalism is that an open, inclusive and democratic debate regarding problems of the urban development of Belgrade would also bring about an economically more advantageous project for the citizens (Matković and Ivković, 2018).

This argument corresponds to the second narrative formation of our conceptual model – the narrative formation of *democratic experimental proceduralism*. As we already argued, the anti-instrumentalist discourse embraces core deliberative ideals. Our interviews showed that the *We Won’t Let Belgrade D(r)own* Initiative aims to be an open deliberative arena and to open up to as many (different) citizens as possible. This is why the members of the initiative are very attentive regarding the language they use when they communicate their messages: the abstract (difficult to comprehend) and ideologically charged notions (like neoliberalism, capitalism, socialism) could, according to the members of the initiative, alienate many people and hence they prefer to use simpler terms, closer to the everyday life of all citizens, such as the notions of the quality of living, the ripping off of budget money, benefits for the few instead for all, etc. Their arguments are justified in terms of common good, but the justification they use is also very inclusive in its nature as it tends to be acceptable and comprehensible to “all”.

Another very relevant dimension of the initiative’s inclusiveness is that it considers as indispensable the networking and cooperation with other citizens’ movements and organisations. In this regard, the initiative began cooperating with various workers’ unions (the Belgrade Police Union, for example) and to form, with other municipal initiatives, “ad hoc alliances” that usually revolve around specific emerging issues. It is worth

remarking that the nature of alliances is far from being openly political, or based on any clear ideological platform, tending to promote *non-exclusive values* and the use of inclusive argumentation.

The Initiative's struggles for (deliberative) democracy are also backed by internal efforts to self-organise in deliberative and participatory ways. In principle, the members rely on inclusionary and egalitarian values, though they admit they are struggling with finding the right way of coordinating the work of a growing group of those interested to be a part of the Initiative. They want to build an inclusive platform, but they are still trying to find orientation under the sudden spotlight they found themselves under in recent months. Their internal organization is not hierarchical, although they admit that the most active and long-term members make an "inner circle" which is a loose decision-making body. They want to bridge the gap between the inner and outer circles as the key decisions are still taken through consultations and careful deliberation of the members of the inner circle (around 20 persons). In order to avoid a hierarchical structure of decision-making, their intention for the near future is to form parallel operative groups – dedicated to the work on specific themes – from which delegates would be chosen to act as members of the core group. The interviewed members see this deliberative democratic reorganization of the initiative as their main challenge and necessary requirement of the democratic initiatives and movements. Therefore, we could argue that they are in the midst of the process of restructuring with an aim of establishing an inclusive and egalitarian platform, and that one of their main aims is to further develop already existing internal deliberative capacities.

Finally, in relying on the insight that people care more about their immediate surroundings – and that local concerns are greater mobilizing factors than global political affairs – the Initiative endorses the third component of our conceptual model – the *politicization of everyday experience from micro- to macro-level* – as it posits itself primarily as an actor concerned about concrete urban problems, but with a clear set of guiding political values. Focusing on a particular project aimed at the urban rejuvenation of one part of Belgrade, the Initiative is raising far more complex issues, connecting the micro-level of municipal planning to the macro-level of state-led decision-making.

## **5. Conclusion**

Even though they bring interesting and sometimes fruitful experimentation into the democratic decision-making processes, top-down designed deliberative mini-publics are still far from being able to offer solutions to a deepening societal crisis in neoliberal

democracies. This is why we have to turn to the engagements from below and to re-think their contribution to the democratization theory, not as a contingent and temporary issue, but as a potentially crucial tool for achieving the true democratization of democracies.

Anti-instrumentalist discourse, as we argued, challenges neoliberal instrumentalism from the positions of democratic inclusiveness, deliberative practices and local rootedness. Our analysis of the “We Won't Let Belgrade Drown” initiative identified the three components of anti-instrumentalist discourse – the narrative formations of *democratic anti-reductionism*, *democratic experimentalist proceduralism* and the *politicization of everyday experiences from micro to macro level* – in the language that the Initiative relies on for defining itself and mobilizing the citizens against the “Belgrade Waterfront” project, which the Serbian government justifies on the basis of neoliberal instrumentalism.

The Belgrade initiative managed to politicize the “Belgrade Waterfront” project, which had been discursively constructed as non-political by the Serbian government, due to its orientation and emphasis on concrete societal phenomena that exert immediate effects on citizens. This supports our argument that anti-instrumentalist discourse could potentially be more effective in challenging the project of neoliberal restructuring than the electoral campaigns of political parties and movements that attempt to mount “comprehensive” critiques of this project. Especially, it is relevant in the context of the contemporary decrease of electoral participation, which points to citizens’ saturation with the existing system of parliamentary democracy. In such a situation, democratic critique coming from bottom-up social engagement is essential for advancing democracy and providing a more consensual maximization of public welfare.

The relative success of the NDBG initiative (massive protests, rising financial and infrastructural support from individual citizens) seems to confirm this, although, of course, the Initiative’s long-term effects on political and wider social processes are yet to be seen. This limited case study was chosen primarily to present a type of democratic social engagement that relies on the discourse of anti-instrumentalism, rooted in the local community but addressing ideas and values of a wider social and political importance, struggling against the instrumentalist arguments usurping public goods.

However, we would like to underline that the proposed conceptual model, given that it is still in its inception phase, needs to be further elaborated. One of the ways in which we would especially like to advance our ideas about concrete forms of social engagement is through transcending oppositionary and defensive modes of thinking (illustrated in prefixes like anti-) with the aim of adopting and implementing more concrete and elaborated visions of the desired political and social order. On the empirical



plane, we still lack a thorough analysis of the broad spectrum of protests we are witnessing today, triggered by the multiple effects of the 2008 economic crisis. Numerous challenges arise from this field: the interplay between global and local contexts, social composition of the actors, the role of social media, the rise of new discourses, etc. Defining the right research questions and conducting comparative research, which will feed into an interdisciplinary reflection on a proposed theoretical framework, are necessary future steps to deepen the inquiry into the new forms of democratic social engagement questioning the logic of neoliberal instrumentalism.

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