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REAFFECTED, REENGAGED? EXPLORING NEW POLITICAL MOBILIZATIONS IN SERBIA

Abstract: In recent years, we have witnessed the advancement of political disaffection and disengagement processes across nearly all European countries. Research indicates that this trend is also present in Serbia (Petrović & Stanojević, 2020). Findings from a 2018 study (Pešić et al., 2021) reveal a relatively low level of external and internal political efficacy among Serbian citizens, a low level of institutional trust, and moderate levels of political participation compared to other European societies.

Building on these findings, this study aims to examine whether, five years later (2023), there have been changes in the level of protest-related political participation among Serbian citizens. The hypothesis underpinning this inquiry is that new forms of political mobilizations, involving emerging issues, such as environmental risks or pleas against violence, and a higher degree of emotional engagement, have led to an increased willingness among citizens to engage in direct political action.

The analysis is conducted on the European Social Survey data (rounds 9 and 11), drawing on descriptive methods.

Keywords: protest participation, trust, efficacy, resources, emotions, political opportunity structure

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Ponovo angažovani? Istraživanje novih političkih mobilizacija u Srbiji

Apstrakt: Tokom proteklih godina svedočili smo napredovanju dezangažmana i otklona od politike u gotovo svim evropskim zemljama. Istraživanja ukazuju da je sličan trend prisutan i u Srbiji (Petrović & Stanojević, 2020). Kada je reč o građanima Srbije, nalazi iz 2018. godine (Pešić et al., 2021) upućuju na relativno nizak stepen interne i eksterne političke efikasnosti, nizak stepen institucionalnog poverenja i umeren intenzitet političke participacije u odnosu na građane drugih evropskih zemalja.

Polazeći od pomenutih nalaza, cilj ove studije je da ispita da li je, pet godina kasnije (2023), došlo do promena u stepenu protestne participacije građana Srbije. Hipoteza koja je u osnovi ovog istraživanja je da su novi oblici političkih mobilizacija, koji uključuju povode poput ekoloških rizika ili apele protiv nasilja, i veći stepen emocionalnog angažovanja, doveli do povećane spremnosti građana da se uključe u direktnu političku akciju.

Analiza je sprovedena na podacima Evropskog društvenog istraživanja (runde 9 i 11) i počiva na deskriptivnim metodama.

Ključne reči: protestna participacija, poverenje, efikasnost, resursi, emocije, struktura političkih mogućnosti

Introduction

In recent years, we have witnessed the advancement of political disaffection and disengagement processes across nearly all European countries. Research indicates that this trend is also present in Serbia (Petrović & Stanojević, 2020). Findings from a 2018 study (Pešić et al., 2021) reveal a relatively low level of external and internal political efficacy among Serbian citizens, a low level of institutional trust, and moderate levels of political participation compared to other European societies. However, despite these findings, we are also witnessing an increase in the number of protest events, both globally (Ortiz et al., 2022) and locally in Serbia (Kralj et al., 2024; Pollozhani & Bieber, 2025), as well as a diversification of causes and triggers leading to protest and other non-institutional forms of political contestation.

Research on various forms of collective and individual engagement in the political arena draws on two strands of literature. The first relates to theories of social movements and collective mobilization, while the second focuses on the study of political participation. Building on these theoretical perspectives, this paper explores the dynamics of the recent collective mobilizations in Serbia. Specifically, we examine the extent to

which readiness for protest engagement is shaped by factors such as internal and external political efficacy, social and political trust, and satisfaction with the functioning of the system. Additionally, given that the number of protests has increased in recent years, contributing to what could be described as a state of permanent protest, we suggest that this willingness of the people to engage could be interpreted both as the consequence of the growing importance of emotions in collective mobilizations and as an effect of political opportunity structure that enabled flourishing of protest initiatives triggered by causes close to lived everyday experiences. Finally, drawing on the resource mobilization and relative deprivation approaches, we seek to assess to what extent factors such as age, gender, level of education, employment status, and socio-economic position influence individuals' willingness to participate in street politics.

The focus of the analysis will be on data for Serbia collected within European Social Survey at two points in time: 2018/19 and 2023/24 (rounds 9 and 11).

Theoretical Framework

For a long time, scholarship on social movements was dominated by theories that emphasized factors such as the nature of the political system or its socioeconomic characteristics (the political opportunity structure approach; see: Tilly, 1978; Tarrow, 2011), in understanding different forms of collective mobilization. However, contemporary approaches acknowledge the importance of these structural characteristics, while also striving to incorporate cultural dimensions, such as emotional drivers of collective mobilizations (Jasper, 1998; 2011; Goodwin et al., 2000).

"The grand return" to emotions has emerged as a growing trend in social movement theory in the past decades. This research agenda has explored the role of specific emotions, and instigated empirical studies that examine how emotional factors "help or hinder mobilization efforts, ongoing strategies, and the success of social movements" (Jasper, 2011, p. 286) and "help explain individuals' trajectories in and out of movements and protest participation" (Ellefsen & Sandberg, 2022, p. 1106). Some authors suggest that we may be witnessing the rise of a new, distinct type of protest that recently gained political importance. These "new emotional protests" may emerge when acts of random violence or other "pain and loss events" (Jennings, 1999) occur, mobilizing previously politically disengaged social actors, as emotional identification becomes forceful enough to overcome the pervasive distrust in politics (Walgrave & Verhulst, 2006).

The second strand of literature focuses on political participation and its correlates – political efficacy (internal and external), political and social trust, satisfaction with the functioning of the political system and life as a whole, as well as with different socioeconomic characteristics. Within this framework, interpersonal trust is usually defined “as the actor’s belief that, at worst, others will not knowingly or willingly do him harm, and at best, that they will act in his interest” (Newton, 2001, p. 202). Trust constitutes the foundation of social capital, serving as a fundamental characteristic of a community or society that facilitates cooperation, social cohesion, and collective action (Putnam, 2000, pp. 16, 18-19). Institutional or political trust, on the other hand, is related to the confidence citizens place in political institutions to act competently and fairly in ways that are beneficial or at least not harmful to citizens (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Political efficacy entails an individual’s expectation that it is possible to alter policies through political engagement (Craig & Maggiotto, 1982) and has two subdimensions: internal and external efficacy. External political efficacy is associated with institutional trust, pointing to the extent to which individuals believe that their actions can influence government or that political authorities are responsive to citizens’ needs (Craig et al., 1990). It is closely connected to the citizens’ satisfaction with the functioning of the system, which, alongside other relevant factors, can play a crucial role in determining whether individuals engage in institutional or non-institutional forms of politics. Finally, internal political efficacy is defined as an individual’s sense of competence in understanding politics and participating in political activities (Craig et al., 1990) and is not necessarily linked to trust in political institutions or to the perception of the political system’s responsiveness (Fiket & Pudar Draško, 2021, p. 406).

The study of protest participation, within the political participation strand, draws broadly upon three major approaches. The first approach relies on the theory of grievances and its assumption that economic inequality and a sense of relative deprivation spur protest participation (Grasso et al., 2019). The second pathway draws upon resource theory, arguing that resources (such as money, skills, and time) are necessary for participation in protest activities (Brady et al., 1995). Finally, the third approach builds on the relative power theory, proposing that concentration of power and capital enables control over discourses on the legitimate political realm and issues, driving the poor away and leaving politics to the rich, powerful, and organized (Solt, 2015).

This strand is significantly empirically oriented and focused on factors ascertaining different levels and forms of political participation. The studies show that institutional trust does not function as a sufficient pre-

condition for political behavior (Hooghe & Marien, 2013); rather, in combination with political efficacy, it helps structure the modalities of conventional or unconventional actions. While trust has either a positive or negligible effect on institutionalized participation, distrust combined with a high level of political efficacy tends to encourage unconventional forms of engagement (Eder & Katsanidou, 2015). Unconventional participation is also associated with high internal and low external political efficacy. Accordingly, the low responsiveness of political institutions tends to reorient individuals away from traditional and toward non-traditional forms of participation (Prats & Meunier, 2018, p. 4). A low level of internal and external political efficacy results in political passivity or apathy, whereas high levels push individuals toward engagement in institutional politics.

Dissatisfaction with the policy performance of the government (within sectors such as economy, education, or health services) or with the political system increases the likelihood that the citizens will turn to extra-representative forms of action. Whether citizens express their discontent through protest also depends on the political configuration of a given country. Protests are more likely to occur when the opposition effectively channels dissatisfaction by initiating protest activities between elections and mobilizing non-regime voters. However, protests can also result from generally inadequate representation or the presence and diffusion of more radical, anti-system beliefs (Quaranta, 2015).

When it comes to other factors shaping political participation, resources, skills, and access to recruitment and mobilization networks play a key role. Their unequal distribution is largely determined by class and socioeconomic status (Dalton, 2017). Political activity tends to increase along the social hierarchy, with middle-class individuals generally more engaged than those from lower or working-class backgrounds. Gender and age have also been identified in numerous studies as predictors of political participation. Conventional participation tends to rise with age, reaches its peak in mature years, and then declines: the oldest cohorts tend to be less involved in political activities due to fewer resources, while younger generations display lower levels of institutional involvement due to the lack of political experience (Quaranta, 2015). Largely disinterested in party politics, young people tend to be more open to involvement in social movements, direct action, and other forms of non-institutional engagement (Grasso & Smith, 2022; Petrović & Stanojević, 2020). In recent decades, women tend to be more active in contentious politics, in comparison to earlier periods (Tarrow, 2011), yet they remain less present than men in both conventional and non-conventional politics (Inglehart & Norris, 2003).

Although protests constitute a standard part of the non-institutional repertoire of participation, they tend to mobilize only a small percentage of citizens (Quaranta, 2013). The factors contributing to protest participation include embeddedness in formal and informal networks, a sense of collective efficacy, strong interpersonal trust, a high level of political interest, political knowledge, and awareness (Mercea et al., 2024). In the context of a dramatic economic crisis, the sense of relative deprivation plays an important role in the motivational structure (Grasso et al., 2019), becoming, alongside post-materialist values, a key driver of protest behavior among the middle class, which is increasingly facing the threat of social decline. Contentious collective actions (like protests or social movements), once considered as the only effective mechanism of political action of economically disadvantaged groups lacking conventional political resources (Cloward and Piven, 1977), have over time adjusted to socioeconomic status models of political participation (Dalton, 2017). Certainly, the share of specific socioeconomic categories in the protest population varies with the type of protest, protest claims, aims, and overall social context.

Contextual Framework

For the most part, the “post-2008 Great Recession” period in Serbian society is characterized by authoritarian neoliberalism (Bruff, 2014), rooted in austerity politics and general democratic backsliding, the shrinking of civil rights and freedoms, electoral manipulation and strict control over media, which enabled unhindered implementation of restrictive economic policies. This resulted in state capture, enforced through large-scale government investment projects characterized by non-transparent financial arrangements with domestic and foreign capital, and accompanied by the consolidation of ruling elite’s control over public institutions, extensive patronage networks, rampant corruption, weakening of labor legislation and degradation of working conditions, as well as an increase in social inequalities, and dissatisfaction among citizens.

Some of the first reactions to illiberal tendencies expressed in protest mobilizations were “We Won’t Let Belgrade D(r)own” protests against the urban project “Belgrade Waterfront” (2016-2017) and a short, but diffuse, and largely uncoordinated wave of “Against Dictatorship” protests in 2017. In the years that followed, the structural insecurity generated by the authoritarian neoliberal regulation model, together with other events, both global and local, has brought Serbian society into a multi-crisis. The sub-

sequent event that mobilized the popular contention against the government was the physical assault on the leader of the minor opposition party, The Serbian Left (Vukelić & Pešić, 2023). Initially focused on political violence, this “One of Five Million” protest wave (2018-2020), which diffused across the country to 71 cities and municipalities (Kralj et al., 2024), saw a more prominent role of the opposition parties. Although the protest had not officially ended by the time the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, it largely dissipated by June 2019. However, the protests were followed by the opposition parties’ withdrawal from the parliament in 2019 and translated into the 2020 parliamentary elections boycott campaign (Kralj et al., 2024). In July 2020, a new wave of protests started, triggered by the government’s announcement of the weekend curfews to curb the spread of COVID-19. These protests were characterized by ideological diversity of the participants, spontaneity, and lack of formal political articulation (Simendić, 2022).

The multi-crisis in Serbia also brought a diversification in the protest repertoire and ignition of some of the previously disengaged segments of the population. One major strand in this regard was the mass protests against the lithium mining project in Jadar Valley by a multinational corporation, Rio Tinto (2019-2022, 2024), which raised issues of displacement of inhabitants, forced expropriation, and environmental degradation. Although not without environmental predecessors (such as grassroots-led protests against the construction of small hydro-power plants), by 2021, the anti-mining protests grew considerably and “became one of the most important political questions in Serbia” (Pešić & Vukelić, 2025, p. 109). Environmental initiatives outline a tendency of protests articulating “earthly” issues, closer to the everyday experience of populace, resulting in effective mass mobilization (Kojanić, 2022; Stuehlen & Anderl, 2024), in large part by “channeling fear and anger into righteous indignation and political activity” (Jasper, 1998, p. 409).

Another “moral shock” (Jasper, 1998; 2011) that provoked an unprecedented emotional reaction and set off a series of mass protests, spread when, in May 2023, a shooting in a Belgrade elementary school occurred, followed by a shooting spree in the villages of Dubona and Malo Orašje. Mass mobilizations induced “by brutal, non-war and non-political violent acts resulting in deaths of private persons” (Walgrave & Verhulst, 2006, p. 278) are not uncommon and depict the powerful mobilizing role of emotions prompted by identification with victims, particularly in the politically disaffected landscapes. Although organized by opposition parties,

the “Serbia Against Violence” protests mostly remained nonpartisan. The protests waned by the summer and reemerged in December 2023, after elections characterized by severe irregularities and suspicion of electoral fraud. The summer of 2024 saw the new wave of protests against lithium mining, extending almost a decade-long protest streak, as “there has not been a year without large-scale mass protests since 2016” (Pollozhani & Bieber, 2025).

To sum up, political and economic deterioration, deprivation, and discontent reflected on recent participation in political life in Serbia in two ways – on the one hand, studies point to political disaffection and disengagement (Pešić et al., 2021), while on the other hand, there is a move towards non-institutional forms of political participation (Fiket & Pudar Draško, 2021). The landscape of active resistance to the regime has also changed. While the mobilization potential of party-organized protests is decreasing, dissatisfaction is directed towards new demands and initiatives (environmental issues, violence, etc.), often led by diffuse and unorganized actors – youth, local grassroots initiatives and other nonpartisan claim-makers. Even though the number of protests is increasing, together with diversification of issues involved, this has not resulted in a durable political and organizational infrastructure and solidarity networks. Dissatisfaction is not clearly articulated in political terms and translated into institutional structures; it appears as if it is expressed again and again and more massively through protests, yet every time, “from scratch”, only with new issues added to the protest repertoire. At the same time, we should bear in mind that the threshold for future engagement might become lower for protest participants who’s personal (emotional) experience of activism influenced the way they view politics and that “the sense of confidence and agency that comes with protest often goes on to inspire further protest” (Ellefsen & Sandberg, 2022, p. 1116–1117).

Data and Methods

The analysis is based on data from the European Social Survey for Serbia, specifically from rounds 9 (conducted in 2018/19) and 11 (conducted in 2023/24). In our study, we focus on protest-related activism, specifically participation in public (lawful) demonstrations. The analysis is limited to descriptive statistics, without addressing causal inference, as the aim is not to test specific theoretical models or hypotheses, but rather to provide a snapshot of the situation to assess whether the data anticipate the mass protests that erupted in 2024 and are still ongoing. Although the

general population is in focus, particular attention is given to data concerning young respondents (under the age of 30), who emerged as the main, and perhaps unexpected, protagonists of the 2024/25 student and civic protests in Serbia.

Drawing on the earlier research (Pešić et al., 2021), in the first step of the analysis, we aim to identify whether any shifts in the prevalence of the examined form of participation have taken place over the observed period. Moving forward, our goal is to explore changes in the development of the correlates of political participation, internal and external political efficacy, interpersonal and institutional trust, and the level of satisfaction with the system, during the observed time frame. In the third step, we compare protest participants and non-participants in terms of their sociodemographic characteristics: gender, age, education, material position, and employment status.

Internal political efficacy is measured using several indicators, including interest in politics (*How interested would you say you are in politics?*), perceived ability to participate in political action (*How capable do you think you are of taking an active role in a political group?*), and confidence in one's own political competence (*How confident are you in your own ability to participate in politics?*).

External political efficacy is assessed through perceptions of the political system's responsiveness to the citizens' political involvement by using the following items: *To what extent does the political system allow people to have a say in what the government does?*, and *To what extent does it allow people to influence politics?*. The level of satisfaction with the functioning of the various public domains (such as government, economy, democracy, education, health services, and life as a whole) is also included in the analysis.

Political trust is operationalized through a set of items measuring trust in national institutions such as the parliament, politicians, political parties, the legal system, and the police. In contrast, social (interpersonal) trust is assessed using the following items: *Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?*, *Do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance, or would they try to be fair?* and *Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful or that they are mostly looking out for themselves?*

Data are weighted by pspweight.⁴

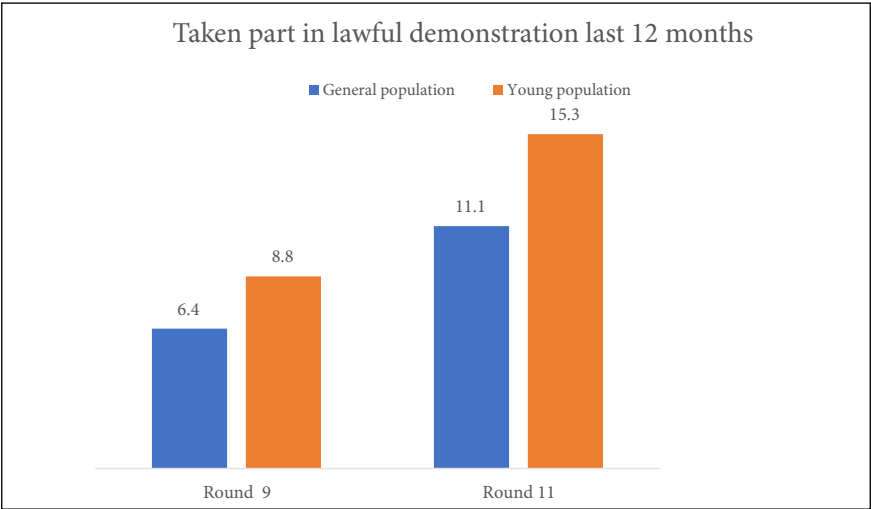
4 More on that, see in: <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/methodology/ess-methodology/data-processing-and-archiving/weighting>

Results of the Analysis

Trends

As a first step of the analysis, we aim to examine the trends in protest participation within the time frame encompassing two rounds of ESS (2018-2023). Data presented in Figure 1 show that protest participation is increasing, with the proportion of citizens involved in legal demonstrations doubling during the observed period (ranging from 6.4% in 2018 to 11.1% in 2023). This trend draws attention to a shift in the modes of political engagement, signalling that protest activism is becoming a more prominent form of participation, especially among younger generations (in 2023, 15.3% reported having participated in some form of protest during the previous year, compared to 8.8% in 2018). Further, this very dynamic may serve as one of the potential indicators of what followed less than a year after the 2023 ESS data were collected, i.e. a wave of the largest youth protest mobilizations in Serbia over the past 30 years manifested through ongoing student struggles against the corrupt system, deterioration of the rule of law and failures of representative democracy. Of course, it should be kept in mind that despite the aforementioned growing trend in 2023, protest participation remains limited to a minority segment of the population. Nonetheless, this finding is in tune with the results from other European societies (Quaranta, 2013).

Figure 1: Trends in protest participation, general population and young people (2018-2023)



To explain the observed trend indicating rise in the participation in public demonstrations, the following section of the analysis seeks to shed light on the dynamics of key correlates of political participation: internal (IPE) and external political efficacy (EPE), and institutional (INT) and interpersonal trust (IPT).

Across both observed years, all three items measuring IPE consistently display low levels, indicating weak internal capacities of Serbian citizens to actively participate in the political arena. If we look at the trends, we can observe that the level of political interest within the general population shows an increase in the proportion of those who are very interested in politics (rising from 4.9% to 8.7%)⁵, although they still constitute a notably small segment of the population. It is also noteworthy that there is a slight decrease in the share of those who are not at all interested in politics (from 38.6% to 35.9%). In contrast, if we focus only on young people, the trend is reversed: in this group, we observe a decline in political interest, with almost half of the young respondents being completely disinterested in politics (Figure 2).⁶ Further, when it comes to perceived ability to take an active role in a political group, we notice a somewhat different pattern compared to the previous indicator. The general population shows modest signs of growth in perceived ability to participate, while the increase is slightly more pronounced among young people. However, these findings should be interpreted with caution, as they may reflect sample fluctuations rather than real change (the Pearson Chi-Square test indicates that differences in the two survey waves are not statistically significant).⁷ Similarly, in terms of the confidence in their ability to participate in politics, we observe a slight increase within the general population (which is not statistically significant),⁸ whereas young people show no increase. To conclude, findings provide insufficient evidence to support the claim that IPE increased during the observed period and that this factor alone can account for the rise of protest activism.

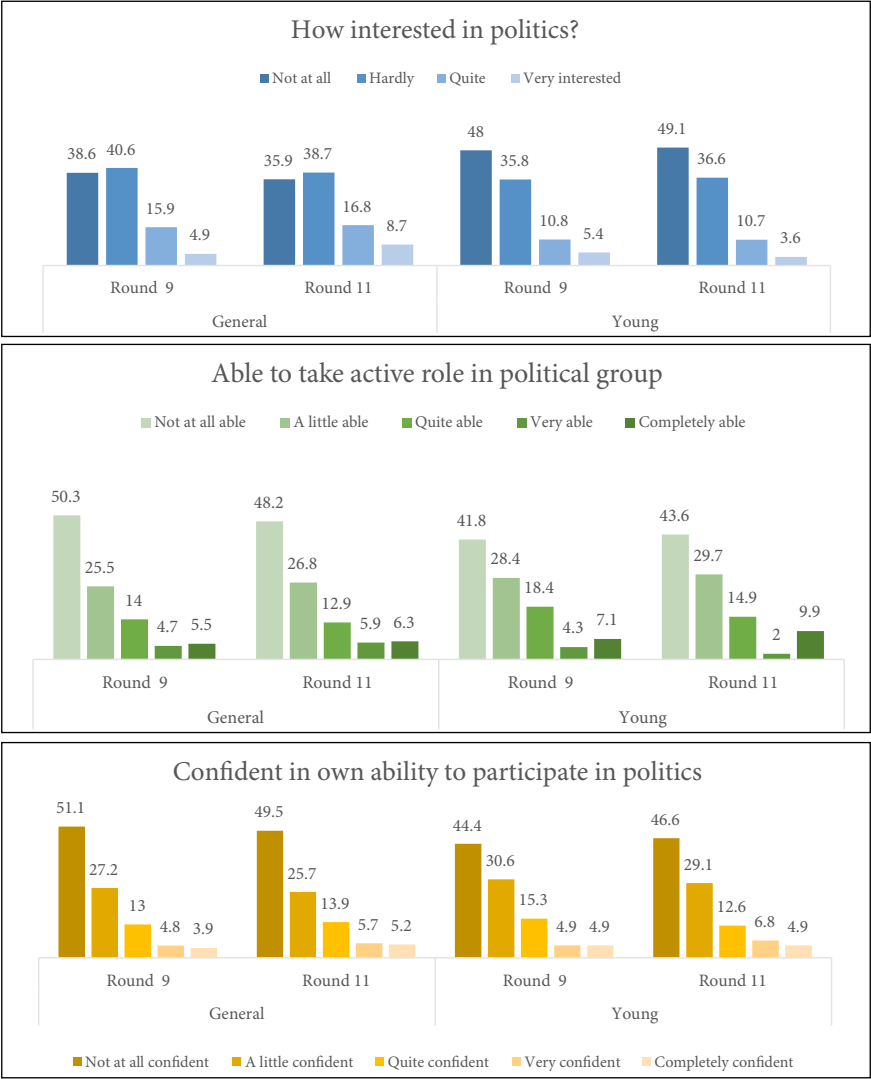
5 Chi-Square: 22.457; p: 0.000.

6 Chi-Square: 1.998; p: 0.573.

7 Chi-Square for the general population is 6.044 (p: 0.196), and 4.298 (p: 0.367) for the youth.

8 Chi-Square for the general population is 5.903 (p: 0.207), and 1.678 (p: 0.795) for the youth.

Figure 2: Internal political efficacy among the general population and youth (2018-2023)

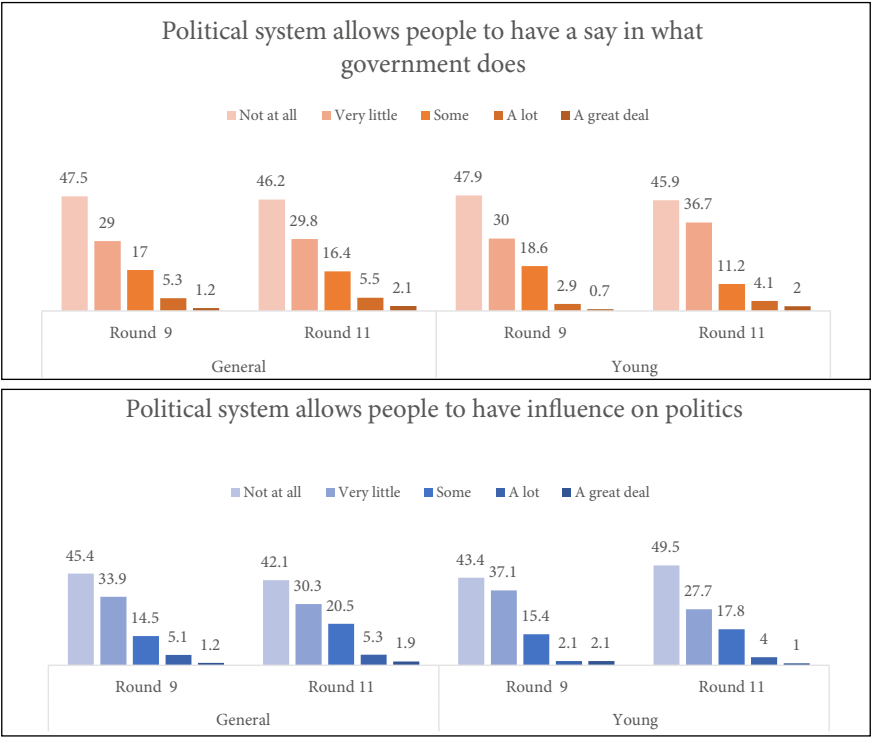


Let us now examine the trends related to external political efficacy. On both items measuring EPE, most people consider the government and the political system as a whole highly unresponsive to citizens' demands (Figure 3). Furthermore, the changes observed during the 2018-2023 period are inconsistent: marginal and statistically insignificant for the item *Political system allows people to have a say in what government does*,⁹ and significant

9 Chi-Square: 5.443; p: 0.245.

for the statement *Political system allows people to influence politics*,¹⁰ when it comes to the general population. Some shifts are also present among young people, who in 2023 perceive the system as unresponsive to a greater extent than five years earlier, although caution is welcome here as well, since the difference between the results obtained in two rounds is significant when it comes to only one of the two statements. Similar to internal political efficacy, which was somewhat higher among the general population than among young people, external political efficacy is more pronounced in the general population, while young people are more likely to perceive the system as insensitive to citizens’ political involvement.

Figure 3: External political efficacy among the general population and youth (2018-2023)

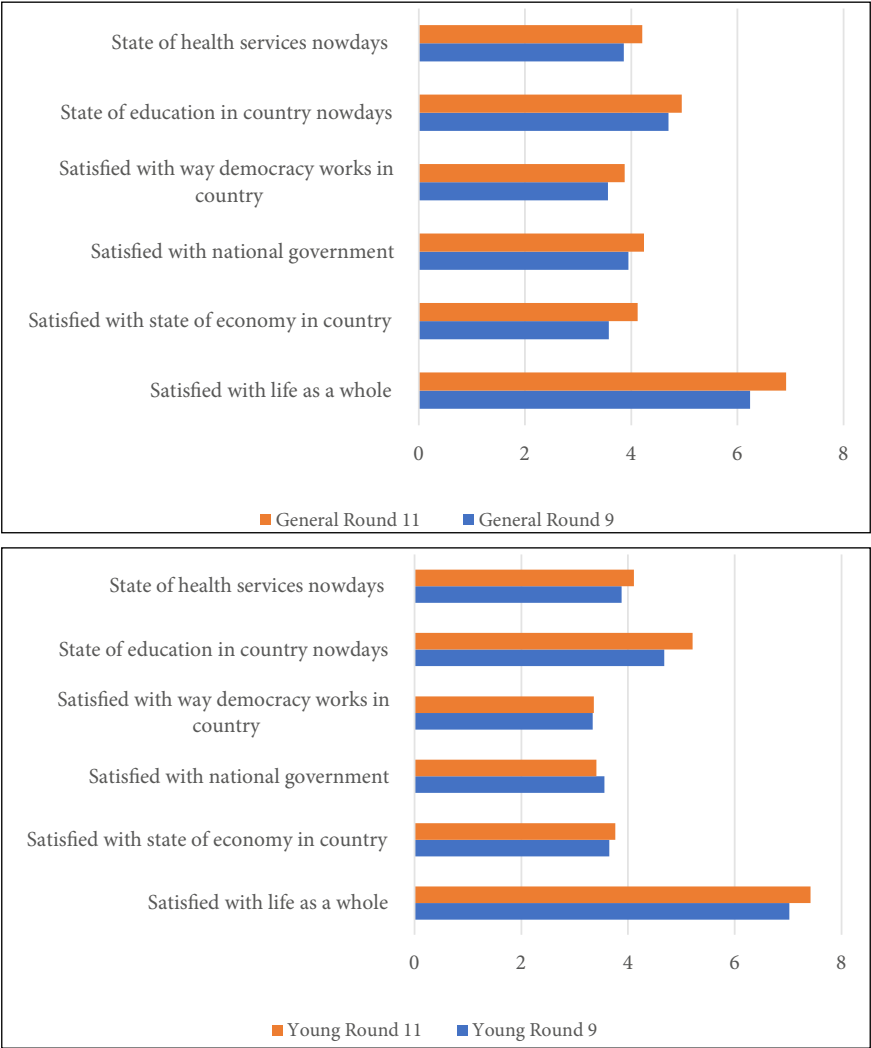


When it comes to the level of satisfaction with the functioning of different domains and subsystems, as well as with life as a whole, the data indicate that satisfaction is relatively high (above-average) only with life as a whole. For all other subsystems (except for education), a low level of satisfaction is recorded, particularly concerning the economy, national gov-

10 Chi-Square: 26.573; p: 0.000.

ernment, and democracy. Also, in these three subdomains, young people report somewhat lower scores than the general population, testifying to a sense of powerlessness among youth, accompanied by concern about their life prospects. What is also evident is that, over the observed period, there were fluctuations in responses in both directions; however, the magnitude of these changes remains relatively modest and not substantial enough to suggest that a significant shift has occurred (Figure 4). To put it differ-

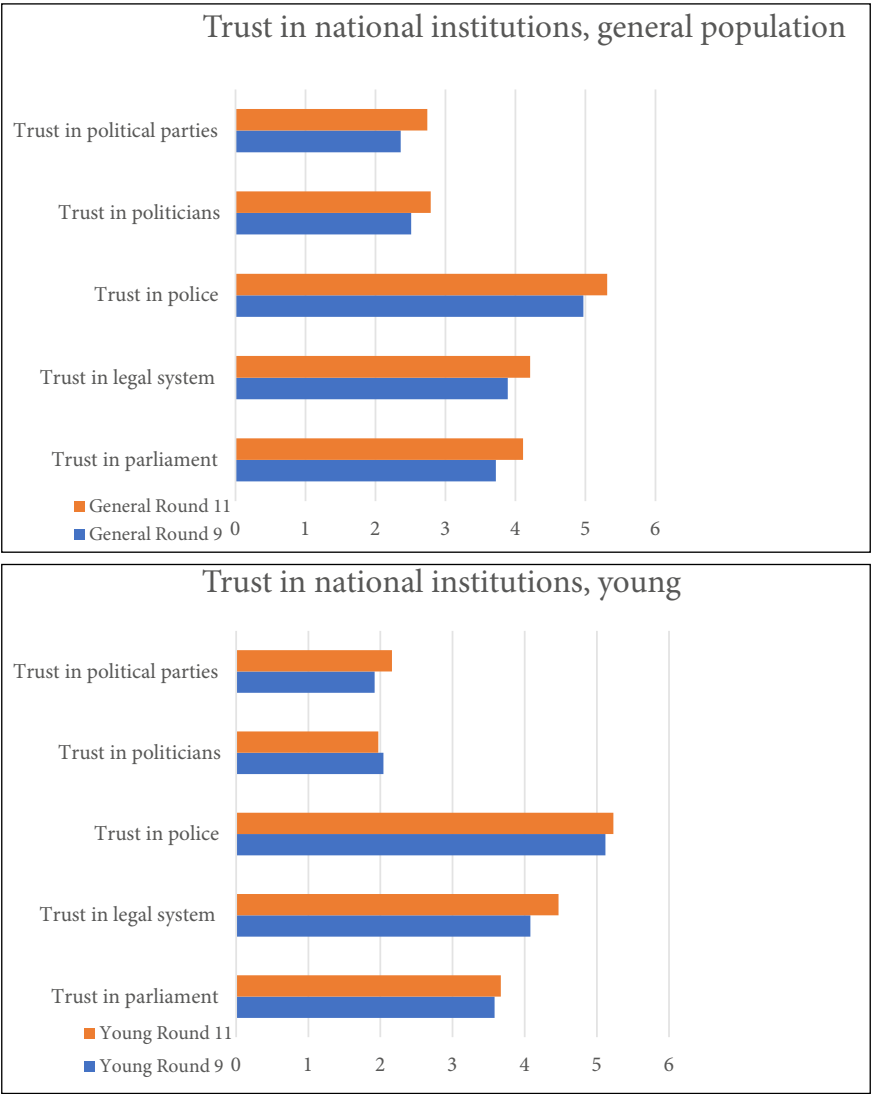
Figure 4: The level of satisfaction with the functioning of various public domains and life as a whole, mean scores for general population and youth (2018-2023)



ently, there is no evidence that any clear trend emerged during this period that could help us illuminate the changes in protest activism.

If we now turn to the other two dimensions, institutional and inter-personal trust, we observe that both remain notably low. The only exception is the police, which consistently stands out as the only institution whose average trust score surpasses the theoretical mean in both observed

Figure 5: Political (institutional) trust, general population and youth (2018-2023)

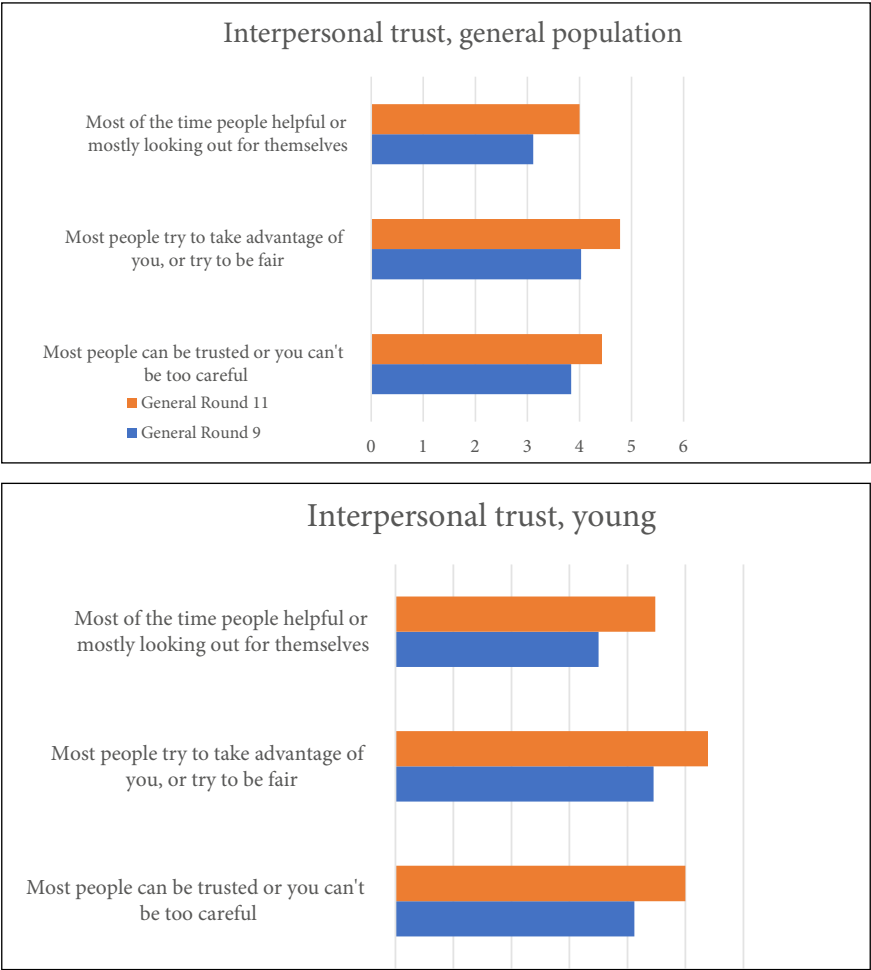


years (Figure 5). Political parties and politicians, on the other hand, record the lowest levels of trust, compared to other institutions, particularly among young people, whose level of political trust is lower than that of the general population. This is consistent with findings related to low levels of EPE and points to a sense of disappointment and disaffection with politics and institutions of representative democracy. Finally, when examining trends across the two observed years, the results indicate a relatively small increase in trust levels, although only some of these changes, primarily those related to trust in political parties and parliament, display statistical significance (Figure 5). These changes could be interpreted as an effect of the emergence of new political parties and the re-entry of opposition parties into parliament (after two years of boycott), which undoubtedly contributed to the rise in trust in both the parliament and political parties. The question, however, remains whether this has propelled the rise in non-institutional political engagement.

When it comes to interpersonal trust, three key findings emerge. First, its overall level is relatively low. Second, it is higher among young people compared to the general population, indicating a reverse pattern relative to INT. Third, IPT has increased over the observed period, which is an important finding for explaining the rise in protest-related activities (Figure 6). Overall, although we record only emerging and underdeveloped trends, when it comes to young respondents, it can be concluded that growing protest engagement is accompanied by low and declining levels of both internal and external political efficacy, as well as low satisfaction with the functioning of different public domains, alongside relatively low but increasing levels of institutional and interpersonal trust. When it comes to the general population, once again, the trends are rather modest and insufficiently discernible to allow for strong conclusions. Still, we observe a slight increase in both IPE and EPE, as well as in INT and IPT, although these indicators remain at relatively low levels.

If we were to shift the analytical focus now, in search of the explanation of expanding protest engagement, and compare protest participants and non-participants, pertaining to the examined correlates of political participation, some interesting findings emerge. First of all, protest participants exhibit a greater interest in politics compared to non-participants, along with a significantly higher overall level of IPE. Furthermore, unlike non-participants, they display a noticeable increase in IPE throughout the observed period (Table 1). Secondly, the level of dissatisfaction with the openness of the political system to citizens' engagement is somewhat higher among protest participants than among non-participants, although in both cases it shows either a declining or stagnant trend over the observed period. INT and sat-

Figure 6: Social (interpersonal) trust, general population and youth (2018-2023)



isfaction with the functioning of different public domains are notably lower among protest participants than among non-participants. Furthermore, an upward trend on both scales is visible among non-participants during the observed period, while a decline is recorded among those who participated in protests (Table 1). Finally, the level of IPT is higher among participants than non-participants, displaying an increase in both categories during the observed period (Table 1). In other words, those who display higher levels of IPE and IPT, alongside low levels of INT and high dissatisfaction with the functioning of the political and other systems, are more likely to be engaged in non-institutional or street politics.

Table 1: Characteristics of the protest participants vs non-participants in terms of political efficacy and trust (2018-2023)

	2018		2023	
	Protestors	Non protestors	Protestors	Non protestors
% of quite and very interested in politics	43.2	19.4	55.5	21.8
% of very and completely able to take active role in political group	27.5	8.9	29.6	9.8
% of very and completely confident in ability to participate in politics	18.9	7.9	25.4	8.8
% of respondents stating that political system allows very little or does not allow at all people to have a say in what government does	84.2	76.4	82.5	75.2
% of respondents stating that political system allows very little or does not allow at all people to have influence on politics	82.1	79.3	82.2	74.0
average score on the scale of trust in national institutions (ranging from 0 to 50; theoretical mean: 25)	14.23	17.49	11.75	19.95
average score on the scale of interpersonal trust (ranging from 0 to 30; theoretical mean: 15)	11.85	10.94	13.84	13.19
average score on the scale of satisfaction with different subsystems (ranging from 0 to 60; theoretical mean: 30)	20.38	26.35	18.84	29.39

Factors

The next step of the analysis aims to determine whether sociodemographic characteristics indicate which individuals are more prone to protest activism, and whether there have been any changes in this regard over the observed period. Therefore, we use the same analytical procedure as in the case of trust and efficacy, and compare protest participants with non-participants.

Let's start with gender. The data for both rounds are consistent with the trends identified in other studies (Tarrow, 2011), indicating that men dominate among protest participants. However, as the protest participation rises over the observed period, the share of women joining the demonstrations increases. The results of the Chi-square test for 2023 data indicate that as women's engagement in protest activities grows, gender gradually ceases to be a statistically significant predictor of this form of activism¹¹ (Table 2).

11 Chi Square for 2018: 4.354 (p: 0.037); Chi Square for 2023: 1.487 (p: 0.223).

In the previous section, we have already seen that the share of young people who were active in the protests increased in the 2018-2023 period. If we now look at the age structure of protest participants and non-participants, we see that the percentage of young people is higher among participants, in both observed years. However, even among protest participants, their relative share declines in 2023, as middle-aged categories increasingly join the protests (Table 2). In 2018, the proportion of protest-active individuals among the youngest respondents was 5.87 times higher than among the oldest. By 2023, this ratio had decreased to 2.55. As shown by other studies (Quaranta, 2015), in addition to young people, respondents in mature age groups have also become more susceptible to protest mobilization.

An opposite trend is recorded among the highly educated and those in the highest income categories (the top three deciles of household income brackets), whose share increases in both groups from 2018 to 2023, although remaining significantly higher among protest participants. Viewed from a different perspective, the data indicate that the likelihood of a highly educated respondent engaging in street activism in 2023 was 20 times higher than that of a respondent with the lowest level of education. Simply put, protest participants tend to have greater material and cultural resources compared to their counterparts who are not involved in such forms of activism (Table 2). Further, the data on educational attainment and material status, as proxy indicators of class position, suggest that protest forms of engagement are more strongly associated with members of the middle class than with other social groups. This finding aligns with data from the earlier research conducted among protest participants in Serbia (Vukelić & Pešić, 2023). Finally, unlike gender or age, the effect of education on protest activism has increased over time, emerging as a significant factor in explaining differences in protest participation across the two observed rounds.¹² On the other hand, the effect of material position was not strong enough in any round to be considered a significant independent predictor of protest engagement.¹³

To complement the data on education and material position, we also include an indicator related to the material dimension – having a paid job. Specifically, we assess whether having paid employment increases the likelihood of protest engagement (Brady et al., 1995). A paid job is related to a greater sense of autonomy, economic security, and access to resources. Literature suggests that, taken together with education, this factor significantly enhances the probability of individuals becoming involved in contentious political actions. Our findings on the effect of this indicator are telling and may point to one of the possible explanations on the trend of growing rates of protest mobilization: namely, the share of those with paid

12 Chi-Square for 2018: 10.372 (p: 0.110); Chi-Square for 2023: 20.275 (p: 0.002).

13 Chi-Square for 2018: 9.639 (p: 0.380); Chi-Square for 2023: 10.720 (p: 0.295).

employment among protest participants decreases over the observed period, while it increases among non-participants (though it remains higher among participants overall) (Table 2).

Table 2: Socio-demographic characteristics
of the protest participants vs non-participants (2018-2023)

	2018		2023	
	Protestors	Non protestors	Protestors	Non protestors
% of females	34.2	51.7	44.4	52.6
% of younger than 30	33.3	24.0	27.4	19.0
% of those holding BA+ level of education (ES-ISCED V1, V2)	28.2	12.8	40.3	18.9
% of those having paid work last 7 days	68.4	40.0	60.3	45.2
% of those in the 3 highest income categories	42.8	23.4	53.7	33.3

Conclusions

The findings of this study demonstrate that the increase in protest activism in Serbia during the 2018-2023 period cannot be readily explained by the individual effect of standard correlates of participation, IPE, EPE, IRNT, IPT, and satisfaction with the functioning of different domains of public life. Rather, it is about their specific combinations, which, together with socio-demographic characteristics, indicate the probability that political engagement will be expressed through protest action.

The resource mobilization approach indicates that resourceful social groups are more susceptible to political mobilization. Thus, our data show that members of the middle class, those who possess material resources, cultural and symbolic capital, are more numerous among the protest participants than social groups that lack these resources. They are joined by young people, who do not necessarily possess all the listed resources, but have free time, certain cultural capital, and aspirations towards future jobs and social positions, which make them more motivated to join the protest acts of contestation. Possession of the resources and higher levels of interpersonal trust lead to an increase in internal political efficacy, facilitating political engagement. Combined with low institutional trust, low external political efficacy and low satisfaction with different public domains, this political engagement is more likely to be non-institutional, including street politics. Our data support this scenario: respondents who display relatively high IPE and IPT, low EPE, INT and satisfaction, were more likely to engage in protests.

Relative deprivation theory could also help us explain why middle classes and young people, despite the possession of resources, are more active on the streets: they are faced with the poorer prospects and possible social decline, especially in the clientelist systems or when the mechanisms typical of (liberal) capitalist societies (such as education, class origin, etc.) are not sufficient to ensure social promotion or maintenance of the achieved social position. The declining number of those with paid jobs among protestors testifies to that. Furthermore, the relative power approach accounts for the weaker presence of lower classes among protestors: namely, extreme social inequalities and the symbolic dominance of the ruling class contribute to their political passivity and absence from the politics of contestation.

The political opportunity structure approach explains why the shift away from purely political motives and claims, and the proliferation of issues rooted in everyday experience, represents an opportunity to mobilize a broader range of ideologically diverse groups into protests. This opens up the possibility for new movements, parties, or groups that engage citizens beyond established political and symbolic frameworks to emerge. In Serbian contemporary context, a favorable political opportunity structure is characterized by a rise in the number of protest events that are not strictly tied to traditional political issues but take on a broader, more universal character, especially with the growing importance of issues such as environmental protection or the increasing incidence of violence in schools. Furthermore, they articulate grievances in an inclusive manner that bridges diverse ideological positions and serves as a platform that enables the overcoming of existing divisions within Serbian society, whether they are class-based, regional, or symbolic, such as the long-standing division between the so-called “First” and “Other” Serbia (Spasić & Petrović, 2012). Despite the lack of a more stable protest infrastructure and the absence of explicit political articulation, often remaining within the bounds of depoliticizing moralistic discourse (Spasić & Birešev, 2012), these protests illuminated the deep-seated, systemic origins of citizens’ discontent. This discontent proved to be readily translatable into new collective mobilizations, once a new trigger emerged, as was unfortunately the case with the collapse of the canopy and the death of 16 people in the autumn of 2024.

Newer cultural approaches emphasize the emotional charge that protest initiatives often carry. This affective aspect is not only helpful in overcoming existing social divisions and in mobilizing previously disengaged groups, but also highlights the potential of protests to boost individual political efficacy and a sense of agency. At the same time, this effect is amplified when the issues triggering the protests offer an opportunity to reset society and redefine the values on which it is based.

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