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- 1 The Great Recession (2008) provoked a series of demonstrations around the globe. In many countries of the European Union (EU), protests initiated by the Institutional Left and various autonomous actors manifested as a synergy of anti-austerity and pro-democracy demands. A significant change in the political and economic landscape, especially in those countries heavily affected by the financial crisis, opened a window of opportunity for greater public receptiveness to critiques of neoliberal capitalism. At the same time, a democratic deficit was identified as one of the major culprits of the financial crisis. The intertwining of the political and economic crises (which came to be known as a "crisis of democratic capitalism") created a powerful impetus for mass mobilisation of people across Europe.¹
- 2 Regardless of the numerous protests that shook Europe in the wake of the global economic crisis, the onset of mass protests in Serbia came almost a decade later. Despite several attempts, the first large demonstrations took place in Belgrade in 2016 (when citizens protested against the Belgrade Waterfront urban megaproject) and were followed by the "Against Dictatorship" protests that emerged after the April 2017 presidential elections.² Research on the "Against Dictatorship" protests showed that, although these were protests in a "time of crisis," they were not articulated as economic (anti-austerity) protests linked to the global crisis of capitalism. The protest participants were mostly young people with middle-class backgrounds³ and they framed the protest as anti-governmental, mainly focused on the corrupt practices of government officials.⁴ By focusing on the "One of Five Million" protests that broke out in late 2018, and the absence of its framing as an "economic" protest, in this paper we explore the socio-historically embedded opportunities and barriers for political

articulation, mobilisation and institutionalisation of left-wing movements and organisations in Serbia. Moreover, we address the question of a time-space bias in social movement studies which has made it difficult to analyse post-socialist social movements of the capitalist semi-periphery. Mainstream explanatory frameworks have been developed from the experiences of core countries,⁵ and as noted by Gagyí,

Using the spatially biased 'crisis of democratic capitalism' framework to make sense of present ECE movements would put serious limits on their understanding. To transcend that limit, the universality of the 'crisis of democratic capitalism' framework needs to be 'provincialized' (Chakrabarty, 2009), and the conceptualization of European post war politics reintegrated in a global picture.⁶

- 3 In this study we undertake the task of demonstrating that, despite the rising opportunities for the Left to develop – provided by the global economic crisis coupled with the adverse socio-economic outcomes of post-socialist transformation – an unfavourable discursive opportunity structure still presents a significant impediment for the development of left-wing political parties and movements in Serbia. Due to almost two decades of the stigmatisation and depreciation of communism/socialism and the marginalisation of the Left in Serbia's political arena, left-wing attempts to frame the contemporary societal crisis as a crisis of neoliberal capitalism seem not to resonate with the wider public. This lack of resonance also impeded the framing of the "One of Five Million" protests as economic; it also impeded the possibility of relating them to the "double" global crisis of neoliberalism and representative democracy. Moreover, we address the question of the class base of the protests, claiming that semi-peripheral middle classes that have internalised the political ideologies of Western hegemonic partners (i.e. neoliberal)⁷ reinforce dominant discursive structures that further impede development of the Left.

Socio-historical context and the formation of the (new) left-wing movement in Serbia

- 4 There is no easy way to define what the Left is today. The global collapse of socialist regimes in 1989 led to an identity crisis for the European Radical Left, while the global financial crisis spurred a revitalisation and proliferation of leftist ideas and a flourishing of left-wing organisations and movements.⁸ Today, the left spectrum ranges from socio-democratic parties and groups at one end, through left-leaning green groups and organisations, to traditional communist parties at the other.⁹ The diversity of the Left is not only contentious, ideological and programmatic, but also organisational: the Left is made up of institutionalised political parties, informal non-party and subculture groups, non-government organisations, movements, alliances, etc. Furthermore, Hildebrandt and Daiber¹⁰ point out that the Left presents a very different picture in each individual country, resulting from different traditions and political structures and from the identity differences of the various organisations. The common denominator of these various forms is, however, the advocacy of social justice, democracy, social security and a dignified life.¹¹
- 5 March¹² identifies Radical and Extreme Left parties and groups as parts of the "Far Left" political spectrum and distinguishes them from the New Left that has been recognised by academics and researchers of social movements (for example, della Porta¹³). Radical Left groups advocate for systemic changes to capitalism, but accept democracy (most

often in the form of direct democracy and local participatory democracy). Their anti-capitalist orientation includes opposition to neoliberal capitalism, but they do not necessarily support a planned economy. The Extreme Left, on the other hand, shows greater hostility to liberal democracy, rejects compromises with bourgeois parties (including social democrats), and advocates for extra-parliamentary struggle. Both the Radical and Extreme Left identify economic inequalities as the "basis of existing political and social arrangements," pinning collective economic and social rights as their principal agenda.¹⁴ Some of these groups and parties participate in electoral processes across Europe, although few are able to elaborate on the nature of, or road to, socialism.¹⁵

- 6 The New Left, on the other hand, developed from anti-austerity movements triggered by the 2008 Great Recession. The designator "new" is used to distinguish these groups both from the Old Left (communist parties) and contemporary Radical and Extreme Left groups. New Left groups and movements exploit themes such as feminism, environmentalism, self-management, direct democracy, local participation, etc., advocating non-dogmatic (non-Marxist) socialism – or even democratic capitalism – and supporting alternative lifestyles and various minorities.¹⁶ Most of these groups are established as single-issue movements, reacting to the specific consequences of neoliberal reforms¹⁷ and suspension of democratic procedures and institutions. They do not, however, develop a clear anti-capitalist agenda nor do they reject the institutions of liberal democracy¹⁸.
- 7 The formation of the contemporary Left in Serbia started during the 1990s. At first, these were mostly anti-capitalist organisations and groups resting on revolutionary traditions suppressed by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia during socialist period (e.g. Trotskyism, Maoism, anarchism, etc.).¹⁹ These first groups were formally or informally organised by humanities students and artists, mostly in the form of alternative education networks or platforms. This was a period when flirting with leftist ideas and theories became popular in the alternative arts scene and also at universities. The first wave brought about a revised evaluation of the Yugoslav socialist legacy, which came as a reaction to the defamation of socialist modernisation both in public and academic discourses; it also brought about the revitalisation of Marxist theory which had been marginalised in academia during the previous decade.²⁰ Organised on the principles of self-education and gathering people in relatively small circles, these first groups resembled similar initiatives active during the last decade of the socialist period (for example, informal discussion groups organised by the persecuted leaders of the 1968 demonstrations and left-wing activists and academics, such as the Open University).
- 8 The process of neoliberal post-socialist transformation and the consolidation of semi-peripheral capitalism in Serbia²¹ had significant negative effects in almost all social spheres. The privatisation of public/state-owned companies resulted in deindustrialisation and massive job losses.²² The commercialisation of higher education closed this channel of social mobility for a significant number of young people from the lower social strata.²³ Reforms of labour legislation considerably reduced workers' rights.²⁴ The retraction of the welfare state led to a reduction of social benefits, gradually shaping the social protection system along neoliberal lines.²⁵ Austerity measures contributed to rising social inequalities,²⁶ while the official suspension of recruitment in the public sector²⁷ compelled many young people to emigrate. Intensive

investor urbanism led to the commodification of public spaces and overexploitation of natural resources.²⁸ Contrary to the experience of Western countries, the establishment of democratic institutions in Serbia (free elections, rule of law, free media, etc.) did not come before but together with neoliberal reforms, which means the country does not fit easily into the narrative of the "crisis of democratic capitalism."²⁹ Nevertheless, all of these issues represent grounds on which different left-wing initiatives arose in Serbia in the past two decades.

- 9 The negative consequences of neoliberal reforms in Serbia, coupled with the global rise of anti-globalisation and anti-austerity movements, the "right to the city" mobilisations, and the emergence of new leftward realignments from traditional social-democracy,³⁰ refocused the activities of leftist organizations from self-education, theoretical discussions and art production to left-wing activism (e.g. supporting workers strikes, student blockades, protests against privatisation). Left-wing groups have made use of social media to increase their visibility and to recruit new members.³¹ In this phase, they started to more strongly connect with international anti-capitalist organisations, which provided organisational, educational and financial support for capacity building. International foundations that support left-oriented activities (such as the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation) prompted these informal left-wing groups to formalise their legal statuses in order to be able to apply for grants. This "NGO-isation" of the Left increased its capacities and diversified its activities (the rights of women, LGBTQ, Roma and other minorities, anti-war campaigns, etc.), but also led to the development of a "project-driven" orientation, ideological dilution and organisational dispersion. Moreover, the increase in the number of leftist groups, now competing for grants, led to the radicalisation of leftist discourses (especially online). Together with unstable membership in the leftist groups,³² ideological and organisational fragmentation and competition are seen as the main obstacles preventing the anti-capitalist left in Serbia from uniting and institutionalising its activities through a joint political party.³³
- 10 Although many lines of division could be drawn between left-wing groups, here we propose one which could be useful in analysing cleavages in the Serbian left-wing political scene: a) the *Radical Left* – nucleuses of cadre organisations stemming from "revolutionary" communist or Trotskyist traditions (examples include Marx 21 [M21] and the Reds Marxist Organisation); b) the *Reformist Left* – organisations aiming to establish a broader coalition of ideologically diverse left-wing groups (e.g. the Social Democratic Union [SDU], the Left Summit and DiEM25); and c) the *New Left* – a number of single-issue, anti-neoliberal movements, groups and organisations that do not have a clear anti-capitalist agenda (e.g. Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own [DLBD], The Associated Movement of Free Tenants [AMFT] and Local Front [LF]).
- 11 While various anti-capitalist left-wing groups have been active continuously since the late 1990s and early 2000s, the New Left arose in the age of austerity.³⁴ They organised around local issues that stemmed from the implementation of neoliberal reforms and were coupled with corruption and clientelism: the commodification of public spaces and urban mega projects (e.g. NDBD), overblown utility bills (e.g. AMFT), and the protection of local ecosystems (the Say No to Mini Hydroelectric Power Plants initiative).
- 12 In organisational terms, the New Left mainly develops in the form of loosely organised, horizontal, grassroots groups based on the principles of direct democracy and

deliberation.³⁵ The Radical Left operates through a number of smaller cadre organisations with variable memberships and continuity. The third category, the Reformist Left, is still in the process of reorganising in an attempt to constitute a political party.

- 13 The ideological and political framing of left-wing groups also varies. Unlike the activities of the Radical and Reformist Left – whose demands mostly relate to economic issues – the movements of the New Left engage simultaneously in both the political and economic domains. As Dolenc et al. argue,³⁶ New Left initiatives are at the same time movements of affluence and movements of crisis. This is because they oppose the capitalist processes of enclosure and dispossession, but also articulate demands for democratisation, participation and alternative forms of governance. In comparison to the New Left, The Radical Left in Serbia is clearly anti-capitalist, although programmes of groups within it vary from acceptance of reforms within capitalism to advocacy for some form of democratic socialism.
- 14 Some leftist groups have elaborated their visions of the society they want to see (e.g. a planned economy and democratic workers' control over the state³⁷ or the humanisation of capitalism³⁸) or a general strategy for their political activities (e.g. principal revolutionary orientation and commitment to the creation of workers states and world communism).³⁹ Other groups, however, mostly rely on vague ideas of partial reforms of capitalism (e.g. reforms of the electoral system and state and local governance,⁴⁰ social security system reforms⁴¹). In spite of these differences, the common ideological denominator for all groups belonging to the Left in Serbia rests in values of solidarity, equality and social justice.
- 15 In terms of coalition capacity, most of the Radical Left groups reject the possibility of joint engagement with mainstream opposition parties and participation in political processes and institutions (such as elections). The Reformist Left (SDU), on the other hand, does not reject the possibility of taking part in the work of political institutions, but rejects the possibility of joining the "mainstream" opposition. Finally, the most recognisable organisations of the New Left (such as DLBD) are embedded within the corpus of mainstream political opposition and primarily oriented towards denouncing the authoritarian tendencies of the ruling party.

Conceptual framework

- 16 The recent resurgence of social movements across the world objecting to austerity measures, rising inequality, the dispossession of rights and democratic deficits, raises the question of their interconnectedness and the responsibility of the global capitalist system for generating them.⁴² The failure of social movement theory to explain the emergence of anti-austerity protests, and the risk of losing a sense of "the big picture," calls for the integration of political economy into the conceptual framework of social movement studies.⁴³ In other words, the global financial crisis and the rise of anti-austerity movements have re-actualized the Marxist approach in social movement theory, which had "strangely disappeared" despite its foundational importance (e.g. the 1970s work of Charles Tilly, Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow).⁴⁴ The "Marxist turn" in social movement scholarship implies bringing capitalism back into the study of collective action, as well as taking into consideration the social base and the wider structural conditions in which protests take place.⁴⁵

- 17 While research prior to the global financial crisis provided strong evidence to support the thesis that the social base of new left-wing movements in the West consists mainly of the middle classes (in contrast to the working class base of the Old Left), research of anti-austerity protests in EU countries indicates that mobilisation had shifted towards the “multitude” or the “losers of neoliberal globalisation” of diverse social biographies: public-sector employees; young people and the well-educated; traditional workers and precarious workers; retired people and the unemployed.⁴⁶
- 18 In their call for the reintroduction of Marxist perspectives to social movement theory, Hetland and Goodwin⁴⁷ emphasise that the dynamics of capitalism and socio-economic factors matter for social movements in several ways. Firstly, capitalist dynamics can inhibit but also facilitate the formation of new collective identities and solidarities, thus shaping the very conditions necessary for the existence of many social movements. Then, the balance of class forces in a society can shape movements’ development, goals, strategies and outcomes. Finally, ideologies closely linked to capitalist institutions and practices may also strongly influence movement strategies and goals.
- 19 One should, however, be cautious about applying theoretical models borrowed from the West in trying to understand the dynamics of social movements at the periphery or semi-periphery. For instance, it should not be taken for granted that semi-peripheral middle classes and social movements in post-socialist countries have the same characteristics and composition as their counterparts in the core countries.⁴⁸ Therefore, we believe that localisation and pointing to the specificities of the post-socialist context are much needed for proper explanation of the development of leftist movements in Serbia. One of the local specificities that should particularly be taken into consideration is the pre-existing discursive opportunity structure (DOS).
- 20 The notion of DOS was introduced into social movement scholarship by Koopmans and Statham (1999) as a “cultural” extension to political process theory. While political process theory stresses the influence of political structures on the development of social movements,⁴⁹ the framing approach emphasises the importance of the construction of meaning by movement adherents and other actors.⁵⁰ By combining the two approaches, the concept of DOS recognises that the cultural and political contexts facilitate or constrain collective action framing and, thus, make some movement frames more resonant and effective than others. On the one hand, this concept successfully overcomes the inadequacy of the “political opportunity approach” to deal with the discursive content of social movement mobilisation and, on the other, the difficulty that the framing perspective has in explaining why some frames fail while others succeed in mobilising the public.⁵¹ The concept of discursive opportunity structure emphasises that social movement mobilisation is influenced both by political institutions and by the culturally embedded, dominant interpretative frames.
- 21 Between the two domains, a common ground has developed where both perspectives refer to political-cultural or symbolic external constraints and facilitators of social movement mobilization. We propose to denote this set of variables by the term discursive opportunity structure, which may be seen as determining which ideas are considered ‘sensible’, which constructions of reality are seen as ‘realistic’, and which claims are held as ‘legitimate’ within a certain polity at a specific time.⁵²
- 22 Further developing the concept, Koopmans and Olzak explain discursive opportunities as “the aspects of the public discourse that determine a message’s chances of diffusion

in the public sphere.”⁵³ Ferree and colleagues make the distinction between the cultural (widespread values and beliefs in the broader population) and the institutional (mainstream/institutionalised discourse in the public arena) components of DOS.⁵⁴

- 23 The concept of discursive opportunity structures provides protest and social movement scholars with an adequate analytical tool to understand which movement frames will likely have the capacity to mobilise wider support, to challenge and alter targeted policies and to influence and shape/reshape dominant political discourses.⁵⁵ It is important to note, however, that dominant discursive opportunity structures are usually not straightforward and internally coherent but contain multiple and sometimes conflicting discourses, thus creating a particularly difficult terrain for collective actors to navigate.⁵⁶
- 24 Arguing that messages that are not resonant can still be very important for challenging the dominant discourses in society, Ferree⁵⁷ makes a distinction between resonance and radicalism. “Resonance is defined as the mutually affirming interaction of a frame with a discursive opportunity structure supportive of the terms of its argument, while radicalism is similarly defined as a mutually contradictory relationship between this structure and a frame.”⁵⁸ Choosing to resonate with dominant discourses can bring certain, short-term success to social movements, while electing to persist with radical claim-making can bring far-reaching success in changing the dominant discourse.⁵⁹
- 25 Social movements are usually composed of numerous organisations and groups that, despite having an overarching goal, tend to differ greatly in terms of their strategies, tactics, values, means and objectives. Disagreements are not rare, therefore, and often pertain to a movement’s framing activities. Frame disputes are conflicts over the interpretation of reality and can occur in diagnosing the problem the movement seeks to address; in deciding what should be done in order to solve a particular problem (prognosis); and, finally, over the frame alignment strategies (“frame resonance disputes”).⁶⁰ Frame disputes often occur between ideologically diverse wings of a movement – for example, between the moderate and extreme factions. If frame disputes escalate, they can result in factionalisms but can otherwise be beneficial if they allow greater frame resonance with the wider audience.⁶¹

Data and methods

- 26 In this paper, we take the “One of Five Million” protests as a show-case to demonstrate how local discursive opportunity structures, on the one hand, and the socio-economic conditions created by the global financial crisis and neoliberal post-socialist transformation, on the other, affect the development and positioning of leftist groups within Serbia’s political scene. As the most visible expression of social movements, protests provide a good opportunity to study the actual behaviour (and not just official proclamations) of social movement actors. Therefore, we mostly rely on the analysis of protest events and the first-hand accounts of protest participants, while qualitative analysis of the websites and promotional material of leftist groups is used as complementary material.
- 27 The analysis rests on the qualitative data from a larger research study⁶² of the “One of Five Million” protests (March-April 2019), from which we derived a total of 15 semi-structured interviews with the leaders of groups and parties involved in the protest.⁶³ Complementarily, we used the protest survey data (n = 451) conducted in February 2019

in Belgrade and desk analysis of the political programmes, website content and visual representation of the groups and organisations active in the protests.

Research findings

Setting the scene

- 28 The "One of Five Million" protests that broke out in Belgrade and many other towns in Serbia in the autumn of 2018 lasted well over a year.⁶⁴ At one point taking place in more than one hundred towns across the country, these protests represented the widest outbreak of popular discontent since the collapse of the Milošević regime in 2000. The immediate cause of the protests was an act of violence committed against an opposition leader. Soon enough, however, the protest demands transcended the original cause, expanding to include more wide-ranging criticism of the regime of Aleksandar Vučić. The branding of the protest as "One of Five Million" came in the wake of Vučić's statement that he would not meet the demands of the protesters even if they manage to gather five million people.
- 29 Aleksandar Vučić and the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska napredna stranka – SNS), together with several other coalition partners, came to power following the 2012 parliamentary elections. In order to solidify its rule, the ruling party called for snap parliamentary elections on two occasions, in 2014 and 2016, winning them both. In the meantime, as acting prime minister, Vučić ran in the 2017 presidential elections and won. The rule of the SNS, which has to date lasted eight years, represents the first extended period since the fall of the Milošević regime during which the ruling party not only remained in government following an election but, on the contrary, consolidated its power. The regime's solidification process has been marked by the degradation of already weak institutions of representative democracy, control over the judiciary, party use of public media and corrupt control of private media, circumvention of the law, expansion and strengthening of clientelistic networks between various actors associated with the ruling party, etc. Along with the process of strengthening authoritarian tendencies with elements of personal power, the consolidation of the regime was marked by the implementation of austerity measures in response to the economic crisis. These were accompanied, on the one hand, by a combination of further neoliberal reforms and the reduction of budget expenditures for the most vulnerable categories and, on the other, short-term populist measures aimed at gaining the support of the electorate.⁶⁵ Before the "One of Five Million" protests, there were few serious attempts by the opposition to consolidate and articulate popular discontent; the opposition had hitherto mostly sought to mobilise the middle classes but generally ignored those categories of the population that were most affected by neoliberal measures.⁶⁶
- 30 Although the protests did not have official leader(s), at the time this study was conducted certain actors could be discerned as the main organisers. These comprised the largest oppositional bloc gathered around Alliance for Serbia (Savez za Srbiju – AFS);⁶⁷ a group of students who were active in the previous "Against Dictatorship" protests (2017) and later declared themselves to be the official organisers of the protests;⁶⁸ and a group of public intellectuals (university professors, actors, journalists etc.). Despite the spontaneous outbreak of the protests, their polycentric organisation,

and its own ideological leanings, the Alliance for Serbia soon became the most important coordinator. The Alliance for Serbia consists of an ideologically heterogeneous coalition of political parties spanning from the political right to the left-of-centre, with a concentration of parties in the political right and centre, and only a principled and faint articulation of traditional leftist ideas of social justice and solidarity. The protest demands, articulated by the mainstream oppositional parties through the "Agreement with the People,"⁶⁹ focused on media freedom, the rule of law and free and fair elections.

Discursive opportunity structures, frame disputes and the positioning of the Left

- 31 Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, smaller anti-capitalist groups have been active all around South Eastern Europe (organised student protests, workers resisting privatisation, "right to the city" movements, activities opposing forced evictions of debtors, local initiatives for the protection of the public good, environmental protests, etc.). What distinguishes Serbia from some other ex-Yugoslav countries (primarily Slovenia, Croatia and Macedonia), however, is the failure of these initiatives to become institutionalised in the form of a political party that would articulate contemporary left-wing politics.⁷⁰ Unlike Croatia and Slovenia, where the socialist legacy was marginalised in the public discourse in the early 1990s and opportunities opened in the early 2000s for new left-wing forces to be discovered and actualised in the abandoned political space,⁷¹ Serbia continued to live in the shadow of criticism of the Milošević regime and communism/socialism well into the 2000s. This situation impeded left-wing movements from constituting a significant political actor for almost two decades. As a member of the Reformist Left group SDU noted, in comparison to the other former-Yugoslav countries, "an additional problem is that we need to bring back the Left into the political mainstream We don't only have the problem of the SFRY [Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia], Tito, but also Milošević."
- 32 The first post-socialist regime, led by the former leader of the Serbian Communist Party Slobodan Milošević (1990-2000), employed a hybrid combination of socialist (social justice and working-class rights) and nationalist ideology as a mobilisation platform in order to retain legitimacy and uphold the privileges of the ruling party.⁷² Regime change in 2000 was marked by a strict break with Milošević's legacy, especially in terms of socialism and leftist ideas, and the introduction of a (neo)liberal agenda. With this change, "the baby was thrown out with the bathwater" and the values of social equality, solidarity and workers' rights were marginalised in the newly formed public discourse. As one of the respondents from a Radical anti-capitalist group, M21, noted: "We have the continuity of the powerful anti-communist discourse [...]. Even the Democratic Party that tends to represent itself as the party on the centre left, has an anti-communist discourse."
- 33 Due to the legacy of the Milošević regime, the political Left lost much of its ability to mobilise people after regime change in 2000. To the contrary, right-wing and populist parties and movements have flourished, especially among those social categories whose structural position in capitalism worsened (the so-called losers of transition). It should be noted, however, that even though this legacy is the most distinctive factor

constraining the formation of a strong left-wing movement, its importance is gradually fading with generational shift. The political socialisation of the younger generations who are active in the new left-wing movements and groups is largely taking place in a post-Milošević political context.⁷³

34 While Milošević's legacy and the dominant discursive structures should be understood to be a significant barrier to the development of left-wing movements in Serbia, certain global and local processes are opening up possibilities for a rise of the Left. One of these processes relates to the global crisis of neoliberal capitalism that has emerged since 2008.⁷⁴ The adverse effects of the implementation of neoliberal policies, especially austerity measures and periodic suspensions/manipulation of liberal democratic procedures and institutions by ruling political elites, has contributed to the growing importance of the left-wing political movements around the world.⁷⁵

35 The brief success of social democratic parties and left-wing movements across Europe (Podemos, Syriza), put the wind back in the sails of some political parties in Serbia to (declaratively, at least) move leftwards in their political profiling. While there were, however, some attempts by both mainstream opposition and ruling parties to present themselves as the Left, the "genuine" Left, especially its radical wing, remains on the political margins. As a respondent from M21 put it:

The Left is completely marginalised. There are, in fact, small political groups that act on the margins [...]. We have left liberals in the Civic Front, who, like all left liberals, can easily become servants of the Right. We have the fake Left, political parties that represent themselves as the Left, but just try to attract voters on the basis of Milošević's legacy [...]. There is no real, articulated Left in the representative bodies.

36 Despite the marginalisation of the Left, members of leftist groups see a window of opportunity opened by the crisis of neoliberalism and the increasingly visible negative outcomes of neoliberal reforms in Serbia. "We wanted to use the highly politicised situation in society and to articulate our demands" (Respondent, M21). They believe that people are steadily becoming aware that the post-socialist transformation is over, and that the struggles faced by the majority of the population are inherent to capitalism on the semi-periphery. Said a respondent of SDU:

The "sobering up" is about to come and it will open a space for the Left to return [...] and that fear that if someone labels you as the Extreme Left, you will be pushed to the margins [...] I do not think that's the case anymore [...]. Time has revealed at least some of the lies - first of all, that the transition will lead somewhere [...]. To the extent that these lies are revealed, I think that there is some understanding in the public for radical left-wing policies.

37 However, said another, "here, many problems and manifestations of capitalism are still not recognised and articulated." Therefore, left-wing groups, especially the Radical Left, used the "One in Five Million" protests to raise awareness of the social problems created by capitalism, to increase the visibility of their work, to reach their supporters, to mobilise bystanders and to position themselves in the mainstream of the political scene. They decided to participate in the protest in order, "to use the politicisation of society, for our activities, to carry out a kind of propaganda activity, that is, to ride on the wave of media visibility created by this protest" (Respondent, M21).

38 This task, however, proved to be quite difficult. Alternatives to capitalism articulated by the Left were ridiculed openly by leaders of other political parties involved in the protest, reinforcing unfavourable discursive structures maintained by all governments

since 2000 and weakening the position of the Left within the protest. As described by a respondent of AFS:

And which system, besides capitalism, exists?! [...] Where do you have socialism? Give me one country in the world that is not North Korea or some tribal community in Africa, where the economic model is not capitalist. I mean, I really don't know how serious people can talk about that [...] to restore self-management [...] that everyone should have according to their needs, it's nonsense.

- 39 Media with a pro-opposition stance did not remain neutral in creating unfavourable discursive opportunities. Thus, in the midst of the protests, the editor of the respected weekly *Vreme* called representatives of the Marx 21 organisation a "regime international," mockingly attributing to them that they wanted to prevent the opposition from blunting the revolutionary edge of the masses.⁷⁶ Meanwhile a columnist for the well-known *Peščanik* media outlet drew parallels between the Radical Left in Serbia and Milošević's former party, the Socialist Party of Serbia, identifying socialism with contemporary regimes in North Korea, China, and Venezuela, or with the nuclear catastrophe in the Soviet Union.⁷⁷
- 40 The heterogeneity of the Left – considered in terms of its three major divisions of Radical, Reformist and New, the lack of an overreaching goal and unifying collective identity, the internal frame disputes, and different protest tactics and coalition capacities – has further undermined the position of the Left within the protests, thus diminishing its potential to challenge dominant discursive structures and frame the current crisis as a crisis of capitalism.
- 41 The physical participation of the New Left in the protests was not always visible (especially in Belgrade). This was because these groups held to the agreement with the organisers not to expose organisation symbols. Although they initially coordinated protest activities with the other organisers, the Alliance for Serbia eventually co-opted the protests and offered the "Agreement with the People." Thereafter, local organisations united into the Civil Front⁷⁸ and decided not to join the Alliance.
- 42 The Radical and Reformist Left entered the protest separately from New Left groups, at first as part of the Roof Overhead platform. Following a series of disagreements among the organisations within this umbrella initiative,⁷⁹ the platform withdrew, while the Radical and Reformist Left stayed in the protests under the name Left Bloc.⁸⁰ The Left Bloc's involvement in the protests was distinct from that of other groups: they marched separately, displayed their symbols (banners, flags, protest slogans against capitalism, etc.) and put forward their own protest demands related to the existential problems of the socially vulnerable categories: poverty, precarious work conditions, etc. The most visible banner carried the slogan, "Down with Vučić, down with capitalism!" By drawing symbolic boundaries between themselves and the other parties and organisations in the protest (including New Left groups), the Left Bloc positioned itself as a group that expressed its opposition to all parties that had been in power since 2000 (some of which were part of the Alliance for Serbia) and to their neoliberal politics.
- 43 On several occasions, the protests were marked by conflicts between the protest organisers and the Alliance for Serbia with supporters of the Left Bloc. This resulted in Left Bloc withdrawing from the protests when "the protests were co-opted by the Alliance for Serbia" (Respondent, SDU). They were aware of the possibility that, "breaking up the protests was, from the start, one of the things that was in some kind of footnote, as a possible outcome [...]. So, our position was that [...] either we will make

our bloc in the protest strong or we will show that the protest is bullshit" (Respondent, M21). For its part, the Alliance for Serbia and its media tried to discredit the Radical Left by linking left-wing ideas – primarily anti-capitalism – with Milošević's legacy. They also accused the Left Bloc of being "Vučić's project to obstruct the protest."⁸¹ On the other hand, the New Left's Don't Let Belgrade Drown initiative and the Local Front remained in the protests and were considered as acceptable partners by the Alliance for Serbia.

44 The protests revealed a lack of unity and several lines of division between left-wing organisations and groups. Besides that already outlined (between the Radical and Reformist Left on one side and the New Left on the other), it seems that groups belonging to the Radical and Reformist Left were also not united in terms of their involvement in the protests. There were differences between those groups who joined the protests and those who refused to join, but there were also differences in terms of the strategy of their involvement. A divergence of opinion appeared between those advocating direct conflict with the mainstream opposition parties in the protests and those who opposed such conflict.

45 A representative of the Radical Left group M21 testified to the lack of unity on the left regarding involvement in the protests:

After a few weeks, within Roof Overhead, the opinion prevailed that we should not participate in the protest. So, essentially, [...] there is this conflict of one "purifying" concept of politics, which says that these protests are organised by Đilas and Dveri, and we will not get dirty by going there [...]. And, of course, Left Bloc was criticised from exactly that position: how can you go to the protests where the right-wingers are marching with you, where the flag of Russia is standing? [...] they show that people are in some kind of pre-political state.

46 The New Left was also not a homogeneous entity (in terms of its vision of a desired type of society or the level of acceptance of systemic changes). If, however, the protests revealed a number of difficulties and obstacles for the unification of the Radical and Reformist Left, they were at the same time a platform that enabled New Left organisations and movements to consolidate into a joint platform, the Civic Front. "The protests directed us to each other, we started networking, discussing, and we have finally realised that there are a lot of people like us and that we are responsible for change [...]. On the other hand, other social circumstances did not allow the leftist groups to occupy this space because of this enormous negative label" (Respondent, AMFT). They hoped the protests would, "bring a positive shift towards better organisation of progressive left movements" (Respondent, DLBD). Unification of New Left organisations into the Civic Front, however, simultaneously dissociated them from the Radical and Reformist Left.

47 The protest demands were narrowed down in the "Agreement with the People" to strictly political concerns with a pronounced absence of the socio-economic aspect. Most of the respondents belonging to the New Left pointed out that the political demands were crucial: "As far as we are concerned, there are three basic demands. The first one is to stop political violence; the second is to have fair media representation [...] and the third is to have fair elections" (Respondent, DLBD). On the contrary, the representatives of the Radical and Reformist Left criticised the protests and organisers for ignoring social and economic demands:

[...] demands against political violence and for the restructuring of the political scene in Serbia are completely okay, but what is unacceptable is the fact that such

mass protests don't deliver social demands [...]. All the protest demands [...] are built on the narrative that we live in a dictatorship [...] that there are no political freedoms, therefore, simply, something that the middle class can relate to [...] (Respondent, M21).

- 48 The Radical and the Reformist Left tried to frame the protests as economic, anti-austerity, and anti-capitalist but, in the end, they were not successful because, among other things, there was a lack of support not only from the mainstream opposition but also from the New Left.

The class base of the "One of Five Million" protests

- 49 The "One of Five Million" protests in Belgrade and some of the other larger cities in Serbia were middle-class protests. While the social background of the protesters in smaller towns was mixed, a survey of protest participants in Belgrade showed that the majority of them belonged to the urban middle class with a predominance of the employed (58%) and students (24%). The protest participants (the so-called civic elite) were those whose interests overcome purely economic issues and who seek to improve their quality of life by demanding more democracy, media freedom and the rule of law.⁸² This was the case in some other post-socialist countries where middle classes protested to maintain their status in the context of economic crisis⁸³ or aspired to achieve living standards comparable to their counterparts in the West.⁸⁴
- 50 "The ruling Serbian Progressive Party demonised the 'civic elite' [...] they antagonised this particular social group and worked on mobilisation, on the recruitment of all other groups" (Respondent, M21). Therefore, the leaders of the mainstream opposition parties, especially the Alliance for Serbia, intended to mobilise this particular social group – the highly educated middle class from urban centres.
- 51 On the other hand, as a member of the Radical Left noted, "[...] people who have to struggle with the real social problems, they are underrepresented in the protest, because these protests do not have anything to offer to them [...] no clear social agenda [...]" (Respondent, M21). The evident absence of people from the lower social strata, the "losers of transition/neoliberalism" in these protests is assumed to be related to their fear of losing the minimal social security they have. "People are frightened [...] with their insecure socio-economic position [...] they are afraid to protest," observed a respondent belonging to the SDU. Therefore, groups gathered around the Left Bloc concluded that "the central problem of democracy in Serbia is [...] neither political violence nor the stolen elections [...] nor the media blockade. The central problem of democracy in Serbia is poverty" (Respondent, SDU).
- 52 One of the specificities of the rise of left-wing movements and organisations in Serbia pertains to structural changes in the post-socialist context. State control of trade unions that were unable (or too inefficient) to organise more wide-ranging collective action for the protection of workers' rights resulted in a huge drop in membership. This lack of collective action largely contributed to the atomisation and fragmentation of the working class after the collapse of socialism.⁸⁵ Furthermore, political support for working-class issues was lacking: nominally socio-democratic (parliamentary) political parties turned towards the right, often forming coalitions in governments that implemented neoliberal policies and completely neglected workers' rights. Without the expected state support and leadership, resistance by working-class organisations to

neoliberal reforms or privatisation processes was, therefore, rather weak and fragmented throughout the whole process of post-socialist transformation. Over time, workers found themselves, as a group, without the resources necessary for collective action.⁸⁶

- 53 The Radical Left also faced a problem that was not specific to Serbia: the loss of the class base for the ideas it promoted. The deindustrialisation process decimated the working class across Europe, and spurred a further heterogenisation of the remaining part of the class. In addition to that, as Vuković⁸⁷ noted, the Radical Left is faced with an evident social gap between the (mostly middle-class) bearers of contemporary socialist ideas and the class whose interests it supposedly expresses. As a respondent from the New Left Local Front noticed: "In Serbia, [...] we have lefties, advocating for workers' rights, [...] without seeing a worker in their life. They do not know what life looks like in Vranje, where people work ten hours a day for 26,000 dinars. And they never asked any of the workers: 'do you want me to be your political representative?'"
- 54 Given the socio-economic background of the majority of protest participants, there was a discussion within the Radical Left groups about whether to participate in the protest at all. As they noticed, those who are protesting, "don't experience the problems we are dealing with as serious enough or even as a problem at all" (Respondent, SDU). They decided to take part, however, assuming that, "a serious change will not happen if there is no social coalition between [...] the disadvantaged class and the progressive part of the middle class [...]" (Respondent, SDU). Therefore, like the mainstream opposition and the New Left, they saw the protests as an opportunity to address the middle class, especially those segments which are, "undecided, who don't understand what is going on" (Respondent, M21) and are not aware of the underlying socio-economic processes.
- 55 The New Left, on the other hand, worked on creating narratives that did not question capitalism *per se*, but rather addressed issues arising from the consequences of neoliberal policies. Unlike the Radical and Reformist Left, it seems that in this way the New Left managed to strengthen its support among middle-class protestors. The aforementioned survey of the protests provided evidence that the majority of young professionals living in central Belgrade municipalities were supporters of the DLBD. A respondent belonging to the core of this organisation describes their supporters as belonging to the "middle, urban, highly-educated social strata from Belgrade city centre." A focus on the local issues, on the one hand, and on the critique of clientelist structures and authoritarian rule on the other, also tends to resonate better with middle-class beliefs and values than the discourses employed by the mainstream opposition or the anti-capitalist left. Suspicious of politics and grand ideologies, the middle classes are striving to distance themselves from both discredited professional politicians who no longer represent their ideals and interests and from radical ideas which call into question their social position.

Conclusions

- 56 Based on the case study of the "One of Five Million" protests, this paper tried to demonstrate that left-wing movements in Serbia face significant challenges in penetrating the public arena and rupturing the solidified discursive structures characterised by the deeply held and taken-for-granted belief that (neoliberal)

capitalism has no alternative – a belief that has been developing gradually since regime change in 2000. Moreover, rising individualism and political cynicism have resulted in declining capacities for political organisation on the basis of solidarity and collective interests,⁸⁸ making traditional left-wing ideas generally unattractive and even repellent due to the negative connotations related to the legacies of the Milošević regime and socialism.

- 57 Although the re-evaluations of (neoliberal) capitalism that emerged in the wake of the global economic crisis could have represented a platform for firmer and clearer articulation of left-wing politics in Serbia, we saw that this opportunity was not fully exploited. Leftist organisations participated in the protests, attempting to generate frame resonance with part of the middle class and the “losers of transition” by tapping into their economic hardships and their feelings of discontent, injustice and unfairness. Still, their fundamental critique of capitalism did not seem to resonate with the targeted audiences. Leftist organisations in Serbia remained mostly invisible to “ordinary citizens” and were relegated to the margins of the oppositional political scene. An unfavourable discursive opportunity structure, fragmentation and low capacities, combined with the dominantly middle-class base of the protests, disabled left-wing groups. The Left was unable to highlight issues related to the outcomes of neoliberal reforms and austerity measures as a part of the protest agenda and could not mobilise the “multitude” of “losers of neoliberalism.” Instead, societal problems were framed as political, and the protests were directed against authoritarian government. This strategy also blurred the fact that authoritarian political regimes are far from atypical for the capitalist periphery.⁸⁹ It should not be surprising, therefore, that crucial political actors are still failing to articulate political, social and economic problems as a crisis of capitalism on the semi-periphery.
- 58 Although the “One of Five Million” protests were part of a larger wave of protests “in the time of crisis,” we should be careful about interpreting them with a reliance on the explanatory framework of a “crisis of democratic capitalism” without taking into account the specific context of the semi-periphery. The conceptual apparatus proposed by della Porta⁹⁰ and other authors advocating for the need to enrich the theory of social movements by re-introducing the political economy approach in the context of a double crisis of capitalism has to be further assessed by examining the conditions which obstruct left-wing groups and movements at the semi-periphery from articulating this “double crisis” as fundamentally economic and social.

NOTES

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4. BIREŠEV Ana, "Protest protiv diktature iz perspektive društvenih pokreta na evropskoj periferiji" [Protest against Dictatorship from the Perspective of Social Movements on the European Periphery], in Jelena Pešić, Vera Backović, Anđelka Mirkov (eds), *Srbija u uslovima globalne krize neoliberalnog oblika kapitalističke regulacije* [Serbia in the Conditions of the Global Crisis of Neoliberal Form of Capitalist Regulation], Belgrade, Institut za sociološka istraživanja, 2018, p. 111-126.
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62. The project was carried out as a joint collaboration between researchers from the Institute for Sociological Research (Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade), the SeConS Development Initiative Group from Belgrade and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. Some of the results of the survey were presented by Cvejić Slobodan in "Democracy against Stabilitocracy: Who are the 'One in Five Million' Protesters and What Is it that they Want?," on website of Monitoring the Social Situation in Serbia (MONS), 5 April 2019, online: <https://mons.rs/democracy-against-stabilitocracy> (accessed in September 2020).
63. The sample was composed of five top-ranking leaders of the political parties belonging to the largest opposition bloc (Alliance for Serbia), two representatives of opposition parties that were not part of the core of the protest (PSG and Party for Modern Serbia), two representatives of the student group that officially organised the "One of Five Million" protests, four representatives of New Left groups active in the protests (DLBD, LF, AMFT and ex-Otpor Group), one representative of the Reform Left (SDU) and one representative of the Radical Left group M21.
64. The first draft of this paper was completed in June 2019; at the time of writing the protests were still active. In the meantime, the protests have changed their formal organisers and official name and were in gradual decline by the end of 2019. This analysis is restricted to the time period covering the onset of the protests in December 2018 until April 2019.
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66. PEŠIĆ, "Politička participacija učesnika Protesta protiv diktature," *op. cit.*
67. The Alliance for Serbia started forming after the Belgrade elections in 2018 and at the time the protests were active consisted of several ideologically and organisationally heterogeneous parties and groups: The Party of Freedom and Justice (Stranka slobode i pravde), The Serbian Movement Dveri (Srpski pokret Dveri), Democratic Party (Demokratska stranka), Serbian Left (Srpska levica), the People's Party (Narodna Stranka) and several other smaller parties and organisations.
68. The "Against Dictatorship" protests broke out after the presidential elections in Serbia in spring 2017 and lasted for several months. They were characterised by a flat and leaderless organisational structure and by the over representation of young people, mostly students. For more on the sociological characteristics of this protest see: PEŠIĆ, "Politička participacija učesnika Protesta protiv diktature," *op. cit.*; BIREŠEV, "Protest *Protiv diktature* i konstrukcija kolektivnog identiteta," *op. cit.*; PETROVIĆ, PETROVIĆ, "Konektivna akcija kao novi obrazac protestnog aktivizma," *op. cit.*; BACKOVIĆ Vera, PETROVIĆ Irena, "Društveni pokret u nastajanju: vrednosne orijentacije učesnika *Protesta protiv diktature*" [Emerging Social Movement: Value Orientations of Participants in the *Protest against Dictatorship*], *Sociologija*, vol. 59, n° 4, 2017, p. 427-451.
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74. UNGER Roberto Mangabeira, *The Left Alternative*, London, New York, Verso, 2009.

75. DELLA PORTA, *Anti-Austerity Protests in the Crisis of Late Neoliberalism*, op. cit.

76. Online: <https://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1659281> (accessed in June 2020).

77. Online: <https://pescanik.net/napred-u-proslost/> (accessed in June 2020).

78. Twelve local organisations joined the Civil Front, as a temporary alliance with an ambition to become a permanent and unified organisation. Although they were active in the protests, they were not a part of the organisational core.

79. The Roof Overhead platform represents an initiative of a number of organisations (belonging both to the radical and the New Left): Who Builds the City, Don't Let Belgrade Drown, Social Democratic Union, Equality, Say No to Enforcers, 7 Demands, Marx 21, Firekeepers and Belgrade Youth Action. It brings together these organisations and other individuals in the struggle for the right to housing. They oppose forced evictions, especially when tenants and homeowners do not have any alternative accommodation, but also advocate the abolition of private executors. Online: <http://zakrovnadglavom.org/#> (accessed in November 2020).

80. The Left Bloc gathered the following organisations: Marx 21 (M21), Social Democratic Union (SDU), Belgrade Youth Action and Marxist Organisation Reds. During the last two protest walks in which they participated, the Left Summit of Serbia also joined Left Bloc.

81. Online: gerila.rs/staro/marks21-vucicev-projekat-za-rusenje-protesta/ (accessed in May 2020).

82. CVEJIĆ, "Demokratija protiv stabilokratije," op. cit.

83. KRASDEV Ivan, *Ometena demokratija. Globalna politika protesta* [Disrupted Democracy. Global Protest Policy], Belgrade, Sluzbeni glasnik, 2017, p. 22.

84. GAGYI, "Social Movement Studies for East Central Europe?," op. cit., p. 28.

85. LAZIĆ, *Čekajući kapitalizam*, op. cit.; LAZIĆ, CVEJIĆ, "Post-Socialist Transformation and Working Class Fragmentation," op. cit.

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89. BIEBER Florian, "Patterns of Competitive Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans," *East European Politics*, vol. 34, n° 3, 2018, p. 337-354.

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ABSTRACTS

The political and economic crisis that followed the Great Recession (2008) created an impetus for mass mobilisation across Europe, protesting austerity measures or demanding more democracy. In Serbia, the protests organised under the slogan "One of Five Million," which broke out in late 2018, were not framed as "economic" but solely as "political." This paper explores the socio-historically embedded opportunities and barriers for the political articulation, mobilisation and institutionalisation of left-wing movements and organisations in Serbia by focusing on their role in the "One of Five Million" protests. We demonstrate that despite greater prospects for the rise of the Left, stemming from the global economic crisis and the adverse socio-economic outcomes of the post-socialist transformation in Serbia, an unfavourable discursive opportunity structure still presents a significant impediment for the development of left-wing political parties and movements.

La crise politique et économique qui a suivi la Grande Récession (2008) a créé un élan de mobilisation de masse dans toute l'Europe, protestant contre les mesures d'austérité introduites par les gouvernements ou exigeant plus de démocratie. En Serbie, les mobilisations regroupées derrière la bannière « Un sur cinq millions » qui ont éclaté à la fin de 2018 n'ont pas été formulées comme relevant de l'« économique », mais uniquement du « politique ». Cet article étudie les opportunités et les obstacles socio-historiques spécifiques auxquels ont fait face des mouvements et des organisations de gauche en Serbie dans leur expression, leur mobilisation et leur institutionnalisation, en se concentrant sur leur rôle dans le mouvement « Un sur cinq millions ». Nous démontrons qu'en dépit des opportunités d'ascension pour la Gauche qu'offraient la crise économique globale et les résultats socio-économiques négatifs de la transformation post-socialiste en Serbie, une structure d'opportunités discursive défavorable continue de constituer un obstacle significatif au développement de partis politiques et de mouvements de gauche.

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Geographical index: Serbie

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