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REPRESENTATION IN LOCAL POLITICS IN SERBIA: UNCLEAR BOUNDARIES AND MULTIPLE ROLES

Abstract: This paper examines how elected and non-elected representatives understand their roles in the specific circumstances of local politics in Serbia. Relying on Keane›s concept of monitory democracy, which emphasizes the shift from representation to monitoring, and Saward›s constructivist understanding of representation, we demonstrate how political actors attempt to improve their position in a centralized, personalized, and semi-authoritarian political environment. Research findings indicate that elected and non-elected representatives are increasingly oriented towards a monitoring and oversight function, and their relationships with citizens are often informal. Some actors, primarily from civil society, employ a tactic of playing multiple roles to improve their position and achieve the interests of the groups they represent.

Keywords: *representation, Serbia, local self-government, monitory democracy, civil society*.

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1. Introduction

The relationship between citizens and political decision-makers is one of the fundamental qualities of democracy. In modern concepts of democracy, the focus is often on the process of articulating interests and their transmission to institutions and the impact on decision-making (Lijphart 2003). However, there has also been a shift in focus toward monitoring and overseeing political, social, and economic centers of power (Diamond 2008). This change resulted from economic development, political consensus, and reduced ideological differences that marked politics in developed democracies at the turn of the 20th to the 21st century (Katz & Mair 1995). Concurrently, a plural field of civil society and social movements develops, as well as a range of temporary and occasional actors who advocate particular standpoints and interests in public. We understand these actors as representatives despite the absence of formal legitimacy (they are not elected).

Although these changes are characteristic of stable post-industrial democracies, the mentioned trends also spill over into transitional young democracies. Due to the stability of Western democracies, their focus shifts to monitoring; in Eastern Europe, however, monitoring and oversight functions are seen as a way to strengthen new democratic institutions further. Additionally, the lack of legitimacy of elected representatives and populist narratives opened a space for new non-party leaders and actors who understand politics differently, more provocatively, and performatively. This collectively leads to a certain convergence of old and transitional democracies and their political practices.

In this paper, I examine how the representative role is understood in Serbia under specific circumstances in the period since the SNS (Serbian Progressive Party) came to power in Serbia, with a particular focus on politics at the level of local self-government. By specific circumstances, I mean a series of related characteristics stemming from how the SNS governs. First of all, it concerns the democratic backslide and authoritarian tendencies (Levitsky & Way 2020), which implies difficult working conditions for representatives of citizens through narrowed institutional and media space, concentration of power in the hands of the president of the state as opposed to the executive and

legislative branches of government, and marginalization of civil society at the national level (Vuković 2020; Tepavac, 2020). Although the representation problems primarily relate to opposition representatives, it can be assumed that authoritarian tendencies also reduce the capacity of representatives from majority parties. These characteristics develop in an already established centralized system with elements of partocracy (Orlović 2009); conversely, politics in Serbia has long been characterized by extremely low trust in politics, politicians, and institutions (Stojiljković 2019). All these trends have been further strengthened by a series of crises (economic, migrant, etc.) that have resulted in a stabilocratic framework (Bieber 2018) that reached its peak during the Covid-19 pandemic through authoritarian tendencies and endangering pluralism (Petrović 2020).

With all this in mind, this text takes a novel approach by shifting the research focus to local politics in Serbia. The aim is to determine how representatives understand their role, especially in the context of high personalization and the emphasized role of leaders who "cover" national politics. The basic working assumption is that there are no significant ideological differences between actors at the local level, that somewhat more influential groups of citizens come from the field of civil society as well as opposition parties, and local movements and initiatives. This unique approach sheds light on a level of politics that has not been sufficiently researched in Serbia.

Empirical data used in this paper were collected through 75 in-depth semi-structured interviews with elected and non-elected representatives (non-elected representatives are considered to be representatives of civil society organizations, activists, and representatives of informal groups), most of whom are active in local politics or at least part of their careers was tied to the local level. Some respondents held multiple positions simultaneously (e.g., local councilors and members of national parliament) or performed various functions throughout their careers (e.g., they were first civic activists before being elected councilors). Multi-role experience is particularly important in the context of the political circumstances at the time of conducting the research, especially the boycott of the 2020 elections by a larger number of opposition parties, as many local assemblies were without any opposition representatives.

Interviews were conducted from September 2020 to June 2022 in 16 municipalities and cities in Serbia, taking into account an even territorial representation of different parts of the country (including the ethnic structure of the population), representation of settlements of different sizes, and an adequate balance between representatives of the authorities and the opposition.

In the first part of the paper, I will present the basic theoretical concepts that will be used in the analysis. Then, I will briefly introduce the basic dimensions of the political context that determine representation in Serbia. Then, I will analyze the findings on political representation and discuss the results.

2. Theoretical Framework

Representation is a key topic in political sciences. It encompasses numerous issues, including the relationship between representatives and those represented, the basis of representatives' legitimacy, the role of representatives in the political system, and the question of representatives' accountability. These issues are raised in the context of elected and formal representatives from political parties and state institutions, as well as when discussing civil society and non-elected, informal, temporary, and/or occasional representatives.

In this text, I will analyze representation through two interesting and complementary approaches. On the one hand, I use the concept of so-called monitory democracy (John Keane), which emphasizes increased attention to the oversight function of modern democracies and the reduction of focus on formal representative institutions, elections, and electoral processes, and the opening of space for informal and non-elected representatives. On the other hand, I rely on Michael Saward, who views representation through a constructivist approach and emphasizes its fluidity, performativity, and adaptability through changes in the forms of representation depending on the audience. Both concepts highlight a shift from the classic "voter-elections-parliament" logic to an informal, extra-institutional, multi-dimensional understanding of representation.

Keane's idea of monitory democracy is an increasingly important form of democracy. His basic argument is the shift from representation to monitoring (Keane 2011). Here, we are talking about a fundamental change in primarily old democracies that marks the transition from the 20th to the 21st century. As Flinders also claims, it is a transition from representative to monitoring democracy, reflecting the shift of focus from ensuring goods by the elected government to scrutinizing, observing, and monitoring politicians and decision-making processes based on the idea that politicians cannot be trusted (Flinders 2011, p. 607).

Keane believes that the era of monitory democracy is the age of opinion polls, focus groups, deliberative publics, and audience satisfaction research (Keane 2011), allowing different opinions to be more clearly heard. The pluralism of voices indirectly affects the understanding of the role of representation – as opposed to the classical understanding based on the idea of one voice – one interest – one representative (where it is conceptually assumed that the voter has one dominant identity from which his party affiliation and/or voting behavior stem), we come to the idea of "one person, many interests, many voices, many representatives." Because of all this, Keane emphasizes the role of non-elected representatives (including celebrities who give additional visibility to specific political issues), thereby approaching influential theorists of representation who view representation in a significantly broader framework than formal representative institutions.

Saward's (2014) constructivist turn presupposes an active process of constructing social relations between the represented and representatives. Representation is understood as a process during which a relationship between groups and representatives is established; Saward emphasizes the performativity of this process and focuses on presenting representative claims and positioning representatives to secure the consent of the represented. Simultaneously, during this process, the creation of (group) identities of those claimed to be represented by the representative can occur. Thus, both "sides" of representation are understood in a fluid manner. This is also well illustrated through the concept of changing forms (the so-called *shape-shifting*). Namely, Saward points out the possibility for representatives to change their roles and

the way they address audiences - "a representative is a political actor who claims (or for whom it is claimed) to represent through strategic shaping of their personality and policies for specific target groups and audiences" (Saward 2014, p. 723). Saward emphasizes that not everyone has the same ability to adapt, nor do all representatives decide on such tactics. The change of approach is most often the result of the political situation, characteristics of the representative, and their assessment of the situation. Relying on representative claims also facilitates the consideration of non-elected representatives, among whom, in addition to civil society representatives, Saward includes experts and scholars who appear in public space and non-elected actors like monarchs or religious leaders.

3. Political Context in Serbia

The political context determining representation in Serbia at the local level has several key elements. On the one hand, institutional factors determine the competencies of local actors – local governments and institutions- and the mechanism of the election of local representatives. This legal framework (i.e., electoral system) has been relatively unchangeable in recent years, especially after the changes in the method of electing mayors in 2007, when the system shifted from direct to assembly election.

Another set of factors arises from the institutional design but is reinforced by political practice and political culture. Here, primarily, I refer to the structure of the most important actors – political parties and their centralized organization. Research clearly shows that parties in Serbia are organized around undisputed leaders, centralized and that local branches enjoy almost no degree of autonomy (Kovačević 2022), not even regarding issues that would be expected to have it – such as the choice of coalition partners or candidates for local elections. Because of all this, local campaigns are rarely conducted around local issues and often rely on national party leaders and their popularity (Lončar & Stojanović 2016).

Undoubtedly, the most influential element of the political context is the multi-year dominance of the Serbian Progressive Party in the party system of Serbia. This dominance, as evidenced by research (Spasojević & Stojiljković 2020), has led to the rule of the SNS in almost all cities and municipalities in Serbia, significantly marginalizing opposition and all non-SNS actors. Moreover, all alternative groups of citizens, movements, and initiatives, as well as actors from civil society in the narrow sense, are strongly inclined towards cooperation with the government and even co-optation by the SNS. The SNS, under the leadership of the immensely popular Aleksandar Vučić, organizes electoral campaigns that often overshadow local issues, local leaders, and local disputes.

Regrettably, the nature of the SNS government has given rise to significant authoritarian tendencies and a decline in the quality of democracy, particularly in the period after the presidential elections in 2017. These undemocratic tendencies are also observed at the local level. As a result, part of the opposition parties boycotted the local and parliamentary elections held in 2020, leading to an almost complete absence of opposition representatives in local parliaments (Bursać & Vučićević 2021). This has further strengthened extra-institutional forms of political struggle and thus the political significance of non-elected representatives, i.e., actors from the field of civil society. Despite these challenges, the local political scenes exhibit some dynamics and represent an intriguing research field.

4. Findings and Discussion

The empirical material for this study comes from in-depth semi-structured interviews with representatives of local governments (councilors and mayors), non-governmental organizations, and informal groups of citizens that have communication with local government representatives. Interviews were chosen as a method of gathering information because they allow us an in-depth understanding of the process of representation, the relationships that representatives enter into, and the dilemmas they face. The findings are divided into three groups –

first, I focus on the perceptions of councilors about their roles in local parliaments, then I move on to how civil society understands its representative position, and in the last part, I consider whether representation is understood as a predefined activity and to what extent we can observe changes in Serbia that Keane and Sayward talk about.

4.1. Limited Competencies – Communication Channels and Damage Control

The role of councilors in city assemblies is quite specific. On the one hand, they formally represent citizens in institutions; on the other hand, research shows that citizens understand that councilors "don't have much say," so their focus is most often on mayors and presidents of municipalities (Lončar, Spasojević & Vučićević 2022).

Another factor that determines the position of councilors has a value layer – namely, in public, it is often interpreted that local problems are not political or ideological but "communal", which essentially means that there is no dispute about whether certain measures should be implemented (i.e., there are no conflicting opinions), but only about the order or priority in which they are carried out. Bearing this in mind, it is not unexpected to find that elected representatives in local assemblies focus on oversight and monitoring the executive authority (under which are meant local self-government bodies and bodies at the republic level) and less on advocating for policies that arise from programs or specific new projects. One of the respondents even emphasizes that her group in the local parliament does not have special interests:

> "Interests have never guided us; actually, there aren't any significant interests of our political group, but rather we simply, first and foremost, when we talk about spending the citizens' budget money, then we all have the right to determine how we will spend it, to point out if it is not being spent for its intended purpose." (Councilor, Paraćin)

Similarly, a councilor from the ruling majority with extensive experience in politics thinks:

> "We as councilors can only influence corrections if certain shortcomings are identified in the proposed decisions, then we can improve them in terms of quality, to point out where legally something is not right. Essentially, the problem is that a councilor can only motivate city authorities to do their job better." (Councilor, Užice)

This focus is also visible when elected representatives talk about their connections with civil society, which is often reduced to a monitoring function. For ruling parties, civil society is used as a source of information about potential problems, while the opposition understands it as a resource for data and topics that can be raised in local assemblies.

> "We cooperated well with people from the initiative Save the Mountain Rivers of Kraljevo. They provided us with information since people are more informed than us and documentation so that we presented it at the assembly podium and organized a meeting with representatives of the executive authority." (Opposition councilor, Kraljevo)

In this case, elected representatives are a communication channel for citizens and civil society with formal institutions, and much less a policy actor who proposes solutions and initiatives. It is most often about problems that require a solution or reactions at a higher level through changing acts, reactions by ministries, or similar steps. On the other hand, when it comes to individual problems, citizens more often turn directly to authorities that can help them, as well as to mayors who have the most authority (Lončar, Spasojević & Vučićević 2022). When it comes to councilors from the ruling majority, they see themselves as a "constructive correction" to the authorities. In contrast, the opposition sees its criticism as an integral part of the political struggle. However,

it seems that in both cases, the focus is aimed at monitoring and over-sight due to a context that does not incentivize programmatic-based action. These tendencies are stronger in smaller and poorer municipali-ties where the significance of the national level as the primary source of finance is obvious.

4.2. Shifting Civil Society Towards Monitoring

Respondents assess the position of civil society organizations in relation to local self-government institutions as quite poor. On one hand, the authorities formalize their recognition of civil society's impor-tance, but there are also a number of communication limitations. So, it can be heard that civil society organizations are desirable partners, but such a position is very often questioned when it comes to specific issues and when civil society representatives challenge some decisions of city authorities.

> "The non-governmental and civil sectors have a very important role in promoting a local self-government. If you receive rep-resentatives of civil society, the non-governmental sector, their story and their voice are very important in assessing whether Vranje is a local self-government to be trusted, whether it has a correct relationship with citizens and with civil society, etc." (Representative of local authorities, Vranje).

> "The problem is politicization, and the problem is that through various initiatives or petitions, narrow party interests, and even personal interests within the party are promoted, which then represents a negation of everything that is or should be the principle." (Councilor of the city majority, Užice).

However, in recent years, the institutional framework provided formal space for cooperation between elected and non-elected representatives, as the participation of civil society representatives is required in an in-creasing number of situations – whether it is about legislative consul-

tations (public discussions and hearings) or the development of local action plans. The experiences of respondents vary – some organizations have positive experiences, some had the impression that they were included for the sake of formality, and some respondents complained about the inclusion of GONGOs, i.e., non-governmental organizations that are close to the ruling parties.

Because of such a relationship, many civil society organizations focus on monitoring and oversight the work of the authorities, assessing that this is a part of local politics where they can still have some influence:

> "...they are terrified of the media. We published a news story about one councilor from the Serbian Progressive Party who had been in the parliament for 400 days and had never spoken up. We simply shared this as information, and immediately, the media attacked him – the record-holder, the biggest silent one, and that resulted in him speaking up 14 times in the next 30 days. We found this fascinating." (Civil society organization, Niš).

> "As we became more visible, people started to contact us; now we are hitting hard, exposing scandals, and then the government cares. Information keeps coming, people write to us... now I have material for 2 years." (Civil society organization, Kragujevac).

Unlike elected representatives, i.e., opposition councilors, this position of civil society actors is usual and "natural" because they often engage in monitoring and controlling functions, work as watchdog organizations, or support whistleblowers from other organizations (Kleut & Spasojević 2015).

4.3. Shape-shifting and Unclear Role Boundaries

Particularly interesting findings from the research relate to the flexibility of representation. Flexibility and informality increase in smaller communities where "everyone knows everyone" and where formal relationships often give way to interpersonal communication and informal decision-making. Sometimes, it is a matter of choosing simpler methods, sometimes a deeply rooted political tradition, and sometimes a desire to increase the discretionary power of those in power.

Saward's concept of shape-shifting, which emerges from the understanding of representation as a fluid, variable, and living relationship between the represented and those representing them, has significant practical implications. It underscores how the boundaries between traditionally distinct entities such as the state, parties, and civil society can blur in smaller political communities, where interpersonal relationships often overshadow formal roles.

Part of the change in roles and shape-shifting is caused by a lack of media freedom and pluralism (Milojević & Krstić 2018). Because of this, some civil society organizations establish independent communication channels. Interesting examples include the organization *Forca* (Požega), which launched a popular podcast to promote topics of local importance, Subotica's portal *Slobodna Subotica*, or the Timok Initiative, which in the case of repeated local elections in 2017 performed the function of local media by organizing candidate presentations and pre-election debates.

Respondents emphasize that local portals have a significant impact because they address a community that is already partially familiar with the problems:

> "Through these local media images, you can break that general image that is presented in Serbia, and moreover, these things are not expensive, and citizens easily recognize what the truth is locally, especially because we all know some things and when someone speaks out about it, then it is clear to everyone that he was right." (Representative of civil society, Subotica)

However, for this study, it is much more important to illustrate more permanent or tactical changes in positions and roles by the same actors, so I will use the examples of two portals that emerged from the activism of elected representatives and civil society organizations - Niš Initiative and Slobodna Subotica, and the Priboj organization Primus.

The Niš Initiative originated from a group of councilors who won their mandate in 2016 as part of the list *Enough is Enough – Saša Radulović*, but later continued to function as a separate group in the local parliament. After the opposition declared a boycott of the local elections in 2020, their activism partially shifted into the field of civil society (through the founding of the organization) and the media field (launching a portal). The need for media space arose during the councilor's mandate because existing media were oriented towards old parties.

Another related reason for launching their portal was information and stories that councilors came across during their work, which were ignored by most of the traditional media. Most of the information was obtained by councilors during regular work at assembly sessions, but the real challenge was finding data in the pile of materials that councilors were swamped with before each session. This problem has long been known from other research on the parliament (Orlović 2012), which indicates the tactic of the ruling parties to outplay the opposition through a dynamic of work and the small resources available to them. Because of this, councilor and deputy work is largely reduced to research and data retrieval, which approaches investigative journalism or scientific research, thus confirming Keane's ideas about focusing on monitoring activities at the expense of representation.

Considering this multifunctionality and the intertwining of the political, institutional, civil society, and media fields, it is interesting to explore how actors understand their position. Srđan Nonić from the Niš Initiative sees this "shape-shifting" as a tactic of political action and does not consider it necessary to make a choice.

> "I am a citizen journalist; I deal with some interesting topics, and if I come across something, I will latch onto it like a pit bull. Why do you have to be only an activist, and why do you have to be only a journalist, or why do you have to deal only with politics... ...for example, when I think Đorđe Vukadinović is the most striking example to me, he is involved in politics and public opinion research and does a bit of journalism, why does he have to be one of 3 things?"

Of course, the question of how citizens perceive such a role change is very interesting. In the absence of answers from the citizens themselves, a helpful response is given by Srđan Nonić himself:

> "People who know me and follow me still think I am something in politics. Others see me as an activist, third as a journalist. They absolutely do not differentiate. They don't know what the Niš Initiative is even though I have a press conference there and register the media, they still think we are some political options or that we are some deputies somewhere. They see the brand and see what you do, what you represent."

Similarly, the roles are blurred in the case of Goran Reković, an activist from the Priboj organization Primus, who is also a journalist and editor of radio Polimlje and collaborates with several national media:

> "I am not sure they see you as a journalist rather than as an activist of the civil sector, but the groups with whom you have worked recognize you as both, although I think that is indeed a double-edged sword... You lose part of that where you are a representative, and they see you more as a public figure. I think that's good because, for years, I could more easily promote civil society even among those who are against a civil society simply they get a different perception because they are used to me as a journalist."

Playing different roles in the community opens up ethical and professional questions related to the relationship with the authorities in a system understood as insufficiently democratic. Opening space for civil society organizations and facilitating their communication with representatives of the authorities, on the one hand, strengthens their position, but on the other hand, contributes to creating an image that everything is fine and legitimizes the existing political order:

> "As much as I manipulate for easier communication with the president of the municipality, so much he manipulates me in showing that everything is fine... ...multifunctionality is implied, and your tolerance for the system, for certain systemic things it does, allows you to help someone and do something because if the system cuts you off, then you reduce your influence. Whether you are selling your little influence too cheaply with such a way of working... ...that is a huge dilemma for civil society" (Civil society, Priboj).

These dilemmas are not only characteristic of non-elected representatives; some elected representatives also decide not to "cooperate," which reduces their influence and maneuvering position. So, they opt for provocative actions or try to achieve results with humor.

> "Let them carry you out of the assembly if you can't do anything else, take the microphone and pull it out, kick up a fuss, curse and spit, tell them "you are the biggest thieves in the world", let them chuck me out, arrest me; if they take everything from you, every way to do your job, well then let them arrest me. That's my way of fighting" (Opposition councilor, Niš).

Some civil society actors increasingly introduce a performative dimension into representation through play, provocation, and using a mobile phone to record interactions and live broadcasts. This produces content that is viral and tries to compensate for the lack of media space while at the same time not requiring significant resources. Performativity is certainly becoming more prevalent in politics as an outcome of new and populist actors trying to attract public and media attention.

"For example, let's say the head of construction does not answer questions, refuses to meet me for a discussion, and I wait for her at half past three to leave work, turn on the camera, and ask her when do you plan to start responding to citizens' questions, do you think you are untouchable. And then I create an uncomfortable situation for you, and then you will meet me to sit down to talk and give me data because you know I will come to you again." (Representative of civil society, Niš).

Finally, as a very common form of responding to undemocratic trends and pressure from ruling parties on opposition parties, we also see the frequent practice of participating in local elections in the form of groups of citizens. However, these are candidates recognized in the community as members or former members of some opposition parties. This can also be understood as a type of shape-shifting where parties hide behind the masks of groups of citizens due to low ratings and political pressures, thereby further encouraging existing anti-party sentiments.

5. Concluding Remarks

The research findings show that representation at the local level is a specific process that must be further investigated through procedures designed for these purposes. Important research questions that remain for the future relate to citizens' perceptions of what their representatives do, how local media spheres function, and how much autonomy they have in relation to the public sphere in Serbia.

Although local institutions are subordinate to national ones and do not have a high degree of autonomy, the characteristics of local (political) communities increase pluralism and at least partially limit the dominance of ruling parties from the national level.

However, the specific features of local communities are not significant enough to change the dominant trends in society. Due to the dominance of the SNS and strict party discipline, the role of elected and non-elected representatives is increasingly shifting towards oversight and monitoring because the space for representing and advocating spe-

cific local policies and concrete solutions is exceptionally narrow. Political and civil organizations are oriented in the same way, which confirms this trend's influence on overall political behavior and dominant forms of political participation.

One of the most interesting findings of this research is the frequency of shapeshifting that was observed among representatives who easily cross the boundaries between public, party, and civil society engagement and enter the media sphere, mixing it with politics. The change of roles is most often explained by limited conditions and the desire to reduce inequalities in the political field. However, it is certain that some actors would decide to change forms out of principled tactical reasons and behave similarly in different conditions. The outcome of such tactics is that, in many cases, there are unclear boundaries between the roles and positions that actors occupy, which affects the perception of those they represent, opens up some moral and value dilemmas, and, in the long run, blurs relationships that are already under the influence of informal and extra-institutional factors.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings show that elements of monitory democracy can be observed in Serbia, as well as a substantial influx of pluralization of interests and representatives. From the quality of democracy's viewpoint, it is clear that these are forced tactics and that representative institutions do not fulfill their essential functions to a significant extent, i.e., that monitory democracy does not develop as a post-democratic phenomenon but as a byproduct of a crisis in an unconsolidated democratic system. However, creating a network of organizations and actors capable of monitoring and alerting the public is significant and represents democratic potential.

The findings also show the importance of the constructivist understanding of representation – it is increasingly fluid, performative, and plural, even though the space for advocacy is narrowed and the distance between representatives and those represented is still quite large. Moreover, it seems that the narrowed space in the institutional sphere encourages extra-institutional actors, new forms, and spaces through which representatives, both government and opposition, as well as civil society, try to solve the problems they face.

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