

**Looking back at Milošević's anti-bureaucratic revolution:
What do ordinary participants now think of their involvement?**

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Abstract

Most scholarship on Serbia's “anti-bureaucratic revolution” of the late 1980s has emphasized elite actors, while ignoring the motivations of ordinary participants. How do ordinary people describe their involvement? Moreover, given the anti-bureaucratic revolution's dark side – such as exclusionary nationalism and political authoritarianism – it is important to investigate if participants are willing to critically engage their personal political histories. What do they now say about their role in this episode? In order to provide answers to this question, six focus groups with a total of 34 participants were organized in the town of Novi Sad, the location of one of the best known rallies of the anti-bureaucratic revolution, the so-called “yogurt revolution.” Most people see their involvement in a rather negative way and regret taking part. However, two blind-spots also appear that lessen one's personal responsibility: conspiracy theories and notions of urban superiority. The former shifts blame onto secret forces and the latter onto non-urban outsiders. Overall, the long-run legacies of the anti-bureaucratic revolution are negative: they are associated with cynicism and apathy.

Keywords: Serbia, Yugoslavia, Milošević, anti-bureaucratic revolution

Introduction

Yugoslavia's “anti-bureaucratic revolution” was one of the key episodes in the chain of events that led to the violent break-up of the multi-ethnic socialist state. In the summer and fall of 1988, thousands of citizens went to the streets and took part in large populist rallies. They demanded solutions for tense Serb-Albanian relations in Kosovo and asked for the resignations of “bureaucrats”, i.e. corrupt and distant elites in Vojvodina, Kosovo and Montenegro. This turbulent period propelled Slobodan Milošević to political stardom, transforming him into a man of the people. In the aftermath of this wave of popular mobilization, Yugoslavia's disintegration began to accelerate. Kosovo, Slovenia and Croatia all began to chart a course towards independence. In Serbia, Milošević established the foundations for a new form of authoritarian regime. Violence and war were on the horizon.

Despite the episode's importance, our understanding of the anti-bureaucratic revolution is still incomplete. Most scholarship has simply noted that Milošević and his allies organized a series of supposedly spontaneous but actually orchestrated mass rallies. For example, Glaurdić says that “there was nothing spontaneous in their [the rallies'] organization and timing” (Glaurdić 2011: 29). Ramet echoes this statement when she writes that the protests were “ostensibly spontaneous” but really “carefully organized” (Ramet 2005: 56). Bennet again suggests that “there was nothing spontaneous about the meetings, which were all carefully stage-managed” (Bennett 1995: 98). Jović writes that “even when they [politicians] mobilized 'the people', they manipulated them successfully in every moment” (Jović 2014). Other contributions similarly speak of the protests as “stage-managed” (Little and Silber 1995: 58; Pavlowitch 2002: 194). The literature on the whole is quite elite-centric (Vladislavljević 2008: 2-5; Grdešić 2016: 775-777). There is very little focus on the actions and thoughts of ordinary Yugoslav citizens.

An emphasis on elite involvement is not so much incorrect as incomplete. When it comes to the motivations of ordinary people, we are left in the dark. Many scholars reacted to the “ancient hatreds” thesis (Kaplan 1994), i.e. the notion that hate is deeply instilled in the cultural DNA of various ethnic groups in Yugoslavia, by understandably emphasizing elite strategies instead. However, this has led to the emergence of another simplified narrative, one that can be called the “paradise lost/loathsome leaders” perspective (Cohen 2001: 465; Dragović-Soso 2008: 15). New research should therefore be sensitive to the opinions and actions of ordinary citizens. This is especially relevant with regard to the anti-bureaucratic revolution since it represents a case of mass contentious action, unimaginable without the voluntary participation of thousands of people.

It is therefore important to give voice to ordinary participants and provide a bottom-up corrective to the existing literature on Yugoslavia's final years. The main question posed by this article is about ordinary participants: what do they now think of their involvement in this often unsavory episode of mass mobilization? Given the dark-side of the anti-bureaucratic revolution – i.e. aspects such as exclusionary nationalism and political authoritarianism – it is important to ask ordinary people what they think about their participation today and how participation in this event shaped their attitudes toward politics. Given that a full three decades have passed since 1988, such a re-evaluation is both possible and timely.

There are several scholarly contributions that are important in pushing forward our understanding of Serbia's anti-bureaucratic revolution. The initial steps came from Veljko Vujačić (1996; 2003; 2015) whose work downplayed the role of elites in order to focus on long-run historical legacies. Another important contribution was Vladislavljević's study, which encompassed both the top-down and the bottom-up dimension of the revolution (Vladislavljević 2008). More recently, historians have begun to investigate the involvement of various working class communities (Musić 2016; Archer and Musić 2017). Other contributions have emphasized the importance of understanding the mass resonance of Milošević's discourse (Grdešić 2016). Building on this body of work, the present article is interested in the opinions of regular citizens, the ordinary “foot soldiers” of the anti-bureaucratic revolution. How do people assess their own personal involvement? How far can they go in critically examining their role in this often unsavory, but important episode? And finally, how has taking part in this episode shaped their view of politics in the present?

Other scholars have begun to address the involvement of ordinary people and the connected processes of coming to terms with the past, but mostly focusing on the terrain of the wars of the 1990s (Pavlaković 2010; Nettelfield 2010; Obradović-Wochnik 2013; Gordy 2014). A particularly promising way to approach this topic is through focus groups (Ćorkalo et al. 2004; Banjeglav 2013; Sokolić 2016). In a collective and interactive discussion, participants can be asked to explain what they thought then, as well as what they now think of their involvement. The focus group can provide a setting in which participants can begin to engage their own personal histories critically. Of course, it is the task of the researcher to create an atmosphere in which people can freely talk about such sensitive and controversial topics. In particular, research ethics make it imperative to avoid shaming participants in any way.

Viewed from a broader perspective, an analysis of the long-run impact of the anti-bureaucratic revolution can also inform our understanding of social movement outcomes. In particular, comparative research on the biographical consequences of participation in mass contentious action has suggested that participation has empowering effects on individuals (Giugni 1998; 2007). This primarily relates to movements that were formative for social movement scholarship, especially the US civil rights movement and subsequent movements of the 1960s and 1970s. It has been shown that those who

participated were more likely to take part in later episodes of activism (McAdam 1989; 1990). It is therefore worth considering if one of the main episodes of mass contention that took place in socialist Yugoslavia – and that was a key event in its later dissolution – had a similar effect on people's subsequent political histories. This is especially pertinent since the Serbian case is a case of populist mobilization (Jansen 2011; 2017; Hetland 2014), i.e. an instance in which elites are heavily involved every step of the way, even as they encourage the entry of the masses into political life. This type of collective action contrasts to what is usually studied by social movement scholars, but has been the norm historically, especially in peripheral and semi-peripheral countries (Mouzelis 1985).

The main themes that emerge from the focus groups can be summarized as follows. Many participants are surprisingly ready to critically engage their personal political histories. They see themselves as contributing to the political and economic disasters of the 1990s. They even talk freely about their own feelings of guilt and responsibility. Viewed in the long run, the legacies of the anti-bureaucratic revolution are negative. People have become apathetic and cynical. Following their involvement in the anti-bureaucratic revolution, most have decided to withdraw into their private lives. Even as most people openly engage their political histories, two blind-spots make it possible to shift blame onto others. The two blind-spots have to do with conspiracy theories and feelings of urban superiority. First, participants often portray the agency of foreign governments as crucial for the anti-bureaucratic revolution and the subsequent dissolution of Yugoslavia. And second, they often place responsibility for the event onto non-urban outsiders, those who have not internalized the norms of “cultured” city living. These two tendencies lessen their own responsibility and shift blame for the outcomes of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The anti-bureaucratic revolution and the “yogurt revolution”

Serbia's anti-bureaucratic revolution was a turbulent period of mass upheaval that began gathering momentum in 1988. Prior to that year, protests were rare and those who decided to undertake them, such as the group of Serbian nationalist activists from Kosovo, faced various forms of repression (Doderović 1990: 21; Lekić et al. 2009: 2). However, by the summer of 1988 protests were becoming a regular feature of everyday life, especially in Serbia. In early September, Milošević decided to publicly support the protests, declaring them an acceptable part of political life in socialist Yugoslavia

(Vladisavljević 2008: 150; Jović 2009: 310). Following this announcement, protest activity expanded and a series of rallies took place, predominantly in the northern Serbian province of Vojvodina but throughout central Serbia as well. The culmination of these rallies was the so-called “yogurt revolution”, a large two-day rally that took place in early October in Novi Sad, the capital of Vojvodina. Roughly 100,000 people took part in the protest.

On October 5th 1988, streams of people from Novi Sad and surrounding Vojvodina towns gathered in front of the provincial committee building. At the time, the committee was holding a session inside the building, which created a very dramatic setting. The demands of the protesters had escalated in comparison with earlier protests. Protesters now demanded that the Vojvodina leadership collectively resign. They expressed support for certain local maverick politicians, notably Mihalj Kertes, who led a group of workers from the near-by town of Bačka Palanka (*Borba*, October 5, 1988, 3). By the second day of the protests, the atmosphere outside the building became increasingly volatile. Many protesters called for Milošević to address them. Shouts such as “Slobo, help us” were common (Lekić et al 2009: 51). Instead of coming personally, Milošević sent one of his right-hand men, who read a speech based on the conclusions of the Serbian party and was greeted with enthusiasm by the crowd (*Borba*, October 6, 1988, 3).

Meanwhile, the Vojvodina committee was inside, discussing what course of action to take. Outside the building, the pushing and shoving between the crowd and rows of policemen grew more dramatic (Lekić et al. 2009: 52). Local authorities tried to calm the crowd down by giving them sandwiches and carton packages of yogurt. Some in the crowd proceeded to throw yogurt at the committee building, breaking several windows in the process and giving the protest the name “yogurt revolution.” In a last ditch effort the Vojvodina leadership contacted Milošević, but he refused to intervene on their behalf (Lekić et al. 2009: 28). Fearing violence, the Vojvodina politicians decided to resign their posts. After the announcement was made, the crowd outside the building slowly began to disperse.

This event was one of the largest and most dramatic protests of the entire anti-bureaucratic revolution. It ended with a victory of Milošević's faction. After ousting the Vojvodina politicians, Milošević began a purge throughout the province, encompassing the state, the party and large companies (Vladisavljević 2008: 28). The faction that had ruled over Vojvodina up to the “yogurt revolution” was labeled

“autonomaši” (autonomists), a derogatory term for those who support Vojvodina's autonomy from central Serbia. By early 1989, they were defeated constitutionally as well, since Milošević managed to amend the constitution in a way that weakened the autonomy of Vojvodina. Until this very day, the “yogurt revolution” is one of the best known events of the “anti-bureaucratic revolution.” Within Vojvodina, the two terms are largely interchangeable.

What is the relevance of Serbia's anti-bureaucratic revolution, view from a broader vantage point? In terms of Yugoslavia's subsequent dissolution, the wave of protest that took place in 1988 was crucial. It amplified the already strong centrifugal tendencies that characterized the multi-ethnic federation. For other republics, notably Slovenia and Croatia, the most pertinent aspect of the anti-bureaucratic revolution lay in the emergence of a newly energized Serbian nationalism. The rise of Milošević as a popular and populist strongman also fed the desire to locate similar leading personalities in other republics. Additionally, the anti-bureaucratic revolution deeply shaped the subsequent path of Serbia. It provided crucial legitimation for a new form of authoritarian politics that dominated Serbia throughout the 1990s. The protests of the late 1980s never put into question the socialist regime and, indeed, were a plea for more socialism, not less (see also Musić 2016). Therefore, Serbia faced difficulties extricating itself from socialism even as the entire East European region embarked on a transition to competitive elections and private property (Vujačić 2004). This made the whole transitional period more complex and protracted in Serbia.

The popularity of socialism should be underlined: unlike other East European countries where socialist regimes were established with the help of Soviet tanks, Yugoslav socialism had deep domestic roots in the partisan-led resistance to fascism. So, while the revolutions of 1989 in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary were revolutions against socialist rule, the events in Yugoslavia were markedly different (see also Grdešić 2016: 799). The anti-bureaucratic protests of 1988 targeted parts of the socialist establishment, while strengthening others. The events also played out with assistance from the regime: party-state institutions were crucial in boosting participation and frequently worked with local-level activists and enthusiasts (Vladisavljević 2008: ch. 4). This makes the anti-bureaucratic revolution rather different from the East European revolutions where all of society confronted the state (Ekiert 1996). Instead, the Serbian case is an instance of mobilization in a populist fashion under the auspices of a semi-authoritarian regime (see also Vladisavljević, this volume). With the rise of both hybrid

authoritarian regimes and the rise of populism globally, the anti-bureaucratic revolution may provide insights into other cases of mobilization not only under state socialism, but under contemporary authoritarian regimes as well.

Focus groups

Focus groups provide an inductive way to research the opinions of ordinary people. The collective and interactive character of focus groups is a unique strength of the method (Morgan and Krueger 1993). Focus groups make it possible to investigate group meanings and collective norms, including the uncertainties and ambiguities that underline such group assessments (Bloor et al. 2001: 4). This allows the researcher to ask questions that are socially and political controversial and receive different, at times opposing, answers. The interactive aspect of focus groups sets them apart from one-on-one interviews since focus groups make it possible for participants to develop ideas based on what their peers say. In particular, people often find it easier to formulate an opinion or attitude if they can formulate it *against* another opinion or attitude (Puchta and Potter 2004: 21).

Such interaction between members of a focus group cannot be fully engineered. Moreover, once it occurs, it cannot be completely controlled either. Often, the researcher feels like they are holding a tiger by the tail (Bloor et al. 2001: 48). The goal is to try to create the conditions under which such interaction can unfold, while steering it away from potentially destructive or harmful directions. Furthermore, the interactive character of the focus group may be able to generate more honest answers, especially if participants react to each other in a spontaneous manner (Langord and McDonagh 2003: 20). And finally, focus groups make it possible for people to use the language they use in their everyday lives. The interaction that takes place in a focus group is like that of any other social setting, which means that most people have spent much of lives perfecting just such a skill-set (Puchta and Potter 2004: 19; Hennink 2007: 7).

The main drawbacks of focus groups concern their lack of replicability and representativeness (Stewart and Shamdasani 2015: 47-49). No group could ever hold the same discussion twice, even if they tried. Therefore, replication is a goal that focus groups can never fully reach. With regard to representativeness, the relatively small number of people that usually take part in focus group research

makes it impossible to treat the groups as representative of a wider population. Although efforts should be taken to include all relevant sub-groups, a focus group is nevertheless not a survey. Rather, the focus group should be used as a tool that can deepen our understanding of a phenomenon, in particular by highlighting the various views that surround a controversial topic, and by giving the people an opportunity to present their opinions in their own words. They give research a bottom-up element of popular participation, especially useful in researching joint norms and collective assessments.

A single populist rally was selected as the main locus of research: the “yogurt revolution” that took place in early October of 1988 in Novi Sad, the capital of Vojvodina. Since focus group discussion can go in multiple directions, focusing on a single event provides a way to keep at least certain aspects of the discussion constant. In addition, the “yogurt revolution” is one of the best known populist rallies of the entire anti-bureaucratic revolution. This means that it is still remembered as an important event in the recent political history of Serbia in general and Vojvodina and particular. There are few events that stand out in quite the same way, for the entire course of the anti-bureaucratic revolution.

A total of six focus groups were conducted in the town of Novi Sad, with a combined 34 participants. There is no strict rule about the proper number of focus groups, but for most social science purposes, saturation occurs with four to six groups (Morgan 1996: 144). There is also no firm rule with regard to group size since focus groups can have anywhere from four to twelve participants. In the social sciences, smaller group size is usually preferable (Bloor et al. 2001: 27). Smaller groups provide a less intimidating setting for participants. In addition, smaller groups reduce the chances of a particularly dominant individual taking over the debate. A total of 34 people took part in six groups. Thus, the average group had about six members. The smallest had four and the largest seven.

In order to reach out to potential participants, an advertisement was placed in the local newspaper *Dnevnik*, as well as a local newspaper which publishes small personal and business advertisements. Ads were printed and placed in busy locations, such as post offices. After a television journalist noticed the newspaper advertisement, I was given a chance to appear on local television. Participants were also asked to inquire with their friends and acquaintances. All in all, the most effective tool for outreach was the advertisement in *Dnevnik*. However, the fact that it reached a large number of people had certain downsides as well. In particular, it caught the eye of a small right-wing party, whose leaders made a

public appeal that the research be stopped. Luckily, this incident had little long-term impact, though a few participants decided to withdraw. Nevertheless, it is a reminder that the anti-bureaucratic revolution is still politically controversial in Serbia and that researchers should be cautious.

Although focus groups are not representative of a wider population, efforts were undertaken to include a mixture of men and women, old and young, blue collar and white collar workers. The largest difficulty was reaching out to women. Out of the 34 participants, only 5 were women. It is quite possible that this gender imbalance is reflective of the anti-bureaucratic revolution itself. Indeed, photographs and video footage from the time suggest that crowds were overwhelmingly male. Therefore, the gender imbalance in the focus groups may reflect the broader population of people at rallies. During focus groups, women and men did not present divergent opinions, which suggests that, in all likelihood, nothing dramatically different would have surfaced had more women taken part.

“I was literally infected”: Participants look back

How do participants view their participation? Can they see that they contributed, at least in some small measure, to the disastrous outcomes of the 1990s? Such questions raise the issue of personal responsibility and thus pose ethical issues for the researcher. In particular, these concerns need to be raised without making the participants feel shame in any way. However, participants in the focus groups would bring up the issue themselves, often without any prodding. They openly talked about the negative aspects of the anti-bureaucratic revolution and even their own feelings of guilt for having taken part. Indeed, in most focus groups, they had to be explicitly asked if they also see any positive aspects to the episode.

Several quotes can show how participants approach the topic of individual responsibility: “I now bitterly regret that I took part. I think I bear part of the guilt as a participant.” Similarly: “I was ashamed that I took part in something so dishonorable.” Or: “I didn’t go [to other protests]. I was afraid I would make another mistake [laughter]. Because I feel guilty.” Many associate the anti-bureaucratic revolution with the beginning of a protracted period of economic crisis that has severely impacted their livelihoods. As they often emphasize, their current situation is one of economic hardship, while they associate the socialist past with a sense of economic security. But they are also aware that the yogurt

revolution was an event in which their political involvement was instrumentalized by Milošević, i.e. that they were used as a chip in intra-elite conflicts. As one person says: “In the end it turned out to be a conflict within the party.” For many, it was difficult to see any positive aspects to the yogurt revolution: “I am trying here, to see something nice, positive, I am trying here.” But, most participants had a hard time thinking of anything.

On the whole, participants would readily admit that they were swayed by nationalist rhetoric. As one person remembers: “I was literally infected, I would call it an infection of some sort... we went to Kosovo Polje, took pictures there with a *kokarda*, I was glad to be in that sort of company.” They remember wearing a *kokarda*, a metal emblem traditionally worn on caps by Serbian soldiers, including the World War II *Četnik* movement. This person kept the *kokarda* as a “reminder of my stupidity.” Another person similarly sees their youthful engagement with nationalism as some sort of infection: “I have to admit that I was pretty enthusiastic about nationalism, intoxicated with nationalism.” Therefore, many participants are willing to admit to taking part in the nationalist euphoria of the time. This enthusiasm also extends to the way they viewed Slobodan Milošević:

“- He said what he said a few times and the people put him next to [religious] icons, which is a sin, god forbid.

- Although he was a communist.

- Yes [laughter].

- Terrible sin. At weddings you could not avoid nationalist songs, on religious holidays [slave], at celebrations. And Slobo's picture had to be as large as possible.

- That's right.

- He captivated everybody with his charisma, he had style [šlif], he had class [šmek].”

Even if they now view Milošević in a different light, participants readily attest to his allure in the late 1980s. Milošević was appealing since he instilled a sense of hope and pride. This included pride in their Serbian identities. As several respondents said, he was the first politician that made it possible for Serbs “to say that they were Serbs.” However, this awakening of national sentiment was also attached to manipulation. As the following person says: “National consciousness was awoken, but I think there was a lot of manipulation after that. We were manipulated, like a million times after that.” As some

admit, this type of manipulation depended on a degree of political naivety. For example, one person noted how they idolized Mihalj Kertes, a local ally of Milošević: “I was 46 years old and I acted like I was 15 or 10, listening to this Kertes, like I see god in him. I had a university education and I listen to him and follow him like sheep. Charge! We should charge on the bunker, if necessary! Like it was forty-something [i.e. World War II], bring them down!” This person admits to behaving as something less than a political adult.

Political naivety and immaturity, partly fostered by the apolitical way of life that most experienced prior to the anti-bureaucratic revolution, was also combined with a relentless media campaign. One person compared it to Nazi Germany: “It was all propaganda, Goebbels introduced the standards in the thirties. And it was implemented successfully, here, in 1988.” In other words, it is not unusual that so many people were persuaded: “Every day, you say that this juice [on the table] is not really yellow, maybe it's a little orange, or actually its orange and red, and for one month, several months, this goes on.” The “infection” of which people spoke was partly due to their own weak defenses – since most were politically inexperienced – and partly due to the barrage of Milošević's allies in the media. Many participants see that they acquiesced to a nationalist agenda and regret this.

Even those that supported Milošević at the time now see themselves as manipulated. The following exchange, rather heated in tone, testifies to this:

“- Until half past 1... When did they resign? We sat there until 3, half past 3, and then let's go home and back to work.

- You drank, you drank. I have to stop you.

- I never had a drink my whole life.

- It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter. Why didn't Serbs from here and Serbs from Serbia gather in all those buses and go there [to Kosovo] and help those Serbs. Why were they helping them from Novi Sad?

- Somebody had to lead them there.

- How do you not see that you were manipulated?

- Partly, yes.

- Well why didn't we get into buses and go down there... I literally feel sick when I hear such things.”

So, even persons with diverging views on the anti-bureaucratic revolution agree that the nationalists manipulated the sentiments of ordinary people. Yet, though explicit nationalism is now rejected, some nationalist sentiments remain. In particular, Albanians are still viewed with the same skeptical eye as in the 1980s. One person expresses this sentiment in the following way: “I am glad that I haven't changed my mind from those times till today in one way... I have a son, my daughter-in-law is Slovak, so there's no nationalism to speak of. Be a human being, it doesn't matter. Actually, if he had married a Hungarian girl, he would have more fun at night [in bed]. But, I never liked *Šiptars*, never... just keep them as far away as possible.” As this person says, a diversity of ethnic groups is welcome, but the line is drawn with Albanians, for whom the derogatory expression *Šiptar* is used. Nationalism is not fully exorcised.

“I will never again go into that kind of mass”: Long-run legacies

What is the long-run impact of participation in the anti-bureaucratic revolution? How has this event shaped attitudes towards politics in general? For many, the late 1980s were a time of political awakening. From a state of disinterest, they were suddenly politicized. Politics entered their lives in an unprecedented way. As one participant noted: “Absolutely, it [politics] entered our lives then and has not left since.” Another person echoed this sentiment: “Politics entered all pores, families, individuals, society.” This was an abrupt change. Prior to the late 1980s, politics was not of much interest: “Look, if somebody asked you in 1985 who the president of some [party] committee was, I guarantee that nobody in Belgrade would know. We were depoliticized to such a degree and later so polarized, like you say.” During the final years of socialist Yugoslavia people started paying a lot more attention to politics.

But since then, respondents have become much more passive and apathetic. Of course, this is not solely the fault of the anti-bureaucratic revolution, since most people in Serbia have since experienced a variety of political and economic shocks. But the anti-bureaucratic revolution was their real first lesson in mass politics. In general, people have concluded that politics is a dirty business and that it is best to stay away. Therefore, many have become not only passive but also cynical: “We thought we could change something. We changed only the names [of those in power].” There is very little trust in

politicians: “There is nobody honest in politics, they are all crooks.” This contrasts strongly to the late 1980s when they invested a lot of hope in politics, including Milošević personally.

Their attitude has swung from one extreme to the other. As one person said: “I would most like it if somebody governed whom I didn't know, but I had the means to live. To pay what I have to and do what I have to. And so long. What do I care if you are in power or you are?” This particular person is nostalgic about the pre-political state that characterized the socialist period. Given the hardships of the last two or more decades, it is not unusual that people crave economic security. Another person summed it up by saying that “you should bow your head like a horse if you want to live like a man.” Many would be willing to exchange the formal political freedoms they now enjoy for a dose of economic security. Indeed, economic nostalgia is very strong. Most see their current economic conditions as much worse than the late 1980s. This deeply influences their attitude towards politics. Overall, their experience with the anti-bureaucratic revolution and the entire transition period has taught them that not much can be changed through politics. The following person summed it up as follows:

“It was a complete fraud. I felt like Wile E. Coyote... I will never again go [to another protest]. I think about myself, I have to earn some money, eat something, drink something. Eat a pizza, a piece of meat, earn something, spend it all quickly, so that I don't regret anything... I live from day to day. I vote, but I don't discuss politics. In socialism, I now think that the system was nobler than what we have today, which is idiotic and perverse. That one [socialism] was only idiotic. And I will never again go into that kind of crowd.”

For many, the central fear is that they would once again be manipulated: “I didn't go [to other protests]. There were opportunities, far from it. I did not want to be manipulated.” Or similarly: “I will never go anywhere again [i.e. to other protests]. I will not allow somebody to take a million Euros while I think to myself that I matter. I am blind, pathetic, small, I can't change anything.” Far from instilling a sense of political efficacy, the anti-bureaucratic revolution seems to contribute to the opposite, a sense of political weakness.

When they contrast the socialist to the post-socialist period, many respondents remark that the socialist

period had certain advantages in the political sphere as well. Despite the fact that the socialist regime is now regarded as authoritarian and the current system as democratic, many participants noted that they felt more confident as citizens then, compared to now. They discuss this change in terms of the “depression” that now prevails. For example, a discussion of this aspect took place when one person recalled a recent television commercial in which a woman asks to borrow detergent from her neighbor:

“- I saw a commercial the other day, for some detergent. And I think to myself, when was the last time that one of you asked for something [from your neighbors], like, give me some sugar, or coffee?

- She comes in with the sour face! [laughter]

- That was completely normal, you don't have coffee, you go the neighborhood.

- My mom sent me...

- Nowadays, you don't say hello to your neighbor.

- That collective depression was not there. You don't have any, doesn't matter, you'll give it back, or you won't. Because in a week she will take five from you, and you took three, and so it goes in circles.”

The following exchange makes a similar point:

“- The people are afraid.

- Today?

- Today.

- And you think it wasn't like that before?

- We weren't afraid.

- The people have had it up to here. There is a terrible depression. General, collective.

- You think there was no depression back then?

- There was less, much less.”

These two sequences compare life under socialism and capitalism. Something has been lost, something that was important for the daily lives of ordinary people. This sense of solidarity and trust that participants talk about made it possible to create a society that did not suffer from “collective depression”, as the participants call the contemporary malaise. Naturally, the anti-bureaucratic revolution is not the sole culprit for this outcome. However, for many in Serbia this was the first

episode of political activism that they were involved with. Instead of empowering them, it convinced them that they can only be pawns in somebody else's game.

“We all know how it is done”: Conspiracy theories

Participants are, generally speaking, quite ready to engage their personal political histories critically. Yet, there are also certain blind-spots in the way they see the “yogurt revolution” and the broader processes of Yugoslav dissolution. The first blind-spot takes the shape of conspiracy theories, i.e. a tendency to see the world as driven by secret forces, foreign regimes in particular. The second blind-spot takes the shape of urban superiority, i.e. a tendency of participants to see themselves as culturally superior to others who come from rural backgrounds. Both of these blind-spots deflect responsibility and shift it onto others, either foreign agents or (supposedly) backward citizens.

With regard to conspiracy theories, participants often put the blame on foreign agents. As one person said: “We all know how it is done, how foreign [secret] services do it.” Or similarly: “Global know-it-alls, Americans, they stirred this up.” The implication is that small countries like Yugoslavia do not really control their political fates. Furthermore, ordinary people living in such countries have even less of an influence: “You see, great powers, they run the show, we can talk all we want.” Or similarly: “Do I think that these processes were served to us from outside? I think they were.” When politics is approached this way, the responsibility of any individual citizen diminishes significantly. Whatever such a citizen aimed to accomplish, his actions would not amount to much compared to the influence of foreign powers.

Conspiracy theories also connect Milošević to foreign plotting. Although he presented himself as a man of the people, i.e. as someone who implements the popular will, Milošević may have himself been but a pawn in a larger game. As one person said: “He was a bad imitation of Tito, a man who was set up to do what needed to be done.” The key piece of evidence that participants bring up is the fact that Milošević spent some time in the early 1980s in New York. As the following person says:

“He came from America. He was instructed, a banker. He had good offers, American offers, to not come back to Serbia as well as to come back to Serbia. But he de facto played a quasi-statesman role,

he destroyed the old Yugoslavia, a state with 25 million people. And this was the goal from the foundation of NATO onwards. This state, this Balkan peninsula, is a very important story, it could not be allowed to survive in that form.”

As this person says, Milošević was “instructed” by foreigners and he agreed to play his role in the destruction of socialist Yugoslavia, a thorn in the side of NATO and the West. Yugoslavia is given great geopolitical importance. It had to be destroyed. Milošević's time in New York was brought up on multiple occasions:

“- The foreign factor, that's right. The foreign factor was very important. You know where Sloba went before he came back?

- America.

- That's right, that's right. And they prepared Sloba to destroy Yugoslavia.”

Another person notes similarly that “I think this was done on purpose. They were looking for new places for wars. It was convenient to throw among these nations, into this multinational state, some stories. It was no accident. That's my opinion. It was done this way because Yugoslavia was not convenient for the West.” Milošević takes his place in this foreign play. One person recalls party meetings where they discussed American foreign policy, the ideas of Zbigniew Brzezinski and the so-called “special war against Yugoslavia.” The communist party was always a setting prone to conspiracy theorizing, since the party was always on the lookout for enemies, either internal or external. Yet, it is a testament to the lasting power of conspiracy theories that they still shape the opinion of ordinary people. At times, however, some participants would object when others brought up conspiracies. For example:

“- Look, the man lived in America all those years. I can even imagine that he was implementing certain...

- He was given orders.

- Now you are talking about conspiracy theories.

- But look, the man spoke English, he drank coffee with Rockefeller every morning.”

It's interesting to note that one person here objects to the interpretation as conspiracy theorizing. In another focus group, another person also rejected conspiracy theorizing by saying that he is “too small to know who destroyed Yugoslavia and why.” Therefore, not all participants accept conspiracy theories. But for many, conspiracies are rather seductive. They extend the promise of a hidden logic that makes sense of a rather turbulent political period. And perhaps just as importantly, they lighten the responsibility of any single Yugoslav citizen. When faced with the long arm of American intelligence agencies, how could any one Yugoslav citizen have an impact? After all, did Milošević not drink coffee with the Rockefellers each morning?

The fear of (once again) being manipulated by politicians also connects to conspiracy theories. Some participants spoke of the behind-the-scenes organizing as something that necessarily taints large protests: “I think that each large protest is orchestrated by some [secret] service. The people never carry that out by themselves. It's impossible to gather so many people without orchestration.” Their experience with the yogurt revolution, when shady actors such as the secret police played an organizing role, makes them skeptical of all large protests. Subsequent protests were therefore often compared to the yogurt revolution: “Everybody who spoke in front of Spens [the sports arena in Novi Sad, during the yogurt revolution] advanced, got rich. In 1993 I worked for six or seven German marks... Next time, when they were bringing Sloba down [in the late 1990s], it was also orchestrated.” The political initiation that most people received in the late 1980s made them see politics in terms of orchestration, cynical manipulation and conspiracy.

“It was imported from outside”: Urban superiority

The second blind-spot in assessing their personal political histories can be referred to as urban superiority. This is a tendency to view people as segmented into urban and non-urban, the former being politically and culturally more advanced than the latter. In the particular setting of Novi Sad, this division is framed in terms of two groups whose names are not fully translatable: *starosedioci* (those who can trace their presence in Novi Sad several generations into the past) and *dodoši* (those who have arrived more recently). Only the former are pure residents of Novi Sad. They are seen as polite, quiet, tolerant, calm, civil and disinclined to stir up trouble. Indeed, sometimes they are seen as too passive, e.g. if the debate turns to the stereotype of the sleepy *lala* (resident of Vojvodina). But even if their

popular representation is not always positive, it is nevertheless always bound up with a certain respect for others and a disinterest in trouble-making. The other group – *dođoši* – are people who have not yet internalized the norms of cultured city living.

This divide is ever-present in Novi Sad and Vojvodina. Its relevance for the “yogurt revolution” is that participants of focus groups would often shift the responsibility for its less savory aspects onto those whom they see as different. The phrase commonly used to express this difference is “mentality” (*mentalitet*), understood as a set of cultural norms that guide personal behavior. As one person summed it up: “People from Novi Sad don't have that mentality, the mentality is completely different, it's not so revolutionary, we are quieter, calmer.” This was something that Milošević and his allies supposedly preyed on:

“- This is serious drunkenness. And the hangover has lasted very long. This has absolutely nothing to do with Novi Sad. It was imported from outside.

- That's right. That's right.

- Why didn't [the revolution] happen in Niš, Kraljevo, Kruševac, which are much closer to [Kosovo]? It happened here because they knew that in Novi Sad, they knew the mentality of people here. Well-meaning, sociable and hospitable.”

This person seems to be unaware that large protests did actually take place in the towns they mention in the summer and autumn of 1988. Yet, the relevant thing to note here is that they see the people of Novi Sad as incapable of defending themselves: they are too quiet and calm to resist the arrival of unruly outsiders. Another person similarly noted: “When we look at October 5th and 6th, there was very little town-folk, very little people from Novi Sad, very little people from near-by towns... And those who came, did so out of curiosity, what is happening here, what are they going to do to us? My people from Kać [town near Novi Sad], what business would they have bringing down the government, it didn't cross their minds.”

This cleavage is something that radiates outwards: the further that one goes, the sharper the difference becomes. Kosovo Serbs are the most extreme case. As one person put it: “My relationship towards Serbs from Kosovo was negative. For me, they were a tribal people, the southern regions. I never went

to [central] Serbia before I was twenty years old.” This person saw the Kosovo Serbs as backward, a “tribal” people.

Participants would usually reject the possibility that ethnic tensions were present in Novi Sad. Typically, residents of Novi Sad like to see themselves as politically tolerant and open towards a multi-ethnic society. Vojvodina is ethnically mixed. Alongside a Serbian majority, there are sizable shares of Hungarians, Slovaks, Croats and others. This is something that people in Vojvodina emphasize with pride. The nationalist aspects of the “yogurt revolution” clash with this stylized representation of benevolent and tolerant multi-culturalism. The following exchange shows how many people see the matter:

“- There is hate, personal, but not national.

- I agree with you there.

- There never was, there never will be. Simply, people from Vojvodina don't have the...

- The gene.

- Yes, for those things, for hate.”

Although this attitude is widespread, it is not universally accepted. For example, some participants reject it: “This person from Novi Sad who says they are authentic, that is a lie.” Or similarly: “Can a person live in one place for a hundred years and still be a *dođoš*, how long will he be a *dođoš*?” Interestingly, however, that even those who reject the label continue to draw lines between themselves and those who arrived in Novi Sad after them. As one such person said: “When I came to Novi Sad, I adapted to it, not the other way around. And those who came since 1995, who were forced to [by wars], they irritated people here, they wanted the setting to adapt to them, which is wrong.” In other words, divisions continue to be drawn even among those who were not born in Novi Sad. Groups are always trying to distinguish themselves as more in touch with the what is supposedly genuine about Vojvodina.

Overall, since the downstream ramifications of the anti-bureaucratic revolution are seen as negative, the culturally ubiquitous and readily available division between urban insiders and non-urban outsiders can help to do some of the “work” of blame avoidance: The revolution was something that they did to us, even as we suffer the consequences.

Discussion

In summary, many participants see their involvement in the anti-bureaucratic revolution in rather negative light. They readily bring up their own responsibility, at times even guilt. They see that taking part in Milošević's anti-bureaucratic revolution means that they contributed at least somewhat to the disastrous outcomes of the 1990s. Yet, they only wish to go so far in coming to terms with the past. In particular, there are two tactics that participants regularly invoke in order to shield themselves from responsibility. These blind-spots can be seen as unconscious biases that plague even good people, i.e. even those who try to act “good” and align their good intentions with good behavior (Banaji and Greenwald 2016: xv). People say that they are willing to take a hard look at their own political past, but are not fully consistent in actually doing so.

The first way in which participants lighten the burden of their own involvement is to invoke conspiracy theories. Allegedly, the most important decisions of the final years of socialist Yugoslavia were never made within the country. Conspiracy theories offer a tactic of denial, a way to escape a full reckoning with the past (see also Obradović-Wochnik 2013). Conspiracy theories were a well-established part of life under socialism as well as the immediate post-socialist period (Blanuša 2011; Živković 2012: 225-250; Grdešić 2016: 789-791). They continue to exist and shape the worldviews of ordinary people, three decades since the anti-bureaucratic revolution. During the socialist period, conspiracy theories combined with official party paranoia. In the immediate transitional period, conspiracy theories offered a way to understand the murky realities of regime change. The fact that conspiracy theories have survived to this day suggests that they are well-adapted to many surroundings.

The second tactic is the tendency to invoke divisions between cultured urban residents and uncivilized outsiders. The blame for the unsavory aspects of the anti-bureaucratic revolution is shifted onto this group: wild outsiders were brought in to cause mayhem. The urban (and urbane) residents were unable to stop them because they were simply too polite. This division between urban and rural is common in the post-Yugoslav space (Jansen 2005a; 2005b; Spasić 2006). Such stereotypes about urban superiority may indeed describe certain aspects of actual behavior, whether because the initial models – drawn up by early twentieth century social scientists such as Jovan Cvijić and Dinko Tomašić – were based on a

kernel of fact or because people have subsequently lived up to the roles expected of them (Živković 1997). More certain, however, is the fact that these divisions are frequently employed as a way to police symbolic divisions by the people themselves.

Another aspect that appeared frequently is nostalgia. Researchers of the post-Yugoslav space have encountered this time and again: the socialist past is seen by respondents as a kind of lost paradise (Petrović 2010; Kojanić 2015; Archer 2018). This means that researchers must peel back several layers while taking care not to impose any particular view on respondents. When probed a little, respondents do recall the economic hardships of the 1980s. Yet, their current economic conditions are so precarious that the economic security of the socialist period dwarfs any nuisance they may have experienced at the time.

The negative appraisal of the anti-bureaucratic revolution by so many respondents, even those who were enthusiastic about it at the time, is connected to this shift in their economic circumstances. The revolutionary events of the late 1980s are seen as a watershed moment that divides their lives into two periods: the socialist period which was characterized by economic security and the subsequent period which is marked by its absence. This means that most participants are able to make a direct link from the anti-bureaucratic revolution to their fall in living standards.

This brings up a limitation of the current study. It is quite possible that where this link cannot be made, for Serbs in Kosovo for example, the anti-bureaucratic revolution would not be viewed in quite the same way, nor would respondents see much relevance in critically evaluating their participation. However, for the participants of these six focus groups, the long-run legacy of the anti-bureaucratic revolution is profoundly negative. It contributed decisively to the current material deprivations but also tainted politics for a long time. Indeed, the particular generation of participants who are now reaching old age – and who at the time were in their prime – appears to be more-or-less lost to all political involvement beyond voting.

These two factors – the economic and the political – are intertwined. The economic security of the socialist period made it possible for people to feel emboldened politically. The current system pacifies them politically by taking away economic security. Of course, it would serve no purpose to admonish

participants for being so ready to give up their formal political freedoms in exchange for a dose of economic security. Rather, it may be more fruitful to see economic security as a prerequisite for political engagement.

Seen from a broader vantage point, the detrimental consequences of the anti-bureaucratic revolution also raise questions about the downstream consequences of social movement participation, especially with regard to the personal biographies of participants. While most social movement scholarship suggests that participation in collective action makes one more likely to participate in the future, i.e. that it has empowering effects (e.g. McAdam 1989; 1990; Giugni 1998; 2007), the case under consideration suggests the opposite. Instead of providing people with a sense of political efficacy, the anti-bureaucratic revolution has helped turn them into jaded and cynical observers of politics. This raises the larger issue of the long-run impact of populist mobilization (Mouzelis 1985; Jansen 2011; 2017; Hetland 2014) and how it may differ from other, more conventional forms of collective action. As suggested in this article – and in contrast to conventional contentious action – the impact of populist mobilization on the subsequent political biographies of participants seems to be detrimental.

As mentioned, the anti-bureaucratic revolution is marked by certain characteristics which set it apart from typical social movement phenomena, as well as the other East European revolutions of 1989. It took place in a semi-authoritarian setting in which Machiavellian elites used existing party-state resources to boost mobilization in populist ways and did not shy away from various forms of political manipulation, especially with regard to the mass media. The generation that was politicized by the anti-bureaucratic revolution learned that politics can only ever be a very dirty business. This suggests a more general implication for social movement scholarship: mobilization undertaken through populist means – i.e. cases where participants lose their autonomy and are not aware of the particularities of who and why has mobilized them into action – risks the distinct possibility of subsequent disenchantment.

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