



# Cartography of Political Perceptions

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- The privatisation of the past, present and future is a striking common characteristic of the interviewed citizens. Besides considering their family and health as valuable in life, the value universe is reduced to traditional moral characteristics: being honest, hardworking, honourable, righteous and obedient.
- Transition to democracy, in which only people must pay the price, has negatively influenced the overall support for some of the basic democratic values and led to almost complete lack of social engagement.
- Citizens tend to exclude themselves from political affairs and do not follow the political scene, resigned to the situation in politics. The perception of politics, parties and politicians is highly negative, while the lack of their responsiveness brings about disappointment and passivity in citizens.

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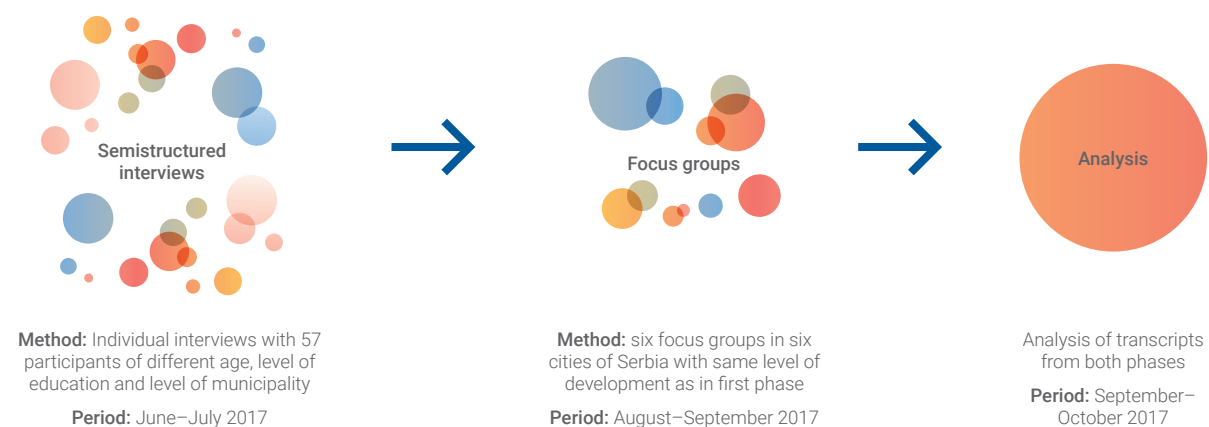
## Study Objectives

The aim of this study<sup>1</sup> was to systematically investigate the political orientation of Serbian citizens – what kind of a „political animal“ the citizen of Serbia is. We focused on the political preferences of citizens, their thoughts on and understanding of democracy, politics and political parties, as well as their value orientation and the potential for political action. How do the citizens of Serbia perceive the current situation in the country? What do they hope for and what are their fears? What is important for them in life? What do they value in Serbia? To whom do they feel they belong, and who is remote from them? How do they understand democracy? How do they evaluate the development of democracy in Serbia, and its main actors? – these are just some of the questions this study sought to answer.

The purpose of the study is to offer insights into the subjective aspects of political culture and the possible directions of further political development of citizens and society as a whole. Mapping of political orientations can be an important basis for planning the strategy of political action, effective communication between citizens and political elites, as well as for improving the capacity of democratic society as a whole. Additionally, it is possible to draw some conclusions on the possible directions of political development of Serbian society and the realization paths of the civic potential and democratic empowerment of citizens.

## Research methodology

A qualitative study in two phases was implemented for analyzing the political orientations of citizens.



1. Fiket, I., Pavlović, Z., Pudar Draško, G. (2017). Političke orijentacije građana Srbije: kartografija nemoći, Beograd, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

## Citizens of Serbia about Themselves and Others

Research participants differ when it comes to a range of relevant criteria: their socio-demographic profiles are different; they have different life histories and experiences; their current family, financial and professional situations are different; they spent their formative years in early childhood under very different historical and socio-political circumstances and so forth.

However, the privatisation of the past, present and future is a striking common characteristic of those citizens interviewed. Their life so far is described as a set of events from private life, often without much reference to wider social circumstances. When they talk about the past, there is a romantic tone in their narratives and a dose of nostalgia. Their current everyday life is privatised to a considerable extent as well. There are no “big” problems because their concerns are reduced to “petty, everyday” things not worth mentioning, although their financial circumstances (poor financial situation) or unemployment figure as prominent “personal” problems. Their main hopes and expectations of the future can be reduced to two related determinants: the wellbeing and safety of their family and the people closest to them, and the improvement of their financial situation.

Staying within one’s private world and being focused on a narrow circle of the closest people is especially noticeable. For our participants, the concept of being happy implies being in harmonious, interpersonal relations and taking care of children and this is what makes them proud. The circle of the people closest to them is an important source of comfort and a kind of safe haven. If they consider that they belong to a group and feel close to its members, they mean their family, and only after this are some typical forms of social identification mentioned, such as ethnic or religious belonging. The answers to the question, “What kind of a person am I?” are very uniform; full of references with a positive connotation, such as: “good”, “honest”, “willing to help others”, “tolerant”, “trusting people” and so on, which again emphasise a particular interpersonal or social orientation.

It is precisely these key elements of self-description that define the scope of values of our participants. Besides considering their (narrow and wider) family and health as valuable in life, the value universe of the majority of participants is reduced to these (traditional, moral) characteristics: being honest, hardworking, honourable, righteous and obedient. Social orientation is inevitable here as well, since the values cited include politeness, unselfishness, sincerity, obliging the expectations of others, harmonious interpersonal relations, love and so on. It is evident that there is a substantial motivational role of the need to be accepted within a close circle of people. The values belonging to the spectre of autonomy, e.g. freedom of thought and speech are rarely mentioned as important. Overcoming narrow divisions and becoming emancipated in an intellectual and social sense are not personally relevant to the majority of participants.

## The State, Democracy and the Individual: The Real and Desired Serbia

Citizens’ dissatisfaction with the quality of all aspects of life in Serbia is very high. The state is perceived as an entity completely detached from the requirements of citizens whose basic needs are, in fact, unsatisfied. The state, as seen by citizens, does not care about the inaccessibility of health services, a discredited and ruined educational system and high unemployment. In addition, citizens perceive the channels of social mobilization as inadequate, and the criteria of social promotion as defective. While the people are seen as “good”, on the other hand we have “bad” politicians who are responsible for poor living conditions. Society is most often described as tired of being worried and disappointed and therefore numb and passive. The prospect of a better future and overall trust in the prosperity of everyday life is almost completely absent.

However, when discussing the direction that Serbia is heading or should head in (the “right or wrong” direction), the respondents show very inconsistent attitudes. While their dissatisfaction

with very poor conditions of life is at high levels, due to the structural deficiencies of the state, at the same time our respondents often claimed that Serbia is heading in approximately the right direction. This inconsistency can be best explained by the influence of ambivalent and dissonant media messages constantly sent out by the political elite.

When speaking about a desirable political system, citizens most often refer to a socialist system with the addition of the non-democratic element of a strong leader. Therefore, they are actually referring to a highly familiar, erstwhile “when everyone lived better” political system. The appeal a political system with a strong leader has among Serbian citizens is to be understood as a consequence of nostalgia for an organized society with a clear and transparent set of rules of the game that apply to everyone (the rule of law and legal equality), and not only to the citizens – the losers, who stand against the privileged political and economic elites - the winners. The transition to democracy, in which only the people pay the price, has led to a loss of patience and a decrease in support for democracy. More importantly, the longevity of this transition has negatively influenced overall support for some of the basic democratic values.

If we take into consideration the perceived social and political atmosphere, it is not surprising that social engagement is almost completely absent. On the one hand, citizens strongly desire change to the system and hypothetically they would be willing to engage in order to contribute to that change. On the other hand, however, there are various obstacles that explain the lack of engagement, the apathy and passivity among citizens: the lack of accountability and responsiveness of the state, low political efficacy, the lack of knowledge of the mechanisms of civic participation as well as the lack of direct experience in participation in democratic civic practices.

## Political preferences of Serbian Citizens

“Hashtag – #ProgramMissing!”

Citizens tend to exclude themselves from political affairs and do not follow the political scene, resigned to the situation in politics. Parties are seen as organizations that are established and function to satisfy personal interest and without clear objectives. They pursue the well-developed demagoguery, “one talked, but others acted” when they are in power. Credibility is the missing component of Serbian politics in every respect, meaning the consistency of words and actions, or fulfilling promises. It is important, yet elusive in Serbia. The values that are crucial for a democratic country, such as social justice, the rule of law and freedom of speech are not incorporated into the actions of the political parties in Serbia.

Respondents, with words full of bitterness, perceived politicians as thieves and crooks, with „complexes“, bad people, a group that cares only about themselves and their personal interests. Politicians bear absolute responsibility for the unsatisfactory situation in the country. The significant electoral abstention due to a strong sense of impotence is a consequence of such an attitude toward politics. A smaller portion of the interviewees pointed to civic responsibility, criticizing the inertia, naivety and vulnerability to manipulation of their fellow citizens. In addition, less educated citizens openly expressed a willingness to sell their vote.

The majority of citizens do not actively follow politics and there is a worrying trend to consider information from the media relating to politics as reliable. They read only the headlines in the print and internet media, while the daily newspapers are identified as the yellow press.

A reasonably positively assessed electoral system needs changes that would allow, instead of electing representatives from party lists, representing the interests of their local constituencies. The current election system naturally promotes a lack of interest in elected politicians to solve the problems

of citizens, and to respect the law for the benefit of the community.

The desired model of parties and politicians is extremely traditional. A good politician must behave like the head of a well-run household. In addition, they must possess the virtues of principle and morality. To succeed in changing the current situation, such a politician must have a team of experts behind them. Expertise and the democratic nature of such a team are key features of a party model that would have the chance to improve the community and put an end to widespread corruption.

The paths to change taken by some new forces range from infiltrating every pore of the social system, fully consistent compliance with the party program and a state-building plan in general if such existed (as it should), to leading by personal example. None of the existing parties is even close to this desired model. In order to achieve this target, it is necessary to completely change the circle of people within and to eliminate corruption.

### The Political Landscape of Serbia: Positioning of Citizens

The Serbian political landscape is, it seems, generally monotonous. Citizens are very concerned about their financial living conditions and the lack of universally acknowledged rules of social life (not just law), which is conducive to a feeling of insecurity already widespread due to poor financial circumstances. Citizens' thoughts and hopes are focused on improving their financial circumstances, but thanks to the unknown (or non-existing) "rules of the game", they are unable to think of the ways in which to accomplish this. Their value aspirations stem from a nostalgic vision of the past and predominantly feature traditional values which are practically derived from their need for security. The perception of politics and politicians is highly negative, while the lack of their responsiveness engenders disappointment and passivity in citizens. In spite of this outlook of monotony common to the participants, it is possible to trace different typical narratives that

may serve as an important starting point for the planning of political activities in Serbia.

### Joint Characteristics of the Profiles:

negative evaluation of politics and politicians; disappointment in the current social system; prioritising the improvement of financial circumstances of living, the need for an ordered social system.

**Authoritarian Populist:** positive evaluation of common people; traditional view of the state as a well-run household; striving towards an authoritarian leader who brings order; passivity as an expression of authoritarianism; low evaluation of the freedom of choice.

In this type of discourse we encounter a clear "hourglass" narrative, organised around the topic of the contrast between the people, on the one hand, and the political elites, on the other. The people are as a rule described as righteous, hardworking, honest and so on, while the elites are just the opposite – corrupt, exploitative and guided by their own interests. In such an interpretation, the people are an important factor in correcting the practices of the political elites. However, at the same time, they are fettered by circumstance and are hence fruitless in their efforts. The elected political representatives do not actually represent the people and make up, in fact, the completely separate upper part of the "hourglass". There are also prominent authoritarian tendencies, expressed through the belief that society and the state need "a firm hand" or "a strong leader" as an adequate alternative to the current situation. The leader, whose role model is found in Tito, should bring order and discipline. Such a person should be strict but fair, a pater familias, in keeping with widespread traditional values.

There is also a prominent dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy in Serbia, and, consequently, the potential for accepting demagoguery and populist policies which place the people within the focus of propaganda. Their anti-elite attitude is mostly instigated by disappointment in the political elites rather than

by an authentic disdain towards the elites as such. This type of narrative is more often found in socially deprived (low educated and financially vulnerable) participants. The key determinants of this narrative stem from a lack of hope, resignation and helplessness.

**Cynical Populist:** positive evaluation of common people; negative view of the state as bureaucratic machinery; non-institutionalist orientation; passivity as an expression of impotence; being susceptible to populist propaganda.

A cynical populist narrative is in many respects similar to the authoritarian populist, but an inclination towards an authoritarian solution to the current situation is not prominent. A positive opinion about the people and society is present, but the state, which includes not only the political elites but also bureaucracy, is perceived equally negatively. This type is mainly denoted by an alienation from politics and a belief that institutional mechanisms cannot be relied on for solving vital issues in life. In some kind of populism, "positive" people are contrasted with "negative" politicians, but without resorting to discipline and a firm hand as an alternative. The people are viewed as the victims of politicians and hence the people should strive towards an ordered state based on the principles of social justice. Such a state is not even minimally present, nor do the political elites seem capable of leading it in that direction. The people are credited with having such a potential, which is, however, restrained by the political elites. The ways in which this potential might be realised are not recognised since these citizens are prominently a(nti)political and spurn any kind of involvement.

This kind of narrative is relatively more frequent among members of the economically deprived segment of society, who, we can provisionally assume, come from the middle stratum. These citizens are under "pressure"; they fear for the future but do not give up in a certain sense, relying on personal efforts to solve their problems and maintain minimum contact with the world of politics.

**Passive Reformists:** a strong tendency towards change; passivity as a consequence of elitism; belief in a "future" political elite.

The main features of this narrative are a desire for change and the expectation that someone else will initiate and implement this change. Negative views on practices in the public sphere prevail, together with distancing themselves from politics and withdrawing from it into a protective, narrow circle. However, the narrative is associated with strongly expressed preferences for social change where they do not wish to actively participate, but wait for something to somehow "fall from the sky." Refraining from engagement is not a deliberate political strategy but comes from a sincere belief that society needs to be reformed by those who are considered the main culprits for the situation perceived as unsatisfactory - the political elite. Such perception is the heritage of the socialist legacy where the state is the alpha to the omega of all reform attempts. Deprivation from agency implies that elites should have their own initiative or that they need to be changed, but somehow bypass the citizens.

This type of narrative is relatively widespread, but it can be heard more frequently among the older population cherishing nostalgic memories of the country from the socialist period.

**Defeated Citizens:** a strong desire for change; passivity as a political strategy of resistance; potentially engaged citizens.

Defeated Citizens seems to be an adequate name for a narrative that clearly acknowledges the discrepancy between democracy as a norm and democracy as practice in Serbia; what democracy is and what it should be. The cynicism that this narrative has in common with previous types is here associated with moral judgments about the distorted and undemocratic political system but also with a critical attitude towards fellow citizens who adopted an approach to social life that could be described as "don't say anything, it could be worse"

Although cynicism is very visible, social engagement is considered as a meaningful and reasonable activity in general and personal initiative as very important, even though most of the time (due to obstacles) the results are ineffective. Nevertheless, they manifest predominantly apolitical behavior since they exclude themselves from active participation in the public sphere.

However, restraint from political participation in this case must be interpreted as political strategy, a form of passive resistance and a refusal to contribute to the legitimation of the unfair rules of the game, rather than the consequence of a lack of awareness of social and political issues. While also very critically oriented towards unaware fellow citizens, they still believe that in society there is the potential for change.

The main obstacles for the democratic potential of citizens to be liberated and fulfilled lie precisely in the arrangements and actions (deliberately) carried out by the political elites.

This kind of discourse is somewhat more noticeable in younger and highly educated citizens, who in some ways feel oppressed and defeated. They are capable of seeing the possibility of creating a better Serbia if only the social mobilization channels and social promotion criteria could change.

The social and political context, in fact, is disincentivizing these citizens and forcing them to choose passivity. They could actually be the conduits of social change according to all their other characteristics - awareness, interest, belief in the importance of social engagement, and so if authentic democratic potential exists within Serbian society, it will be located within this (not insubstantial) group of citizens.

**The Activist – Would-be “Fighter”:** a strong aspiration towards social changes; democratic consciousness; involvement in the community.

The narrative of an activist – a would-be fighter can rarely be heard. If we bear in mind activist

practice which stems from abstract democratic norms, emphasis on solidarity and care for others, the norms of autonomy, independence and personal responsibility, this type represents the prototype of a democratic citizen.

This narrative type shares the positive evaluation of social activism with the constrained citizen type, but what distinguishes it from the other described types is the insistence on immediate involvement in the community, in spite of the perception of the non-supportive political context. The people are also considered as an inevitable corrective agent of the practices of the political elites in this case, but the people here implies the citizens, who bear the responsibility for themselves and society as a whole.

This kind of narrative is frequently encountered in younger and, especially, in more educated participants, who represent some kind of gatekeepers of democracy. Hence, this type may be described as a subtype of the constrained citizen, different only in their resolute preaching of the importance of involvement. An activist – a would-be fighter - tries to influence wider social processes, resolute in the belief that democracy and civic activism under the wing of democratic rights and freedoms have no alternatives.

## Conclusion

This assessment of the situation in the country was unanimously negative in its findings. The country is seen as unable to service citizens' needs nor guarantee the social justice principle. Citizens are aware that democracy as norms and democracy as practices are not the same. They want and value (social) democracy, but they are clear that such democracy is missing in Serbia. Opinions as to whether Serbia is moving in a good or bad direction are divided. Pessimistic estimates mostly prevail, mixed with a feeling of hopelessness, particularly among young people.

When describing the desired model of society, they lean on the familiar former socialism, along with a typical example of a positive leader who solved



problems (Tito). The paradox that citizens want democracy through a firm hand and a system that is not compatible with democratic practices is a consequence of prolonged transition resulting in something that is not democracy. While there is no genuine respect for democracy, citizens are aware that they live in a society of crumbling values, dominated by starlets and reality shows.

Social and political passivity, a very prominent feature among citizens, are actually the final result of the lack of rules that should apply to everyone. A state of general insecurity and dissatisfaction has led to a sense of their own inadequacy, political inefficiency and finally paralysis of any kind of civic engagement. There is a kind of "vicious circle" of mistrust and stagnation in seeking democracy, without a willingness to engage, while pejoratively describing those who are currently in positions of power. The gap in society-politics is very pronounced, almost insurmountable. Citizens are mostly unaware that they themselves are promoting and facilitating the survival of unwanted practices. A kind of pride in resolutely abstaining from and defaming the political scene does point to the deep historical roots of political unenlightenment, and the ignorance of citizens. All this engenders possible injustice and bad political practice.

Citizens cry out for credibility, which is interpreted as keeping promises and consistency. Their "pain" is not really economic woes, but injustice and dishonesty. The cure is in responsible political figures to a lesser extent. But, the problem can actually be eliminated merely by strengthening those institutions that will guarantee that the law applies to its legislators, which is quite a clear message to representatives of the political elite.

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