“There’s Nothing Anyone Can Do About It”: Participation, Apathy, and “Successful” Democratic Transition in Postsocialist Serbia

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Nonparticipation in politics provides a rich set of moral, political, and cultural engagements. Contrary to the idea that apathy reflects an absence of political and social progress, nonparticipation can be an expression of complex and sophisticated responses to changing sociopolitical contexts. Apathy can also be a citizen response to the ways that international policymakers and democratization experts deploy normative models of democratic success and failure in newly emerging democracies. Ultimately, “resolute nonparticipation,” to use Matthew Gutmann’s phrasing, challenges policy and scholarly analyses that rely on apathy as a key measure of democratic failure.1 By focusing on the social life of such “failure,” I seek to move beyond dichotomies—democracy, or its absence, reconciliation, or its absence, political participation, or its absence—that have long been applied to postsocialist and newly democratic countries. In taking these phenomena seriously, I reveal agentive social forms that haunt the margins of “successful” democratic practice in the context of international democratization programs and scholarship.

The significance of nonparticipation in politics hit home for me one evening in November 2003 during my fieldwork in Niš, a city in southern Serbia.2 A friend had asked me to drop by his English class to help out with conversation. I had been to class a couple times and knew a few of the students, many of whom were in high school. The class was conducted in English and taught by a man from Niš who had spent significant time in Australia. He was always excited to have me in class and frequently held me up as a representative of America and the larger world outside Serbia. He was always excited to have me in class and frequently held me up as a representative of America and the larger world outside Serbia. During this particular class, he had asked me to field questions about America. After a while, discussion turned to the bombing of Serbia.

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2. The long-term fieldwork on which this article is based was conducted over a period of eighteen months between 2002 and 2004. Research was conducted in Novi Sad, Niš, and Belgrade and focused mainly on university student organizations, faculty, administrators, and participants in Serbian nongovernmental sectors.

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in 1999 by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The bombing was a particularly sensitive topic in Niš, where a number of civilians had been killed when a bomb went astray and landed in an open-air market in the center of town.

One young student, I will call him Dušan, who had been making critical comments about the United States throughout the evening, erupted in anger. He announced that he was happy when the World Trade Center was attacked and thought that America got what it deserved. This prompted a flurry of reactions and objections among the other students. The teacher, embarrassed and upset, quickly tried to silence Dušan. I immediately intervened, insisting that Dušan be allowed to speak. I added that he had a right to be angry at America. Another young student, whom I will call Mira, immediately objected. I was shocked by the force of her reaction; she had always been easy-going when we spoke in and out of class. No, she insisted, it was not acceptable for him to be angry. She recounted how incredibly angry she had been during and after the NATO bombing. But, she said, she eventually began to realize that everyone was innocent—they (in Serbia) were innocent; the Americans were innocent. The bombing, she continued, was the result of political decisions over which individual citizens had no control. She proclaimed that this was how the world worked: innocent people have to die because of the policies of governments, and there was nothing anyone could do about it. After she realized that, she said, she stopped being so angry. In response to Mira’s outburst, Dušan backed down. Chastened, he concluded that there was really only one person to blame for the bombing: former Serbian president and strongman Slobodan Milošević.

This incident weaves together several moments that reveal a moral logic underpinning nonparticipation in politics. It also demonstrates how such nonparticipation is forged in relation to the gaze of an imagined west. Each of us positioned ourselves in relationship to Dušan’s anger through different narrative framings of politics and Serbia’s relationship to “the west.” First, let us take the initial moment in which the teacher silenced Dušan. On one level, the teacher was trying to save me from embarrassment at the outburst, or possibly a sense of guilt about the NATO bombing. I was a guest in the classroom, and Dušan’s outburst violated principles of hospitality, especially for a foreign visitor. But there is more to the silencing than this. This Australian-identified language teacher had gone out of his way to hold me up to the class as a pedagogical object, linking his students to an English-speaking west in order to model how they should talk (quite literally) and behave. Dušan’s anger put a firm wedge between me (brought in to model an outside world) and the students (the objects of this pedagogical exercise). Dušan’s anger linked the class to the kind of isolation and images of Serbian parochialism that the teacher was trying to undo. In addition, by allowing me into the classroom, the teacher had also bolstered his credentials as western, English-speaking, and worldly. He often engaged me in jokes or references to life in Australia and America, creating a sense of connection (or intimacy) between us. Dušan’s outburst
threatened this connection, pulling the conversation, the students, and the teacher squarely back into Serbia, and indexing Serbia’s difference from and hostility to America. In an attempt to reframe the classroom as a space of western belonging and behavior, and to reassert his authority, the teacher mobilized a strategy of silencing.

My reaction to the teacher, however, undermined his attempt to reassert authority. In exhorting Dušan to speak, I (unwittingly) provided an example of how Serbian failure to be western is constituted in relationship to an outside, judging gaze. In response to the teacher’s attempt to silence Dušan, I stepped in to open up a space for Dušan’s anger. Mobilizing a language of “rights” (he has a “right” to be angry), I displaced the teacher’s authority through a metapragmatic framing that marked me as the magnanimous westerner, tolerant of anger and difference, even while I simultaneously asserted the power to create a space for that anger. Only upon reflection much later (and with the much-appreciated perspective of others) is it clear to me how, in using this authority, I attempted to manage the critique being leveled at me as an American.3 My insistence on Dušan’s right to be angry not only marked me as tolerant, it differentiated me from the teacher whose illiberal reaction was to silence rather than open up dialogue. This further shamed him, throwing into question his status as authentically western and democratic. My reaction put hierarchies of democratic ability and liberal tolerance into play, and I seemed to have the final word on defining where and how Dušan should express himself.

It is at this moment that Mira intervened, insisting that Dušan did not have a right to that anger. On the one hand, her response might well have been intended to assuage my feelings of discomfort. It could also have been an attempt to shore up her teacher’s compromised authority. But it was certainly an attempt to shift and control the direction of the narrative in a way that both denied Dušan’s right to anger and linked this denial to a moral, antipolitical framework that challenged my call for a public airing of grievances. In place of Dušan’s anger, the teacher’s shame, and my tolerance, Mira asserted an alternative narrative frame. She positioned herself as a moral subject formed through nonparticipation in politics. In place of anger she offered powerlessness. In her comments, Mira narrated how once she accepted that only politicians were in control (and that she and others around her had no agency) she could let go of her anger. For Mira, everyone was innocent except those who made real-life political decisions and those who were implicated in the world of political power. Mira was able to create and sustain an alternative moral framework—a way of reestablishing the goodness and humanity in the world—by shifting responsibility to politicians who people like her could neither influence nor control. At the same time, she positioned all of us

3. Thanks to Benjamin Lee, Dilip Gaonkar, Olga Sezneva, Brian Edwards, David Wittenberg, Lars Toender, and Nasrin Kader for helping me to strengthen the analysis of this incident.
in the classroom as equal in our powerlessness in relationship to politicians. Given this powerlessness, there was no point in either anger or open discussion of the past. The only acceptable path was to withdraw from such a discussion and the larger social-political processes in which it was embedded.

The force of Mira’s reaction to Dušan’s anger indexed how important it was to her to protect the moral universe she created through inaction and nonparticipation. The acceptance of her inability to have an effect on policies or control leaders of state was what, she claimed, allowed her to stop being angry. If politics really were a site through which one could affect the country and its policies, we all would have been implicated in past violence. In place of the hierarchies and judgments that we were building in our discussion of the NATO bombing, Mira offered another path. In the end, Dušan followed Mira’s narrative lead, undercutting the tension by mobilizing a trope similar to Mira’s. He attributed blame to Milošević, the ultimate figure of power, authority, violence, and to the corruption of politics. In so doing, he both partook in a common genre of allocating responsibility for Serbia’s failures to the singular figure of Milošević, and he reinforced the shifting of blame to the sphere of politics, over which ordinary people have no control.

As this example shows, nonparticipation or self-exclusion from politics and political agency is a way people in Serbia can manage and displace what they perceive as a judging western eye. It is also a way for Serbian citizens to try to position themselves against Serbia’s recent violent history and to move beyond that history. This incident involved a complicated struggle over, not only who could express anger and critique, but whether such expression was useful at all. What made Mira’s position possible was a disavowal of politics. I called on these students to engage their anger through a public discussion with me as tolerant witness. Mira displaced my authority through a framework of nonparticipation and silence. By invoking discourses of rights, I attempted to manage potentially illiberal or explosive anger by transforming it into rational discourse. In response, Mira proposed an alternate model of citizenship that relied on a total withdrawal from even the discussion of politics and a denial of any agency in relationship to political life. Our struggle, forged together, reinforced my position as a judging westerner to whom Mira was appealing, even as she attempted to position us as equals in relationship to political powerlessness.

On Nonparticipation

This complicated interaction led me to take nonparticipation seriously as an analytic lens. How might this lens bring into focus a highly contested field in which people struggled to define political agency and democratic “success”? How might a judging western gaze, like the one I inhabited above, affect how people in Serbia understood themselves as political agents, Serbian citizens, and European subjects? Finally, how might inter-
national programs that exhorted Serbian citizens to participate in politics play into these complicated negotiations over the meaning of politics? In considering these questions I turn to international programs designed to foster political participation in Serbia and suggest that the normative frameworks of success and failure at the heart of many of these programs may have an impact on local meanings of political engagement and participation. Following Mira’s lead and focusing on nonparticipation in politics, permits us to take an innovative approach to the analysis of democratic forms of power and their increasingly global deployment.

These questions are also animated by a larger body of scholarship that examines the micro and macro relations of power in which international democratization efforts are embedded. Increasingly, both academics and practitioners engage ethnographic methods to examine the complex, contradictory, and often unanticipated consequences of international aid and democracy intervention. Such work interrogates the ways these programs rely on intersecting histories of knowledge and action, rather than one-way transfers of political models and know-how. In turn the measurement of “success” in newly democratic contexts is always conditioned by relations of power and difference, often couched in moral or civilizational terms. In the process, international intervention may have the unintended consequence of fueling and perpetuating the very categories and conflicts such intervention was meant to resolve. The case of


5. See, for example, Paul Stubbs, “Civil Society or Ubleha,” in Helena Rill, Tamara Šmitidling, and Ana Bitoljanu, eds., Twenty Pieces of Encouragement for Awakening and Change: Peacebuilding in the Region of the Former Yugoslavia (Belgrade, 2007), 215–28.


nonparticipation in Serbia reveals how circulating discourses, practices, and institutions meant to influence democratic practice create conditions for counterintuitive and paradoxical results.

In addition, I build on existing work on participation, and its limitations, in the anthropology of democracy. I seek, however, to recenter nonparticipation as a useful critical lens in democracy scholarship and ethnography. As Gutmann has argued, “We gain a far better understanding of why some people participate sometimes in some forms of political activities if we understand why others do not.” Building on his insight, as well as his rejection of active/passive understandings of participation, I ask how apathy is a productive aspect of how people experience and understand democracy.

Questions of democracy and participation in Serbia have resonance far beyond this small country’s borders. As Kimberly Coles has shown, the project of shaping postsocialist and postconflict societies as democratic involves complex technologies of power and governance. These technologies rely on the movement of international governmental and nongovernmental organizations, individuals who implement democratization programs, and technical practices and materials designed to produce desired democratic effects. Serbia, and the Balkans more generally, have become key sites in this matrix of democratic production and power. The former Yugoslavia was a prominent experimental site for early democratization policy, and the region was a central locus for “lessons-learned” regarding international intervention, nation-building, and democratization. Serbia is thus a significant point in the transnational circulation of democracy as a set of normative models, practices, and ideologies. As postsocialist countries become sites where normative concepts are deployed and materialized, exceptions to successful progress shore up the validity of normative versions of democratic progress. Failure is attributed to cultural or political shortcomings, rather than the normative model itself. When we see similar frameworks for civil society, democracy, and participation deployed across the globe, we see the circulation of new forms of democratic power. When we trace how such processes are con-


solidated, refracted, and circulated in and beyond a place like Serbia, we are witnessing the effects of postsocialisms unbound.

**Success and Failure in Postsocialist Europe**

The European Union may be presiding over the most successful democracy promotion program ever implemented by an international actor. The track record so far is excellent: every democratizing state that has become a credible future member of the European Union (except perhaps Serbia) has made steady progress toward liberal democracy.12

The language of success, failure, and democratic “progress” suffuses scholarly and policy discourse about formerly socialist eastern Europe. The quote above hails from a special issue of *East European Politics and Societies* that is drawn from background papers for the 2005 General Assembly of the Club of Madrid, an event that brought together high-ranking policymakers and influential scholars.13 The rest of this article elaborates on the social and political ramifications of Serbia’s classification as an exception to successful transition in the region. It is a response to Serbia’s parenthetical position in the above quote. I begin with a particular site through which policy and scholarly ideas about democratic success and failure circulate in Serbia: nongovernmental and government-sponsored democracy participation programs. International and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have focused on increasing participation at multiple levels in Serbia since 2000.14 Get out the vote campaigns and citizen education programs geared toward increasing local civic engagement are just two examples.15 This work is conducted by a number of committed NGOs and activists, as well as government officials and has certainly had important effects in contemporary Serbia. However, unintended resonances arise when these programs mobilize a language of political and civic participation, particularly in relationship to “European belonging.” The discursive frameworks that these programs mobilize are transformed in a context in which “politics,” “Europe,” and “democratic participation” intersect with complicated histories, social meanings, and relations of power on the ground.

In this article, I use “democratization programs” and “international aid” interchangeably. My focus is on democracy and civic education, as opposed to the range of other efforts (for example, humanitarian, anti-corruption, rule of law) often overseen by institutions such as USAID, the


14. Previous support for democratization was explicitly focused on support for the anti-Milošević movement. See Carothers, *Critical Mission*.

15. Get out the vote campaigns were particularly significant in the 2000 presidential elections. These campaigns were especially targeted at young voters, who were a key factor in Milošević’s electoral defeat.
World Bank, and the European Union. In addition, I tack back and forth between material drawn from these international agencies, policymakers, and democratization scholars. I see these actors as part of an intersecting set of processes and institutions that produce and circulate normative democratic frameworks. Nicolas Guilhot refers to the academics, policymakers, and activists who move through the “dense social networks” of the global human rights and democratization field as “double agents.” He notes that “the actors who contribute the most to construction and expanding the field of promoting democracy are those who were able to play on different levels, to occupy pivotal positions at the junction of academic, national and international institutions, activist movements, and to mobilize the diversified resources of all these fields—knowledge, affiliations, networks, financial resources.” These interactions in turn produce commonsense definitions of democratic progress that are integrated into policy initiatives as well as academic discourse.

In order to pinpoint a nexus connecting policy and academic discourse, popular Serbian narratives in politics and media, and Serbian understandings of democratic practice, I focus on material related to civic participation and nonparticipation in scholarship and policy documents. I then try to place these documents in the context of an intellectual history that has informed thinking on participation. Material from my fieldwork in Serbia provides the context for how such ideas often reinforce understandings of democratic policies as elitist, corrupt, morally suspect, and disempowering. Thus I am placing concepts, scholarship, and discursive frameworks in conversation with examples of talk about politics, democratic participation, and European belonging in the media, popular culture, and everyday conversation in Serbia. This approach assumes both that discourses have institutional locations and material lives that have an impact on political action and social imaginaries. Ways of framing questions about democracy and transition are picked up and given new meaning as they circulate among policy documents, political speeches, academic texts, and media representations.

Circulation here is meant as a socially and institutionally mediated process by which language is recontextualized and put into conversation with other “voices.” Susan Gal argues that,

A central property of language is its ability to be chunked, disengaged from its current environment, only to be quoted, parodied, alluded to, cited, ventriloquized, or in other ways reinserted elsewhere. It is here that notions of discourse and text . . . can be fruitfully employed. “Texts” are defined here as segments of discourse that are potentially detachable from their co-occurring social and cultural surrounds. As such, texts can be embedded in other contexts—“recontextualized”—and hence they can circulate spatially, temporally, and across social, political, and lin-

16. For an example of how policy and NGO frameworks are taken up in scholarly analysis, see Charles Tilly, Democracy (Cambridge, Eng., 2007), which relies heavily on Freedom House analysis and categories.

guistic boundaries. Conceptualizing circulation in this way allows us to investigate with more precision what . . . is loosely called the movement of “ideas.”

Such “texts” can be “put into conversation” and competition with other voices. Texts about democracy circulate in Serbia through specific NGO programs, as highly publicized conditions attached to international funding or debt relief, in international and national press coverage, in university classes or secondary school civic education programs, or through tabloid media and political rallies, to name just a few examples. In the words of Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma, “circulation is a cultural process with its own forms of abstraction, evaluation, and constraint, which are created by the interactions between specific types of circulating forms and the interpretative communities build around them.” Definitions of democracy and ideas of success and failure are recontextualized and become objects of discussion, action, and contestation. In other words, they become part of a social field of interpretation and action through which people develop an understanding of the meaning of democracy, assess their own success or failure as Serbian or European subjects, come to understand themselves as being judged, and contest the power relations embedded in democratic discourse.


19. Consider, for example, the efforts of the Serbian government to introduce gradjansko vaspitanje, or citizen education programs into secondary schools in the early 2000s. I thank Milorad Lazić for this point.

20. Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma, “Cultures of Circulation: The Imaginations of Modernity,” Public Culture 14, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 191. In addition, Lee and LiPuma note, “Cultures of circulation are created and animated by the cultural forms that circulate through them, including—critically—the abstract nature of the forms that underwrite and propel the process of circulation itself” (192). Indeed in keeping with this analysis, it is worth noting that the very idea of the circulability or transferability of democratic programs and policies attributes an objective reality to democratic relations that is characteristic of liberal democratic models. It is worth considering that the abstract nature of a liberal democratic public (transcendent of relationally constituted, contested, and always socially embedded political practices) might be a critical condition for the emergence of a democratization industry reliant on the circulation of normative policy frameworks.

21. The dichotomy of success and failure has had a real impact on Serbian political discourse, limiting horizons for democratic action and curtailing possibilities for critical perspectives on Serbia’s past and future. Serbia is often cited as an exemplary failure among transition countries, just as the Balkans more generally were cited as the case study in European civilization’s failure in the 1990s. Serbia enjoyed a brief moment of success on the world stage as an example of electoral-democratic revolution after the 5 October 2000 ouster of Milošević. But a refusal to comply with the Hague Tribunal and to make key arrests of indicted war criminals; a rise in nationalist, populist political parties; the 2003 assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić; and intransigence on negotiations for Kosovo’s independence have landed Serbia back on the margins of democratic success stories in eastern Europe. This article is not intended to dispute the validity of these international demands for compliance. I am not arguing that, because international demands are embedded in relations of power, Serbia is any less responsible for its key role in the violence of the 1990s. Indeed it is crucial to make space in Serbian political discourse for
“Community” versus Nation in the Social Capital Model

Policymakers and scholars have only recently emphasized wide-scale citizen participation as central to strengthening emerging democracies. The mainstreaming of this connection began in the 1980s with the rise of NGOs like the National Endowment for Democracy and the development of a professionalized core of democratization experts. Powerful aid institutions such as USAID and the World Bank took up the cause of democratic participation, and democratization itself became a significant component of U.S. foreign policy. Like earlier participatory democratic efforts, these programs linked participation and the production of democratic citizens. In keeping with U.S. and European policy goals for economic liberalization, however, these new participatory approaches also integrated liberal notions of individual agency and choice. Democratic participation was increasingly tied to notions of stability and economic development.

Robert Putnam’s writings on social capital popularized these connections, both within the social sciences and in the development and democratization world. Beginning with his 1993 book Making Democracy Work, the notion of social capital was hailed as the key to economic and political development in the United States, Europe, and the developing world. Rooted in horizontal connections based in trust, norms of reciprocity, and civic engagement, social capital enables a revitalization of the civic associations and social networks that create the bonds of trust underpinning civic engagement and ultimately successful democracy. Not only can these dense social networks solve the dilemmas of collective action, but they have the ability to promote economic growth, social stability, and democratic development as well.

a discussion of international relations of power that do not foreclose engagement with ethical questions of social and political responsibility. I seek to open up such a space by examining particular instantiations of how normative frameworks for liberal democracy have an impact on other aspects of political expression and possibility in Serbia—namely participation. In trying to break apart dichotomies of success and failure and participation and apathy, I hope to create some small space for considering social and political possibilities that are more complex than the either/or options to which Serbian political life has been reduced.

22. Guilhot, Democracy Makers.
23. Brown, Transacting Transition; Carothers, Critical Mission.
25. Interestingly, Putnam takes up the question of postsocialist societies directly. Drawing on his case study of social capital in Italy, he notes that “without norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement, the Hobbesian outcome of the Mezzogiorno—amoral familism, clientelism, lawlessness, ineffective government, and economic stagnation—seems likelier than successful democratization and economic development. Palermo may represent the future of Moscow.” Robert Putnam, Making Democracy Work, 183. Such dystopic visions of postsocialist futures lend a certain urgency to the work of creating democratic and civic cultures in formerly socialist Europe.
The development of association-based forms of community, civic organizations, and participation became a linchpin in international democracy assistance. The framework of social capital helped cement a culturalist turn in democracy assistance. A culture of democracy meant that people’s behavior and practices were mutable and subject to change through outside intervention. Toward the close of the 1990s, democratization programs increased their support for civic organizations rather than promoting top-down democracy efforts. They emphasized horizontal ties productive of civil “community” based in “a new set of civic virtues—participation, active cooperation, deliberation, and reciprocal trust.”

This emphasis repudiated earlier, more hierarchal approaches to democratic transformation. Instead, the new approach took for granted the inherent democratic value of “community.”

Taken together, social capital and a later notion of civic community assumed that democratic participation would produce a community-based sociality that could both transform individuals and support institutional change. In addition, Putnam’s model of social capital reinforced the idea that civic networks were conflict free and, in James DeFilippis’s words, “win-win.” In this vision, community, belonging, and participation produce harmony and allegiance, rather than tension and disunity. The idea of social capital has taken on a special salience in Serbia, and the former Yugoslavia, because it presents a vision of postnational democratic belonging linked to political stability. European Union democracy programs in the region wed participation to the emergence of locally embedded social networks in a way that avoids explicitly dealing with questions of national identification. Yet the threat of nationalism implicitly shapes the direction and purpose of civic education and participatory democracy initiatives. In other words, the twinned notions of community and stability contain a postnational/ist agenda smuggled into the framework of democratic participation. While “community” implies the redefinition of terms of belonging at a local rather than a national level, “stability” marks a repudiation of the nationalist violence and politics that wrecked the Balkans in the 1990s. Thus the language of participation sends both overt messages about links between citizen participation and democracy and implicit judgments about Serbia’s particular capacity for democratic politics and citizenship.

For example, in 2005 the Council of Europe funded an extensive research project and manual, entitled *Guide to Participatory Democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia and Montenegro* that assessed local participatory democracy programs throughout the region. In a section entitled, “Participation as the Foundation for Building Social Capital,” the manual asserts that

The primary advantage of a tradition and history of participation is its contribution to the formation of social capital. Through the practice of participation, individuals and groups become more capable of organizing themselves independently from the state, articulating their demands,

maneuvering successfully in various policy arenas, and interacting with public officials and agencies. The more experience individuals and groups have in participating, the more likely they are to develop enduring patterns of mutual trust, to mobilize around issues, to engage in collective action, and to be successful in securing a place and influence in the democratic process/system.28

Here the main goal of participation is the production of social capital, and the social bonds of trust and collective action that it presupposes. The authors understand strengthening social capital as part of a trend in which “community is a mode of belonging and consists in desires and beliefs rather than in territorial or institutional structures.”29 These bonds of trust—clear markers of a democratic sociality—are situated at the “local” level. Associational bonds are constitutive of community, but that community is independent from the state and from frameworks of national belonging. Interestingly, the authors are not explicit concerning whether these are homogenous or heterogenous groups, what Putnam would refer to as a bonding versus bridging form of social capital.30 Indeed, the fact that the document elides heterogeneity (in terms of class, education, region, but most significantly ethnicity) points to some of the underlying ideological assumptions at work in the authors’ vision of participation and social capital. And the elision of difference in the production of social capital and democratic community suggests a postnationalist agenda at work in such programs.

The community implied by participatory democratic civic action is local, but it is also specifically European. The Guide to Participatory Democracy is based on Council of Europe “Recommendation (2001)19 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the Participation of Citizens in Local Public Life.”31 This local democratic participation should, “seek for new ways to enhance civic-mindedness and to promote a culture of democratic participation shared by communities and local authorities.” Based on an “awareness of belonging to a community” this culture of democracy “encourages citizens to accept their responsibility to contribute to the life of their communities,” yet it also remains embedded in “European” traditions.32 As in other European Union policy language, a vague notion of European culture and tradition comes to stand in for specific policy goals and economic agendas.33 By linking community participation to being

28. Paddy Greer, Anne Murphy, Morton Øgård, and Jose Manual Rodriguez, Guide to Participatory Democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia and Montenegro (Strasbourg, France, 2005), 17.
29. Ibid., 14.
30. Putnam distinguishes between bonding social capital, which is “inward looking and tend[s] to reinforce exclusive identities and homogenous groups,” and bridging social capital, which is “outward looking and encompass[es] people across diverse social cleavages.” Putnam, Bowling Alone, 22.
32. Ibid., 119, 117.
European, the document aligns democratic success with contemporary European Union goals.

Missing from this picture of local and European community, of course, are national-level institutions and space for nationally defined forms of belonging. It is not surprising that a European Union policy document would avoid questions of nationalism, given the problematic and highly politicized status of national sovereignty and nationalist sentiment in contemporary Europe. Craig Calhoun has argued for the historical importance of nationalism as a creative and socially meaningful mode of forging solidarity that underpins the constitution of a democratic polity. The national as a site of democratic community has presented problems in contemporary Europe, however. Indeed, anxieties over the nature of social and political belonging—and the troubled role of nationalism—have concerned policymakers and scholars since the European Union's inception.

The language of the postnational is even more significant in the former Yugoslavia, which recent scholarship, European leaders, and popular press across the continent have presented as a case study in the dangers of nationalism in Europe. In the context of this symbolically charged legacy, "community" and "stability" in the Balkans seem to code a specifically postnationalist democracy. Within the framework of social capital, participation in democratic life is linked to trust, associational connections, and civic-mindedness. These categories of belonging work against ethnic or national affiliations and resurgent violence. Postnationalist community is...
forged through common “desires and beliefs” rather than territory (the nation) or institutions (the state), and yet this community is also situated in a larger European social and political geography. In the words of the Guide to Participatory Democracy, such local democracy is “one of the cornerstones of democracy in European countries and its reinforcement is a factor of stability.”

For the writers of this document, these local and sui generis forms of community displace the national in constituting postwar, post-Yugoslav (and postsocialist) democratic belonging. What happens, however, when both citizens and international actors see national belonging as contradictory to democratic legitimacy? And how does problematizing “the national” community affect people’s commitments to and interest in participating in a larger democratic polity? The language of local democracy, community, and social capital seem to give Serbia a chance at postnational neutrality. Yet these terms, and the larger forms of belonging they index, such as Europe and democracy, are far from neutral in Serbia. The European Union democratization discourse signals power relations that many people in Serbia experience as alienating. Democracy programs mobilize local participation as a neutral path to a postnationalist democratic politics. But the rhetoric of democratic participation silences, rather than resolves, questions about national belonging and its relationship to civic life. The “absent presence” of national questions informs how Serbian citizens struggle to create forms of democratic belonging under the watchful gaze of international legal, political, and economic institutions.

Problematizing the (Post)national in Serbia

These frameworks link local participation to European community, while eliding the role of nationality in constituting democratic citizenship. How does this rhetorical configuration intersect with popular and political discourse in Serbia? In the contemporary Serbian context, it would be hard to find a more charged or rhetorically productive dichotomy than Serbia versus Europe. First, the idea that Serbia is being watched from and judged by “the west” is a common feature of public discourse, political campaigns, and even everyday conversation. The belief that Europe has presented an either/or choice to Serbia, reinforces a popular sense that “the world” is out to get “us.” This perception of a judging eye from the west—embedded in notions like democratic transition or social capital—pits the national identity of Serbianness against Europeanness. The power of this dichotomy to organize widespread perceptions of Serbia’s choices means there is little public space for exploring the ways that the country

36. Greer, Murphy, Øgård, and Rodriguez, Guide to Participatory Democracy, 117.
could be both Serbian and European, democratic (non-nationalist) and patriotic.

Consider an ironic and graphic scene that plays with the notion of Serbia versus Europe: the opening credit sequence of a popular television program, *Mile versus Transition* that ran for several years on the independent network B92.³⁹ Mile, an affable fool, is both the symbol of everything wrong with Serbia and an ironic antihero to urban intellectuals. He opens the program standing against a blue background with a circle of yellow stars (the European Union flag). He saunters suavely up to the circle of yellow stars, carefully contemplates them, and headbutts the ring like a pro-footballer, scattering the stars off-screen.⁴⁰ Mile celebrates his victory by mugging for the camera and slickly running his fingers through his hair. But the stars have another agenda. They come out of nowhere, on the attack (perhaps hurled from offstage by a faceless European Union enemy). They confuse, abuse, and finally subdue Mile. A single star attacks his manhood, and while he is distracted, another brains him in the forehead. In the end Mile seeks revenge by vacuuming up the stars (reduced from his manly tactics to a more domestic approach, perhaps?).⁴¹ The choice is clear for Mile, and for Serbia—either you get them, or they get you. In the either/or context implied by the alignment of democracy and Europe against Serbia and democratic failure, there is no other choice.

Other examples in mainstream media rely on just such oppositions.⁴² Such distinctions operate recursively and can be mapped and remapped in different social contexts, redefining and reframing those contexts in terms of this central dichotomy.⁴³ The Europe versus Serbia (or democracy versus nationalism) distinction is overlaid on specific political positions, forcing more complicated and nuanced issues into either/or camps. These distinctions are further grafted onto “types” of people, defining them as successful or failed democratic subjects.⁴⁴

³⁹. For a detailed analysis of *Mile* in relation to Serbian culture and politics, see Marko Živković, “’Mile vs. Transition’: A Perfect Informant in the Slushy Swamp of Serbian Politics?” *Social Identities* 13, no. 5 (September 2007): 597–610.

⁴⁰. For the particular social and political significance of footballers in Serbia, see Ivan Čolović, *Politics of Identity in Serbia: Essay in Political Anthropology* (New York, 2002). To view an example of Mile fighting the European Union in the opening credits, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eg1vAwTrf0s (last accessed 1 December 2009).

⁴¹. For an analysis of the ways in which the Balkan’s relationship to Europe is gendered, see Helms, “Gendered Transformations of State Power.”


⁴⁴. Take, for example, the common notion of the “other” Serbia (*druga Srbija*) that pits a modern, intellectual, and urban European milieu against a backwards, nationalist, and culturally retrograde social layer. See Ljubiša Rajić, “Koraks, Prva i Druga Srbija,” *Vreme* 785 (19 January 2006) at www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=440050 (last accessed
Europe Is Watching

Mobilizing a language that aligns progress and democracy with belonging to Europe plays into people’s sense that participating in democratic life entails a choice between Serbia and Europe. This is not to say that the mere existence of programs linking participation and European belonging cause apathy. But the discursive frames of these programs find their way into popular media, political rhetoric, and even institutional and funding arrangements. In turn these powerful discursive frames shore up the central dichotomies and tensions already deeply embedded in Serbian everyday life. At this intersection of material practices, discursive frames, and political practice we see why certain framings of participation reinforce people’s sense that political engagement carries with it moral and personal compromises, and even betrayal of one’s commitment to the nation.

These framings are explicitly deployed in Serbian political debates. Take, for example, voter apathy. There is no question that voter apathy greatly increased after the 2000 elections in which Milošević was ousted from power. Multiple elections in the early 2000s failed to generate the necessary 50 percent voter turnout that was required at that time for the electoral process to be legally valid. This low voter turnout seemed strange for a population that had come out in massive numbers for anti-Milošević protests in the late 1990s, and finally for his ouster in 2000. But general sentiment in both popular media and everyday narratives reflected deep disappointment with the early years of democracy, as well as a sense that political choices were neither “real” nor worthwhile in the current system. People often commented to me that after years of being against Milošević, there was no one to vote for.

There are a great many reasons why citizens in Serbia do not participate in formal political processes. Many of these are elucidated in a comprehensive survey conducted by researchers at the University of Belgrade that focuses on citizens’ relationships to politics several years after the democratic revolution of 5 October 2000.45 Interviewees expressed a sense of disappointment in or disillusionment with democracy since 2000; a belief that politics is the domain of the rich, criminal, and corrupt; a

1 December 2009). The dichotomy is perhaps most stark in recent controversies around Kosovo’s independence. Economist Vladimir Gligorov frames the stakes precisely in a column on Serbian foreign policy in the progressive online journal Peščanik. In characterizing Serbian politics as divided between two irreconcilable “pro-European” or national-ist extremes, he notes, “Serbian foreign policy, at least officially, gravitates towards the realization of two central goals: preservation of Kosovo within Serbia and membership in the European Union. . . . Unfortunately, the state of Serbian foreign affairs is the result of avoiding the choice between pro-European and the nationalist policies/politics.” Vladimir Gligorov, “Besciljna spoljna politika,” Peščanik, 23 March 2008 at http://www.pescanik.net/content/view/70/95/ (last accessed 1 December 2009). This and all other translations are mine.

Participation, Apathy, and “Successful” Democratic Transition

sense that politics ought to be professionalized rather than the burden of ordinary men and women. These reasons all highlight people’s fatigue, frustration, and disenchantment with politics. They also, as sociologist Ivana Spasic´ points out, mark citizens’ desire for the clear distinction between professional politics and the private lives and responsibilities of ordinary citizens that is characteristic of liberal democratic regimes.46

What these explanations do not illuminate is the paradoxical relationship between democratic participatory politics and nonparticipation that emerges in the context of international relations of power and judgment. Why are people in Serbia still so concerned about the appearance of apathy? Despite people’s comments that elections presented no real choice and were not meaningful, the fear of apathy and “failed” elections hung like a cloud over most election proceedings. For example, at one political rally I attended for the 2003 presidential election, discourses of apathy (tied to judgments from “the west”) were alternately used to scare, shame, and entice those present. The election followed the March 2003 assassination of Prime Minister Žoran Djindjić who had been hailed, more in death than in life, as Serbia’s great democratic hope. Citing Djindjić and the 5 October revolution, speakers at the rally exhorted voters “not to be apathetic.” As one politician noted, “If on 16 November Serbia stays at home, the spirit of 5 October won’t be victorious.” 47 Another told the crowd that Serbia’s only enemy was apathy and cited a recent article in London’s Financial Times about the high level of apathy. This contributed to an overwhelming sense that the world (here London and the Financial Times came to stand in for a larger “west”) was watching and that Serbs needed to vote to prove their democratic capacity. Comment after comment, and article after article, made clear that the outcome of the election was far less important than the act of voting itself.

Increasingly, participation in the political process in Serbia has been linked to improving the country’s image on a world stage. The rise of what has been labeled apathy coincides with an overwhelming sense in the region that politics is both all powerful and pervasive and utterly ineffective as a form of democratic engagement for the citizenry. Participation produces procedural markers of democratic success—a smooth electoral process, a ratified constitution—rather than substantive political programs and commitments.48 The implications of nonparticipation are twofold: Serbia will not be seen as a serious and responsible state that has achieved democratic stability, and real resources and membership in international associations will be denied on the basis of electoral “failure.” Participation in the political process thus provides access to another set of practices through which Serbia can “succeed” but that remain beyond the control of individuals—World Bank loans, foreign direct investment. Thus the act of participation is only the first step toward a set of non-

47. Author’s fieldnotes from rally at Sports Hall Cair, Niš, 11 November 2003.
48. The argument that the world was watching was also mobilized in encouraging ratification of Serbia’s first post-Milošević constitution in the fall of 2006.
participatory politics, which is where social and political change really happen. Participation is thus not participation in a political process but in a set of power relations that reinforce a simultaneous sense of complicity with Serbia’s marginalization, moral and social responsibility for the failure and violence of the 1990s, and powerlessness on the international stage.

Finally, calls for greater participation ignore the complicated moral and political status in Serbia of those “types of people” associated with democratic discourse and the organizations that implement and receive funding for encouraging participation in politics. The international or internationally funded NGO is an object of suspicion in Serbia, as in much of the postsocialist world. Janine Wedel has shown that the contradictions and social realities of international aid in eastern Europe led to a profound sense of disillusionment in the formerly socialist European countries: “Western donors seemed to be caught in a paradox: to achieve their stated reform goals (in this case, of pluralism, civil society, and democracy), they selected and promoted specific political parties and groups. But this strategy seemed more likely to help narrow, rather than to widen, the range of participation.”

Perceptions about “NGO elites” (a term I often heard in Serbia) were based on their supposed self-interest. Despite the crucial role that NGOs and civic groups played in the democratic revolution, such perceptions have persisted in Serbia. Although some of the most virulent rhetoric against NGOs has disappeared from public discourse, NGO activists are still accused of betrayal, or worse. Overlapping connections and memberships between civic groups and political parties bolstered associations between “dirty” politics and the NGO sector. In a complex environment, notions of participation, community, and democracy signal larger relations of power, contested understandings of belonging, and long-standing tensions between social groups mired in the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities.

49. It is ironic that the ultimate goal of citizen control, participation, and accountability is joining the European Union, an organization in which the general democratic deficit and the displacement of political decision-making to regulatory agencies and technocratic processes have put direct citizen control further out of reach. See, for example, Jan Zielonka, “The Quality of Democracy after Joining the European Union,” *East European Politics and Societies* 21, no. 1 (February 2007): 162–80.

50. Wedel, *Collision and Collusion*, 101. See also Hemment, *Empowering Women in Russia*, 58–64, on the ways in which internationally funded democracy initiatives ironically shore up existing social hierarchies and bolster the status of elites.


52. In Serbia, the student resistance movement Otpor’s transformation into a political party is exemplary: the group lost significant popular support once it formally entered into party politics. The sudden appearance of democratic opposition figures in positions of power after 5 October 2000 continued to fuel popular perception of significant connections between the independent NGO sector and formal governance.

53. This field of contestation is more akin to Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of “social capital” than to Putnam’s. Bourdieu writes of a contested field of social relations, rooted in class
Democratic Participation, Morality, and Culture

In moving toward a conclusion, I want to highlight the moral stakes implied in contemporary democratization efforts and compare them to the moral logics at work in the opening scene of this article. That discourses of democracy are bound to cultural and moral assumptions about progress, civilization, and modernity is clear, whether it be the narrative of clashing civilizations or the link between democratic values, military intervention, and nation-building. Guilhot argues that a moral logic grounded in notions of civic virtue animates contemporary international democratization work and finds its most forceful expression in notions of participation: “Civic virtue is precisely the active participation in the production of the common good. This form of dedicated citizenship is today enacted by NGOs on the global scene, in particular through their reliance on ‘participation’ as a method for solving some of the world’s most pressing problems . . . such participation . . . becomes legitimate because of its moral nature: it takes place in the name of and for the sake of universal values or the common good.”

Ironically, participation has not always been central to modern definitions of democracy. Early instantiations of European democracy pitted elite revolutionaries against aristocratic regimes that specifically decried the involvement of large swaths of the population. And for most of modern democracy’s history, the struggle for participation and enfranchisement excluded the propertyless, women, slaves (and later emancipated slaves), and colonized peoples. Movements for the mass participation of the working class or colonized subjects were historically squashed, as “the masses” were deemed threatening to the democratic order and seen as incapable, too immature, or too uneducated to represent themselves. Many twentieth-century theorists of democracy feared mass participation and decried wide-scale mobilization as the road to chaos and political instability. Other foundational scholars of democracy believed that widespread participation was incompatible with political stability.

struggle, through which people exercise power and dominance by mobilizing unequally distributed resources of political, social, and cultural capital. See Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste (Cambridge, Mass., 1984). For an in-depth comparison of competing theories of social capital (including Putnam and Bourdieu), see Fine, Social Capital versus Social Theory.

55. Guilhot, Democracy Makers, 5–6 (emphasis in the original).
57. David Lloyd and Paul Thomas, Culture and the State (New York, 1998). See also John Kelly and Martha Kaplan, Represented Communities: Fiji and World Decolonialization (Chicago, 2001) for the mobilization of similar arguments in colonial contexts.
58. See, for example, Gaetano Mosca, The Ruling Class (New York, 1939); Jose Ortega y Gasset, Revolt of the Masses (1912; New York, 1957).
The link between participation and democracy was thus an argument to be made rather than an idea to be assumed. Those who saw civic participation as constitutive of, rather than threatening to, democracy argued that participation produced democratic capacity and democratic citizens. Hannah Arendt in her defense of civic republicanism linked political participation and a revitalization of civic life within a public political sphere. Participation in this sphere produced a citizen capable of rising above personal interest and factionalism. In a different vein, defenders of participatory democracy argued that only democratic participation in all spheres of life, including work and the family, could produce a truly democratic society. This link between participation and democracy hinged on the idea that participation was productive of democratic subjectivity and sociality. In a major work on participatory democracy, Carol Pateman made this link explicit, noting that “the major function of participation in the theory of participatory democracy is . . . an educative one, educative in the very widest sense, including both the psychological aspect and the gaining of practice in democratic skills and procedures.” The key here is that participation was not only intrinsic to democracy as a system but to making people into democratic subjects. From this perspective, the view of democracy as a set of stable institutions managed by an elite is replaced by the vision of democratic sociality anchored by action, education, and experience.

These theoretical perspectives were rooted in social and political transformations worldwide. They began as part of a progressive critique of antidemocratic, colonial, and imperial forms of political and economic power. By the 1960s, notions of critical consciousness, grassroots participation, and (often feminist-inspired) networks of grassroots political organizing and participation linked movements across the globe. In the United States, participatory models of democracy were popularized by the civil rights and women’s movements of the 1960s, and, as Anne Philips has noted, “the principles of self-organization were conceived as intrinsic to the political goals” of these groups.

62. Participatory democratic theory was itself affected by the experience of radical democratic participation in the socialist world. For example, the Praxis group, a group of humanist Marxist scholars founded in Yugoslavia in the 1970s, was a source of both inspiration and scholarly exchange for participatory democratic theorists in the United States and western Europe. See William McBride, *From Yugoslav Praxis to Global Pathos* (Lanham, Md., 2001); Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*. It is thus ironic that Yugoslavia, once frequently cited as a “success story” in self-managed participatory democracy has now become a site to which external models of participatory practice are imported to ensure a successful “democratic transition.” What began as an international theoretical and political project (constituted across east-west divides) was ultimately folded into a model of democracy that reinscribes relations of power and difference across those very boundaries.
64. Anne Philips, *Engendering Democracy* (University Park, 1991), 121. In addition, for the impact of notions of participation in critical analysis in social psychology, see Herbert C.
In 1963, Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba identified a “new world political culture” defined by participation, noting that “if there is a political revolution going on throughout the world, it is what might be called the participation explosion.”65 Their idea of civic culture incorporated cultural and psychological (affective) aspects that oriented citizens toward democratic political processes and institutions. A healthy democratic political culture required citizens who had learned to be democratic through their life experiences, education, and dedication to building the common good.

Almond and Verba’s notion of political culture remained central to scholarly understandings of participation, particularly as researchers grappled with the threat that apathy and nonparticipation posed to emerging democracies. Nonparticipation took on a social-psychological as well as a political dimension expressed in notions such as disillusionment and disaffection. For example, in describing apathy in Poland in the 1980s, David Mason, Daniel Nelson, and Bohdan Szklarski argue that a low level of “psychological involvement . . . was accompanied by a detachment from civic obligations, reduced concern for ideological and social goals, a decline in civic pride, and a retreat into private affairs and family life.”66 This language of alienation, disaffection, and retreat implies that apathy is a withdrawal from not only failed state institutions and compromised political processes but a cultural-psychological state produced by political-social contexts. In turn, disaffection and hopelessness are reactions to past experiences of authoritarianism or a reaction to uncertain or compromised state institutions and political processes. Some argue that skepticism or lack of trust in institutions in the postsocialist context may also translate into citizen withdrawal from politics and apathy.67

The notion of a culture of democratic participation convinced many scholars, policymakers, and practitioners that it was not enough to simply introduce democratic processes and procedures into postauthoritarian, postsocialist, or postconflict contexts. Rather, internationals had to help citizens learn to be democratic subjects oriented toward a particular social-political configuration.68 The underlying assumptions of a culturalist turn in theoretical approaches to democracy translated into democratization policies and programs in the post–Cold War period. Indeed, “In recent U.S. history, the promotion of democracy abroad has been mostly...
thought and designed as a cultural if not as an ideological policy.” This 
language of culture also laid the groundwork for a deeply moralizing 
language embedded in programs and agendas meant to produce good 
“democratic political culture.”

The link between participation and democracy has thus come to in- 
clude implicit arguments about political practice and cultural competen- 
cies. Although it began as a critical perspective challenging authoritar- 
ian forms of governance, participatory “culture” has become a means of trans- 
forming undemocratic societies into moral democratic polities oriented 
toward a common good. In turn, democracy is credited with transforming 
socialist, nationalist, and antidemocratic citizens into moral, liberal sub-
jects. Note, for example, the language in this excerpt from the special 
issue of *East European Politics and Societies* cited above:

In unsuccessful countries, “democracy” is often dangerously associated 
with failed or incomplete economic reforms; thus many people react to 
the words “democracy” or “liberalism” with annoyance and scorn. This 
situation needs to be changed: a more solid understanding of democracy 
and its mechanisms must be achieved . . . Thus a “proper, prodemocratic” 
culture needs to be developed. Some *cultural syndromes*, such as various 
forms of religious or nationalistic fundamentalism, are anti-democratic, 
but culture is not immutable. . . . No effort should be spared to instill 
prodemocratic culture through education and through building free 
and responsible public media.

In this argument, the failures of democracy lie not with the social and eco-
nomic inequalities of the democratization process but with citizens’ failure 
to understand democracy itself. In other words, a “‘proper prodemocratic’ 
culture” is defined by an understanding and embrace of normative demo-
cratic principles. The flip side of good democratic culture is the “cultural 
syndrome”—forms of cultural expression stemming from the unsuccess-
ful embrace of democracy. Here the double-edged sword of the culturalist 
turn is evident, as is the implicit moral framework embedded in notions 
of good and bad culture. Although antidemocratic cultural syndromes are 
not incurable, their infectiousness gives the project of democratic educa-
tion a moral urgency. Interestingly, in response to the lurking dangers 
of antidemocratic behavior, policy prescriptions recommend a particular 
focus on civic education and participation, especially for youth. As de-

70. This link between moral transformation, liberalization, and democracy is cer-
tainly not new in (post)socialist Europe. Calls for civil society among east European dis-
sidents were grounded in moral claims that decried the ethical degradations of socialist 
citizens, most famously by Czech dissident and later president, Vaclav Havel. See Vaclav 
against the State in Central-Eastern Europe* (London, 1985). See also Konrád György’s notion 
(emphasis added).
72. Ibid.; Susan Rose-Ackerman, “From Elections to Democracy in Central Europe: 
Public Participation and the Role of Civil Society,” *East European Politics and Societies* 21, 
no. 1 (February 2007): 31–47. For the European Union policy priorities on youth, see also
mocratization efforts take on the notion of culture, it is not surprising that a concern with youth comes to the fore. Perceptions that a society is in crisis are often accompanied by a concern about youth, social reproduction, and the future. What better place to initiate the correction of cultural syndromes—nationalism, despair, bitterness, apathy—than by initiating young people into a culture of democratic participation?

But as the example of Mira shows, we need to ask what people, and young people in particular, are opting out of when they do not participate in politics. For many young Serbian men and women, politics is colored by a sense of the failure of their parents’ generation. Time and again I heard young people express the frustration that they suffered the consequences of violence, poverty, and isolation for which they were not responsible. The idea that political participation could be a regenerative site of moral-cultural possibility ran counter to many of these young people’s experiences. But more critically, the very possibility that politics might be efficacious, that it might reflect the will of the people, ran the risk of implicating the nation in questions of collective guilt and national shame. Those who see a direct link between democratic participation and moral transformation fail to grasp the complexity of this relationship.

This dynamic might well be instructive in other newly democratic contexts, especially where politics is understood to be corrupting and dirty. For example, in his study of university students’ relationship to nationalist discourse in Romania, Jon Fox shows that apathy helps students distance themselves from what they perceive to be a corrupting sphere of politics. Labeling politics “corrupt,” “dirty,” and “putrid,” students used “indifference and scorn—and sometimes humor and irony—to absolve themselves of complicity with the dirty business of politics.” Not surprisingly, Fox’s interlocutors expressed apathy through a moral register that revealed more complex social meanings than simple disinterest. Fox argues that these “students’ self-professed apathy was not the mere absence of interest in politics; it was at the same time a practical accomplishment, a set of stances that required work to both produce and uphold.” Thus it is important to take the complexity and moral significance of nonparticipation, disinterest, and apathy seriously. Mira and many of her generation who have retreated from political engagement struggle to be democratic citizens and to avoid the messy pitfalls, moral compromises, or sense of powerlessness that can accompany political engagement. Indeed, they struggle with a central question in Serbian politics: how to be a Serbian citizen, a democratic participant, and a moral subject. This generation seems caught in the whirlwind of hope and despair, possibility and frustration that characterizes political life and social worlds in contemporary Serbia.

75. Ibid.
Nonparticipation is a practice that condenses overlapping and contradictory networks of meaning and history. By making this argument I do not discount historical and institutional legacies of socialism in contemporary political practice. The experience of the socialist past has a significant impact on how people frame, understand, and imagine politics in postsocialist contexts. Indeed, as many anthropologists have shown, expectations about state-citizen relations, regimes of ownership and property, labor practices, and the moral pitfalls of economic and social survival continue to shape postsocialist lifeworlds. But I believe that not enough attention has been paid to the role that democratic policy and discourse as specific forms of power have in how people understand themselves as specifically postsocialist citizens, successful or failed democratic subjects, Serbians or Europeans. In asking these questions, scholars and policymakers may find more meaningful ways to open up democratic possibilities than circulating and recirculating moralizing narratives of politics and progress, which may alienate more than inspire. Indeed, researchers and practitioners can also interrogate their own roles in creating and deploying frameworks for successful and failed democracy. Such frameworks, and the moral, cultural, and political forms of judgment they convey, are part and parcel of how democracy comes to be meaningful in the postsocialist world and beyond.