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The Role of Emotions and Affect around Student Protests in Serbia* *

ABSTRACT

This research explores the affective and emotional dimensions of the student-led protests in Serbia in 2024/2025. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews, the research examines how emotions shaped mobilization, participation, and persistence within the movement. By situating the case within the broader literature on social movements, emotions, and affect theory, the study challenges rationalist explanations based on cost-benefit logic, showing instead how affective practices, such as hugging or sharing food, produced embodied experiences of unity and democratic possibility. The findings demonstrate that “negative” emotions like fear or pain did not demobilize participants but were transformed into collective strength and endurance. Moreover, hope emerged as an affective outcome of shared experience, fostering political imagination and belief in change. The study argues that understanding affective dimensions of protest is essential

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for grasping how democratic potential can be reactivated even in hybrid or authoritarian regimes. The Serbian student movement thus reveals how affect and emotion can generate solidarity, transform social relations, and open new horizons of political possibility.

KEYWORDS: student protest, affect, emotions, social movements, hope, authoritarianism

INTRODUCTION

On November 1, 2024, the recently reconstructed train station canopy in Novi Sad collapsed and killed 16 people (Le Monde with AFP 2025). This event started a snowball that soon turned into the biggest popular uprising in decades. Soon after, a civic protest started (Dragojlo and Baletić 2024) but a turning point came when a group of people attacked students of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts (Nova 2024; Bednar 2024). After the plenum of this faculty declared blockade (N1 2024), by late December, each and every higher education institution was occupied and blocked by the students (N1 and Beta 2024). Initial demands of students (Student Demands n.d.) were ignored, in a demand for snap general elections (Beta Briefing 2025). This protest, unlike most of those happening over the previous years, was marked by mass mobilization and accompanied by strong emotions, visible in public, and astonishing persistence of students and duration of protest. Moreover, the significance of this protest is in the tactics of the protest that were different from anything we have seen before in Serbia. Two key characteristics of student-led protest in Serbia are blocking of faculties and direct democracy. Faculties are physically occupied by students who use plenums as decision-making bodies. Plenums are based on horizontalism, and the movement has no leaders.

For this introduction, it is important to provide a brief overview of the wider context. The Serbian government is dominated by the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and their regime might be called stabilitocracy (Bieber 2018), or illiberal democracy (Pavlović 2020) or hybrid regime (Ilić and Pudar Draško 2022). Moreover, in terms of elections, Serbia is easy to label as electoral authoritarianism (Pavlović 2020) and captured state (Prelec 2020). With the President as the dominant political figure that turned politics to “one-man show” (Milačić 2024), Serbia is far from liberal or minimal democracy. Moreover, the weak and atomized opposition (Fiket and Spasojević 2023) didn’t manage to impose a serious challenge to the coalition that won power in 2012. To complete the general image of how Serbia looks today, it is important to underline eroding freedom of media (Kmezić 2018; Dragojlov 2025) and dominance of tabloid journalism (Mladenov Jovanović 2018; Jevtić and Vranić 2024).

With my research, I want to understand the role of affect and emotions around student-led protest in Serbia. I am interested in how the affect is manifested in protest, and how students experienced it. Finally, as mainstream parties often struggle to offer convincing answers to the crisis of democracy globally, I am interested in whether there are any lessons to be learned from the student movement in Serbia in terms of affect and emotions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Early theories of crowds pathologized collective action (Le Bon 2016; Hoffer 2002), while later social movement studies call this tradition “fearing emotions” (Goodwin and Jasper 2006), rejecting irrationality. Emergence of noninstitutional politics allowed movement scholars to emerge (Goodwin and Jasper 2006) as protest politics became an inseparable component of Western societies (Della Porta and Diani 2006). With movements such as the student movement of 1968, it was hard to attribute irrationality to their demands and actions.

Theories of social movements were based on rationalist views that saw social movements as result of individual decisions and actions, and basic premises came from rational choice theories (Nash 2010). These theories were interested in why individuals join mass movements as a result of rational calculation of their interests (Zald and McCarthy 2017; Della Porta and Diani 2006). Influenced by Olson (1971), who outlined personal gains as core for understanding of collective action, they provided rationalist explanations of collective action. Personal gains motivate instrumental action that attempts to influence the social and political environment (Klandermans 2014). These theories reduce the decision on participation in movements to cost-benefit analysis.

However, a purely rationalist approach is not sufficient to explain high levels of mobilization in an authoritarian context, due to the fact that repressive action of authoritarian governments can significantly increase the cost of participation and hinder action (Tilly 1978; Oliver 2015). These explanations of collective action overemphasized rationality without taking the role of emotions into account adequately (Della Porta and Diani 2006; Gould 2009). The recognition that emotions have a role and that they pass through political action (Goodwin and Jasper 2006) allowed the emergence of new research. Jasper (2011) argues that in all stages of movement development there are emotions, and they can help in achieving the aims.

Literature on emotions in social movements mostly groups them in two categories. The first are “deactivating” emotions (Goodwin and Jasper 2006) or “debilitating” emotions (Flam 2015) and those prevent collective action. Opposite to them are “subversive mobilizing” (Flam 2015) or “active” emotions (Goodwin and Jasper 2006). Goodwin and Jasper (2006) provide example based

on the research of Gould (2001; 2002). However, the incoherence of their idea, and why I reject this separation of emotions, lies in the very example they bring in. They start with the idea that pride is an active emotion, while shame is deactivating emotion, moving on to the expression of pride in the LGBTIQ+ community. In Stonewall pride riots, pride did motivate militant protest, while the same pride invoked remembrance of the dead, or silent lobbying. Shame on the other hand discouraged expression of anger, but Goodwin and Jasper do not provide explanation or claim that it prevented the movement from collective action. Gould (2009) herself says that the presumption that despair or negative emotions do not have political potential is not always the case as it can also open new political horizons and ideas (2009, 396). After all, there is no necessary connection between negative emotions and demobilization (Gould 2009, 399).

There is no such thing as the singular theory of affect (Gregg and Seigworth 2010) that everyone would agree on, and affect itself is quite difficult to define or describe (Grossberg 1992; Bakko and Merz 2015). The turn to affect in social sciences happened in the mid-ninety nineties and ever since has attracted attention in different research (Clough 2010; Leys 2011). While this turn extended other research, such as exploring the emotions, it also opened new horizons of possibility in politics (Hardt 2007).

Moving on to theories of the affect, we can define affect as a potential autonomous response of the body that is not conscious (Clough and Hardt 2007). This autonomy of the affect is the cornerstone in works of Massumi (2002) who points out that “there is no cultural-theoretical vocabulary specific to affect” (Massumi 2002, 27). Thus, this leads to applying the psychology apparatus and often use of terms emotion and affect as synonyms. Some authors indeed make a sharp distinction between the two indeed (Ahmed 2004; Ngai 2005), blurring the difference. However, it is important to set the difference between the two for the purpose of this research. The difference is situated in the logic they are following – emotion is subjective, personal and described the words, so it is “qualified intensity” (Massumi 2002). In other words, emotions describe the affect. So, discussing the affect is actually discussing nonsignifying and automatic processes that happen beyond our consciousness (Leys 2011; Wetherell 2012), or beyond emotion (Gregg and Seigworth 2010). This seems tense, but this approach is allowing me to get “experience registered personally at given moment” (Massumi 2015). Understanding emotions as expression of affect is understanding it as “sensations that have found the right match in words” (Brennan 2004, 5). Understanding emotions as descriptions of affect actualized or concretized (Gould 2009) is the direction that I took in my research.

The relation of emotion and affect introduces an important cornerstone of my research, the concept of “affective practices” of Margaret Wetherell (2012). In her words “affective practice focuses on emotional as it appears in social life and tries to follow what participants do” (Wetherell 2012, 4). Her approach to affect as “embodied meaning-making” that “could be understood

as human emotion” and that human affect is “linked with meaning-making” (Wetherell 2012) allows me to map these through the interviews. Wetherell’s (2012) approach fits the case of protests in Serbia due to the fact that she sees affective practices as something that can vary in duration and also can be massively scaled up and engage large numbers of people. Thus, my research will use emotions as an indicator of existence of affect, following theories of Massumi (2002) and Wetherell (2012).

The question of how emotions shape what we see in public behaviour of individuals or groups (Ahmed 2014) is relevant for studying movements. Considering the topic of this research, introducing the argument that the “social bond is always rather sensational” (Ahmed 2010, 35) is important as the groups gather around those things that are seen as good. The question Brennan (2004) asks about the “feeling” everyone sensed when they “felt the atmosphere” entering the room is easily transferred to other situations, such as the first student plenums, protest marches, or mass protests. The question of circulation of affect is important for my research.

Discussing the circulation of affect has been present since ideas of “contagion” (Le Bon 2016). Earlier explanations were criticized by Blackman (2008), and they can be perceived as “unsolved business of psychology” (Wetherell 2012). The emotions can move the person, but also, they are about connections as they connect different bodies (Ahmed 2010; 2014). Ahmed’s (2004) work on circulation of affect notes that emotions “do things, and they align individuals with communities” (Ahmed 2004, 119), creating the relation between individuals and collectives. This aligns with the notion of Gould (2009) that “the movement in ‘social movements’ gestures towards the realm of affect” (Gould 2009, 3). Affective practices are distinguished by showing emotions and performance of affect (Wetherell, McConville and McCreanor 2019). This concept is not opposing the theory of Ahmed (2004) in the way that both cannot be used together, as Wetherell’s (2012) approach is not denying circulation itself.

Finally, I want to conclude this framework with the issue of hope. Passion is crucial in political life as it can be a powerful motivator of protest (Gould 2009; Thrift and Amin 2013; Fenton 2016). Grossberg (2018) describes “affective landscapes” as ways we experience things as they are, and how they are going to be in the future. Political possibility can emerge in the gap of how people feel now, and how people might feel, which is directly determined by how those feelings are generated (Grossberg 2018). Our idea of political possibilities is influenced by affective components that we can later name as emotions (Gould 2009).

Lack of hope indeed can be described as “loss of the capacity to imagine that things could be different” (Bloch 1985). The idea that the notion of democracy is strongly related to hope and “possibilities of future” (Fenton 2025) is important for my research because I want to understand how the affect is related to hope in the case of student-led protests in Serbia. In the case of progressive movements, hope has a role in motivation to act and to change

the course (Benski and Langman 2013). Moreover, hope in these terms is not equal to optimism (Anderson 2006), or expected success (Massumi 2015). I do not see hope as a simple potential that politics will improve in the future that will inevitably be unfulfilled (Sleat 2013). Hope in my understanding is a more affective dimension of politics that influences political action (Bettarelli et al. 2024), and that can be shared within groups.

The act of protest is an activity that can evoke hope (Gould 2009) and there are many political expressions of hope (Lacelle-Webster 2023). What makes hope important for democracy and democratic outcomes is that democracy relies on the possibility of mobilization, debate, acting with others, and shaping possible futures (Lacelle-Webster 2023). The connection between the two evident, if hope inspires action and mobilization. But, moreover, hope can lead to political imagination (Gross 2021) of future society or inspire a road to future.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses qualitative methods as they provide insights into human behaviour, and as reality is to be understood through the meanings (Guba and Lincoln 1994) and allow understanding of meaning, events, experiences and actions (Maxwell 2013). They provide us with the perspective of subjects (Bryman 1988; Maxwell 2013).

Ethnography involves participation of researchers in the events that are the focus (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019) and asks for direct involvement of researchers in order to experience meanings (Jorgensen 1989; Fielding 2016). Its advantage in studying protest in the first place is immersing the researcher in the protest environment (Juris 2008).

This is combined with interviews as “valuable as strategies for discovery” (Fielding and Thomas 2016, 283), that are social encounters where the researcher collaborates with the subject in producing retrospective accounts on past actions, experiences, feelings and thoughts (Rapley 2004) which is how knowledge is constructed (James and Busher 2009).

For the purpose of this research, I visited Serbia three times during research. First visit was on January 12, 2025, for the protest in front of the Constitutional Court of Serbia in Belgrade. This protest gathered tens of thousands of people (Reuters 2025). The second visit was on March 15, 2025, for the occasion of a big student protest in Belgrade that gathered almost 325.000 people in the largest protest in the history of Serbia to date (De Launey 2025). Finally, the third visit was from July 2 to 10, where I visited seven protests and road barricades in Belgrade during the stay.

I took notes in a written record and arranged them based on the date and location of the event. I was taking notes while carrying out observation, which

some describe as the best way to do it (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). As some consider notes the “raison d’être” of fieldwork (Fielding 2016, 326), I was taking notes no matter what happens, including while being confronted with police forces.

In recruiting subjects for the interviews, I was using personal contacts, and I also directly contacted official student social media accounts and emails of plenums of different faculties to avoid a biased sample. The population I gathered data from are students that took part in the blockades and protests in Serbia. They study in three major university centres in Serbia – the capital Belgrade, and the cities of Novi Sad and Kragujevac, the next largest cities. I included students from the State University of Novi Pazar who declare themselves Muslims in order to account for their experiences. Due to the disparities in size of universities, I decided not to have an equal number of subjects from each university. All subjects took part in plenums, and six of them took part in marches, bike rides and relay marathons. Five of them are studying in Belgrade, three in Novi Sad and Novi Pazar each, and two in Kragujevac. I recruited students studying formal (1), natural (4), social sciences (5) and humanities (3). Five subjects were male, and eight female. To further avoid bias, five interviewed students had activist backgrounds. In total, I interviewed thirteen subjects. All interviews took place in June and July 2025.

Given my involvement both as a researcher and participant of the events, and in my case participant with direct interest in the outcomes and success of the protest, there was a danger of going native. The reason for complementing ethnography with semi-structured interviews was to mitigate this danger.

For the purpose of analysis, I chose thematic analysis to make sense of qualitative data (Seal 2016). I followed six steps of the process of thematic analysis as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). I was focused on themes that make sense to data (Seal 2016), that have a certain level of patterned response (Braun and Clarke 2006). The reason why I chose thematic analysis is that it allows understanding of experiences or behaviours (Kiger and Varpio 2020). Moreover, thematic analysis allows interpretative researchers to explain how people create meaning in a consistent and reliable way (Boyatzis 2010). While directly stated emotions were obvious, what also helped to identify the emotions are “emotion expressing words” that represent implicit emotional impressions (Kleres 2010, 194). Moreover, I tried to map some of the sensory nouns such as that subjects used as these can also be valuable indicators (Pilkington 2016). Finally, hyperboles (Pirkkalainen 2023) and metaphors indicated emotional and affective states.

FINDINGS

Together in solidarity

Togetherness stood out, and it was reflected by subjects in different contexts and situations. Universal recognition of other people in protest as allies went further, as they were perceived as someone who would help in trouble. Students referred to this as solidarity. One of the students who emphasized this while standing in silence said: "In that moment, no matter what happens, attack, or someone do something they should not be doing on those protests, you have that trust in your comrades, you don't even know their names, you see them first time in your life at that crossroads" (S4, 2025). This was universal in each city where subjects are coming from: "Suddenly, everyone cares for the people that they don't know, people that they are not concerned with, people who maybe didn't even come to the protest" (S7, 2025).

My own observations confirm things that students shared with me. I encountered four different police units equipped for crowd or riot control in two hours while I was in a group of some 200 people, mostly students. I wrote down that "In moments when Police are approaching you feel tension but not panic. The group takes care of itself. Even if someone is afraid and starts running or rapidly retreating, others calm them down and tell them, "Don't panic, we are together" (field notes, July 4, 2025). I felt some of what students shared in the interviews, as at certain moments, I was not afraid for my own safety that much compared to thinking about others around me. Despite the fact that this was a rare opportunity for me to take part in a student-led protest in Serbia, and my role as researcher, I felt like part of the group.

Experiencing Madness

The word "madness" indicated emotions in certain encounters, like when describing the atmosphere when students who marched across Serbia were arriving at their destination. The welcome of these students was described as "madness" (S4, 2025). The madness is exclusively used to describe the experience and the feeling in a group of people. When the first plenum where students discussed and voted on establishing a blockade of the faculty was the topic of conversation, I was interested in what the feeling was when the result in favour of blockade was announced. One student was describing how they lacked experience in organizing and said, "We don't know what we are doing, how are we doing it, what is going on, but we feel that madness" (S9, 2025).

The feeling of adrenaline and euphoria that several subjects felt at certain moments was also noticeable. Claiming that it is transmitted through people, the same student who explained the feeling after the decision to start the blockade said "I think that is really something that is transmitted. That is that

energy, that is that 'madness in the air', that goes, and goes" (S9, 2025). Feeling was described as "hyped" (S4, 2025; S9, 2025; S11, 2025), or even "hit by the wave of energy" (S2, 2025; S6, 2025).

Touches that Feel Familiar

I was initially interested in crying during protests, in early interviews one other practice was more tangible – hugging unknown people. A few students said that they felt "social anxiety" in encounters with unknown people before (S13, 2025; S3, 2025; S5, 2025). The feeling was now described as "amazing" (S9, 2025). Students in different cities noted the same thing: "Now it's completely normal for a stranger to hug me, I don't feel uncomfortable" (S5, 2025).

Hugs with an unknown person now have a different meaning: "You feel huge support at that moment. Like someone is holding your back" (S5, 2025). These encounters included the feeling of love that "gives you wind in the back". The hugs are described as familiar because they are accompanied by internal feelings: "when you have awakened something in someone, you simply feel as if those touches are familiar" (S4, 2025). At the biggest protest I visited, I noticed people who are obviously not close hugging for different reasons (field notes, March 15, 2025). They were smiling, and supportive to each other, sharing the space, but going beyond as they also shared feelings.

Showing Support with Food

Almost all students that took part in protests mentioned giving food donations as something that showed support of people to them. Students mentioned welcoming with food (S4, 2025), or people going out of their houses and bringing apples (S7, 2025). The amount was sometimes so big that students didn't even have enough space to keep all the food (S8, 2025).

Students understood these donations as a way to express support to them (S1, 2025). There were free food stands at one of the protests I visited, but due to the large crowd I could not see them. However, what I did experience at that protest were people who were giving away sweets to everyone (field notes, March 15, 2025). People were buying packets of sweets, going through the crowd, and offering them to others.

Horizon of Hope and Future

Hope is widely experienced by the interviewed students. In most cases, students experienced hope for the first time when they encountered citizens and the masses that supported them. Some stated that it was during the first protest in Belgrade that gathered 100,000 people (S4, 2025; S6, 2025; S10, 2025) while for

others a significant moment was the first plenum when they declared blockade (S1, 2025; S8, 2025). Emergence of hope is always experienced in a group.

Students described hope as “something that smoulders, it is not a flame, but it is a smouldering spark, that is always there, and then it stings you” (S8, 2025). Another said it is like “sun that warms you up from the inside” (S11, 2025). Two more students said that it is “sun shining from you” (S6, 2025) and “sunny day” (S13, 2025). The hope was also followed by a strong wish to do something and be productive (S13, 2025) but it also gave life to new ideas (S1, 2025). Hope also derives from the things that students managed to change (S7, 2025).

CONCLUSIONS

Paying the Price: Dismissing Cost-benefit Logic

Explanations of traditions that were rationalist and focused on the cost and benefit of participation in a mass movement do not provide sufficient, or any explanation whatsoever, for what is going on in Serbia. Violence against students, clashes with police, or arrests did not prevent students, or others, from participation. The approach that cost of participation in an authoritarian context can hinder action (Tilly 1978; Oliver 2015) is not confirmed in my data, as none of the students I talked to said that fear, or any consequences, prevented them from being part of the movement, or actively participating in blockades.

In my field visits, when I had a chance to be chased down by the police forces, or confronted with potential arrests, I did not notice anyone who gave up. Mostly, this led to stronger unity and affective bonds. In the terminology of cost-benefit analysis, the participants of research were ready to pay the price for their participation, regardless of how high it might be. This directly indicates that rationalist approaches to protest mobilization and participation or group behaviour in general are not confirmed here, as in many more historical cases.

Debilitating Emotions: What Are Those?

What I found in my research is that separation of emotions where some prevent mobilization and others encourage it (Goodwin and Jasper 2006; Flam 2015) does not offer explanation for student-led protest in Serbia. As data interpretation shows, students in Serbia experienced different emotions and encountered situations where fear would be expected to emerge. However, in those situations students were motivated to keep protesting. I found evidence of what Goodwin and Jasper (2006) call deactivating emotions and Flam (2015)

debilitating, since there were emotions such as fear, pain or pressure. Yet, I did not find any evidence that these emotions were preventing further action and participation. What I named the “ambivalence of emotions” in my theoretical framework inspired by Gould (2009) is demonstrated throughout the protest in Serbia. This leads me to the conclusion that the emotions such as fear or pain, that are expected to debilitate or deactivate, have significant political potential. These emotions can be “transformed” (Wulff, Bernstein and Taylor 2014) or channelled and utilized to advance movement mobilization and participation. My data rather confirmed the position of Gould (2009) that there is no necessary connection between negative emotions and demobilization or giving up of participation. These emotions are indeed present, but they can produce opposite effects of what Goodwin and Jasper (2006) expected in a context such as the student protest is, where circulating affect and shared meanings motivate participation.

Bringing People Together: Significance of Affective Practices

The concept of affective practices (Wetherell 2012) was useful to understand relations among students, and their relations with supporters. Strong feeling of solidarity and togetherness between students and those citizens who support them was mediated by different affective practices such as hugging or food donations. Donations were also used as an emotional expression of support, but beyond demonstrating simple support, as students were attaching meaning to this. In terms of Wetherell’s (2012) understanding of affect as embodied meaning-making that is understood through emotions, I point to these practices as important experiences of affect by the students.

Even more, hugs by unknown people were expressions of affect, and students explained it as emotionally charged. Hugs are indeed a physical way to show affection, care, solidarity or to express emotions. However, they are rather common among people who know each other. What my data shows is that hugs in this case were among people who never met before. The meaning of these practices among the students was shared as well. Hugs were explained as “touches that feel familiar”, and students witnessed that, unlike before, this didn’t cause social anxiety, but a feeling of love. The hugging became a powerful affective practice that not only brings people together, but it is accompanied by affective and embodied recognition of alliance. The meanings created, such as togetherness, alliance, support or love, emerged from the hugs, which are themselves embodied.

The existence of affective practices confirms the presence of affect in protest. It is true that the academic debate about the preconscious nature of affect is pretty much a rare point of agreement of different theorists, despite the differences among them. Thus, affect is hard to indicate, but Brennan (2004) attributes “energetic dimension” to the affects and has an interesting

explanation that uses “warmth” as an example when feelings of others are enhancing us. In describing their emotions and embodied sensations during student protests, research subjects often used metaphors of sun, heat, spark or warmth. Again, despite conceptual differences among different theorists of affect, this approach also indicated presence of affect.

Circulating Affect: Shaping Communities and Spaces

Following Ahmed’s (2004) idea of circulation of affect and that emotions align people with communities, my research showed that this is what happened in the case of students, but also wider. Students I talked to for the purpose of this research explained that different emotions such as fear, hope, pain, optimism, or anger circulated at the same time, often existing simultaneously. This helped in creating strong bonds among students that started accepting their faculties as home. Students also were clear that they felt that others are sharing the same emotions in some moments, and that they feel that everyone is aligned in that sense.

Confronting the police force, which represents state monopoly of force that would naturally cause fear, caused the opposite. The very reason for that lies in affective practices, and embodied resistance (Wetherell 2012) with bringing bodies tighter together. My research indicates that this is due to circulation of affect as it aligns people in groups along with their feelings (Ahmed 2004).

Where There Is Affect, There Is Hope

My research shows that hope was omnipresent as a feeling among students who participated in protest. This hope does not have a utopian dimension, that Massumi (2015) labelled as hopeless, but rather affective one. What I found in my research is that hope emerges from affective practices and affective encounters that students found themselves in. It is a more affective dimension of politics that influences political life and activities (Bettarelli et al. 2024).

Hope came from the group experience, and in encountering those who support students on different occasions. My research is confirming the positions of Gould (2009) that political possibilities are influenced by affective components that can later be named as emotions. An important finding is that hope is “fuel” for future endeavours, and that it gives birth to new ideas and motivates action. In terms of Gross (2021), it leads to political imagination and can influence outlines of future society. Students see protest as an embodied experience of society they want to live in. What Hardt (2007) called horizons of possibility in politics is embodied into relations established within protest movement led by students. The protest itself is perceived as a possibility of a new and different society.

Motivated by passion (Gould 2009; Thrift and Amin 2013; Fenton 2016), the student-led protests generated emotions that according to Grossberg (2018) can shape the emergence of political possibilities. This possibility emerges in the gap of how people feel now and how they might feel (Grossberg 2018). My research indicates that this gap was evident, and that people experienced how they might feel through the protest. The hope was found in this, and the meaning attached to it was that the future can bring the same feelings of togetherness, solidarity and unity that protest did.

This is the final important insight for the future of democratic struggles, as it shows that the movements that operate with affect and emotions need to nurture democracy at its heart, and need to practice very democratic values, providing a model of new society. Students in Serbia are showing one of the potential ways in which others could do the same. Pure rationalist approaches to politics and simple claims that “democracy is better” are far from sufficient to prevent authoritarianism. Winning hearts of people and creating affective bonds among them, as my research indicates, eventually gives more benefits to strategies of countering authoritarianism and undemocratic tendencies.

FURTHER RESEARCH

The research I conducted has its own limits, deriving from the aims of the research, as each of the aims might be further explored. In order to have a more rounded reflection on student-led protest in Serbia, there are several potential research directions I would propose, especially in the field of affect and emotions.

To create a more comprehensive picture of student protest within society, further research might focus on those who supported students and how they experienced affect and what meanings they attach to mentioned encounters. This would allow a more complete image of the role of affect and emotions around the protests in Serbia.

The strict refusal of students to be classified as left or right, or to declare any ideological commitments is pointing towards potential direction of future research. There are students who belong to different ideologies, and that usually would not be joining forces. Gould (2009) suggests that affect is providing better explanations of work of ideology, and this research could contribute to addressing critique that suggests that some affect theorists have intention to shift focus from ideology consequentially causing indifference to role of ideas and beliefs in politics (Leys 2011). Understanding the interplay of ideology and affect in the protest movement can enrich this debate.

As my research was not concerned with the behavior and actions of the government and supporters of the ruling party, and they do use affects and emotions in their communication and organizing, mostly focusing on

emotions such as fear, it would be interesting to look into this. "The battle of affects", as I would name it, might provide new insights important for the future of democratic struggles. This would without a doubt enrich research of affect in contemporary politics and social movements by understanding what happens when there is an interaction of two different affective strategies.

Finally, considering the significant use of social media by students and emotional content, future research can also look more into the mediation of affect and how it contributed to mobilization and durability of protest.

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ULOGA EMOCIJA I AFEKTA U STUDENTSKOM PROTESTU U SRBIJI

APSTRAKT

Ovaj rad istražuje afektivne i emocionalne dimenzije studentskih protesta u Srbiji 2024–2025. Oslanjajući se na etnografski terenski rad i polustrukturirane intervjuje, istraživanje ispituje kako su emocije oblikovale mobilizaciju, učesće i istrajnost unutar pokreta. Smeštajući slučaj u širu literaturu o društvenim pokretima, emocijama i teoriji afekta, studija dovodi u pitanje racionalistička objašnjenja zasnovana na logici troškova i koristi, pokazujući, umesto toga, kako su afektivne prakse, poput grljenja ili deljenja hrane, proizvele otelotvorena iskustva jedinstva i demokratske mogućnosti. Rezultati pokazuju da „negativne” emocije, poput straha ili bola, nisu demobilisale učesnike, već su se transformisale u kolektivnu snagu i izdržljivost. Štaviše, nada se pojavila kao afektivni ishod zajedničkog iskustva, podstičući političku maštu i verovanje u promene. Studija tvrdi da je razumevanje afektivnih dimenzija protesta neophodno za razumevanje kako se demokratski potencijal može reaktivirati čak i u hibridnim ili autoritarnim režimima. Srpski studentski pokret tako otkriva

kako afekt i emocije mogu generisati solidarnost, transformisati društvene odnose i otvoriti nove horizonte političkih mogućnosti.

KLJUČNE REČI: studentski protest, afekat, emocije, društveni pokreti, nada, autoritarizam