

# The Hybrid Discourse of the Serbian Antibureaucratic Revolution

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## Abstract

This article investigates the discursive logic of the antibureaucratic revolution through discourse analysis of three Serbian dailies: *Politika*, *Borba*, and *Večernje Novosti*. We conceptualize this discursive logic as a “hybrid discourse,” employed by Slobodan Milošević’s faction of the political elite and by prominent Serbian press outlets in their discussions and reporting on the diverse Serbian protest movements of the day. The core of the hybrid discourse, as our analysis demonstrates, consisted of the symbolic interweaving of different types of citizens’ discontent in order to present them as one single demand for societal “reform” that resonated with the agenda of the Serbian political elite. We argue that the hybrid discourse and the antibureaucratic revolution itself had a structural role related to the crisis of systemic legitimacy in Yugoslavia. The hybrid discourse performed the operation of what we term the “reversing of the symbolic fixing of antagonism between the ordinary actors’ discontents and the structurally inevitable reforms,” introducing instead the discursive fusion of the two vocabularies.

**Keywords:** antibureaucratic revolution; hybrid discourse; strikes; Kosovo; reform; social change; Yugoslavia

## Introduction

Analysts of socialist Yugoslavia have a hard enough time grappling with the complexity of its national, economic, and political structure even when they are dealing with periods of relative stability and prosperity in the country, such as the 1970s. But when the structural complexity of Yugoslavia becomes augmented by instability and contingent political dynamics as was the case in the late 1980s, the period that preceded and to a large extent conditioned the violent breakup of the country in the 1990s, things indeed begin to look somewhat unsurveyable. It is therefore no wonder that the “antibureaucratic revolution,” a series of political events that happened in the largest Yugoslav federal republic—Serbia—from the summer of 1988 to early 1989, the time of Slobodan Milošević’s consolidation of power as leader of Serbia, is either quietly ignored or explained in reductionist terms in the literature on Yugoslavia, as a simple outburst of Serbian nationalism or a top-down “orchestrated” mobilization (Vladislavjević 2008).

The “revolution,” however, included at least *four* different types of political mobilization, with different causes, aims, and proportions, some of which predated 1988 but reached a qualitatively new stage in that year: (1) workers’ strikes that began in the early 1980s throughout Yugoslavia in response to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) monitored austerity politics that followed Josip Broz Tito’s death—the strikes exploded in May 1988 in response to the harshest austerity measures introduced thus far, and signaled the beginning of the antibureaucratic revolution, (2) protests of Kosovo Serbs and their allies, strongly backed by Milošević, including two subtypes: *protests of Kosovo Serbs* regarding their difficult “position” in Kosovo (repression by the Albanian majority,

lack of self-determination, attacks on property, etc.) that started in 1986 and peaked in 1988, and *protests of Serbs outside Kosovo* expressing “solidarity with the Kosovo Serbs’ suffering,” which started in the summer of 1988, and (3) *protests of Kosovo Albanians* that erupted in November 1988 in response to the Serbian government’s plan to dismiss the Albanian heads of the Kosovo Provincial Committee of the League of Communists and against the Serbian government’s proposal for changes to the 1974 Constitution which significantly diminished the autonomy of Kosovo. The aim of this article is to give a modest contribution to the understanding of the complexity of the antibureaucratic revolution and the late 1980s in Yugoslavia.

The article analyzes the emergence of a particular discourse in the context of the Serbian “antibureaucratic revolution,” created through the joint effort of the Serbian political elite and the media in the summer and autumn of 1988, with the aim of preparing the terrain for the main phase of the revolution (October 1988–February 1989). We term this strategy the “hybrid discourse” of the antibureaucratic revolution, since it involved a complex discursive interweaving of different forms of citizens’ discontent with the aim of presenting them as one single popular demand for “reform” that resonated with the agenda of the Serbian political elite—namely, with Milošević’s plans for substantive reform of the 1974 Constitution of Yugoslavia.<sup>1</sup>

Nebojša Vladisavljević, an influential analyst of Serbia’s antibureaucratic revolution, identifies in Milošević’s discourse from September and October 1988 a tendency to “deliberately conflate socio-economic with political issues, principally with regard to constitutional reform in Serbia” (2008, 156). Vladisavljević draws our attention to the *modus operandi* of the antibureaucratic revolution—the fusing of heterogeneous forms of citizens’ discontent and protest through the process of rearticulating all protest demands as “antibureaucracy.” Vladisavljević explains that

From September the broader frame of anti-bureaucratic struggle dominated mobilization. The theme reduced a number of largely unrelated phenomena to the struggle of ordinary people against detested high officials, the so-called bureaucrats. The grievances of Kosovo Serbs, the constitutional reform of Serbia and Yugoslavia, the political deadlock at the federal level, the lack of genuine political participation, the economic crisis and falling living standards (...) all now came to be seen as the product of incompetent and irresponsible high officials (2008, 172).

However, Vladisavljević does not explore further the logic of this discursive strategy, mostly leaving open the question of how this fusion of different political phenomena occurred. At the start of the political processes that led to the antibureaucratic revolution, in May 1988, there was no unified and spontaneous social movement in Serbia that combined socio-economic demands with nationalist symbolism and the demands for political democratization. The image of such a multi-dimensional movement that brings together the people and political elite in a common quest for comprehensive societal “reform” was, as Vladisavljević’s analysis clearly shows, the *end result* of the process. The main question that motivates our analysis of the media representation of protests in Serbia from May to November 1988 is precisely how this “unity in difference” was produced.

In contrast to the “elite-centric” approach (Ramet 1992; Ramet 2004; Gagnon 2010) to the antibureaucratic revolution, we agree with authors such as Grdešić (2016) and Vladisavljević (2002, 2008) that the protest movements that shook Serbia in 1988 were an authentic bottom-up phenomenon in which nonelite actors played key roles. We argue, however, that the Serbian political elite largely “produced” the unity of the disparate protest movements. Our analysis aims to show that one of the most important instruments for producing this unity was “hybrid discourse.” The hybrid discourse, developed already in the summer of 1988, constructed a symbolic unity of protests, a notion that all protest movements (mainly in Serbia) were essentially part of one popular desire for “reform.”

In the following sections, we reflect on the profound crisis of systemic legitimacy in 1980s Yugoslavia caused by economic stagnation and the workers’ movement and explain the phenomenon

of hybrid discourse as a particular strategy of response to this crisis. We analyze the discourse of the dailies *Politika*, *Borba*, and *Večernje Novosti* in their reporting on all types of protest, demonstrating the functioning of the hybrid discourse as it appears in the vocabulary of the political elite, the press outlets (which were to varying degrees under its control), and the participants in the protests. In the conclusion we argue that the hybrid discourse would not have had the effect of producing the symbolic unity of the demands of various protests and presenting Milošević's agenda as the solution, if it had not resonated to some extent with the expectations of ordinary social actors.

### Theoretical Framework: The “Hybrid Discourse” in Light of the Yugoslav System’s Crisis of Legitimacy

By 1988, socialist Yugoslavia faced a crisis of systemic legitimacy, primarily as the result of a prolonged economic downturn that escalated after the death of Tito and the introduction of the first arrangements with the IMF in the early 1980s. As Goran Musić points out, the loss of legitimacy was particularly evident within the Serbian political elite: “A significant part of the political and economic elite inside Serbia was starting to view the developmentalist economic reforms of the previous decade and radical political decentralization as grave mistakes. (...) [T]he younger politicians such as Ivan Stambolić and Slobodan Milošević alike saw 1970s as a missed opportunity to continue with the market modernization policies of the 1960s” (Musić 2016, 137).<sup>2</sup>

Within the broad social strata, the crisis of legitimacy was embodied in the birth and gradual growth of *workers’ strikes* against the federal government’s policies of “economic stabilization,” i.e. the cutting of wages and public spending required by the IMF’s demands for foreign debt repayment (see Lowinger 2009; Musić 2016; Woodward 1995b). Few forms of political action and unrest could have posed a graver threat to the legitimacy of the self-management order of socialist Yugoslavia than a large-scale, sustained workers’ movement.

As labor unrest gradually grew from 1981 to its peak in 1986 and 1987, the federal government found itself in a difficult position: it could not explicitly condemn and suppress the workers’ movement, but it had to implement ever harsher economic policies and adapt to a substantially changed international environment.<sup>3</sup> The strike wave culminated in 1987 and 1988, with more than 1700 strikes recorded in both years—however, by late 1988, the strike wave began to subside, and was practically finished by early 1989. Clearly, the antibureaucratic revolution was a factor in defusing the strike wave, even though it occurred in the context of elite conflict between Milošević’s faction of the party and the federal government.

Although recent interpretations such as Vladislavjević’s (2008) and Lowinger’s (2009) have successfully challenged the dominant trend of reducing the antibureaucratic revolution to no more than an episode in the “surge of ethnic nationalism” that destroyed Yugoslavia, or to “Milošević’s scheme” for consolidating power, so far the question whether the antibureaucratic revolution can be considered a form of response to the crisis of systemic legitimacy in Yugoslavia has mostly remained unaddressed. For example, Jake Lowinger’s analysis sees the “revolution” as essentially a part of the Polanyian “double movement”<sup>4</sup> of Yugoslav society in the second half of the 1980s, whereby the Yugoslav political elites of all republics sought to preserve their grip on power by defusing and ultimately incorporating the workers’ movement through ethnic nationalism (Lowinger 2009). Yet, despite the structural optic of Lowinger’s analysis, he reduces the antibureaucratic revolution to one instance in the 1988–1989 process of “breaking of deadlock” between the political elite and the working class that involved elite-controlled nationalist mobilization in all Yugoslav republics.

In our understanding, both types of explanation—Vladislavjević’s “action-theoretical,” which focuses on the complexity of the grassroots level of political mobilization in 1988, and Lowinger’s “structural,” which focuses on nationalist mobilization in all republics—are extremely insightful, but should be complemented by a third type, one that combines action- and structural-theoretic angles, and grasps the complexity of the antibureaucratic revolution through analyzing what might be termed its “symbolic logic.” Our analysis aims neither to contest the fact that ethnic nationalism

was an important factor in the breakup of Yugoslavia, nor to offer an economic explanation of the complex events of 1988–1989 in Yugoslavia. On the contrary, grasping the complexity of the symbolic logic of the antibureaucratic revolution, its fusing of nationalist and economic imaginaries and of different “vocabularies of discontent” used by ordinary social actors, is an attempt to contribute to the understanding of one particular and fruitful strategy of *instrumentalizing both nationalism and political economy* employed by Milošević’s faction—namely, the strategy of *synthesizing* the two. As we also try to demonstrate, the connecting tissue for the synthesis was to a large extent played by the limited strategic use of a third component, that of political and economic liberalism.

While Lowinger seems to deduce from the 1989 constellation of forces that Milošević was “antireformist,” opposed to economic and political liberalization and devoted exclusively to nationalist mobilization, our analysis suggests that Milošević, a former banker in the USA lauded by the IMF and diplomatic circles of the time as an economic reformist (Woodward 1995a; LeBor 2004), was in no way rhetorically opposed to the economic reform and political liberalization in the second half of 1988—the strategic use of the rhetoric of political and economic liberalism was instrumental in legitimizing the actual authoritarian and centralist agenda of his faction.

Even though the attempt of the Yugoslav federal government to implement austerity measures as late as May 1988 was met with a huge backlash in the form of the largest strike wave since the beginning of labor unrest, Lowinger stresses that “1989 was clearly a turning point in the history of Yugoslavia in that the government was finally able to implement key aspects of the reform package that had been blocked for years by worker protest” (2009, 53). In the interest of taming hyperinflation<sup>5</sup> in 1989, Yugoslavia committed to the most far-reaching structural reforms such as trade liberalization, and, above all else, *privatization* that culminated in the opening of the Yugoslav Stock Exchange in Ljubljana in December 1989 (Lowinger 2009, 52; Dyker 2011).

In contrast to Lowinger, we argue that the decisive moment for breaking the political deadlock between the labor movement and the federal government was the summer and autumn of 1988. The successful fusion of the (economic and political) reformist and nationalist imaginaries within the antibureaucratic revolution managed to stabilize the floating signifier of “social change” and thus symbolically responded to the widespread demand for technocratic yet nonalienated (close to the ordinary people) politicians of a new kind, and for meritocratically selected, competent cadres in the economy. This fusion, as we will demonstrate, was performed through the “hybrid discourse” of the antibureaucratic revolution, the discourse whose logic we analyzed in three Serbian dailies by means of critical discourse analysis.

## Methodological Framework

In analyzing the symbolic (discursive) logic of the antibureaucratic revolution, we sought to identify how the complex events of 1988 were represented in the media and how different political vocabularies and distinct normative claims of ordinary social actors were fused within the hybrid discourse of the “revolution.” We mainly focused on the media covering of different kinds of protest that were happening more or less simultaneously in Serbia in the second half of 1988: (1) workers’ strikes, (2a) protests of Kosovo Serbs and (2b) protests expressing “solidarity with the Kosovo Serbs,” and (3) protests of Kosovo Albanians. Our principal research question was: how did the first three varieties of protest—namely, type (1) and the two subtypes of (2)—gradually “coalesce,” not so much physically as symbolically, to form the monolithic representation of the antibureaucratic revolution that we have today?

The analysis is rooted in critical discourse analysis (CDA),<sup>6</sup> an approach to studying discourse in a dialectical relationship with social reality, positing that discourse is both socially shaped and socially constitutive (Fairclough 1995, 55). Following Fairclough, we define discourse as a construction or signification of some domain of social practice from a particular perspective (Fairclough 1995, 94). Understood as particular ways of representing certain aspects of the social

world, discourses often compete with one another, as they not only entail different representations of social events, processes, and relations, but can also represent different “possible worlds,” and in this respect be tied to projects to change the world in particular directions (Fairclough 2003, 17, 124). In any given sociohistorical context, one of the competing discourses may dominate others, depending largely on its relation to the dominant social groups, degree of repetition, the range of representations it can generate (its “scale”) and the ability to encompass grievances and interests of various social actors. One of the goals of analysis of the hybrid discourse is to show how it gradually came to the dominant position in the later part of 1988. Finally, the interpretive framework is complemented with analysis of (de)legitimation strategies (van Dijk, 1998) and the analysis of the vocabularies of discontent that ordinary actors used in order to grasp the reality of the crisis of systemic legitimation of socialist Yugoslavia.

We analyzed the reporting on the 1988 protests in three Belgrade-based press outlets with broad circulation—the Milošević-controlled *Politika*, the populist *Večernje Novosti*, and the federally controlled *Borba*. Well aware of the power of media in socialist Yugoslavia, in the course of building up political support and expanding his rule of the Socialist Republic of Serbia, Milošević extended personal influence over the prominent Serbian dailies, especially *Politika*, and the press now “came to play an important role in deciding the very outcome of the power struggle” (Vladislavjević 2008, 71–72). This was not the case with *Borba*, the daily published by the federal institutions, which remained open for voices of different regional political officials, as well as for the opinion pieces of independent commentators of various ideological profiles. *Večernje Novosti*, the “mainstream” populist daily, adopted the fiery rhetoric of Serbian activists (Grdešić 2016, 784), as well as “antibureaucratic” discourse that resonated well with general public opinion.

The corpus comprised reports, commentaries, and opinion pieces pertaining to all varieties of protests published from May 1 to November 30, 1988. The analyzed articles include instances of different “types” of discourse (in terms of their “producers” or “principals”): media discourse, discourse of members of the political elite, and discourse of participants in the protests.

### Hybrid Discourse at Work: Discourse Analysis of the Media Representation of the 1988 Protests

As our analysis shows, the hybrid discourse—developed by Milošević’s faction of the Yugoslav political elite and used in the Serbian media in their reporting—framed all types of protest except the Kosovo Albanian protests of November 1988 as different reactions to *the same essential crisis and underlying demand*: the crisis of the excessively “bureaucratized” Yugoslav political and economic system and different forms of expression of the fundamental popular “demand for reform.” The term hybrid discourse is related yet distinct from discourses produced through complete chains of equivalence (Laclau and Mouffe 1985), because elements of the discourse that are articulated in this way must bear some ideological and/or contextual “family resemblance” throughout the elements in the chain. The hybrid discourse, in contrast, entails a “unity in difference” of elements, meaning that this requirement of family resemblance is less pronounced. These elements are, within the hybrid discourse, held together through the overall structural instability which creates in ordinary actors a sense of urgency of social change that renders the actors more prepared to accept the incomplete equivalence of the elements within the hybrid discourse (the grievances of Kosovo Serbs and the demand for meritocratic change in the economy).<sup>7</sup>

According to the hybrid discourse reconstructed from media reporting, the “bureaucratized” political system simultaneously suffocates the economy and impedes national self-determination. Elaborate discursive work was put in motion in order to demonstrate that there is one *single solution* for the ongoing crisis of the Yugoslav system: the antibureaucratic revolution, a simultaneous transformation of the economy (liberalization) and politics (centralization combined with high levels of political mobilization “from below”).

Our investigation also established that the antibureaucratic revolution involved not only the incorporation of critique coming from below, but its reshaping in the form of the discursive “fusing” of diverse political phenomena, demands of protest movements that articulated qualitatively different normative claims that were made mutually compatible through what we term the *symbolic fixing of floating signifiers* such as “social change,” “the people” and “bureaucracy.”<sup>8</sup> In the following sections we show how different types of protest were represented in the analyzed media and how the hybrid discourse manifested itself in different contexts and permeated the whole public sphere of that time.

### Workers' Strikes

The first and most widespread type of protest that one identifies in this period is not limited to 1988. The strike wave, which encompassed the whole of Yugoslavia, began in 1981, after the first “stabilization measures” were introduced at the behest of the IMF, peaked in 1986 and 1987 when the Yugoslav federal government signed a new arrangement with the IMF, and dissipated—or rather, was suppressed and incorporated in complex ways by the government—by late 1988.

The austerity measures that were enacted in May 1988 entailed the limiting of salaries and public spending, opening the country to foreign trade and capital, as well as limiting workers' rights (Woodward 1995b). The so-called “May Measures” (and, in particular, the pay freeze of May 15) were met with great public backlash, including a number of strikes, demonstrations, and public gatherings in front of federal institutions in Belgrade (Vladislavljević 2008, 117; Musić 2016, 152). Although the workers, who not only articulated their grievances against the company directors and local officials, but also blamed the federal government for imposing the measures, frequently insisted that their protests were not antisystemic, the wave of strikes in the summer of 1988 certainly undermined the legitimacy of the Yugoslav system and held the potential to be transformed into a conflict at the central political stage (Vladislavljević 2008, 117–118). Therefore, the workers' demands had to be reframed in press reports and placed in “acceptable” terms for which the overarching buzzword was found in the notions of “reform” and “social change.”

When on June 17, 1988 workers of the large agricultural company Zmaj decided to radicalize their strike, on their way to the Federal Assembly they chanted: “We want bread,” “You have betrayed the people,” adding that they “are not outraged only because of wages, but primarily because the society has not undergone changes” (*Politika*, June 18, 1988). In a *Politika* article on June 19, 1988 we can see how the demands of the Zmaj workers that aimed at social change were made compatible with the official line of stabilization politics:

Clearly, the business policy of “Zmaj” in previous years did not bring anything good, and now the only option is new production, new market offers (...) It is, in fact, the essence of economic reforms which are already generally accepted. This acceptance of innovation has been expressed the day before yesterday, when the workers in front of the Assembly of Yugoslavia shouted: “We want change.” Sure, for many these reforms will not be easy, and it is therefore necessary to figure out the appropriate social measures that will pave the way to a market economy (...) This is because the “Zmaj” workers were not just talking about themselves. Everything they said, every slogan that they shouted, shows that they are for a thorough social and political reform.

The above excerpt shows that the notion of social change operated as a floating signifier: complex grievances shouted by Zmaj workers are resolved by the “already accepted” set of reforms that will bring about the (inherent) prosperity of the market economy. As Musić rightfully observes, the actual content and objectives of the reforms were often perceived differently by the workers, company management, and political leadership (2016, 149).

The reporting of *Večernje Novosti* on the same event provides insight into the perspective of the workers (ordinary actors) for whom the need for social change is primarily perceived in terms of

dismantling the corrupt nomenklatura that has failed Tito's program of social justice and replacing them with someone who would arguably be more efficient and accountable:

Those in charge who are most responsible must answer us: for how long are we going to live so miserably (...)? The official (executive) positions should be reserved for those who are competent, rather than for crooks and fraudsters. The municipality of Zemun has no time for us. They tell us how good the production rate is. If it is so, where is our money? (*Večernje Novosti*, June 18, 1988)

Several days after the protest in front of the Assembly, on June 23, 1988, *Večernje Novosti* highlighted that the workers "accept societal and economic reform and will themselves contribute the most to its accomplishment," while the caption below the photograph congealed the logic of the hybrid discourse in the phrase "reform of the economy and responsibility."

On the other hand, *Borba*, the official newspaper of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, was more focused on economic measures and demonstrably skeptical regarding the attempts to discursively fuse political and economic changes, typical for media outlets closer to Milošević. It could be argued that *Borba* presented an instance of opposition to the hybridization, but only insofar as it articulated a predominantly economic approach to the 1980s debt crisis in Yugoslavia. In *Borba*'s article we find an interesting example of nominalization, a linguistic form frequently used in (neo)liberal economic discourses (Fairclough 2003), through which the *process* of the economic reform is presented as an authoritative *entity*, accentuating the inevitability of the proposed socio-economic changes.

The dissatisfaction of the workers from Zmaj is a serious warning that the *economic reform will require us* to deal with the social tensions (...) in order to avoid the reform being called into question, and the workers becoming victims of illusions and demagogic egalitarianism and the radicalism of non-economic "roads" out of the crisis, we need an urgent offensive and an efficient restructuring program for the Yugoslav economy (*Borba*, June 18–19, 1988, emphasis added).

We now turn to the "epicenter" of the antibureaucratic revolution—to early October 1988 when, several days before the protests of workers from the Belgrade industrial suburb of Rakovica in front of the Federal Assembly, *Borba* featured an article reporting on the Rakovica workers' letter to the working class of Yugoslavia, supplemented with interviews with the workers' representatives. In the text entitled "Kičma koja se uspravlja" ("The Spine that is Unbending") we find how a worker at the Rekord factory envisioned the reform as an efficient economic and social policy which would protect the working class from the hazardous effects of inflation, stating:

We demand that the workers no longer be intimidated with economic reform, we stress that the workers are not against economic reform, they want an economic system which will motivate them to work hard, but in which they will also feel the concrete, material rewards for their efforts, a system that will allow them to live better and more dignified lives. (*Borba*, October 1–2, 1988)

A few days later, when addressing the Rakovica workers in front of the Federal Assembly, Milošević "summarized" the demands of the "entire working class and Yugoslav public" and skillfully applied the hybrid discourse in order to create an impression that the society as a whole ("the people") concurs with his own definitions of the problem ("the bureaucrats") and the solution ("the three reforms"). This was achieved through his (re)articulation of demands.

We have heard all demands, and these are not only your demands. These are the demands of the entire working class and the Yugoslav public—to implement economic reform, to conduct a reform of the political system and to stop counterrevolution in Kosovo. These are the main

factors supported by the whole working class and all the nations and nationalities of Yugoslavia, and the League of Communists of Yugoslavia is currently fighting for them (...)

One can safely say that the people as a whole support these demands for reform, for solving the Kosovo issue, for changing the Constitution. And it is certain that (...) the best way for everyone to contribute to the realization of these demands (...) is to work as diligently as possible (...) and (...) to get politically engaged within socialist forces, in order to stabilize and recover the brotherhood and unity of all nations and nationalities, so that this unity could serve as a basis for all of us to attain better quality of life and to begin tackling the crisis in which we have been for too long, not because we cannot work hard, but because of the discord created by the bureaucrats, who have divided the people along national, republican and provincial lines (...) out of (their own) personal interest, to secure positions (*Politika*, October 5, 1988).

Milošević's speech exemplifies the logic of the hybrid discourse in a particularly acute manner. As one can observe, the discursive interweaving of the workers' concrete demands with the floating signifiers of "reform" and "bureaucracy" simultaneously neutralizes the workers' critique and "stabilizes" the signifiers, and the positing of the "constitutive other" in the form of the Kosovo "counterrevolution" completes the symbolic unification of the protesting people and the political elite. Musić (2016) and Vujačić (2006) root Milošević's appeal precisely in the fact that he succeeded in creating an impression of being both an economic reformer and the keeper of egalitarian values, the advocate of the Serbian people and the proponent of the unity of Yugoslavia, due to his ability to encompass all the identities and grievances. As Musić points out, in Milošević's speech, "the concrete calls for wage increase, tax burden deduction, resignation of high functionaries and the introduction of Associated Labor into Parliament were buried under the broader theme of constitutional reforms" (2016, 146).

#### *Protests of (Solidarity with) Kosovo Serbs*

The initially grassroots protest movement of Kosovo Serbs regarding their difficult position in Kosovo started in 1986, but it peaked only in 1988 and played a constitutive role for the antibureaucratic revolution itself (Vladisavljević 2002, 773). In the summer of 1988, it spread outside Kosovo in the form of numerous protests of "solidarity with the Kosovo Serbs' suffering"—a phenomenon intrinsic to the antibureaucratic revolution. These protests gradually came under Milošević's control in the autumn, particularly after the "Yoghurt Revolution" of October 1988 in the capital of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, Novi Sad, which resulted in the overthrow of the regional government and the full subjugation of the Vojvodina leadership to Milošević's rule (Vladisavljević 2008).

In all analyzed dailies, we discovered an abundance of texts that provide insight into the 1988 protests of Kosovo Serbs and their allies. The petition with 2,000 signatures of "Serbia's Women" that was submitted to the President of the Assembly of Yugoslavia, Dušan Popovski, at the beginning of the observed period exemplifies a strong request to take effective action against Albanian nationalists and change the 1974 Constitution:

How does one even begin to explain to the civilized world that today (...) there is a completely legal genocide of a whole nation, perpetrated with those same methods that once already caused the whole world to burn. We demand radical changes to the Constitution that will allow the Socialist Republic of Serbia to be equal to other republics in its rights and its statehood. (*Večernje Novosti*, June 12, 1988)

In conversation with the petitioners, the President of the Serbian National Assembly pointed out that "those who seek freedom and human rights cannot be labeled nationalist," and that "this issue was resolved at the meeting of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia"



(*Večernje Novosti*, June 12, 1988). The protests' demands were thus legitimized by the Serbian political leadership already in June 1988, as the leadership invoked the authority of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia as the highest ideological arbiter, and combined it with a liberal rhetoric of freedom and human rights, that the protesters themselves also relied on.

The protests were depicted in the press and by the Serbian state and party officials as a mobilization of people against “the counterrevolution of Albanian nationalists and separatists” and the struggle to perform “ideo-political differentiation” (to remove corrupt elites, *bureaucracy*) and support the constitutional changes (*reforms*) that will help overcome the overall crisis in Yugoslav society (*social change*). Opportunistic and incompetent elites were blamed for the Kosovo Serbs' problems. At a public gathering in Kosovo Polje in late June 1988, the president of the Council of Municipalities of the Federal Assembly of Serbia argued that: “the counterrevolution in Kosovo was not suppressed over the past seven years because of the opportunism and bad relations in the former leadership of Serbia, which did not want to fight the separatists with concrete actions” (*Večernje Novosti*, June 25, 1988).

Even before the July protest in Novi Sad that initiated “solidarity gatherings” across Vojvodina, Montenegro, and central Serbia, the Kosovo Serb activists had already shifted their attention to other republics and province leaderships' sensitivity for their problems (turning their discontent toward bureaucracies—this time, in the national sense) and suggested going to Novi Sad to “see whether the people of Vojvodina think the same as their leadership” (*Večernje Novosti*, July 1, 1988). The notion of people, a floating signifier *par excellence*, was evoked quite often. On August 10, 1988, *Politika* published an article on the meeting of Kosovo Serbs:

No one can manipulate this nation because it has suffered a lot. (...) [T]here are demands for a unified Serbia, freedom, equality and everything else a man needs at the end of the 20th century. In contrast to the people, one notices that certain officials want some other kind of Yugoslavia, not one with a strong and unified Serbia. This movement of the Serbian people for solving the Serbian political problem presents a threat to the bureaucracy in the whole country (...)

The above example demonstrates the complex symbolic fusing of “antibureaucratic” vocabulary and Serbian nationalism with certain elements of political liberalism (freedom, equality, universal human rights), an aspect of the antibureaucratic revolution that is missing from most analyses. The phrase “everything else a man needs at the end of the 20th century” also demonstrates that the hybrid discourse attempted to place the “antibureaucratic” project into a “global” context, that it presented Milošević's agenda as an effort of “keeping up with the times”—as we argue in more detail in the conclusion, with this rhetorical move the creators of the hybrid discourse were responding to a very real sentiment within the broad social strata in Yugoslavia.

We found another aspect of hybrid discourse in the reporting on protests in Novi Sad on October 6, 1988, after which the Vojvodina leadership resigned, and it became known as the “Yoghurt Revolution:” *Politika*'s 15 page-long report on the events stated that “practically the entire working class of Novi Sad came out to protest” (*Politika*, October 7, 1988), showing that the legitimation of protests was achieved not only through the authority of the Party, the people, and the pro-reform sentiment, but also through the very fact that the workers (the central figure of the Yugoslav self-management system) participated in them in substantial numbers.

### *Protests of Kosovo Albanians*

After the purge in Vojvodina, Milošević decided to take control of Kosovo representatives in the federal party and state organs in order to strengthen Serbia's position on the federal level. The session of the Province Committee, where Kosovo officials were supposed to resign, was called for November 17 (Vladislavljević 2008, 182). This initiated five-day protests of Kosovo Albanians in Priština and other towns against the dismissal of Azem Vlasi, Kaqusha Jashari, and others, as well as against the intended changes to the 1974 Constitution, which significantly diminished the autonomy of Kosovo.

Although the protests had the usual Yugoslav political iconography, the analyzed press outlets dismissed these as a mere “scenography,” serving to cover the “true” character of the protests. In a report published on November 2, 1988, *Borba* wrote ironically: “Everything unfolded under the Yugoslav tricolor, the flag of the party and the flag of SR Serbia, as well as the flags of the Albanian ethnic group in Kosovo and the miners (workers) flag.”

In contrast to the dominant framing of the Kosovo Serb protests and rallies of solidarity presented above, the protests of Kosovo Albanians in November 1988 were delegitimized in the press as antisystemic, nationalist, and separatist:

This, after all, is the goal of those who organized all this, an organization and leadership that has been infiltrated by enemy forces. They have succeeded in manipulating a portion of the workers. From nearly every detail we can see that the entire action is entirely well organized and led (*Večernje Novosti*, November 20, 1988)

In times of instability, the goals and demands of protest movements of “outgroups” that challenge the dominant group need to be delegitimized (van Dijk 1998). The protests of Kosovo Albanians were thus not only labeled as a continuation of the “counter-revolutionary” mobilizations of 1968 and 1981, they were represented as protests *against the desired changes*:

(...) [T]hese are essentially anti-Serbian protests of large proportion, prepared in the same kitchen of 1968 and 1981. The basic aims and demands are that nothing change, that existing politics be defended at all cost. (...) What has been happening in Kosovo these last few days are protests, but protests as a new emergence of the continuous counter-revolution of Albanian nationalists and separatists. (*Večernje Novosti*, November 22, 1988)

The fact that the majority of Kosovo Albanians were strongly opposed to constitutional reform that diminished the province’s autonomy was used to frame the protests as a force of social inertia equated with the negative connotations of bureaucratic power. In this sense, the Albanian protests may be seen as a “constitutive other” of the antibureaucratic revolution.

#### *Hybrid Discourse from Above and Below: The Desire for Social Change*

Since the Yugoslav society of the late 1980s was plagued by both financial and “ideological” uncertainty, we should not be surprised that the keyword of hybrid discourse is *social change*: “things will not be the same” was the implicit credo of the discourse that resonated with the public sphere. It is the “call for change” that the ordinary actors, impoverished through austerity measures of stabilization, heard when listening to the promises of the antibureaucratic revolution. A multiplicity of forms of collective desire for taking charge of one’s life through social change opened up the possibility for parts of the elite close to Milošević to depict him as the only one who is efficient enough to fulfill *different visions* of urgently needed changes. Later, this picture was to a great degree interiorized by ordinary actors and endorsed by the media.

One rather important illustration of how structural factors created the maneuvering space for Milošević’s faction can be seen from the telephone social survey conducted by *Borba*,<sup>10</sup> aptly called “*Borba*’s Barometer.” In this nationwide survey, citizens of Yugoslavia had an opportunity to provide answers to some of the more pressing questions within the Yugoslav society of the day. For example, when asked: how do you see the future of the state—will we find our way out through regular means or do we need radical changes?—52% of the surveyed people stated that radical changes were needed (“we don’t need conclusions from meetings, but rather deep, quick, and thorough changes”), while 40% thought that regular means will suffice, and the remaining 8% opted for “I don’t know.” Even if we take these percentages with a grain of salt, one cannot ignore the fact that urgent and thorough political and economic action was seen as vitally needed throughout Yugoslavia.

The need for change is closely related to the level of ambivalence (among ordinary actors) regarding the existing socioeconomic system and those who at the time held key positions in the state. An interesting example of this ambivalence can be found in a “measuring” of “*Borba’s Barometer*” that followed the question: “Do you think that we first need to identify those responsible for the current state of affairs, or should finding a way out (of the crisis) be a priority?” (*Borba*, August 31, 1988). In their response, 45% of the respondents thought that finding solutions should come before determining responsibility, while 43% maintained that the opposite approach was more adequate.

Finally, perhaps a crucial insight into the structural factors that formed a “collective disposition” toward social change can be found in the social poll that asked quite a simple question: “Do you personally have any ideas how to get out of the crisis in the quickest possible way?” (*Borba*, August 31, 1988). This question also reveals the level of fragmentation of Yugoslav society. Namely, 16% of the respondents think that economic reform should be a priority, 20% want more “work discipline,” 10% find that a “proper stimulation for people to work harder” would be the optimal solution. Regarding political issues, 11% of the respondents want changes “on the top,” 10% of them wish that the “younger and more capable take charge,” 5% finds that a federalization of the state would be the best solution, 5% maintain that better state management would be in order, 2% are for “one strong leader,” while another 2% hold that Yugoslavia needs more democracy. Finally, 22% do not know the answer, while 5% think that others should worry about these kind of issues.

“*Borba’s Barometer*” shows that the central operation of the hybrid discourse involved a subtle form of *fusing two vocabularies* of the Yugoslav ordinary actors’ discontent. The *first form* of discontent was expressed through the vocabulary of the “suffering” of ordinary actors, a vocabulary that constructs the image of ordinary people being “betrayed” by the political elite incapable of continuing Tito’ legacy.

The *second form* of discontent that one can identify among the broad social strata takes the shape of a vocabulary of *social change*, and also centers around the archetypal trope of a “corrupt elite,” the Yugoslav nomenklatura of “armchair politicians” (*foteljaši*), incompetent and inefficient bureaucrats who make their way to key positions in the economy and the political system, not through processes of meritocratic selection, but through machinations, nepotism, and intra-party power games. The “corrupt elite” is the primary source of the crisis in Yugoslavia within this vocabulary, and the solution is presented in terms of a “meritocratic” reform of the system, often envisaged along the lines of integrating Yugoslavia into the Western world. However, one key characteristic of the vocabulary of “change” is that the imperative of reform toward meritocracy is not seen as necessarily entwined with one dimension of Yugoslav economic policy that already signaled the integration of Yugoslavia into the West—the politics of “stabilization” monitored by the IMF, austerity measures, which were by and large rejected by the population.

As one notices, the peculiar quality of the two vocabularies—those of the “suffering” of ordinary actors and of “social change”—is that they can be made both mutually compatible and antagonistic through processes of further symbolic “fixing.” The common denominator of the two vocabularies is the image of the “corrupt elite,” the “bureaucrats,” but the fundamental antagonism between the two lies in the relationship to “Tito’s legacy,” to self-management socialism: the vocabulary of suffering is, *prima facie*, devoted to the preserving (or restoring) of Tito’s legacy, while the one of “social change” is open toward substantive kinds of societal reform.

A particular process of symbolic fixing was already taking place in Yugoslavia in the period of 1986–1988: the fixing of the symbolic *antagonism* between the trope of the ordinary actors’ “suffering” and that of “social change.” The central message of the workers’ strikes was that the “reforms” the federal government was undertaking were the primary cause of the popular masses’ suffering, which translates into fundamental antagonism between the “elites” and the “people,” and was, of course, an existential threat to the Yugoslav nomenklatura by 1988. Milošević’s main talent was to rhetorically minimize the negative effects of social change (austerity measures) and to highlight the “fact” that changes that he promised to conduct would restore everyday actors to the position of full-fledged *political subjects* as promised in self-management socialism (in that regard, Milošević was a “harbinger

of social change” offering instant amelioration of the overall structural instability and the hybrid discourse was introduced to posit this promise in various ideological registers).

*Politika*’s article reporting on the discussion in the Presidency of the Republic Committee of the Socialist Alliance of the Working People (SAWP), titled “The crisis has forced people to take part in the creation and implementation of policies,” includes an excerpt from Bogdan Trifunović’s speech:

It’s not only about the presence of the people, it’s about their direct engagement in political affairs, on a clear socialist and Yugoslav platform (...) The present times demand this kind of role from the Socialist Alliance. (...) The crisis has shown to the people that they can’t be passive listeners of any official, in any kind of forum, they cannot be passively waiting for others’ initiatives and decisions, they have to take part in the creation and implementation of policies themselves (*Politika*, October 6, 1988)

Trifunović’s rhetoric is suggesting that it is the “crisis” (in other words, the political failures of the “corrupt elite”—bureaucracy) that has created the space for the political agency of ordinary actors. This element of the hybrid discourse ties in very well with Milošević’s message to the working class, formulated in an extensive interview for the Serbian weekly *NIN* which featured in all major press outlets in the early stage of the revolution, in which he elaborates the theme of the corrupt elite substantially:

Of all the questions you asked, this one I like best, said Slobodan Milošević when answering the question why certain Communists offer tears to the people instead of political programs for overcoming the crisis. For a long time I have been hearing only complaints from the highest political positions, they have escalated into a kind of defeatism (...) I personally have fought this defeatism (...) it (...) is an inevitable consequence of the fact that some people have been in leading positions for too long, have lost both the ideas and motives for a serious, and especially creative political work, and the lack of this seriousness and creativity have especially come to the fore in times of crisis.

The reform has to bring about radical changes, said Slobodan Milošević. One shouldn’t draw the wrong conclusion, that because these reforms are radical, they will be anti-socialist. That possibility frightens some and makes others happy. But there are no grounds for either fear or joy.

Nationalism is a cuckoo’s egg planted into the Yugoslav working class (...) by national bureaucracies and the remnants of—to use an old-fashioned term—the “class enemy.” (*Borba*, July 1, 1988)

The above excerpts demonstrate how the hybrid discourse managed to counter the process of the symbolic fixing of an antagonism between the “people” and the structurally unavoidable “reforms.” What the hybrid discourse managed to accomplish was the opposite kind of symbolic fixing, the *fusing* of the vocabularies of suffering and social change, primarily through the positing of “bureaucracy” as the common enemy of the suffering masses, the need for comprehensive societal “reform,” and the need to address the national grievances of Serbs. Within this new symbolic landscape, as Vladislavjević notes, Milošević was “expected to infuse efficiency and flexibility into a rigid and lethargic party apparatus and bring it in line with changes that had already occurred in society” (Vladislavjević 2008, 70).

### Conclusion: The Ordinary Actors’ Receptivity for Hybrid Discourse

As our analysis tried to show, the antibureaucratic revolution was a far more complex phenomenon than an episode in the “nationalist mobilization” that broke the deadlock between the workers’ movement and the federal government, and Milošević did much more than simply co-opt the labor movement through nationalism. As we argued, hybrid discourse was instrumental in *reversing the*

process of the symbolic fixing of the antagonism between the ordinary actors' discontents and the structurally inevitable reforms. For Lowinger (2009, 76), Milošević was the "ultimate anti-Tito:" "where Tito seemingly always knew precisely how to defuse a crisis or settle a dispute, Milosevic always knew how to foment and exploit divisions." Yet, Lowinger neglects the fact that Milošević also knew how to produce "connections" between seemingly completely disparate phenomena—workers' strikes, Kosovo Serb protests, and the general desire for social change. As some of our sources demonstrate, Milošević's rhetoric and the hybrid discourse in general invoked the need for Yugoslavia to "catch up" with the rest of the developed world, to be able to provide to its citizens "everything that a man needs at the end of the 20th century."

There exists, to a certain extent, a consensus among the interpreters of the 1980s in Yugoslavia (Lowinger, Grdešić, Woodward) that workers were not in favor of a fundamental transformation of the Yugoslav system. For example, Lowinger (2009, 19) points out that "it makes little sense to assume that the movement emerged in favor of greater liberalization once it can be shown that it was neoliberal restructuring against which the labor movement was reacting," suggesting that workers in fact desired only the "correction" of a corrupted, yet essentially legitimate political and economic system—the replacement of "bureaucratized," corrupt and alienated party elites with the return to a more authentically "self-management" form of governance.

Our analysis paints a somewhat more complex picture: while the broad social strata in Yugoslavia were definitely opposed to politics of austerity, we argue that they were not against societal "liberalization" understood more broadly, as a constellation of processes: further relaxation of authoritarianism, greater participation of ordinary people in the decision-making processes, transformation of corrupt and inefficient, "bureaucratized" state-owned enterprises, and, above all, the introduction of *meritocratic procedures* ("multi-candidate elections") for the election of both state functionaries and economic cadres which could pull the country out of the crisis.

The ordinary actors understandably did not use explicit antisystemic language in stating their requests (they always "held" the proverbial "picture of Tito"), but an analysis of their discourse (exemplified by "*Borba's* Barometer") cannot but notice a particular demand—that for a new type of political and economic leadership, agile, innovative and knowledgeable, a leadership that will be capable of changing whatever is necessary in the system itself to restore economic welfare (which did not inherently imply conservation of the existing system, as most analysts of Yugoslavia seem to infer). This technocratic figure of a new type of leader fuses within itself the motives of "entrepreneurship" and responsiveness to ordinary people. In that sense, we argue that the image of the new leader, the political-economic "entrepreneur," who is at the same time prepared to engage in direct discussions with ordinary actors, did present an element of a liberal dimension of the antibureaucratic discourse.

The above arguments suggest that an explanation of Yugoslavia's upheaval in the late 1980s and the subsequent disintegration that focuses solely on the political elite's successful substitution of "nationalism" for "economic welfare" misses one crucial dimension. Namely, no such strategy of substitution would have worked if the inchoate public demand for social change, the demand that Yugoslavia somehow "keep up with the times" was not addressed as well within the symbolic logic of the antibureaucratic revolution. In trying to understand the sources of the liberal impulses in the Yugoslav population, one should not neglect the fact that Yugoslavia was itself being forcefully drawn into the vortex of the global "neoliberal revolution" through its IMF tutorship.

We would argue that ordinary actors held an intuition that some kind of fundamental transformation of the Yugoslav society was inevitable, in both factual and normative terms. Our analysis demonstrated that a genuine desire for *social change* did exist in the broad social strata of Yugoslavia, and, consequently, that not just the "corrupt elite," but the Yugoslav socio-economic order itself, was by the late 1980s delegitimized to a significant extent. The hybrid discourse of the antibureaucratic revolution was, arguably, as sophisticated an attempt as imaginable on the part of Milošević's faction of the Yugoslav political elite to transform the profound crisis of systemic legitimacy in Yugoslavia into a new foundation of legitimacy for its own authoritarian project.

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## Notes

- 1 The proposal comprised reforms in the enterprise sector and changes in the structure of the federal state. It aimed at achieving greater efficiency of the economic subjects based on profitability criteria, as well as measures toward the tighter integration of the Yugoslav market. The plan was premised on the argument that once federal institutions became stronger, and Serbia gained greater control over its two autonomous regions, economic liberalization and democratization of political life would help Yugoslavia transform into a functional state, in line with the global trends (Musić 2016, 138). See also Hayden 1999; Lydall 1989.
- 2 This complicated entanglement of different social systems that was typical for the Yugoslav model of socialism was also visible in the form of normative-value dissonance which, according to Lazić and Cvejić (2007), refers to a situation when a large number of individuals (members of social groups such as class) adopt (or retain) value orientations that contravene the normative system of a society they live in.
- 3 By the “changed international environment” we mean a constellation of processes that gradually undermined Yugoslavia’s symbolic standing as the “leader of the Non-Aligned movement” and a Cold War “buffer zone.” Furthermore, the “neoliberal revolution” of the late 1970s and the subsequent transformation of the Eastern bloc that started in 1985 involved a multifaceted “liberalization.” All these processes aggravated the intra-Yugoslav crisis of systemic legitimacy in complex ways. Susan Woodward explains the change of international circumstances succinctly: “By 1985, these assumptions were seriously challenged as a result of changes in Europe. The moves toward greater European integration after 1985 (...) suggested that the division of the world economy into separate markets, which had given Yugoslav manufacturers some flexibility, might end” (Woodward 1995b, 349).
- 4 In *The Great Transformation*, Karl Polanyi (2001) formulates the influential conception of class struggle as the “double movement” of society, which refers to the “self-protection” of “society” from the attempts at “disembedding” the market from the institutional complex of society that restrains the capitalist imperative of absolute commodification. In Polanyi’s perspective, the “deadlock” between proponents of the disembedding of the market (bourgeoisie) and their opponents (workers’ movements, social democrats, etc.) is broken through the bourgeoisie’s endorsement of fascism, which co-opts the working class. In Lowinger’s analysis, the double movement pertains to (1) the attempts of the federal Yugoslav government to liberalize the economy and introduce austerity measures from 1981 onward, and (2) the labor unrest that responds to these attempts and successfully blocks them.
- 5 Jeffrey Sachs and David Lipton pointed out that the measures conducted in 1989 were radical: “The Yugoslav shock program has several simultaneous aims: to stop Yugoslavia’s hyperinflation (...) to open the country’s borders to international trade in a bid to reintegrate Yugoslavia with Western Europe; and to reintroduce private ownership of businesses” adding that “it was International Monetary Fund advice that helped cause Yugoslavia to drift from high inflation into hyperinflation” (Sachs and Lipton 1989).
- 6 For systematic studies of media coverage of the 1988 protests that apply content analysis, see Mimica and Vučetić (2008), and a recent mixed-method study conducted by Grdesić (2015). Critical discourse analysis is similar to content analysis in their shared orientation toward the study of textual data in order to analyze social issues. However, discourse analysis is a hermeneutical, interpretive, and anti-essentialist approach, while content analysis (even in its

qualitative form) remains positivist. Content analysis normally rests on the development of analytical categories for a coding frame which is then applied to data, while discourse analysis relies more on an inductive approach and assumes reconstruction of discourses (or their particular features) from the corpus (Hardy, Harley & Phillips 2004, 20).

- 7 In that regard the concept of hybrid discourse can be considered an instance of Boltanski's "managerial" or "complex domination" (Boltanski 2011) where those in a position of power acknowledge the "necessity" of partial social critique and change but only as a means of undermining radical and comprehensive forms of critique.
- 8 Following Laclau (2005), Grdešić defines floating signifiers as empty markers that are "undergoing a process of change, most notably during a period of political upheaval," when even the most fundamental concepts of society's symbolic order may float toward new meanings" (Grdešić 2016, 787). According to Grdešić, the notion of "bureaucracy" emerged "as an umbrella term that defined the opponents of the people and served to galvanize popular mobilization. The bureaucracy could be targeted from both a socialist and a nationalist perspective, as either a parasitic elite living at the expense of the working class or as a national bureaucracy determined to divide the people according to ethnic lines" (779). In this respect, Grdešić also speaks of the hybridization of nationalism and socialism, but in contrast to our analysis, insists that there was no link between liberalism (both economic and political) and the "antibureaucratic" attitude in Serbia, as he examines the revolution as a populist phenomenon (Grdesic 2015).
- 9 On the long-term strategy of the Yugoslav political elite to delegitimize the Kosovo Albanians' protests of 1968, 1981, and 1988 as nationalist and thus counterrevolutionary, even when they included socio-economic demands, see Ivković, Petrović Trifunović, and Prodanović (2015).
- 10 *Borba's* Barometer is here used as a relatively systematic media overview of the citizens' insight into the state of Yugoslav social structure. In that sense, the formulation of survey questions, as well as selection of emblematic answers could be seen as another emanation of media discourse.

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