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Grassroots Groups, Milošević or Dissident Intellectuals?

A Controversy over the Origins and Dynamics of the Mobilisation of Kosovo Serbs in the 1980s

Nebojša Vladisavljević (LSE)

The mobilisation of Kosovo Serbs, barely noticeable from the capital initially but highly visible at the centre political stage between 1986 and 1988, played an important part in the political struggles of the late socialist Yugoslavia. The prevailing view in the literature is that Kosovo Serbs were little more than passive recipients of the attitudes and actions of high officials and dissident intellectuals. The elite thesis says that Belgrade-based dissident intellectuals initiated and guided the mobilisation of Kosovo Serbs, aiming to undermine the party’s approach to Yugoslavia’s national question and to initiate reassessment of the official policy on Kosovo and Serb–Albanian relations. According to the thesis, Milošević then took over and orchestrated the action of various groups of Kosovo Serbs in order to make the case for the removal of Kosovo’s autonomy.\(^1\) The intellectuals and Milošević have generally supported this interpretation, claiming their role in the events leading to the constitutional change to the disadvantage of Kosovo Albanians in 1989–1990.

The prevailing view on the mobilisation of Kosovo Serbs in the 1980s requires attention partly because it reflects broader debates among specialists on the former Yugoslavia and socialist and non-democratic regimes in general. Firstly, the elite thesis originates from the focus on elites, high politics and personalities, especially Milošević, as well as on the discourse rather than behaviour of political actors in research on the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Secondly, the thesis provides an implicit theory about the
emergence and timing of mobilisation in socialist party-states. It is based on two, seemingly assumptions. One assumption is that the increase in grievances, originating from the deterioration of the relative position of a group, leads to the protest of its members. Since the mobilisation occurred at a time when the position of Serbs in relation to Albanians in Kosovo was not deteriorating and both the scale of their mobilisation and the inter-ethnic incidents that triggered protests were repeatedly exaggerated, many concluded that elites had a decisive role in the events. Another assumption is that the prospect of a sustained autonomous mobilisation of non-elite actors in a socialist party-state was hardly realistic and that only high officials and, to a smaller extent, dissident intellectuals possessed the resources required to make this happen.

The prevailing view on the mobilisation of Kosovo Serbs is based largely on the testimonies of Milošević’s opponents in Serbia’s leadership, which few bothered to reassess in the context of Serbia’s repressive policies towards Kosovo Albanians in the 1990s. Ivan Stambolić, for example, claimed that protests, though rooted in legitimate concerns of Kosovo Serbs, were orchestrated by a Belgrade-based “nationalist directorate,” meaning dissident intellectuals and Dobrica Ćosić, a well-known dissident novelist who had been purged from the higher party ranks for his disapproval of the party’s policy on Kosovo in 1968, and amplified by Milošević. However, the elite thesis is not supported by evidence. It merely reflects the lack of information about the collective action of Kosovo Serbs before 1988, since Serb–Albanian relations were then still a taboo topic outside official organisations. This problem is associated with the study of popular protest in general and in non-democratic states in particular. Since it is not easy to study groups that do not produce and store documents and are on the
margins of political life, scholars often focus on documents produced by intellectuals supporting a social movement.

Drawing on previously unavailable sources, I have found that various grassroots groups of Kosovo Serbs played a decisive role in the mobilisation, originating from the post-1966 twist in the politics of inequality and their rapid demographic decline in Kosovo. I show that the mobilisation of Kosovo Serbs was autonomous through a close look into their protest networks, demands and protest strategies as well as their links with the dissident intellectuals, other confidants and high officials of Yugoslavia, Serbia and Kosovo. The high officials tolerated the mobilisation partly because of the political changes that occurred in the first half of the 1980s, partly because of the small scale of mobilisation and partly due to the moderate strategies of the protest groups. Having in mind the episodes of mobilisation in socialist Yugoslavia, such as the 1968 and 1981 protests of Kosovo Albanians, it is hardly surprising that changes in political context favourable to a group, rather than a deterioration of its relative position, often lead to the protest of its members. The argument in this article only partly touches upon the role of institutional factors in the rise of the movement of Kosovo Serbs, since I have discussed this relationship elsewhere.³

The Politics of Inequality and the Demographic Decline of Kosovo Serbs

The mobilisation of Kosovo Serbs in the 1980s originated from consequences of the post-1966 shift in the politics of inequality and the rapid demographic decline of Kosovo Serbs in relation to Kosovo Albanians. The policy of the League of Yugoslav Communists on Kosovo, a part of its approach to Yugoslavia’s national question, proved unable to prevent the continuation of the pre-1945 politics of inequality, which
was to the disadvantage of one or the other ethnonational group. Aware of the hostility of Kosovo Albanians towards the state and regime after the war, the Communist leadership sought their cooperation. The new government designated Kosovo as an autonomous region in Serbia, banned post-1918 Serb settlers from returning to the region after they had been expelled during the Second World War, opened Albanian-language schools, encouraged the cultural emancipation of Kosovo Albanians and increasingly financed development of this peripheral region. However, a range of administrative restrictions of the rights of Kosovo Albanians remained in place for security reasons, since Albania backed Stalin in the 1948 break with Yugoslavia. There was no adequate representation of Kosovo Albanians in government due to the party’s policy of staffing the state apparatus with its long-serving members, most of whom during and after the war were Serbs.

A major political change in Kosovo occurred after the 1966 fall of Aleksandar Ranković, a vice-president of Yugoslavia long in charge of the security apparatus. Since most excesses of the police state had occurred in Kosovo, and some thought this to be associated with disproportionate representation of Serbs, a policy of positive discrimination was introduced to change the ethnonational make-up of the party-state and public sector. The party developed a range of policies to meet the growing demands of the Kosovo Albanians and granted more autonomy to the province in the process of the radical federalisation of Yugoslavia between 1967 and 1974. Kosovo and Vojvodina, earlier little more than administrative regions of Serbia, were granted status similar to that of republics while Serbia effectively lost jurisdiction in these parts of its territory. The new ethnonational configuration of the party-state organs and public sector and the lack of control by the central organs resulted in the shift from the policy of national emancipation of Kosovo Albanians to domination over non-Albanian
population. While open discriminatory policies were largely avoided, in real life there were inequalities in the use of language, access to jobs in the huge state-controlled sector of the economy, allocation of public housing and, most importantly, inadequate protection for the rights and property of Kosovo Serbs by the courts and law enforcement agencies. Cases in which Serbs were targets of nationalist violence or their property was damaged tended to be disregarded in a variety of ways. The police officers repeatedly avoided bringing charges against Albanians, especially in areas where Serbs were a small minority, or the cases remained unresolved in the courts of law for years. Alternatively, law enforcement agencies failed to implement court decisions. Local authorities frequently turned down requests by Serbs for various licences and permits.  

From the 1960s Kosovo Serbs faced a rapid demographic decline, which generated an acute sense of insecurity in this community. While the proportion of Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo’s population remained relatively stable in the period between 1948 and 1961 (68.5–67.1% and 27.5%, respectively), in the following two decades the proportion of the former increased from 67.1% to 77.4% and that of the latter decreased from 27.5% to 14.9%, and continued to decline in the 1980s. Critical to the demographic decline of the Kosovo Serbs was the much higher rate of population growth of Kosovo Albanians, which largely resulted from a higher birth rate than the Kosovo Serbs’. The higher birth rate in turn originated from underdevelopment and traditional characteristics of this community, especially the subordinate position of women. A steady migration of Kosovo Serbs out of the province contributed to the demographic decline, in terms of their decreasing absolute numbers and shrinking territorial dispersion, and intensified their feelings of insecurity. The 1981 Yugoslav census listed around 110,000 Serbs from Kosovo living in other parts of Yugoslavia, of whom 85,000 had left the province between 1961 and 1981. In the 1980s, outmigration
continued. In other words, nearly a third of Kosovo Serbs had moved out of the autonomous province since 1961.

The findings of the survey conducted in 1985–1986 among Serbs who had left Kosovo indicate that more than three-quarters of the emigration originated from non-economic factors, mainly verbal pressure, damage to property or seizure of crops and land, violence (assaults, fights, stoning, attacks on children and women, serious injury, attempted and committed rape), trouble at work and inequalities in the public sector. What also emerged from the survey was that there was a clear territorial pattern of emigration largely resulting from the level of pressure and inequalities. The latter was inversely related to the proportion of Serbs in a settlement, and the critical point for a major increase in the pressure was if their numbers dropped below 20–30%. This finding was compatible with evidence from the official census that there was a strong trend towards emigration of Serbs from settlements where they accounted for less than 30% of the population. Therefore, the decreasing proportion of Serbs in a settlement led to a sharp increase in pressure and inequalities, which in turn resulted in emigration. While open discriminatory policies were generally, though not always, avoided, most cases of discrimination occurred because of the lack of protection for Kosovo Serbs by the courts and law enforcement agencies.

The mix of the politics of ethnonational inequality, demographic decline and steady migration out of Kosovo resulted in mounting grievances among Kosovo Serbs. In the early 1970s a number of Kosovo Serb officials raised in Kosovo's party organs the issue of the growing Albanisation of the province and the problems this brought to the non-Albanian population. Miloš Sekulović and Jovo Šotra pointed to growing pressure on Serbs, especially those living in the countryside, to emigrate from the province as well as their inadequate protection by the law enforcement agencies, their
problems in education and the obstacles to their finding employment. Kadri Reufi, an ethnic Turk, demanded that the leadership investigate the causes of the deteriorating position of this minority and claimed that the number of Turks in Kosovo was significantly reduced in the 1971 census because they were labelled Albanians. All three were removed from the Provincial Committee and public life, the effect of which was to silence other non-Albanian politicians. The appeals of Serb party members and ordinary Serbs to local authorities and the provincial leadership were either ignored or rejected and the appellants harassed.

Emerging Protest Networks and Their Allies

The grievances of Kosovo Serbs could not translate into collective action in a political context hostile to any reference to their concerns, but accumulated over time and eventually resulted in the high level of politicisation of Kosovo Serbs. As a local observer put it, “in the southern socialist autonomous province each and every head of a Serb household who takes himself seriously keeps a library of petitions, appeals, pamphlets and newspaper clips.” The political change ultimately opened space for the collective action of various groups of Kosovo Serbs. In 1981 protests of Kosovo Albanians swept through the autonomous province. A student protest over socioeconomic issues turned into large-scale demonstrations with a demand for a republic of Kosovo. The government declared a state of emergency, deployed tanks and security forces, closed schools and factories and suppressed demonstrations. The scale of protests apparently surprised the federal leadership and raised fears of the rise of a major separatist movement. High officials now increasingly acknowledged inequalities facing the non-Albanian population, in terms of the use of language, access to jobs in
the state-controlled part of the economy, allocation of public housing and inadequate protection of their rights and property by the courts and law enforcement agencies. Kosovo’s high officials came under much closer scrutiny of the federal leadership and Albanian–Serb relations in Kosovo ceased to be under their exclusive control. The prevention of outmigration of Serbs and the tackling of their other concerns now became part of the party’s policy.

The political change raised the expectations of Kosovo Serbs that the authorities would fully address their grievances. Soon, however, many from this community felt that the new policy had only partly been put into practice and the emigration continued. Some believed that the high officials of Yugoslavia and Serbia were not aware of the full scale of the problem, and thus arranged a number of private meetings, at times involving large delegations, with the officials and other people they thought to be influential. They met Nikola Ljubičić, president of Serbia’s state presidency (1982–1984), high party officials in Montenegro, Svetozar Vukmanović Tempo, a retired member of Tito’s old guard, and Branko Pešić, a Belgrade mayor, among others. In most cases the delegations were given a sympathetic hearing and assurances that the new party’s course, including the policies aimed at halting the emigration of Serbs, would be implemented.

Simultaneously, a growing number of ordinary people, mainly in predominantly Serb settlements, attended local meetings of the official political organisations, mostly those of the Socialist Alliance of the Working People (SAWP, formerly the People’s Front), to raise their concerns. In Kosovo Polje, a suburb of Priština with a dominant Serb population, roughly thirty political outsiders regularly debated various issues and forwarded the meetings’ minutes to high officials at all levels, from Priština and Kosovo to Serbia and the federation. Although remaining within the boundaries of officially
permitted dissent, they increasingly laid blame for the inequalities on Kosovo’s officials, both Albanians and Serbs. Early on the core of this group, namely Kosta Bulatović, Boško Budimirović and Miroslav Šolević, jointly prepared the meetings and gradually shifted the agenda from local problems to the issues of broader political significance.\textsuperscript{11} Parallel developments unfolded in other predominantly Serb settlements.

Despite some successes, such as that Priština’s and Kosovo’s officials periodically attended the meetings in Kosovo Polje, the debaters felt that the authorities would not take their problems seriously unless they gained broader support among Kosovo Serbs. Bulatović, Budimirović and Šolević therefore extended their activities beyond the official organisations and started mobilising support at the grassroots. In 1985 they extended the core group to include as informal advisors Zoran Grujić, a university professor, and Dušan Ristić, a former Kosovo high official. They agreed that the post-1981 party line on Kosovo was adequate and that they should only press the authorities to implement that policy.\textsuperscript{12} In late October 1985 the Kosovo Polje group sent a petition to high officials of Yugoslavia and Serbia. They protested against discrimination aimed at Kosovo Serbs, and asked for the protection of their rights and the establishment of law and order. They pointed out that Kosovo was getting increasingly “ethnically clean” of Serbs, accused Kosovo’s officials of the tacit approval of forced migration of Serbs out of the region and demanded that Yugoslavia’s and Serbia’s authorities bring that trend to a halt.\textsuperscript{13} About 2,000 people signed the petition within ten days and by April 1986 the number of signatories had multiplied several times.

In 1986 prominent activists initiated several highly visible protests and a series of small-scale local protest events. They sent three large delegations to the capital to meet high officials of Yugoslavia and Serbia, namely in late February, early April and
early November. The protest events also included a highly visible protest march of several hundred people, which unfolded under the label of collective emigration just before the party congress in May, and a number of large public meetings in Kosovo Polje, including one before Serbia’s party leader Ivan Stambolić. There was also a series of small-scale protests across the autonomous province, mostly in the form of public meetings or outdoor public gatherings, organised in response to specific cases of nationalist-related violence. As people became aware of the advantages of non-institutional action, they started petitioning local authorities, and sometimes managers of large state enterprises, to protest against discrimination at work.

The main consequence of various post-1981 initiatives were the incipient and unconnected networks of activists and supporters in towns and villages inhabited by Serbs. Throughout 1986 the Kosovo Polje group, including the new arrival Bogdan Kecman, worked to link up the emerging local networks into a more powerful political force. Each of them took responsibility for a specific area of Kosovo and worked to strengthen links between the existing activists in the area, recruit new ones and inform potential supporters about their initiatives. Before long the Kosovo Polje group could mobilise groups of activists for protest events in and outside Kosovo within a day or two. The activists’ demands, initially focused on the lack of protection by the law enforcement agencies and courts and inequalities in the public sector, gradually evolved towards constitutional issues. The protesters asserted that if the provincial officials were unable to guarantee protection of the rights and property of Serbs then Kosovo should be brought back under the jurisdiction of Serbia’s authorities.

High officials tolerated the mobilisation for several reasons. Firstly, the highly decentralised political structure of socialist Yugoslavia, based largely on national rights and identities, encouraged groups to mobilise along national lines. After 1981 high
officials had already acknowledged the grievances of the Kosovo Serbs and put emphasis on prevention of their outmigration. Unlike the Kosovo Albanian protesters in 1981 who aimed at important institutional change, the Kosovo Serbs demanded little more than implementation of the existing party policy, which was much less likely to trigger repression. Serbs, though a minority group in Kosovo, constituted a majority in Serbia as a whole and a plurality in Yugoslavia, which rendered their concerns more urgent for Yugoslavia’s political class. Other political changes also mattered. The change of political generations in the first half of the 1980s brought younger politicians into the highest regional offices and many of them felt that repression against ordinary people would go against the values of their generation. Growing elite disunity, rooted in the decentralised political structure and intensified during the leadership succession, had already resulted in the deadlock at the federal level and now thwarted attempts to reach a common position on the grassroots protest.

Secondly, the small scale of mobilisation and its limited potential for expansion, which sharply distinguished it from the 1981 mobilisation of Kosovo Albanians, were also important. The movement of a minority group in a peripheral region hardly posed a threat to the regime. High officials were mainly concerned about the potential implications for political stability at the centre, since the protesters’ demands were potentially highly resonant with Serbs outside Kosovo. Attempts of Kosovo Serb activists to stage dramatic protests in the capital, as in the case of the May 1986 march, were therefore prevented. High officials were hardly lenient towards prominent activists, especially after the October 1985 petition. They often conducted campaigns of abuse against the activists in the local press, and Bulatović was briefly jailed in early April 1986. Thirdly, activists opted for moderate protest strategies and repeatedly stressed that their protest was not anti-systemic. The protests often unfolded under the
auspices of the SAWP partly because high officials rarely tolerated openly non-institutional initiatives and partly because the minority constituency of the movement ruled out large-scale discontent. The highly decentralised political structure of socialist Yugoslavia, including complex relationships between organs of Yugoslavia, Serbia and Kosovo, a high level of local autonomy and a large number of official organisations, provided space for the activists to organise, recruit new supporters and appeal for support.

From the early 1980s various groups of Kosovo Serbs sought contacts with influential people. Activists kept in touch with some earlier Kosovo Serb migrants, such as the managers of state enterprises and middle-rank officials in the capital and reporters of Belgrade media based in the province. The confidants helped by identifying targets for appeal outside Kosovo, since the activists knew little about institutional structure and informal political alliances, and commented on protest strategies. Activists also established contact with dissident intellectuals, including Dobrica Ćosić. Ćosić supported their cause and suggested that they make use of all legal options of appeal. Others contacts from Belgrade-based dissident circles urged radical action early on and claimed that protests of Kosovo Serbs in the capital would trigger demonstrations of hundreds of thousands. Ćosić claims to have initiated the October 1985 petition at the meeting with a number of Kosovo Serbs, but that a Belgrade journalist, an earlier Serb migrant from Kosovo, actually wrote the first draft. This is probably true. Although Kosta Bulatović claimed that he initiated and drafted the petition, other prominent activists suspected that this journalist, a friend of Bulatović, wrote the text.

In January 1986 around 200 Belgrade-based intellectuals signed a petition supporting the cause of the Kosovo Serbs, while the writers union subsequently held a number of protest meetings. A number of dissident intellectuals had already initiated a
debate on Kosovo a year before, partly from the perspective of the revisionist history of Serb–Albanian relations and partly focusing on the current grievances of Kosovo Serbs. Without doubt dissident intellectuals’ action alerted the general public in central Serbia to the concerns of Kosovo Serbs and made a strong impression on high officials of Yugoslavia and Serbia. However, this was only a part of the intellectuals’ sweeping critique of the Communist regime and had little to do with either the creation or consolidation of the local protest networks. There was little difference between a few meetings of activists with Ćosić and their contacts with other potential allies, as the activists initiated nearly all of them. The significance of the October 1985 petition, drafted by the intellectuals, did not lie in its content, since the same demands had featured prominently in the activists’ discussions in the official organisations. The Kosovo Polje group had even drafted a similar petition two years before but collected only around seventy signatures. The 1985 petition became important because around 2,000 Kosovo Serbs signed the text within ten days and thus demonstrated strong commitment to their cause despite a widespread fear of job loss or imprisonment.

Nor were the dissident intellectuals the only group that helped publicise the cause of the emerging movement, since Kosovo Serb war veterans occasionally supported some activists’ demands and demanded resignations of various Kosovo officials, both Albanians and Serbs. Before initiating any major protest event, prominent activists tested their ideas before at least some of the above confidants to find out whether the chosen targets and timing were appropriate. While seeking contact with, and advice from, various quarters, the protest organisers made decisions on protest strategies on their own. They firmly believed that people at the grassroots understood their problems best and could make appropriate decisions. More importantly, they were
painfully aware that they, not their confidants, would have to suffer the consequences of any wrong moves.\textsuperscript{23}

\textbf{The Spread of Mobilisation and Slobodan Milošević}

Before 1988 political alliances in Kosovo’s leadership had rarely followed ethnonational cleavage and the views of most Albanian and Serb high officials shifted over time with changes in the party line. This was reflected in the demands of Kosovo Serb activists for the resignation of some Albanian and Serb officials and their occasional support for other officials, both Serbs and Albanians. The activists had generally been cautious about Serbs in Kosovo’s political establishment, feeling that their loyalty lay with the party policy of the day.\textsuperscript{24} After 1981 a number of Serb high officials originally from Kosovo, who had occupied posts in federal organs, were sent back to influential positions in Kosovo’s leadership. The so-called weekend or travelling politicians, whose families stayed in Belgrade, had little connection with Kosovo Serb realities and were generally despised by ordinary people. The activists therefore continually sought allies among the leadership of Serbia, but with little success.

This changed after the visit of Slobodan Milošević, Serbia’s new party leader, to Kosovo Polje in April 1987. Arriving at a previously announced meeting with the representatives of Kosovo Serbs, Milošević and Azem Vllasi, a leading Kosovo Albanian politician, witnessed a short but violent encounter of the crowd of several thousand protesters with the police. At the meeting, Milošević delivered a speech, in most part a typical speech of a high official, but his stance stood out, namely his public disapproval of the use of force by the police.\textsuperscript{25} After the Kosovo Polje visit Milošević
pulled all strings to call a session of the Central Committee of Yugoslavia and demanded that specific targets be set for the performance of party and state organs in relation to the Kosovo problem. As his intervention related only to the implementation of previously jointly approved policies and remained firmly on the Titoist course, Milošević gained support from high officials from other republics without difficulty. However, the developments initiated a conflict in the leadership of Serbia. Minor disagreements over policy details on Kosovo were exaggerated in the heat of the power struggle between factions based on the personal networks of Milošević and his former protector Ivan Stambolić, which unfolded according to the rules of the game in socialist party-states, with little influence from society.²⁶

Since the 1967–1974 constitutional reforms, the main concern of high officials from Serbia was the fragmented political structure of Serbia.²⁷ In the aftermath of the 1981 protests of Kosovo Albanians, Draža Marković and Petar Stambolić claimed that the eruption of protests resulted from the unconstitutional extension of the autonomy of Serbia’s provinces, but had little success in persuading high officials from other republics to help strengthen Serbia’s central organs. Following the change of political generations, Ivan Stambolić reaffirmed the need for greater coordination between the central government of Serbia and its autonomous provinces and put emphasis on economic issues and the concerns of Kosovo Serbs. The rise of Milošević in 1987 changed little in this respect and he reiterated the demands cast by his predecessors. The change in the leadership, however, turned the fortunes of the growing social movement. While Stambolić had kept pressure on Kosovo’s officials to address the problems of Kosovo Serbs and had ignored protest networks, Milošević aimed to establish control over the mobilisation by coopting prominent activists. The change partly originated from the spread of mobilisation so that it now had to be dealt with through either
suppression or cooptation. Also, Milošević exploited the mobilisation for his own ends and often provoked activists to publicly denounce his opponents. The activists did not object, since they now felt a degree of protection from the federal and Kosovo officials and their protests achieved greater visibility. Prominent activists were in turn under strong pressure to channel their initiatives towards the official organisations and employ their influence over the local networks to halt non-institutional action.\textsuperscript{28}

The growing influence of Milošević on prominent activists often failed to transform into action on the ground partly because they intended to proceed with protests until their demands had been fully addressed and partly because of the highly decentralised character of their protest networks. Although influential, the Kosovo Polje group by no means presided over the networks, and other activists at times ignored its advice. Around thirty to forty prominent activists from various parts of Kosovo, who gathered occasionally, commanded sufficient influence to prevent any initiatives they disapproved of or to start new ones. In the summer of 1988 the activists formed a protest committee, which quickly became another important decision-making centre. Neither of the three main circles of power within the social movement, however, could control a group of radical activists, who at times would not listen to anybody’s advice and proceeded with action, often getting support from one or two hundred supporters. The local networks therefore proceeded with protests across Kosovo. To placate Milošević they now wrapped up all protests, even large outdoor gatherings, in the form of meetings of the official organisations. There was a growing number of cases in which local and Kosovo’s officials who attended the meetings were booed at or prevented from speaking or the audience left the meeting altogether.

In the spring of 1988 prominent activists became increasingly sceptical about the claims of Milošević that a constitutional change, aimed at empowering the central
government of Serbia, would occur in the near future. Convinced that the pressure from the grassroots was essential to political change, they launched a petition in May 1988, before the federal party conference, the so-called small party congress, and soon presented it to high officials of Yugoslavia and Serbia with nearly 50,600 signatures. The reason that nearly a quarter of the Kosovo Serbs found themselves signatories of the petition was that many activists signed up their whole families. Despite this wild exaggeration, the petition did have elements of a plebiscite of Kosovo Serbs. The petitioners now demanded that the federal organs temporarily establish direct rule in the province in order to establish security for the Serbs or, alternatively, recognise their right to self-defence. They also threatened that they might collectively emigrate from the province in the last resort.\(^{29}\) Aware of the limits to the protest groups’ organisational resources, the high officials of Yugoslavia and Serbia were nonetheless concerned that any activities under the label of collective emigration might trigger public unrest on a large scale and Milošević resolutely demanded a halt to such activities.\(^{30}\)

Having to drop an important protest strategy and fearing a decline in participation by dispirited supporters, prominent Kosovo Serb activists found an alternative target, a protest in Novi Sad, the largest city in Vojvodina. After the unexpected success of the protest, the activists and their non-elite allies outside Kosovo launched a series of protests in Vojvodina and Montenegro during the summer.\(^{31}\) The protests coincided with a spiralling conflict between elites of the republics and provinces over amendments to the constitutions of Yugoslavia and Serbia, partly regarding the relations between Serbia’s central government and its autonomous provinces. In September the protests of Kosovo Serbs unfolded all over the province. The activists now engaged in cooperation with the Kosovo Serb intellectuals, since they needed well-educated people to deliver speeches at a growing number of protests.\(^{32}\)
While the local Serb intellectuals had timidly signalled their discontent with the position of Serbs in Kosovo, few of them took part in protest activities prior to the late summer of 1988.

The consolidation of support for the social movement among Kosovo Serbs and the efforts of Milošević to break the resistance of Kosovo’s officials to constitutional reform gradually affected political alliances in the provincial leadership, which had rarely followed the ethnonational cleavage. The first signs of rising tensions occurred in early 1988 when several Serb officials from the Priština Committee openly supported prominent activists. The September protest campaign coincided with the break between Kosovo Albanian and Serb members of the Provincial Committee. Serbs now supported the demand of Milošević for the resignation of Kosovo’s high officials for their alleged obstruction of party policy; Albanians defended their leaders and objected to the significant constitutional changes. In the aftermath of the purges of Kosovo Albanian officials and the reduction of the autonomy of Kosovo in 1989, Milošević filled key political and public sector positions with low-ranking Kosovo Serb officials, mainly ones who had little connection with the grassroots mobilisation. As the constitutional changes and greater involvement of the government of Serbia in the affairs of Kosovo met important demands of the Kosovo Serbs, the movement swiftly disintegrated.

The Protest of Kosovo Serbs and Patterns of Mobilisation in Socialist Yugoslavia

The rise and dynamics of mobilisation of the Kosovo Serbs in the 1980s reveal that shifts in political context favourable to a group, rather than a deterioration of a group’s relative position, often lead to mobilisation of its members. The mobilisation of Kosovo Serbs reflected the pattern behind other important episodes of mobilisation in
socialist Yugoslavia. In June 1968 Belgrade University students initiated protests against growing unemployment and increasing economic inequality and materialism. They objected to a system that set obstacles to the career advancement of well-educated young people and favoured middle-aged and often poorly qualified cadres of the revolution. Although the protest was hardly anti-systemic, high officials swiftly ended the mobilisation by a mixture of appeasing and repressive measures. In the autumn of 1968, large-scale demonstrations of Albanians broke out across Kosovo and northwest Macedonia, with demands for a republic of Kosovo, and ended with a similar response from the authorities. In 1981 another, larger wave of protests of Kosovo Albanians swept the province. The protests repeatedly erupted all over the autonomous province from March to May and involved serious clashes with the police.

These episodes of mobilisation of non-state actors erupted after the rise in political expectations of respective groups. The 1966 removal of Ranković, a symbol of the post-war police state, raised expectations in society that political and economic reforms would follow. University students were among the groups that were most interested in reforms and apparently took the political change seriously. The fall of Ranković also initiated a change in the party’s policy on Kosovo, since many saw him as responsible for the excesses of the police state in Kosovo. The change in turn raised the expectations of Kosovo Albanians. In both cases the rise of political expectations was followed by a partial relaxation of repression and the two factors combined to trigger protest by the respective groups. Likewise, in 1981 the leadership succession and the increase in political instability in Yugoslavia triggered expectations among groups of Kosovo Albanians that in the newly emerging balance of power in Yugoslavia Kosovo might get republic status. The failure to transform the wave of protests into sustained mobilisations, that is, social movements, was partly due to political conditions
unfavourable to sustained mobilisation and partly due to their large scale and potential for further expansion.

The mobilisation of Kosovo Serbs also resembled somewhat the pattern of collective action of Yugoslavia’s working class in the 1980s. The growing discontent of the workers with the consequences of economic crisis initially appeared in the form of a sharp increase in absenteeism and sick leave rather than open protest.\textsuperscript{33} The sudden rise in the number of strikes, a more visible and dramatic form of protest, occurred between 1985 and 1987,\textsuperscript{34} roughly at the same time as the emergence and spread of protest networks of Kosovo Serbs. This suggests that the timing of both instances of mobilisation was due to the relaxation of the grip of the party-state on society, just like in the case of the strikes in the 1960s.\textsuperscript{35} Moreover, the expansion of the protests of Kosovo Serbs in mid-1988 occurred simultaneously with the shift of the strategy of the miners and metalworkers from strikes to protest marches and demonstrations, largely directed at high federal officials in Belgrade. The argument that the relationship between grievances and popular protest is more complex than the elite thesis suggests holds at the local level as well. There were many more protests in the predominantly Serb settlements than in those in which they constituted a small minority. I have shown that Serbs in the latter settlements held stronger grievances, but it was much more difficult to organise protest in such an environment. Popular protest, however, may arise not only after the relaxation of repression or in a relatively permissive context, but also in response to an immediate and direct threat to the interests of a group, as the protests of Kosovo Albanians in November 1988 and February–March 1989 suggest.

Frequent exaggeration of nationalist-related incidents, which the elite thesis considers as an example of elite manipulation about Albanian–Serb relations in Kosovo, was often little more than the consequence of the recruitment and protest strategies of
Kosovo Serb activists. Lacking the advantages of formal organisation and stable membership, activists often exaggerated the scale of these incidents to trigger stronger reaction among Kosovo Serbs and to attract the attention of high officials and the local press. Sometimes they framed indecent attacks of Kosovo Albanian men on Serb women as rape.\textsuperscript{36} Partly as the consequence of these protest strategies, a level of mobilisation increased despite the fact that the rate of nationalist-related violence declined. The activists also spread rumours that vastly exaggerated their strength among Kosovo Serbs and their support outside the province. The rumour was that tens of thousands signed the 1985 petition and that thousands participated in the May 1986 march. Repeatedly activists and their allies outside Kosovo stressed that thousands, even tens of thousands, of Kosovo Serbs were ready for collective emigration and that they would leave if the federal organs failed to swiftly address their demands. The rumour campaigns owed success to the very nature of Yugoslavia’s party-state. The protest of Kosovo Serbs was politically sensitive and could not be freely reported on and debated in the local press, although the boundaries became increasingly flexible in 1987 and 1988. The mix of the information shortage about an important political issue and the lack of experience of activists, their supporters, high officials and the population at large about the real limits to collective action of ordinary people became a hotbed for wild guesses, wishful thinking and deliberate rumour campaigns. This is a common outcome in repressive social and political settings\textsuperscript{37} and had little to do with elite manipulation before 1988.
Conclusion

Without doubt, the support of dissident intellectuals and Milošević boosted the Kosovo Serb activists’ prospects of success, in terms of publicising their cause and bringing urgency to their demands for high officials. The support nonetheless mattered little in the creation and consolidation of the local protest networks. While activists engaged in contacts with a range of influential people and opted for specific protest strategies with an eye on the broader political context, they remained an autonomous political factor and largely took decisions on their own. The mobilisation originated from their discontent with the post-1966 twist in the politics of inequality and the demographic decline of Kosovo Serbs, partly resulting from their steady migration out of Kosovo, which strongly intensified this group’s feelings of insecurity. The changing political context strongly shaped the timing, forms and dynamics of the mobilisation. The changes in the party line on Kosovo after 1981 resulted in a softer approach of high officials of Yugoslavia and Serbia towards Kosovo Serbs and their informal exclusion from the authority of Kosovo’s leadership. These developments opened space for various groups to lobby high officials outside the province and to initiate debates about their concerns in the official organisations at the local level.

The slow response of the authorities to growing complaints shifted the efforts of some of the debaters to non-institutional action and building up the local protest networks. The relatively small-scale and grassroots character of protest and the moderate protest strategies, including mobilisation partly within the official organisations, shielded the activists from repression. Despite cooperation with Milošević, who put their demands firmly on the party’s agenda, Kosovo Serb activists proceeded with non-institutional action. The reduction of Kosovo’s autonomy, which
met an important demand of the Kosovo Serbs, and the purge of Kosovo’s leadership by Milošević and its replacement by Kosovo Serb party apparatchiks effectively closed the space for the autonomous political efforts of Kosovo Serbs. The timing and dynamics of the mobilisation of Kosovo Serbs differed little from the patterns of mobilisation of other groups in socialist Yugoslavia, especially the protests of Kosovo Albanians in 1968 and 1981, since all unfolded in the aftermath of growing expectations and the relaxation of repression centred on those groups. The case of the mobilisation of Kosovo Serbs in the 1980s reveals that a prevailing focus on elites and high politics as well as on the discourse rather than behaviour of political actors in the literature on conflicts surrounding the disintegration of Yugoslavia is misleading. Due to the gradual relaxation of repressive policies and practices, non-elite actors played an important political role even in the unlikely context of a socialist party-state.

NOTES


4 It is hard to establish the scale of inequalities between 1966 and 1981, since this was an official taboo. After 1981, however, credible evidence from official reports provided insight into the forms and pervasiveness of the inequalities. See, for example, excerpts from the report of the working group of the Federal Assembly in “Tačno i netačno: nijesu Albanci, no nepravda,” Intervju, 11 April 1986, pp. 38–45, and “Ispitano i provereno,” NIN, 13 April 1986. The evidence should not be confused with Milošević’s propaganda in the following years. For the latter see Srdja Popović, Ivan Janković, Vesna Pešić, Nataša Kandić and Svetlana Slapšak, Kosovski čvor: drešiti ili seći? (Belgrade: Hronos, 1990).

5 Calculated from the figures for Serbs and Montenegrins from Jugoslavija 1918–1988: statistički godišnjak (Belgrade: Savezni zavod za statistiku, 1989), p. 48. Montenegrins, who comprised less than 15% of this section of Kosovo’s population, saw the Serb identity as more inclusive, shared with all Serbs.


10 For an account of one of the meetings see excerpts from the diary of Draža Marković in Mirko Djekić, Upotreba Srbije: optužbe i priznanja Draže Markovića (Belgrade: Besede, 1990), pp. 209–210.

11 Boško Budimirović and Miroslav Šolević, interviews with the author, Belgrade, 15 and 17 July 2001, respectively.


16 Boško Budimirović, Miroslav Šolević and Bogdan Kecman, interviews with the author, Belgrade, 15 and 17 July 2001 and 29 August 2000 respectively.
See “Šta su Kosovci rekli u Skupštini,” NIN, 23 and 30 March and 6 and 13 April 1986; and “Šta je ko rekao u Kosovu Polju,” pp. 1–18.


Ćosić, Piščevi zapisi, pp. 169–170.

Boško Budimirović and Miroslav Šolević, interviews with the author.


Miroslav Šolević, interview with the author.

Ibid.

Boško Budimirović, interview with the author.


Draža Marković, interview with the author, Belgrade, 16 August 2000.

Boško Budimirović, Miroslav Šolević and Bogdan Kecman, interviews with the author, and Dušan Ristić in Antić, “Srbiya nema rešenje za Kosovo.”

The author’s copy of the petition. See excerpts in “Iz peticije 50.000 potpisnika,” Danas, 5 July 1988, p. 23.
30 Boško Budimirović and Miroslav Šolević, interviews with the author, and Mićo Šparavalo, a prominent activist, in Sava Kerčov, Jovo Radoš and Aleksandar Račić, Mitinzi u Vojvodini 1988. godine: radjanje političkog pluralizma (Novi Sad: Dnevnik, 1990), pp. 243–244.


34 See the table showing the numbers of strikes and participants in strikes in Yugoslavia between 1978 and 1988 in Salih Fočo, Štrajk izmedju iluzije i zbilje (Belgrade: Radnička štampa, 1989), p. 62.


36 For details see Tijanić, Šta će biti s nama, p. 128.