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“The Yellow Duck” Attacks: An Analysis of the Activities of the “Ne da(vi)mo Beograd” Initiative in the Serbian Public Space

Introduction

The “Ne da(vi)mo Beograd” Initiative¹ (hereinafter referred to as ‘Initiative’) came into existence in 2014 as an expression of active opposition to the implementation of the “Beograd na vodi” project (“Belgrade Waterfront”, “Belgrade on Water”), which was headed by the Serbian government at that time. It brings together various organizations and associations, as well as individual citizens interested in urban and cultural policy, urban development and transformation of their everyday environment. Members of the Initiative represent different professions and have different

¹ The Initiative’s name is a pun that means “we will not give Belgrade/give Belgrade away” and “we will not drown Belgrade” at the same time. It refers, among others, to the location of the “Belgrade Waterfront” project, about which I will write later in this text.

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cultural capital but share a common goal: to "stop the degradation and robbing of Belgrade in the name of megalomaniacal urban and architectural projects" (cf. *Šta je inicijativa Ne da(vi)mo Beograd?*), such as the aforementioned "Belgrade Waterfront". They appeal for transparency of the actions of the Serbian authorities – at both local and national levels – expressing at the same time the conviction that the main subject of social life is citizens, who should be involved in political decisions and have the right to ask authorities questions about their own lives. Members of the Initiative also stress that they do not only participate in social life during elections – it is their everyday practice; thus, they call for the abandonment of the attitude of a passive voter, taxpayer or consumer. Moreover, they expect state institutions to listen attentively to the voice of citizens; they are in favor of the creation of an egalitarian society as they recognize the need to consistently eliminate social inequalities and to abolish the power-based hierarchy ("O grupi građana", 2018). It is worth noting that the Initiative is financed by voluntary contributions from organizations and individuals who support its activities, ideas, and objectives ("O inicijativi", 2018).

The hallmark of the Initiative is a yellow duck² (the word duck – Serbian *patka* – also means a lie or a rumor [Imami, 2003, p. 264]), symbolizing both political and journalistic fraud (Fig. 1). Another symbol used is a black flag with the acronym "NDM BGD" (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1. Belgrade coat of arms with a yellow duck instead of a boat. Source: <https://nedavimobeograd.wordpress.com/page/2/>



Fig. 2. Initiative's official symbol source: <https://nedavimobeograd.rs/>

² The yellow duck symbol also accompanied the anti-government protests in Brazil and Russia (*Russian activist in jail for giant duck protest*, 2018) (*Gigantic Yellow Ducks Drafted In To Protest Against Brazil's President*, 2016).

The aim of this analysis is to present the performative dimension of the activities undertaken by the Initiative. I will be particularly interested in verbal and non-verbal practices of expressing resistance, as well as strategies for building a sense of community among participants of meetings organized by the Initiative. Political action is a perfect space for extensive performative acts (Butler, 2016), which are now becoming the dominant manner of constructing knowledge and power (Banaś, 2012, p. 293), as well as the area in which social discourse is being shaped. Performative activities are supported by various media strategies. New media (mainly social media) can significantly influence the reception of messages concerning the activity of social movements (Crain & Hughes-Freeland, 2003).

The article will analyze both conventional and unconventional activities undertaken by the Initiative; in the literature on the subject, they are also referred to as "institutionalized and non-institutionalized practices" (Leighley, 2012, p. 145). Conventional actions concern the electoral process either directly (e.g. participation in elections) or indirectly (communication between citizens and the authorities). Unconventional activities, in turn, include various protests and demonstrations, blockades, petitions, and political terrorism. Political science literature's traditional division of political activities is also supplemented by the concept of "postconventional political action". This includes political involvement at the level of everyday life, for instance *e-activism* (O'Toole & Gale, 2013, p. 12) (*internet activism, online activism*). It consists in using internet communication, including social media, to trigger particular actions.

"Then it all began..." – a few words about the "Belgrade Waterfront" project

The "Belgrade Waterfront" project is so far the largest investment to be realized in the very center of the capital of Serbia. The contract for its implementation was signed by the Serbian government and Eagle Hills company, which is based in the United Arab Emirates. This company mainly carries out projects in the Middle East and North Africa, e.g. in Jordan, Bahrain, and Morocco. The estimated value of the project is around €3.5 billion. The total

area of the project will cover 1,850,000 m² of the Sava riverbank, where a modern business and residential center will be built, including a two-kilometer boulevard. According to the concluded contract, the whole project is to be completed within 30 years ("Ugovor o *Beogradu na vodi*", 2015). The Serbian government and the strategic partner will have 32% and 68% shares, respectively. The Arab entrepreneur committed to investing €300 million in the project, while the state and the city were obliged to create appropriate transport and public utility infrastructure.

As a promise made by Aleksandar Vučić³, the project was first presented during the 2012 election campaign (Omorac, 2014) as a way of attracting foreign capital and accelerating the country's economic growth. However, the details of the investment were not made public ("Transkript: Ispod površine Beograda na vodi", 2014). The launch of the project was announced in 2015 with the assurance that thanks to this investment Belgrade would become the center of the region, attracting tourists and investors from all over the world. In addition, the investment was presented as an antidote to the high unemployment rate (Omorac, 2014).

But "Belgrade Waterfront" has many opponents. It was criticized not only by city activists and the "Ne da(vi)mo Beograd" Initiative, but also by the Academy of Architecture of Serbia ("Deklaracija o *Beogradu na vodi*", 2015), because it violates the city's urban plan that was established in 1950 and which protects the Sava riverbank (Grzegorek, 2015). According to the recognized architect, Dragoljub Bakić, this project could be successfully carried out in a completely different part of the city ("Za i protiv Beograda na vodi", 2015). In turn, non-government organizations highlighted the fact that there was no transparent tender procedure. However, it was the Initiative that won the greatest renown and took the most expressive measures to block this controversial project.

³ Aleksandar Vučić – Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia from 2012 to 2014, and Prime Minister of Serbia from 2014 to 2017. Since May 2017, the president of the state.

Activities of the “Ne da(vi)mo Beograd” Initiative

The “Ne da(vi)mo Beograd” Initiative began its public activity in 2014, when a yellow bath duck was put on the president’s desk during a session of the city council; it immediately became a symbol of protest against the authorities’ plans and a permanent element of any of the Initiative’s protests (Komarčević, 2015). Since then, the Initiative has organized many different actions and happenings that were intended not only to show but also to condemn the lack of transparency of the authorities’ decisions.

The first such event was organized immediately after the “Belgrade Waterfront” project had been announced. During the public debate in November 2014, the members of the Initiative expressed their reservations about the presented preliminary land-use plan, stressing that the project is against the law and does not take into consideration the interests of citizens (“Ne da(vi)mo Beograd – odbacimo”, 2014). Each of the consecutive protests was staged under a catchy and popular slogan, for example “Maske su pale” (“The masks have fallen off”), “Čiji grad?” (“Whose city is it?”), “Naš grad!” (“Our city!”), and “Beograd nije mali” (“Belgrade is not small”). Each of these catchphrases can be analyzed as an action in itself. The motto “The masks have fallen off” directly indicates the sense of agency of the Initiative, the members of which believe that they have exposed the actions and intentions of the Serbian authorities. According to the protest organizers, these actions and intentions were taken in a dishonest and non-transparent manner. In turn, the slogan “Whose city is it?” is a call that, on the one hand, obliges Belgrade citizens to answer it, and, on the other hand, suggests the answer that the city belongs to the citizens who should take responsibility for it. Therefore, the answer to such a question will contain a civic commitment. And the slogan “Our city!”, which is a specific response to earlier interrogations, is intended to unite people around a common cause. The use of the pronoun “our” suggests the existence of an urban community and builds a sense of the existence of a collective will. The transition from individualism to the collective character of the Initiative will certainly help overcome the temporary character of the movement and the “fugitive moment of democracy” (Butler, 2016, p. 21), namely protests. Finally, the last of the quoted slogans, “Belgrade is not small” (“Beograd nije mali”), refers not so much to the size of the city as to the name of the former mayor of the capital city (Siniša Mali) and tries to talk us out of identifying the city exclusively with this politician. All these slogans are not only political demands directed to the public and appeals for real actions for the benefit of the city, but also commitments of the Initiative itself.



Fig. 3. Photograph taken at one of the Initiative’s protests (“Beograd NIJE MALI”) source: <https://nedavimobeograd.wordpress.com/page/12/>

Subsequent protests (13 July 2016) became again an opportunity to make demands for immediate resignations and for individual officials and politicians to take responsibility for the demolition of buildings in the Savamala district. In particular, the protesters demanded the resignation of the Mayor of Belgrade, the President of the City Assembly (Nikola Nikodijević), the Minister of Internal Affairs of Serbia (Nebojša Stefanović), the Director of the Serbian Police (Vladimir Rebić), and the Chief of Police of Belgrade (Nikola Ristić). Nearly two weeks earlier, in front of the police station, a happening had occurred during which watermelons were thrown at the building (*Lubenicama na komunalce* 1.07.2016) – an action that can certainly be considered unconventional. Its purpose was to draw attention to a watermelon seller’s death, to which police officers had apparently contributed, as well as to express opposition to the conduct of the police in explaining the circumstances of this death. It should be added that this type of action was a continuation of the event of May 2016 called “Zahtev za podnošenje ostavki” – Demand for resignation (*Maske su pale* 11.05.2016). Therefore, these actions consistently broadened the scope of the Initiative’s activities.

The main theme of the next action, called “Ostavke! Odgovornost!” (*Resignations! Responsibility!*) (*Ostavke! Odgovornost!*, 17.02.2017), was demanding the resignation of the city’s mayor and individual police employees due to their incompetence, lack of responsibility for decisions taken, and actions to the detriment of the city. Such imperatives with a clear message show that the initiative, which initially consisted in protests against the “Belgrade Waterfront” project, started to formulate increasingly serious demands, including those for the resignations of prominent politicians”.

A cyclical event that the Initiative organizes every year is a concert on Belgrade Liberation Day (*Dan oslobođenja Beograda*, 20 October) (Fig. 4). It takes place in Republic Square, which is a central place in the capital, and is directed to all residents of the city. In this way, the Initiative strives to increase the group of citizens to whom it addresses its message. The fact that the concert is held on this day is obviously not accidental. One of the event's most important messages is to remind Serbian society about the heroic anti-fascist struggle undertaken by Serbs during the Second World War. Therefore, the organizers of the concert refer to one of the most important Serbian state ideologies of the 20th century, simultaneously treating it as a factor that legitimizes their own activity. This symbolic takeover – or rather the adoption of the myth for their own purposes – is also an attempt to invoke the tradition of resistance, which is well consolidated here. In this way, the organizers not only find in the past the foundation of their current activities, but also mobilize their supporters and remind them of the need to defend values (*Dan oslobođenja Beograda*, 2016).



Fig. 4. The Initiative's poster promoting the Belgrade Liberation Day concert, source: <https://nedavimobeograd.wordpress.com/page/3/>

The actions organized by the Initiative also have a significant physical dimension and involve the bodies of participants. One of the demonstrations (March 2017) consisted in creating a living chain in front of the City Assembly building. The physical involvement of protesters was an attempt to build a collective body and thus constitute the unity of this community. This act had an inclusive character: it confirmed the existence of the community and at the same time established a political body. Performative action in this situation involves not only being in a specific space, but also placing one's own body in the space of another's actions (Butler, 2016, p. 12). The aforementioned demonstration was a response to the fact that the Mayor of Belgrade, Siniša Mali, avoided both journalists and citizens. The protesters thus demanded his resignation, accusing him of constant lawbreaking ("Živi lanac za gradonačelnika", 2017).

However, the actions undertaken by the Initiative are not directed exclusively against individual politicians or officials. The organization has also started to fight intensely against selected media outlets, accusing them of disseminating false information and revealing their relationships with the authorities. Such action was directed against the allegedly independent newspaper “Informer” (“Podneta prva tužba”, 2016), which on its pages presents the Initiative as a “foreign element” in Serbia – traitors supported by unspecified “foreign countries”, including NATO or associates of George Soros. NATO has negative connotations in Serbia, mainly due to the fact that the Alliance’s intervention in Yugoslavia in 1999 is still remembered. In turn, George Soros appears to be the embodiment of a stranger: an American, a capitalist, a liberal, whose aim is to become rich at the expense of the Serbian state and society. In response to such insinuations, the Initiative called on Serbs to boycott the Informer and filed relevant lawsuits (Horvatek, 2017). The initial protest against the undertaking on the Sava riverbank in Belgrade thus transformed into a political struggle for the citizens’ right to honest information. In this way, the organization expanded the circle of its potential supporters. The yellow duck symbol was used in the campaign against the media (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. The Initiative’s poster “Mrak se plaši nas!”
source: <https://nedavimobeograd.wordpress.com/page/10/>

However, the duck, which embodies rumors and false information, differs from previous likenesses. Its face expresses the feeling of being lost and confused. The names of the media outlets (Informer and Pink TV) and the ruling party (Serbian Progressive Party) around the duck indicate the causes of this information chaos. The message is also reinforced by the meaningful slogan “Mrak se plaši nas!” (“Darkness is afraid of us!”), which suggests that darkness is the domain of the indicated media outlets and parties. The image uses

the classic contrast of light and dark, in which the first element is judged positively and the other negatively. The slogan used in the picture also emphasizes that the Initiative is growing in strength and is becoming an important actor on the Serbian political scene, and, as a result, opponents are starting to fear it. The authors of this message present themselves as an enlightener of Serbian society whose task is to illuminate the local gloom. The use of the pronoun “us” is also noticeable and highlights the common nature of the Initiative.

One of the essential strategies of the organization is an attempt to legitimize its own activities by including well-known and highly regarded figures from the world of politics, science and culture in its circle of supporters. They were supported by Srbijanka Turajlić (professor, activist, involved in the activities of the Otpor group in 1990), Srđan Keča (film director), Vesna Rakić Vodinelić (lawyer and professor), Jovana Gligorijević (journalist), and Minja Bogavac (writer). The support of these people gives the movement greater recognition, but also results in the movement being perceived as a serious and fully professional organization. Predrag Koraksić, a Serbian graphic artist, supported the Initiative in an extremely meaningful and vivid manner because he became the “court” caricaturist of the movement, thus popularizing the activities of its members. As Koraksić says, by expressing his support for the Initiative he wants to build a kind of community of senses (Petrović, 2018). In his work, he willingly uses and transforms the yellow duck motif, which he perceives not only as a symbol of resistance to the local authorities but also to the state authorities. Therefore, the second most frequent motif is the figure of President Aleksandar Vučić. As a sign of support for the Initiative, this cartoonist even organized an exhibition of his works right in front of the parliament building (“Otvorena Koraksova izložba”, 2018). He did not choose this place (the very center of the capital) accidentally. The content of the works directly criticized the Serbian authorities and the president. The exhibition was intentionally placed in the immediate vicinity of the parliament, where it could not be missed and the images could not be interpreted in another way. Moreover, it guaranteed a wider audience for the exhibition than if it had been presented in a gallery.

The “Ne da(vi)mo Beograd” Initiative makes perfect use of various media channels to strengthen its activities in urban spaces. In March 2015, it started to publish its own newspaper, “Glasilo Inicijative Ne da(vi)mo Beograd”, in which it systematically informs the public about its activities (“Iz štampe je izašlo glasilo”, 2015). In addition, at the beginning of 2017, a book entitled *Naš grad!* was published (“Promocija zbornika ‘Naš grad!’”, 2017), and there is a professional, up-to-date website that keeps local people informed about

the movement's activities. Undoubtedly, however, the basic tool used by the Initiative to communicate with citizens is social media, i.e. Facebook and Twitter. Facebook is the perfect place to encourage the movement's supporters and inform them about upcoming actions. Although liking the fan page of a given organization does not mean that you actively participate in its actions, there is no exaggeration in saying that it is a kind of ideological declaration. Undoubtedly, this medium propagates the way of thinking about politics adopted by the Initiative. This thinking is expressed by short and simple slogans that are shared and addressed directly to the recipients. Pieces of information about planned events usually end with the slightly overfamiliar call, “Vidimo se!”, as well as with the flagship slogan, “Nedavimo Beograd!”. We could even say that the atmosphere of protest is being transferred to social media. The “Whose city is it?” slogan is repeated many times; together with the answer, “Our city!”, this call and response is similar to the behavior of leaders of street protests who warm up participants to express their opinions. The strategy of repeatedly spurring people into political dispute is used so as to constantly remind them of the values on which this community is based, but also to constantly motivate supporters and keep them convinced that the participation of every single person is necessary to achieve the Initiative's goal.

It is worth noting that the Initiative has gained publicity outside Serbia and has received support from many organizations and associations in various European countries. Solidarity was expressed by, among others, the pan-European “DiEM25” (Democracy in Europe Movement 2025), the Italian “Massa Critica” and “Decide Roma”, the Croatian “Zagreb je NAŠ!” and “Prava na grad”, the Spanish “Barcelona en Comú” and “Marea Atlántica”, the English “Take Back the City”, the network of activists, urban planners, scientists and officials of INURA (International Network for Urban Research and Action), as well as the Polish “Miasto Jest Nasze” from Warsaw. The common denominator of these movements is a demand for the increased participation of residents in the everyday life of the cities in which they operate. They also organize similar unconventional activities in the form of happenings, demonstrations, and protests. All these groups monitor and publicize irregularities in the activities of politicians and city officials, and they present concrete proposals for changes they consider necessary in urban policies.

The considerable recognition and popularity of the Initiative has encouraged its members to go beyond local politics and become involved in elections. Therefore, the initiative abandoned its original unconventional activity, which

was based mainly on grass-roots and civic activities. The first step towards expanding the area of activity and incorporating conventional practices into it was taken during the presidential campaign in 2017, when the Initiative supported Saša Janković's candidacy for president of the state ("Inicijativa *Ne da(vi)mo Beograd podržava*", 2017). However, Janković suffered an election defeat and the current Prime Minister of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, was elected as president. The day after the results were announced, mass demonstrations were held throughout the country under the slogan "Protiv diktature" ("Against dictatorship"). The Initiative joined them ("Podrška Inicijativi *Ne da(vi)mo Beograd*", 2017), but it already had a dual status: its candidate had been defeated in the elections, and at the same time it was a so-called watchdog – a civic organization that monitors public authorities.

The next step taken in order to achieve political subjectivity was the decision to run in local elections in Belgrade in March 2018. In the autumn of 2017, a series of talks with the residents of the capital city began under the slogan "Novobeogradska ofanziva!" ("New-Belgrade offensive"), "Kakav je naš kraj, takvi smo mi ljudi" ("What our country is like, we are people") (Razgovori: "*Kakav je naš*", 2017). The first slogan indicates a change in the tactics used by the organization – a move away from a defensive strategy towards an offensive one. In turn, the other slogan is definitely more emotive and expresses some conditionality; it says that the environment we live in influences our characters. Thus, it calls for active shaping of our own environment and giving up the attitude of passivity because it affects the condition of society. The main election catchphrase of the Initiative during the 2018 campaign was "Promena dolazi" ("Change is coming") (Fig. 6). According to the concept that a word not only means something but this meaning something at the same time does something (Butler 2010, p. 55), this clearly creates a certain reality, announces a change that is "coming" soon, names something and thus makes it real. However, it is not possible to definitively state that the change has already come, so the slogan is both postulative and performative. It is both a promise and an action.



Fig. 6. Election poster of the Initiative from local elections (2018)
source: <https://nedavimobeograd.wordpress.com/>

The Initiative failed to reach the 5% election threshold (result 3.44%, won votes 28,017), and, as a result, it did not gain any seats. The election was won by the list headed by the party of the current president of Serbia, which won 44.99% of votes (366,461 votes, which guaranteed 64 seats). The Initiative's defeat was devastating. As previously, after the election results were announced, the members of the Initiative pointed to numerous irregularities in voting and violations of the principle of secrecy. Despite the defeat, it was still believed that a change of power is possible only through democratic methods – in particular through participation in elections (*Ne davimo Beograd: Ozbiljna*, 2018). Moreover, the Initiative also declared that it would expand its activities and might become a civic front that – after merging with other similar groups and associations – would be inaccessible for political parties. The creation of this "wider front" in Serbia could be an opportunity to pursue politics not only at the local level in Belgrade but across also the whole country. In the future, this would lead to the removal of the current government from power ("*Don't let Belgrade drown*", 2018), which in a way exposes the indirectly formulated political demands and unfulfilled dreams of this group.

Conclusion

The actions of the "Ne da(vi)mo Beograd" Initiative clearly illustrate contemporary ways of managing civil opposition, as well as performative practices aimed at creating civil communities. As I have tried to show, the creation of this organization was directly related to opposition to a controversial property investment in the center of Belgrade. The Initiative began to build political capital in relation to this undertaking. The next step was getting involved in the local authorities' urban policies, and then in activities at a national level. The aim of the group is primarily to transform the structure and mentality of society, as well as to create a new kind of community that strengthens civil society. By means of conventional and unconventional activities, different types of practices in urban space, the creation of a strong and legible visual identity and repetitive patterns of action (announcing planned actions on social media, intense motivation of participants, constant practices of reconstruction by means of which meanings are created), the Initiative has managed to open up

a space for expressing political resistance that has not been present in Serbia since the end of Slobodan Milosevic's dictatorship.

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„Žółta kaczką” atakuje. Analiza działalności inicjatywy „Ne da(vi)mo Beograd” w serbskiej przestrzeni publicznej

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie performatywnego wymiaru działań podejmowanych przez inicjatywę „Ne da(vi)mo Beograd”. Akcje inicjatywy, początkowo związane ze sprzeciwem wobec projektu „Belgrad na wodzie”, przerodziły się w regularną kampanię polityczną. Działania te dobrze ilustrują współczesne sposoby zarządzania sprzeciwem obywatelskim, a także praktyki performatywne mające na celu tworzenie społeczeństwa obywatelskiego. W centrum zainteresowania znajdują się werbalne i niewerbalne praktyki wyrażania oporu, a także strategie budowania poczucia wspólnotowości wśród uczestników zgromadzeń organizowanych przez inicjatywę.

Słowa kluczowe: Serbia, „Ne da(vi)mo Beograd”, Belgrad, działania polityczne, protesty, akty performatywne

“The yellow duck” attacks: An analysis of the activities of the “Ne da(vi)mo Beograd” initiative in the Serbian public space

The main aim of the paper is to present the performative dimension of activities undertaken by the “Ne da(vi)mo Beograd” Initiative. The Initiative’s actions, which initially concerned opposition to the “Belgrade on Water” project, turned into a regular political campaign. These activities clearly illustrate contemporary ways of managing civil opposition, as well as performative practices aimed at creating a civil society. The focus is on verbal and non-verbal practices of expressing resistance, as well as strategies for building a sense of community among the participants of the Initiative’s gatherings.

Keywords: Serbia, “Let’s not drown Belgrade”, Belgrade, political activities, protests, performative acts

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