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Political Experience of Local Representatives in a Flawed Democracy: Serbia in Comparative Perspective

ABSTRACT

Many studies cite experience as a desirable characteristic of candidates standing for election, accompanied by debates on which electoral rules incentivize voters to value this type of information. However, the number of studies addressing

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this issue in local elections is limited, and even fewer focus on the state of play in flawed democracies. The local elections in Serbia in 2020 took place in a unique political climate, as they were boycotted by many opposition parties. In this context, the majority of local assemblies were filled by councillors from the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and its minor partners. This paper utilizes data from the Local Councillors Project, a survey of local councillors conducted simultaneously in 27 European countries. The authors carried out a survey for Serbia in September and October 2023, involving 870 participants – members of city and municipal assemblies. Based on the survey results, it is possible to explore how the political and wider regional context, institutional rules, and other factors affect the distinct variable where considerable difference between Serbian and other European local representatives is expected, due to the flawed democratic context further complicated by the boycott of the opposition: the experience of elected representatives.

KEYWORDS: political experience, local councillors, hybrid regime, opposition boycott, Serbia

INTRODUCTION: THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EXPERIENCED

Political experience is widely regarded as a desirable attribute among electoral candidates, as it associates with competence, credibility, and policy expertise and as such is an important signal for both party elites and the voters alike. But what factors influence the level of political experience among those who are ultimately elected. Possible determinants are many and they may include party recruitment strategies, personal backgrounds, incumbency advantages, electoral designs, institutional incentives, as well as broader contextual factors.

Authors generally agree that voters typically prefer experienced candidates who have previously held various political positions, and that such candidates tend to perform better in elections compared to novices (see: Jacobson & Kernell 1981; Jacobson 2004). Evaluations of candidates' personal and political qualities are a crucial aspect of voters' decision-making processes. These preferences are especially pronounced in electoral systems where voters have a more direct role in selecting candidates, thereby allowing personal vote-earning attributes to play a significant role (Carey & Shugart 1995). On the other hand, in proportional systems, even those with a high degree of personalization, party affiliation remains the most significant informational shortcut for voters (Coffe & von Schoultz 2021). The debate on the factors influencing candidates' experience is thus immediately situated within the domain of the institutional design of electoral rules. Nevertheless, political experience

continues to be a relevant attribute in highly personalized, candidate-centered systems. Additionally, some voters favor candidates with strong local ties, such as friends or neighbors (Tavits 2010; Collignon & Sajuria 2018), while others support those from whom they anticipate tangible benefits, such as budget redistribution (Carozzi & Repetto 2016).

Appealing to voters, parties often balance their electoral offer between new faces, experts, and experienced candidates, with the latter frequently being allocated to safe seats on electoral lists (Galasso & Nannicini 2015). In this context, political experience serves not only as a signal to voters in terms of vote-earning attributes or party's professionalism (Gherghina 2014) but also as a guarantee to the party selectorate that the candidate will remain loyal and would not deviate from the main line in the future (Put, Muyters & Maddens 2020). This is evident even in closed-list systems, where party elites form electoral lists that citizens cannot influence on the ballot. Research on the closed-list PR component of Germany's mixed electoral system (Ceyhan 2017), as well as on the closed-list system in Italy (Galasso & Nannicini 2015) and the combined open- and closed-list in Colombia (Hangartner et al. 2019), demonstrates that prior experience – whether as former MPs, party officers, or politicians with campaign or administrative expertise – is a strong predictor of a high placement on the electoral list. Similarly, Chiru & Popescu (2016) concluded that, in the case of Romania, legislative experience is the key predictor of a high position on the list, either in terms of incumbency or cumulative parliamentary involvement in the past. A common explanation for this frequent appraisal of experience is that it serves as an indicator of the candidate's long-term loyalty to party goals and/or party leadership. Experience is therefore highly valued in different subtypes of electoral systems: in candidate-centered ones, where the personal characteristics of candidates serve as one of the vehicles for maximizing votes, experience is an important asset in candidate evaluation; whereas in party-centered systems, experience functions as a guarantee of loyalty to party elites responsible for composing electoral lists.

Scholars have rarely analyzed the significance of political experience in the context of local elections. Most studies focus on national candidates, typically in presidential or parliamentary elections, while the local dimension has usually been examined through the lens of candidates' local connections with voters and the traits of individual MP candidates, most often in single-member districts or other more personalized electoral mechanisms. This gap in the literature is partly due to the diversity of local electoral rules, as well as the lack of comparative data on local councillors across multiple countries. Furthermore, the relationship between institutional and other potential predictors and political experience has rarely been examined in the context of democratic backsliding. In countries experiencing democratic erosion, research on elections and representation tends to prioritize other themes, despite the fact that the study of candidacy and conversely, political experience, could shed

light on important patterns of political behavior, voter mobilization, activism, and even autocratization or democratization processes within these states.

Hence, the research question is: How does the type of electoral system, particularly closed-list proportional representation (CL-PR), affect the political experience of local councillors across European countries? Furthermore, can the varying levels of experience be explained not only by the institutional design of the electoral system, but also by broader contextual factors that influence the electoral behavior of political actors – including democratic backsliding, electoral boycotts, East-West divide?

To answer this, the next section provides background on the contemporary political context in Serbia, with particular attention to local elections. Serbia serves as a compelling case for this type of study, combining a rigid closed-list PR, a post-communist legacy, features of a flawed democracy, and significant asymmetries between ruling and opposition parties – all of which may meaningfully shape candidate selection dynamics in a comparative framework. Following this contextual overview, we outline the study's hypotheses, then justify the data and methodology employed, and finally present our research findings along with a discussion on their implications. Naturally, the concluding section summarizes the key findings, highlights the main challenges and limitations, and explores potential avenues for future research arising from this study.

CONTEXT OF SERBIAN FLAWED DEMOCRACY

The ongoing democratic decline of Serbia is clearly reflected in reports from international organizations, which began describing the country as a hybrid regime (Freedom House 2020) or an electoral autocracy (V-Dem 2019), as well as in many academic papers that characterize the regime as hybrid or competitive authoritarian (see: Bieber 2018; Keil 2018; Pavlović 2019). In a hybrid regime, the kind we can observe in Serbia, elections are held regularly and are somewhat free, but their standards of fairness are questionable. While all the formal legal prerequisites for democratic elections exist, in practice, the playing field is significantly tilted in favor of the ruling parties. They have unprecedented access to funding, media, and state institutions, while the opposition faces various obstacles in their political activities (Levitsky & Way 2010). All of these traits can be observed in Serbia, gradually emerging since the Serbian Progressive Party (srb. Srpska napredna stranka, SNS) came to power in 2012, and becoming more pronounced after 2017, when the party consolidated control across nearly all horizontal and vertical levels of governance, which is dully noted by the abovementioned indices and scholars. Ever since, election observers in Serbia have repeatedly noted the misuse of public resources, the blending of party and state activities during the campaign by ruling party

officials, voter intimidation and pressure, misuse of welfare funds, as well as heavily unbalanced media coverage (see: ODIHR 2017).

The penultimate local elections in Serbia, in which local councillors in more than 150 city and municipal assemblies were elected, as well as, indirectly, mayors and municipal presidents after those assemblies were constituted, took place in a specific context. In accordance with the long-standing political practice of nationalization of lower-tier elections (see: Schakel 2012), these were scheduled on the same day as the parliamentary elections and the elections for the provincial assembly of Vojvodina. However, due to restrictions related to the pandemic, the voting was postponed from April 26 to June 21, 2020. At that time, a debate regarding the boycott of the elections had long been ongoing within opposition circles, and it was clear that many of the major opposition parties had decided to abstain from the electoral race. Most of them have cited the lack of democratic standards and, in particular, a heavily biased media landscape as key reasons for the abstention. The decision to boycott the elections also emerged in the context of mass protests that began in late 2018 in response to violence against opposition politicians, as well as the subsequent boycott of the Serbian parliament sessions a few months later (for a broader context, see: Bursać & Vučićević 2021).

The strategies employed by actors in preparation for the 2020 elections fully align with theoretical expectations of behavior in such regimes. While the ruling parties seek to legitimize their power through the elections and therefore aim to keep the entire competition within the electoral arena (where they can easily defeat the opposition in an uneven playing field), the opposition fights on two levels: within representative institutions, as well as in an extra-institutional arena where the rules of the game themselves are challenged, which involves the dilemma between boycotting and participating in unfair elections (Schedler 2002). Prior to 2020 elections, majority of opposition actors resolved that dilemma by declaring against competing, for the first time since the 1997 Milošević-era opposition boycott.

The elections were nevertheless held, with a highly predictable outcome. They resulted in an unusual situation where representative bodies at all vertical levels were dominated by the SNS and its partners, presumably alongside a number of scattered councillors of minor actors who took part in the elections despite the boycott. This include several smaller opposition parties who saw an opportunity to make political gains due to the absence of major competitors on the opposition side; parties of ethnic minorities which, where present and organized, entered local parliaments under relaxed electoral rules (no threshold); as well as various local groups, movements, and organizations that participated in the elections, free from the obligation to boycott as suggested by the major opposition parties. In an attempt to attract such actors and make the elections more pluralistic, SNS, in a move characteristic of hybrid regimes, changed the electoral rules several months before the vote: the threshold was lowered from 5% to 3%, and moreover, parties representing ethnic minorities

were provided with an additional incentive through a provision that artificially multiplied their electoral results by a coefficient of 1.35. However, the majority of relevant opposition actors remained firm in their decision to boycott.

Such circumstances provide us an opportunity to gain valuable insights from a natural experiment: what local democracy and local representative bodies look like under a hybrid regime and in assemblies formed through boycotted elections, most of them comprising predominantly of government-aligned councillors. Specifically, we are interested in how such local parliaments have performed in a comparative perspective in terms of the experience of elected representatives, considered this an important characteristic of politicians in elections.

Moreover, this live laboratory, in which we can assume that the vast majority of councillors support the hybrid regime (SNS or their partner parties), gives us the opportunity to examine differences of councillors within this regime and those in other countries, especially since the data for this study are drawn from a pan-European survey conducted simultaneously in 27 countries.

HYPOTHETICAL FRAMEWORK: EXPECTED EXPERIENCE OF LOCAL COUNCILLORS IN SERBIA

When discussing Serbia, electoral rules can play a dual role in influencing the overall level of experience of legislative members, particularly at the local level. Serbia is one of the few countries that use a closed-list proportional representation system while voting in a single, at-large district and a 3% threshold across all levels (national, provincial, local). In this rigid system, citizens have no influence over which candidates will be elected; they can only vote for the entire list as nominated by the political party of their choice. This also enables a high level of nationalization, as parties at all levels tend to associate lists with national leaders, meaning that citizens rarely know who the actual candidates are. In addition to allowing a high degree of fragmentation in representative bodies, the closed-list PR system is highly inefficient in terms of internal party democracy. Specifically, in a system where nominations and list order (and thus chances for re-election) are entirely controlled by party elites, hyper-centralization ensues, leaving all elected representatives completely subordinate to the party leadership. Furthermore, mayors and municipal presidents in Serbia are not directly elected but are appointed by majorities in local parliaments, which further fosters a high degree of subordination and centralization in political life. Local coalitions are often dissolved and reconstituted to mirror national parliamentary majorities (see: Stojanović 2022). Regarding the ruling SNS, it is also worth noting that party defection and switching are exceedingly rare, indicating a high level of loyalty within the party (Ilić 2020).

On the one hand, high centralization of decision-making and very weak incentives for personal vote-earning campaigns could mean that parties place little emphasis on candidates' personal characteristics, making experience of a candidate an insignificant factor. On the other hand, however, as previously reviewed studies highlight, experience is not only a signal to voters but also a critical informational shortcut for party elites to assess the loyalty of potential candidates, which is a highly valued trait in hyper-centralized systems (see: Put, Muyters & Maddens 2020). For this reason, in the case of Serbian closed-list system, we could potentially expect a high level of experience among elected local representatives.

However, this early conclusion is complicated by the political context of the 2020 local elections, which were held amid an opposition boycott. Thus, local assemblies were dominated by the ruling SNS and its partner parties, which had the flexibility to include inexperienced candidates on their lists due to their certain victories and also high number of seats won in virtually all races which presumably depleted the pool of experienced candidates placed on top of their lists. In contrast, the local opposition from 2020 to 2024 primarily consisted of smaller parties, local movements, and independent councillors who filled the void left by major opposition parties following the boycott, supposedly adding to the overall inexperience because their parties had little chance to get involved with the local parliaments or governments in the past. In sum, this suggests that, albeit we can still expect councillors from the ruling parties to have more experience than those in the local opposition during this period, the opposition boycott could emerge as a factor that lowers the overall political experience of Serbian councillors within the given comparative sample. Moreover, both political influence of local councillors and financial compensation for their municipal work in Serbia is very low, incentivizing local politicians from ruling parties to pursue more favorable positions in local executive bodies, public enterprises, or higher tiers of politics. This could contribute to many of their more seasoned politicians to seek political appointments elsewhere, potentially adding to the declining experience levels of SNS councillors within our sample, given that the party has been in power in the vast majority of local governments in Serbia since 2012 or 2016.

A significant outlier is the largest local parliament in the country, the Belgrade City Assembly, elected in 2020, and then again in 2022, simultaneously with another snap parliamentary election and the regular presidential election. This timing was once again used to nationalize all levels of voting, blocking the opposition from securing a potential victory in the capital. In this election, the SNS and its partners won a narrow majority, with 56 to opposition's 54 seats. Since our sample was created in 2023, it includes the Belgrade councillors from 2022 elections, as well as 13 other cities and municipalities in Serbia where local elections were held between 2020 and 2023 and were not boycotted, since the opposition has changed it stance since. However, given that this is only

a fragment of all local representatives in Serbia (and a fragment of those we surveyed), we do not expect significant changes to our overall findings.

Finally, one of our expectations is that local councillors in Serbia during the analyzed period will have a lower level of prior political experience compared to their European peers, not only because of the electoral system, opposition boycott or general lack of incentives, but also due to typical post-socialist traits. These include the inherited patterns of political centralization (Grzymala-Busse & Jones Luong 2002) that disregard personal characteristics of legislative candidates, especially in local politics; weaker citizen engagement and an underdeveloped civil society (Sissenich 2010); as well as electoral volatility typical of post-socialist countries (Bielasiak 2005; Gherghina 2014). These unstable patterns of voter loyalty lead to a constant influx of new parties and candidates into the political arena, thus presumably reducing the overall experience level of elected representatives. Therefore, we also expect to find regional differences between developed Western democracies and post-socialist Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, with Serbian values likely aligning more closely with the latter.

Based on the above, we can establish the hypothetical framework for our study, shedding light on factors determining the overall councillors' experience. We assume (H1) that local councillors in Serbia (2020–2024) will demonstrate less previous political experience than members of local assemblies in other sampled European countries at the time of the comparative study (2023). Despite expecting a higher level of experience in countries with closed-list proportional representation systems (H2), in the case of Serbia, the election boycott may prove to be a significant disrupting factor. Therefore, we will compare the experience of ruling and opposition councillors in Serbia, where we expect a higher level of experience among those from ruling parties (H3). Finally, we will compare Serbia within the broader framework of developed Western democracies and CEE countries, expecting Serbia's values to align more closely with those of post-socialist states (H4).

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The research design is based on data collected in 2023 from the Local Councillors Project, conducted across 27 European countries, with a total of 36,017 respondents.[1] Our focus is on comparing the political experience of Serbian local councillors with those of representatives from Eastern and Western European local parliaments and councils, on one hand, and examining the differences between government and opposition councillors, on the other. To facilitate these comparisons, we created different combinations (Serbia

1 List of countries is given in Appendix A.

/ Eastern Europe / Western Europe; government / opposition) of dummy variables. To further explore the political experience of Serbian councillors, we compare Serbia with countries (and a German lander, given the fact that local electoral rules in Germany are not prescribed by the national law) that are using closed-list proportional representation systems in local elections (Portugal, Spain, France, Croatia, North Macedonia, Romania, Israel, Saarland). This comparison aims to identify whether factors specific to Serbia, such as the election boycott by opposition parties, contribute to differences in the political experience of councillors, independent of the electoral system.

The classification of councillors into government and opposition parliamentary groups is based on responses to five survey questions:

1. I am a member of the ruling coalition/majority/party. (*government*)
2. I am a member of the mayor's party or the mayor's group/movement. (*government*)
3. I frequently vote with the majority in the council. (*government*)
4. I am in opposition to the ruling coalition or the mayor's group/movement. (*opposition*)
5. I frequently vote against the majority in the council. (*opposition*)

We excluded two categories of local councillors from the empirical analysis: 1. Councillors who did not select any of the five provided options; 2. Councillors who selected logically inconsistent responses (e.g., combinations of responses 1, 2, or 3 with responses 4 or 5). This resulted in a total of 24,161 local councillors who can be classified into one of the six categories (see: Table 1).

Table 1. Local Councillors by Affiliation to Government and Opposition

	total
Serbia government	546
Serbia opposition	64
Eastern Europe government	3,088
Eastern Europe opposition	974
Western Europe government	14,007
Western Europe opposition	5,482

Since our hypotheses focus on testing the differences in political experience between Serbian and European councillors, as well as between government and opposition representatives, we measured prior experience and political background in two ways. First, the questionnaire included the question, "For how many years have you been a councillor in total?" (an ordinal variable with options ranging from "less than 1", 1, 2... up to 28, 29, and "30 and more"). Additionally, councillors were asked whether they had held or are currently holding any of the following positions: member of parliament; mayor in

another municipality; member of a regional (or provincial) executive board or national government; parish council; member of the board of a council-owned joint stock company or foundation; member of a council committee; president of a council committee; member of the executive board; president of the council; leader of a party group in the council; member of a cooperative body of local authorities.

To further quantify political experience, we created a Political Experience Index (PE Index) from the responses to these 11 questions (excluding "no response" and "not applicable" answers). The PE Index is a cumulative measure based on 11 dichotomous items, each reflecting different forms of political involvement, coded as 1 (past and present experience) or 0 (no experience). The final index was calculated by summing the responses and standardizing them to a 0-1 scale. While these items measure distinct dimensions of political engagement, they collectively capture the breadth of political experience, providing a unified metric for comparison across groups.

Factor analysis supports the creation of this cumulative index. The 11 variables grouped into four distinct components, reflecting various aspects of political experience such as legislative and executive roles, leadership in council committees, and involvement in cooperative bodies. The factor structure explained over 50% of the total variance, indicating that the underlying factors effectively capture the core dimensions of political experience. Given these findings, the aggregation of responses into a single index is justified, as it accurately represents the diversity of political experience in a simplified and unified measure.[2]

Since political experience is not influenced solely by the position of the parliamentary group in the local assembly, nor by the political context (such as a hybrid regime and election boycotts, and inherited patterns of more centralized decision-making characteristic of post-communist societies in Central and Eastern Europe), our empirical analysis also tests the effects of other factors – such as demographic traits of councillors, and institutional rules. Therefore, in different models, we included a set of control variables: gender, age, education, local parliament/council size, councillor's electoral

2 The value of Cronbach's Alpha for the Political Experience Index was found to be 0.600, which indicates moderate internal consistency. While values above 0.70 are typically considered acceptable, the nature of the questions, which relate to different political roles that may not exist across all political systems, helps explain the lower Alpha value. Additionally, the high rate of excluded cases due to missing values (61%) may have further affected reliability. However, our factor analysis identified four interpretable components (legislative, executive, committee leadership, and civic involvement), supporting the view that these 11 indicators capture distinct but related facets of political experience. Given the complexity of the existing models and limited space, we chose to rely on a composite index for parsimony and comparability across analyses. Analysis of sub-indices may yield additional insights and is a promising avenue for future work, especially in the context of system-level or country-level comparisons.

list affiliation (national party, local list, independent), electoral system type (closed-list proportional representation vs. others).

We created the dummy variable "closed-list PR" to capture the level of voter influence on the composition of local parliaments. In eight countries (Portugal, Spain, Croatia, France[3], Serbia, North Macedonia, Romania, and Israel) and one German lander (Saarland) party elites determine the composition of local assemblies by pre-selecting candidate lists. In contrast, other electoral systems – first-past-the-post (FPTP), two-round system (TRS), single-transferable vote (STV), panachage, open-list proportional representation (OLPR), flexible-list proportional representation (FLPR), mixed-member one-vote and two-vote systems, limited-vote (LV) and block-vote (BV) – allow voters to influence which candidates secure representative seats. We also included an Activism Index in the models, which measures the activity of councillors across different types of organizations (trade unions, business associations, farmers' associations, humanitarian, sports/athletic, women's, environmental, ethnic minority, religious, neighborhood, and pensioners' organizations). The index is constructed as an additive scale based on a series of dichotomous items indicating whether the respondent reported active participation in each of the listed organizations. The resulting score is then standardized to range from 0 to 1 to ensure comparability across models.[4]

Since our dependent variables are right-skewed or exhibit peaks at both the minimum and maximum levels (Figure 1–2), we are presenting both the mean and median values in the descriptive part of our analysis. In more complex models, with the addition of control variables, we are using both OLS and quantile regression. We used quantile regression in addition to OLS to account for differences at various points in the distribution of political experience, providing a more nuanced view of how these factors differ across councillors.

3 Local councillors in small French municipalities (up to 1.000 citizens) are elected by block vote. However, since the dataset lacks information on the size and location of municipalities, all French respondents are categorized as elected under closed-list PR.

4 Descriptive statistics for all variables can be found in Appendix B.

Figure 1. Histogram "Years being councillor"

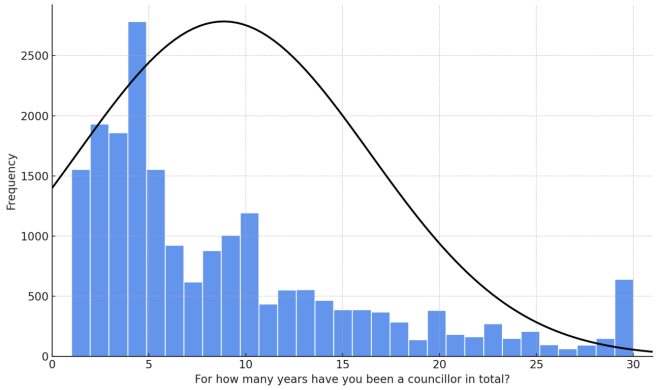
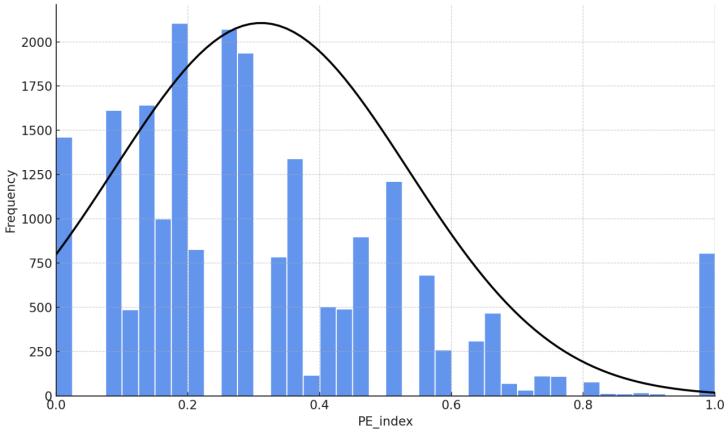


Figure 2. Histogram "Political Experience Index"



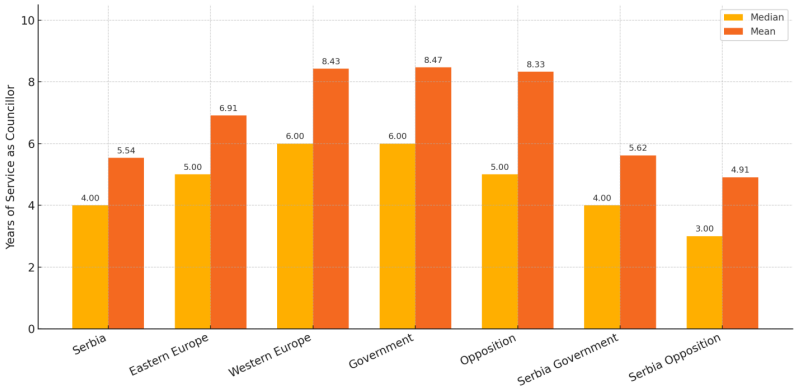
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As expected, local representatives in Serbia have served as councillors for fewer years than their counterparts in Eastern and Western Europe (Figure 3).[5] The representatives in Serbia who participated in the survey have, on average, about one and a half years less experience than their counterparts in Eastern European countries and nearly three years less than their colleagues from the

5 Individuals categorized as having "30 or more years" of political experience were treated as having 30 years for the purposes of calculating mean values. Given that this group constitutes only 3% of the sample, this treatment is unlikely to materially affect the overall results.

West. Although there are no significant differences between government and opposition representatives at the overall sample level, in Serbia, opposition representatives are less experienced in terms of their total years of service (median = 3, mean = 4.91) compared to government representatives (median = 4, mean = 5.62). However, it should be noted that local elections in Serbia were held in June 2020, and the survey with Serbian councillors was conducted in October 2023.[6] Considering the length of local parliamentary terms in Serbia, it is interesting to note that at most 42% of opposition representatives and 53% of government representatives served as councillors in any of the assemblies formed before the 2020 elections.

Figure 3. For how many years have you been a councillor in total?



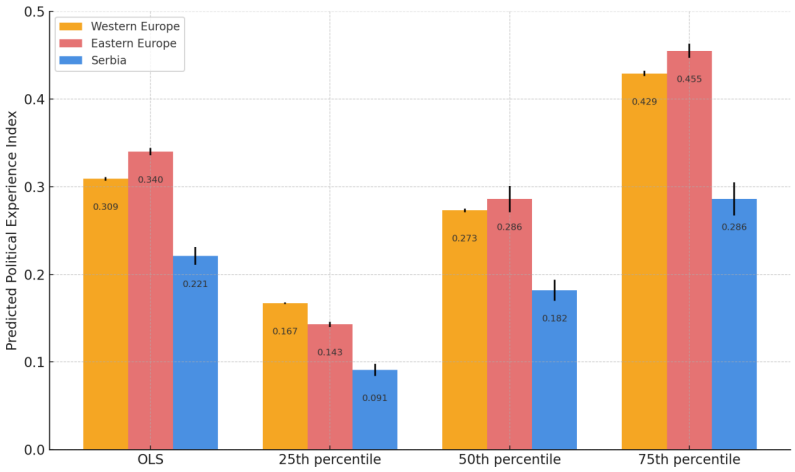
Building on the descriptive findings presented above, we turn to the analysis of the PE Index. As explained earlier, the PE Index offers a more precise measure of the political background and qualifications (CVs) of local representatives. Moreover, the index is designed to minimize the influence of the specific year within the parliamentary term in which the research was conducted, ensuring greater reliability and consistency across the data.

Figure 4 illustrates the PE Index values (model 1) calculated using both OLS (mean) and quantile regression (25th percentile, median, and 75th percentile). More importantly, across all models, the differences between Serbia, on the one hand, and Eastern and Western Europe, on the other, are statistically significant at the .01 level. In the overall sample, differences in the PE Index between government and opposition councillors are small but statistically significant. In Serbia, however, the differences between government and opposition councillors are not statistically significant. Notably, at the lower

6 An exception is the local elections in Belgrade and 13 other cities and municipalities, which were held in April 2022.

end of the distribution (q=0.25), councillors affiliated with government parties in Serbia (.091) tend to have more political experience than opposition councillors (0). This is likely a result of the election boycott, as the assemblies included many new opposition councillors, elected from local electoral lists and smaller opposition parties, who had no prior political experience. Conversely, at the higher end (q=0.75), government councillors have slightly less experience (.296) compared to non-boycotting opposition councillors (.364). Differences between the lower and higher ends of the distribution may be explained by the specific approach the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) takes towards distributing positions in representative and executive institutions, as well as in national and local public enterprises and institutions. Since local parliaments have limited influence and the compensation for councillors is symbolic, more experienced party members are presumably not interested in working in representative institutions.[7]

Figure 4. Predicted Political Experience Index for Serbia, Eastern Europe, and Western Europe (Model 1, OLS and Quantile Regressions)



Note: Error bars represent ±1 standard error

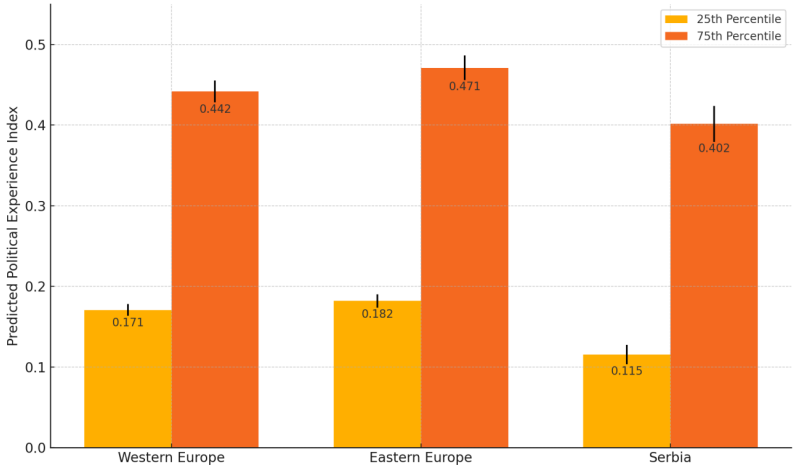
The hypothesis regarding differences in political experiences among Serbian, Eastern European, and Western European councillors is tested using more complex regression models as a form of robustness check. Detailed results are presented in Appendix C (Table 1). In model 2, we included key demographic

7 Until 2023, the compensation for councillors in the Belgrade local parliament was 10,000 dinars (around 80 euros) per session (held at least once every 3 months), after which it was increased to 40,000 dinars (320 euros). Compensation in other Serbian municipalities is even lower, while heads of local public enterprises earn up to fifteen times more.

variables (gender, education, age); in model 3, the Activism Index was added; in model 4, various institutional variables were incorporated, including the type of electoral list (national vs. local list vs. independent candidate), the type of electoral system (CL-PR vs. others) and council/parliament size.

Controlling for all variables in Model 4 (Figure 5), the Political Experience Index is significantly higher for Eastern and Western Europe compared to Serbia. At the lower end of the distribution, male councillors without a college education, elected from national electoral lists in a closed-list PR system (holding all other variables at their means), have a PE Index value of 0.171 in Western Europe, 0.182 in Eastern Europe, and 0.115 in Serbia. At the higher end of the distribution (75th percentile), councillors from Serbia have a PE Index of 0.402, compared to 0.442 in Western Europe and 0.471 in Eastern Europe.

Figure 5. Predicted Political Experience Index at the 25th and 75th Percentiles, by Region (male, no college education, national party list, CL-PR system; all other variables held at mean values)



Note: Error bars represent ±1 standard error

Although this is not the main focus of our research question, most other variables align with the expected predictive signs. Almost all, except education, are statistically significant across models. More experienced councillors tend to be male and older. Additionally, councillors with greater political experience are often more active in their local communities. Local politicians with stronger political backgrounds and qualifications (CVs) are at the same time members of various civic organizations, such as humanitarian groups, sports clubs, or professional associations. This finding suggests that broader civic engagement not only reflects a community-oriented approach but may also enhance councillors' chances of attaining significant political roles.

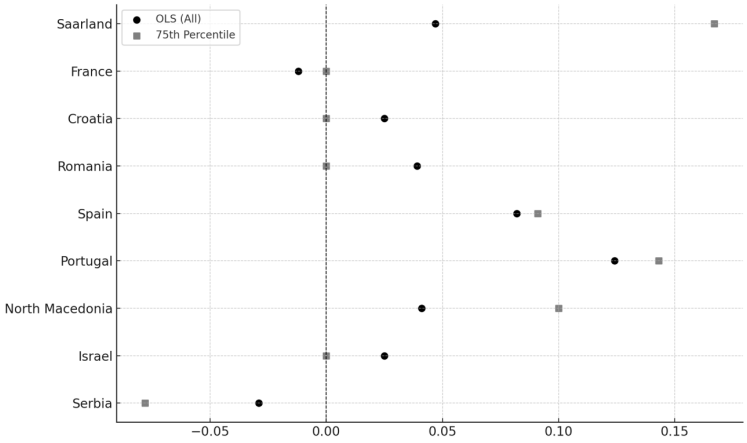
Councillors elected from local lists or as independents generally have less extensive political CVs than those from national lists. This disparity underscores the influence of national-level political structures in shaping councillors' experience while highlighting the challenges faced by locally affiliated or independent politicians in acquiring comparable credentials. The effect of municipal council size on the Political Experience Index varies across the distribution. In smaller councils, concentrated roles may favor experienced individuals, whereas larger councils increase opportunities for engagement but diminish individual influence due to structural dispersion. This variability reflects systemic trade-offs in council composition across Europe.

More importantly, the type of electoral system is a strong predictor of councillors' political experience. In eight countries and one German lander, where party elites pre-determine candidate lists, councillors generally have less experience than in systems with more personalized rules. This finding contradicts the previously reviewed literature, which identified higher levels of experience as desirable among party elites in such systems, translating most commonly to the trait of loyalty. Thus, the low experience level of Serbian councillors, even after accounting for rigid, party-centered electoral rules, appears to stem from specific contextual factors rather than inherited post-communist patterns. This finding is particularly noteworthy given Serbia's hybrid regime classification. Contrary to the expectations in less democratic systems, where entrenched local politicians often dominate their political landscapes, Serbia's regime-affiliated councillors are frequently inexperienced newcomers, reflecting unique dynamics in its local politics.

Just as we tested differences in councillors' political experience between Serbia, Eastern, and Western Europe, we also examined differences between governing and opposition parties using more complex regression models, both for the full sample (see: Appendix C, Table 2) and for Serbia specifically (see: Appendix C, Table 3). Across the full sample, in all models, councillors from governing parties have a stronger political background. The differences compared to opposition councillors are not large but are statistically significant. However, in Serbia, multivariate models reveal no significant differences between councillors from ruling party lists and those from opposition lists that did not boycott the elections. This finding is particularly interesting given that the election boycott allowed smaller, less popular and less institutionalized parties to win council seats. In boycotted elections within hybrid regimes, one might expect that governing councillors would have significantly more political experience than the few opposition councillors. However, this result is not surprising to those who closely follow how positions have been allocated during the rule of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). As we mentioned, positions in the assemblies, even in the national parliament, are often allocated to the third-tier members of the ruling parties, while more prominent party officials and activists seek appointments in the executive branch, where they can wield more power and influence.

As with the broader analysis of the Political Experience Index, where differences between Serbia and the rest of Europe are not solely the result of Serbia's highly rigid and hyper-centralized electoral system, the greater experience of opposition councillors compared to government councillors is also not a consequence of the closed-list proportional representation (CL-PR) system. This is evident in Figure 6, which displays the experience differences between government and opposition councillors across all nine electoral systems using closed electoral lists. Interestingly, Serbia stands out as the most prominent case where opposition councillors – despite the partial boycott of elections and hybrid regime characteristics – display more political experience than their government-affiliated counterparts.[8] This trend is particularly evident at the higher end of the distribution (q = .75), where Serbian government councillors exhibit notably weaker political backgrounds and qualifications (CVs) compared to their opposition peers.

Figure 6. Differences in Political Experience between Government and Opposition Councillors in Selected Countries (OLS and 75th Percentile Estimates)



Note: Estimates are based on baseline models including only government/opposition status and country dummies. OLS estimates represent mean differences between government and opposition councillors, while 75th percentile estimates capture differences among the most experienced councillors. Positive values indicate that government councillors have higher levels of political experience.

8 In France, a similar but much less pronounced pattern is observed. The specific context of French local elections – characterized by the prevalence of small municipalities (average size under 2,000 residents), a very high share of councillors elected from local political groups, and a substantial presence of independents – likely explains the lower levels of political experience among both government and opposition councillors.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on an analysis of a substantial Europe-wide dataset, we can confidently assert that local councillors in Serbia are significantly less experienced (H1) than their counterparts in both Western and Eastern European countries. However, we were unable to confirm our hypothesis (H2) regarding the impact of closed-list proportional representation (CL-PR) electoral systems, which operates contrary to our expectations. In the nine cases where party elites pre-determine candidate lists, councillors generally exhibit lower levels of experience, contradicting previous findings about experience serving as a positive signal to party leadership regarding a candidate's longstanding loyalty to the party, and hence the expectation that closed-list systems would therefore result in more loyal – that is, more experienced – candidate lists overall. This raises a question for further research regarding potential selection processes and incentives within these systems. Specifically, party leaders in less-consolidated democracies may still place higher value on experienced and loyal candidates compared to more developed democracies. However, this remains highly speculative, given the contradicting results and especially limited number of cases examined in this study, including its temporal limitations stemmed from the fact that data was collected at a single time-point. It is also important to repeat that our research was conducted on a sample of local councillors elected in municipal, low-tier elections, which may additionally influence the emergence of different patterns of behavior.

In contrast, Serbia demonstrates considerably lower levels of experience than both the Western and Eastern European CL-PR cohorts, suggesting a different set of incentives for party decision-makers than in the other countries within the same group.

These findings enable us to draw conclusions about the nature and functioning of the hybrid regime in Serbia, particularly at the local level. It is noteworthy that Serbia's results deviate from those observed in similar post-communist contexts (therefore excluding H4 from our explanation), as well as from countries with comparable institutional constraints, especially with regard to electoral rules, which are key factors influencing both the composition of assemblies and the incentives of elected representatives. This indicates that the results in Serbia are shaped by contingent circumstances, primarily the election boycott by major opposition parties, as well as the operational strategies of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), the dominant party in this hybrid regime, in distributing candidates within a hyper-centralized electoral and decision-making system, combined with higher incentives for politicians to move further up from the local municipal assemblies. This could also help explain why Serbia prominently features seemingly more experienced opposition councillors compared to those from the ruling parties among all CL-PR cases, regardless of the electoral boycott. While candidates from the ruling parties in a hybrid regime that controls all horizontal and vertical

levels of government have access to a variety of more lucrative and influential positions, for opposition politicians, (local) assemblies often represent the only available political posts. Presumably, in the absence of a boycott, this gap could be even greater, as more experienced opposition politicians would return to the assemblies.

But regarding overall sample, one of our hypotheses (H3) compared the experience levels of ruling and opposition councillors, expecting a higher level of political tenures among Serbian councillors from ruling parties due to the relative rookieness of the available non-boycotting opposition in local parliaments. Although descriptive statistics reveal differences between government and opposition parties under these circumstances, more complex models show no significant differences between councillors from ruling party lists and those from opposition lists that did not boycott the elections. This may also be linked to the fact that the majority of councillors in Serbia had not previously served in local parliaments before the 2020 elections, thus contributing to the overall inexperience. These results remain robust even when controlling for a wide range of variables, including demographic factors, local activism, institutional rules, and political affiliations.

Our findings aim to contribute to the exploration of local democracies and the interplay between candidate traits and electoral rules, a topic that remains understudied in comparative literature. Moreover, they offer insights into the functioning of hybrid regimes and flawed democracies at the local level and within selectorates. These patterns warrants further investigation, particularly in the context of local parliaments elected without a boycott, to determine whether our findings persist and whether they reflect enduring structural issues or specific conditions tied to the boycott period.

The main limitation of this study is that the findings are heavily influenced by the major opposition boycott, which has since ended, with new local assemblies being elected in late 2023 and mid-2024. Therefore, these results are temporally and contextually specific and may not be replicable in future electoral cycles. Nevertheless, they provide crucial insight into the post-boycott political environment and its effects on local democracy and the quality of local governance. Investigating the evolving dynamics between opposition and ruling parties in hybrid regimes may offer further insights into the long-term implications of political boycotts and institutional arrangements alike.

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Appendix A: Countries included in the study of local councillors

country	number of respondents
Austria	3355
Belgium	1753
Bosnia and Herzegovina	346
Croatia	341
Czechia	621
Finland	1494
France	2678
Germany	1778
Greece	1054
Hungary	467
Iceland	85
Ireland	65
Israel	243
Italy	2137
Latvia	115
Lithuania	532
North Macedonia	170
Poland	132
Portugal	247
Romania	106
Serbia	610
Slovakia	544
Slovenia	688
Spain	592
Sweden	2116
Switzerland	536
United Kingdom	1356

Appendix B: Descriptive statistics

Variables	Mean	Median	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	Skew.	Kurt.	N
PE Index	0.312	0.273	0.223	0	1	1.193	1.526	21519
years_councilor	8.43	5	7.606	0	30	1.261	0.863	21336
age	53.779	54	12.694	18	103	-0.204	-0.574	20687
Activism Index	0.237	0.182	0.161	0	0.91	0.608	0.062	21571
council size	29.1	25	17.162	2	147	1.828	4.906	19143
female	0.380	-	-	-	-	-	-	21181
college education	0.655	-	-	-	-	-	-	21542
local electoral list	0.331	-	-	-	-	-	-	21500
individual/independent cand.	0.115	-	-	-	-	-	-	21500
national electoral list	0.554	-	-	-	-	-	-	21500
closed-list PR	0.209	-	-	-	-	-	-	23734

Appendix C

Table 1. Political Experience Index – Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Serbia

	model 1				model 2				model 3			
	OLS	qtile_25	qtile_50	qtile_75	OLS	qtile_25	qtile_50	qtile_75	OLS	qtile_25	qtile_50	qtile_75
Constant	**.309*****	**.167*****	**.273*****	**.429*****	**.106*****	**.086*****	**.090*****	**.172*****	**.072*****	**.056*****	**.063*****	**.127*****
	(.002)	(.001)	(.002)	(.003)	(.007)	(.005)	(.008)	(.011)	(.007)	(.005)	(.008)	(.011)
Eastern Europe	**.031*****	**-.024*****	**.013****	**.026*****	**.043*****	.004	**.025*****	**.047*****	**.048*****	**.011*****	**.029*****	**.047*****
	(.004)	(.003)	(.015)	(.008)	(.004)	(.003)	(.004)	(.006)	(.004)	(.003)	(.004)	(.006)
Serbia	**-.088*****	**-.076*****	**-.091*****	**-.143*****	**-.056*****	**-.060*****	**-.054*****	**-.063*****	**-.062*****	**-.066*****	**-.060*****	**-.071*****
	(.010)	(.007)	(.012)	(.019)	(.010)	(.007)	(.011)	(.015)	(.010)	(.007)	(.010)	(.015)
Female					**-.036*****	**-.023*****	**-.040*****	**-.052*****	**-.039*****	**-.024*****	**-.039*****	**-.057*****
					(.003)	(.002)	(.003)	(.005)	(.003)	(.002)	(.003)	(.005)
College education					-.004	-.001	.004	**-.019*****	-.005	-.001	.000	**-.017*****
					(.003)	(.002)	(.003)	(.005)	(.003)	(.002)	(.003)	(.005)
Age					**.004*****	**.002*****	**.004*****	**.005*****	**.004*****	**.002*****	**.003*****	**.005*****
					(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)
Activism Index									**.218*****	**.156*****	**.237*****	**.279*****
									(.009)	(.007)	(.010)	(.014)
Adjusted R^2 / Pseudo R^2	.007	.005	.003	.003	.068	.016	.027	.050	.092	.029	.045	.069
CI	1.599				11.873				13.051			
VIF highest value	1.005				1.036	for Eastern Europe			1.041	for age		
N	21518				19999				19948			

standard errors in parantheses,*** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.1, reference: Western Europe (models 1-4); male, without college education (models 2-4); national electoral list (model 4); other electoral systems (model 4)

	model 4			
	OLS	qtile_25	qtile_50	qtile_75
Constant	**.082*****	**.063*****	**.072*****	**.142*****
	(.009)	(.007)	(.010)	(.013)
Eastern Europe	**.036*****	**.011*****	**.022*****	**.029*****
	(.005)	(.004)	(.005)	(.007)
Serbia	**-.041*****	**-.055*****	**-.041*****	**-.040*****
	(.012)	(.010)	(.013)	(.018)
Female	**-.041*****	**-.030*****	**-.044*****	**-.054*****
	(.004)	(.003)	(.004)	(.005)
College education	-.002	.000	.001	**-.010***
	(.004)	(.001)	(.004)	(.006)
Age	**.004*****	**.002*****	**.004*****	**.006*****
	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)
Activism Index	**.188*****	**.136*****	**.208*****	**.239*****
	(.011)	(.009)	(.012)	(.016)
Local electoral list	**-.031*****	**-.019*****	**-.032*****	**-.040*****
	(.004)	(.003)	(.004)	(.006)
Independent candidate	-.009	**-.010****	**-.020*****	**-.037*****
	(.006)	(.005)	(.007)	(.009)
Municipal council size	**.000*****	.000	**.000*****	**-.001*****
	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)
Closed-list PR	**-.031*****	**-.019*****	**-.024*****	**-.038*****
	(.006)	(.005)	(.007)	(.009)
Adjusted R^2 / Pseudo R^2	.105	.030	.054	.078
CI	15.138			
VIF highest value	1.397	Closed-list PR		
N		16047		

Table 2. Political Experience Index – government vs. opposition

	model 1				model 2				model 3			
	OLS	qtile_25	qtile_50	qtile_75	OLS	qtile_25	qtile_50	qtile_75	OLS	qtile_25	qtile_50	qtile_75
constant	**.305*****	**.167*****	**.273*****	**.400*****	**.099*****	**.068*****	**.079*****	**.149*****	**.065*****	**.037*****	**.050*****	**.111*****
	(.003)	(.002)	(.004)	(.005)	(.008)	(.006)	(.008)	(.012)	(.008)	(.006)	(.008)	(.012)
government	**.009*****	.000	.000	**.029*****	**.018*****	**.011*****	**.018*****	**.024*****	**.022*****	**.016*****	**.022*****	**.025*****
	(.003)	(.002)	(.004)	(.006)	(.003)	(.003)	(.004)	(.005)	(.003)	(.003)	(.004)	(.005)
Female					**-.038*****	**-.025*****	**-.040*****	**-.054*****	**-.041*****	**-.026*****	**-.040*****	**-.060*****
					(.003)	(.002)	(.003)	(.005)	(.003)	(.002)	(.003)	(.005)
College education					.001	.000	.006	**-.013****	-.000	.001	.001	**-.013*****
					(.003)	(.002)	(.003)	(.005)	(.003)	(.002)	(.003)	(.005)
Age					.004	**.002*****	**.004*****	**.005*****	**.004*****	**.002*****	**.003*****	**.005*****
					(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)
Activism Index									**.211*****	**.159*****	**.228*****	**.276*****
									(.009)	(.007)	(.010)	(.014)
Adjusted R^2 / Pseudo R^2	.000	.000	.000	.000	.062	.014	.026	.048	.085	.027	.043	.066
CI	3.572				12.860				14.015			
VIF highest value	1.000				1.015	for college education			1.022	for age		
N	21518				19999				19948			

standard errors in parantheses,*** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.1, reference: Western Europe (models 1-4); male, without college education (models 2-4); national electoral list (model 4); other electoral systems (model 4)

	model 4			
	OLS	qtile_25	qtile_50	qtile_75
constant	**.068*****	**.036*****	**.056*****	**.120*****
	(.009)	(.008)	(.010)	(.014)
government	**.033*****	**.024*****	**.035*****	**.040*****
	(.004)	(.003)	(.004)	(.006)
Female	**-.042*****	**-.031*****	**-.044*****	**-.056*****
	(.004)	(.003)	(.004)	(.005)
College education	.005	.005	.006	-.003
	(.004)	(.003)	(.004)	(.005)
Age	**.004*****	**.002*****	**.004*****	**.006*****
	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)
Activism Index	**.184*****	**.140*****	**.189*****	**.238*****
	(.011)	(.009)	(.012)	(.016)
Local electoral list	**-.032*****	**-.019*****	**-.032*****	**-.038*****
	(.004)	(.003)	(.004)	(.006)
Independent candidate	-.003	**-.009***	**-.014****	**-.032****
	(.006)	(.005)	(.007)	(.009)
Municipal council size	**-.001*****	**.000*****	**-.001*****	**-.001*****
	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)
Closed-list PR	**-.043*****	**-.035*****	**-.035*****	**-.051*****
	(.005)	(.005)	(.006)	(.007)
Adjusted R^2 / Pseudo R^2	.105	.031	.055	.080
CI	16.109			
VIF highest value	1.140	for municipal council size		
N	16047			

Table 3. Political Experience Index – Serbia government vs. Serbia opposition

	model 1				model 2				model 3			
	OLS	qtile_25	qtile_50	qtile_75	OLS	qtile_25	qtile_50	qtile_75	OLS	qtile_25	qtile_50	qtile_75
Constant	**.246*****	.000	**.182*****	**.364*****	-.023	-.035	-.067	-.002	-.070	**-.092***	**-.109***	-.077
	(.026)	(.021)	(.032)	(.037)	(.051)	(.048)	(.054)	(.071)	(.051)	(.049)	(.056)	(.067)
Serbia government	-.029	**.091*****	.000	**-.078****	-.021	.033	.020	-.033	-.023	.010	.009	.010
	(.028)	(.023)	(.034)	(.039)	(.026)	(.025)	(.028)	(.037)	(.026)	(.025)	(.028)	(.034)
Female					**-.070*****	**-.072*****	**-.062*****	**-.081*****	**-.065*****	**-.070*****	**-.064*****	**-.081*****
					(.017)	(.016)	(.018)	(.023)	(.017)	(.016)	(.018)	(.022)
College education					**.094*****	**.069*****	**.095*****	**.095*****	**.095*****	**.061*****	**.091*****	**.093*****
					(.019)	(.018)	(.020)	(.027)	(.019)	(.018)	(.021)	(.025)
Age					**.005*****	**.002****	**.004*****	**.007*****	**.005*****	**.003*****	**.005*****	**.006*****
					(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)
Activism Index									**.222*****	**.141*****	**.200*****	**.244*****
									(.046)	(.044)	(.051)	(.062)
Adjusted R^2 / Pseudo R^2	.000	.005	.000	.002	.132	.019	.062	.113	.171	.038	.076	.134
CI	5.876				15.273				16.613			
VIF highest value	1.000				1.065	for age			1.070	for age		
N	529				501				499			

standard errors in parantheses,*** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.1, reference: opposition (models 1-4); male, without college education (models 2-4); national electoral list (model 4)

	model 4			
	OLS	qtile_25	qtile_50	qtile_75
Constant	-.024	-.051	**-.108***	-.049
	(.055)	(.053)	(.061)	(.069)
Serbia government	-.010	.004	.023	.019
	(.027)	(.026)	(.030)	(.034)
Female	**-.064*****	**-.065*****	**-.058*****	**-.069*****
	(.016)	(.016)	(.018)	(.021)
College education	**.096*****	**.066*****	**.091*****	**.099*****
	(.019)	(.018)	(.021)	(.023)
Age	**.004*****	**.002*****	**.004*****	**.006*****
	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)
Activism Index	**.225*****	**.150*****	**.202*****	**.250*****
	(.046)	(.044)	(.051)	(.057)
Local electoral list	.009	.011	.019	-.041
	(.026)	(.025)	(.029)	(.033)
Independent candidate	-.001	-.059	-.041	.053
	(.038)	(.036)	(.042)	(.048)
Municipal council size	-.001	.000	.000	-.001
	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)
Adjusted R^2 / Pseudo R^2	.161	.043	.075	.136
CI	19.315			
VIF highest value	1.113	for local electoral list		
N	489			