NETWORK OF POLITICAL PRESSURES
in Social Welfare Centers

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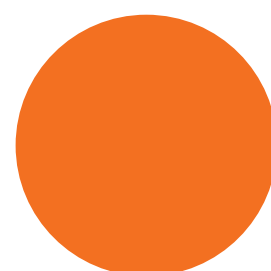
Summary

Subject, Aims, and Research Methodology

Findings from the research conducted by CRTA in the eve of the 2022 elections suggest that political pressures on citizens are constant and not limited to the pre-election period. Public sector employees and citizens from the most vulnerable segments of society are particularly exposed to political pressures. Political clientelism and party patronage, which have already become a part of Serbia's political landscape, extend into areas that at first glance may appear less lucrative and attractive to political parties. One such area is also social welfare, where political parties find their interests despite limited resources.

The aim of the research conducted by the CRTA research team from May to August 2023 was to examine the **ways in which political clientelistic networks operate within Social Welfare Centres (SWC) and how their influence is reflected in the centres' work.** To achieve these aims, a qualitative method of semi-structured interviews was employed. A total of 27 interviews were conducted with SWC employees in various positions, including case managers (12), supervisors (6), service unit heads in centres (4), acting directors (2), directors (1), as well as experts in social welfare (2).

Context: how are clientelistic networks formed?

There is a large number of problems faced by the centres: deficit of professional workers, low salaries, workload, increased number of cases and beneficiaries, poor infrastructure of institutions, lack of equipment, lack of vehicles and drivers, inexperienced personnel in managerial positions, bad relations in the collective, bad organisation of work, poor intersectoral cooperation, limited possibility of advancement and professional training, endangered worker safety, negative publicity in the media, etc. All of these are **unequivocal symptoms of weak and dysfunctional institutions, as well as demotivating organisational cultures.**

Weak formal institutions that fail to fulfil their role become fertile ground for the establishment of informal practices and clientelistic relationships. Then informal channels serve as an instrument to compensate for the shortcomings of formal institutions or to increase their efficiency. The research participants testified about a number of situations when they used informal forms in order to take care of their beneficiaries (for example: they used personal acquaintances, worked outside of their authority, acted beyond the formal procedure, etc.). In some segments, the informal culture has become an integral part of the centres' organisational culture. **Poverty** is another important prerequisite for the emergence and development of clientelistic networks like those we can find in the social welfare centres. **The most vulnerable population is the most frequent target of political manipulation, abuse and blackmail, but also the most frequent addressee of populist messages in pre-election campaigns.** Social welfare centres are in this sense of great interest to the political parties in power, because they can "connect" them with the most vulnerable categories of the population through the misuse of beneficiaries' personal data, but also help them "bribe" the beneficiaries, their potential electorate, through misuse of public resources.

Modus operandi: how do political clientelistic networks function in the SWC?

In political clientelistic networks in SWC, we recognise a **hierarchical model of relationships** and several key actors, each of whom has a specific role, and, accordingly, a certain level of power.

1) The leadership of the political party, as a patron, exerts its influence through the representatives of the municipality, primarily through the president of the municipality/mayor (who sometimes acts through his mediators, municipal politicians, members of local community councils, etc.).

2) The president of the municipality ("party operative") exerts pressure on the director of the centre or directly on the employees of the SWC who work on material assistance tasks and local services financed by the municipality.

3) The director of the centre ("gatekeeper") is the main link between the party and the institution – they develop their own clientelistic network, put pressure on other employees for both party activism and professional work (prioritisation of "party" beneficiaries) and enable the abuse of public resources (e.g. setting up public bids for eligible companies, use of official premises and vehicles for party activities, "donation system" – a part of the salary is "given back" to the party) and personal data on beneficiaries (forward lists of beneficiaries to higher, party and municipal, instances).

4) Professional workers in charge of material assistance and performing other jobs financed from the municipality represent the next important link in this chain. Usually engaged through the party, they play an important role in the implementation of bribery of the electorate through material gifts. In addition to professional support, they also provide financial ("donation system") and political (party activism: going to rallies, collecting votes, etc.) support to the party.

5) Employees hired by the municipality, and employees under temporary and occasional employment contract, and on a fixed-term basis, also most often hired through the party, are used in the clientelistic chain as "safe votes", but also as party activists and financial support (e.g. they give 5% of their salary to the party).

6) Beneficiaries of services, "safe votes" and "party army", as well as providers of financial support to the party (forced to "share" financial aid from SWC with the party), close the network's chain. In this chain, the action of higher instances is aimed at party "capture" of the institution and control of lower instances. Although this model of party control has had a long tradition and continuity, the interviewees note that political clientelistic relations have intensified in the last decade and have also become more unscrupulous.

Political influence and **party clientelistic networks are most pronounced at the top** (primarily centre directors, but also their deputies and managers) and at the bottom (unskilled, technical staff) of the hierarchical pyramid within the centres. Party staffing and employment are the main mechanisms for strengthening the party network and control, both over employees and public resources, and also serve as a means to exert party control over the implementation of measures in the domain of the work of social welfare centres. **Pressure on employees and beneficiaries** of this network is maintained and used to fulfil their goals.

In these relationships, various resources are exchanged: votes, money (e.g. "donation system", setting up public bids, raises and compensation for party-active employees), **information** (e.g. lists of beneficiaries), **jobs and positions, and services** (urging for individuals linked to the party, days off for active party members, etc.). Although those who got a job through the party, hired by the municipality and those who have an unregulated final status in the company (temporary and occasional employment contract and fixed-term contracts) are the most exposed to party demands, other employee profiles are also exposed to pressure. Some of them refused requests that conflicted with professional ethics and profession without any consequences, while some were still faced with sanctions (for example, downgrading, losing their jobs). In addition to pressure for party and professional work, SWC employees are also faced with a kind of **"party omertà",** which implies a ban on commenting on certain topics and criticising higher authorities (e.g. ministries or management) and their decisions. The red lines that mark the boundaries of opposition to the government are usually not explicitly set, but are implied or anticipated.

Consequences: How do clientelistic networks affect SWC work?

Out of a number of consequences of political clientelism on the work of SWC, we will single out a few key ones.

1) **The undermining and entrapment of the SWC** as an institution is reflected in: *the predominance of informal over formal rules* (actors of clientelistic networks do not respect formal rules and laws; work in SWC is not obtained according to legally defined criteria; social services are obtained by those who have no right to them; abuse of public resources and corruption is noticeable); *the emergence of parallel lines of responsibility* (employees are "accountable" to the party; they answer to the party and patrons, not to managers, legal norms or users). "Getting things done for the party" is often prioritised, *causing workers to neglect their current files/cases and responsibilities.* Recruitment through party connections becomes the dominant channel for getting a job in the public sector, which has the effect of *weakening human resources* (political criteria suppress formal criteria for getting a job; incompetent workers and managers are produced). In this way, *the institution weakens, and its work becomes arbitrary and inefficient.*

2) **Passivisation of the profession and ethics**, as another important consequence, is reflected in the *creation of a new professional culture, the culture of "silence without provocation".* Employees are not ready to publicly criticise the shortcomings of the system and wrong decisions, nor to fight for better working conditions, because *the clientelistic and party networks that rule public institutions and the state represent clear limits to autonomous professional work and freedom of speech and criticism* (employees are well aware of where the red lines of opposition to party interests and authority are). The absence of critical thinking and freedom of speech also leads to *bad decisions.* In such a working climate, *creating public policies based on empirical findings is almost impossible.*

3) **Inequality among users, employees and institutions.** In is noted in the research that people close to a political party enjoy various privileges: they received services or benefits to which they are not entitled, or they receive them through an accelerated procedure, or without the necessary documentation. Inequality among employees is reflected in the fact that workers whose salaries are provided by the municipality and who deal with rights under the jurisdiction of local self-government are more often hired on a fixed-term basis

and are under greater pressure to participate in clientelistic exchange, do party work or work in the interest of the party. On the other hand, members of clientelistic networks can obtain privileges such as bonuses, participation in projects, etc. The inequality between institutions is reflected in the fact that centres headed by directors with a better position in those networks more easily provide official vehicles, premises refurbishment, equipment and projects.

The system organised in this way maintains the status quo and prevents essential change and improvement of the work of the SWC.

Conclusion

Clientelism is recognised as the organisational principle of local social welfare. Clientelism is also recognised as the organisational principle of authoritarian governance, along with the principles of institution destruction, violence, fear, and passivity.

Introduction

Party clientelistic networks are not new on the Serbian social and political scene – they have been part of the technology of government and political folklore for at least two decades *(although it is quite certain that the roots are deeper in modern history, compare Cvejić, ed. 2016; CRTA 2022).* **They affect almost all segments of society, from the economy, through sports and culture, all the way to social protection as this research will demonstrate.**

The study of clientelistic networks in social welfare is important because it shows the extent to which party networks are ready to dominate different social systems, and even those in which, according to the testimonies of the actors, there are not many resources, and therefore they are not overly attractive to parties and politicians. In this sense, social welfare is far less attractive compared to infrastructure, the economy or some other areas where state budgets are larger. **In spite of this, the study of clientelistic networks in social welfare is important because it can indicate the ability of the system to provide support to citizens who are in a state of need, particularly because we record high rates of poverty in Serbia (the rate of risk of poverty in 2021 was 21.2% is among the highest in Europe, while the rate of absolute poverty in 2020 was 6.9%) and social inequality (the Gini coefficient is among the highest in Europe and is 33.3).** Therefore, the research of clientelistic networks in social welfare should contribute to our understanding of the strategies and abilities of political stakeholders to control all segments of society, as well as the ability of institutions to solve social problems of citizens, communities and society as a whole.

Social welfare centres are key institutions in the planning and implementation of social protection measures. Their internal organisation is specific in that they actually have two founders: the ministry in charge of social welfare and local self-government. These two institutions participate in appointing directors and financing the work of SCW. The rights defined by laws at the state level in the field of social and family legal protection are within the competence of the SCW. Professional workers whose salaries are paid from the state budget are in charge of their implementation. Furthermore, the centres implement local programmes, such as material assistance and services under the jurisdiction of the local self-government. Professional workers are the ones who implement it, and their salaries are funded through the local self-government budget.

In this relatively complex context, characterised by a political scene intertwined with clientelism, a complex institutional structure consisting of two founders and two task groups, and increasing beneficiaries' pressures for services, social welfare centres are undergoing continuous reforms. These reforms aim to ensure that services be tailored to the beneficiaries' needs; accessible, and efficient. This research should shed additional light on the functioning of clientelistic networks in this specific environment, as well as on public institutions whose mandate is to ensure the social security of citizens.

About research

Aims of the research and methodology

The research had two goals: to examine (1) how clientelistic networks function and (2) how they influence the work of social welfare centres. In addition to the question of what is the *modus operandi* of clientelistic networks in SWC, within the first goal, the discussion revolved around the motivations and reasons prompting individuals to join clientelistic networks, along with an exploration of how they perceive and rationalise their involvement in such networks. The second aim of the research was to examine the patterns of influence of clientelistic networks on the work of SWC. We started from the assumption that clientelistic networks undermine formal institutions by (1) **creating parallel lines of loyalty** to networks, and not to formal institutions and laws; (2) weakening institutions because **less qualified personnel** are employed through them; and (3) creating a **specific professional culture** shaped by the absence of ambition, the belief that things cannot be changed, etc.

In accordance with the aims of the research, the qualitative method of semi-structured in-depth interview was used. In the selection of participants, a purposive sample and the "snowball" technique were used. 27 participants (21 female and 6 male participants) participated in the research, from 21 municipalities, aged from 31 to 63 (the average age of the participants is 49), with work experience in SWC ranging from 8 to 30 years (the average experience of the participants is 20 years), who are currently working as professional workers, that is, case managers (12), supervisors (6), heads of services in centres (4), acting directors (2) and directors (1). Two interviews were also held with experts in the field of social welfare who have decades of experience in working with SWC. The interviews were conducted online or by phone, from May to August 2023. The conversations were recorded with the consent of the participants, transcribed, coded (in QDA miner software) and then analysed. All interviews are anonymised. The instrument, i.e. the guide, through which the interviewer directed the conversation with the participants with questions and sub-questions, contained three main thematic units: the representation of informal practices and their impact on the work of SWC and employment, political influence and the representation of clientelistic relations in SWC, the way these networks function and the way the interviewees perceive them.

Context:
how are clientelistic networks formed?

Weak institutions and informal culture

A system characterised by numerous shortcomings, unclear procedures and difficult working conditions is fertile ground for the establishment and development of practices that take place outside the formal sphere **(informal practices)** and unwritten rules that are created and applied outside official channels **(informal norms).** Sometimes informal practices are reinforced by norms and thus provide stable and permanent frameworks for the actions of individuals **(informal institutions).** Such informal patterns are present and highly developed in social welfare centres and in many segments form an integral part of the organisational and professional culture. Moreover, the interlocutors' statements indicate that the informal culture in these institutions has a long tradition dating back to the socialist period.

Informal practices and institutions occur when **formal institutions weaken** and fail to fulfil their roles. Informal channels serve as an instrument to compensate for the shortcomings of formal institutions or to increase their efficiency. In such cases, informal channels serve as a means to compensate for the shortcomings of formal institutions or enhance their efficiency. The interviewed individuals attested to numerous situations in which, due to resource constraints or the absence of formal solutions or capacities, and with the aim of performing their tasks effectively and responding adequately to beneficiaries' needs, they resorted to informal solutions. They mentioned cases when they used their personal acquaintances with employees in the institutions they cooperate with (shelters, health care institutions, and the like) in order to take care of beneficiaries of the centre's services beyond formal correspondence, when they even performed tasks that were outside the scope of their competence in in urgent cases when the beneficiary's health or life was threatened, or when they were in a situation of asking colleagues to perform tasks outside their authority because "there is no one else"; they testified that they had to use their private vehicle to go to the field because an official vehicle was not always available, that they paid for accommodation or transportation "out of their own pockets" for beneficiaries, and that they had to take over the jobs of managers who have performed the work incompetently or with neglect.

"The advantage is that this is a small community, so we all know one another. We don't have to wait; everyone recognises us, so we can enter any official place without any problems. We all have one another's phone numbers, and if we need to contact paediatricians, psychiatrists, or collaborate with any services, there's a kind of cooperation with all the agencies. Schools, etc. (...) You know, I have to ask a colleague, a driver who is currently delivering mail for us, to go with us to the health centre so that I can find the accommodation for the client I'm working with, we can ask the doctor to provide a medical certificate. If no one else is available, I have to do it myself." (supervisor, 49, 21 years working in a SWC)

"And then if we have an urgent intervention, if someone's life is in danger, one of our colleagues starts their car, and then we go to the field." (supervisor, 51, 23 years working in a SWC)

"We do not have a shelter for the homeless. Our home is full. The palliative care works for a short time. The other day we had the situation of a man who needed palliative care, as he was in a serious condition, lives alone and they ask us for medical tests, among other things, coproculture. And we ask who will do it, home care centre does not do it because he lives in the countryside, and they cover the city. Not even a rural nurse does that because it is not her job. No one does it either from palliative care or from the laboratory. But, you know who does, SWC. My colleague did it because she felt sorry for him to die alone in such pain; she arranged for him to be taken care of in the palliative care department. He was there for five days and passed away. At least he spent those five days in some humane conditions." (professional worker, 52 , 17 years working in a SWC)

The example of a social worker, who describes one of his "informal" working nights, is also illustrative:

"According to the law on social welfare, every local self-government is obliged to provide: a safe house for victims of violence, a shelter for children and a shelter for adults. Most of the local self-governments, justifying that they do not have the funds, do not establish it. They have another possibility to obtain this type of service through public procurement. Some local governments say: 'Well, we don't even have money for public procurement". We don't have a service provider in our territory, so they don't have one either. Our local government procures the adult shelter service through public procurement. Our local self-government acquires the service of shelter for adults through public procurement. But it is a shelter with a small capacity, 5-6 places. In the winter period, as a rule, they have no place. The expert worker who is on duty that night, he has to provide for that beneficiary, then he sits as a martyr in SWC with him all night. Which is not his job, but he is responsible, the police handed it over to him, he has to. I travelled to X (name of city) one night because I had an elderly who was demented and got on the bus and got lost in Y (name of another city). I couldn't place him in our shelter, because I had to test him for Covid, and the Covid clinics don't work at night, there is no testing. I had to take him to Y (name of city). I found there where his daughter is, where he went from. At the same time, I went there by taxi, because I don't even have an official vehicle at night. I had to do everything informally, although the powerful system exists." (professional worker, 58, 25 years working in a SWC)

The participants particularly underscored the importance of informal relationships in the context of solidarity and collegiality and the positive effects that such relationships have on the efficiency and quality of work *(for example, informal consultations between colleagues when they are uncertain about making a decision, 'covering' colleagues and taking over their work then when they have prior engagements or are overloaded with other duties, etc.).* In some of the participants' statements, we even noted the intention of fostering an 'informal culture' (especially in smaller communities) between the employees of the centres and individuals from other institutions, as well as in the relationship with the bene-

ficiaries. The informal culture is certainly not a specificity of SWC, because it also appears in other spheres of social life. Informal relationships are often perceived as a harmless and efficient means of "getting things done" or "speeding things up" for the benefit of service beneficiaries, but also for personal benefit. The informal climate between individuals, in which "doing a favour" and "returning a favour" implies a personal sense of obligation to respect an unwritten rule, is sometimes perceived as a strengthening of cooperation between two institutions:

"I also call them, I have quite good relations with the employees of the municipality. We cooperate in many segments. When I need a service, I call the municipality and vice versa. Just to speed things up. All institutions do that, there is that informal climate. For example, when I was supposed a file a request d for my mother's pension, I took brought the request. My brother works, and his close associate is the boss, and he told me it would be ready tomorrow. It's just the way it is, someone will also call me, I'll do it, but I'll do it for the beneficiary."
(professional worker, 44, 14 years working in a SWC)

While such practices, from the perspective of employees, have a certain degree of positive impact on the efficiency of institutions, they simultaneously, in fact, maintain the status quo and pose an obstacle to the possibility of substantial improvement of formal structures. They also create a culture in which clientelistic networks are more easily developed and normalised.

Poverty and party abuse of public resources and authorities

Poverty is another important prerequisite for the emergence and development of clientelistic networks such as we find in social welfare centres. In Serbia, we record high rates of poverty (the rate of risk of poverty in 2021 was 21.2% and is among the highest in Europe, while the rate of absolute poverty in 2020 was 6.9%) and social inequality (the Gini coefficient is among the highest in Europe and amounts to 33.3). According to the data of the Republic Institute for Social Protection, the number of users on the SWC records in 2013 was 654,558, and five years later it reached its peak (753,996), while in 2022 it fell to 707,118.

Chart 1: Registered beneficiaries during the year, 2013–2022 (RSWI, 2022)

Source: SWC reports

Total   Children   Adults

12
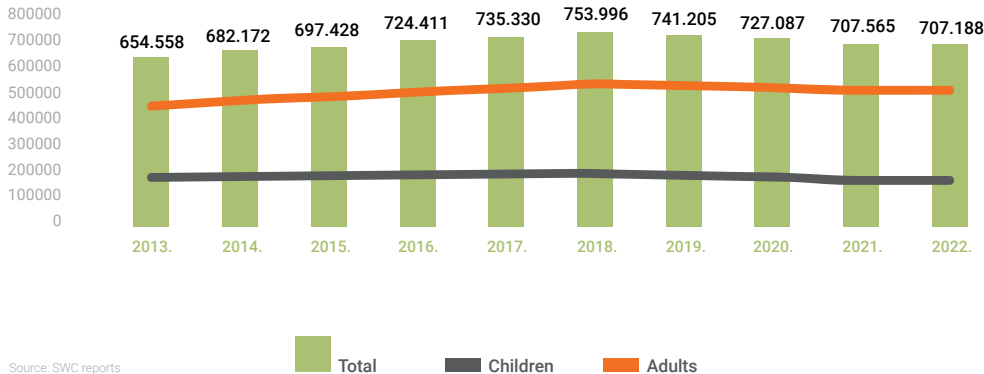
The number of users on the SWC records is far higher in less developed (poorer) parts of the country, such as Southern and Eastern Serbia, than in Belgrade. In Belgrade in 2022, there were 68 users of CSR services per 1,000 inhabitants, 100 in Šumadija and Western Serbia, 110 in Vojvodina, and 125 in Eastern and South-eastern Serbia (RSWI, 2022:7).

The economic vulnerability of citizens, especially those living in absolute poverty (accounting to nearly half a million in Serbia), compels them to enter into clientelistic relationships, which they perceive as a "way to survive". Moreover, in a society where institutions are dysfunctional, corrupt and compromised by various political affairs, citizens' trust in institutions decreases (Vuković, 2022). Informal channels are therefore perceived as the only way to assert rights or obtain any kind of protection from the state.

In such circumstances, the fear of the poor regarding potential loss of the meagre state assistance becomes a primary tool wielded by political parties. This is exactly why the most vulnerable individuals are not only frequent targets of political manipulations, abuse, and coercion but also the primary recipients of populist messages during electoral campaigns. The incumbent parties are interested in social welfare centres because they can "connect" them with the most vulnerable categories of the population through the *misuse of beneficiaries' personal data,* but also help them "bribe" the beneficiaries, their potential electorate, through the *misuse of public resources.* Politically motivated abuses are especially pronounced on the eve of the elections, with an increased number of individuals being "directed" to these centres by municipalities or political parties. Consequently, citizens may expect a certain form of assistance because it was promised to them by someone outside the official channels and procedures.

The involvement of the impoverished in clientelistic relationships and the buying of votes is a practice that has been present in the Serbian political scene for quite some time. Our interviewees testify to this, noting that even previous administrations employed similar clientelistic tactics. An interviewed expert explains that political parties have access to almost all beneficiaries' data, using it both to bribe potential voters among vulnerable groups and to exert pressure on beneficiaries to participate in various party activities.

> *"Let me tell you something, they handle all sort of data. What is the protection of these data? Personal number is the most meaningless of all… They have all data. They can also call these people by phone, they have all the lists. That's how it started, you know, from the distribution of firewood, so then they started to distribute firewood, to go to people's houses. You know, they bring firewood, they have a list of the vulnerable people, that's it, here we distribute firewood, give us a list of the vulnerable people, that's how it started, I think, in the municipalities. Well, then, when they started distributing firewood and packages, then, of course, they had to ask for concessions... Interviewer: And what kind of concessions did they ask for? Interlocutor: Well, I mean, political concessions, I mean that they be voters, that they bring two, three more to vote, that... You understand, that they go to the rally, that... I mean, that is what is expected of them, yes."* (expert, 58, 35 years working in a SWC)

"But I remember when I was at the gerontology centre, back then, X (the name of the party) wasn't in power, it was the other ones... I remember coming to work the next day, and my office was full of drinks, Coca-Cola, all sorts of things... Then they told me that some colleagues had sat in the afternoon, calling those safe votes and such. They were sitting there, enjoying themselves and making calls... That I remember, but for here, I really don't know... Directors kept changing, so no one really settled in that much." (professional worker, 37, 12 years working in a SWC).

Nevertheless, some research participants also note that the practices of "bribing" voters from the most vulnerable strata through one-time financial aid are becoming more frequent and unscrupulous:

"Unfortunately, we find ourselves in a situation where one-time aids are distributed to people who absolutely do not meet those criteria, and they are distributed upon the order of the municipality president. Unfortunately! It's so noticeable now, more than before, in a way that earlier it used to come, how should I say, through written requests, and then the beneficiary would come personally, and you couldn't recognise it, you just considered that request like any other citizen's request. However, now it has become so, I don't know how to describe it... Bold, arrogant, I had a situation where a citizen came to me and said, "They sent me from X party." Believe me. And why I... And then, of course, how can I approach all of that... That's when I say I don't know which party that is, sorry, I'm just an official here. But unfortunately, the misuse of funds intended for social welfare is so present, I believe, in other centres as well." (professional worker, 63, 35 years working in a SWC)

"I know of situations where a beneficiary comes from the municipality and on a piece of paper it is written that he is being given money. In that situation, you are not allowed to give money to that beneficiary, if he does not meet the requirements prescribed by law. That's the problem you are facing." (professional worker, 58, 25 years working in a SWC)

In addition to having a long tradition and continuity and becoming more intense, the participants have the impression that illegitimate and illegal practices of political influence on the most vulnerable categories are increasingly being normalised and tolerated. The account of one interviewee, to whom a political party activist explicitly requested a list of beneficiaries (at the behest of the municipality president, who is also a member of the same party), illustrates that such practices are perceived as a form of legitimate assistance to beneficiaries. The informal way of working, in which abuses and falsification of documents are "legitimised", has completely replaced formal procedures and frameworks in this case. The specificity of this example is that the SWC is located in the municipal building, right under the office of the municipal president, and the dynamics of relations in the clientelistic network are even more obvious and "picturesque".

"It's not even that we give lists. I was asked that once from X (the name of a humanitarian organisation founded by a political party). When the X organisation was formed, a woman from that party – we all know each other here – came to me knowing that I work on social assistance. she came to me and said that

they had founded X and they wanted to help. I tell them, great, nice, very nice. Right, and that she says something like "they just need lists". (...) These are the beneficiaries of social assistance that are paid from the budget. Yes, and I say, what do you mean, well, I can't read the lists, there are other people. You find other people who are, are they not... She told me, you know for sure who these people are, who are vulnerable. Like, well, we would also like to... Well, I said, we are already helping these people, but I can't give you that information. And then she tells me: "But I was sent from above."

"Well then, I go upstairs, I rarely go to his office (president of the municipality). I go there to tell him, not knowing who she was… I state her name; I give the name of the organisation. He says, I sent her. Surprised, I say, you sent her. And add, you do know that these data are protected and are unavailable. He says how come, we help these people, why can't we know who these people we help actually are. I say, but these are the data that are… They receive the assistance from the Republic. He says, but we help them in other ways too. I say, but this is simply illegal. He asks me, says who. I say, I know it is so and you find it in writing. I said it without much thought, but I really did. He just nodded and said alright then. Interviewer: So they still found a way to get that data through the director? Interlocutor: The director gave them, even this colleague who works on those local rights, and she takes those files and puts one-time aid in those files. How shall I put it, it's available to her." (professional worker[1])

The above example also illustrates the ramifications of the clientelistic chain, in which several individuals in different positions necessarily participate. How clientelistic networks function in social welfare centres, who participates in them and how, as well as what kind of exchanges take place in these relationships and how the research participants perceive them, are topics that we deal with in detail in the next chapter.

Modus operandi:
how do political clientelistic networks
function in social welfare centres?

Considering the number and structure of participants and the limitations of the applied method, the analysis of the collected material provides a limited insight into complex clientelistic relationships. Nonetheless, with all the expected limitations, the statements of our interlocutors allowed us to reconstruct and understand the basic patterns according to which political clientelistic networks in social welfare centres function. We recognise a hierarchical model of relationships and several key actors, each of whom has a specific role, and, accordingly, a certain level of power. In this chain, the action of higher authorities is aimed at party "capture" of the institution and control of lower authorities.

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1   In this example, data about the interviewee have been omitted because they could reveal her identity.

| LEADERSHIP OF THE POLITICAL PARTY (PATRON) | is at the top of the clientelistic network |

↓

| PRESIDENT OF THE MUNICIPALITY / MAYOR | *the most common channel of party influence, exerts pressure on the director of the centre or on lower levels in the SWC directly or through their intermediaries (e.g. municipal politicians and officials, members of local community councils). This influence encompasses both party work (for example, they give instructions on party activities, quotas for rallies, quotas for safe votes, etc.) and professional work (directly or indirectly influence professional decisions in the centres (those financed from the municipality and related to the distribution of material aid), "send" beneficiaries, (potential) voting body, in SWC for various services, they have lists of SWC beneficiaries;* |

↓

| DIRECTOR OF THE CENTRE | *the main link between the party and the institution, appointed by the local self-government, "gatekeeper" of the network that "opens the door" for political influence and abuse of public resources for party purposes, works on strengthening and developing the clientelistic network (for example, through party employment); exerts pressure on other employees in the hierarchical chain; participates in enable the abuse of public resources (for example, setting up public bids for eligible companies, use of official premises and vehicles for party activities) and personal data on beneficiaries;* |

↓

| PROFESSIONAL WORKERS IN CHARGE OF MATERIAL ASSISTANCE AND PERFORMING OTHER JOBS FINANCED FROM THE MUNICIPALITY | *(including jurists) – usually engaged through the party, or sometimes cooperative (out of fear) and do not oppose to party's requests, they play an important role in the implementation of bribery of the electorate through material assistance given or promised to the most vulnerable people, they participate in the "donation system") and provide support in party activities (rallies, collecting votes.);* |

↓

| **EMPLOYEES HIRED BY THE MUNICIPALITY, AND EMPLOYEES UNDER TEMPORARY AND OCCASIONAL EMPLOYMENT CONTRACT, AND ON A FIXED-TERM BASIS** | *also most often hired through the party, are used as "party army" in political activism (they go to rallies and participate in other party activities), as "safe votes" and they also participate the "donation system" which implies diverting of money from the state to the party treasury (5% of their salary is deduced in favour of the party);* |

↓

| **SWC BENEFICIARIES** | *"safe votes" and "party army" (attending party gatherings, collecting votes, sharing promotional materials, and the like).* |

Political influence and **party clientelistic networks are most pronounced at the top** (primarily centre directors, but also their deputies and managers) and **at the bottom** (unskilled, technical staff) of the hierarchical pyramid within the centres. **Party staffing and employment** are the main mechanisms for strengthening the party network and control, both over employees and public resources, and also serve as a means to exert party control over the implementation of measures in the domain of the work of social welfare centres. **Pressure on employees and beneficiaries** of this network is maintained and used to fulfil their goals. Although these mechanisms of party control have a historical dimension and are not exclusively a characteristic of the current political nomenclature, in the statements of interlocutors who have been working in SWC for decades, it is suggested that clientelistic relations have intensified in the last decade, but also that these phenomena have normalised. In the rest of this section, we will present the basic elements of clientelistic networks: party recruitment and staffing, pressures on employees to join or work for clientelistic networks, and pressures on beneficiaries.

Easy job access: party-based appointments and employment

The appointment of directors according to party affiliation is mentioned in interviews as a "commonplace" and an unwritten rule that applies to the entire public sector, including social welfare institutions. Participants confirm that public institutions at the local level are divided as "political preys," and some interviewees underpin that in their municipalities, it is always known which political party "claims" a particular institution at the local level. According to the participants, the position of the director in the Social Welfare Centres (SWC) is not attractive at all, both due to the nature of the institution, significant responsibilities, media exposure of the centres, difficult working conditions, and the scarce resources available to these institutions. Some of the interviewees point out that individuals

are often appointed to the position of director as a form of "punishment" *(e.g. transferred from the position of director of public companies)* or younger and inexperienced "party people" who have yet to prove their loyalty to the party.

> *"Of course, since I have been in the centre, there have always been suitable people. There has never been someone who deserved thanks to their knowledge, expertise, professionalism."* (supervisor, 51, 23 years working in a SWC)

> *"Interlocutor: And everyone complains about the directors, of course. Interviewer: Do they mention that directors are appointed according to their political affiliation? Interlocutor: Yes, and most of them do not hide it, but consider it normal. My favourite case is when the director of the centre for social work complained to me that he had been transferred there as a punishment from the position of director of public utility company."* (expert, 49, 18 years of experience in social protection)

As an additional mechanism of control and ensuring the loyalty of their personnel, political parties often use acting status, as evidenced by the material collected in this research. The "party" directors of the centres are obliged to act in accordance with the party's interests, but private interests are also achieved through them, which sometimes involves the abuse of public resources and office. Experts and employees in the centres testify that the role of (both former and current) directors in their centres, who are often appointed to that position although incompetent and without formal qualifications and the necessary work experience, is reduced to the role of "party managers" whose priority is to maintain clientelistic relations with local "party colleagues" and actors in different hierarchical positions (primarily with representatives of the municipality and local self-government) and to control resources in favour or interest of the political party. As an example, some of the interlocutors state that the directors of their centres are not at all familiar **with the tasks entrusted by the ministry, but exclusively deal with tasks financed by the municipality (material benefits, social housing and other local services), with the representatives of which they enter into clientelistic relations.** It has also been suggested that parties usually appoint people with no integrity to leadership positions, as they will be "cooperative" and will not resist party demands.

> *"He is a defectologist, a special education teacher, with no work experience in social welfare. He came immediately to the director's position. Then, he somehow retained some position. But that decision was not made by the board of directors, or there was something disputed. Now he has the opportunity to return. But he is dissatisfied that they removed him and envisions that he will return to the director's position. He doesn't return to work but is on sick leave all the time. He should be back now. I don't know what he will do and whether he will stay in that position. I'm not sure if he is competent, and he hasn't been very involved. His main concern was not to upset the municipality and local government. As long as the municipal affairs were going well, the rest didn't matter to him. They don't understand what we do through the ministry, what tasks are assigned to us. For them, the most important things are some financial benefits, social housing – those are local services where the municipality provides funds. That's how I understood his role and tasks during his office. (...) The current director is a sociologist by profession, but in the meantime, since she couldn't work as*

a social worker, she attended a private social science school. She took the exams to become a certified sociologist and is now the director. Everything she knows about social work is material assistance; she hasn't done anything, and she doesn't even have a licence." (supervisor, 60, 30 years working in a SWC)

"The municipality ordered the director to return to the centre. After about two years, she was returned to the centre. She started working on financial social assistance, just like a social worker covers a part of the field that is very interesting because the village (name of the village) covers a large part of the Roma population, and we know that for them it is also a voting body." (social worker, 52, 17 years working in a SWC)

"I don't know, it was a long time ago when I heard about that, I don't know which centre it was, but the director was a geography teacher. I was shocked thinking that it was not possible. It is clearly prescribed who can be the director of SWC. They told me that he was a geography teacher, who had never even worked at the centre. That was shocking to me." (acting director[2])

Interviewer: How much does political party framing affect your work? Interlocutor: It affects a lot. It is very degrading when your subject is checked by someone who has less work experience than you, who is not in your field at all. With due respect to all professions, no special pedagogue or jurist or whoever can judge what I omitted as a psychologist. It is the first and basic rule that a jurist is evaluated by a jurist, and a psychologist by a psychologist. But a psychologist who evaluates another psychologist must have greater work experience and a greater title and greater authority to be able to point out to me what I did wrong. And not someone who came to the ministry two years ago to point out to me what I failed to do, and believe me, sometimes we find ridiculous what they write to us that we should do. (supervisor, 51, 23 years working in a SWC)

In these relationships, directors are assigned tasks related to party activities, which involve organizing attendance at party rallies and similar events (e.g., "creating a crowd" at the ceremonial opening of factories), collecting safe and capillary votes, and other party-related activities. Confirmation of such a mechanism was obtained in a conversation with one acting director who reveals the nature of her party involvement:

Interviewer: When there were elections, did you have the obligation to collect a certain number of signatures, capillary votes, was that a must? Interviewee: They only give you the number of people, not a list. Interviewer: How will they know that you gathered those votes? Interviewee: There's no way of knowing it. They didn't ask me to take pictures of the ballots, if that's what you want to ask me. Interviewer: Not only that, they tell people to collect ten capillary votes. How do they know you got ten votes? Interviewee: They have a call centre and check if they are for X (party name), they say yes, and that's it. Interviewer: Do you provide a list of people they call? Interviewee: Yes. But other parties have the same lists. I don't know how it will be eradicated, how it will all work differently.

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2   Information on age and length of service for directors is not shown in order to protect identity

Everyone does that. (...) It was, if you don't like it, you can go. I also wanted to move from that position. In the end, I stayed because we did a lot of good things for the centre. (...) For example, yesterday when he was in Belgrade, I had to... I don't think anyone would kill be if I didn't, but it wouldn't be good for me if I hadn't gone." (acting director, 38, 10, iskustva u CSR)

The interviewees testified that their directors often used the official cars in their party activities, but also that during working hours they carried out activities within the framework of the campaign *(e.g. they visited households and distributed humanitarian packages, they distributed party promotional material to employees in the centre, but also to beneficiaries)*, as well as that they used official premises for party activities *(calling "safe" and capillary votes from the office and the like)*.

"He brings the mail, takes official letter to the court, to the prosecutor's office... He has a car with him, he goes home by car. The building next to mine. I go to work in a private car, he's been using the company car all the time since he started working here, he's been driving around the city all the time. We know that he uses it during elections for party work, goes to meetings and he doesn't even hide it. They deliver packages, when you ask about packages, packages for the New Year, food packages that are distributed before the elections, they are all party affiliates, they are like a team from the local office, everyone from the local office is in the party, they deliver it to addresses, we don't have insight into where they are taking." (professional worker, 52 , 17 years working in a SWC)

The case of the so-called donation system, in which money from the state treasury is poured into the party by the director of the centre "giving back" a part of his salary to the party that appointed him to this position. Moreover, other jobs that are under the patronage of a political party where state funds are misused, such as public tenders and "cooperation" with eligible contractor firms, are all overseen by the director. Several examples record the case of the non-targeted spending of budgets from projects, where directors used public funds for party celebrations, but also for "bribing" their employees, in order to additionally ensure their "loyalty ".

"I worked on a procurement for some construction work on a certain reconstruction project. It wasn't a high-value procurement, but you know how things work in the city. Contracts for business-technical collaboration are usually signed with them. Whether there is favouritism involved, I'm not sure how to put it, but I've heard of situations where she (the director) terminated contracts when she was dissatisfied. However, it's generally known who procures what from whom." (professional worker (jurist), 44, 14 years working in a SWC)

"My fellow jurist, I think, captured various solutions. For example, for two or three years, we've owed five thousand to the elderly who are recipients of social assistance. These are minimum one-time payments, since the municipality has no money and is in a blockade. But then we pay someone from X (name of the party) 70,000 dinars because there was some celebration, some feast." (professional worker, 39, 15 years working).

"We had a situation where our director had to give part of their salary to the party, as directors, when they were appointed to the position according to their party affiliation need to do so. We had a director who did not want to give money to the party, of course. Why would she do that, she studied in Belgrade, she has a university degree... Why would she give anything? And then she was called upon, there was such a fuss about the dismissal and the woman had to cash out and pay 20,000 dinars, to give to the party." (professional worker, 48, 29 years working in a SWC)

"The previous director, before her, had already introduced this practice. In order to buy loyalty from employees, he would say, 'I need a salary of 100,000, increase the salary for these people by 4,000, and maybe for the managers by 10,000.' That's how he rewarded people, and it has remained unchanged. Instead of directing that money towards services, they are essentially, how shall I put it, engaging in influence trading." (expert, 58, 35, years of experience in social protection)

Through the directors and their clientelistic chains, which in the first place imply a narrow and reliable circle of collaborators, the parties in power influence the availability and distribution of services and resources of the centres, as well as the way of their working *(e.g. urging that assistance be granted outside of formal channels to a certain beneficiary or speeding up certain procedures, and the like).*

"How shall I put it, she (the director) has her own person handling the mail, her manager who won't do anything without her, and her jurist. The manager can't even find out about these, let's say, corrupt practices and these certain families, can't even reach him. So, they became very, very, well, as I would put it, skilled at it. Not all of them, I'm specifically talking about this centre, but believe me, it's very, very present here." (expert, 58, 35, years of experience in social protection)

"I started that story now, I'll go back to the fact that the director at the time, who came on the proposal of X (name of the party) or whatever, conducted and acknowledged social assistance without findings or opinions. I mean, there must be a finding and an opinion, but she carried everything out and acknowledged it for a certain period of time, and now I see that this person who does not live in the territory at all, but only has a residence there, is regularly granted social assistance. That one-time help. I don't know how regularly, but anyway I did see her name." (professional worker, 61, 12 years working in a SWC)

In return for working in favour of a political party, directors have the opportunity to retain their managerial positions or advance within the party hierarchy, thus increasing their social capital and influence. The privileges associated with this power are primarily personal gain, including advancement in professional and political careers, improvement of one's economic status, and so forth.

"I can't say there were pressures, but there were offers. In the sense that there would be elections for a representative in the provincial assembly, and things

like that. Personally, I think, because I am focused on a career in social welfare rather than something else, it would do me more harm than good. In terms of experience, work, and advancement." (director)

"The director himself is not someone who ideologically supports the whole thing with the X party. I simply think that people in lower positions have to make a living, while those in higher positions are striving for even better positions, connections, and maintaining relationships with all these people who can, let's say, make things easier for them... I believe that nobody, at least that's my opinion, works for ideology or such motives; it's simply interests, nothing else. You know, in my 12 years of work, and having experienced different periods, it has never happened that someone replaces all directors in a system overnight, and someone from the previous parties stays. Now, ... literally, all directors have been replaced." (professional worker, 37, 12 years working in a SWC)

The interviewed individuals also testify that their directors enjoy various material and non-material benefits, such as the use of an official car for personal purposes, absence from work, and the like. Nevertheless, sometimes even the social welfare centres themselves benefit from their "suitable leader." According to the participants, thanks to the "good connections and relationships" of directors, some centres have been renovated and equipped with modern facilities.

On the basis of the analysis of the collected material, we can conclude that the primary role of the centre's director is that of a "gate keeper of the network." They serve as the main link between the political party and the institution, opening doors for political influence, conducting a triage of those deemed suitable or unsuitable, and ensuring that both public resources and employees be under party control. For this reason, during interviews, participants often described their directors by underscoring their subservient and servile mentality and their readiness to make compromises in favour of political interests.

Through suitable directors, **party-based employment** is facilitated within the centres. However, the findings suggest that party-based employment in SWC is more pronounced when it comes to engaging individuals in higher positions, who are also the closest associates of the director, as well as for technical tasks and those that are not closely related to expertise. Although certain education and work experience are required for managerial positions, it seems that these legal conditions do not present an insurmountable obstacle to hiring inadequate personnel.

On the other hand, the employment of professional workers occurs through different patterns. One pattern applies to small local self-governments where specific profiles are in demand (social workers, special education teachers, psychologists, etc.), and another pattern applies to larger ones where such deficits do not exist, so party affiliation, alongside appropriate qualifications, is a necessary condition for getting a job. One pattern applies to workers involved in public authorisations *(at the national level)* whose salaries are paid by the relevant ministry, and another applies to workers dealing with rights and services under the jurisdiction of local government (including one-time material benefits and local social welfare services), whose work and position are more directly controlled by both directors and municipal representatives. In these cases, party-based employment is particularly pronounced.

The patron-client relationship (political party – SWC director) thus descends and replicates throughout the entire hierarchical structure within the institution. Directors, now acting as patrons, create their own clientelistic networks with employees, as well as with service beneficiaries. In these networks, as we will see, an army of party activists and voters is secured. Moreover, they serve as a basis for various corrupt practices.

Pressures on employees: professional or party-based work

Pressures on employees to work for a political party or in the interest of the ruling party represent a mechanism within clientelistic networks. Party and municipal leaderships instruct professional workers to directly work for the party, utilising their positions and public resources for party activism, or they exert pressure on them to align their professional decisions with the party's interests. In such circumstances, a specific culture of silence and non-opposition emerges, further perpetuating and sustaining clientelistic networks.

Party activism in the workplace

Interviewed individuals testify that employees in the centres are subjected to various demands from directors or their intermediaries (e.g., deputy directors) for party-based work. Nevertheless, not all employees are equally exposed to such demands. Those employees who got their jobs through the party, as well as those hired by the municipality, are generally part of the clientelistic chain. In these relationships, they participate to secure benefits such as keeping their jobs, or job position, employment contract extensions, maintaining good relations with superiors which leads to various privileges and "rewards" (days off, promotion opportunities, project participation, salary increases, and so forth.). Some employees, especially those with fixed-term contracts or unregulated status, engage in party activities out of coercion and fear. However, some of them participate in party activities without any explicit demand from their superiors because they anticipate deriving some benefit from it or avoiding potential sanctions. Furthermore, some interviewees explain that parties intentionally hire more workers than *necessary (especially for technical and administrative tasks, under temporary and occasional employment contracts or with fixed-term contract),* creating a competitive atmosphere among employees who must compete for jobs. Employment contract extensions, in such cases, often go to those who have been most active in party activities.

> *"Especially people who have, let's say, lower vocational education, someone who works in the clerk's office, someone who works on records, I don't know, a woman in accounting... These are very manipulative methods, that is, corrupt... I don't know, I'll give you a gift or I I'm going to put you on the project, even though you don't do anything, but you'll have to get me five capillary votes, you know. And the like. You know, unfortunately people are really inclined to accept very easily those small, small, I don't even know what to call them… gestures, some kind of gifts, help, whatever. So let me tell you, they got a free rein from the municipality as far as money is concerned in one part, that's what I heard about the project. The project is won, it doesn't matter what is written in it, the project passes at the province level and she takes 10% of the project for herself,*

and 10% goes to someone in the provincial government who enables the project to pass." (expert, 58, 35, years of experience in social protection)

"We have a surplus of workers. I think they are afraid of a change of government – whether they will keep the positions they have now. It is really pronounced with those who are in X (party name)." (professional worker, 44 , 14 years working in a SWC)

"First of all, they are scared at the existential level. Second, many are still on a fixed-term contract, that's how they blackmail them... Perhaps they won't have a job next month. They are literally forced to go to the rallies by bus, because they tell them – your contract expires in two months, I have three more people that I can hire. Therefore, either find another workplace or hop on a bus. That's the story. Or bring 3-4 people with you, grandmothers, grandfathers, uncles, aunts, whoever wants to and whoever can sign there, and be put on their lists." (expert, 58, 35, years of experience in social protection)

The participants referred to cases when the director asked the employees to be a "safe vote" and vote for a certain party, to go to rallies (within working hours), to "bot" for the party on social networks, but also to lead their family members to events organised by the party. A case has also been recorded when employees have to give a part of their salary to the party (the so-called donation system).

"They have safe votes, I can see that, they are being blackmailed into having to show ballots, taking photos. They have to bring along their families. It was recently commented in the centre, a colleague who did not have a regulated status in the company, had to take her sick mother to the rally. I guess that even when it came to going to polls, there would be no difference." (supervisor, 60, 30 years working in a SWC)

"I can indirectly conclude when there are campaign periods, when there is a period before the elections, that there is a group of people who go to rallies, who leave work early, and for some people I talk to sometimes, I believe that they do it unwillingly, because they have to or they hope to will get a permanent placement contract or something. There are people, I think, who go to those gatherings, but I know that they are not interested in it, but go because they have to." (professional worker, 37, 12 years working in a SWC)

"Of all my colleagues, I only know that one colleague really likes that party. She is not even a professional worker. She is an administrative worker. She is very nice and hard-working. I have only words of praise for her. But that woman really loves that party. The others, except for the director, all say that they don't like him and that they were blackmailed. And they pay that 5% every month. Interviewer: Do those who are employed under a permanent placement contract pay, or everybody pays? Interviewee: Only these younger ones who are employed under a fixed-term contract." (professional worker, 39, 15 years working in a SWC)

One of the examples is particularly illustrative. Our interlocutor points out that going to rallies, but also to other events (for example, the opening of factories), is an imperative in her centre. From this example, we also learn that employees receive days off as a "reward" for participating in party activities, which they experience as a "moral duty" towards the party and their superiors. The interlocutor also describes the climate in her team on the eve of the recent party event, when the centre had to function without almost half of the employees. A social worker from a small municipality confirms that the centres have to work with reduced capacities because of party activities. Also, another professional worker quotes an example from her centre where employees are almost forced to neglect their professional duties in order not to go to a rally.

"I heard from a colleague who was in X (name of the city), at the rally. I asked her if she was going to Belgrade, she said no. A quota was needed in X, but now someone else fills the quota. We know that the figure is fifty, that our director is taking people. Interviewer: The director of the centre has to bring fifty people? Interviewee: That's right, it's the task for our director, this time. They went to Belgrade last Friday. That's what I heard from a colleague who was in X. This time she was spared, so she didn't go to Belgrade. She told me, I know that now she needs to bring fifty people. She had promised to go to X, to fill in the number. Interviewer: Who did she promise, the director Interviewee: The deputy is asking for it, she is just the acting deputy on paper. But she doesn't even lead the meeting in the centre, she just sits there, he makes all the decisions. He changes everything he needs: workers, positions, offices, public procurement. Interviewer: Does he (the deputy) manage everything for the party when necessary? Interviewee: He does everything. They are both in the party, they do everything together. He is the one who is more agile, more enterprising, more active, she is just present there, I don't know what her job is. Interviewer: Has the current or previous director asked you latently or jokingly for some quota for the rally, or to vote in a certain way? Interviewee: There were rumours about that. Those who are older workers, who are here through the ministry, who are not members of the party… They did not have the courage to ask us for it. Maybe they asked those who support their option. They didn't urge directly those they knew were opposition or undecided, although there were attempts. Not for these rallies, but when the Chinese came to XX (company name). That was important because our director organised it. To make a crowd in front of the centre. He didn't do it personally. He had a quota because of the party. Tjey were asking who'd like to go. Days off were offered in return. So people went because of that. There was no coercion, when they asked me, I said: 'I'm sick', and I really didn't want to expose myself to the sun. I had a serious illness ten years ago. Now that's my excuse. If I work, I can also go to the rally but I don't want to. Interviewer: The previous director offered days off to go to the meeting, how many days? Interviewee: I think it was two days off for someone going to a gathering or a rally. He has two days off. They are now giving them one day off. They don't like that the number of days has been reduced. Interviewer: That's not a bad offer. (ironically) They go for a couple of hours, they have two days off for that. And that day when the rally is, they don't work? Interviewee: And they don't work that day, of course. Maybe they move around here a bit, and then go. They set off before the end of working hours. I can see that they are going through a lot; they returned only around midnight. They were out there in the rain, and it was all for nothing, even though they had five days off. Interviewer:

How many people went from the centre now? Interviewee: I don't know the exact number of people from the centre. I think all party members went, as well as younger individuals who haven't regularised their employment, those who work under temporary and occasional employment contract or have recently gotten a job. They went for moral reasons. It's not a question of whether they want to go or not. It's just that you don't go, but rather if you're sick; it goes without saying that they must go if needed. Almost half of the centre wasn't at work on Friday." (supervisor, 60, 30 years working in a SWC)

"I know colleagues from X (name of the city), I know t some colleagues from Y (name of the city), and from other cities where people would leave work at 10, 11am... Interviewer: Those are the people who told you that. Did they complain that they were forced to go, or did some of them go freely, voluntarily? Interviewee: A colleague with whom I hang out, who is just like me, literally complained to me that the members of the professional team went to the rally, that she and perhaps three other colleagues stayed to work and went berserk." (professional worker, 48, 29 years working in a SWC)

"People are simply mistreating their employees. He led them, I can't remember exactly, when the president came to XX (city name), all colleagues left, except for me and one other colleague. They left work at 10-11am, and they didn't come back. So, the centre was empty. In an institution with 20-something employees, only my colleague and I remained. (...) They all had to leave. Everyone had to leave. In the end, the colleague who had to go with another colleague to a trial in XX (city name) said she wouldn't make it because who knows how long the trial would last. The director said, "I don't care! When you come back, you'd better come immediately!" They did come to the rally, but had a very uncomfortable situation because they arrived a little later. The bullies pushed them into the crowd. And those people asked if they could stand there by the edge, and they shouted at them, "You can't, move forward!" After that, they weren't allowed to say anything, which is also fascinating… how a person can't even fight for some basic rights." (professional worker, 39, 15 years working in a SWC)

In addition to days off, we learn in the interviews that the "reward" for employees is sometimes also monetary, and that is not money in the form of a raise, but a one-time payment after the rally, whereby public funds are again misused. As one of the participants points out, this benefit is enjoyed by the so-called "VIPs", employees who are agile and loyal members of the party.

"Those who are closer and share the same political orientation presumably have benefits. And they are exigent towards them, they go to rallies, send them to do this and that, that is also problematic. Thank God I'm not in it. It all takes its tall. They go to a rally and then have two days off. They are given one-time financial aid for going to the rally. They have to pay them; they are some sort of VIPs here. That's what we call them, they know they're going to get money and certain favours in return, they fill those quotas or whatever. After every rally, they are there to get money…. I mean, I haven't seen it myself. By coincidence, I heard in the car today that they will get three thousand each, I'm not sure if it's our colleagues or beneficiaries." (supervisor, 60, 30 years working in a SWC)

Nevertheless, conversations within the research confirm that other employee profiles are not immune to pressure for political activities from superiors. According to participants, some of them have rejected such demands without any consequences.

> *"I had a problem in 2017 when the then acting director called me to his office – I became the president of the union at the time – and he asked me to be a safe voice. I told him that my right is not to declare who I will vote for. I said I didn't want to be on any list, that I would vote for whomever I think was appropriate, and that I was going to the polls for sure."* (professional worker, 52 , 17 years working in a SWC)

> *"People always go. Someone gets away, someone says they are sick. You have good people, and good colleagues, my colleagues who are from some families... who are experts, and they call them... you have those who are (employed) through the municipality. It happened that some (female) colleagues refused, there were no consequences."* (professional worker, 44, 15 years working in a SWC)

> *"Here, I'll openly tell you, I did go once too. No one asked me. I went out of collegiality towards other young colleagues. Because they had been going, and I hadn't. No one even asked me. I didn't feel the need to express my opinion. But I went. I get along very well with everyone. It seemed pointless to me that they go without me."* (manager, 54, 22 years working in a SWC)

However, some employees, according to the tacit rule and for fear of jeopardising their position in the collective, comply with these pressures. Some, as can be seen from the last example, participate in party activities out of solidarity with other colleagues, or as our interlocutor says, out of "collegiality" towards younger colleagues who are forced to go.

Service providers, in this case foster parents and geronto-housewives, also suffer pressures for party activism. Several interlocutors point out that they are often explicitly blackmailed that they will lose their licence if they do not participate in party activities. Also, a bizarre case was recorded in which the foster mother was warned because of her activities on social networks that were "unacceptable for the party".

> *"What bothers me personally is that I think foster parents are abused. Foster families. Because they deeply believe that their licence would be revoked if they were not loyal to SWC and the party. I don't know why they believe that. Because it's professional workers who process them and give eligibility. But I can see that the directors are having a hard time keeping them under control. They are just like our beneficiaries, the voting body. People for those rallies. They lead them. We have an association of foster parents, and they expect that a foster mother, who is the president of the association, bring I don't know how many foster parents to the rally. That is simply unacceptable to me. I would like to ask them, but I will not interfere. Why do they do that? I strongly doubt that all of them are motivated by selfless motives. Rather, they probably think that they will not get children, a licence, the right to work."* (supervisor, 60, 30 years working in a SWC)

"Two or three weeks ago, a woman who has been a foster carer at the centre for an eternity, said: "You know what happened to me the other day at the centre? As soon as I entered, supervisor XX (name), told me: we saw that you liked Facebook posts published by XY (name of a politically ineligible employee at the centre). Interviewer: So it goes as far as that? Interlocutor: Some of my posts that were about the state of social protection in general, were printed and stood for days on the notice board of the centre, for everyone to see, both parties and people. Everyone! They printed them. They put them on for two or three days, then put the next one on... Interviewer: So there is also that kind of pressure, that people are not allowed to socialise, to like the statuses of other people, of those who are unsuitable, political enemies? Interviewee: Absolutely. Yes, yes, everyone is afraid. He tells her "you like his statuses", to a woman who has been a foster mother since 2002." (professional worker, 52, 20 years working in a SWC)

Party interests above professionalism and ethics

In addition to suffering pressures to engage in party activism, SWC employees are required to prioritise certain cases involving individuals associated with the party, outside of procedures. Besides urging the directors and representatives of the municipality and local self-government to grant material assistance to certain beneficiaries, e.g. the case when the centre had to prioritise beneficiaries ("safe votes") from the director's village, as well as to grant material aid to someone without the necessary documentation, cases of urging for influential party financiers were also recorded.

"I know that there was interference in the divorce, which is the most terrible thing, to whom to entrust the child, I know that. That's what a colleague who works on divorces told me – she simply insists that the child, a very young child, be entrusted to the father. So you literally understand, you know, that she was indebted to someone in the political sense, in the sense of interest, she will do this for him... These are big decisions, you know, trusting the children, so there is no morality, there is no... They just say how it should be done. I mean, that's terrible. My colleague, having worked with the family for a long time, really resisted. Now, I'm not sure that younger colleagues can resist, to be honest, especially not colleagues who worked under temporary and occasional employment contracts, they can't most certainly." (expert, 58, 35, years of experience in social protection)

Pressure for professional work, as in the case of party work, is exerted along hierarchical lines. As one participant explains, the director is obliged to "nurture" his network and provide services to individuals from different institutions, who are either in a higher position in the party or organisational hierarchy. In such situations, directors rely on their trusted circle of people *(employees who are also members of the party or got a job through the party)*. One example vividly shows how the party – through the SWC director, social workers who are in charge of material benefits and members of local communities – oversees the distribution of financial aid.

"Social workers who provide cash social assistance are now divided according to local communities and villages. And when someone comes and says you are from A (name of the village), you better go to B (name of the social worker). You are from that village; you go to C (name of another social worker). Then when B does it to you for A, you know that she works covertly. I don't even know if she went to the field, but she obeyed the director's order. Those notifications that arrived in the social cards, which need to be checked: whether the person has died and whether they have social assistance, whether the person is employed, these are situations that can only involve the party." (social worker, 52, 17 years working in a SWC)

Interviewees with more experience in SWC note that younger colleagues are in this sense more inclined to meet the demands of the party – partly because of lack of experience and insufficient knowledge of procedures, partly because of the feeling that in this way they are returning the favour to the party and proving their loyalty. However, several examples show that similar requests were made, often outside working hours and from party premises, to those who are not from the director's loyal circle and who did not get a job through the party.

"He sends me messages on Viber. He sends them outside of working hours, he writes to me on Sundays. Someone gave him an information as they have receptions at the party headquarters. They receive citizens on Saturdays. If a party related to my job shows up, he reports without any problems on the weekend." (professional worker, 52, 17 years working in a SWC)

"There was a bunch of those abnormal things. As I am part of the team for financial aid, I remember that at one point, the former director asked me to provide an opinion for a family with no papers, that had just the name and a phone number. I refused to do that. "You have to, you have to!" she insisted, and I said there's no way. Since she was pressuring me, I wrote a report based on the available data and suggested that the director considers it. I never allowed myself to do something I thought shouldn't be done. Then the younger ones came, and they were writing everything for everyone, and decisions were being made for people for whom they had no data. No basic information, no data whatsoever." (professional worker, 39, 15 years working in a SWC)

"The pressures regarding campaigns with the previous director were terrible. He couldn't do anything more blatant here. And then the atmosphere itself. And in other centres, I think they were on fire during that election campaign. From using one-time aid to motivate members, to and I don't know what… some rewarding. Pressures to resolve certain cases, which even didn't have to be related to material assistance." (manager, 60, 17 years working in a SWC)

"They call, or come to the office, since we are mostly alone, everyone has got their own office, I mean not literally everyone, but most of us have. Either they call for an interview, or they come to the office, and then they tell you that it is through someone from another institution. I mean some other institutions, which are usually supervisory for us, because we have several supervisory bod-

ies. First, we have our headquarters, analytics, then we have the secretariat, we have the ministry, and then it's simple, the name and surname are not so important, it's only important that they come from those institutions. So very often we don't even know who's pulling strings, we just hear that it is expected to be solved. Interviewer: So, in a way, it depends on the hierarchy? Interviewee: Yes. Interviewer: Then she's actually under pressure too. She has to make the decision she was told to make... Interviewee: Yes, because in fact if she were to oppose, then people would be afraid that they would lose their position, and then they simply do everything to make a good impression. Interviewer: So it literally goes like a pyramid. They do each other a favour so that everyone keeps their position and does not suffer any consequences. Not to face any sanctions. Interviewee: That's right." (supervisor, 51, 23 years working in a SWC)

"Doing work for the party" has been fully integrated into work duty in some work environments. The interviewees testify about their colleagues who consider it their duty to do everything their superiors ask of them. Cooperativeness thus becomes a "virtue" that is above professionalism and ethics in such kind of work climate.

"It is not very nice to say, but although she may appear dull compared to another colleague who is assertive and energetic, handling social welfare matters at a higher level, but didn't secure a permanent position. However, she's the one the director can ask to quickly handle tasks in the village. The mayor comes from that village, and people from his village have priority. Because, you know, that village is important; we do things there right away. Interviewer: Did he informally call and say that? Interviewee: Probably. Someone probably comes from the mayor's office, and then the director calls her, saying, "Please, get this done." There were such situations. Interviewer: Does she feel it's her duty because she got the job? Interviewee: I think she believes that we all work that way with our intelligence capacity, not realising that it doesn't have to be done that way and doesn't have to function like that." (professional worker, 52, 17 years working in a SWC)

"I can't lie now. The woman who is currently in that position is also compliant, but she is hardworking. I feel she's not dishonest, but of course, if someone expects her to make a certain decision, they will exert pressure. Now, it depends on how colleagues yield to that pressure. She tried that with me, but I stuck to my opinion, and she gave up. So, what does she do now? When she encounters someone unwilling to change their opinion, she changes the case manager and resolves it that way. Interviewer: So, someone presumably comes to her who knows her, has contacts, and wants a certain case to be resolved in a way that suits them. Then, they contact the director of the institution, and she tries to influence the case manager? Interviewee: Yes! Now, if the case manager agrees, everything is fine. But if they don't agree, she changes the case manager and finds someone she thinks will solve it properly, and that's how the problem is resolved. Thank God, it's okay for me because otherwise, I would face too much pressure. She hasn't changed me; I can't say that because it was her poor judgment. She promised at a meeting with the municipality and the police that she would handle things in a certain way, but she didn't consult with me. When I told her it couldn't be done that way and that I didn't accept resolving the case in

that manner, especially since it involved adults – they wanted to strip a man of legal capacity because he wrote too many letters to the police about problems in the neighbourhood. They thought the issue would be resolved by initiating a procedure to deprive him of legal capacity, so they wouldn't have to intervene or respond to him anymore. I opposed it and said that as a psychologist, I couldn't support it, and then she gave in. Interviewer: So, she overstepped a bit, so to say. Interviewee: Yes, she promised them, "We'll take care of it. We'll write such a request." Besides, she is a lawyer by profession. In my opinion, she can't make an assessment like a psychologist has to, and I have to stand behind what I write. Then she somehow reconsidered and gave in." (supervisor, 51, 23 years working in a SWC)

"Let me tell you about a situation I had. It was last year when a colleague and I decided that we wouldn't give one-time assistance anymore, and the mayor called us – me, the director, and that colleague – to discuss the matter. They didn't pressure us; it was a constructive conversation. I'm 48 years old and a licenced psychologist by profession. I should be able to control myself and not always speak my mind in every situation. It's absurd to say what I think when no one has asked. But the higher the government representative, the greater my horror and disgust. When I enter the mayor's office and see a picture of XX (the party president's name), I can't bring myself to having a civilised conversation. The tone of my voice reveals that I don't like those people. I don't confront; I mention current circumstances – workload, no legal obligation to work, we talk about specifics, not politics. But I see that my colleague, who probably aspires to be the next director, is different. He is a capable worker, and if he becomes the director, I'll have no problem with that; I'll be fine with it. But he always pre-sents himself as compliant and cooperative. It's nice when a person can be like that, but either you can or you can't, or you want to or you don't. I don't want to." (supervisor, 49, 21 years working in a SWC)

However, although some interviewees testify that they have refused such requests without any consequences (when they judge that these requests conflict with their professional judgment and professional ethics), in some cases "uncooperative" and "disobedient" are still punished. The interviewed expert illustrates this with her own example, when, while working in one centre, she was prevented from keeping the position of supervisor, and was transferred from the position of case manager to the position of triager, because she did not want to submit to pressure and make compromises regarding professional decisions favouring of party interests.

"So, that was the reason why he transferred me from the position of case man-ager to be a triage officer. He asked me that, but I didn't know who he was, you know, when someone first comes in, and you think, okay, start positively, okay, he'll be a manager, if that's how it has to be. I genuinely said that the greatest impact for the centre would be for me to remain in the supervision role. Some-how, I could provide guidance to younger colleagues in those challenging cas-es, etc. He, of course, did not consider that. Okay, I continued to work as a case manager in the service for children and youth, and on the first case of a divorce involving violence, he called me into the office and tried to draw my attention: "Well, you know", he said, "that man is not really, you know, as you described

him, violent…" I said, well, that is violence, what that man did now. I talk to some-one who is not from the profession, but of course, in language they understand. He says, "No, no, if you could change it a bit, not present it that way, you know." No, no, not a single letter can be changed in my report; it's my opinion, and that's it. I won't change anything about it. I see what he's alluding to. Now, for me to delete, reduce, I don't know what to do about the violence that was evident, the man towards the woman. I don't know now what connections, no, he says, that man probably has some ties to XX (party name), or he's a financier or a member, now, it doesn't matter. Since I stick to it, the next day a colleague who is a super-visor calls me, and now she feels very uncomfortable. She told me, "I really don't want to change anything in your case, but simply, you should know that I've been asked, and I will ask not to be a supervisor." She told him that, I can't teach a woman who taught me because I taught her everything and introduced her to the job. After that, he decided that I would move to triage without any explana-tion. So, I moved after three months of work to work in triage. In triage, I noticed, of course, a series of irregularities, so I worked to establish the regulations that were not there, regarding one-time assistance. Of course, they went around me because the one-time assistance didn't go through me; it went through the law-yer, who they also brought in from the municipality. He received people from the municipality who came with a sheet of paper, doing all that, of course, without involving me." (expert, 58, 35, years of experience in social protection)

Practices of coercion, threats, and pressures, both for professional and party-related work, have become almost commonplace in some work environments and are no longer seen as a problem. Nevertheless, this is not the only challenge that employees in these centres face. "Party customs" in the workplace are not only directed at encouraging par-ticipation in party activities or actions in favour of the party, but they also imply certain prohibitions and tend to regulate not only the organisation of work but also freedom of thought and speech.

A culture of silence and non-confrontation

Party control of the public sector limits the professional and personal freedoms of em-ployees and creates a new professional culture of "silence" and "non-confrontation". That culture implies the existence of imaginary and symbolic boundaries that define desirable or permissible actions and thinking. These boundaries define the topics that may or may not be tackled, as well as the way in which certain topics may or may not be discussed.

This phenomenon appears first at the top, in the relevant ministry, and then it is transferred and adopted by all instances in the centres – directors, managers and other employees. In the interviews, it was particularly pointed out that there is little space for a critical review of the state and work in social protection and that this topic is completely taboo.

"…Those people who sit in the ministry, people with whom I cooperated, among whom there are really great experts working there, who are obviously in some positions that are not so attractive, so no one touches them, because someone has to do some work in that ministry too... But if those people sitting in the min-

istry watch their ministers change and spin like on a merry-go-round, every now and then someone new comes, like Daria, like Dmitrović came, and if you see that in your centres they change in the same way director, you don't say a thing, and those people are obviously scared, they are not allowed to say anything. And when those in the ministry are not allowed to say anything, people who are actually doing some work, and they watch as ministers and directors are replaced all over Serbia... Anyone with the slightest sense of intelligence will see that he is not allowed to say anything." (professional worker, 37, 12 years working in a SWC)

"Interviewer: Do you, as employees, dare to express any personal criticism, point out flaws in the centre, or highlight issues within the Ministry? How much freedom do you have? Interviewee: We are not allowed to point out what is not working in the Ministry. I mean, it hasn't brought us any good, and it won't. This is my third term as the director. I have never had the impression that there is a receptive ear on the other side for the problems of the centres. I'm not saying there haven't been attempts to improve things, but I haven't felt them. I haven't seen anything changing structurally or systemically. Every time we discuss why there aren't enough staff, why new people aren't being hired, I get the response that they passed the opportunity-based competition." (director)

The experience of pressures and the long-term abolition of the autonomy of professional workers in the public sector strengthened the "culture of non-confrontation" among other employees. It occurs both among older and younger workers. Both seem to have accepted that there are implicit limits to autonomous action, informal norms stemming from party networks that limit their freedom and independence in work, thinking and action.

"Interviewer: What do you think about your other colleagues? Do they hold back; do they engage in self-censorship? Interviewee: I think there is some of that, especially among the older colleagues, which is very strange to me. My impression is that there is more of that among them than among the younger ones. Interviewer: How do you explain that, given that the older ones have probably got permanent placement contract? Interviewee: Yes, I don't know, I have no explanation for that. I've thought about it a lot because I always believed that, especially for them, with 30 years of work experience in social welfare, when someone unfamiliar with social welfare comes in, whether they're a director or whatever, one shouldn't step back. It's never been clear to me why they would step back. I think, in general, when it comes to social welfare, not just the centres, I don't understand how these older colleagues allowed everything happening in social welfare. They have never, not for a moment, said, "Stop, this is too much, it can't go on like this," like people in education, for example. They declare strikes, work stoppages; we can't take this anymore. That's what's missing in social welfare. As for why, I don't have an answer." (professional worker, 31, 8 years working).

"Well, you know what, I've been in this team for a long time... Now you have young people, they're keep coming. It's just a generational change, of course. And now you have young people who, in some way, probably have that attitude "It's better not to get involved" but you know what, on the other hand, many de-

cisions in the centres are also made by the entire team. So we also have team decisions, where the final solution to some problem should be a joint, team decision. So, in a team that includes a pedagogue, a psychologist, a social worker, a jurist – and when it comes to those team decisions, there is an opportunity for us to unite and if we have a common attitude that somehow we can fight more, in case the director insists it be different." (professional worker, 63, 35 years working).

"I think that when it comes to our centre, people are not even motivated... I think that even for those larger activities [unintelligible] we get points that we collect for some licences, but we don't get any money... Then people, if there is no money, and some effort should be invested, no one is interested in it. I think it's demotivation, in general I think that people in social protection are very inert and very scared, whenever the ministry is mentioned, they shrug, as if someone were to about to cut their heads off. So, no one is making a fuss... Everyone is whining in the corridors, and when we have a meeting, everyone is silent. I don't think it's due to fear, there was probably a period when fear was instilled in the bones, now that's not the case, people simply aren't interested. Even so, a hundred times when an initiative was launched, nothing ever changed for the better, it always changed for the worse. And also nobody believes that anything can change. I mean, I don't believe it either, but at least I want to talk…" (professional worker, 37, 12 years working).

Fear and self-censorship, as well as censorship by managers, limit professional discussions among the employees of social work centres. As in public, in social welfare there are limits to free speech and things that are not said publicly. Experts from social welfare centres sometimes "know" where the limits of opposition to those in power are, even though no one has explicitly set those limits for them. When faced with aggressive personal or political control of a public institution, professional workers often withdraw and become passive.

"Well, you have to be very careful about talking about it, I'm someone who appears at gatherings and talks about problems, but I don't talk the way I think I should, I speak in a way that would allow me to speak, yet still convey what I meant... I don't know, when we celebrated the centre's day, I conducted some short research on the influence of the media on the work of the social welfare centre. And then the director told me that it would be great to talk that day, "but since I know what you are like, bring me a presentation so I can see it." So he butchered my presentation so that no one would accidentally be singled out. Interviewer: I understand, he reviewed it and it's a kind of censorship so that you wouldn't say something... Interviewee: Censorship, of course, exists. Our centre is such that, of course, people have no initiative and no enthusiasm, they just do what they are supposed to do, and apart from that they are not proactive... Nor does anyone show up somewhere, say something, I'm the only one who does that." (professional worker, 37, 12 years working).

"I remember, when I got a permanent placement contract, before that the then director received some anonymous application that I had mentioned, which went to the ministry. I was young and it was logical for me that those from the

ministry send two inspectors to XX (name of the city) and tell them to have a conversation like you and I are now having and see how things are. However, it was not resolved that way, the director wrote a letter to himself, saying that it was not true, and said – with my signature, I confirm that the statements in the anonymous application are not true. And then he told everyone to sign. I didn't agree with that at the time, but I signed, because I didn't want to lose that job as well, because before that I lost a job in a gerontology department because of someone who had a connection (...) A meeting was called, we were all there... And he said: "Does anyone agree with what is written in the application?" When the whole collective is there, and you have just arrived... Everyone knows that it is true, but no one will say... (...) Yes, imagine now that I, who am twenty-something years old at the time, stand up and say – yes, everything is true... And everyone knows that everything is true, it was so obvious, so clear... And no one confirmed it... And he says: "So no one agrees... Nothing then, please sign that you disagree." And what are you going to do, sign. And now, for example, I probably wouldn't do that now, because I know they can't just take me away..." (professional worker, 37, 12 years working).

"I cannot say that they do not have the freedom to criticise, but no one hears them." (supervisor, 51, 23 years working).

Pressures on beneficiaries: citizens or voters

In the end, as indicated in the previous examples, SWC service beneficiaries also become part of clientelistic networks. The parties are targeting those who are the easiest to manipulate: senior citizens and socially and economically deprived beneficiaries of social assistance.

A vote exchange for a favour (most often one-time financial aid or some other material aid – firewood, humanitarian packages, etc.) is dominant in these relationships. Beneficiaries are blackmailed into having to vote for a certain party, because otherwise they will not receive financial aid (even if they meet all the conditions), so political eligibility is presented as an additional, but also primary condition for exercising rights.

"You know what? They tell them: "You won't get social assistance if you don't do it." They don't even hide it. Then those people go. I do not know if they believe what is presented to them." (supervisor, 60, 30 years working in a SWC)

"But I know, when I was in the office with the girl who was in the party, that people entered our office every day, people who did not have a job. Those people are indeed someone who should receive such assistance, but someone from the city sends them straight to her, because they know that she is the only one on our floor who is in a party... And then she asks me to leave or she goes out and then she explains to them what needs to be done, what papers to bring in order to get something... I know that these are not people who are citizens who came to us for help, but someone sent them from the city administration or some of their party bodies. I think that these are the people who are the eas-

iest to manipulate, because they are in a situation where they cannot choose. Simply, if you will vote for us, go and get in touch there, go see that person in the centre and they will help you. Whether they will be give 1,000, 2,000 or 5,000 dinars, it doesn't even matter... I've seen that..." (professional worker, 37, 12 years working in a SWC)

Citizens sometimes actively participate in this exchange of money for votes and do not hide it as a secret. One interlocutor testified that on the eve of the election, people came to her explicitly asking for money "for voting", that is, people to whom the political party promised help through the SWC if they voted. One participant shares a vivid example of the triage of users based on their political suitability, which takes place in the director's office on the eve of the election, while another participant recounts a conversation with her beneficiaries, who "complained" to her that the SWC director, a party member, "remembered" them only during elections.

"What happened during these last elections was insane. They would come to the office. They were, I think, illiterate people. I would say to them, "Please, what do you need?" "I came for my five thousand." "How? Why? What exactly do you need?" "They told me to come for five thousand." People don't even know why they came or what they need. Interviewer: And who told them? Interviewee: Well, those from the party. And those are people who don't even know that they need to submit a request. (...) Yes, and then there was also voting. Those who came and said, "For voting." And what was I supposed to say? We're not allowed to do that. And I didn't do it. I felt like grabbing a camera and recording those people and saying, "Enough, really, that's enough!" (professional worker, 39, 15 years working in a SWC)

"When there were elections, and I don't even remember anymore which ones... The last ones, the ones before... Here, there are elections every day. All those who got [assistance], those who were in the social welfare office, the corridor was full of them, everyone went to the director for a talk... So, I asked a guy I know: "What did he tell you?" To him, he specifically said: "I know you're in XX (party), but it's okay." But everyone, I mean, went there probably to be told who to vote for. I have no idea. Interviewer: So, people, parties, beneficiaries, regardless of the fact that there are people qualified to determine who, let's say, can receive that one-time assistance, or any kind of social assistance, they still have to go to the director? Interviewee: To the director, yes, to... Who knows what he tells them... To this friend, acquaintance, who is in XX (party), he said that, I know you're in XX (party), it's okay... Okay, bye. Now, what he tells others, I don't know." (professional worker, 51, 20 years working in a SWC)

"That's what the Roma people tell us without hesitation. Our XX (user's name) says, 'They only remember us before elections. We heard he takes money, but he didn't give us anything before the elections. In the other village, they get 50 euros for going to the polls, and we get nothing.' Then the woman says, 'It's not exactly nothing. He sent a taxi for us, and then the taxi takes us to vote and brings us back.' I ask them, 'Do they tell you who you have to vote for?' The woman says, 'The one who helps you is there; he does everything for you." (social worker, 52, 17 years working in a SWC)

Clientelistic "bartering" is most often "arranged" and carried out through informal contact between the beneficiary and the political party, i.e. the president of the municipality or the mayor who refers them to the SWC, members of the council of local communities, or between the beneficiary and the director of the SWC. From the interviews, we also learn that it is usually directors, but also managers, who control the lists of users that are forwarded to other institutions and organisations (municipalities, local communities, humanitarian organisations...) or they, on the other hand, delegate their closest collaborators, "their party people" from the centre (who are entrusted with the tasks of providing or officially recording this type of assistance) to be in direct contact with other "party colleagues" at higher levels.

> *"Yes, they ask for lists... Maybe there were a couple of … But I knew about it, and I never had any problems. So, if they ask, I respond that there are official lists of beneficiaries in the Ministry because the Ministry funds both financial social assistance and the allowance for care and assistance, as well as accommodation in institutions, and all the records regarding one-time financial assistance are in the Municipality. I've never had any issues. On a few occasions, as far as I remember, someone asked me for information of public interest."* (manager, 60, 34 years working in a SWC)

In this chain, presidents of municipalities appear most often as a party channel through which they influence centre directors, managers, or directly employees in charge of material benefits (whereby it is assumed a priori that the director agrees with that decision). The possibilities of misuse of beneficiaries' data and exerting political influence and pressure on users in these cases are certainly significant, as pointed out by several interviewees in the research.

> *"If they need it, it's entirely accessible to them. Our leadership can provide it to them. They don't need to ask me. So, I think, I'm not familiar with it, but I believe it happens. How else would they reach these people if not through the lists? They publicly blackmail them with these extraordinary aids. There's absolutely nothing hidden about it. I think it's being done, but I personally haven't witnessed it. I can't ascertain it, but I deeply believe it's the case."* (supervisor, 60, 30 years working in a SWC)

> *"What is actually crucial and problematic for me, and what is really... I say, it's the toughest position, the most thankless job, you know, because there are no criteria now based on which they will be given aid. There are medications for children, everything is given with a prescription. However, there are periods: "now we don't have [resources], we've spent the money," I hear that from colleagues now, there's no this, there's no that. I see that she doesn't want to give it to someone, whether it's... I know that often it's her own decision because she believes, and sometimes she's right, that someone doesn't need to be given assistance. Hummm, and sometimes it's also because the mayor communicates with her, not with any of us. He hasn't communicated with me for a long time. Neither with the jurist, I don't know about the others who work in family and legal protection [department], there might have been a couple of cases. But mostly, the mayor communicates with the person who gives one-time assistance. (...) But especially during elections, he communicates only with that*

person from the Social Welfare Centre or when there's some promotion, there's someone from the Social Welfare Centre." (professional worker, 61, 12 years working in a SWC)

"We try to avoid giving any lists unless it's officially required. Even if that happens, usually when the Red Cross sends a request, we still try to provide as little information as possible. In principle, the beneficiary must give consent to be included in the list. For gift packages, they themselves come to us when they want them, and then we know we can put them on the list. And that's it. But even those gift packages, it's related to politics. It's the misuse of families around New Year's" (professional worker, 39, 15 years working in a SWC)

Nevertheless, other forms of manipulation have also been recorded, in which private companies appear as actors, to whom one-time aid is disbursed, which they then distribute to the vulnerable, as well as certain non-governmental organisations that mediate in "animating" and intimidating users.

"The centre distributed, that was corruption...There was a coincidence during some elections a few years ago. The municipality provided funds for one-time assistance; however, the money was transferred to a private chicken farm. People, instead of receiving cash, were given old, worn-out laying hens. The director's godfather was involved. And this might have happened just before the elections." (professional worker, 51, 20 years working).

"Yes, I believe they are threatening them, but I don't think they used our institutions for that. They used some non-governmental organisations that deal with minorities, so maybe they did it through them. Interviewer: Do you think that some non-governmental organizations that deal with the protection of Roma, that they abuse... Interviewee: Yes, they have a role to animate these people, and maybe they showed them that they should... Interviewer: And why, how, do they then have an influence on who will receive social assistance, if they can blackmail the team? Interviewee: No, they don't. Interviewer: So you think it's just intimidation? Interviewee: I think so. With us, intimidation works, so... On all levels, really." (manager, 54, 22 years working in a SWC)

Moreover, workers from various social welfare centres testify that one-time financial assistance is received by people who are not poor, who, therefore, do not meet the conditions prescribed by the state, and that their party obligations are not entirely clear. The informal conditions that must be fulfilled remain somewhat unclear, but it seems that closeness to the parties or personal closeness to the management of the municipality and the social welfare centres influence this kind of unintended spending of municipal budgets.

"(...) A guy who has, for example, two bars in the centre of XX (name of the place), drives a Mercedes ML and a Golf, has been getting 20,000 for ten months in a row. Interviewer: Ten months at 20,000, as a one-time aid? Interviewee: As a one-time aid. That's when the president of the municipality got really pissed..., pardon my French. Why, he asks. I said, I don't know, I have no idea. I gave the same to the prosecution. The whole list. Excerpts from that programme, Inte-

gral. Ten months, XX (beneficiary's name) receives it and in the findings it only says that he is in need of money. And he has got bars and cars, which are worth as much as my house. Now, why, I don't know." (professional worker, 51, 20 years working)

"You have to understand, they have a person in the municipality who receives these people, then they determine the amount that will be given to him, it is not for poverty, the man is not poor, there is no reason, the man is not poor, how can I tell you, not only in appearance but in what he is when someone asks him, it's not someone who is at risk, but they come to the centre and they know, they go to that jurist, they don't go to the triage where people normally come... (...) I talked about the fact that many of those one-time monetary aids go to people who are absolutely not materially threatened, I don't have that data from the report, but it's the data I have from the field. So, I mean, it's all pointless." (expert, 58, 35, years of experience in social protection)

During interactions with the SWC employees, we have learnt that the exchange with the beneficiaries involves more than just a "vote for service", but in some cases, in addition to political support, financial support is also requested from customers. In one conversation, it was noted that beneficiaries are required to share their one-time assistance, provided by the "party," with the party. The mechanism is similar to a "donation system" where directors and employees, engaged through the party, return a portion of their salary to the party.

"I heard in the previous department when I was there, that a man on his own initiative blackmailed people saying that he would give them a one-time financial aid, which they really deserve by the way, on the condition that they give him half of the amount that he determines." (supervisor, 51, 23 years working in a SWC)

Political parties "mobilise" SWC users for other party activities, not only for voting. One interlocutor testified about the SWC, which was full of people, beneficiaries, who came to collect their "reward" for going to the party meeting. Another interlocutor shares with us the experience of a SWC services beneficiary who was blackmailed by the representatives of the local community who would deny her material assistance through SWC if she did not go to the meeting.

"Yesterday I spoke with an employee from the centre and she told me that when the rally was held, that day she did not have any requests from those people who come from marginalised groups, namely Roma or socially disadvantaged. That day, that was Friday, only one person appeared, who was highly educated. The others were at the rally. Because it's easy to motivate that group with small amounts of money, to, let's say, participate in a rally. Is not it? It's unlikely that I'll go to the rally if you give me two thousand dinars, but someone who lives below the poverty line, which is about 7% of the population in Serbia, will go to the rally if you give him that much. And he won't have time for the social welfare centre on that day either." (expert, 49, 18 years working in a SWC)

Interviewer: Are there periods when the pressures and demands of the beneficiaries are more intense, in the pre-election period? Are more beneficiaries

coming then? Requests for one-time assistance? Is it crowded here before the rallies? Interviewee: Yes, it is. It is made because they are paid that money, which they expect, whether it was agreed before, I don't know. It's really crowded, one colleague commented. The director was angry, because she said that a little too loud, and publicly. I don't know if anyone else has heard that. She said: "Here they come... They have come to be paid for going to the rally." And the director was quite angry, she said: "How dare she talk like that." Why so loud?" But it is so, there is no doubt about it." (supervisor, 60, 30 years working in a SWC)

"Now I had a wife who is a victim of abuse, she has a five-year-old child, and she has lower intellectual capacities, she does not have the support of her family. In the end, she returned to the abuser. She is pregnant and called me the other day and said: "But I can't, I called the people in the local community the other day, they told me that I won't get a food package because I didn't go to the rally." I'm pregnant, I was unable to go." Interviewer: Who told her that? Interviewee: She was told that in the local community. The Red Cross distributes food packages, gives packages to local communities, SWC and the municipality cover the city, fifteen villages and fifteen farms. And now you have local communities in the villages. This is specifically the local community XX (name of the local community). This woman tells me that they will not give her in XY. Then I call and ask again and again, they say, you know, the council of the local community made a decision that the aid will be distributed according to the list made by XX, that's my colleague. Now let's consider families that have two social benefits, which means that there are two recipients in the family, which should not be the case. Now the question is whether it is done along political lines or whether the social worker has assessed that they live in two separate households, they just have the same surname. But both husband and wife will receive a package, I say: "Isn't it ridiculous that they will receive a package now and then they won't receive a package for months." Let's arrange it better so that they receive those packages more regularly, every two months or every month, and distribute packages to others now." She said that she would meet me and see if she could give that woman a package, because she is pregnant and has a child and cannot work." (professional worker, 52, 17 years working in a SWC).

In this way, trade in SWC services turns into a real business in which public resources are misused in various ways. **Socially vulnerable citizens are blackmailed into "deserving" through party loyalty material benefits and services to which they are legally entitled to; state funds are directly used for party activities and objectives; companies close to the regime are engaged in the distribution of humanitarian aid, etc.** Clientelistic networks in social protection thus take on a double form: they serve to blackmail voters and to ensure support for the party in the form of activists, voters and donors, while companies close to the regime engage even in this not particularly lucrative field, seeking to participate in the implementation of social welfare measures through preferential positions.

Consequences: how clientelistic networks influence the SWC work?

Undermining and capturing the SWC institution: the silent supremacy of the informal

The analysis of research findings indicates that clientelistic networks, firstly, undermine the formal rules underlying the institution and replace them with informal rules that have opposing goals in relation to the formal ones and, secondly, they undermine in various ways the human resources that the institutions have at their disposal.

Predominance of informal rules and parallel lines of responsibility

Research shows that members of party clientelistic networks do not respect formal rules, i.e, laws that define the work of social welfare centres. Jobs in social welfare centres are not obtained based on legally defined criteria; material assistance or services are also received by those who do not have the right to it, or that right is conditioned by voting for the party; the resources of the centres are not used according to the law (vehicles, premises, etc.); employees report their work to the party, not to the director of the institution, etc. All these formal rules are replaced by informal ones that are part of clientelistic networks: jobs are given to party people who in turn have to work for the party (by securing a certain number of votes, participating in party activities, donating part of their salary to the party, etc.); party voters receive material benefits; party people get jobs in the centres regardless of qualifications, etc.

Clientelistic networks operate based on informal rules that provide instructions for the functioning of both actors within clientelistic networks and others. For example, research participants state that it is clear to them what may or may not be said precisely because of fear of reprisals from politicians or party representatives; they know who can win a public bid or help, what are the conditions for getting a job, etc. Informal norms, therefore, replace formal ones and become the basis of institutional action. It can even be said that some of those informal norms related to "doing work for the party" in some collectives completely become part of the work routine and work duties.

The informal practices and norms we have identified so far undermine or nullify the fundamental norms and objectives of social protection and SWC work. This occurs when assistance is provided to those who do not meet the criteria, when material aid or packages are distributed secretly without criteria, or when conditionalities such as voting are imposed. At times, through informal practices, some less fundamental "rules of the game" are violated, such as when aid is distributed without appropriate decision-making or when people who do not meet legally prescribed conditions are employed. In both cases, informal practices become a dominant pattern through which social welfare centres operate. The difference lies in the "weight" and significance of the norms. In the first case, nullifying

fundamental norms related to social rights and material aid actually erodes the very foundations of social protection. If assistance is given to those who do not deserve it or if the socially vulnerable are politically blackmailed to receive help, then it is no longer the social protection as we know it today.

Clientelistic networks are based on loyalty and exchange, and the mutual loyalty of network members can be so strong that parallel lines of accountability arise not towards managers, legal norms or users, but towards patrons (party heads, mayors, etc.). This is exactly the phenomenon we noted in this research, especially when it comes to rights and benefits provided by local self-government. Professional workers who are employed in these positions and directors of social welfare centres account for their work rather to the municipality than to the relevant ministry and citizens (this is just another example of the reversal of responsibility, i.e., accounting in clientelistic networks). Many of these employees are kept by the municipality in a dependent state (under a fixed-term contract, and not under a permanent placement one), while they fulfil the political demands of local self-government representatives, material benefits (and to some extent services) are adapted to the needs of the municipality, not the beneficiaries, etc. "Performing tasks for the party" also affects the dynamics of work in the centres, because employees, especially before the election cycle, are obliged to prioritise such requests and to neglect their current obligations.

Weakening of human resources

When clientelistic networks penetrate institutions, they replace formal norms with informal rules and thus undermine the normative foundations of institutions and create parallel lines of responsibility. Moreover, clientelistic networks weaken the human resources available to institutions. Recruitment through party connections is becoming the dominant channel for getting a job in the public sector. And as a rule, when a political criterion is introduced into the employment formula, it slowly suppresses the criteria related to education, work experience, knowledge and skills. So it happens that unskilled people perform not only technical and administrative jobs, but also managerial ones. Some of them go through an accelerated process of continuing education, and they get the qualifications needed to work in a social welfare centre "overnight".

Poor human resources, incompetent employees and managers, weaken human capacities of institutions, and consequently, weaken institutions themselves. The research provides a wealth of insights into how unqualified managers make inadequate or illegal decisions and how they ineffectively lead a team, creating divisions among employees and fostering a poor work culture that is not focused on success but rather on avoiding criticism, staying under the radar, and similar passive strategies.

The personnel weakening of an organisation is often carried out through the widespread practice of appointing directors in an acting capacity. This places them in a state of prolonged or permanent dependence and loyalty to political parties and their interests. To add to the paradox, the position of the director of a social welfare centre is not particularly attractive, both due to the nature of the institution and a myriad of challenges it faces *(primarily, limited resources and high beneficiaries' needs)*. As a result, the position of the

SWC director is sometimes assigned as a form of "punishment" *(e.g., transferred from the directorship of public enterprises)* or filled by young, inexperienced "party loyalists" who are yet to prove their allegiance to the party.

When it comes to social welfare, the silver lining in this unfortunate situation is that political patronage is most intense at the top and bottom of the hierarchy. Directors and technical personnel are most easily and frequently employed through party connections, while a confirmation of expertise is above all still sought for professional workers. Nonetheless, even in this field, we are witnessing changes. Once, as our interviewees attest, nepotism or personal connections represented the main channel for informal employment. Today, however, party affiliation has taken that place.

Passivation of the profession and ethics: a new professional culture of silence and non-confrontation

Clientelistic networks cover large segments of society, from the public sector, through sports and culture, to the economy, and set clear "rules of the game" demanding loyalty to the party and participation in the exchange (party activity or vote in exchange for the job, for example). It is clear from the interview that the professional workers of the social welfare centres are aware of these rules and are inclined to obey them. Some participated in party activities even when they were not asked to do so, while others testify that there are clear boundaries of what can and cannot be said or done.

On the other hand, it is paradoxical that we have recorded cases of refusal to comply with the demands of clientelistic networks and ruling parties, and that this refusal has gone without consequences. Some interviewees testify that a strategy of avoidance without confrontation is employed. These are cases where employees justify their non-participation in party activities for various reasons (for example, citing sick leave). Others, however, engage in open confrontation. Sometimes confrontation goes without consequences, but we have also documented individual cases where workers who protested suffered serious repercussions.

Although not unequivocal, the testimonies of research participants indicate a passive stance among professional workers in social welfare, suggesting that they are unwilling to publicly criticise system deficiencies and incorrect decisions or advocate for better solutions and working conditions. Sources of fear include the relevant ministry, municipal leadership, and the leadership of the social welfare centre. The ministry sets boundaries on free speech and initiatives for professional workers in both the ministry and social welfare centres, as well as for directors. Directors and municipality presidents make similar demands on professional workers. In other words, clientelistic and party networks that govern public institutions and the state impose clear limitations on autonomous professional work.

Party control over public institutions creates a professional culture of "silence" and "non-confrontation." This culture permeates the entire hierarchy of social welfare, from the relevant ministry to social welfare centres. Employees in the ministry do not question

decisions made by ministers and other leaders; directors and employees do not question the ministry's decisions; and employees in social welfare centres do not question the decisions and views of directors and the municipal leadership. The research not only records direct censorship but also self-censorship, indicating normalisation and acceptance of limitations.

There are clear limitations on freedom of speech in the context of creating and implementing public policies. Professional or political decisions, whether from ministries, social welfare centres, or municipalities, remain without critical scrutiny in this way. In such circumstances, it is very difficult for sound decisions to emerge, and creating public policies based on empirical findings becomes almost impossible. A climate lacking freedom and open dialogue is a climate in which non-transparent and inadequate decisions are made, for which later, no one is held accountable.

In addition to leading to poor decisions, the absence of critical thinking and freedom of speech undermines the institution of the social welfare centre. Formal channels of planning and decision-making are bypassed, decisions made may be inadequate or illegal, employees do not criticise them or socialise in that manner, and conditions for institutional memory are therefore not created, and the like.

Inequality among users, employees and institutions

Clientelistic networks deepen social inequalities. This specific research on clientelistic networks in centres for social work points to three dimensions of inequality: among beneficiaries, employees and the institutions themselves.

Clientelistic networks enable party members, activists and voters to receive favours and benefits to which they are either not entitled or to gain certain advantages due to their proximity to the ruling parties. This puts citizens who are not close to the parties in these ways in an unequal position. The first form of inequality refers to people close to the ruling parties who do not meet the conditions for various material benefits, but still receive them. The introduction of the information system limited the possibilities of abuse of state benefits *(first of all, social assistance, that is, the family financial security programme)*. Material benefits from the jurisdiction of the local self-government are not processed using the information system, and therefore there is a greater domain of discretion, and therefore the possibility of abuse.

The unequal position is observed among employees in social welfare centres, both in terms of employment status and income. The employment dimension of inequality is reflected in the fact that those in a better position are professional workers whose salaries are covered by the national budget, and who deal with tasks assigned at the national level. They have indefinite contracts and greater flexibility to avoid the demands of clientelistic networks. On the other hand, workers whose salaries are provided from municipal budgets and who deal with issues within the jurisdiction of local self-government are more often employed on a temporary basis. They face greater pressure to participate in clientelistic exchanges, engage in party-related activities, or work in the interest of the party. Less fa-

vourable contracts and the possibility of discontinuing job funding are two mechanisms through which local governments and ruling parties explicitly or implicitly exert leverage over them. Therefore, they are more likely to be a part of clientelistic networks, and there is greater pressure on them to work for the party, such as attending rallies or gathering capillary votes. Alternatively, they may be pressured to align professional decisions with party interests, such as directing material benefits toward voters or sympathisers of the ruling party.

Labour and legal inequality among employees evolve into economic inequality. Members of clientelistic networks receive various benefits, such as bonuses or involvement in projects, thus improving their financial position. In one of the interviews, these members of clientelistic networks are called VIPs. Those differences in professional status are visible, sometimes leading to division in the collective, and sometimes to acts of solidarity *(like when one of the participants says that he went to the party meeting out of solidarity with younger colleagues who were forced)*.

The infrastructural equipment of the institution also depends on clientelistic networks. According to the participants' statements, the material and infrastructural equipment of the institution depends on the ability of the director of the social welfare centre and his position in the party and clientelistic structure. Centres headed by directors with a better position in those networks can more easily provide official vehicles, room renovations, equipment and projects. Inequality among institutions translates into inequality among employees, as professionals working with fewer resources *(for example, no vehicle or room to accommodate and talk to beneficiaries)* either use informal channels and personal resources or fail to meet beneficiaries' rights and needs. Thus, in the end, inequality between institutions turns into inequality between beneficiaries.

Conclusion

The investigation of political clientelism in social welfare centres provides several important insights.

Clientelism as an organisational principle of local social protection. Research on clientelism to date has revealed how these networks function in a high-profit business world (for example, Cvejić, ed. 2016; Pešić and Milošević, 2021). This research shows that the same logic of "extracting profit" for parties and their members and sympathisers is also observed in less profitable areas such as social welfare. Here too, just as in energy or construction industries, companies that are close to the incumbent parties receive preferential treatment in obtaining state contracts, whereas state jobs are seen as a party resource. This means that clientelism may have already become the organising principle of large segments of society and economy, including social protection. By conquering local social protection, clientelistic networks succeeded in undermining some of its fundamental assumptions, so that the right to social assistance is realised in the full sense only through political eligibility, voting or activism, or this assistance is distributed secretly, without clear criteria.

Destruction of institutions as an organisational principle of governing. The famous philosopher Karl Popper once said that any long-term policy is an institutional policy. There are no good decisions nor social and economic progress without strong institutions, but also without institutional memory that will restore human resources in those institutions. This research shows how clientelistic networks destroy institutions (in this case, social welfare centres), by weakening their internal capacities, including personnel ones, creating parallel lines of responsibility towards the party, subjugating public institutions to party interests, and generating a new unproductive work culture.

Violence as an organisational principle of governing. Research into clientelistic networks in social welfare centres shows us how ruthless party networks are. They blackmail the most vulnerable citizens, condition the receipt of social assistance with party involvement, voting or party activism, giving back a part of the financial assistance to the party, etc. They do not choose where and how they will secure political support. Nonetheless, they blackmail not only the beneficiaries, but also the employees in social protection, in the same ruthless way, asking them to work in the interest of the party, not in the public interest, to engage in party work or to pay part of their salary to the party as a donation. This research has revealed, and not for the first time, how merciless Serbian politics is, but this time not towards political rivals from the opposition, but towards citizens.

Fear and passivity as an organisational principle of governing. Respondents testify that there are clear boundaries of speech and action, things that must not be said or done publicly. These limitations are set by clientelistic networks based on the principles of loyalty and reciprocity. Party networks are based on principles of loyalty and reciprocity and contain norms of dos and don'ts, and impose informal or formal sanctions on those who rebel *(for example, rebels lose jobs or benefits).* Authoritarian rule rests on fear and passivity, and clientelistic networks successfully spread these foundations in the domain of social protection and in the public sector.

Clientelism as an organisational principle of authoritarian governing. Clientelistic networks bring votes, party activists, profits to the party and persons connected to it, passivise citizens and employees in the public sector, set limits to criticism and free speech, generate self-censorship. These are all elements of authoritarian governing, while clientelism is shown not only as one of the governing mechanisms, but as one of the fundamental organisational principles of governing.

Basic concepts: informal practices and institutions, and clientelism

Informal practices are the ones that take place outside the formal sphere, be it economy, politics or society in general (Aliev, 2015). Formal practices are regulated by norms adopted by the state, international organisations (UN or EU) or institutions (such as companies, schools, churches, etc.). In contrast, informal practices arise spontaneously and outside

of those formal institutional frameworks. In our context, typical informal practices are re-lationships, tipping, smuggling in public transport, honouring employees in public institu-tions, and the like.

Informal practices differ from informal institutions. If we decide to "tip" a public official af-ter completing a job, that is an informal practice. However, if we fail to complete a task at a public institution, if we are unable to realise our legal rights because someone obstructs it, and if the obstruction is removed when we "tip" or give a bribe, then we have faced a form of sanction because we did not engage in informal payment or in some other informal way "compensate" for the fulfilment of rights or obtaining a service. At that point, the informal practice of "tipping" transforms into an informal institution of corruption. An **informal in-stitution** consists of: 1) **informal norms,** i.e., rules of behaving in a certain way and sanc-tions associated with those rules, and 2) **common behaviour** that aligns with those norms.

Informal institutions represent informal practices empowered by informal norms. They are significant because they have a more enduring and influential impact on formal in-stitutions and laws. They provide lasting and norm-reinforced frameworks for behaviour, offering very clear guidelines that, if not adhered to, entail some form of sanction.

The central theme of our research is **clientelism.** In everyday language, we denote this phenomenon in various ways, such as party networks, party dominance over the state and society, partocracy, and the like. However, for the purposes of this research, we will use the following, more precise definition: clientelism is a relationship between two individuals or groups referred to as patrons and clients. A patron is a person in a higher social position who uses their power and influence to secure protection or benefits for a person in a lower socio-economic position – the client. In return, the client provides support and assistance to the patron (Scott, 1972: 91). Patrons and clients exchange various resources, such as money, contracts, job positions, services, etc. Party-clientelist networks operate through party and state officials providing jobs, state contracts, and similar resources to compa-nies and individuals, expecting political or financial support in return (e.g., services during election campaigns, party financing, or work in party organisations, etc.) (Cvejić, ed. 2016; CRTA, 2022). Clientelism is an informal institution because it contains elements of norma-tivity, that is, coercion.

Without ramified clientelistic networks, there is no systemic corruption, as the networks formed by patrons and clients serve as a channel through which services are exchanged, and corrupt actions are carried out (della Porta and Vanucci, 2010: 7). Therefore, clientelis-tic networks form the basis of corruption. In the Serbian context, they arise thanks to **party patronage**. Party patronage refers to the practice of placing party members in positions in state administration (Christiansen and Piattoni, 2003), or more broadly, in positions with-in the state, including civil service, public enterprises, administrative boards, universities, advisory boards and committees, regulatory bodies, and other positions (Kopecký and Scherlis, 2008: 356).

At first glance, clientelism, connections and other informal practices and institutions have a negative effect on law enforcement and the work of, for example, public institutions. Nevertheless, the relationship between informal and formal institutions is far more com-plex. They can actually be found in four types of relationships: 1) **complementary**, when

informal institutions increase the efficiency of formal ones; 2) **enabling**, when informal institutions influence the functioning of formal institutions by changing their outcomes, but not violating laws; 3) **competitive,** when informal institutions produce effects that are opposite to the effects that should have been produced by formal ones and 4) **substitutive,** when informal institutions replace formal ones
(Helmke and Levitsky, 2004: 728–729).

Clientelism has a number of negative consequences:

It prevents the normal functioning of institutions. Numerous informal institutions have opposite goals to formal institutions, and undermine their work and reduce efficiency (Helmke and Levetsky, 2004). Sometimes informal institutions suppress formal ones, as is the case in parts of Italy where the mafia creates its own management systems and parallel norms (Catino, 2015). Similarly, party clientelistic networks can obstruct or suppress state institutions.

It penetrates into formal institutions and controls their work. Clientelistic networks carry great political and economic power, thanks to which they manage to impose their interests on the institution. In those situations, decisions are not made through formal channels, but within informal networks that exist within the institutions themselves. Later, those decisions can be "legalised" or "formalised" through a prescribed decision-making process. Ultimately, their implementation will also depend on informal networks. In clientelistic structures, politicians have power, not citizens, businessmen or judges, and therefore the lines of responsibility are reversed (Aliyev, 2015: 190 i dalje; Fox, 2014; Peruzzoti and Smulovitz, 2006; Vuković and Babović, 2018).

It threatens or even abolishes equality before the law and institutions. Informal practices and institutions can introduce arbitrariness and subjectivity into the work of state institutions (Rajagopal, 1999: 499). Clientelism, specifically, is a source of discrimination and unfair distribution of public resources. This happens when state contracts are not awarded to the best bidders, but to members of clientelistic networks, when the best candidates are not hired, but party members and the like.

It deepens inequalities. This is especially the case with grand or political corruption. But clientelistic networks can also deepen inequalities. A study of clientelism in the security sector reveals some of the mechanisms: for example, security companies manage to bid low enough to win contracts by reducing workers' labour and social rights below the minimum required by law: not paying them minimum wages, belatedness in payments and the like (Pešić i Milošević, 2021: 124).

It creates a specific culture of reliance on informal practices and institutions. Some research shows that relying on connections and informal networks to solve every day practical problems has become a kind of habit. This is contributed by the historical circumstances of scarcity, i.e. lack of material goods and public services, and irresponsible management of social assets. With the transition to capitalism and democracy, the culture of corruption did not disappear (Grødeland, 2013: 539–540). It is additionally strength-

ened by the widespread belief that the situation in our society is neither normal nor moral (Greenberg, 2014; Fridman and Hercigonja, 2017; Vuković, 2020).

It undermines democracy and trust in institutions, as well as civil society. Clientelism and corruption violate the basic assumptions of democracy by, firstly, by buying votes, making free elections and the responsibility of the government meaningless and, secondly, by weakening civil society, because citizens are encouraged not to join associations and not to be active in public or the political sphere (Fox, 2008: 41–42). Clientelism undermines civil society by encouraging people to refrain from civic or political activism. Clientelistic networks lead citizens to reject all other methods by which they could realise their interests (voting, organising and protesting) and to reduce them to one method: a direct agreement with the patron. Clientelism also undermines citizens' trust in the state and its institutions, by undermining the basic assumptions of democracy: fair procedures and equality before the law. (Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007: 339).

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