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Cycling to Brussels: Democratic Subjectivity Between Situationship and Political Form

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Abstract: This paper argues that the contemporary impasse of European Union enlargement is not a temporary delay but a structural condition of political suspension. Rather than operating as a linear process of convergence, enlargement unfolds through deferral, ambiguity, and managed proximity. Drawing on political theory and recent student movements in Serbia, the paper develops the distinction between relationship and situationship to conceptualize forms of political belonging that are neither fully institutionalized nor entirely external to institutions. It argues that democratic subjectivity increasingly emerges outside institutional frameworks and that the future of enlargement depends on the capacity to recognize these emergent forms as political rather than residual.

Keywords: EU enlargement; Serbia; democratic subjectivity; political situationship; student movements; political belonging; indeterminacy.

1. Suspended Democracies: Enlargement Without Arrival

European Union enlargement has long been conceptualized as a temporal project. It presupposes movement, direction, and eventual completion. Candidate countries are positioned along a trajectory defined by reform, convergence, and accession. This trajectory is not merely institutional; it is normative. It organizes expectations about what political transformation should look like and how it should unfold. Yet this temporal logic has increasingly come undone. Enlargement no longer operates as a

process moving toward completion, but as a condition in which movement persists without arrival¹. Negotiations continue, reforms are announced, benchmarks are evaluated, but the endpoint remains indefinitely deferred. What emerges is not stagnation but a peculiar form of continuity — a process that continues precisely by not concluding. This shift cannot be explained simply by political reluctance or institutional fatigue. It reflects a deeper transformation in the structure of political time. Enlargement no longer organizes time as progression but as suspension. The future remains open, but not in the sense of possibility. It remains open as delay.

In Serbia, this temporal shift produces a specific configuration of political life. Democratic institutions remain in place, but their function changes. Elections are held, but they no longer serve as sites of genuine contestation. Legal frameworks are maintained, but their capacity to regulate power is weakened. Public discourse expands, yet it increasingly operates within a space that is disconnected from decision-making. This configuration is often described through the language of democratic erosion or backsliding. However, such terms presuppose a deviation from a stable democratic norm. They imply that democracy has weakened and could, in principle, be restored. What they fail to capture is that democracy is not simply weakening — it is being reorganized. The persistence of institutional form alongside the erosion of political agency suggests that the problem is not the absence of democracy but its transformation. Institutions continue to function, but they no longer produce the kind of political subjectivi-

ty they once did. They stabilize power rather than opening it to contestation.

At the same time, the European Union undergoes a parallel transformation. Enlargement is no longer a political decision in the classical sense. It is not the result of a sovereign act that includes or excludes. Instead, it is governed through procedures — through reports, criteria, conditionalities, and compliance mechanisms. Decision is displaced into process. This proceduralization of enlargement does not eliminate power; it redistributes it. Responsibility becomes diffuse, and decision-making becomes opaque. Enlargement continues, but no one appears to decide it. It becomes a system that reproduces itself without requiring closure.² This reading resonates with recent critical approaches that interpret enlargement not as a linear process of expansion, but as a geopolitical regime structured by deferred inclusion and planetary-scale asymmetries. What connects these two transformations — in Serbia and in the EU — is a shared condition of suspension. Both operate within a temporal structure in which the future is continuously deferred. Serbia remains a candidate without becoming a member; the EU remains committed without deciding. This mutual suspension is not symmetrical. It produces clear asymmetries of power. The European Union controls the conditions, pace, and criteria of integration, while Serbia remains subject to them. Yet the relation is sustained not through resolution, but through its postponement. This asymmetry becomes most visible precisely at the level of temporality. Power operates not only through the capacity to include or exclude, but

¹ See for the legitimization of the concept of the political time, Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

² Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities — Skopje, *Envisaging EU Enlargement...* (2024)

through the capacity to regulate time — to defer, accelerate, or suspend movement. Enlargement thus functions less as a spatial project of expansion than as a temporal regime in which access is continuously negotiated but never finalized. In this sense, waiting must be understood not simply as a condition imposed from outside, but as a structured mode of governance. Waiting organizes political participation by maintaining actors within a process that demands continuous engagement while withholding resolution. Candidate countries are required to reform, adapt, and align, yet always within a horizon that recedes as it is approached. This produces a peculiar form of political activation without transformation. Movement is constant, but its direction is unstable. Reform becomes iterative rather than cumulative, and compliance replaces decision as the dominant logic of political action. What is sustained is not progress, but the appearance of progress. For Serbia, this condition enables the consolidation of what might be described as a managed democracy. Democratic procedures remain in place, but their capacity to produce political change is constrained. External pressure for reform does not necessarily destabilize existing power structures; it can become part of their reproduction. Reform is translated into performance, and alignment into rhetoric.

At the same time, the European Union's reliance on procedural governance produces its own form of depoliticization. Enlargement becomes a technical question of readiness rather than a political question of inclusion. The criteria of accession are framed as objective and measurable, while the decision to admit new members remains

indefinitely postponed. This separation between evaluation and decision allows the process to continue without requiring political commitment to its outcome. It stabilizes enlargement as a system, while suspending its resolution. In doing so, it transforms enlargement from a project of expansion into a mechanism for managing uncertainty. What emerges, therefore, is a regime in which political time is neither linear nor static, but regulated. It produces a condition in which actors are continuously oriented toward a future that does not arrive, yet remains operative as a horizon of expectation. This raises a fundamental question: what kind of political subjectivity is produced under conditions in which belonging is continuously deferred?

2. "Situationships": Indeterminacy as a Political Condition

If enlargement no longer functions as a trajectory toward inclusion, but as a condition of suspended proximity, then the conceptual vocabulary through which we understand political belonging must also shift. The binary distinction between inclusion and exclusion, inside and outside, no longer adequately captures the nature of the relation between the European Union and its candidate states. What is needed is a concept capable of describing relations that are sustained without being resolved. It is in this context that the distinction between relationship and situationship becomes analytically productive. A relationship, in political as well as interpersonal terms, implies recognition, continuity, and institutionalization. It stabilizes expectations and produces a temporal horizon oriented toward a shared

future. It defines positions, roles, and obligations. In short, it produces a form of closure, even if that closure remains open to change. A situationship, by contrast, is defined precisely by the absence of such closure. It is sustained through ambiguity, temporal openness, and deferred definition. It involves proximity without commitment, connection without institutionalization, and continuity without resolution. It persists not despite its indeterminacy, but because of it. While the term originates in the language of contemporary intimacy, its analytical reach extends far beyond it. Situationships provide a way of understanding forms of relation that are neither fully institutionalized nor entirely external to institutions. They name a mode of being-in-relation that is structured by uncertainty. This uncertainty is not simply a lack. It is constitutive. Drawing on Derrida, we can understand undecidability as the very condition of decision. A decision is only political insofar as it cannot be fully grounded in prior certainty.³ If it were, it would be merely the execution of a rule. Political action emerges precisely where such grounding is impossible. Indeterminacy, in this sense, is not the failure of politics, but its condition. It is what makes political action necessary and possible. The attempt to eliminate indeterminacy — to reduce politics to administration, to procedure, to governance — is therefore not the completion of politics, but its displacement. Indeterminacy, however, must be understood more rigorously if it is to function as a political concept rather than a descriptive gesture. It is not simply that political situations are complex or uncertain. Rather, indeterminacy names a structural condition in which no deci-

sion can be fully grounded in prior knowledge or rule. This is precisely what Derrida insists upon when he argues that a decision, to be worthy of the name, must pass through the ordeal of the undecidable. A decision that is merely the application of a norm is not a decision, but a calculation. What follows from this is crucial: indeterminacy is not the failure of political order, but the condition of its possibility. Any attempt to eliminate indeterminacy — to render political life fully predictable, calculable, and governed by procedure — results not in the perfection of politics, but in its displacement into administration. What we are witnessing in the technocratic management of EU enlargement is precisely such a displacement. Decision does not disappear; it is absorbed into procedural frameworks that obscure its contingency. In this sense, the suspension that characterizes enlargement is not simply a delay in decision-making, but a transformation of the very nature of decision. Decisions are no longer experienced as moments of rupture or responsibility; they are diffused across time, fragmented into stages, and distributed across institutional actors. Responsibility becomes untraceable, and with it, the possibility of political accountability. Nancy's intervention further complicates this picture by displacing the idea that political belonging can be grounded in a shared identity or substance. Being-with is not a property that subjects possess, nor is it a unity that precedes difference. It is, rather, the exposure of singular beings to one another — an exposure that cannot be stabilized into a totality. Community, in this sense, is not something that can be achieved; it is something that happens.⁴

³ For the rethinking of the concept of decision as political, see Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship* (London: Verso, 1997).

⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (2000)

This has significant implications for how we understand political organization. If being-with is fundamentally exposed and incomplete, then any attempt to close it into a stable form — whether through national identity, institutional membership, or legal status — necessarily excludes the very condition that makes relation possible. Institutions, in this sense, are always partial. They organize relation, but cannot exhaust it. Glissant radicalizes this insight by introducing the notion of opacity as a political principle. Opacity is not the absence of knowledge, but the refusal of reduction. It is the insistence that relation does not require transparency⁵ — that subjects can be connected without being fully understood, translated, or absorbed into a common framework.

This is particularly relevant in the context of EU enlargement, where the dominant paradigm presupposes that integration requires transparency: alignment of laws, harmonization of institutions, standardization of practices. What is lost in this paradigm is precisely the possibility of relation that does not reduce difference. Enlargement becomes a process of translation into sameness, rather than a negotiation of multiplicity.

If we take Glissant seriously, then the problem with enlargement is not only that it is delayed, but that it is conceptually constrained. It operates within a framework that equates political belonging with equivalence, rather than relation. Serbia is not asked to enter into relation with Europe, but to become recognizable within its existing categories. This is where the concept of situationship acquires its full analytical force. Situationships do not eliminate dif-

ference; they sustain it. They do not resolve relation into identity; they maintain it as a process. They are unstable, but this instability is precisely what allows for new forms of connection to emerge. Yet this also points to their limit. Situationships cannot provide the conditions for durability on their own. They require forms of articulation with institutional structures if they are to produce lasting effects. The challenge, therefore, is not to move from situationship to relationship as a linear progression, but to think how the openness of situationship can be preserved within institutional forms. This would require reimagining institutions not as mechanisms of closure, but as sites of ongoing negotiation. It would require accepting that political belonging cannot be fully stabilized, and that any attempt to do so will necessarily produce exclusions that undermine the very relation it seeks to secure.

When viewed through this conceptual lens, the EU–Serbia relation appears not as an incomplete relationship, but as a sustained situationship. It is characterized by proximity without inclusion, engagement without membership, and recognition without commitment. Serbia is integrated into processes, subject to continuous evaluation, and positioned within a horizon of eventual accession. Yet this horizon remains indefinitely deferred.

This produces a specific form of asymmetry. The European Union occupies a position from which it can regulate the temporality of integration — determining when progress is sufficient, when conditions are met, when movement can occur. Serbia, by contrast, remains positioned within a horizon that is always postponed. Its political time is struc-

⁵ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (1997)

tured by waiting. This waiting is not neutral. It is a political technology. It organizes time, distributes responsibility, and produces attachment. It sustains the relation precisely by preventing its resolution. The promise of Europe remains effective not because it is fulfilled, but because it is deferred.⁶ At the same time, this condition produces a particular form of political subjectivity. Subjects are constituted not through stable inclusion, but through their position within a relation that remains open. They are neither fully inside nor fully outside. They inhabit a space of in-betweenness. This in-betweenness is not merely spatial; it is temporal. It is a condition of being oriented toward a future that does not arrive. It produces a form of suspended belonging — a belonging that is felt, enacted, and desired, but not fully recognized. Yet this condition is not without tension. The very indeterminacy that sustains the relation also destabilizes it. The absence of closure generates uncertainty, frustration, and disorientation. It produces a sense of being held in place. This is where the limits of situationship as a political form become visible. While it enables the emergence of new forms of relation, it does not provide a stable framework for their continuation. It opens space, but does not organize it. It allows for movement, but does not guarantee direction. The political challenge, therefore, is not to replace institutional forms with situationships, but to rethink the relation between them. This requires a reconfiguration of institutions themselves — not as mechanisms of closure, but as frameworks capable of sustaining openness. Such a reconfiguration would require a shift in how we understand political order. Rather than grounding it in stability, identity, and

resolution, it would have to be understood as a process of continuous negotiation. Institutions would need to be capable of accommodating indeterminacy without collapsing into instability. This is not a technical adjustment; it is a conceptual transformation. It requires abandoning the idea that politics aims at closure. Instead, it suggests that politics unfolds through the management of what cannot be resolved.

3. Cycling to Brussels: Student Movements and the Return of the Political

If the EU–Serbia relation can be understood as a prolonged situationship sustained through deferral and temporal asymmetry, then the question becomes where, and how, political subjectivity can still emerge within such a condition. If institutions no longer function as sites of political articulation, and if belonging is continuously postponed, what forms of political life remain possible?

Recent student movements in Serbia provide a crucial point of departure for answering this question. These movements do not simply respond to institutional failure; they operate in a way that redefines the very conditions under which politics takes place. Their significance lies not only in what they demand, but in how they act. Through practices such as walking, cycling, occupying public spaces, and reclaiming universities, these movements produce a form of political presence that cannot be fully captured within institutional frameworks. Their actions are not reducible to representation. They do not speak only through demands articulated to power; they act through the creation of a shared space in which political subjectivity be-

⁶ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011)

comes visible. What is at stake here is a shift from representation to presence. In representative politics, political subjects act through mediation — through institutions, parties, and procedures that translate collective will into decision. In these movements, however, political action is enacted directly, through the act of appearing together. This appearance is not merely symbolic. It is constitutive. It brings into being a political space that did not exist before. Streets, squares, and campuses become sites of articulation, not because they are designated as such, but because they are occupied and transformed through collective action. In this sense, these movements do not simply intervene in politics; they produce it. They enact democracy not as a system of governance, but as a mode of collective existence. Democracy appears here not as something to be implemented, but as something to be practiced. At the same time, these movements resist closure. Their demands — justice, dignity, ecological responsibility — are articulated in ways that do not reduce to a single ideological framework. They open space rather than closing it. They produce a field of contestation in which meanings remain negotiable. This openness is not a weakness. It is a condition of their political force. It allows for the emergence of forms of solidarity that are not based on fixed identity, but on shared exposure and participation. It enables coordination without rigid hierarchy, and belonging without formalization.

In this sense, these movements can be understood as political situationships. They are sustained through intensity, affect, and presence. They generate relations that are real and consequential, yet not fully institutionalized. They op-

erate through proximity without closure. What becomes particularly significant in this context is the way these movements reconfigure the relationship between political subjectivity and space. Space is no longer a neutral backdrop against which political action unfolds; it becomes something that is actively produced through movement. Streets, campuses, and public squares are not simply occupied—they are transformed into sites of articulation through the very act of being traversed collectively. This transformation is inseparable from the role of the body. In institutional politics, the body is often abstracted or rendered secondary, replaced by representation, delegation, and procedural mediation. Here, however, the body reappears as a central medium of political expression. To walk, to cycle, to remain present over time—these are not merely symbolic acts, but material practices that produce political meaning. These practices introduce duration into political action. They require time, effort, and persistence. They unfold not in isolated moments, but across extended sequences of movement. This temporal dimension is crucial, as it contrasts sharply with the temporality of suspension that characterizes enlargement. Where enlargement defers, these movements endure. Where institutional processes postpone, bodies persist.

Cycling, in particular, intensifies this dynamic by introducing rhythm as a condition of collective action. Cyclists do not simply move together; they must continuously adjust to one another. Distance and proximity are constantly negotiated. Speed is not fixed, but collectively modulated. Coordination emerges not from central command, but from distributed attention. This produces a form of orga-

nization that is neither hierarchical nor chaotic. It is structured through relation. Each participant remains singular, yet movement depends on their capacity to respond to others. What is enacted here is not unity, but synchronization—a form of being-with that remains open, contingent, and unfinished. At the same time, this mode of movement foregrounds exposure. Unlike enclosed or mediated forms of political participation, cycling takes place in direct contact with the environment. It involves risk, vulnerability, and the possibility of interruption. This exposure is not merely a constraint; it is constitutive of the political intensity of the movement. It produces an awareness of shared presence that cannot be fully translated into representation. In this sense, cycling can be understood as a materialization of relation in Glissant's sense: a mode of connection that does not require reduction, that allows for multiplicity, and that unfolds through movement rather than stabilization. Participants do not become identical; they remain different while moving together.

This has important implications for how we understand the relation between movements and institutions. Rather than viewing movements as preliminary or transitional — something that must eventually be translated into institutional form—cycling suggests a different temporal logic. Movement does not necessarily aim at closure. It can sustain itself as a form of political existence. This does not eliminate the need for institutions, but it destabilizes their exclusivity. It suggests that political life cannot be fully contained within institutional frameworks. There are forms of organization, coordination, and belonging that emerge outside of them, while remaining deeply political.

At the same time, the question of durability remains unresolved. The very openness that enables these movements to emerge also makes them difficult to sustain over time. Without mechanisms of stabilization, they risk dissipation. Yet any attempt to stabilize them risks undermining the conditions that made them possible. This tension should not be resolved prematurely. It is precisely within this tension that the political significance of these movements resides. They do not offer a model to be replicated, but a problem to be thought: how to sustain forms of collective action that remain open, relational, and non-totalizing.

It is here that the metaphor of cycling to Brussels acquires its full force. It no longer refers simply to movement toward a destination, but to a form of movement that redefines the meaning of destination itself. Brussels, in this sense, is not only a place, but a horizon — a point that organizes movement without fully determining it. To cycle toward Brussels is therefore not simply to move closer to institutional inclusion. It is to inhabit a form of political action that refuses to be governed exclusively by the logic of arrival: to remain in motion without subordinating movement to completion.

Cycling is movement without guarantee. It does not follow a predetermined path toward a fixed endpoint. It requires constant adjustment, coordination, and effort. It is collective, but not centralized. It is directional, but not teleological.

Unlike walking, which implies proximity and continuity, or driving, which implies control and enclosure, cycling occupies a space in between. It is exposed, vulnerable, and

dependent on others. It requires balance — not as a stable condition, but as an ongoing activity. This mode of movement offers a way of thinking about political action under conditions of suspension. It neither accepts stagnation nor presupposes arrival. It moves without guaranteeing where it will end. Within the context of EU enlargement, cycling disrupts the temporality of waiting. Instead of orienting political action toward a deferred future of membership, it enacts movement in the present. It refuses postponement as the dominant temporal structure. In doing so, it redefines what it means to be pro-European. Being pro-European is no longer reducible to aspiring to institutional inclusion. It becomes a matter of enacting democratic practice — of embodying the values that are said to define Europe, regardless of whether recognition is granted. This redefinition introduces a fundamental shift. The central question of enlargement is no longer whether Serbia is ready for Europe, but whether Europe is capable of recognizing democracy when it appears outside its institutional frameworks. This question is not merely rhetorical. It exposes a structural limitation in the current enlargement paradigm. If democracy can only be recognized when it conforms to institutional criteria, then forms of political life that exceed those criteria remain invisible or illegible. In this sense, enlargement risks reproducing the very exclusions it claims to overcome. It extends the promise of inclusion while maintaining the conditions that prevent it. It sustains relation while deferring recognition.

The student movements challenge this logic not by rejecting Europe, but by rearticulating it. They insist that democracy is not the property of institutions, but a practice

that can emerge wherever collective action takes place. They shift the site of Europe from institutional structures to political action. This shift has significant implications. It suggests that the future of enlargement cannot be determined solely through policy, negotiation, or institutional reform. It depends on the capacity to recognize forms of political life that do not fit established categories. Such recognition would require a transformation in how political belonging is understood. It would mean acknowledging that democracy does not exist only where it is formally recognized, but also where it is enacted. This, in turn, requires rethinking the relation between institutions and political subjectivity. Institutions would need to become capable of responding to forms of political life that emerge outside their frameworks. They would need to engage with openness rather than suppress it.

Cycling, in this sense, names not only a form of movement, but a mode of political imagination. It suggests that political action does not need to wait for recognition in order to be real. It can proceed without guarantee, without closure, without predetermined outcome.

Conclusion

The contemporary condition of European Union enlargement reveals a fundamental transformation in the logic of political belonging. Enlargement no longer operates as a linear process of convergence, but as a regime of suspension that organizes expectation without fulfillment. This transformation cannot be adequately understood within the framework of institutional analysis alone. It requires a conceptual shift toward forms of relation that are struc-

tured by indeterminacy. The distinction between relationship and situationship provides one way of articulating this shift.

Situationships name a mode of political relation that is sustained through ambiguity, openness, and deferred definition. They capture forms of belonging that are neither fully institutionalized nor entirely external. They make visible a dimension of political life that remains obscured within binary frameworks of inclusion and exclusion. At the same time, situationships are not sufficient as political forms. Their openness enables emergence, but does not guarantee continuity. The challenge is therefore to think their articulation with institutional structures — to develop forms that can sustain indeterminacy without collapsing into instability. Recent student movements in Serbia provide an example of how such articulation might begin. Through practices of collective presence, they enact forms of democracy that are not reducible to institutional frameworks. They demonstrate that political subjectivity can emerge in spaces that are not formally recognized as political. The metaphor of cycling to Brussels captures this condition. It names a form of movement that is collective, contingent, and open-ended. It resists both stagnation and teleology. It suggests that political action can proceed without guarantee.

In this sense, the future of enlargement is not simply a question of policy or institutional reform. It is a question of political imagination. It depends on the capacity to recognize that democracy is not only a system to be implemented, but a practice to be enacted. To take this seriously

would require a transformation in how political belonging is understood. It would mean acknowledging that political life unfolds not only within institutions, but also in the spaces between them.

It is in these spaces — uncertain, open, and contingent — that new forms of relation become possible.

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