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**LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND: PARTY CLIENTELISM IN
SOCIAL WELFARE IN SERBIA*****

This article analyzes the functioning of party patronage and clientelism in the centers for social work. Building on previous research, based on qualitative research conducted in 2023 in Serbia, we examine parasitic relations of informal and formal institutions and their ability to nihilate the legal system and create a parallel or dual normative system. The initial step in institutional capture is party patronage and the deprofessionalization of public services. We further demonstrate how party cadre employed in public institutions create and reproduce clientelist networks and divert the working of the institutions. Finally, most public sector employees quietly comply with the expectations to work in the network's interest, creating a new culture of fear and professional and civic passivity. We argue that informal institutions of clientelism parasitize formal institutions and that capturing institutions and society transforms the internal norms of clientelist networks into social norms, creating a backbone of normative dualism.

Key words: *Clientelism. – Serbia. – Normative dualism. – Social welfare. – Centers for social work.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Serbia has been described as a hybrid democracy or competitive authoritarianism (Vladislavljević 2019) with a profoundly flawed rule of law (Vuković 2022). Typically, this is explained by referring to weak institutions (Kmezić 2017), lack of political will to achieve European standards (Dallara 2014), political instability generated by populist leadership (Bieber 2018), etc. However, living in Serbia is a testimony of ambivalence. We live in a relatively ordered society; our actions are constrained by the law, while our rights, property, and personal and physical integrity are reasonably well protected (Spasojević 2021). On the other hand, the actions of powerholders fall beyond the reach of legal institutions; they can violate laws and misuse public powers and resources with impunity. The critical role is played by party clientelist networks, which parasitize formal institutions and capture them.

The malfunctioning of public institutions is sometimes attributed to inadequate resources, poor management, and understaffing, as is the case with waiting lists for medical interventions (Subin 2024). In other situations, it is the result of vested interests of social and professional groups that block the transformation or adaptation of institutions, as in the case of education (Vuković 2017; Babović, Vuković 2014). Finally, such practices may stem from the political capture of institutions by the ruling parties. For example, it is believed that the reluctance of the Public Prosecutor's Office to address cases where there is a suspicion that state officials or politicians have violated the law is precisely a result of such institutional capture (Mandić 2020). In these cases, it becomes evident that different legal standards are applied to members of the political elite compared to ordinary citizens.

The first step in such institutional capture is party patronage, the practice of appointing party members to positions within the public administration (Christiansen, Piattoni 2003) or, more broadly, to positions within the state, which include civil service, public enterprises, governing boards, universities, advisory boards and commissions, regulatory bodies, and other posts (Kopecký, Scherlis 2008, 356–359). With the decline of mass political parties, appointing personnel to public administration has become a means for parties to strengthen their organization, solidify their networks within the public sphere, and thus ensure long-term influence over the policymaking process. However, the type of patronage observed in Serbia differs because it serves as a mechanism for extracting public resources through clientelist networks. The party's control over institutions facilitates these networks, which enable the unlawful allocation of public resources for the private benefit of its members.

Previous works (Vuković, Spaić 2022) claimed that clientelist party networks conquer institutions, creating *parasitic* relations between formal and informal institutions. The activities of these clientelist networks, which we identify as informal institutions,¹ are governed by unwritten and not fully explicit rules. However, members of the networks point to certain norms that reward loyalty, punish dissent, and exempt network members from legal accountability. These unwritten rules are essential in maintaining permanent clientelist networks and the continuous capture of institutions, leading to normative dualism or a dual state (Vuković, Spaić 2022).² In this article, we will (1) examine the functioning of local clientelist networks within the social welfare system and how they capture local centers for social work (CSWs); (2) demonstrate how CSWs operate in the interest of political parties, with managers and employees of the CSWs allocating the resources at their disposal to serve party interests (funds for cash benefits, referrals for benefits and services, employee salaries, and beneficiary data); and (3) show how CSWs participate in electoral clientelism by distributing money in exchange for votes. Additionally, we will explore their involvement in relational clientelism as a form of linking the society and the state (Bliznakovski 2021; Sotiropolous 2023; Magaloni 2014), as well as a mechanism for the ongoing paralysis of the system and the creation of parallel normative and institutional structures (Vuković, Spaić 2022; Vuković 2022).

Our analysis is based on the data obtained through qualitative research with employees and managers of the centers for social work and experts in social welfare (Stefanović, Vuković 2023). Altogether 27 participants (21 female and 6 male participants) from 21 municipalities were interviewed: case managers (12), supervisors (6), heads of services in centers (4), experts (2), acting managers (2), and managers (1). The interviews were conducted online or by phone, between May and August 2023. The conversations were recorded with the consent of the participants, transcribed, coded (using QDA miner software), and then analyzed. All interviews are anonymized.

¹ Formal institutions are sets of formal and informal rules and procedures that provide frameworks or guidelines for human behavior, thus constraining or enabling actor's behavior (Brinks 2003, 3–5; Helmke, Levitsky 2004, 725; Nee 2005, 55; Portes 2006, 241–242). Formal institutions thus consist of formal and informal rules, associated sanctions, and behavioral regularities. At the core of informal institutions are informal norms, which are, to reiterate, social rules usually unwritten but widely created, communicated, and accepted outside formal channels.

² The theory or concept of normative dualism refers to a case of unequal legal and civic status of individuals, depending on their ethnicity (Nazi Germany), race (USA before the civil rights movement), party affiliation (USSR, contemporary Serbia), membership or proximity to mafia (Italy, South America), or rebel groups (again South America).

2. THE THEORY: CLIENTELISM AND NORMATIVE DUALISM

2.1. Clientelism

Clientelism is the relationship between two individuals or groups known as patrons and clients. A person in a higher social position (the patron) utilizes their power and influence to secure protection or benefits for an individual in a lower socio-economic position (the client) who, in return, provides support and assistance to the patron (Scott 1972, 91; Munro 2010). They exchange money, contracts, job positions, services, etc. Clientelist relationships are a form of instrumental friendship, as two individuals or groups, despite unequal social power, engage in a close mutual relationship based on some form of reciprocity. However, clientelism can also be perceived as a relationship of political subordination in which a person wielding political power receives support in exchange for goods or services.

In traditional societies, clientelism entailed the exchange of services between clients and patrons, i.e., between peasants or farmers on one hand and lords or rulers on the other. Patrons provided protection and support to their clients, and clients worked for the patrons, fought, and provided them with political services (Scott 1972, 98–99). In contemporary democratic society, clientelism has retained the dimension of exchange, but now clients offer primarily political services while patrons distribute protection and various economic resources. The critical difference between traditional and contemporary clientelism is that today, patrons distribute benefits by controlling the state apparatus and public resources (Bliznakovski 2021, 276).³

Researchers typically distinguish between electoral and relational clientelism. Electoral clientelism is an ad hoc relationship of short duration, while relational clientelism is a long-term relationship with a broader “catalog” of inducements, “ranging from party patronage in employment to giving away long-term or permanent benefits, usually at the expense of public resources. Unlike electoral clientelism, these practices are much more nuanced and are often situated within a grey area of the political domain; their influence on the election outcome lies somewhere between legality and illegality” (Bliznakovski, Gjuzelov, Popovijk 2017, 7; Yildirim, Kitschelt 2020).

³ Clientelist networks have been identified in both developed and underdeveloped countries; they include politicians, the electorate, businesspersons, members of the judiciary and bureaucracy (Trochev 2018; Grzymalla-Busse 2010; Cook 2014; Bliznakovski, Gjuzelov, Popovijk 2017; Babović, Vuković 2018).

Clientelism has a disruptive effect on both democracy and the rule of law, violating their fundamental pillars: free and fair elections – by forcing citizens to disclose their ballots or vote under coercion or blackmail; vibrant civil society – by encouraging people to refrain from civil or political activism (Fox 2008, 41–42); and equitable procedures and the principle of equal treatment under the law – by diverting institutions away from public and citizens’ interest (Kitschelt, Wilkinson 2007). Due to the political and economic power ingrained within them, networks of clientelism manage to impose their interests on institutions, conditioning them to work in line with these interests (Aliyev 2015, 190ff). Consequently, institutions are prevented from making lawful decisions and operating efficiently (Fox 2014; Peruzzoti, Smulovitz 2006; Vuković, Babović 2018), which erodes public support for democracy and the rule of law, and undermines trust in institutions.⁴

2.2. Informal Norms and the “Dual State”

An extensive body of literature demonstrates that the norms or instincts of reciprocity powerfully shape clientelist exchange. Ethnographic accounts of clientelism produced over the last seventy-five years are drenched in the language of obligation. Clients regularly report feeling indebted to the politicians who provide them with benefits and act accordingly (Lawson, Green 2014, 65) or describe their relationships with patrons as that of debt and obligation. Particularly, the members of the inner clientelist circle emphasize the notions of care, trust, solidarity, and reciprocity (Auyero 2000, 73–74). Clients report their obligation to meet the patron’s requests even if they do not explicitly ask and emphasize that it is a form of gratitude. And, like elsewhere in the world, this South American study shows that people who receive gifts or benefits *know* that they have to fulfill the requirements

⁴ On the other hand, Beatriz Magaloni insists on the positive aspects of clientelism. She states, following Huntington, that authoritarian rulers who used clientelism were significantly more stable and often less repressive than rulers who had no established linkages with civil society. Corruption and clientelism might hence be conceived as strategies to tame political violence, and in this sense, they might not have a negative effect on development. A second positive aspect of clientelism relates to the lack of political linkages that prevail in many young democracies. Clientelism entails a form of electoral accountability, even if limited. Machine and voter are linked through an ongoing relationship that entails mutual obligations. Although this relationship is asymmetrical and based on inequality, it is often better for the poor than having no linkage with an elite patron at all. Magaloni concludes that we need to take voters’ strategies more seriously and understand why voters invest or willingly engage in this form of exchange (Magaloni 2014, 260).

of the politicians (e.g., attend rallies) to be able to secure benefits in the future (Auyero 1999, 308–309). In other words, they attend rallies because they are concerned about the sanctions.⁵

Studies in Serbia have shown the same (Cvejić 2016). Members of clientelist networks can be exempt from legal accountability, but they do abide by certain informal norms of these networks. They seem to be aware of them when they enter clientelist networks, willingly or under pressure, and there appears to be a shared expectation among members that norms will be respected.⁶ Violating the informal rules of clientelism and corruption brings disapproval, pressure, criticism, and sanctions.

Those who dare to break the rules within the system by, for example, becoming disloyal or greedy, threatening the patron's position, or causing excessive political and media damage, face consequences within the informal order. Consequences may include loss of support within informal networks and the benefits derived from that support, loss of membership in the party or affiliated organizations, or loss of protection within the legal system. Suppose the offense is significant or involves violating informal rules deemed particularly important within the order, such as the rule of loyalty. In that case, individuals are excluded from the informal order that shields them from the legal system (for an illustrative example, see Štetin Lakić 2021).

Just as adhering to informal rules provides protection from the legal system, a kind of limited immunity for actors in informal institutions, violating informal norms entails the removal of protection from the legal system.⁷ The degree of protection is directly proportional to the significance

⁵ To generate normative compliance, givers may try to instill in recipients a belief that the candidate is good or worthy (Schaffer 2002, 5).

⁶ Pressure to join networks can be exerted by state authorities through the manipulation of permits and approvals, delaying their issuance, threats that contracts will not be renewed, or sending a message to state-owned companies and institutions not to cooperate with uncooperative actors. This sends an implicit or explicit message that the only way to operate and conduct business, for example, in a given local government, is to informally pay politicians and officials or provide other services. Still, the most common form of pressure to respect informal rules relies on regulatory and coercive state bodies, such as inspections and the police. In addition to direct coercion, there is also implicit pressure, a "general atmosphere of pressure" – a widespread belief that involvement in party structures and exchange mechanisms is the only way to run a private enterprise at all (Stanojević, Gundogan, Babović 2016, 233–234).

⁷ Members of the network who respect informal rules, in turn, enjoy a privileged status: for example, the quality of work or services they provide to state organs is not scrutinized (Pešić, Milošević 2021, 124), or they are exempt from inspection

of the actors in clientelist structures – lower-positioned actors may be subject to judicial prosecution. However, even then, they may have a certain degree of political protection, whereas, for more powerful actors, this is far less likely. By entering these limited circles of the political and economic elite, one becomes bound by these rules, which can carry immunity from legal norms.

This duality in applying formal and informal norms has been described as a normative or legal duality or the dual state. The concept of the *dual state* was first introduced by Ernst Fraenkel in the context of Nazi Germany (Fraenkel 2017). This framework has since been effectively applied to analyze legal duality and normative systems in the Soviet Union (Sharlet 1977; Sakwa 2010), contemporary Russia (Sakwa 2010; Hendley 2011), Latin America (O'Donnell 1994), southern Italy (Catino 2015), Serbia (Vuković, Spaić 2022; Vuković 2022), and other regions. In a dual state, two institutional and normative orders coexist – one in which laws are observed and public institutions function in accordance with the law, and another in which public institutions are dominated by the ruling party, a criminal organization, or a business. In the latter, institutions operate based on informal norms, and the application of the law is subject to the discretionary power and specific interests of politicians.

In our previous work (Vuković, Spaić 2022), we argued that informal norms of clientelist networks govern the actions of political and economic elites and individuals associated with them. These informal norms regulate exchanges between network members, define their status and behavior toward external actors, and enforce sanctions. Sanctions may be applied entirely through informal means or by invoking formal institutions. This is possible due to the *parasitic* relationship between informal and formal institutions. In addition to the existing typologies of these relations (Helmke, Levitsky 2004),⁸ we argue that existing parallel informal institutions are parasitic to the formal ones. Building on this argument, the following section will analyze the mechanisms of clientelist networks within social

control (Stanojević, Gundogan, Babović 2016).

⁸ *Complementary informal institutions* increase the efficiency of formal institutions; enabling informal institutions to change the outcomes of formal institutions without being illegal; *competitive informal institutions* produce effects contrary to the effects that formal rules should have (e.g., clientelism and corruption); *substitutive informal institutions* arise when formal institutions are inexistent or while achieving the exact effects that formal institutions would achieve if they were functional (Helmke, Levitsky 2004, 728–729).

protection systems, illustrating how these networks infiltrate and capture formal institutions, thereby reinforcing informal institutions and the parallel normative order.

3. CLIENTELISM IN THE SERBIAN SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEM

The primary focus of this analysis is local centers for social work responsible for assessing applicants' eligibility for cash benefits or social services in a given municipality. CSWs themselves are structured within two founding entities: the ministry in charge of social welfare and the local self-government. Both institutions participate in appointing managers and financing CSW operations. CSWs are tasked with administering social rights as defined by national laws on social and family protection. Personnel engaged in these duties are paid from the national budget. Additionally, the CSWs implement municipal policies such as cash assistance and services under the purview of local self-government, with staff in these roles paid from the local self-government budget.

In both cases, the CSW evaluates applicants for cash benefits and determines their eligibility. There are two material benefits: the national financial social assistance program and the local social assistance scheme. The national program uses a rigorous means-tested procedure facilitated by software that links various national databases (e.g., tax offices, cadasters, police) to assess the applicant's income and assets accurately. This approach has faced criticism for its rigid eligibility criteria and invasive methods, potentially excluding vulnerable individuals who must meet strict technical requirements but still need support. Additionally, concerns about privacy violations and misuse of sensitive personal information have been raised due to the extensive data collection involved in verifying eligibility. In contrast, the local scheme is administered by CSWs through personal assessments by social workers. Unlike the national program, it lacks sophisticated testing mechanisms and relies on direct knowledge of the applicant's living conditions, allowing for significant discretion by welfare services.

Local social welfare budgets and programs fuel local clientelist networks in social welfare. Our research has revealed a hierarchical model of relationships and several vital actors, each with a specific role and a certain level of power. In this chain, the action of higher authorities is aimed at the party "capture" of the institution and control of lower authorities. In the following section, we will present party patronage mechanisms and exchanges between political patrons and clients/employees in the public sector and beneficiaries of social welfare programs.

The following paragraphs describe the key members of the clientelist networks in social protection: municipal party leadership, the CSW manager, public employees, and beneficiaries (citizens).

The political party's leadership is at the top of the clientelist network. The *president of the municipality* (or the mayor) is the most common channel of party influence. They exert pressure on the manager and staff of the CSW directly or through intermediaries (e.g., municipal politicians and officials, members of the local community councils). This influence encompasses both party work (e.g., they give instructions on party activities, quotas for rallies, quotas for secured votes, etc.) and professional work (they influence, directly or indirectly, professional decisions in the centers, particularly those financed by the municipality and related to the distribution of material aid).

The *manager of the CSW* is the main link between the party and the institution, appointed by the local self-government, the "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 clientelist network (e.g., through party employment), exerts pressure on other employees in the hierarchical chain, participates in enabling the abuse of public resources (e.g., fixing public bids for eligible companies, use of state-owned premises and vehicles for party activities) and personal data on beneficiaries.

Professionals working at the CSW (social workers, lawyers, etc.) are usually engaged through the party, or they are sometimes cooperative (out of fear) and do not oppose the party's requests. They play an essential role in the implementation of bribery of the electorate through material assistance given or promised to the most vulnerable; they participate in the "donation system" and support party activities (rallies, collecting votes).

Employees hired by the municipality are also most often employed through the party. They are used as the "party army" in political activism (they attend rallies and participate in other party activities) or as "secured votes." They also participate in the "donation system", which implies diverting money from the state to the party treasury (5% of their salary is deducted in favor of the party). They receive benefits through days off, promotion opportunities, project participation, or salary increases.

Beneficiaries or *ordinary citizens* are "secured votes" and the "party army", who attend party gatherings, collect votes, share promotional materials, etc.

3.1. Party Patronage and Institutional Capture

The appointment of managers based on party affiliation is described as a routine practice across the entire public sector. Public institutions at the local level are perceived as “political prey”; some interviewees emphasized that it is always clear which political party influences a specific institution at the local level. The role of the manager of CSW lacks appeal due to the nature of the institution, substantial responsibilities, extensive media scrutiny, challenging working conditions, and limited resources available to these establishments. Some interviewees highlighted that individuals are often appointed to the manager’s position as a form of “punishment” (for instance, being transferred from the managership of public companies) or as younger and inexperienced “party loyalists” who are yet to demonstrate their allegiance to the party.

Of course, since I have been in the center, there have always been suitable people. There has never been someone who deserved it due to their knowledge, expertise, and professionalism. (supervisor, 51, 23 years working at a CSW)

Interviewee: And everyone complains about the managers, of course.

Interviewer: Do they mention that managers are appointed according to their political affiliation?

Interviewee: Yes, and most of them do not hide it, but consider it normal. My favorite case is when the manager of the CSW complained that he had been transferred there, from the position of manager of the public utility company, as punishment. (expert, 49, 18 years of experience in social protection)

Managers often assume posts despite a lack of competence, formal qualifications, and necessary work experience, relegating them to the position of “party managers”. They function as “gatekeepers of the clientelist network”, the primary intermediary between the political party and the institution, facilitating political influence and ensuring that public resources and personnel remain under party control. Some managers lack familiarity with tasks mandated by the ministry but exclusively handle responsibilities financed by the municipality (local material benefits and services), fostering clientelist relations with municipal representatives. Additionally, parties often appoint individuals lacking integrity to leadership roles, presuming they will be compliant and unlikely to oppose party directives. Consequently,

in portraying their managers, interview participants emphasized their subservient and compliant demeanor and readiness to compromise in favor of political interests.

He is a defectologist and a special education teacher with no work experience in social welfare. He came directly to the manager's position. [...] His main concern was not to upset the municipality and local government. The rest didn't matter to him as long as the municipal affairs were going well. They don't understand what we do through the ministry or what tasks are assigned to us. The most important things for them are some financial benefits and social housing – local services for which the municipality provides funds. That's how I understood his role and tasks in his office. [...] The current manager is a sociologist by profession [...]. Everything she knows about social work is material assistance; she hasn't done anything and doesn't even have a license. (supervisor, 60, 30 years working at a CSW)

Furthermore, parties intentionally hire more employees than necessary (especially for technical and administrative tasks, under temporary and occasional employment contracts or with fixed-term contracts), creating a competitive atmosphere among employees who must compete for jobs. In such cases, employment contract extensions often go to those most involved in party activities.

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 forced to go to the rallies by bus because they tell them – your contract expires in two months, and I have three more people I can hire. Therefore, either find another job or get 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)

Political influence and party clientelist networks are most pronounced at the top (primarily management) and at the bottom (unskilled, technical staff) of the hierarchical pyramid within the centers. Party staffing and employment are the primary mechanisms for strengthening the party network and control over employees and public resources. They also serve as a means to exert party control over the implementation of social policy measures. Political parties frequently resort to interim appointments as an

additional method of control that secures the loyalty of their personnel. Although these mechanisms are not exclusively a characteristic of the current political nomenclature, our respondents suggested that clientelist relations have been intensified and normalized in the past decade.

Party control of the public sector restricts the professional and personal freedoms of employees, fostering a culture of “silence” and “non-confrontation”. This culture creates symbolic boundaries that dictate acceptable actions and thoughts. These boundaries determine which topics can be addressed and how to discuss them; although often implicit, they have tangible effects on behavior and decision-making, shaping what individuals view as acceptable and unacceptable within institutions.

This phenomenon first appears at the top, in the relevant ministry, and is then transferred and adopted by all instances in the centers – chief executives, managers, and other employees. The respondents particularly pointed out that there is little space for critical review of the state of affairs in social protection and that this topic is entirely taboo.

Those people who sit in the ministry, people with whom I cooperated, which includes great experts, who are obviously in positions that are not so attractive, so no one touches them because someone has to do some work in that ministry too. [...] And when those in the ministry are not allowed to say anything, people doing some work watch as ministers and managers are replaced all over Serbia... Anyone with any intelligence will see they are not allowed to say anything. (professional worker, 37, 12 years working at a CSW)

Interviewer: Do you, as employees, dare to express personal criticism, point out flaws in the center, or highlight issues within the Ministry? How much freedom do you have?

Interviewee: We cannot point out what is not working in the Ministry. It hasn't brought us any good, and it won't. (professional worker, 39, 15 years working at a CSW)

The experience of pressures and the long-term abolition of the autonomy of professionals in the public sector strengthened the “culture of non-confrontation” among other employees. It occurs both among older and younger employees. Both seem to have accepted the implicit limits to autonomous action, i.e., 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. I think there is more of that among them than the younger ones.*

Interviewer: *How do you explain that, given that the older ones probably have permanent placement contracts?*

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 manager or whatever, one shouldn't step back. It's never been clear to me why they would step back. I think, in general, regarding social welfare, not just the centers – I don't understand how these older colleagues allowed everything to happen 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 went on strike and stopped work; 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 of work experience)*

[...] In general, I think that people in social protection are very inert and terrified. Whenever the ministry is mentioned, they shrug as if someone was about to cut their heads off. So, no one is making a fuss. (professional worker, 37, 12 years of work experience)

Fear and self-censorship, as well as censorship by managers, limit professional discussions among the CSW employees. As is the case generally, there are limits to free speech and things that are not said publicly. Employees 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, professionals often withdraw and become passive.

I cannot say that they don't have the freedom to criticize, but no one hears them. (supervisor, 51, 23 years of work experience)

To conclude, party control over public institutions creates a professional culture of "silence" and "non-confrontation". This culture permeates the social welfare hierarchy, from the relevant ministry to the CSWs. Ministry

employees do not question decisions made by ministers and other leaders; managers and employees do not question the ministry's decisions; and CSW employees do not question the decisions and views of managers and the municipal leadership. The study records direct censorship and self-censorship, indicating normalization and acceptance of these limitations.

3.2. Party Work

Party work takes various forms, from direct political activism, such as attending political rallies and securing votes, to professional decisions that favor party interests. In some CSWs, attending rallies and other events, such as the opening of factories, is imperative. Employees are given days off or one-time payments⁹ as a “reward” for participating in party activities, which they experience as a “moral duty” towards the party and their superiors.

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 colleagues refused, and there were no consequences. (professional worker, 44, 15 years working in a SWC)

In addition to undergoing pressures to engage in party activism, CSW employees must prioritize (outside of procedures) certain cases involving individuals associated with the party.

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 manager asked me to provide an opinion for a family with no papers that had just the name and 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 the manager consider 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 passed

⁹ 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.

for people for whom they had no data. No basic information, no data whatsoever. (professional worker, 39, 15 years working at a CSW)

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

At some CSWs, "doing work for the party" has been fully integrated into the daily routine. The interviewees testified about their colleagues who consider it their duty to do everything their superiors ask of them. Cooperativeness thus becomes a "virtue" above professionalism and ethics in such a work climate.

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 institution's manager, and she tries to influence the case manager?

Interviewee: Yes! Now, if the case manager agrees, everything is fine. But if they disagree, she changes the case manager and finds someone she thinks will solve it properly, and that's how the problem is resolved. (supervisor, 51, 23 years working at a CSW)

Centers are also used to finance the ruling party. One mechanism is the "donation" system, which has been publicly discussed for quite some time.¹⁰ In our study we recorded cases in which employees on fixed-term contracts must repay a portion of their salary (5%) to the party. This obligation also extends to managers. When they attempt to avoid it, they face political pressure and sanctions.

We had a manager who naturally wanted to avoid giving money to the party. Why do that? She had gone to school in Belgrade, and she has a university degree... Why would she give anything? And then she was called upon; there was such a fuss

¹⁰ Rujević 2017; Kosić 2017.

about the dismissal, and the woman had to cash out and pay 20,000 dinars to the party. (professional worker, 48, 29 years working in a SWC)

And they pay that 5% every month.

Interviewer: Do those employed under a permanent contract pay, or everybody pays?

Interviewee: Only these younger ones are used, under a permanent contract.” (professional worker, 39, 15 years working at a CSW)

The interviewees testified that their managers often used the official vehicles for their party activities, but also that they carried out campaign activities during working hours (e.g., they visited households and distributed humanitarian packages, they distributed party promotional material to employees of the center, but also to beneficiaries), as well as that they used official premises for party activities (calling “safe” and capillary votes from the office, etc.).

Besides CSW employees, external service providers, such as foster parents and home caregivers (Serbian: *gerontodomaćice*) also suffer pressures for party activism. They are often explicitly blackmailed with losing their licenses if they refuse to participate in party activities. Also, a bizarre case was recorded in which a foster mother was warned because her activities on social networks were “unacceptable for the party”.

3.3. Vote Buying

Vote buying has been a persistent phenomenon in the Serbian political scene, with CSWs often implicated in securing votes through material aid and benefits. The interviewees testified to this, noting that previous administrations employed similar clientelist tactics. An interviewed expert explained that political parties can access almost all beneficiary data, bribing potential voters among vulnerable groups, and pressuring beneficiaries to participate in various party activities.

[...] they handle all sorts of data. What is the protection of this data? The [Unique Master Citizen Number] is the most meaningless of all... They have all the 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 they

started distributing firewood 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, they had to ask for concessions.

Interviewer: And what kind of concessions did they ask for?

Interviewee: Well, I mean, political concessions. I mean that they vote, that they bring two, three more [people] to vote, that... You understand that they go to the rally, that... I mean, that is what is expected of them. (expert, 58, 35 years working in a SWC)

Nevertheless, some study participants also noted that the practices of “bribing” voters from the most vulnerable strata, through one-time financial aid, have become more frequent and unscrupulous:

Unfortunately, we find ourselves in a situation where one-time aid is distributed to people who do not meet those criteria and is distributed on the order of the municipality president. Unfortunately! It's so noticeable now, more than before, in a way that earlier it used to happen, how should I say, through written requests, and then the beneficiary would go personally. You couldn't recognize 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 and arrogant. (professional worker, 63, 35 years working at a CSW)

In addition to having a long tradition and becoming more intense, the participants have the impression that the illegitimate and illegal practices of political influence on the most vulnerable categories are increasingly being normalized. The account of one interviewee, from whom a political party activist explicitly requested the list of beneficiaries (at the behest of the municipality president, who was also a member of the same party), illustrates that such practices are perceived as legitimate assistance to beneficiaries.

It's not even that we give lists. I was asked that once from [a humanitarian organization founded by a political party]. When the organization was formed, a woman from that party – we all know each other here – came to me knowing that I work on social assistance. She told me they had founded [the

humanitarian organization] and wanted to help. I told them, great, nice, very nice. Right, she said something like: “They just need the lists.” [...] I said, we are already helping these people, but I can’t give you that information. And then she told me: “But I was sent from above.” [...] Well then, I went 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, and I give the name of the organization. He says “I sent her.” Surprised, I said, “you sent her. You also know that this data are protected and unavailable.” He asked how we help these people. “Why can’t we know who these people we help are?” I say, “but this is data that is... They receive the assistance from the Republic.” He says, “but we support them in other ways, too.” I say, “but this is simply illegal.” He asks me, “who? I know it is so, and you find it in writing.” I said it without much thought, but I did. He just nodded and said, alright then.

Interviewer: So they still found a way to get that data through the manager? Interviewee: The manager gave them [...] .” (professional worker, identity concealed)

In this case, the informal way of working, in which abuses and document falsification are “legitimized”, has completely replaced formal procedures and frameworks. This example is specific because the CSW is located in the municipal building, right under the office of the municipal president, and the dynamics of relations in the clientelist network are even more apparent.

When loyal managers are appointed to lead the centers and loyal or coerced professionals are employed, these centers can become hunters of secured voters. Social welfare centers have shared lists of socially vulnerable citizens with other organizations (e.g., civic associations, local communities, local governments, etc.). The citizens who are on these lists receive various forms of assistance, and in return, they are asked to vote for the ruling party or attend rallies.

Party activists organize voters, with rewards, such as one-time financial aid or other benefits and services, distributed at the centers. Sometimes, money or aid packages are transferred to the Red Cross or local communities and distributed to recipients. This type of aid may also be conditional on voting or attending political gatherings.

Interviewer: During elections, were you required to gather a certain number of signatures or grassroots votes?

Interviewee: *They only give you a number of the people, not a list.*

Interviewer: *How do they know you've collected those votes?*

Interviewee: *They don't. They didn't ask me to photograph the ballots, if that's what you're asking.*

Interviewer: *Not just that, they give people a quota, to collect ten grassroots votes – how do they know you've gathered those votes?*

Interviewee: *They have a call center and check, 'Are you voting for [party name]?' They say yes, and that's it.*

Interviewer: *Do you submit a list of people for them to call?*

Interviewee: *Yes. However, the same lists are held by other parties. I don't know how this can be eradicated or made to work differently. Everyone does it. [...] It was, "If you don't like it, you can leave." I wanted to step away from that position. In the end, I stayed because we did many good things for the center. [...] For example, yesterday in Belgrade, I had to attend. I mean, no one will cut my head off, but it wouldn't be good if I didn't go."*

(acting manager, 38 years old, 10 years of experience at the Social Welfare Center)

Vote-buying has become so normalized that citizens openly come to the center to claim the money they "earned" by voting for the ruling party. In this chain, municipal presidents serve as the party's channel, influencing the center managers, supervisors, or the employees responsible for distributing material aid.

The last elections were insane. People came into the office, most of them illiterate. I asked, "How can I help you?" They said, "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 that?*

Respondent: *The party officials. [...] Even those who said, "It's for voting," came. (social worker, 39 years old, 15 years of experience at the Social Welfare Center)*

The main actors in these operations are the centers' managers and employees who were hired through party connections. Some are on fixed-term contracts and engage in party activities to secure their jobs. Others receive promotions, salary raises, participation in projects, days off, and other rewards.

4. CONCLUSION: A CASE FOR NORMATIVE DUALITY?

Clientelist networks cover large segments of society, from the public sector, sports and culture to the commercial sector, and set clear “rules of the game”, demanding loyalty to the party and participation in the exchange. The relationships between patrons and clients are entirely personal and informal. These relationships are founded on reciprocity and solidarity. Patrons provide disadvantaged citizens with various benefits, such as financial aid, employment opportunities, and medical assistance. In return, citizens participate in political activities such as attending rallies, casting votes, or otherwise supporting the political party represented by the patron. The provision of benefits occurs through informal channels, with patrons leveraging their networks of contacts, or through collaboration with formal institutions, such as healthcare or local government bodies.

The patron–client relationship (between the political party and CSW manager) permeates and replicates the entire hierarchical structure within the institution. Managers, acting as patrons, establish their networks of clients among the employees and service beneficiaries. These networks ensure a cadre of party activists and voters, and serve as a foundation for corrupt practices. Members of the clientelist network participate under coercion or without an explicit demand from their superiors – they anticipate deriving some benefit from it or avoiding potential sanctions.

Social workers are aware of these rules and are inclined to follow them. The study participants stated that it is clear to them what may or may not be said or done, precisely because of fear of reprisals from politicians or party representatives; they know who can win a public bid, the conditions for getting a job, etc. Informal norms provide instructions for both actors within clientelist networks and others, replacing formal norms and becoming the basis of institutional action.

Clients risk being deprived of benefits if they fail to comply with the patron's requests or demonstrate expected tokens of appreciation. This deprivation may occur either through the cessation of support from (1) the informal network, when patrons assess the costs and benefits of a particular

relationship, or (2) formal institutions captured by the party's clientelist network, who then deny rights and services to the client. Although some interviewees have resisted political pressures without consequences,¹¹ in some cases the "uncooperative" and "disobedient" are still punished. The punishment can be the obstruction of career advancement, financial losses, opportunity costs, etc. (for details, *cf.* Stefanović, Vuković 2023).¹²

This parasitic relationship between the formal and informal spheres is enabled by the predominance of the political sphere over economic, cultural, and other spheres of social life, making the political currency a key tender in every market, from business to education, culture, and even religion. The strength of informal structures is such that they can monitor and regulate even the private lives of citizens, e.g., their interactions and activities on social media. This has been analyzed as society capture (Cvetičanin, Bliznakovski, Krstić 2024), business capture (Burtlet 2021), and weakness of a non-differentiated society opposed to the dominant state (Vuković 2022; Lazić 2011). All these accounts testify to the strength of informal norms, weak resistance, and widespread voluntary compliance.

The integration of captured state and public institutions into clientelist networks not only expands the scope for both exchange and punishment but also fundamentally alters the nature of these formal institutions. Modern party clientelism, as noted previously, diverges from its traditional counterpart in distributing public resources and using public institutions as mechanisms for enforcing sanctions. In such cases, formal institutions support the workings of informal institutions and contribute to the certainty and consistent implementation of sanctions, imposed by informal order but executed by captured formal institutions. Paradoxically, the interest of the informal structures is to keep the basic functioning of formal structures not only for elementary service delivery and securing electoral support, but also for enforcing informal norms and sanctions associated with them and even legitimizing the entire system.

¹¹ For example, when they assess that these requests go against their professional ethics and personal morals.

¹² In a wider perspective, looking at the totality of party clientelist networks in Serbia, it seems that formal sanctions are applied only when public sanctions will not jeopardize the informal power structure. For more details, *cf.* Vuković 2022.

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