



# Institutions and demotions: collective leadership in authoritarian regimes

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## Abstract

Like any other regime, authoritarian regimes mutate. Many of these mutations depend upon the upshot of internecine elite conflicts. These condition the ability of a ruler or would-be ruler to seize state resources and acquire the capacity to exercise violence. It is therefore crucial to investigate the factors that shape the dynamics and outcomes of contention among elite groups in authoritarian regimes. This article pursues this line of investigation by examining from a micro-analytical, process-oriented, and phenomenological perspective how institutions of collective leadership affect power struggles in oligarchic power configurations. Drawing on the case of Serbia in the late 1980s, the following inquiry lays bare three institutional effects. First, collective organs of deliberation and decision-making channel intra-elite contention by defining the arenas in which elite members expect contention to take place (channeling effect). Second, by exacerbating actors' mutual awareness and coordination dilemma, the forum setting of these collective organs lends itself to the emergence of open-ended situations (indeterminacy effect). Third, the verdicts delivered by institutions of collective leadership shape elite members' expectations about group allegiance (collective alignment effect). In conjunction with this sequential argument about impact, the present article engages the conceptualization of authoritarian regimes, the analysis of institutional effects, and the study of delegitimation in an interactional setting.

**Keywords** Authoritarian regimes · Collective alignments · Elites · Institutional effects · Legitimacy · Serbia

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Intra-elite conflicts have considerable bearing upon the fate of authoritarian regimes. Significant power shifts in these regimes result more often from power struggles among elite members than from popular rebellions (Geddes 2003, p. 50; Svoblik 2009, p. 478). It is by undermining the power of their rivals, collaborators, and opponents that some incumbents acquire an unchallenged control of the state apparatus. As these incumbents expand their grip over state organizations, the threat they pose to groups, individuals, and neighboring countries increases as well (Weart 1994; Weeks 2012, pp. 339–340). Conversely, splits and conflicts among a ruling elite often undercut an authoritarian state's repressive capacity, thereby inducing opportunities for mass challenges and the possibility of regime change (Ekiert 1996, pp. 141–142). These considerations alone explain why we should pay systematic attention to the modalities of power shifts in authoritarian regimes. What are the *modi operandi* and the repercussions of intra-elite contention in these regimes?

Two broad research designs help address this question. One identifies dimensions of variation among regimes categorized as “authoritarian,” constructs data sets in light of these dimensions, assesses correlations, and given these correlations probes the empirical relevance of different possible accounts (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Gandhi 2008; Frantz and Ezrow 2011; Svoblik 2012). This design is variable-centered. A second research design delimits an empirical class and, within the confines of that class, seeks to pin down the processual logics of one or several typical scenarios from a “genetic” standpoint (Ermakoff 2019). While the first design is intended to be wide in scope, the second purposefully trades breadth for specificity. These two research designs complement one another. Assessing correlational patterns helps probe claims about contention mechanisms and their conditional factors. Conversely, the analytical specification of mechanisms informs the construction of data sets and variable selection. The present article adopts the second research design. The focus is on authoritarian regimes characterized by two features: the existence of institutions of collective leadership and an oligarchic power structure. Institutions of collective leadership designate collective bodies of deliberation and decision-making formally entitled to make, or validate, appointments to top positions. Through these appointments, collective organs indirectly bear upon policy orientations and power practices. Highly visible in party states, they are also present in authoritarian regimes devoid of a hegemonic party or a legislature: governing juntas in military dictatorships, consultative councils in monarchies, and leading institutions in theocracies (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007, pp. 1288–1289; Svoblik 2012, p. 91). When no single actor or faction has the capacity on a regular basis to shape *ex ante* the decisions that these collective bodies deliver, that is, when the power structure is oligarchic, these institutions can be presumed to have effects of their own.

For the purpose of investigating the emergence and outcomes of intra-elite contention in this institutional setting, we investigate one case that lends itself to an empirical scrutiny fine-grained enough to document the motivational and interactional dynamics of power struggles: Serbia in the 1980s and, more specifically, Slobodan Milošević's power bid in 1987. After the death of Tito (1980), the Serbian party-state epitomized an institutionalized setting made up of collective bodies supervising appointments to positions of leadership (Vladisavljević 2008, p. 61). Furthermore, the case exemplifies intra-elite competition in an oligarchic power configuration. No incumbent could credibly claim to exercise full and exclusive control over these appointments (Stanković 1981, p. 79; Vladisavljević 2008, pp. 70–71).

This last point applies with particular relevance to the intra-elite showdown that took shape in 1987 as Slobodan Milošević, acting as head of the Serbian League of Communists, made a bid to expand his power (September 1987). To document as precisely as possible elite members' beliefs, incentives, expectations, and tactical choices from a sequential standpoint, we draw on the following sources: (1) the transcripts of high-stake sessions, (2) memoirs and personal accounts and (3) interviews we conducted for the purpose of identifying the logic, if any, of these moments of intra-elite showdowns (see Appendix 1). This triangulation of sources makes it possible to crosscheck claims and insights, and to delve into the event from a process, interaction-centered, and phenomenological perspective.

As these remarks underscore, the perspective adopted in this article is micro-analytical and process-oriented. The perspective is micro since the units of analysis are individual actors behaving in a collective setting, and analytical since the inquiry seeks to specify how contextual or situational factors shape collective behaviors and beliefs. A micro-analytical approach does not presume that individual actors have a clear understanding of what they are up to. Nor, by way of consequence, is it premised on the presumption that individual actors seek to optimize their interests. Rather, this approach rests on the argument that we cannot probe or identify how elite members relate to their institutional environment as they engage, or get embroiled in, a power struggle unless we document from a sociological standpoint the collective dynamics of beliefs, motivations, and behavioral stances. To this end, the present inquiry adopts a process-oriented approach understood as the study of how behaviors and beliefs unfold in time. Cast in this analytical mold, a process-oriented perspective is necessarily forward-looking and centered on actors' subjective experience (i.e., phenomenological).

Underlying this analytical framework are two overarching claims. The first one is that it is possible to assess the causal significance of one or several factors in light of actors' experience, behaviors, and beliefs (Ermakoff 2008, p. xxviii). Transposed to the study of institutional effects, this claim states that if institutional setups are of any consequence, we should be able to observe their effects in the way actors make a bid for power, react to such a bid, and assess its likely outcomes. The second, and related, claim is that for the purpose of probing causally significant factors decisional moments are of considerable heuristic relevance insofar as these moments disclose which considerations matter in actors' assessing a situation and adopting a line of conduct (Ermakoff 2008, pp. xiv, xix).

Within this analytical framework, the following inquiry distinguishes three institutional effects from a dynamic and sequential standpoint. 1. Organs of collective leadership channel competition and conflicts among elite members by setting the main venues for power bids in an oligarchic context. 2. When no single player is in a position to determine *ex ante* the outcome of power bids through either threats or appointments, these organs' institutional setting crystallizes an acute coordination dilemma among elite members in moments of showdown. The uncertainty thus generated destabilizes power arrangements. 3. The political sanctions delivered by these organs, whether they endorse or disqualify a power bid, have a knock-on effect on the political elite as a whole. They shape expectations about political allegiance and create the conditions for more autocratic forms of governance.

In addition, the empirical focus on interactional dynamics makes it possible to document the very processes whereby an actor gains or loses legitimacy, that is, elicits

or stops eliciting the belief among the members of a group that she or he is entitled to request their acquiescence. Milošević's ascent to state power went along with the delegitimation of the incumbent state ruler, Ivan Stambolić. A close empirical focus on the interactional underpinnings of this process underscores three points of broader analytical relevance: 1. Moments of collective uncertainty in situations of decisional challenges create the possibility of shifts in allegiance and, by way of consequence, shifts in legitimacy. 2. Legitimacy beliefs have a performative character. They take shape through the public enactment of allegiance. Conversely, they wobble or crumble in light of the public display of disaffection. 3. These two points highlight these beliefs' epistemic structure. They are premised on an assumption of homology: group members impute legitimacy under the assumption that their peers do so as well.

The structure of this article elaborates these different claims. The first section below situates the type of authoritarian regimes that Serbia in the 1980s epitomizes in an analytical space defined in terms of two dimensions: the modalities of office appointment and the power structure. The "Delineating institutions" section spells out a definition of institutions as sets of interrelated formal rules, and outlines the main claims set forth in the literature regarding the effects of collective leadership on power struggles. Shifting attention to Serbia in the 1980s and, more specifically, Milošević's bid for power in September 1987, the "Arenas of contention" section examines under which conditions collective bodies of deliberation and decision-making become sites of contention and competition. The "Showdown" section inquires into the collective experience of showdowns and the impact of formal rules—primarily voting and deliberation procedures—on this experience. In the "Alignments" section we consider the impact of these organs' political verdicts on elite members' political allegiance. Here the focus is both on alignment processes within and across organizations and on the construction/deconstruction of legitimacy. These empirical observations underpin an interactional understanding of legitimation.

Because of its empirical and analytical foci, this article engages several interrelated conceptual and methodological issues. One concerns the criteria used to elaborate a classification grid of authoritarian regimes. Gauging the modalities of intra-elite contention in authoritarian regimes requires mapping out the broad diversity of political arrangements that make such regimes "authoritarian." Second, this article advances the claim that definitions of institutions are consequential for the investigation of their effects. Consequently, it speaks to the issue of how to define institutions. Third, this article provides a template for the investigation of institutional effects grounded in decisional analysis, and, more broadly, for the investigation of historically situated decision making. The focus is on: (1) how actors perceive the stakes inherent to the decision they have to make, (2) the on-going state of their knowledge as they grapple with their choice, and (3) the impact of formal rules, i.e., the institutional setting, on this process. Finally, this article is intended to be a defense and illustration of the possible research benefits of a one-case research design (Gerring 2004, p. 346).

## Mapping authoritarian regimes

In authoritarian regimes, "voters do not choose their leaders through contested elections" (Cheibub et al. 2010, p. 83). Either open and competitive contests are absent or

power holders regularly subvert and rig elections through various means (suppressing the expression of dissent, curtailing the margin for maneuvering of would-be competitors, repressing opponents, and falsifying election results) (Levitsky and Way 2010, pp. 3–13). Apprehended from this perspective, the category “authoritarian regimes” is a residual one: it encompasses regimes that do not satisfy the requirements of a democratic polity (Alvarez et al. 1996, p. 6). Unsurprisingly, given this residual character, authoritarian regimes greatly vary with regard to the political arrangements they display. To disentangle this disparity of arrangements, we need a classification grid.<sup>1</sup>

Analysts have pursued this work of classification by relying on two alternative approaches: typologies and dimensional analyses. The typological approach distinguishes regime types presumed to capture coherent socio-historical entities (Geddes 1999, 2003, p. 72; Gandhi 2008, pp. 19–34; Magaloni and Kricheli 2010). To the extent that this approach outlines the functional logic of each type, it can also be depicted as ideal-typical from a Weberian perspective (Aron 2018, pp. 185–187). The dimensional approach identifies dimensions of variation and, in light of these dimensions, constructs the analytical space in which cases are to be located. Svobik’s (2012, pp. 32–39) descriptive grid, which distinguishes four dimensions—military involvement in politics, restriction on political parties, legislative restriction, and executive selection—exemplifies this approach.

To be up to the task, a classification grid has to be exhaustive, consistent, and unambiguous. That is, the grid should be able to classify all the cases under consideration. It can hardly be deemed satisfactory if ad hoc categories have to be devised to cull out cases left stranded. Furthermore, the grid needs to be consistent. It cannot be so if categories are not mutually exclusive and cases can be adjudicated to several of them. Finally, the grid should be amenable to unambiguous observable markers or indicators.

Inductive typologies of authoritarian regimes may have a hard time fulfilling these requirements. Geddes’s (1999, pp. 212–223) threefold taxonomy—personalist, military, and single-party authoritarian regimes—yields categories that are “neither mutually exclusive nor collectively exhaustive” (Svobik (2012, p. 21). “Personalist” regimes for instance can “depend on a party or military apparatus” (Lai and Slater 2006, p. 115). As a result, classifying cases in this tripartite scheme can be arduous and problematic. The absence of observable and clear-cut operationalization criteria compounds the difficulty. These drawbacks, which undercut data and inference reliability, can be expected to be endemic among typologies when they collapse dimensions that are a priori relevant given the object of investigation at hand.

A dimensional approach avoids these liabilities insofar as it selects non-overlapping dimensions and, for each dimension, categories that mutually exclude one another, cover the full range of possible phenomenal patterns along this dimension and are empirically incompatible. Consider for instance the dimension “restriction on political parties.” A threefold scheme of “parties banned, single party and multiple parties” (Svobik 2012, p. 32) makes the classification grid exhaustive and consistent.

<sup>1</sup> Labeling non-democratic regimes “authoritarian” seems analytically more appropriate than labeling them “dictatorships” since “dictatorship” connotes the existence of a dictator and therefore an autocratic power configuration characterized by the concentration of power in the hands of one man or one clique. As mentioned above, authoritarian regimes encompass contrasted power configurations.

The analytical space considered in the present article takes into account executive selection and power concentration. “Executive selection” describes the method whereby actors acquire positions of leadership. “Power concentration” denotes the extent to which the capacity to bear upon policy decisions is shared. Regarding executive selection, regimes can be classified in light of the existence, or not, of organs in charge of appointing office holders. Criteria of membership to these organs vary across regimes. In party-states, members are affiliated with the hegemonic party. In military dictatorships, they are high-ranking military officers, and in theocracies, religious officials (as in leadership institutions in post-revolutionary Iran). Family and network ties condition membership to the advisory councils of regimes best described as monarchies (e.g., contemporary Arab monarchies).

Regarding power concentration, two basic configurations can be contrasted. At one end stand regimes in which one actor exercises power in the absence of checks and supervision—regimes that Chehabi and Linz (1998, p. 5) designate as “Sultanistic” and Geddes (1999, p. 121) as “personalist dictatorships.” At the opposite end stand regimes in which elite members coopt themselves, share state power and shield themselves from external competition (Lai and Slater 2006, p. 116). Power-sharing arrangements between autocrats and ruling elites are likely to get formalized, that is, subjected to explicit rules of protocol and decision-making. Formal rules, however, can be rendered insignificant through informal practices subverting their intent (Helmke and Levitsky 2004, p. 798). In particular, the formal existence of an institution of collective leadership is no warrant of an oligarchic power structure. Collective bodies of deliberation may fall under the purview of one “boss” who pulls the strings and, in effect, is able to direct dismissals and appointments (Linz and Stepan 1996, pp. 349–351). Deprived of autonomous power, collective bodies then window-dress an autocratic power configuration (Alvarez et al. 1996, p. 16).

Having laid out these dimensional bearings, let us situate the class of authoritarian regimes that sets the empirical background of the present investigation. Two features underpin this empirical class: the existence of collective organs endowed with the formal capacity to appoint office holders, and an oligarchic power configuration. A power configuration can be adequately described as oligarchic insofar as no single actor is in a position to predetermine outcomes on a regular basis. Members of these organs enjoy significant decisional autonomy as they regularly meet to oversee political appointments or policies. Their deliberations are not shadow plays. At issue is whether, and in which respects, these organs affect the modalities of power struggles.

## Delineating institutions

Analysts commonly designate organs of deliberation and decision-making as “institutions” (e.g., Frantz and Ezrow 2011, p. 21; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007, p. 1280; Svolik 2012, p. 8). According to this designation, exploring whether councils, juntas, or committees affect intra-elite contention amounts to studying the possibility of institutional effects. Which conception of institution underlies this type of investigation? At issue is not simply a matter of terminological clarification. Definitions are like empirical nets. Their grid affects the type of observations we might be able to cull.

There is no want of statements defining institutions. Regarding this profusion of definitional statements, two points stand out. First, it is not rare for analysts of institutions to subsume disparate socio-historical realities to the same generic category: “social

relationships and actions taken for granted” (Zucker 1983, p. 2), “regularities in repetitive interactions, ... customs and rules” (North 1986, p. 231), “the rules of the game in a society” or, “more formally ... the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction” (North 1990, p. 3), “a social order or pattern that has attained a certain state or property” (Jepperson 1991, p. 145). The drawback of this definitional approach is that since it bundles up different phenomena together, chief among them explicitly stated rules versus informal norms, it hampers the investigation of their respective effects.

Second, extant definitions have a propensity to conceptualize institutions in terms of their behavioral consequences. Consider Calvert’s (1992) conceptualization of institutions as “equilibria” (p. 17), Clemens and Cook’s (1999) reference to “self-sustaining” and “reliable” “higher-order effects” (pp. 442, 445, 453), and Crawford and Ostrom’s (1995) mention of “enduring regularities of human action in situations structured by rules, norms and shared strategies” (p. 582). In this conception, a behavioral regularity is enough to demonstrate the existence of an institution and to validate an argument about institutional effect. Definitional statements that adopt this standpoint lend themselves to arguments by definition and self-validation.

In order to avoid these shortcomings, the present investigation acknowledges the difference in kind between norms and formal rules. An institution in the framework of this article is a set of interrelated and explicitly stated rules—their explicitness makes them “formal”—that actors take into account as they interact with one another in a domain of activity. This definition does not presume that rules *shape* collective outcomes. In a minimal sense, institutions are “rules that prescribe behavioral roles and relationships among these roles” (Roeder 1993, p. 8). Correlatively, the degree of institutionalization of a realm of activity refers to the extent to which actors involved in this realm draw on formal rules to orient their actions.

Transposed to the realm of politics, this conception designates as “political institution” a set of interrelated formal rules bearing upon the activity of making decisions with an explicit collective stake. Collective bodies of deliberation and decision-making are *prima facie* instances of political institutions. These bodies “typically take the form of committees, politburos, or councils that are embedded within authoritarian parties and legislatures” (Svolik 2012, p. 90). Under different names—juntas, councils, committees, politburos, or Presidiums—they head legislatures or formal organizations. Their members coopt themselves, meet regularly, make appointments, and through these appointments have the capacity to shape policies.

Claims regarding the impact of these institutions have centered on the relationship between a dictator and a ruling elite, i.e., actors who regularly influence decision-making at the upper levels of the state (Bunce 1999, p. 27). One set of arguments centers on a ruling elite’s collective agency: the monitoring and coordination capacity of its members. Collective organs of deliberation and decision-making enhance the elite members’ ability to monitor a dictator’s behavior by facilitating the exchange of information (Svolik 2012, p. 8). In addition, these institutions decrease coordination costs “when it comes to ousting the leader” (Frantz and Ezrow 2011, p. 21).

Another set of arguments pertains to a dictator’s ability to control rivals and make “credible commitments” (Magaloni 2008, pp. 716–717). Collective bodies of deliberation and decision-making provide “institutional trenches” allowing autocrats to neutralize “threats from rivals within the ruling elite” (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007, pp. 1280, 1289). These bodies furthermore enable dictators to commit credibly to power-

sharing arrangements (Frantz and Ezrow 2011, p. 21; Svulik 2012, pp. 8, 88). Here the claim is that a dictator can credibly promise not to abuse his power by agreeing to submit himself to the supervision of collective organs.

Each one of these effects (monitoring capacity, coordination, neutralization through cooptation, and credibility) can be presumed to stabilize, and therefore consolidate, power-sharing arrangements between a dictator and a ruling elite. Cross-sectional analyses corroborate this hypothesis: organs of collective deliberation and decision-making decrease the likelihood of violent takeovers (Svulik 2012: chapter 4). Is it possible to specify further this diagnosis by examining from a sequential perspective whether institutions of collective leadership affect elite members' incentives and strategies at different phases of a power bid? The following considerations address this question in light of one case that exemplifies with particular clarity an institutional setup made up of collective bodies that no single actor was in a position to singlehandedly control: Serbia in the wake of Tito's death.

## Arenas of contention

As in the other republics of the Yugoslav federation, organs of collective leadership were institutional fixtures of party and state structures in Serbia in the 1980s. Municipalities had their own party committees. These sent delegates to the republic's party central committee (Cohen 1989, pp. 186–188). Crowning the party edifice was a Presidium whose president elect chaired the Communist party (in Serbia: the "Serbian League of Communists"). Membership to these high party organs—the Presidium and the central committee—was a coveted prize: since the 1974 constitutional reform, which transferred federal jurisdictions to the republics and made their top executives more autonomous, power had shifted from the federal center to the republics (Burg 1986, p. 177; Vladisavljević 2004, p. 187). Politicians eager to carve a political destiny for themselves were therefore looking at their own republic's institutions rather than the federal ones as the most appropriate venue to fulfill their ambition (Guzina 2003, pp. 95–96; von Beyme 1993, p. 413).

By way of consequence, it is within the setting of these institutions that ambitious party members were making their claims. Ivan Stambolić's bid to the position of President of the Presidium in 1984 and Slobodan Milošević's bid to the same position two years later are cases in point. Jockeying for high-ranking positions required eliciting the endorsement of collective bodies. This was the stuff of "normal" politics in Serbia in the 1980s (Vladisavljević 2004, p. 197).

Far from acting as rubber-stamp organs though, these collective bodies were sites of contention. Members of the Serbian political elite opposed Stambolić's efforts to be appointed head of the Serbian Communist party in 1984 (Vladisavljević 2008, p. 62). Similarly, when Stambolić pushed Milošević as his successor at the helm of the party two years later (25–26 January, 1986), "conflict erupted" (Vladisavljević 2004, p. 191). Some older politicians who had come to prominence after the war correctly interpreted the move as an attempt to marginalize them. They also resented Stambolić's strategy of power consolidation through the appointment of his protégés (Gagnon 1994, p. 147; Vladisavljević 2004, pp. 191–193).

To highlight further the tactical incentives generated by these collective bodies in an oligarchic power configuration, let us magnify the focus on Milošević's bid for power

in September 1987. All the protagonists (Ivan Stambolić, Slobodan Milošević, Dragiša Pavlović) were elite members. Milošević had been a bank manager before holding positions within the party apparatus (Cohen 2001, p. 94). Dragiša Pavlović owed his political stature to his position at the helm of the Belgrade committee, which had the largest membership in the country. Ivan Stambolić was the head of the Serbian state.

For several months, in the context of an on-going economic crisis characterized by inflation, food shortages, rising unemployment, and budgetary deficits (Burg 1986, pp. 173–175, 185–187; Magaš 1993, pp. 94–99; Vladisavljević 2008, p. 46), ethnically framed claims had been gaining in salience. At the end of 1986, a strongly worded memorandum by the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts lamenting Serbia's status in the Yugoslav federation became public and generated considerable controversy. Meanwhile, Serb activists living in Kosovo were becoming more and more vocal about alleged discriminatory measures and acts of violence against them (Vladisavljević 2008, chapter 3).

It is in this context that, during a trip to Kosovo, Slobodan Milošević, the head of the central committee of the Serbian Communist party, publicly endorsed a demonstration by Serbian nationalist activists (April 24, 1987). His endorsement was most likely unplanned and made on the spur of the moment. It received considerable attention for several reasons. First, activists interpreted Milošević's public stance as an open acknowledgment of ethnic Serbs' grievances in Kosovo. Second, Milošević's embracing popular protest was at odds with the party norm against involving the public in intra-elite divisions (Jović 2009, pp. 258–261; Vladisavljević 2008, pp. 100–101). Third, in siding with a Serb demonstration in Kosovo, Milošević was ostensibly departing from the anti-nationalist credo that constituted the official stance of the Serbian Communist party on the issue of ethnic grievances. Communist officials were expected to fight against the nationalism of their own ethnic group (Jović 2009, p. 189). Milošević's new and unprecedented stance was shattering the Serbian party leadership's apparent consensus on this issue.

Testimonies suggest that the attention he received emboldened Milošević. He was becoming popular among the rank-and-file and this popularity made him feel that he was entitled for more.<sup>2</sup> To claim more, he needed an opportunity. This opportunity emerged in September 1987 in the wake of a dramatic incident: the killing in early September 1987 of four Serbian soldiers by a military recruit of Albanian origin in the army barracks in Paraćin, Serbia (September 3, 1987) (Mertus 1999, pp. 145–147; Jović 2003, pp. 389–390). The event led to an outpouring of nationalist rhetoric on the part of Serbian newspapers.<sup>3</sup> In reaction, Dragiša Pavlović, the head of the Belgrade party

<sup>2</sup> Interviewee 9 describes Milošević as “carried away” by his April 1986 intervention at Kosovo Polje: “something happened down there ... he came back as a charismatic person, a leader.” His stance resonated with lower ranking party officials (Interviewee 10; Jović 2008, p. 45). He was aware of this popularity (interviewee 9).

<sup>3</sup> Following the event, the front page of *Politika* featured an article titled “Kelmendi fired into Yugoslavia” (*Politika*, September 4, 1987, p. 1). The article stated that Kelmendi “shot the most important pillar of Yugoslav unity and Yugoslav stability, the Yugoslav People's Army, and the most sensitive part of its being, our youth that always carried its uniform with pride.” The continued coverage of the Paraćin case evolved into an investigation of the town from which Kelmendi came, which implicated all its Albanian inhabitants in the killings (“Road sign leads to Dušanovo,” *Politika*, September 7, 1987, p. 5). Meanwhile, the press also downplayed the Serbian riots that followed the event in which Albanian shops across Serbia were attacked (“Protest gathering because of the crime in Paraćin,” *Politika*, September 5, 1987, p. 5; on the press see Magaš 1993, pp. 109–110; Mertus 1999, pp. 145–154).

committee, openly castigated the media for their rabid nationalism while implicitly criticizing Milošević for cheaply promising “quick change.”

A few days after Pavlović took this stance, Milošević called for a meeting of the Presidium of the Serbian party central committee for the purpose of discussing “the statement of Dragiša Pavlović” and its “political consequences” according to the wording of the meeting agenda. This was party jargon. In plain terms, it meant that Milošević, acting as head of the Serbian Communist party, had decided to put Pavlović, the head of the Belgrade section of the Serbian Communist party, on the stand before a collective body (the Presidium of the central committee), which would have to decide whether this incumbent would be sanctioned or not.

Milošević’s move amounted to a political indictment. He was calling upon the Presidium of the central committee to determine whether the indictment was valid or not. At first glance thus, we are considering a political confrontation involving two prominent members of the Serbian ruling elite who were opposing one another regarding the nationalistic tune played by some media outlets about Kosovo. These two figures were insiders. They held high-ranking positions within the Serbian power structure.

This reading of the showdown, however, would be incomplete. In indicting Pavlović, Milošević was actually challenging Stambolić: the latter had previously stated his support to the former in a letter written to the members of the Belgrade party central committee (Djukić 2001, p. 21; Vladisavljević 2004, p. 198). Were Pavlović to be ousted from the Presidium, the political blow to Stambolić would be plain and obvious to elite members. Milošević’s fortunes, on the other hand, would soar. The move against Pavlović should therefore be interpreted as a bid to dislodge Stambolić from the state leadership.<sup>4</sup> Beyond the immediate justification for the confrontation and the issue of Kosovo, power over party and state organizations was the ultimate stake as elite members did not fail to notice. In this configuration, Milošević was the challenger bidding to oust the incumbent, Stambolić, from his position as state leader.

Members of the Presidium knew that ultimately their political verdict would determine the outcome of this power bid. They would either confirm Stambolić in his leadership position or discredit him and, by the same token, anoint Milošević. The winner would gain exclusive legitimacy credentials while the loser and his affiliates would have to relinquish positions of responsibility (Interviews 1, 3, 5, 6). From elite members’ perspective, the Presidium was to decide who would be entitled to rule and who would be demoted.

The way in which Milošević made his bid is telling. He was not instigating rallies or demonstrations. He was not engaging in a show of force. Rather, he was calling upon a collective organ to demonstrate the validity of his claim for greater political leverage. This collective organ—the Presidium—was to be the arena in which the bid would be made and, presumably, from Milošević’s standpoint, validated (Vladisavljević 2008, p. 73). Obviously, Milošević would not have launched his offensive had he thought that it was bound to fail. The Presidium constituted a plausible site to this effect because Stambolić was not in a position to preempt its ruling.

<sup>4</sup> Svetislav Stojakov, “Prilog proučavanju ‘antibirokratske revolucije’ i ‘dogadnja naroda’,” p. 130. Stojakov was member of the Presidium.

These few observations underscore two points. First, institutions of collective leadership are strategic focal points and sites of political investments. Elite members, i.e., actors who are routinely involved in policy and appointment decisions, invest time and resources in institutional arenas from which they expect status, career prospects, decisional capacity, or opportunities to be influential. This investment in time and resources is all the more substantial as actors view the decisions rendered by an organ as consequential especially when this organ supervises appointments to leadership positions. Second, since competition for influence and institutional capacity takes place through these collective bodies, these also provide arenas for power bids and contention. An elite member who challenges a given allocation of institutional responsibilities elicits the opposition of those whose political standing is thereby called into question.

## Showdown

Let us now examine what happens when the members of a collective body get confronted with a power bid in an oligarchical context. On September 18, 1987, the twenty members of the Presidium of the central committee of the Serbian League of Communists along with about twenty members of the central committee met in Belgrade to discuss, and vote on, a motion dismissing Pavlović from the Presidium. To circumscribe the possible effects of the institutional setting on interactions and outcomes, the following discussion adopts the methodological guidelines outlined in the introduction. We reconstruct actors' experience in light of their behavioral record and the subjective states revealed through their testimonies (see Appendix 1).

In particular, we document the process of stance and decision-making by investigating (1) actors' perception of the stakes, (2) the information at their disposal as they face the prospect of a choice, and (3) the role that formal rules writ large play in this process. Actors' perception of the stakes outlines the configuration of interests in which they view themselves embedded. The state of their knowledge highlights their degree of confidence in handling decisional stakes. Both stakes and cognition contribute to the emotional facets of the showdown. As for formal rules, they delineate resources or constraints depending on actors' positions. This threefold focus—stakes, knowledge, and rules—provide a template for an investigation of institutional effects grounded in decisional analysis.

## Uncommitted and insecure

Forty-four speakers took to the rostrum during a session that lasted two days. If we restrict our attention to the statements that were *not* delivered by one of the three main protagonists (Pavlović, Stambolić, and Milošević) and that were *not* procedural—that is, statements from which the audience expected a stance on Milošević's proposal ( $n = 57$ )—it is striking to note how often these betrayed an effort to avoid taking a stance by cultivating ambiguity or by wandering to off-topic considerations and “endless rhetorical tirades” as Živorad Minović remarks<sup>5</sup> (see Appendix 2 on the coding of statements). Speakers for instance rambled on the upcoming memoirs of important political figures, literary awards, the Serbian

<sup>5</sup> Minović, *Gojko i Pavle* p. 310.

academy of sciences and arts, workers' strikes, a textile factory in Kosovo, and the Slovenian avant-garde music group Laibach.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore the propensity to avoid taking sides depended on whether actors were commonly perceived as affiliates of one of the main protagonists (see Appendix 3 on the coding of affiliations). With two exceptions, statements by elite members identified as lieutenants or close allies of either Milošević or Stambolić ( $n = 16$ ) took a stance as expected. By contrast, statements by unaffiliated politicians often dodged the issue: 22 statements were uncommitted while 19 took a clear-cut stance (see Table 1). Being “unaffiliated” was positively and clearly correlated with the propensity to remain uncommitted.

This behavioral record becomes clearer in light of actors' accounts of the event and their experience. Irrespective of the stance they took, testimonies and interviews underscore a pervasive and, at times, acute insecurity. “Voting at the Presidium meeting was very uncertain.”<sup>7</sup> Participants viewed the event as “alarming” (Interviewees 1, 2, 5, 10). Interviewee 5, who opposed Milošević, mentions “stomach aches.” Some openly acknowledged their anxiety during the meeting.<sup>8</sup> Even Milošević, at one point, seemed to be gripped by insecurity: “the meeting proceeded and I was not dissatisfied. And Milošević? He was panicking. I know his reactions. His jaw was protruding. His eyes were glazed. He was afraid of losing and he was not used to it” (Stambolić's account).<sup>9</sup>

Why so much insecurity? There is no indication that coercive pressures from either Stambolić or Milošević were at play. No interviewee reported being threatened.<sup>10</sup> Only in the 1990s would intimidation and violence become part and parcel of Milošević's political repertoire. Furthermore, Milošević had no coercive resources at his disposal: he did not hold a state position in contrast to Stambolić who, as the head of the Serbian state, was fully entitled to summon police and military forces if he saw fit. With regard to coercion, the “strong” man was actually Stambolić. Yet, Stambolić did not resort to coercive pressures in September 1987. The reasons for actors' insecurity thus have to be found elsewhere than in their exposure to threats and intimidation.

### Conditional stance

To account for the etiology of insecurity in the absence of direct threats, it is necessary to examine (1) how Presidium members appraised the stakes, (2) on which information they could rely to make their choice, and (3) how the rules constitutive of the Presidium institutional setup affected their experience. In September 1987, the stakes of the Presidium meeting, at once collective and individual, were geared to collective alignment. Yet, Presidium members lacked the information that would have allowed them to gauge the

<sup>6</sup> Transcript of the Thirtieth Session of the Presidium of the central committee of the League of Communists of Serbia, Centralni komitet Saveza komunista Predsjedništvo, 0300 Broj: Strogo pov. 290/1, Archives of Serbia, Belgrade, hereafter ‘Presidium transcript’, 7/3 BB, 7/5 BB, 20/5 BR, 23/4 BB, 58/2 TDJ, 43/3 BB. The pagination of the Presidium transcript available at the Archives of Serbia in Belgrade is peculiar: it uses a combination of letters and numbers. We use the original document's pagination to make any subsequent re-analysis possible.

<sup>7</sup> The statement is by Borisav Jović, member of the central committee and the Presidium. At the time, Borisav Jović was a close associate of Milošević (*Knjiga o Miloševiću*, p. 36).

<sup>8</sup> “I could not sleep last night” (Presidium transcript, 106/4 MB); Presidium transcript, 49/5 AZ.

<sup>9</sup> Stambolić, *Put u bespuće*, p. 201.

<sup>10</sup> “That is what everybody would like to believe now: they put a knife to my throat so I had to [vote this way] (Interview 1).

**Table 1** Substantive statements made at the Presidium meeting, Belgrade, September 18–19, 1987 ( $N = 57$ ): speakers' affiliations and statement contents

	Statements		Total
	Committed	Uncommitted	
Speaker affiliated with either Stambolić or Milošević	14	2	16
Speaker unaffiliated	19	22	41
Total	33	24	57

Chi-square = 7.998  $p = 0.005$

stance prevailing among their peers. Given the stakes and this lack of information, the forum setting amplified the Presidium members' uncertainty despite the small size of the group involved in the decision. In the course of the showdown, Milošević drew on procedural rules to capitalize on what he perceived to be a momentum in his favor.

### Stakes and incentives

At stake in the September 18, 1987 Presidium meeting was the leadership of the Serbian state. For the participants in the event this collective stake was clear enough. Milošević's unorthodox stance on Kosovo and his practice of power heightened this perception of the stakes. Elite members were being caught off guard by the fact that one of their own—Milošević—was now drumming up support for claims that he had criticized in the past. In strict ideological terms, giving credence to nationalist grievances was anathema to Tito's heirs (Jović 2009, p. 139). High-ranking party members were furthermore aware of the fact that right after his election to the chairmanship of the central committee in 1986, Milošević had stopped consultations regarding cadre choices and had decided to supervise the selection process himself (Pavić 2007, p. 19). Insiders viewed his leadership style as prone to a certain dose of political rashness and authoritarianism (Jović 2008, p. 46).

Concerns about the way in which Milošević was conducting his political offensive against Pavlović surfaced in the course of the debates. Usually, themes, policy issues, or events defined the agendas of the Presidium and central committee meetings. In the present instance, members of the Presidium and of the central committee were being called upon to consider the possible exclusion of one of their colleagues (Pavlović). The meeting agenda was thus putting one party member on trial. This was a break with previous practices (Interview 2; endorsed Milošević). The move smacked of “Bolshevism.”<sup>11</sup> Viewing Pavlović's indictment as “alarming” (Interview 1; endorsed Milošević), some delegates protested the agenda, regretted the highly confrontational character of the meeting, and voiced their fears that purges might be in the offing.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Svetislav Stojakov, “Prilog proučavanju ‘antibirokratske revolucije’ i ‘događanja naroda,’” p. 128.

<sup>12</sup> One speaker exclaimed: “who is next?” (Presidium transcript 1/6 AZ). Another stated: “This is uncomfortable, as comrade Stambolić said, this form of confrontation, either you or us, the sinner versus the accusers. We have to build bridges of cooperation if there are differences, large or small. Without that, without unity and the capacity to act, we cannot fulfill any task” (Presidium transcript, 71/1 SS). Right after the Presidium meeting, Momčilo Baljak, member of the Presidium, more or less jokingly mentioned to Radovan Ristanović, member of the central committee: “I am sent to Siberia while they are preparing the firing squad for you” (reported in Pavić 2007, p. 22).

Intermingled with these collective stakes were individual ones. Presidium members knew that voting for the losing side meant putting an end to their career (Interviewees 3, 5, 6). When such considerations prevailed, their interest was to align with the majority. As Interviewee 10—who endorsed Milošević—plainly states it, “why should I expose myself”? For these actors the strategic configuration at play was characteristic of a coordination game (Schelling 1980, pp. 83–100). Siding with the winner was the best outcome. This in turn meant making one’s stance conditional on the group’s stance (Interviewees 2, 5, 6; Pavić 2007, p. 24). The motivational force acquired by this interest in alignment at this particular juncture did not escape Stambolić: “while I was observing people at the Presidium meeting [...] it appeared to me that most people [facing the prospect of exclusion] would subjugate themselves [to the winner] if for them this is the condition—and often it is—not to be excluded.”<sup>13</sup>

### Gauging forces

While Presidium members and other elite members interested in minimizing individual risks shared an interest in assessing what the majority of their peers were up to, at the time of the meeting however no one knew for sure where the majority stood. Conjunctural and institutional factors combined to hamper this assessment. Milošević was commonly viewed as Stambolić’s protégé. As mentioned earlier, Stambolić had been instrumental in engineering Milošević’s appointment to the party chairmanship against the opposition of party caciques. His move against his mentor thus caught elite members off guard. So did the speed with which he mounted his offensive. There had been no impending signs that Milošević was concocting a power bid. The elite had neither the time to anticipate nor the time to get prepared to the challenge.

Compounding these conjunctural factors was the official ban on organized factions. There were cliques and factions within the Serbian Communist party for sure. But since these could not be formally organized, in the mid-1980s they remained loose conglomerates of allies and affiliates (Vladisavljević 2008, p. 126). The most visible and committed individuals provided the faction with its apparent identity. Beyond this core, the reach of the faction was somewhat indistinct. Actors identified with one another informally. They parted ways in an equally informal fashion. Boundaries were blurry and fluid.<sup>14</sup> In these conditions, assessing the balance of forces seemed particularly challenging. Elite members consequently had a hard time “reading” the situation.

With no instructions about how to vote in the Presidium meeting (Interviews 2, 8, 10) and in the absence of a tottering figure who could help them make their choice, the bulk of elite members were left stranded.<sup>15</sup> Insecurity reflected the inability to assess possible outcomes with some degree of confidence. Not knowing where the majority

<sup>13</sup> Stambolić, *Put u bespuće*, p. 197.

<sup>14</sup> Milošević could rely on the support of some media editors (including the editor of *Politika*), the University Committee, where Milošević’s wife organized a group of allies, and a few affiliates who had openly sided with him regarding his more assertive approach to the Kosovo issue. Beyond this core of explicit supporters, the contours of the pro-Milošević’s camp were open to question. The same observation applies to Pavlović’s and Stambolić’s support within the party leadership.

<sup>15</sup> One speaker observed: “there is nobody who can appear as the referee, outside of us. In earlier situations, this was comrade Tito” (Presidium transcript, 49/5 AZ).

stood, they were at a loss to figure out what their own stance should be.<sup>16</sup> The upshot of the confrontation was thus open to question. Elite members on both sides of the fence concur on this diagnosis.<sup>17</sup>

This point both reflects and explains why wait-and-see was the modal behavior among elite members facing the dilemma of their own collective stance. Being “afraid to take a stance,” Presidium members “were waiting to see in which direction things would go” (Interviewee 3; opposed Milošević). The effort not to commit oneself took various forms. Some tried to remain invisible, “trying to hide until they had something to say” (Interviewee 3). Others chose to speak early on when they were not yet expected to take a stance in order to avoid being explicit about where they stood: “I would speak among the first when it is still unclear how things are going to turn. ... So I spoke first because if you wait too long then you have to take a stand. By then you see where things are heading” (Interviewee 2; endorsed Milošević).

### Institutional setup

Which role if any did the formal constitution of the Presidium as an organ of deliberation and decision-making play in this collective process? Collective organs define an interactional setting that can be of significance from a cognitive and emotional perspective. These interactions furthermore take place in a regulative framework that actors depending on their positions can experience as either constraints or resources. Finally, the size of the collective organ—i.e., the number of participants and decision-makers—is an institutional parameter actors have to reckon with. The following observations address these three institutional factors in turn, paying close attention to their cognitive and emotional impacts.

**Interactional setting** While institutions of collective leadership vary with regard to size and procedure, they share an interactional ecology that has the format of a forum and is therefore conducive to mutual awareness and common knowledge. Mutual awareness is inherent to any interactional setting in which group members are in a position to observe one another (Collins 2001, p. 28). On September 18–19, 1987, the Presidium members were directly observing their peers’ insecurity and their unwillingness to commit themselves. As a result, they became mutually aware of their indecision. “I was not alone in struggling to make up my mind” (Interviewee 1; endorsed Milošević). The forum setting dramatized the confrontation.

**Procedures** Voting at the Presidium was public. It was customary for the President to request that Presidium members declare themselves by raising their hand when being asked “Who is for the motion? Who is against? Who abstains?” Presidium members therefore knew that they would have to take a stance and that this stance would commit their future by making them accountable. Exit was

<sup>16</sup> Interviewee 2 remembers asking a Presidium colleague: “What should we do? ... You and me were not made to pick corn. We have to finish this meeting and then Monday we start picking corn.”

<sup>17</sup> Ivan Stambolić, *Put u bespuće*, p. 189. Minović, *Gojko i Pavle*, p. 310. Ivan Minović at the time was an ally of Milošević.

not an option. That is, even the decision to shun voting or to shun a definite stand would bear the mark of a stance. The voting procedure made the prospect of a commitment phenomenologically salient. One could not escape the prospect of a choice publicly signed.

Far from assuaging their uncertainty, the impossibility of evading a choice and actors' mutual awareness of their indecision undercut their ability to "stand firm." The forum setting of the Presidium exacerbated equivocation by making it plain to all those who were present. As elite members partaking in the meeting became aware of their peers' indecision, they became aware of their own. The interactional setup of the Presidium at once objectified and amplified a coordination dilemma, thereby contributing to the open-ended and indeterminate character of the collective conjuncture. "You wait until you see what the others will say" (Interviewee 10; endorsed Milošević). "[I was] looking around, ... listening to people's talks ... sensing the atmosphere" (Interviewee 2; endorsed Milošević).

As president of the presidium, Milošević could decide the order of the speakers and when to call for a vote. The rules of deliberation were therefore under his purview and available for strategic intervention. At the end of the second day of debates, he called for a vote believing that the momentum was turning in his favor.<sup>18</sup> Yet, even this manipulative capacity cannot disguise the prevailing sense of indeterminacy: eleven Presidium members voted for Milošević's motion requesting that Pavlović be expelled from the Presidium, five rejected it and four abstained.<sup>19</sup> Since, according to party rules, abstentions counted as negative votes, Milošević's motion passed by one vote only (Đukić 1992, p. 157).

Obviously, the call had been close. Milošević's bet could have petered out. "Everything could have been different" (Jović 2008, p. 37). In Stambolić's words: "indeed, at certain moments, even decisive moments, we lacked that little bit extra. Remember that at the Presidium [meeting] we lost by just one vote. One of my friends told me: 'If only that vote had gone the other way, there would have been no eighth [central committee] meeting, no war, none of these unheard-of misfortunes.'"<sup>20</sup>

**Group size** The Presidium of the central committee of the Serbian League of Communists was a small group composed of twenty individuals. In this context, one could have expected Presidium members to read quickly each other's cues and settle on a shared, although tacit, understanding of the outcome. The previous empirical observations belie this theoretical expectation. The dramatization of the stakes – related to the intermingling of collective and individual risks – mutual indecision, and the impossibility of exit trumped the possibility of quickly reaching consensus.

<sup>18</sup> Milošević called for a vote with the following statement: "we should ... agree on the motion that comrade Dragiša Pavlović be removed from his position. I suggest that the Presidium votes. We have the right to suggest that he be discharged from the Presidium of the central committee" (Presidium transcript, 128/3 AZ)

<sup>19</sup> Presidium transcript, 2/4 TDJ.

<sup>20</sup> Stambolić, *Put u bespuće*, p. 252.

## Informal processes

Informal processes took place in the interstices of this formal structure. Presidium members strove to gauge in which direction the wind was blowing in light of their peers' public statements. When asked about the factors that ultimately influenced their decision, interviewees refer to (1) the public stances taken in the course of the meeting by prominent peers whom they perceived to be above the fray (Nikola Ljubičić, Dušan Čkrebić and Petar Gračanin)<sup>21</sup> and (2) Milošević's disclosure of a written statement by members of the Belgrade Committee denouncing a letter by Stambolić in which the latter had thrown his weight behind Pavlović. The disclosure (hereafter "the letter episode") took place on the second day of the meeting as the deliberation was entering its nineteenth hour.

Stambolić's letter of support for Pavlović was neither at odds with party rules nor a revelation properly speaking. Stambolić was a delegate of the Belgrade party organization to the central committee.<sup>22</sup> From a "statutory" and "moral" standpoint, he was entitled to convey his opinion to the Belgrade committee (Djukić 2001, p. 21). His letter of support for Pavlović, which he read at the Presidium meeting after Milošević "disclosed" it, made this point very clear. Furthermore, the motivation of the letter, duly acknowledged by his author, was to state explicitly his views.<sup>23</sup>

Milošević nonetheless depicted Stambolić's letter as if it were reprehensible. Some prominent party members endorsed this interpretation.<sup>24</sup> There is wide agreement among participants, witnesses, and political analysts that this last-minute "disclosure" had a considerable impact. It "tipped the balance" (Interviewee 5; opposed Milošević) and had "the effect of a bomb" (Interviewee 7; endorsed Milošević). After this disclosure, there was "nothing Stambolić could have done to win" (Interviewee 10; endorsed Milošević). Pavlović in his own account describes it as a "climax."<sup>25</sup> For Minović, this was the "key resolution to the plot."<sup>26</sup> Political analysts concur: Đukić (1992) evokes a "complete reversal." (p. 170) and LeBor (2004) views it as the "final act in this brutal piece of political theater" (p. 91). The "timing ... proved decisive" (Sell 2002, p. 48).

Had the last-minute "disclosure" of Stambolić's letter not taken place, had some prominent elite members not lent credence to Milošević's public condemnation, Milošević most likely would not have had the upper hand. Both the fact that participants in the meeting viewed the letter episode as a turning point and the outcome—a one-vote

<sup>21</sup> Nikola Ljubičić is mentioned by interviews 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, Dušan Čkrebić by interviews 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, and Petar Gračanin by interviews 1, 2, 3, 5, 8. Two interviewees also mentioned Dobrivoje Vidić (Interviews 5, 10).

<sup>22</sup> Ivan Stambolić, *Put u bespuće*, pp. 198–199.

<sup>23</sup> "I have been elected to the central committee of the League of Communists of Serbia as a delegate of the Belgrade party organization and since the matter involves the president of the City Committee of the League of Communists of Belgrade, I would like to inform you of my position that I will take at the Presidium of the central committee (Text of the letter reproduced in the transcript of the Presidium meeting, 95/3 SS, September 19, 1987).

<sup>24</sup> Ivan Stambolić, *Put u bespuće*, p. 201; Živorad Minović, *Gojko i Pavle*, p. 312.

<sup>25</sup> "We know that every play, however mediocre, has its 'climax' that provides the plot with its resolution. This time the main actors were replaced by letters, by the will and the imagination of an author unknown to me" (Dragiša Pavlović, *Olako obećana brzina*, p. 149).

<sup>26</sup> Živorad Minović, *Gojko i Pavle*, p. 312.

margin—strongly suggest that the scales were initially not in Milošević’s favor.<sup>27</sup> This probably explains why in the course of the debates he became so insecure, and why Stambolić at first seemed quite confident. After all, Stambolić had exercised institutional power for a lengthier period of time than Milošević at the head of the Serbian party. Many seating on the Presidium and the central committee owed their positions to him.<sup>28</sup>

Given how Presidium members interpreted the impact of the letter episode and the public stances of prominent peers perceived as neutral, there is ground to argue that those who were making their stance conditional on the majority’s tacitly and conjointly opted for Milošević because the odds now seemed on his side. Undergirding this shift in expectations and the process of tacit alignment that went along is a key epistemic property of a forum setting: a public happening in this setting has the epistemic status of common knowledge. Each one knows that everybody else knows (Chwe 2001, pp. 31–36). On September 18–19, 1987, public statements made before the Presidium members were immediately part and parcel of their common knowledge. Similarly, for the attendees, the letter episode was a public event of which they share the knowledge. Their depiction of the letter episode as a turning point underscores the fact that they were mutually aware of its impact.

These observations highlight the prevalence of a coordination dilemma. Actors facing a dilemma have to figure out collectively on which collective stance they will agree. They look for information providing them with hints about their future behavior. Of particular relevance in this regard are the public stances adopted by highly visible individuals who in the past have been eager not to depart from the group’s modal preference. In contrast, individuals who stand up for their own faction offer no relevant information for the resolution of the dilemma (Ermakoff 2008, pp. 205–209). They would only if their public stance signaled an unexpected shift in political allegiance.

## Alignments

### Party apparatus

Let us now examine which impact, if any, the outcome of the Presidium meeting had on subsequent political developments. The meeting that took place a few days later within the setting of another institution of collective leadership—the party’s central committee—is informative in this regard. On September 23–24, 1987, at the “eighth session of the central committee,” 159 members of the central committee convened upon Milošević’s request to discuss, and confirm, the motion dismissing Pavlović from the Presidium. Thus, in contrast to the Presidium meeting, the central committee meeting was a large-

<sup>27</sup> Interviewees 3 and 5, who both opposed Milošević, make this diagnosis. For interviewee 3, Stambolić’s political position was stronger than Milošević’s before the confrontation. Interviewee 5 indicates a shift in allegiance among cadres who “were actually Stambolić’s people.”

<sup>28</sup> The repercussion of the letter episode on the dynamic of the meeting is consistent with the theory of public statements’ impact in conjunctures of coordination dilemma and mutual uncertainty (Ermakoff 2008, chapter 6). Actors facing a coordination dimension have a strategic incentive to read the public statements of their prominent peers as “revealing” the group stance when these prominent peers are commonly perceived as “mainstream” in terms of political orientations. Public statements in these conditions operate as a device for tacit alignment.

group process. It was also a more socially diverse group. As interviewee 2 explains, the Presidium was mainly composed of members of the Belgrade elite: “the circle of tram no. 2,” that is, the tram that circles around the center of Belgrade. The central committee, on the other hand, involved a higher proportion of workers, farmers and delegates from the provinces (Interviewees 1, 2, 3).

As for the previous analysis, the following inquiry documents behaviors and expectations by drawing on the transcript of the central committee meeting (hereafter “eighth session”) and on actors’ accounts and testimonies, including the information provided by interviewees. Similarly, the perspective is sequential. Our focus is, first, on the period immediately preceding the event. We then consider statements, behaviors, and beliefs at the time of the meeting before examining its outcome.

The vote of the Presidium molded expectations of what would happen at the eighth session of the central committee. Thus, interviewee 2 states that elite members “adjusted” their beliefs to the verdict delivered by the Presidium. The pervasive expectation was that the central committee would align with the presidium decision (Interviewees 1, 2, 3). For working class and provincial delegates, aligning with the Presidium decision was a matter of party “discipline” (Interviewees 1, 8, 9). Furthermore, given the party’s organizational hierarchy—the presidium had hierarchical precedence over the central committee—it would have been very unusual for the central committee to reverse the decision of the party presidium (Interviewees 1, 2, 8). “I don’t know if ... there had ever been a case when the central committee voted against its own Presidium” (Interviewee 1). That is why party elite members expected the Presidium vote to shape decisively the stance of the central committee even though it had been a close call. “If there were any dilemmas at the central committee then the previous decision at the Presidium resolved all doubt. ... I don’t think there were many who [at the central committee meeting] changed their mind” (Interviewee 1).<sup>29</sup>

Yet, even though the expectation that Milošević would have the upper hand was pervasive, participants could not rule out the possibility of an outcome at odds with their expectation. Accordingly, some committee central members had prepared two speeches depending on which camp would prevail (Interviewees 5, 6). “The [claim] that some members of the central committee came with two speeches in their pockets is true.... People went in and out. They were asking how various speakers fared and who was winning.... They swam from one side to the other several times in the course of a day.”<sup>30</sup> “You must realize that 90 % of these people’s careers and futures depended on the outcome of the meeting” (Ljubinka Trgovčević, member of the central committee in 1987 reported in Silber and Little 1997, p. 46).<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> “The presidium meeting was more important than the eighth session, because [at the Presidium meeting] the battle was still undecided” (Svetislav Stojakov, “Prilog proučavanju ‘antibirokratske revolucije’ i ‘dogadanja naroda,’” p. 128).

<sup>30</sup> Pavić, *Olako shvaćena silina*, p. 24. Interviewee 3 indicates that central committee members were constantly leaving the auditorium in order to smoke outside.

<sup>31</sup> Stambolić concurs with this assessment: the eighth central committee was no different from the Presidium meeting with regard to the eagerness to align with the majority (Ivan Stambolić, *Put u bespuće*, p. 201).

**Table 2** Substantive statements made at the eighth central committee meeting, Belgrade, September 23–24, 1987 ( $N=88$ ): speakers' affiliations and statement contents

	Statements		Total
	Committed	Uncommitted	
Speaker affiliated with either Stambolić or Milošević	14	1	15
Speaker unaffiliated	45	28	73
Total	59	29	88

Chi-square = 5.656  $p = 0.017$

To the surprise of most attendees, some speakers in the first hours of the meeting criticized the way in which Pavlović was being castigated and raised the specter of an authoritarian party machine.<sup>32</sup> It seems that these critical stances caught Milošević and his lieutenants off guard. As party chairman, Milošević chaired the session. He had therefore the capacity to postpone the interventions of those who might express dissent with the motion he was advocating. Several interviewees (3, 5, 6) mention that he did try to manipulate the order of those slated to speak so that his supporters would speak first and, in so doing, would set the tone.

The few statements of dissent expressed in the first hours of the meeting were not enough to disrupt a dynamic that participants expected to benefit the party chairman. After a few hours of debate, one could indeed gauge the “constellation of forces” (*raspored snaga*) (interviewee 7): Milošević was expected to have the upper hand (interviewees 3, 5, 7). The two following exchanges during session breaks are telling: “‘Comrade, how does our cause stand?’—‘It stands shakily. We’ll see’” (exchange reported by interviewee 5, who opposed Milošević). ‘What should I do when I drank so much whiskey with both of them?’—‘Why vote for Ivan when he is losing?’” (exchange reported by interviewee 7, who endorsed Milošević). Revealingly, individuals identified as supporters or affiliates of Stambolić soon found themselves shunned away in informal interactions (Interviewee 4; opposed Milošević).

Given the tacit understanding that Milošević would win the day, it is not surprising to observe that “unaffiliated” speakers were less prone to take refuge in ambiguous or irrelevant statements than at the Presidium meeting (see Table 2).<sup>33</sup> At the end of the second day of debates, Milošević called for the vote with the following statement: “I propose that the central committee vote on the

<sup>32</sup> Vasa Milinčević: “the real topic of today’s conversation should be the method and style of work of the Presidium and its president [Milošević];” Ljubinka Trgovčević: “does the Presidium believe that ... instead of our current party it wants an authoritarian party?” (transcript of the eighth central committee reproduced in Slaviša Lekić and Zoran Pavić (eds.), 2007. *VIII Sednica CK SK Srbije*, p. 184, p. 192).

<sup>33</sup> Minović offers a consonant assessment: there was “more maneuvering with endless rhetorical tirades” at the Presidium meeting than at the central committee meeting (Minović, *Gojko i Pavle*, p. 310).

motion of the Presidium of the central committee. The motion of the Presidium states: comrade Pavlović should be discharged from the Presidium of the central committee of the League of Communists of Serbia. Can we vote?”<sup>34</sup> The voting procedure at the central committee was similar to the procedure at the Presidium: a vote by hand. The majority this time was overwhelming: among the 159 central committee members who cast their ballot on September 24, 1987, only eight voted against and eighteen abstained. Central committee members had decided to align *en masse* with the Presidium outcome.

## State apparatus

Consistent with the claim that Milošević and his lieutenants expected to prevail and to elicit a wide-scale shift in allegiance was their decision to give the event full publicity by having the debates broadcast. This was unprecedented. For two days, “people throughout Serbia were glued to their TV screens, watching the showdown” (Silber and Little 1997, p. 45). “The eighth session of the Serbian central committee ... was one of the most electrifying pieces of political theatre ever witnessed—and everyone realized that something momentous has happened.”<sup>35</sup> In this respect, the event can be described as a “breaking point” (*dogadaj koji lomi*) (interviewee 1).

In the wake of the eighth central committee meeting, party members and state agents identified as supporters of Stambolić “suddenly ceased to exist in the public sphere” (interviewee 3). For elite members it was clear that Stambolić could not survive a negative vote: “it was clear that after the session [of the central committee] Stambolić was politically dead” (interviewee 1; endorsed Milošević). “People understood that this was the end of Stambolić” (interviewee 3, opposed Milošević). The event initiated a large-scale shift of allegiance across party and state organizations. “[Milošević’s] primacy on the political scene was definitively confirmed at this meeting.”<sup>36</sup> Political purges began soon afterwards. “Many politicians who until then had been at the head of Serbia were thrown into the background.”<sup>37</sup> Milošević appointed affiliates to key positions.<sup>38</sup> Pavlović and Stambolić resigned and left politics altogether in December 1987 after a media campaign targeted them (Đukić 2007, pp. 46–47).

## Delegitimization

The fall of Stambolić is a case of delegitimization: Stambolić lost the capacity to elicit the belief among elite party members that he was entitled to request their allegiance. Conversely, Milošević acting as his challenger acquired this

<sup>34</sup> Transcript of the eighth central committee reproduced in Slaviša Lekić and Zoran Pavić (eds.), 2007. *VIII Sednica CK SK Srbije*, p. 259.

<sup>35</sup> Statement by Misha Glenny, former BBC Central Europe correspondent: Saturday, 16 February 2002, BBC News for the opening of Milošević’s trial in The Hague.

<sup>36</sup> Borisav Jović, at the time a very close associate of Milošević (Jović, *Knjiga o Miloševiću*, p. 31).

<sup>37</sup> Jović, *Knjiga o Miloševiću*, p. 31.

<sup>38</sup> Pavić, *Olako shvaćena silina*, p. 25

capacity. His rise went along a process of legitimization. A close focus on the dynamic of interactions that took place on this occasion brings several observations into relief. First, mutual uncertainty in a situation of high contention creates the possibility of a shift in allegiance. As group members collectively undergo doubt and indecision about who should have the right to command their obedience, they by the same token suspend any “transfer of control” to the incumbent (Coleman 1990, p. 468). To state it otherwise: at this juncture, the incumbent’s legitimacy becomes an open question.

Second, a close interactional focus highlights the performative character of delegitimization. For the challenger, the crux of the matter lies in demonstrating disaffection from the incumbent. Any indication that group members no longer assume that an incumbent is entitled to demand their allegiance contributes to the latter’s loss of legitimacy (delegitimation). That is why the challenger takes pain to orchestrate the publicity of the challenge. Publicity makes disaffection from the incumbent common knowledge (Adut 2018, p. 46).<sup>39</sup>

Third, this empirical analysis corroborates an epistemic and group-related understanding of legitimacy in contradistinction with conceptions that make institutional capacity its *ultima ratio* (Schmitt 1932, p. 6; Stinchcombe 1968, p. 162).<sup>40</sup> An incumbent’s legitimacy is a matter of shared beliefs and attitudes (Berger et al. 1998, p. 380; Johnson et al. 2006, p. 57), “a generalized perception or assumption” (Suchman 1995, p. 574). Individuals believe that an incumbent is entitled to request their obedience insofar as they assume that their reference group as a whole endorses this transfer of control. The scope and intensity of this assumption provide the gradient of the incumbent’s legitimacy. Conversely, any suspicion that disaffection is on its way undercuts the belief that the incumbent has the right to demand obedience. Both legitimation and delegitimation ultimately rest on an assumption of belief homology among group members. By way of consequence, the notion of legitimacy only makes sense by reference to the group that partakes in this epistemic process.

## Conclusion

An in-depth account of intra-elite contention in Serbia after the death of Tito underscores how institutions of collective leadership affect the dynamic of power struggles in oligarchic power configurations. First, collective organs channel intra-elite contention by defining the arenas in which elite members expect contention to take place (channeling effect). Second, collective organs crystallize coordination dilemmas in

<sup>39</sup> For the sake of clarity, a distinction should be drawn between “delegitimization” (i.e., the willful attempt to undermine an incumbent’s claim to legitimacy) and “delegitimation” (i.e., the loss of legitimacy). Delegitimization describes the strategy pursued by a challenger vis-à-vis an incumbent. Delegitimation is the end-result of this strategy regarding the incumbent’s status. The delegitimation of political and business leaders can result from various processes: seemingly intractable policy challenges (Linz 1978, pp. 53–55), the systematic discrepancy between words and actions (Przeworski 1991, pp. 2–3), fraudulent institutional practices (Goodwin 2001, p. 178), external normative challenges (Yaziji 2005, pp. 89–91), and internal challenges (this article). That is, delegitimization is only one *opus operandi* of delegitimation.

<sup>40</sup> “A power is legitimate to the degree that, by virtue of the doctrines and norms by which it is justified, the power-older can call upon sufficient other centers of power, as reserves in the case of need, to make his power effective” (Stinchcombe 1968, p. 162).

moments of confrontation. The collective conjuncture then becomes open-ended and the outcome anything but pre-determined. Incidents, accidents, and individual lapses can tip the collective dynamics (indeterminacy effect). The third effect describes the opposite process: collective alignment. The verdicts delivered by institutions of collective leadership shape elite members' expectations about their own future allegiances.

Both the channeling and the alignment effects are congruent with the claims set forth in the literature: institutions of collective leadership decrease the likelihood of coup and violence as means of conflict management and political competition (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007, p. 1292; Gandhi 2008, pp. 99, 118; Svolik 2012, chapter 4). By providing arenas for contention, these organs channel power bids within a procedural universe. Similarly, by inducing large-scale alignments within and across party and state organizations, these organs undercut incentives for violent challenges on the part of the losers.

Intra-elite conflicts in Serbia in the 1980s furthermore draw attention to the fact that in oligarchic power configurations institutions of collective leadership also create opportunities for challenges from within. The confrontations enacted by these challenges are bound to be deeply unsettling for elite members if no one calls the shots and the risks attached to making the wrong choice are substantial. Conversely, leaders anointed by collective organs, such as Milošević in the fall of 1987, acquire the capacity to reshuffle power arrangements to their benefit by taking advantage of widely shared expectations of collective alignment.<sup>41</sup> The point about shared expectations of consent has broad significance for the constitution of power in conjunctures of regime transitions (Ermakoff 2008, pp. 331–332).

From a sequential perspective thus, institutions of collective leadership in oligarchic power configurations are factors of indeterminacy in moments of intra-elite confrontations and factors of determinacy with regard to transition processes. Underlying these two opposite effects is the same type of epistemic and interactive processes (Ermakoff 2010, pp. 544–548). Formal institutions are factors of indeterminacy insofar as they make the conditional character of the choice tangible for those involved in the collective process. They are factors of determinacy insofar as, through the political verdicts they deliver, they shape the dynamics of convergent expectations. In this sense they can be said to be “double-edged” (Brownlee 2007, p. 83).

Organs of collective leadership thus shape elite circulation in authoritarian settings through their impact on (1) the “repertoires of strategies” from which contenders “can choose their courses of action,” and (2) on “the mappings between outcomes and the selected strategies” (Przeworski 1988, pp. 66–67). While these institutions stabilize authoritarian regimes by increasing the likelihood that contenders for power will submit their bid to formal rules of decision-making, they also create the conditions for more power concentration resulting from large-scale shifts in allegiance. We cannot comprehend the trajectories of authoritarian regimes, that is, the ways in which their power structures evolve, without paying attention to how organs of collective leadership enhance would-be autocrats' ability to expand their power in a monopolistic fashion.

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<sup>41</sup> On the relationship between elite circulation and policy changes, see Bunce (1981, pp. 161–162).

## Appendix 1: Interviews

One of the authors conducted ten semi-structured interviews with members of the central committee: seven interviewees attended both the Presidium and the central committee meetings, three attended the central committee meeting only. We asked interviewees to describe the political context, their understanding of the stakes, their perception of the Presidium and the central committee meetings, their thinking and state of mind as the meeting proceeded, and the factors that influenced their voting decision. No question referred to political developments subsequent to Milošević's takeover. Six interviewees (1, 2, 7, 8, 9, 10) took a stance against Pavlović (i.e., for Milošević's motion) while four opposed Milošević (Interviewees 3, 4, 5, 6). Interviews were recorded, except in three cases when the interviewees did not provide consent. For these three interviews, the author conducting the interview took notes. All interviews took place in November and December of 2012. Since several interviewees asked to remain anonymous, we have decided to preserve the anonymity of all.

## Appendix 2: Coding of statements

The Presidium meeting took place over two days: the transcript of the meeting reports 172 statements: 76 on the first day and 96 on the second day. By "statement," we mean a verbal occurrence by a speaker identifiable by his or her name. Among these 172 statements, 62 were by the three main protagonists (Pavlović, Stambolić, and Milošević): 26 on the first day, 36 on the second day. Not all the 110 remaining statements were substantive. Many ( $n = 52$ ) were procedural or too short to stand as substantive statements that participants would have interpreted as such. Among the 58 substantive statements delivered at the meeting, we collapsed two contiguous ones that amounted to the expression of the same stance. The sequence we are considering thus comprises 57 substantive statements: 29 on the first day and 28 on the second day. The same procedure yielded 88 "substantive" statements (not delivered by the main protagonists) at the eighth central committee meeting.

We coded substantive statements by examining whether they conveyed a definite stance or not ("committed" versus "uncommitted" statements) and, in the case of committed statements, whether these signaled support for Pavlović or for Milošević. Statements signaling support for Pavlović took various forms: some praised his deeds; others criticized Milošević; still others called into question the trial to which he was being subjected. For instance: "I repeat, for me, Pavlović [is] a man who showed quite a lot of courage in saying a few things against Serbian nationalism. It is not easy today, especially publicly, to win popularity if you talk about Serbian nationalism, even if you only confront it with words" (Presidium transcript, 83/6 BM).

Statements endorsing Milošević depicted Pavlović as unfit for his position or took issue with the latter's public criticism of the media and, implicitly, of Milošević. For instance: "I think comrade Milošević has the right to call for work speed, and efficiency in solving problems in general and in solving problems connected to the implementation of decisions made by our League of Communists in Kosovo. I think that from this perspective comrade Pavlović made a mistake or that his formulation was unfortunate" (Presidium transcript, 11/1 MB).

Uncommitted statements typically shunned the meeting agenda, rambled on various topics and, in so doing, made it impossible to figure out where the speaker stood regarding Milošević's request that Pavlović be sanctioned. For instance: "One may have thought that anything was possible, but few among us could have imagined that we would be in a situation leading us to talk like this, especially in a situation as difficult as the one we have now. Along with inflation, economic losses, low wages, a drop in production, the slow resolution of problems in Kosovo, I have to repeat that some elements complicate our current situation" (Presidium transcript, 9/4 AZ).

### Appendix 3: Coding of affiliations

As Đukić (1992, p. 158) remarks, members of Serbian elite circles in the 1980s had a clear sense of who was politically involved with whom. We assessed whether participants in the Presidium and the central committee meetings were commonly viewed as affiliated with either Milošević or Stambolić in light of the information provided by interviewees, scholarly accounts (Jović 2003; 2007; Magaš 1993; Vladislavljević 2008), politicians' memoirs (Dušan Čkrebić, Borisav Jović, Živorad Minović, Dragiša Pavlović, Ivan Stambolić), as well as insiders' and journalists' reports (Đukić 1992, 2007; Djukić 2001; LeBor 2004; Pavić 2007; Sell 2002; Silber and Little 1997). For instance, Đukić (1992) characterizes Borisav Jović as follows: "In Jović, Milošević had his most capable associate, a supporter of his view of politics characterized by hostility and conspicuous self-confidence" (p. 164).

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