

Cringe as a Public Evaluative Affect: Negotiating Authority–Public Relationships in the Platform Society

Snežana Bajčeta

 0009-0006-6876-0825

University of Belgrade, Faculty of Political Science

Aleksandra Krstić

 0000-0003-0090-9911

University of Belgrade, Faculty of Political Science

Abstract: This article examines how cringe operates as a low-intensity public evaluative affect through which political authority is publicly negotiated within the platform society. Drawing on affect theory, platform society theory, and a topological understanding of political power, it conceptualises cringe as a collectively organised affect through which authority–public relationships become publicly recognised and evaluated. Empirically, the article analyses platform communication surrounding the Serbian student protest movement between December 2024 and December 2025 through an interpretive qualitative analysis of content on Instagram and X. The analysis focuses on three performative episodes – Ćacilend, Barricades, and Blockades – that reveal a dominant authority–public relationship, its public contestation, and an alternative configuration grounded in collective participation. The findings show that cringe registers moments of topological misalignment in which dominant authority–public relationships lose cultural credibility while alternative configurations of authority–public relationships become publicly recognisable.

Keywords: cringe; public affect; platform society; authority–public relationships; Serbian student protests

INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2024, Serbia was shaken by the collapse of the canopy at the Novi Sad railway station, which resulted in the deaths of sixteen people (Vasović, 2024; BBC, 2025). Rather than addressing citizens' demands for a transparent investigation and political accountability, the government responded repressively

(Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade, 2024). This triggered a large wave of student-led protests, including faculty blockades across all public and most private universities, the suspension of classes, and the cancellation of exam periods (Radovanović, 2025). As the mobilisation expanded, it increasingly extended beyond universities through local initiatives, citizens' assemblies (zborovi), and other forms of collective self-organisation (Cvejić, 2025). Alongside street protests and confrontations, political contestation also intensified on platforms, where students and citizens continuously documented, interpreted, circulated, evaluated, and challenged political authority (Janković, 2025). In this context, the protests unfolded within the platform society, where platforms are no longer merely communication technologies but part of the social infrastructure through which political life is organized (Van Dijck et al., 2018).

At the same time, the protests unfolded within a broader context of competitive authoritarianism, characterized by the systematic weakening of public accountability mechanisms in Serbia over the past decade (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Bieber, 2018; Lončar & Spasojević, 2024). The weakening of opposition parties, independent media, civil society, and academia has been accompanied by the parallel construction of regime-aligned substitutes, including tabloid media, government-organised NGOs and low-quality private universities, producing a simulation of political pluralism without meaningful contestation (Freedom House, 2024). In such an environment, politics is experienced less as a space of deliberation and more as a field of public performances to be watched, evaluated, and circulated. As Krstić (2022) observes, Vučić's Instagram profile is „an intimate self-portrait of a powerful statesman and a compassionate leader loved by the people” (p. 27).

The student protest framed itself as non-ideological and anti-partisan, yet in practice articulated an ambivalent value position, revealing a hybrid political orientation shaped more by pragmatic coalition-building than by ideological coherence (Jerkov et al., 2025).

The overall political constellation in Serbia has been described as „anti-political”, marked by deep distrust in institutions, the interplay between populism and technocratic depoliticization, and the erosion of political reasoning (Spasojević, 2024). In a setting where politics has been emptied of meaning, whether in the name of „anti-elitism” or „expertise”, emotions are no longer politically peripheral. They become constitutive of how politics is experienced, publicly evaluated, and ultimately negotiated, functioning as central drivers of political judgment and action in a sharply divided society (Cvetkovich, 2012; Ahmed, 2004, 2014; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Jović, 2019; Marcus et al., 2020).

This growing importance of affect in contemporary politics has attracted significant scholarly attention over the past two decades, particularly in the context of rising populism, democratic backsliding, and new digital technologies

(Demertzis, 2006; Ahmed, 2004, 2010, 2014; Serrano-Puche, 2015; Papacharissi, 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019; Chen et al., 2025). The affective turn has reconceptualized emotions and affects as constitutive of social and political life (Clough & Halley, 2007; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Cvetkovich, 2012; Demertzis, 2013; Nussbaum, 2013; Ahmed, 2014). Within this broader discussion, growing attention has also been devoted to low-intensity affects and, more recently, to cringe across popular culture, digital communication, and everyday mediated practices (Ngai, 2005; Duncan, 2017; Schwanebeck, 2021). Despite this growing body of scholarship, the analytical potential of affects and cringe for understanding how political authority is publicly evaluated and negotiated remains largely unexplored.

To address this gap, the article develops an integrated conceptual framework organized around three interconnected dimensions. First, it conceptualizes cringe as a low-intensity public affect, establishing its political relevance beyond individual psychological experience. Second, it examines how cringe becomes collective within the platform society by explaining how platform infrastructures, networked publics, and platform affordances transform individual affective responses into shared forms of public evaluation that contribute to the negotiation of political authority. Third, it examines what cringe registers by conceptualizing the performative and spatial organization of the relationship between authority and publics through a topological understanding of political space. Together, these three dimensions provide the theoretical foundation for the empirical analysis that follows.

Building on this framework, the article examines how cringe operates in the public negotiation of political authority within the empirical setting of the Serbian student protest movement. The central research question is: How does cringe operate in the public negotiation of political authority in the platform society? The article positions cringe as an analytical lens for examining how authority–public relationships are publicly evaluated under conditions of platform communication and how the circulation of these evaluations contributes to the public negotiation of political authority.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Placing affective evaluation at the center of the analysis of cringe, this article conceptualizes cringe as a public evaluative affect, explains how it becomes collectively organized through circulation in the platform society, and conceptualizes authority–public relationships as the object of those evaluations.

CRINGE AS A PUBLIC AFFECT

The affective turn has fundamentally reshaped understandings of political life by challenging the traditional liberal assumption that emotions are irrational, private, and therefore politically irrelevant. Instead, it foregrounds affects as constitutive of political identities, collective life, and political boundaries, positioning them as fundamental to political life (Clough & Halley, 2007; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Cvetkovich, 2012; Demertzis, 2013; Nussbaum, 2013; Ahmed, 2014).

According to Ahmed (2014), affects do not reside within subjects or objects but circulate between them, shaping social and political relationships. They „stick” to bodies, signs, and words, creating „affective economies” that organize belonging and exclusion and, politically, alignments and divisions. As performative forces, „emotions are not ,in’ either the individual or the social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 10). Affects do not simply express existing political divisions, but actively participate in their production by aligning subjects, delineating communities, strengthening distinctions between „us” and „them”, and shaping relationships between political authority and publics.

Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen (2000) argue that emotions are central motivators of political decision-making and action rather than merely secondary to rational choice. While political psychology has traditionally focused on high-intensity emotions such as fear, anger, or hope because of their mobilizing effects, critical affect theory has drawn attention to a different affective register. Ngai’s (2005) concept of „ugly feelings” captures low-intensity, non-cathartic affects, such as envy, anxiety, or „stuplimity”, that do not culminate in decisive action but instead sustain ambivalence, tension, and unresolved engagement. These low-intensity affects illuminate how political relations, legitimacy, and authority become publicly experienced and evaluated in everyday life.

In everyday usage, cringe refers to a feeling of awkwardness or second-hand embarrassment experienced either directly or through identification with others. As Dahl (2018) explains, cringe typically arises from a perceived misalignment between self-presentation and shared social norms, often when an individual appears to overestimate their credibility, authenticity, or authority. It is experienced as an acute moment of awkward self-recognition. Cringe is characterized less by emotional intensity than by sustained discomfort and the perception that a person, performance, or claim to authority has failed to meet culturally shared expectations.

Psychologically, cringe has primarily been explained through mechanisms of embarrassment or empathy. It has been linked to the „spotlight effect”, or the tendency to overestimate how much others notice one’s behavior (Gilovich et al., 2000), as well as to „vicarious embarrassment”, an empathic response elicited by witnessing another person’s socially inappropriate behavior (Krach et al.,

2011). These perspectives explain how cringe is experienced as an individual affective response, but offer a more limited account of how it becomes publicly shared, collectively sustained, and politically meaningful.

Building on Ahmed's relational understanding of affect, this article approaches cringe not simply as something that is felt, but as a circulating public evaluative affect. Psychological accounts explain the individual experience of cringe, while critical affect theory situates it within the broader spectrum of low-intensity affects. From this perspective, individual affective evaluations become collectively organized through circulation. In this article, cringe is conceptualized as a low-intensity public evaluative affect through which individual affective evaluations become collectively organized and politically meaningful.

PLATFORM SOCIETY AND THE CIRCULATION OF CRINGE

If cringe is conceptualized as a circulating public evaluative affect, the next question concerns the conditions under which such evaluations become collective. Rather than treating digital communication as a separate sphere, this article situates the circulation of cringe within the broader framework of the platform society (Van Dijck et al., 2018). In the platform society, platforms no longer merely facilitate communication but have become part of the social infrastructure through which political, cultural, and everyday life are organized. Social and political relations increasingly unfold through platforms, while platform logics simultaneously shape how they are produced, circulated, and publicly recognized. Consequently, political performances do not simply acquire digital representations after they occur. They are increasingly constituted through the continuous circulation between offline political action and platform mechanisms.

Within this environment, networked publics actively produce, circulate, and evaluate political meanings through continuous interaction (Ito, 2008; Varnelis, 2008). Yet these interactions are not organized independently of platform infrastructures. Platform affordances – including persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability – allow political performances to be archived, reproduced, amplified, and repeatedly reinserted into new communicative contexts (boyd, 2010). Platforms further privilege short, visual, and easily reproducible formats such as memes, screenshots, edited clips, and looping fragments, thereby facilitating the extraction of particular moments from broader political performances and their recombination into highly shareable communicative units (Highfield, 2016; Milner, 2016; Gillespie, 2014; Bucher, 2018).

As political performances circulate in platform society, they become detached from their immediate contexts and stabilized as recognizable objects of public evaluation. Individual gestures, images, encounters, and performances are repeatedly encountered, reinterpreted, parodied, visually compressed, and

recontextualized, allowing evaluative patterns to emerge across different communicative situations. In Ahmed's (2014) terms, cringe becomes collective not because individuals experience identical emotions simultaneously, but because repeated circulation enables affective evaluations to accumulate, resonate, and become publicly recognizable. Circulation across platforms does not simply amplify individual emotional responses but constitutes the process through which affective evaluations become collectively organized.

This dynamic is particularly pronounced among digitally socialized actors, whose political perception is shaped less by stable ideological attachments than by culturally embedded evaluative repertoires developed through everyday platform practices (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011; Papacharissi, 2015; boyd, 2014; Loader et al., 2014). Political authority is increasingly encountered through communicative performances, visual styles, and symbolic self-presentation, making evaluations of authenticity, appropriateness, and cultural adequacy especially salient (Ngai, 2005; Milner, 2016).

Finally, the circulation of cringe is reinforced by broader anti-political conditions in which political language increasingly appears hollow or performative, while formal channels of deliberation lose credibility (Rosanvallon, 2008; Spasojević, 2024). Political judgment shifts from ideological programs towards questions of authenticity, legitimacy, and cultural adequacy (Moffitt, 2016; Cossarini & Vallespín, 2019). This tendency is further intensified by the interplay between populist performativity and technocratic depoliticization, which saturate the public sphere with visibility while simultaneously eroding deliberative political discussion (Bickerton & Accetti, 2021). Under these conditions, platform circulation organizes not only the visibility of political performances but also their collective affective evaluation, directing public attention towards the ways political authority appears, positions itself, and relates to publics.

Taken together, these conditions explain how cringe moves beyond an individual emotional response to become a collectively organized public evaluative affect. The platform society provides the social and infrastructural conditions through which political performances circulate. Platform affordances shape the forms through which they are fragmented, repeated, and recontextualized. Repeated circulation enables individual affective evaluations to become collectively recognizable. Anti-political conditions orient those evaluations towards the authenticity and legitimacy of authority–public relationships rather than ideological disagreement. These dynamics provide the conditions under which political authority becomes publicly negotiated through circulating affective evaluations.

AUTHORITY–PUBLIC RELATIONSHIPS AS THE OBJECT OF CRINGE

As a low-intensity public evaluative affect, cringe relates to the way political authority appears in public. In addition to its institutional position, political authority is encountered through its public performances that shape how it appears, claims legitimacy, and relates to publics. Although cringe is elicited by these performances, understanding what it evaluates requires moving beyond the performances themselves to the relational and spatial organization they enact.

The performance of political authority is never independent of space (Wihstutz, 2015). Political space is more than physical territory or merely the setting for political performances. It refers to the organization of political relations: how authority is positioned in relation to publics, how proximity and distance are established, and how patterns of belonging and exclusion become publicly visible. Space constitutes one of the conditions through which authority–public relationships become publicly organized by defining where authority appears to be „in place” or „out of place”.

With regard to space, authority–public relationships are primarily organized through political boundaries. Instead of fixed territorial divisions, boundaries are conceptualized as processes that actively produce social and political forms (Abbott, 1995). They determine how authority and publics are positioned in relation to one another, how their relationship becomes publicly legible, and under what conditions it becomes open to collective evaluation. Political boundaries are simultaneously relational and normative. While Abbott’s relational perspective focuses on how these relationships are organized, symbolic boundaries explain why particular forms of organization appear legitimate, appropriate, or culturally convincing. Lamont and Molnár (2002) show that symbolic boundaries organize moral evaluations and distinctions of legitimacy, belonging, and appropriateness by relying on culturally available criteria rather than formal institutional rules. As they note, boundaries draw upon existing cultural resources and social contexts that shape who encounters whom and under what conditions. In addition to their organization, authority–public relationships are evaluated according to whether they correspond to culturally shared expectations of legitimacy and appropriateness.

In contemporary politics, performative, spatial, relational, and normative dimensions rarely operate independently. Together, they configure particular authority–public relationships. A topological perspective brings these dimensions together by conceptualizing them as a single configuration of these relations. Originally developed in mathematics, topology has been adopted in the social sciences to move beyond territorial understandings of political space by conceptualizing power through configurations of relations, circulations, and forms of presence operating simultaneously across multiple sites (Lury, Parisi, & Terranova, 2012; Massey, 2005; Jessop, Brenner & Jones, 2008; Allen, 2016).

Allen (2016) emphasizes that political power frequently operates through carefully staged relations of presence and reach rather than direct territorial control, while Massey (2005) understands space as relational and processual, continuously produced through interactions.

Within this perspective, cringe is conceptualized as an affective indicator of topological misalignment. It does not evaluate political content as such, but whether a particular configuration holds culturally. Political performances become the immediate occasions for affective evaluation because they render configurations of authority–public relationships publicly visible. Cringe emerges when these configurations are perceived as excessive, artificial, outdated, or discordant with shared expectations of legitimacy and appropriateness. Political authority may remain institutionally intact while the configuration through which it relates to publics no longer appears culturally convincing or politically intelligible. Cringe registers moments in which relationships between authority and public no longer appear to be „in place”.

Finally, cringe neither produces nor redraws political boundaries. However, it signals moments when those boundaries become publicly visible because they no longer hold smoothly. As a low-intensity public affect, it neither determines political mobilization. Instead, it collectively evaluates configurations of authority–public relationships through the performances in which they become public. Through circulation across platforms, these evaluations become collectively recognized and contribute to the public negotiation of political authority. The following analysis applies this perspective to three performative episodes through which different configurations became objects of collective affective evaluation.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative research design to examine how cringe operates in the public negotiation of political authority within platform society. The theoretical framework is operationalized through an integrated analytical framework linking public affect, platform circulation, and topological configurations of authority–public relationships. These three dimensions perform different methodological functions: the first two guided the selection of empirical material, while the third informed its interpretation.

The empirical material is drawn from platform communication surrounding the Serbian student protest movement following the collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy in November 2024. The analysis covers Instagram and X between December 2024 and December 2025, which served as the principal public communication platforms of the protest movement. Throughout this period, communication surrounding the protests was continuously monitored. Given the

dynamic character of protest communication, the monitoring remained responsive to the evolving communication environment, including newly emerging accounts, informal initiatives, and other digitally native forms of mobilization. At any given time, around 100 student and local plenum accounts per platform were active and prominent within the monitored communication, although the composition of this group changed over the research period.

Continuous monitoring was not intended to produce an exhaustive corpus of all published content. The broader monitored material cannot be expressed as a fixed number of posts. It constituted a dynamic field of observation from which the analytical material was purposively selected. Selection was guided by the first two dimensions of the conceptual framework: public affect provided the substantive criterion, while platform circulation provided the criterion of sustained relevance.

The first selection criterion concerned moments in which political performances became the object of intensified public evaluation associated with cringe. The analysis identified recurrent evaluative repertoires through which performances were publicly interpreted as awkward, embarrassing, artificial, inauthentic, culturally inappropriate, or “out of place”. These evaluations were treated as affective indicators of perceived misalignment, signaling moments in which the configurations of authority–public relationships rendered visible through political performances no longer appeared to hold culturally. The second selection criterion concerned the sustained circulation of these evaluations through repetition, visual reinterpretation, parody, memes, recontextualization, and other forms of platform engagement. Applying these complementary criteria resulted in the selection of three performative episodes for analysis: *Ćacilend*, *Barricades*, and *Blockades*.

The individual social media post constituted the primary unit of observation. Posts were understood as content pieces through which political authority was publicly represented and evaluated. They were examined as components of performative episodes, which constituted the analytical units of the study. For each episode, the corpus was assembled through the purposive selection of posts documenting, circulating, interpreting, and publicly evaluating the respective political performances. Sporadic or isolated evaluations without sustained circulation, as well as posts unrelated to the selected episodes, were excluded from the analytical corpus.

The analysis proceeded in two stages. The first consisted of the analytical description of each performative episode. Description focused on four inter-related dimensions of authority–public relationships: the performative, examining how political authority was publicly enacted through communicative repertoires and symbolic practices; the spatial, examining the organisation of space, boundaries, and visibility; the relational, examining how relationships

between authority and publics were organised through patterns of positioning, proximity, and distance; and the normative, examining claims to legitimacy and appropriateness.

The second stage interpreted the interaction of these dimensions as specific topological configurations of authority–public relationships. Their combined interpretation made it possible to identify how political authority was publicly organized within each episode. These configurations were then interpreted in relation to the collective affective evaluations through which they became publicly legible, allowing the analysis to explain how cringe registered moments of topological misalignment.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS: THREE PERFORMATIVE EPISODES

The empirical findings are structured around three performative episodes identified through the analytical corpus: Ćacilend, Barricades, and Blockades. They illustrate different ways in which authority–public relationships became publicly enacted, collectively evaluated, and circulated across platforms during the Serbian student protests.

ĆACILEND

Ćacilend emerged following the outbreak of student protests and university blockades across Serbia, when a state-supported counter-movement, „Students 2.0”, began advocating a „return to classes”. It quickly became associated with the ironic nickname Ćaci, derived from the misspelled Cyrillic slogan „Ђаци у школе” instead of „Ђаци у школе” („Students back to school”), which rapidly circulated online as a symbol of regime loyalism. When members of the movement established a tent camp opposite the Presidency building in Belgrade, officially presented as a gathering of the „students who want to learn”, the site itself became widely known as Ćacilend (hereafter referred to as Ćaciland in English). It remained in place for several months and was later reproduced around the ruling party’s premises in several Serbian cities, becoming one of the defining performative episodes of the protest period.

The episode was organized around the public construction of the identity of the „students who want to learn,” reinforced through repeated displays of loyalty, national symbols, appearances by political leaders, and continuous media coverage. Spatially, the encampment combined tents, fencing, controlled access, police protection, national flags, and the occupation of a highly symbolic public location. Relationally, it enacted proximity between governing authorities and „the people” while simultaneously maintaining separation from protesters and

broadier publics through security and regulated access. Normatively, it presented loyalty, stability, patriotism, and support for institutional continuity as appropriate expressions of political legitimacy.

BARRICADES

Barricades refer to a performative episode organized around recurring interventions that temporarily interrupted the ordinary circulation of urban life. Initially taking the form of sixteen-minute human barricades commemorating the victims of the Novi Sad railway station collapse, they later evolved into materially obstructive barricades constructed from waste containers. Although differing in material form, both practices transformed streets and intersections into recurring sites of political confrontation, establishing interruption as a recognizable repertoire of collective mobilization.

The episode revolved around the repeated interruption of everyday urban life. The performance of human barricades relied on the collective presence of bodies standing in commemorative silence, while container barricades translated the same logic into a more durable material form by relocating ordinary objects of urban infrastructure into the center of political life. Through these interventions, streets and intersections ceased to function solely as infrastructures of mobility and became temporary spaces of political contestation. In response, governing authorities were repeatedly drawn into direct public encounters through police interventions, municipal responses, and the continual reopening and re-blocking of streets. These recurring interactions displaced relatively stable patterns of authority—public relations with a dynamic structured around interruption and response.

At the same time, the episode challenged the claim that political and urban order could legitimately be restored while responsibility for the Novi Sad tragedy remained unresolved. Accountability was presented as the necessary condition for the resumption of ordinary public life, making the restoration of order itself a publicly contested political question.

BLOCKADES

University blockades emerged in response to violence against students and demands for accountability following the collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy. What initially began as the suspension of teaching rapidly developed into a broader practice of collective self-organization. Universities gradually ceased to function solely as educational institutions and became spaces in which political life was organized through plenums, collective decision-making, mutual care,

and the everyday coordination of common activities. As the movement expanded, blockades became one of the defining features of the Serbian student protests.

The episode revolved around practices of collective participation through which political authority was enacted beyond formal state institutions. Plenums structured collective decision-making, everyday routines were distributed through horizontal coordination, and the continuous organization of common life became a central feature of the protests. Universities were simultaneously transformed from educational institutions into politically organized spaces. Classrooms, entrances, and common areas acquired new political significance as sites of deliberation, collective organization, and everyday political practice.

These practices also reshaped the relationship between political authority and publics. Students simultaneously participated in deliberation, implementation, and public representation, reducing the distinction between political authority and publics through continuous collective participation. Participation, accountability, institutional autonomy, and collective responsibility were advanced as the normative foundations of legitimate political authority, challenging the assumption that political organization could emerge only through formal state institutions.

PLATFORMS AND COLLECTIVE EVALUATION

The three performative episodes generated distinct evaluative repertoires. Čacilend-related evaluation centered on artificiality, staged proximity, and performative excess. Barricades became associated with accountability, public order, and legitimacy, while Blockades foregrounded participation, horizontal organization, and collective responsibility. Although these evaluative repertoires differed, they emerged through the same platform infrastructures and communicative mechanisms.

Across all three episodes, political performances appeared in various forms, including memes, edited clips, photographs, short videos, protest announcements, maps, and other highly reproducible visual formats. These recurring representations consistently foregrounded space and political boundaries: fences, controlled access, and tents in Čacilend; human chains, containers, and police cordons during Barricades; red lines and banners announcing blocked buildings, protest marches across the country, and protests identified through their locations, such as Slavija and Autokomanda, during the Blockades. Although the political content differed, the spatial organization of the performances was the significant focus of collective attention.

The findings further demonstrate that platform affordances shaped how these relationships became collectively evaluated. Fragmentation, repetition, and visual

compression, supported by continual circulation, enabled particular authority–public relationships to be repeatedly encountered across different communicative contexts, allowing evaluations to accumulate and stabilize over time. At the same time, offline political performances increasingly displayed features that aligned with platform affordance, through visually recognizable spatial arrangements, symbolic locations, recurring boundary practices, and communicative formats that facilitated repeated recording, circulation, and reinterpretation.

This process unfolded through networked publics. Continuous circulation transformed individual affective responses into shared evaluative repertoires surrounding each authority–public relationship. What became collectively shared was not merely a meme or a viral image but a relatively stable way of interpreting the position of formal political authority: the organizer and protector of Ćacilend, the repeated remover of barricades, and failing to acknowledge university autonomy.

Finally, the evaluative repertoires identified across the three episodes reflected broader anti-political conditions. Collective evaluations consistently focused less on ideological disagreement than on moral values such as authenticity, accountability, participation, proximity, and public order. These evaluative criteria circulated recursively between platforms and political life, shaping subsequent performances and counter-performances while simultaneously informing their public evaluation. Under these conditions, cringe emerged as the low-intensity public evaluative affect through which changing relationships between authority and public became collectively recognized.

TOPOLOGICAL (RE)CONFIGURATIONS OF AUTHORITY–PUBLIC RELATIONSHIPS

The three performative episodes reveal distinct configurations of authority–public relationships. In addition to different political content, they differed in the principles through which political authority was organized, legitimized, and related to the publics. A topological perspective makes it possible to interpret these differences as competing configurations of political power rather than as isolated political events.

Ćacilend reproduced the dominant configuration of authority by organizing legitimacy through staged proximity, symbolic identification, and controlled visibility. Although it claimed closeness to „the people”, this relationship depended upon carefully managed boundaries separating governing authorities, supporters, protesters, and broader publics. Collective evaluation increasingly exposed the discrepancy between the claim to popular embeddedness and the

organizational practices through which that claim was sustained, rendering the dominant configuration progressively less culturally convincing.

Barricades destabilized this dominant configuration by transforming political boundaries into objects of contestation. Repeated interruptions made the authority to restore public order itself contingent upon accountability for the Novi Sad tragedy. Political authority no longer appeared as a stable institutional position but as a relationship continuously negotiated through recurring encounters between governing authorities and publics. Collective evaluation shifted from the disruption itself towards the legitimacy of the authority responding to it.

Blockades articulated an alternative configuration in which new political authority emerged through collective participation rather than institutional office. Universities became spaces where deliberation, coordination, and shared responsibility organized political life, while authority was enacted through continuous collective practice. In this configuration, legitimacy is derived from participation itself, demonstrating that authority–public relationships could be organized according to fundamentally different relational principles.

Taken together, the findings suggest that authority–public relationships are not fixed institutional arrangements but relational and spatial configurations continuously enacted through political practice. The dominant configuration organized legitimacy through representation and managed proximity; the contested configuration challenged its capacity to maintain political and urban order; and the alternative configuration demonstrated that political authority could also be organized through collective participation. What changed across the three episodes was not simply the content of political claims but the relational principles through which political authority sought legitimacy.

Within this process, cringe functioned as an indicator of topological misalignment. It did not attach to three isolated political performances but to changing configurations of authority–public relationships. As platform circulation repeatedly rendered these configurations publicly visible, networked publics collectively recognized when dominant configurations no longer appeared culturally convincing and when alternative configurations became increasingly intelligible. Cringe, therefore, emerged as the affective register through which topological configurations of authority–public relationships became publicly negotiated.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article examined how cringe operates in the public negotiation of political authority within the platform society. Moving beyond conceptualizing cringe as an individual emotional response or a marginal form of internet humor, it approached cringe as a low-intensity public evaluative affect through which

authority–public relationships become collectively recognized and negotiated. The analysis demonstrated that collective evaluation addressed neither political performances nor ideological positions as such, but competing ways in which political authority related to publics.

Existing scholarship has shown that affects organize political identities, boundaries, and social relations. The analysis extends this perspective by identifying authority–public relationships as the object of collective affective evaluation. Political performances provided the occasions through which these relationships became publicly visible, while cringe registered moments when dominant configurations no longer appeared culturally convincing, politically intelligible, or publicly „in place”. Rather than signaling the collapse of institutional authority, it functioned as an affective indicator of topological misalignment.

The findings further show that platforms did not merely disseminate political performances but organized their collective evaluation. Across the three performative episodes, the same platform infrastructure and communicative mechanisms repeatedly transformed political performances into reproducible visual forms that foregrounded space, boundaries, and authority–public relationships. Platform affordances enabled these configurations to be fragmented, repeated, and recontextualized, while networked publics stabilized distinct evaluative repertoires around them. In turn, these evaluations informed subsequent performances and counter-performances, demonstrating that political authority was negotiated through the recursive interaction of political performances, platform circulation, and collective affective evaluation.

Finally, the analysis demonstrates the value of a topological perspective for understanding political authority. Rather than locating power primarily in institutional office or territorial space, it shows how authority was publicly negotiated through competing relational configurations. *Ćacilend* reproduced a dominant configuration organized around staged proximity and managed representation. Barricades destabilized this configuration by making the legitimacy of restoring political and urban order contingent upon accountability. Blockades articulated an alternative configuration in which authority emerged through collective participation, deliberation, and shared responsibility. Together, these findings show that political authority is continuously enacted, contested, and reconfigured through changing authority–public relationships rather than institutional position alone.

Cringe neither produces political change nor generates new authority–public relationships. Instead, it contributes to their public recognition by signaling moments in which dominant configurations lose cultural credibility while alternative configurations become increasingly intelligible. As an interpretive study, the article does not claim that these dynamics operate identically across political contexts. It proposes a conceptual framework that can be applied comparatively

to examine how different affective registers participate in the public negotiation of political authority across platforms and diverse political environments.

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