

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# AGENCY FOR CHANGE

Alternative Democratic Practices in Southeast Europe

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The crisis of representative democracy in Southeast Europe has renewed awareness for the necessity of encouraging active citizenship.



Established political actors should take democratic innovations seriously as civic mobilizations could help democratize Western Balkan societies, with North Macedonia's *Colourful Revolution* of 2016 being the outstanding example.



Local initiatives and movements built around defending ›public things‹ are a rediscovery of the values of the past. This should be seen as an opportunity to widen the space of political conversation to include topics and memories that were, until recently, suppressed or safely excluded.



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# LOCATING AGENCY FOR CHANGE IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

VEDRAN DŽIHIĆ AND GAZELA PUDAR DRAŠKO

Almost twenty-five years after the end of the Cold War, initial euphoria about democratic change in many countries in the East and Southeast of Europe has given way to growing mistrust of political institutions and politicians, and an increasing disaffection with democracy itself. This wide-ranging disaffection has many sources. One of them lies in the increasingly weak performance of governments and the fact that »democracy«, whatever the term meant at the beginning of the transition processes, has failed to deliver on its promises. Politicians and governments no longer seem able or willing to deliver tangible results to their voters. Politics in Southeast Europe produces no or too few goods »for« the people and instead of »delivering«, engages in populist nationalism, politics of fear, and serves particular power interests.

Another reason for the widespread disaffection with democracy is a loss of alternative horizons able to motivate the population to engage politically, spark the social imagination, and fuel progressive action. Out of this disaffection with democracy comes the question of whether traditional instruments of representative democracy are sufficient to motivate constituencies to participate in political life and start renewing or reclaiming the notion of democracy. This is not only a Southeast European issue, but a wider European one.

The crisis of traditional instruments of representative democracy has renewed awareness for the necessity of encouraging active citizenship in many parts of the world. Following the principles of participatory and deliberative democracy, democratic experimentation along these lines can be observed worldwide, including some EU countries. These forms of *democratic innovations* include public debates, neighbourhood councils, citizens' juries, participatory budgeting, social media-based participatory actions, etc. At the same time, in the post-socialist and post-conflict societies of Southeast Europe, the lack of a democratic tradition and of efficient mechanisms of citizen participation, and the infinitely prolonged accession to the EU, pose additional challenges to any attempt to engage citizens meaningfully. While the crisis of representative democracy in the EU has resulted in a call for more democracy and tangible efforts to institutionalize different democratic innovations aiming to foster the effective inclusion of citizens, similar actions are rather absent in SEE states. To the

contrary, research results show a retreat to the private sphere of citizens' lives and their complete absence from the political arena (Fiket et al. 2017).

However, we have recently witnessed in this region different kinds of citizens' participation in initiatives against growing authoritarian tendencies. Examples of these bottom-up citizens' mobilizations vary from the »Colourful Revolution« in North Macedonia, plenums in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), a series of protests in Serbia (*Protests against Dictatorship, 1 of 5 million*), and a wide variety of civic initiatives at local levels in all countries of the region. All these initiatives exhibit citizens' willingness to participate in democratizing societies. In such demands for inclusion and participation, citizens of SEE countries sometimes search for inspirational traditions, like socialist self-government modes, but they also look to other forms of participative strategies for inspiration, above all to democratic innovations (the plenums in BiH, for example).

New social movements and democratic practices are important emerging social actors that 1) mobilize citizens based on their distrust of political institutions to 2) challenge the deficits of the current representative-liberal modes of governance, and 3) propose alternative models of democratic governance. Citizens' distrust of institutions, far from being merely a symptom of the crisis of democracy, could yield some democratic opportunities as well, as »institutionalizing distrust in a positive way« could serve »as a kind of protective barrier, a guarantee of the interests of society« (Rosanvallon 2006: 9).

A question underpinning the new social movements and different forms of public and pro-democratic action is one about the form and the character of the political engagement. One important and rather traditional understanding of »engagement« is civil society, understood as a democratic corrective force in all societies, and even more so in those that undergo a transition from an authoritarian regime to a liberal democracy. The idea is that civil society and thus citizens through their action fundamentally contribute to the development of a sustainable democratic political culture, thus preventing countries from lapsing back into authoritarian rule. Given this idea, it is easier to understand why so much – and generally too much – is expected of civil society as a panacea, even more so in times of il-

liberal and authoritarian challenges in broader East and Southeast Europe.

In order to get a realistic picture of civil society and citizens' movements and their role and potential as well as limitations, it is essential to move away from over-simplified images of civil society and hopes of salvation. Civil society is not always and automatically a cure for illiberalism and a guarantee of sustainable democratic development. Indeed, it can even serve the opposite goal. But in times of new conflicts within societies, where the front-lines between those defending values of liberalism and democracy and those negating and fighting them are increasingly visible, the »people« acting in plurality – be it assembled in the form of civil society or protest movements – become once again an agent of change or resistance.

Individuals, who come together to advocate for common goals and engage in local alternative democratic practices, develop in the process a new collective identity. This implies joint awareness, a common »language«, and the sentiment that they belong together and share the same fate. Most often, they stand in opposition to power structures (Kriesi 1997) and assume provocative means of action (De-la Porta and Diani 1999). In this context it may be crucial to underline that social movements are not by nature »progressive«. They may very well be conservative or nationalist. Particularly in the former Yugoslavia and Eastern Europe, where the nation is the main framework of reference, nationalist movements may contain enormous potential for mobilisation. Quite often (see the counter-mobilization of the Serbian president Vučić as a reaction to the 1 of 5 million movement), the illiberal or authoritarian regimes use and instrumentalize the potential of those conservative and national mobilizations. Yet, we are interested in progressive, democratic forms of social engagement with the potential to change the political and rejuvenate the notion of democracy.

In general, citizens' actions taken against »untouchable« political elites, against injustice, corruption, the malfunctioning of state and economy, and generally against illiberal trends spreading across Europe, create a momentum of resistance against illiberalism and establish a new coalition assembled around values of open societies. Such a process of critically questioning and challenging bad politics can ultimately lead to re-establishing active engagement as the core of the political. We believe that the case of »Colourful Revolution« in North Macedonia serves as a good example of the activation of citizens. Their resistance towards an authoritarian regime and ability to create a coalition with oppositional actors can act as a role model for bringing change – acknowledging, however, the criticism in North Macedonia on the course and the action taken by Zaev's government.

One very important question in this context is whether the new social forms of protest and resistance against new authoritarian-type politics spreading across Europe will be able to persist and to transform into a new emancipatory

political force able to shape European societies more fundamentally. The political establishment fights these new social movements for a simple reason – they dare to question the new authoritarian model, and they offer alternatives. Active citizens, be they in social movements or other forms of civil society, aspire to be thinkers and actors of an active utopia.

Despite noteworthy actions prompted by individual causes throughout the region, we believe that a positive utopian horizon within the region of Southeast Europe is lacking. The *way out* of the dilemma has to come with a *realistic* utopian view and perspective based on intrinsic leftist values and fundamental human rights, which addresses burning social issues of inequality, poverty, and emigration that are haunting the region. This must become a common goal for progressive and emancipatory movements and individuals both in the region as well as in the EU. We need to invent and to fight for *new* (social) democracy that will win the hearts of common people in Southeast Europe. This democracy must make them feel empowered to take control of their destinies by stepping into politics and engaging with the political not just every four years but permanently and in all possible spheres of public and social life.

The contributions to this publication discuss several approaches to active engagement and thinking about alternatives. The first paper examines the question if and how the emancipatory energy found in social movements may help in renewing social democracy (Felix Henkel). The next paper combines theoretical thinking about democratic innovations as opportunities for channelling popular discontent with concrete inquiry into the situation in Southeast Europe (Irena Fiket). The third paper provides an analysis of the Sisyphean task of democratizing societies, using the example of North Macedonia (Ivan Stefanovski). Last but not least, the fourth paper focusses on local struggles and actions in the Serbian city of Niš (Rastislav Dinić). The mobilization in Niš, where activists are in everyday contact with citizens at the local level, creates a deeper foundation for political engagement inscribed into the living context of individuals. This »grounding« together with broader societal utopian horizons of progressive thought provides a framework for the democratic renewal of Southeast European societies, a renewal that should be high on the agenda of the EU and all international actors dealing with the region.

# THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY: DRAWING INSPIRATION FROM SOUTHEAST EUROPE?

FELIX HENKEL

During an era of resurgent populist politics, social democracy has lost much of its influence and appeal in recent years. Some formerly powerful ideas of the European left have been pushed to the margins of the political debate or appropriated by the center or even far-right, with nationalist alliances presenting themselves as the guardians of their respective people's interest. As an internationalist movement, social democracy, in turn, has sought different ways to reform and renew across the continent.

A substantial mistake social democratic parties and key figures have made is not to argue strongly enough for real alternatives to the global neoliberal restructuring present since the 1970s. The resulting public disappointment with »established« social democracy lingers until today and, together with growing socioeconomic inequality and an increasing complexity behind global threats and uncertainties, has led voters to turn to other groups for alternatives, however simple and damaging these may be.

Populist rhetoric has skewed the public debate on many defining subjects, including the welfare state, migration, and national sovereignty, exacerbating any serious attempt to engage with these issues on a transnational level. What social democracy needs is a fresh start that wins back discursive dominance on the movement's core ideals of solidarity, social security, and regulation. Social democracy has to be reinvigorated and reclaimed by credible agents of change who can bridge the perceived gap between political parties and civil society.

It is a puzzling fact that some of the most innovative political movements in this respect have emerged in a region where progressive politics have been so thoroughly curbed after decades of social and economic desolation: Southeast Europe. One of the worst outcomes of this state of affairs is a crisis of representative democracy, with citizens profoundly alienated from institutionalized politics, often including both governing and opposition parties.<sup>1</sup> Nowhere on the continent are the pitfalls of neoliberal deregulation and unresponsive technocracy more visible than in Southeast Europe. Looking closely then, it is only logical

that alternatives are being so readily endorsed and developed here.

Southeast European politics, however, was taken by surprise by the increase in grassroots mobilizations since 2012. From Romania to North Macedonia and Turkey to Slovenia, left-wing activists and protesters have swept the region in outcry about the dysfunctional paralysis in which their countries are trapped. In Slovenia, Romania, North Macedonia, and Bulgaria these mobilizations have even induced changes of government and opened new paths for substantial reform. But what is the relationship between »established« politics and »the politics of the street«? Is it possible to draw input and inspiration for parliamentary social democracy from civic movements advocating a range of leftist ideas?

As in any intellectually vibrant civil society, ideas, even from the same political spectrum, are being contested and debated. It is precisely this vibrant and deep discussion that is generated when party politics encounters substantial argumentation and demands by engaged citizens. To foster meaningful exchange between »the ins« and »the outs«, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung over the past years has brought together activists with party representatives across the whole region. Beginning in 2016, we organized an open process of networking, coordination, and position-building with over a hundred activist participants. The *Democratic Left in Southeast Europe* platform came to life as a result, including a political manifesto from the streets of Southeast Europe. This document, which is available at [www.dl.community](http://www.dl.community), aims to create transnational progressive discourse in a region that is too often stuck in national frames of fear.

Social democratic youth organizations within and beyond the region have since endorsed the Democratic Left and debates that were published online have reached thousands of views.<sup>2</sup> What we as facilitators have taken away from the process is that opening up to civil society is beneficial for political parties, even when that means hearing criticism and differing viewpoints. For social democracy to find its future path towards regained strength and cohe-

<sup>1</sup> Tina Olteanu and Dieter Segert: *Movements and Parties: Trends in Democratic Politics as Challenges for Social Democracy in Southern and Eastern Europe* in: Mujanović 2017.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLq2HcUW5Xz4882inTGP5jYtNheSGxsXjB>

sion, it can and should distance itself from the populist rhetoric used by protest movements. It must, however, take citizens' demands, including those expressed through protest, seriously in developing its policy.

The *Democratic Left* manifesto continues to be discussed among various actors on the left spectrum. Our goal remains to rebuild trust between anti-establishment activists and political parties. And, at least sometimes, these exchanges lead to the realization that progressives from the parties and the movements fundamentally share the same vision: to change the political direction of their countries towards truly just, sustainable, and democratic societies.

# DEMOCRATIC INNOVATIONS AS OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANNELLING POPULAR DISCONTENT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

IRENA FIKET

## DEMOCRATIC INNOVATIONS AS SOLUTION TO THE CRISES OF REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

The increasing demand for the integration of innovative democratic institutions in the existing systems of representative democracy in all European countries as well as the EU itself initially developed because of problems that appeared too difficult to resolve through traditional institutional mechanisms. The growing disillusionment of citizens towards electoral politics, accompanied by a decline in institutionalized forms of participation as well as the progressive detachment from the public sphere (Crouch 2004, Dalton 2004), and the more recent trend of strengthening populist tendencies gave rise to the promotion of democratic innovations.

These innovations were supported by democratic theorists who developed a critique of representative democracy, stressing its inner limits and its inability to meet the needs of the public (Köchler 1987, Rosenthal 1998). In fact, according to this view, the traditional instruments of representative democracy should integrate tools of participatory and deliberative models of democracy, based on the broad involvement of citizens in decision-making (Benhabib 1996, Cohen 1997). Aiming to bring citizens back inside the public sphere, these approaches stress that all citizens interested in a public issue should be allowed to participate in a debate in which all opinions, interests at stake, and conflicting positions are represented (Habermas 1996, Young 2000). Through participating in deliberation on public issues, citizens would become more interested, more involved, more informed, more tolerant, and more aware of the legitimacy of political decisions. Participation in public deliberation, in fact, is seen as a kind of school for ideal citizenship. In addition, by providing alternative channels for public participation and deliberation, the expectation is that both output and input legitimacy of the political decisions can be enhanced. Institutionalization of democratic experimentations along these lines can be observed in all European countries, from local to national and transnational levels (Bozzini and Enjolras 2012).

However, while literature on democratic governance, when thinking about democratic innovations, often uses the terms ›participatory‹ and ›deliberative‹ interchangeably, since both models emphasise the importance of involvement of citizens in policy-making processes, there are some important differences between them. The deliberative model belongs to the family of participatory governance, yet goes beyond it; it emphasizes the process of communicative action and reflection that should lead to the victory of the ›better argument‹, rather than an aggregation of the preferences (Habermas 1997, Fishkin 2009).

Along with a deliberative approach, institutionalized democratic innovations are based not only on the involvement of the citizens (the modality that is used, for example, in referendums) but also a discussion (deliberation) in which competing arguments are presented. The most frequently used models of democratic innovations in Europe are deliberative mini publics – citizens' fora in which a sample of citizens, selected from the population affected by some public issue, deliberates on that specific issue, most often with the possibility of interacting with experts and politicians relevant to the topic they are discussing (Goodin and Dryzek 2006).

Institutionalisation of such democratic innovations is usually done at the local level as it proves to be more efficient in attracting the population to participate in discussions about tangible, local problems. In an ideal situation, in which »all« those who are interested in a public issue participate in the formulation of a decision related to this public issue, it is easier to implement it at the local than at the national or supranational level. Besides, at the local level, citizens are experts: they have knowledge related to the needs and problems of the population. By taking their expertise into account when formulating policies, citizens' ownership of the policies is enabled, which reduces the possibility of conflict between the government and citizens. The legitimacy of political decisions is thus increased and citizens cease to be passive users and are given the opportunity to become active citizens of democracy.

However, this tendency of institutionalising democratic innovations into existing institutional arrangements of representative model of democracy is lacking in Western Balkan countries where the state of democracy, while also affect-

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ed by crises of the institutions of representative democracy, manifests its own peculiarities due to distinct social, economic, and historical factors.

## DEMOCRATIC INNOVATIONS AS SOLUTION TO THE CRISES OF (REPRESENTATIVE) DEMOCRACY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS?

The specific post-socialist and post-conflict political environment of the Western Balkan countries (WB), characterized by the lack of democratic tradition and related authoritarian tendencies, underdeveloped and inefficient mechanisms of citizens' participation, and instability of political institutions influenced by the infinitely prolonged accession to the EU, pose additional challenges to the fulfilment of the basic democratic principles.

When reflecting on the crises of democracy in WB countries, manifested in the withdrawal of citizens from all institutional arenas of political participation, one should keep in mind that unlike developed Western democracies, the crises are strongly related to the overall trend of lack of support for democracy and consequent lack of trust in the institutions of representative democracy and all major institutional political actors. Citizens' trust of institutions, political parties, and non-governmental organizations is very low in many WB countries (i. e. CESID 2017). Institutions are perceived as corrupt and dependent on the interest and powers of the few without any consideration for the citizens' needs and policy preferences (Fiket et al. 2017). The effect of such high mistrust in political institutions and political organisations is widespread political passivity, particularly in terms of institutionalized forms of participation.

As far as support for democracy, it has been demonstrated that in the underdeveloped democracies of Eastern Europe this is linked to the population's dissatisfaction with political performance (political outcomes of the system) (Waldrón-Moore 1999). Citizens of underdeveloped democracies in fact, support democracy primarily because they are associated with high standards of life (Dalton et al. 2007), not necessarily because they understand the real meaning of the principles of democracy. What is highly problematic here is that this type of support is time-limited and therefore, a prolonged transition process in which the citizens of WB were those to pay the major cost meant that this support faded away, along with trust in institutions and willingness to participate in political life.

In addition, the belief that the return to the institutional arrangements that preceded the democratic (dis)order, namely a »communist nostalgia« that is typical of the (older) population, proves to be highly problematic from a democratic point of view since it recalls the presence of a strong leader and a stable state (Ekman and Linde 2005). However, on the other hand, »communist nostalgia« may also provide incentives for the mobilization of (younger) citizens by inspiring them to reflect on the substantial so-

cial and democratic values of the past and the role of local communities in the political life of WB societies.

We have recently witnessed different kinds of citizens' participation in initiatives against growing authoritarian tendencies. The examples of these bottom-up mobilizations range from the so-called »colourful revolution« in North Macedonia's capital Skopje to plenums in Bosnia and Herzegovina and a variety of civic initiatives at the local level in all countries of the region. While contesting authoritarian rule, the citizens' mobilizations promote the values of social democracy with a strong participatory element. What is relevant here is that they are often referring, in their activities, to participatory (deliberative) traditions like socialist self-government, indicating that there is willingness to participate in some alternative political arenas and institutions.

Keeping in mind the promises of democratic innovations and their (relative) success within systems of representative democracy), observed in (not only) European countries, it seems that they could be considered as instruments that would help the democratization of WB societies. In the case of the WB, the argument that would support the thesis of the usefulness of democratic innovations is not only substantive, as shown by scholars of democracy, but is also related to the perception of political institutions. Democratic innovations, as alternative political institutions, however complementary to the representative ones, could gain a positive perception far easier, particularly when recalling the legacy of participatory tools used in the period of socialist self-government. Participatory potential, manifested in mass opposition to authoritarian politics in the Western Balkans may indeed be channelled through institutionalized democratic innovations.

# THE ROLE OF MOVEMENTS IN DEMOCRATIZING SOCIETIES IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE – A SISYPHEAN TASK

IVAN STEFANOVSKI

## THE OFFSPRING

In the last decade, the region of Southeast Europe has caught the eye of scholars of social movements and democratization. What was once considered a relatively inert and passive region in terms of protest suddenly transformed into a cradle of opposition to the illiberal and ethno-political mainstream that has dominated Balkan politics for about three decades. From Ljubljana to Athens and Tirana to Bucharest, squares and streets were filled with empowered citizens who aired out their numerous grievances related to widespread corruption, politicization of society, endangered human rights and media freedoms, abuse of power, and ethnic and political cleavages in what were rather fragile and shallow democratic societies.

Continuously climbing down the ladder of democratization and sliding into illiberal democracy (Zakaria 1997), the »trend of protest« was one of the few »checks« to the rather undemocratic regimes dominating the region. This increased agency set off a process of (re)democratization of retracted democracies, which had gone through years of violent conflict, ethnic divisions, and unjust transformation of public goods, which left many citizens deprived of their basic economic and social needs. Citizens had shown their readiness to fight for the reinstatement of values such as solidarity, multiculturalism, inclusion, and diversity. Some of the basic tools used in these processes were alternative democratic practices such as citizens' plena, student occupations, public debates, and similar actions aimed at democratization.

## THE PITFALLS VERSUS THE »SMALL WINS«

It was precisely these alternative democratic practices which initiated, at least to some extent, the (re)democratization processes in the respective countries. Their main target was the growing authoritarian practices enshrined in the political culture of Southeast Europe, which had been amplified in recent decades. By introducing these modular (repetitive and known) repertoires of contention, defined as actions that »can be employed in a variety of settings, by a variety of social actors against a variety of opponents« (Tarrow 1993: 77), these alternative democratic practices posed a serious threat to competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and

Way 2002) flourishing in the region and characterized by ruling through crisis (Bieber 2018). Competitive authoritarianism is defined as a regime that is democratic in appearance but authoritarian in nature, i.e. a civilian regime in which democratic institutions exist in form but not in substance, because the electoral, legislative, judicial, media, and other institutions are so heavily skewed in favour of current power holders.

In the process of countering competitive authoritarianism, pro-democratic social movements and initiatives in Southeast Europe face(d) a plethora of pitfalls. One of the hurdles to be overcome is the historical legacy of protest in the region, which is closely tied to right-wing nationalist movements, especially on the territory of the former Yugoslavia (della Porta 2014). The point of departure is different in Romania and Bulgaria, which went through democratization movements in the late 80s, on the eve of the fall of the USSR (Ibid). In the former Yugoslavia, the ethno-nationalist narrative remains dominant, coming both from powerful state actors as well as conservative and nationalist parts of civil society.

The region offers numerous examples of this narrative in the political discourse of the ruling elites, whether in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, North Macedonia, or Croatia. With regards to illiberal and extreme right civil society initiatives and NGOs, recent happenings in North Macedonia and Croatia are rather vivid examples. In the case of North Macedonia, we witnessed an attack on parliament in April 2017 where MPs were attacked by a group of extreme right-wing activists closely aligned with the outgoing regime. North Macedonian society still faces difficult challenges to overcome the democratic deficit and complete the process of internal political reconciliation. On the other hand, in Croatia, around twenty organizations have been established in the last 12 years that are based on strong conservative ideas, traditional Catholic and pro-life standpoints, homophobic sentiments, and similar illiberal narratives (Cеровac in Dzihic et al. 2018, p. 17). This strong ideological cleavage between the pro-democratic and liberal movements and the illiberal right-wing organizations and initiatives, amplified by the not-so-favourable context where nationalistic, xenophobic, and religious narratives are mainstreamed, poses one of the biggest challenges to this positive wave of re-democratizing of societies in the region.

Another pitfall worth noting is the failure of left-wing movements and initiatives to create feasible alliances with established centre-left parties in the region. With the exception of the »Citizens for Macedonia« case from 2015, where more than 70 NGOs, initiatives, movements, and individuals joined forces with more than 20 political parties (Stefanovski 2016) in order to create a large platform which led to the demise of the Gruevski regime, no other significant partnerships can be mapped in the region. This lack of »members' cumulative involvement« and »identity coherence« (Piccio 2016) could possibly be bridged by both movements and parties realizing that they are »two sides of the same coin«. Centre-left and leftist parties need the ideas and know-how stemming from movements and individual activists, while social movements need their voices to be heard and their grievances to be channelled in the political sphere. Ultimately, the point of conversion is the common opponent of rising illiberalism and the emergence of stronger nationalism and xenophobia (Stefanovski 2017).

The third and last pitfall pinpointed in this text is related to the claims-making process of recent pro-democracy movements in Southeast Europe, which can be defined as strong and intensive but also rather erratic and partly chaotic, dominantly based on claim and frame bridging (accumulation of grievances and claims) (Snow 1986), which shows a clear lack of priorities and grievances to be channelled. Two noteworthy examples come from the Bulgarian winter protests in 2013 and the large mobilization in BiH at the beginning of 2014. In the Bulgarian case, the wave of protest, which sparked from the grave economic situation and high energy bills, later transformed into an endless »wish list« from multiple strands of the movement. In reference to the Bosnian case, the protracted socio-economic and ethno-political crisis resulted in a violent, but more than justified protest outburst in Tuzla, which rapidly sparked throughout the country. Due to the large number of grievances accumulated for almost two decades, the movement organizers ended up archiving several thousand claims coming from citizens in plenums (Arsenijevic et al. 2014, Stefanovski 2017). This lack of focus usually does not result in access to the policy arena and accommodation of the expressed grievances. The path forward lies in better tactical strategies and management of resources, which are always rather limited when social movements are in question.

Turning towards the »small wins« of recent movements in the region, one must note the changes in government which occurred in North Macedonia and Albania. The first case, where social movements and informal networks played a very important role is explained more in depth in the rows below. In the Albanian case, the ousting of power by Berisha's government was also supported by activists and thinkers who later also entered politics.

The protests in Bosnia discussed previously did not just give birth to the citizens' plenums, but also reinvigorated the debate around direct democracy, horizontal citizens' decision-making, as well as solidarity. The resignation of several cantonal governments may not have produced any sub-

stantial political and policy changes which could alleviate the numerous grievances of BiH citizens, especially in terms of democratization, but the comradely spirit and cooperation created loose networks of solidarity whose immediate effect was seen in the volunteer response to the catastrophic floods that hit BiH in spring 2014. Citizens played the role of »safety nets« in parts of BiH where the state could not provide the needed assistance and logistical support. In terms of strengthening the citizens' base for protest, the Bulgarian winter protests in 2013 set the groundwork for the following two protest waves occurring the same year – the #ДАHCWithMe protests and the student occupation.

Lastly, the region also witnessed the creation of several movement parties that aim at changing the leftists discourse in Southeast Europe. Slovenia, Croatia, and North Macedonia are vivid examples of energy from the streets being transposed into the electoral arena. Although success is varied among the cases, the increase of democratic potential in the Balkans' left should not be underestimated.

### **»CITIZENS FOR MACEDONIA« AND THE »COLOURFUL REVOLUTION« – HIGH HOPES GONE BAD?**

Probably the most recent scholarly example of movements' participation in (re)democratizing of society in the region is the case of North Macedonia. A wave of protests which began around late 2012 and gradually grew, reaching its culmination during 2015 and 2016, managed to oust the hybrid regime installed by former PM Nikola Gruevski and his conservative party, VMRO-DPMNE. Building on the protests of the opposition who had been evicted from parliament in order to block the adoption of the 2013 budget, the students' protest, the #Protestiram movement, and the protests of the freelancers whose taxes had been dramatically increased, the creation of the »Citizens for Macedonia« (CfM) platform marked an important milestone in cooperation between social movements and political parties. The creation of the Special Prosecutors Office (SPO), strongly supported and advocated for by citizens, and the difficulties it faced from the outgoing regime circled by President Ivanov's pardoning of influential politicians and businessmen prosecuted for corruption, gave birth to the »Colourful Revolution«. This was one of the most energetic and strong citizens' responses to undemocratic behaviour in recent years, with an eye-catching repertoire of contention consisting of throwing paint on government institutions and monuments used for embezzling huge amounts of public money. This continuous pressure from below, coupled with the support of the international community contributed to the change in power following the general elections held in December 2016.

Although Gruevski was ousted, Gruevism was not fully eradicated. To the contrary: the very high hopes rapidly transformed into high disappointments. A political amnesty for high-ranking opposition VMRO-DPMNE officials for

their involvement in the violent incidents in parliament on 27 April, meddling with the work of the SPO, as well as allocation of public money through grants to companies related to politicians in power, are the main points of criticism of the SDSM-led government, which was initially labelled progressive and reformist. Neglecting internal political developments under the veil of signing the »Prespa Agreement« and achieving tangible international success and proximity to NATO accession backfired on the SDSM and its inability to strengthen democratic and professional institutions practicing rule of law. This does not mean that North Macedonia has not made any effort to substantially improve the democratization processes in the country. To the contrary, the signing of the »Prespa Agreement« and the »Agreement on Neighbourly Relations with Bulgaria« has seriously improved the country's regional and international standing. Furthermore, all international reports measuring the condition of democracy around the world have shown slight improvements in media freedom and freedom of expression. Unfortunately, it seems that in the region, every member of the political elite looks forward to inheriting and misusing the already set up state capture. North Macedonia might be the only example in the region where some positive changes have occurred. One can rarely find political elites who would want to give up on corruption, nepotism, embezzlement of public funds and politicization of the public administration (Bieber 2018).

## A PATH FORWARD – WHAT'S NEXT?

If North Macedonia managed to counter the democratic backslide, things moved from bad to worse in neighbouring Serbia. Facing the problems of lacking a credible political opposition that can potentially overthrow the current regime, paired with the Serbia-Kosovo territorial dispute and the stabilitocracy currently favoured by the international community, progressive forces in Serbia are facing tough times. Current protest events in Serbia raise optimism that Vučić's competitive authoritarianism can be contested, at least to a certain extent. Although it is difficult to find a suitable partner in the political arena which is strong and credible enough, this doesn't mean that progressive Serbian citizens should stop raising questions related to corruption, unsolved attacks on activists and journalists, environmental protection, and criminal urban planning. What pro-democratic forces in Serbia can take into consideration is an assessment of the issues, setting priorities and an agenda, and pushing for viable changes in these spheres before opening other burning issues. Furthermore, they can try to choose their battles wisely, but also create alliances with other political actors which will be long-term and based on ideological coherence. Lastly, Serbian activists must never underestimate the potential of right-wing illiberal mobilization, which can easily undermine the struggle for a more democratic society.

# REDISCOVERING PUBLIC THINGS

RASTISLAV DINIĆ

In recent years, several local movements and initiatives have coagulated around the issues of what American political theorist Bonnie Honig calls »public things«. In Serbia, *the Don't let Belgrade D(r)own* movement was able to draw crowds of more than ten thousand citizens in its protests against the Belgrade Waterfront project. Several thousand citizens of Niš gathered to protest the decision of the local government to confer ownership over the Niš airport to the national government, under the slogan »Defend the Niš Airport!«. Villagers from the Stara Planina mountain have united with eco-activists to fight against the building of mini hydro-power plants that would destroy the rivers and streams on the mountain and wreak havoc on the endemic wildlife.

Why have these issues proven so electrifying and mobilizing in a country pervaded by political apathy and distrust of its institutions? Each of these issues, admittedly, provides an example of misuse of power and ignoring democratic norms and the rule of law. In the case of the Belgrade Waterfront project, buildings were illegally torn down in order to clear the space for building luxury apartment complexes. In the case of the Niš airport, the decision was made overnight, without any kind of public discussion. In the case of the mini hydro power plants, many legal protections of natural resources were simply ignored.

However, in Serbia today such examples abound, and yet most of them never ignite mass protests. Each of these cases also comes with a certain economic cost for the citizens living in the area – for example, the takeover of the Niš airport, and the planned limiting of its air traffic, would take its toll on a plethora of local businesses and endanger the nascent tourist industry in the city. But again, numerous political decisions with much more detrimental economic effects were made in the recent years and were still passed over in silence.

Therefore, what incited the mass protest in these three cases must have been something else, and Honig's writings may help us understand what that something is. According to Honig, public things play a crucial, although often overlooked role in democratic politics: they are objects of shared attachment of many different individuals and groups that compose the »demos«, or people. By endangering the very existence and/or permanence of public things, neoliberalism threatens the very foundations of a democratic commu-

nity. Without objects of shared attachment, Honig argues, citizens cannot see themselves as members of the same »demos« and are instead pushed into private and mutually isolated worlds of work and consumerism. In citizens joining up to protect public things, Honig sees expressions of a democratic need for living together, or as she puts it, »cheek by jowl« with others, as well as glimmers of democratic hope in the midst of an increasingly privatized neoliberal world.

Honig's examples of public things which may inspire this kind of shared attachment, and therefore democratic hope, range from parks to streets, schools, water and even Big Bird, a character from the popular children's TV show, Sesame Street. To this, we could add a riverbank and a historic neighbourhood in the centre of Belgrade, the city airport in Niš, and mountain rivers and streams on Stara Planina.

In Serbia, however, the newly discovered political importance of public things excavates another layer in the collective political psyche – a deep dissatisfaction with the processes of privatization that were until now treated as a »normal« and »necessary« part of the transition from socialism to liberal democracy, and were not questioned, much less opposed in the political arena. The ideological hegemony of neoliberalism in post-socialist Serbia, joined with nationalist efforts to erase the legacy of socialist Yugoslavia from official public memory, have resulted in an effective silencing of opposition to the processes of privatization. In that sense, initiatives and movements built around defending public things also represent an opportunity to widen the space of political conversation to include topics which were until recently, safely excluded from it, but also to recover suppressed memories of a different past, and therefore explore the possibility of a future not predetermined by the process of neoliberal transition.

One example of this is particularly telling: the logo of the »Defend the Niš Airport initiative« depicts a stylized fist with an airplane flying over it. To an outsider, the fist might represent just a generic symbol of resistance, or even a variation of the symbol of »Otpor« (Resistance), a youth protest movement that played an important part in bringing down the reign of Slobodan Milošević in the end of the 1990's. However, to a citizen of Niš, the fist is instantly recognizable as a prominent detail from the monument on

the Bubanj hill, just outside the city centre. The monument itself, the work of Croatian architect Ivan Sabolić and consisting of three gigantic concrete fists, was built in 1963 as a part of a memorial park commemorating the victims of Nazi occupation in WWII. The Bubanj hill itself was the site of mass executions of prisoners, mostly members of the communist resistance movement.

In the meantime, the memorial park has become a popular picnic destination for citizens of Niš – in accordance with the plans of its creator, Sabolić, who envisioned the memorial park becoming »a place where citizens will enjoy their leisure time«, while the monument will »forever educate the young«. According to Sabolić, »this way, the goal of the monument will be most fully achieved – in the Bubanj memorial park, the visitor will always be able to experience the grandiosity of our specific revolution, and at the same time enjoy the fruits of its humane struggle.«<sup>4</sup> A park for spending leisure time »cheek by jowl« with others is of course an exemplary case of Honig's public thing – the monument is there not just to commemorate the victims of the fascist occupation, but also to open up the future for their descendants to enjoy the freedom embodied in using public things. Contemporary joy does not invalidate past suffering, but rather gives full meaning to past struggles.

By connecting its struggle for the defence of the city airport to the monument commemorating the antifascist struggle as well as a popular public park built during socialist Yugoslavia, the »Defend the Niš Airport« initiative not only underlined the importance of public things, but also pointed to a past in which these things were created (the Niš airport itself was also built in socialist Yugoslavia, and financed by the contributions of the citizens of Niš), a history of struggle for the right to enjoy them freely.

<sup>4</sup> Documentary »Priča o slobodi [Tales on Freedom]«, MRCN (2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3LfxTWdLLw>

Honig bases her work on political importance of public things on D.W. Winnicott's object relations theory, and stresses Winnicott's difference from other famous psychoanalytic theorists, such as Freud and Melanie Klein. While for the latter two, growing up is primarily a work of mourning the permanent loss of childish objects of affection, Winnicott »would argue that becoming [an adult], as it were, requires the absorption, not the renunciation, of childhood things«. A child's »transitional objects«, a blanket, a toy, a teddy bear, help them accept reality and come to terms with it. Honig argues that the »repertoires of resilience« the child acquires in the process stay with it long past childhood, and are used to navigate the world of adulthood as well. As Honig (2013) writes:

*»Since Winnicott is not committed to a progressive nor to any linear temporality in development, we do not infantilize citizens when we think about democracy through Winnicott's categories or at least not necessarily so. That is, the various stages through which infants move in development, and the skills that attach to those stages (self-comfort, working through, acceptance of reality, and so on) are not left behind as the infant »progresses«. Acquired skills stay in a person's repertoire. These are not infantile impulses that plague otherwise mature adults, nor are they the pathologized remnants of a stage that ought properly to have been left behind. Rather than move through time, the infant acquires in time a repertoire, a resource-rich skill-set that can be drawn upon in health over a life.«*

Following Honig, we can conclude that rediscovering public things through the local movements and initiatives should not be seen a sign of nostalgia for a bygone era, or a childish fetishization of objects, but as a rediscovery of the resilience of the »demos« in the face of external pressure and a rekindling of democratic hope.

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Acknowledging the lack of platforms allowing for quality debate among progressive young scholars, research institutes and think tanks across Southeast Europe, in cooperation with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, have launched the joint initiative »Think Engaged: SEE Academia in Dialogue Series«. Since autumn 2017, an

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## AGENCY FOR CHANGE

### Alternative Democratic Practices in Southeast Europe



The crisis of traditional instruments of representative democracy has renewed awareness for the necessity of encouraging active citizenship. The principles of participatory and deliberative democracy are widely discussed and incorporated in the actions of democratic social movements in the Western Balkans. We turn to examples of engagement that can potentially lead to a deeper impact in our societies by offering a realistic utopian vision based on intrinsic leftist values and fundamental human rights, and which address vital social issues of inequality, poverty, and emigration.



Established political actors should take democratic innovations seriously. Alternative political institutions, for instance, are instruments that could help democratize Western Balkan societies. They find fertile ground in the legacy of participatory tools used in the period of socialist self-government. Their participatory approach can serve to bridge the manifested mass discontent with authoritarian politics in the Western Balkans and the institutionalized democratic arena. The case of North Macedonia's *Colourful Revolution* is an example of success as well as a warning about what must be done to build a credible political position.



Local initiatives and movements built around defending ›public things‹ are a re-discovery of the values of the past. This should not be seen as a sign of nostalgia for the socialism of the past, or a childish fetishization of objects, but as a rediscovery of the resilience of the »demos« in the face of external pressure and a rekindling of democratic hope. They should be seen as an opportunity to widen the space of political conversation to include topics and memories that were, until recently, suppressed or safely excluded from the public discourse.

Further information on the topic can be found here:  
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