DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

(UNHEARD) CALLS FOR DEMOCRACY FROM BELOW

Social and Protest Movements and Potentials for Democratic Renewal

Gazela Pudar Draško, Vedran Džihić and Marko Kmezić
December 2020

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Activism in Southeast Europe takes a unique path, that is not an imitation of the Western patterns of activism. Moreover, local contexts in a specific way encourage the expression of activism in the community, providing truly innovative examples of mobilization and organization.

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Contentious movements are formed by individuals, who act as a group and advocate for common goals and who in the process of acting together develop a collective identity.

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Activists have recognized that structural change in their societies is impossible to achieve without taking their struggle to the realm of electoral politics and developing genuine platforms for political change.

FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG

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Content

PREFACE

When the underprivileged and those with limited possibilities of political participation raise their voices, it often results in opportunities for social and political changes. Non-violent protests and campaigns proved as a legitimate tool for societal improvement, and for advancing a country's democratic transition. Even in those instances when such social movements do not obtain immediate transformation, they at the very least provoke the public and so-called moderators within the power-elites, and initiate momentum for eventual changes to come.

In the past two decades, Southeast Europe was a region affected by various social movements, protests and riots. All countries in the region experiences some type of uprisings, some violent and some »colored by peace«. The general impression nowadays is that most of these protests, riots and non-violent resistance campaigns had brought little to no long-lasting betterments, yet trustingness in non violent protest power is greater compared to the trust in political establishment.

5th of October 2020 marks twenty years after one of the most monumental protests in the region, that resulted in the fall of Milošević's regime. To that occasion, FES Regional Dialogue Southeast Europe and the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory organized a debate on the role of protests and social movements. As a result of this engaging and interesting exchange, we are publishing *(Unheard) Calls for Democracy from Bellow*.

This publication contemplates the potentials of social and protest movements for democratic consolidation and renewal. It describes how citizen participation takes different forms in efforts to change societies and rise against authoritarian tendencies, that are currently resurfacing across the region.

The authors aim to give an overview of existing and potential avenues to engage socially, and to commonly diminish fear, ever-present in societies of »captured states«. They also reflect on authoritarian government (re)actions against all forms of citizens engagement. Furthermore, they explore how democratic innovation can come from below and how social movements transform into political parties, that are usually more open and inclusive in their approaches to politics.

Having in mind the rising populist nationalism and authoritarianism worldwide and in the SEE, it is of great importance to support democratic participation and create fertile grounds for peaceful social movements, activist groups, and other forms of citizen engagement. Since 2016, we have been supporting activists, that are advocating and fighting against different challenges, through our project *Democratic Left in SEE* and we will continue to do so, in time to come.

Sarajevo, December 2020
Saša Vasić and Ralf Melzer

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INTRODUCTION: CONTEXTUALISING CONTENTIOUS MOVEMENTS IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

Almost twenty-five years after the end of the Cold War, initial euphoria about democratic change in many countries in Eastern and Southeast Europe has given way to a growing mistrust of political institutions and persons, and an increasing disaffection with democracy itself. This wide-ranging disaffection has many sources. One of them certainly lies in the increasingly weak performance of governments and the fact that increasingly authoritarian governments and regimes usurp institutions and capture the state and society. Judging recent democratic developments in the last decade by general democracy indices such as Bertelsmann Transformation Index or Nations in Transit, stagnation and even rapid democratic decline becomes apparent.

Freedom House's *Nations in Transit* report for 2020 points out »dropping the democratic façade« as a global phenomenon. However, the cover photo of the report comes from the streets of Belgrade where violent protests broke out in July, followed by the police brutality against protesters. The Balkans have ended up more than once in global news reports due to the actions of authoritarian regimes, which have steadily declined into hybrid regimes according to this report.

> Meanwhile in the Balkans, years of increasing state capture, an abuse of power, and strongman tactics employed by Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia and Milo Djukanović in Montenegro have tipped these countries over the edge—for the first time since 2003, they are no longer categorized as democracies in »Nations in Transit.« This change comes at a time when the EU's accession process is mired in disagreements and no longer serves as a lodestar for democratic reform, and when great-power politics and transactional diplomacy are turning the Balkans into a geostrategic chessboard.[1]

Widespread political and civic passivity of citizens has significantly weakened defective democracy and allowed a capturing of the state, causing even greater passivity on one side, and a new surge of bottom-up movements on the other.

Many electoral systems in established democracy consist of blind spots and as a result, face problems. Some of them are even subject to open attacks by democratically elected representatives, such as U.S. president Donald Trump. However, the legitimacy of a people's election and their chosen representatives in fair elections being enshrined as a pillar of democracy, is seriously questioned by weak institutions, lack of rule of law and dominant strong men rule like in many countries in Southeast Europe. The recent elections in Serbia in June 2020 might be a good example of such a case. In other cases, such as the elections in Montenegro this year or even local elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina, though there were some irregularities and challenges, partly new and surprising outcomes were produced. Yet, even these changes do not alter the overall bleak picture of democracy in a region characterized by weak rule of law, compromised institutions, authoritarian tendencies mixed with toxic types of nationalism and new types of despotism.

This is where social and protest movements as forms of contentious movements and moreover, assemblies of citizens ranging from the local to national and even regional level, come into the play. Despite this pessimistic picture, in this region we have witnessed different kinds of citizens' participation for the common good and against growing authoritarian tendencies. These movements and these bottom-up or grassroots energies are made possible in spite of captured states and captured societies. Citizens urge for credibility, they want politicians who are responsible to them – closer to the local level and focused on tangible problems. A majority of these initiatives are actually focused on local issues. Activism in Southeast Europe takes a unique path, that is not an imitation of the Western patterns of activism. Moreover, local contexts in a specific way encourage the expression of activism in the community, providing truly innovative examples of mobilization and organization. Local initiatives manifested the willingness to democratize societies and could represent a base for formulating specific, tailor-made institutional modalities for the direct participation of citizens in political life. They represent a genuine call for democracy from the ground and carry a potential for democratic renewal through opening up new avenues and methods for participation and even democratic experimentation.

As a point of departure for this study we define social and protest movements – or contentious movements in gener-

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[1] Freedom House Report 2020, p. 2

al – as collective entities that possess a minimum of organisational and temporal continuity and fight outside of standard institutional channels for or against certain change(s).[2] Publicity and the sharpening of arguments and positions mark contentious episodes during which such movements appear. In its extreme form, contention may spur polarisation and end up in violence. However, contention may also go alongside democratisation because it constitutes a »highly visible« yet »less destructive variety of interaction« than other »life and property threatening forms of public, collective claim making«.[3] Contentious movements are formed by individuals, who act as a group and advocate for common goals and who in the process of acting together develop a collective identity. This means a joint awareness, common language and sentiment for the fact that they belong together and share the same fate. In contrast to non-governmental organisations, contentious movements act outside of institutional structures. Most often, they stand in opposition to power structures[4] and assume provocative or even illegal means of action.[5]

There are various strands of research that can be found among the burgeoning literature on contentious movements that are mostly relevant for analysing the movements in Southeast Europe. One part of the academic debate focuses on various dimensions of mobilisation, looking into how the movements were made up and by whom, and exploring their discourse and frames as well as collective identification processes.[6] The term 'frames' is particularly important here, since it helps understand how contentious movements identify problems, formulate political alternatives and motivate their own activists. In this context it may be crucial to underline that contentious 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 or far-right movements may pose an enormous mobilisation potential and threat. Another interesting part of the literature on the movements claims that movements are but one element within a wide range of (other) institutional and non-institutional actors[7] whose actions might partly interact and/or offset each other. Nevertheless, protest movements, since they challenge the status quo, become relevant political factors especially in countries where the feedback loops between politicians and citizens are not yet couched in democratic routines and electorates are volatile (if at all easily mobilised). Hence this issue warrants special attention.

Against this background we depart from social movements as collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity *outside* of institutional or organizational channels for the purpose of challenging unjust social relations and authority. Based on this understanding we offer the analysis of the narratives, claims and regimes' responses to these claims throughout captured states of Southeast Europe. With this study we aim to offer a comprehensive overview of possible and existing forms of engagement and actions which can serve as an incentive for all groups with critical potential to decrease the presence and influence of fear and to enhance citizens' potential against the condition of »the captured state«. We also explore the potential for democratic innovation from below and analyze the patterns and challenges of transformations of contentious movements into political parties and movements.

2 McAdam, Doug; Tarrow, Sidney and Tilly, Charlse (2001): *Dynamics of Contention*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

3 Idem, p. 269

4 Kriesi, Hanspeter et.al. (1997): »New Social Movements and Political Opportunities in Western Europe.« In: *Social Movements: Readings on Their Emergence, Mobilization, and Dynamics*, edited by Doug McAdam, David Snow. Los Angeles: Roxbury, 52–65.

5 Della Porta, Donatella and Diani, Mario (1999): *Social Movements. An Introduction.* Oxford: Blackwell

6 See Benford, Robert and David, Snow (2000): »Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment.« In: *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26, 611–639.

7 Amenta, Edwin and Caren, Neil (2011): »The Legislative, Organizational, and Beneficiary Consequences of State-Oriented Challengers.« In: *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, edited by David Snow, Hanspeter Kriesi and Sarah Soule. Malden: Blackwell, 461–488.

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PARADIGMATIC MOVEMENTS IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE – FEATURES AND CLAIMS

Social movements arise, articulate their demands, activities and methods of struggle in mutually similar and specific ways. In the following section we describe several paradigmatic social movements from the countries of Southeast Europe. Movements' claims are diverse and encompass demands that are more general and call for more democratic features in the political system from fair elections, free media, welfare demands linked to accessible education and health and dignified workers' conditions to environmental and cultural demands to protect natural resources and preserve valuable historical and cultural heritage. On the other side, movements that are largely reactive and rooted in the local context focus on single-issue or very specific problems in local communities.

The core common characteristics or common features of social movements are the following: : 1) ad-hoc spontaneous (self)organization, 2) reactive vs proactive character of movement, 3) movement as a product of the protest and 4) (non)horizontality of decision making. Of course, these are archetypal classifications, because in reality, most movements combine several common features simultaneously.

Most contemporary social movements in Southeast Europe are ad-hoc spontaneous self-organized initiatives. They arise »overnight« through the spontaneous mobilization of citizens around some usually local problem or goal. These movements have a certain level of authenticity and autonomy in their activities and they are not created by other »external« actors or out of already existing organizations and movements. They are often informal or unregistered and can range from small local neighborhood initiatives to large social movements that organize mass demonstrations.

One of the largest ad-hoc (self)organized movements is *Resist (Odupri se)* from Montenegro[8]. This horizontal, informal civic movement was established in January 2019. It was created as a response of the citizens to the so-called »envelope affair«, which exposed corruption in the regime. The protest march eventually turned into a wave of 13 mass protests, several of which were the largest gathering

in contemporary Montenegrin history (with more than 20.000 people). A protest caravan was organized in 10 cities and the movement supported other Montenegrin civic initiatives. The movement had fluid, horizontal structures, so membership was open to all interested citizens, and was funded by self-contributions, anonymous donations, and several opposition political parties. *Let's Save Sinjajevina*[9] is another informal civic initiative that emerged as a spontaneous reaction to the decision of the Ministry of Defense and the Armed Forces of Montenegro to destroy obsolete weapons and ammunition and to establish military training facilities and training grounds in areas used for grazing. The protests in Sinjajevina continue to this day, despite difficulties in organizing and measures taken to ban large gatherings in the context of the corona virus pandemic. Several activists are on duty on the mountain every day, preventing military exercises from taking place.

Movements arise as a reaction to the decisions and plans made by government and state institutions. Reacting upon decisions and plans of governments characterizes almost all social movements and local initiatives. This is at the same time one of the key limitations to the activities of social movements as it is often pointed out by the activists themselves. The lack of a proactive political approach is often criticized as not only reactive but also *reactionary*, as the demands of these movements often relate exclusively to »restitution of previous condition« and essential maintenance of the status quo, rather than fighting for alternative proposals and more radical social change. The reactive character of the movements is often reflected in the very names of movements and initiatives, as there are many which begin with »*Defend*«, »*Save*«, »*Stop*«, »*Prevent*«, »*Protect*«, and similar. *The Alliance for the Protection of Theater* was formed when the Albanian government made the decision to demolish the building of the National Theater in Tirana and build a new theater in its place. Actors, directors, artists and activists have been organizing daily protests since June 2018. In July 2019, they occupied the building to prevent its demolition. Despite the resistance of Albania's citizens, the building was demolished on the night between May 16 and 17, 2020. During the night of the

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8   https://www.facebook.com/oduprisecg/

9   https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/395276/gi-sacuvajmo-sinjaje-vinu-drzava-i-njeni-interesi-ne-brane-se-otimanjem-imovine-gradana

demolition, conflict with the police took place and about thirty activists were detained. *Rakita resistance*[10] in Serbia united villagers through organizing direct actions to prevent the construction of a mini hydropower plant (MHP) on the Rakita river, below the Ruj mountain. Since they were not initially supported by larger movements that fight the construction of MHPs, the people of Rakita relied on their own resources and radicalized the protest through physical clashes with the police, direct actions which blocked excavators from removing pipes from the river. *The Brave Women of Kruščica* movement from Bosnia and Herzegovina[11] organized themselves around similar issues regarding MHP construction. During 2017, the residents of Kruščica went on duty for more than 500 days, blocking the local bridge, preventing the passage of excavators and the construction of mini-hydro power plants on the river. Authorities sent police forces that used brutal physical force against activists. The fight succeeded, as the Cantonal Court in Novi Travnik annulled construction and urbanist permits, halting the construction of two planned mini hydropower plants.

Even though the majority of movements in the region simply react on decisions and plans made by the government there are also several *proactive movements* and initiatives that have offered original innovations in terms of models of social organization or those whose demands are focused on alternative political models and radical social change. The exceptions are also movements that have transformed their actions from initially reactive towards a more proactive approach of proposing alternative solutions or expanding demands. *The colorful revolution I Protestiram*, supported by the opposition led by the Social Democratic Alliance of Zoran Zaev, was a mass peaceful demonstration organized in 2016 throughout Northern Macedonia[12]. They were organized after the »wiretapping« affair. The protests included artistic actions and a variety of creative performances, such as painting state institutions and monuments. They offered creative innovations in the method of struggle within peaceful civic demonstrations. The actions led to a change of government, since the government of Gruevski and Ivanov lost the elections, and the mandate for forming the government was given to the leader of the Social Democrats (SDSM), Zoran Zaev.

We believe that the reactive character of the movement is often not the choice of its activists, but rather a *forced* mechanism in the context of authoritarian systems. Citizens are forced to react every day to defend rights and freedoms of theirs, which have become endangered. Proactive movements are few, but they do exist. Their efforts from non-institutionalized organization into alternative

models of functioning are legitimate and important to demanding more participatory democracy. However, it is a rare reality as a majority of these movements lack resources and knowledge of relevant political strategies.. Networking and exchange that occurs during protests is capacity building on a wider scale that sets a framework for new political actors to emerge.

When we discuss articulating demands, it is possible to single out two dominant approaches: (1) demands articulated »from above« by (informal or formal) leadership of the movement, (2) demands articulated »from below« by participants of the (protest) movement , among which the *directly-democratically voted demands* and the *demands articulated by the »faction« of the movement* stand out. The differentiation of these two approaches is derived from the criteria of internal hierarchy. Differences in the internal structure of the movements themselves (hierarchical and non-hierarchical, or, horizontal and vertical structures), cause differences in the ways of making decisions, and the articulation of the demands themselves.

In movements in which there is a pronounced hierarchy, demands are »made from above« by the leadership of the movement. Although this way of articulating demands is simpler because it facilitates organization and shortens the time needed for discussion, voting, or consensus-building, it often leads to dissatisfaction among members due to exclusion from the decision-making process and contributes to divisions within the movement. On the other hand, horizontal social movements vote for the demands in a direct and democratic way, »from below«.

The *One of Five Million* and *Defend the Rivers of Stara Planina* movements articulated their demands within the informal leadership. In the case of the *One of Five Million* movement, the demands were articulated by an expert team for dialogue with government officials[13], that was formed at the »One in Five Million« protest. At the same time, the coordination group has often been accused of collaborating with opposition politicians »behind the scenes« and there has been speculation that politicians are behind the demands, trying to manage protests and direct them to their advantage through student activists[14]. In the case of the *Defend the Rivers of Stara Planina* movement[15], the hierarchy in decision-making was formed on the basis of the »functions« of the members within the Facebook group of the same name. Namely, the demands were articulated by members of the movement who are also the group's administrators on Facebook. The question of »fairness« of such functioning appeared during the popularization of the group, by pointing to the exclusion of a large part of territory in Serbia equally affected by the problem of the construction of derivation mini-hydro power plants.

10 https://zajednicko.org/blog/slucaj-zajednickog-samoorganizovanja-mestani-istocne-srbije-protiv-mini-hidroelektrana-milena-stanic-dusanka-milosavljevic/

11 https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/bih-kruscica-nagrada-euronatur/30101398.html; https://www.kontrapress.com/clanak.php?rub=GRADovanje&url=Hrabre-zene-Kruscice

12 https://www.blic.rs/vesti/svet/sarena-revolucija-hiljade-gradana-na-protestima-u-makedoniji/jwdl8r8

13 https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/vazno/14655/

14 http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a546518/Jelena-Anasonovic-optuzuje-opoziciju-da-je-preuzela-proteste-1-od-5-miliona.html

15 https://novastaraplanina.com/

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BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA – A CONTINUOUS STRUGGLE AND DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION THROUGH PLENA

Bosnia and Herzegovina, a state and society very much captured by ruling ethnonational elites and the power of ethnopolitics, has a decade long history of various types of social and protest movements. Already in 2013, the so called »baby protests« in Bosnia and Herzegovina erupted due to the failure of officials to pass a new law on identity numbers. As a result, babies born after February 2013 did not get assigned the so called JMBG number which is needed to receive medical cards and passports. The cases of babies Berina Hamidović and Belmina Ibrišević became public as they both urgently needed to leave the country for surgery but were not allowed to cross the border and died that same year.

The biggest wave of protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina but also in the region at that time emerged in February 2014 and was described by many as the »*Bosnian Spring*«. The protests were initiated after the announcement of insolvency in four privatized factories in Tuzla (»*Dita*«, »*Polihem*«, »*Poliochem*« and »*Konjuh*«). Hundreds of workers who lost their jobs due to corrupt and non-transparent privatisation processes gathered together to protest against injustice, corruption and material and emotional exploitation. After months and even years without appropriate payment, the dismissed workers started to demand their rights in front of the cantonal government in Tuzla. Corrupt privatisation processes after the war had led to the closure of once successful production units resulting in dismissals and non-payment of workers who lost their means of subsistence. Soon students, pensioners and other citizens who shared their discontent and frustration, joined the workers' protests, which spread like bushfire over to other cities and smaller local communities. Even though protests were also held in previous years (2013 JMBG protests), the events of 2014 were characterised by a new component: For the first time after the war, the citizens actually felt that they were able to exercise pressure on the responsible authorities. They felt that a transformative power was integrative part of their demands and their joint uprising, which even had potential to lead to long overdue changes of the gridlocked political and economic systems of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In the course of the Bosnian spring a new format of citizens' engagement, solidarity and deliberation emerged in the form of citizens' assemblies, the so-called *plena*, which appeared in several cities following the massive and partly violent protests in February 2014.

In the plena, the citizens elaborated on their demands, which they directed towards the authorities at the cantonal and entity levels to urge them to deal first and foremost with widespread corruption. They discussed other important topics such as the violation or absence of human rights, unemployment, weak health care, education and social protection systems, the closure of cultural institutions (the National Museum of Sarajevo) due to a lack of budgetary means, while at the same a small minority of elected officials enjoyed unproportioned and unjustified privileges financed from the public budget such as personal drivers, expensive transport fleets, and other benefits reserved exclusively for them. The demands for dismissals of certain authorities became louder, as they continued to fail at fulfilling their duties toward the citizens who trusted and elected them.

What made the plena new and special was a lack of hierarchy and a clear structure. On the one hand, this allowed a democratic way of communication, meaning that everyone had the right to speak and to express their opinion after putting their names on a speakers' list. On the other hand, this meant that the gatherings easily became a sort of support group for frustrated citizens, however without delivering real, specific activities, concrete steps and long-term perspectives. The lack of organisation and a clear division of responsibilities finally led to the collapse and disintegration of the plena or to a formation of opposed subgroups which began to fight each other, instead of concentrating on the real problems of the citizens. Still, the plena created a new form of discourse and knowledge that might be mobilised in the future as an »archive of societal experiences.« Furthermore, these new forms of protests opened new platforms for civic activism and encouraged the citizens to initiate changes within very small initiatives at the local level and in local communities. Some of the positive examples are the *Banja Luka Social Center* – BASOC, the Informal Group for Social Justice in Prijedor, the Movement of the Citizens in Gračanica or the Workers' Union Sindikat Solidarnosti in Tuzla. These local movements continue their fight and struggle in the present. An interesting and important example of creating a new public space for deliberation and voicing the societal critique

stemming from the protests in February 2014 is the Banja Luka Social Centre – BASOC. BASOC advocates for political equality and the recapture of public space in post-war and post-socialist Bosnia and Herzegovina. The activists focus on social justice and social equality, workers' rights and their self-empowerment, they work with the diaspora and minorities, provide help to refugees on the Balkan Route and dismantle discrimination of marginalised groups. These issues are addressed through various interdisciplinary methodological approaches (cultural and artistic etc.), thus strengthening independent cultural and artistic practices, contemporary historiography, analysis of urban policies and critical discourse analysis of the current repressive political discourses and narratives in the Republic of Srpska. The centre, situated in one of the few remaining ottoman houses, which were not destroyed during the war in Banja Luka, is an attraction itself.

All these traces of engagement and solidary action with an origin in the protests of 2014, provided support and solidarized with a very recent wave of protests in Banja Luka. In March 2018, David Dragičević, a 21-year-old young man from Banja-Luka, went missing and was found dead in a river six days later. Officials ruled his death an as an accident but his parents were convinced that he had been killed. The lack of transparency in the investigation provoked major public protests calling for »Justice for David«. Following March 2018, thousands of citizens in Banja Luka gathered at the Main Square, which is now called »David's Square« to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with ineffective institutions, which provided insufficient proof and explanation during the investigation process. The protests resonated not only in the streets of Banja Luka but also in Sarajevo (joined by the »Justice for Dženan« protests, in Mostar, Tuzla, but also in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Zagreb and Vienna. On December 24, 2018, Davor was arrested and the symbols of the protest (among others, *David's heart* made of candles on the pavement) were removed from the square and people were chased off and hurt by police, a repressive response of the authorities in the Republic of Srpska. On the one hand, the arrest of Davor Dragičević in December 2018 provoked an even stronger anger, dissatisfaction and disappointment with the governments and the institutions. On the other hand, it strengthened the bonds of solidarity and support throughout the Western Balkans and beyond. »*Pravda za Dženana! Pravda za Davida i svu našu djecu!*« (»Justice for Dženan! Justice for David and all our children!«) echoed through the streets of many Western Balkan cities.

With an already long history of protests and social movements, Bosnia and Herzegovina serves as an important regional example on dynamics, challenges, achievements, and also failures of contentious movements. It also provides insight into patterns of democratic innovation, such as the »*plena*«.

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DEALING WITH SOCIAL MOVEMENTS – GOVERNMENT RESPONSES TO SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN THE BALKANS AND TURKEY

The reactions of governments to the demands and actions of social movements are rarely the object of the analysis in the Balkans. A lot has been said on the repertoires of these movements, their narratives and organizing principles, but what kind of action they have elicited from the side of regimes is not systematically explored. Therefore, we wanted to focus our attention on several country-based cases that spurred perhaps the most media coverage in past decade. Colourful revolutions have been successful in regime change and therefore are not included in this overview. The initiatives mentioned here include the movement against the destruction of »Gezi Park« in Istanbul, »Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own«, »Justice for David« from Banja Luka, and the movement against the destruction of the »National Theatre« in Tirana. Even though the example from Turkey exceeds the regional boundaries of southeastern Europe, we consciously included the »Gezi Park« protests as a very illustrative example of authoritarian response to the grassroots demands and protests.

Departing from an understanding of discourse as a mechanism which gives meaning to social action, we investigate patterns in government actions towards these social movements and their production of the meaning. We point out some of the constant elements in government narratives about these social movements and also indicate how those elements gain specificities depending on the context. The main elements of government narratives about the social movements can be put into the five categories: (1) the movement is not authentic because it is being governed by hidden actors which aim at destroying the country, (2) the movement's members are people with problematic behaviour – vandals, hooligans, drug users, (3) the movement is unimportant because its supporters can be always outnumbered by those who support the regime, (4) the movement's supporters do not understand development and want to stop modernization, (5) the movement aims to politicize questions which are not political.

We also single out some patterns in the practical side of government reactions to these social movements. Constant elements include police violence, arrests, intimidation through violence, legal prosecution, and negative media campaigns through pro-regime media.

– small minority
– bad behaviour
– political interests
– against the nation
– funded by foreigners
– retrograde forces

THE MOVEMENT AGAINST THE DESTRUCTION OF THE »GEZI PARK« IN ISTANBUL (GPI)

The case of GPI relates to a series of demonstrations that played out in 2013 regarding the attempts of Turkey's government to remove Gezi Park from the centre of Istanbul in order to build a shopping mall in its place. The demonstrations started with a peaceful gathering of eco-activists that blocked Gezi Park by sitting in it (sit-in) but quickly escalated into a violent confrontation of the police with the protesters. The protesters made quickly clear through their chants and media appearances that they were protesting against the authoritarian government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.[16]

In his media appearances, Erdogan tried to discredit the protests. He claimed that an »interest rate lobby« was behind the protest – implying that the protest was led by bankers who were preventing the investments and slowing down the development of the country by keeping interest rates high.[17] Erdogan also discredited the protests by diminishing their significance, calling the protesters »a few vandals.«[18] On another occasion he pointed out that »foreigners« were spotted among the protesters as well as that »extremists implicated in terrorism« were hiding among the protesters.[19] The mayor of Istanbul, Kadir Topbas, claimed that the protests were being manipulated for the purpose of a »political agenda.«[20] Also, Erdogan stated for

16 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/31/istanbul-protest-ers-violent-clashes-police

17 https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-pm-erdogan-calls-for-immediate-end-to-gezi-park-protests--48381; https://www.hurri-yetdailynews.com/opinion/erdogan-alkin/is-there-really-an-interest-rate-lobby--12041

18 https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-22744728

19 https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-22801548

20 https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/tur-key/10092490/Tear-gas-fired-at-protesters-in-Istanbul.html

the media that the protests was caused by »foreign powers« in cooperation with »domestic extremists and bankers.«[21] He also condemned the role of the media in organizing protests – in particular social media, calling them a »menace« tasked with spreading lies.[22] Erdogan also accused protesters of violently intruding into mosques, consuming alcoholic drinks, and assaulting women.[23] The climax of the government's opposition to the Gezi Park protests came when Erdogan's »Justice and Progress« party organized a counter-protest. Erdogan attempted to show that his followers outnumber the protestors, claiming that for every 20,000 protesters, he would gather 200,000 followers, and for every 100,000 protesters he would gather a million.[24]

Elements we can spot in the practical side of the government's actions against the GPI's protests are police violence in the form of throwing tear gas, burning protesters' tents, and using water cannons. Also, the police prevented a certain number of protesters from the eastern side of Istanbul from joining the protest. In her analysis of the dynamics of the relation between police and protesters, Damirel-Pegg claims that police violence escalated the protesters' violence and that the protest were suppressed only when police started arresting protesters.[25]

JUSTICE FOR DAVID (JFD)

In the case of JFD (see above for the context of Justice for David) the reactions of the government in the Republika Srpska (RS) were marked by tensions related to the autonomy of RS and its relation to the other BiH entity, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH).

The narrative of the entity government can best be seen through the media appearances of Milorad Dodik, at that time President of RS. Dodik claimed that the movement's members were aiming to abolish the autonomy of RS, saying the protests were a »politicizing« the murder and claimed that political interests were behind the protest.[26] In his view, these political interests encroached on RS autonomy, focusing on JFD's request to reform the police force, and the potential to centralize the police force in FBiH.[27] On another occasion, Dodik claimed that JFD, Bijeljina television (BN televizija), and opposition parties were all part of a conspiracy aiming to abolish the autonomy of RS, funded by

Great Britain in order to weaken the influence of Russia in the Balkans[28].

Besides claims like these, there were also attempts to personally discredit David Dragičević's parents. In one interview, Dodik claimed that David's family was problematic since his parents divorced while he was a child.[29] There were also attempts to discredit the protest in media appearances of Lukač, RS's minister of internal affairs who claimed that violent football fans from FBiH were joining JFD's protests.[30] He also claimed that the protests became problematic when opposition politicians joined them because they were attacking the police and some among them had been »tried for drugs.«[31]

The RS government practically reacted to this movement's protests by violently suppressing them and arresting protestors, among which the arrest of David's father, Davor Dragičević, stands out. The government claimed that he was arrested for »disturbing public order and peace« and for »disturbing security« because of threats he allegedly made against minister Lukač.[32] The movement's protests have since been prohibited with the explanation that they constantly disturb public peace and order and obstruct the normal functioning of traffic.[33] Since dozens of activists received criminal charges and sentences, and the death of David Dragičević has not yet been clarified, activists united in the protests founded the Put Pravde association in order to continue the legal struggle.[34]

THE MOVEMENT AGAINST THE DEMOLITION OF THE NATIONAL THEATRE IN TIRANA (NTT)

NTT organized gatherings around the National Theatre and attempted to physically prevent its demolition in May 2020, for which – as protesters argued – the government has not secured the proper permits to carry it out. The movement became popular and the protesters quickly started protesting against the government of the Prime Minister Edi Rama, accusing him of corruption and dictatorship.

The most important media appearances that demonstrated the government's narrative about this movement are those of the Prime Minister Edi Rama and the mayor of Tirana, Erion Veliaj. Veliaj claimed the National Theatre must be demolished because it could not be renovated. He

21 https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-pm-erdogan-calls-for-immediate-end-to-gezi-park-protests--48381

22 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-22744728

23 https://www.latimes.com/world/worldnow/la-fg-wn-erdogan-protesters-vandals-20130609-story.html

24 https://www.haaretz.com/erdogan-for-every-100-000-protesters-i-will-bring-out-a-million-from-my-party-1.5272067

25 Demirel-Pegg, Tijen. 2019, »The Gezi Park Protests and the Escalation and De-escalation of Political Contention,« *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 22(1):1–18.

26 http://ba.n1info.com/Vijesti/a389149/Dodikova-ponuda-grupi-Pravda-za-Davida.html

27 https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/29217553.html

28 https://www.danas.rs/svet/dodik-niko-pa-ni-davor-dragicevic-ne-moze-da-rusi-rs/

29 https://www.rtvbn.com/3916268/dodik-davoru-nije-ugasena-krsna-slava-ima-jos-jednog-sina

30 https://www.danas.rs/svet/lukac-na-skup-pravda-za-davida-ce-doci-navijacke-grupe/

31 https://www.blic.rs/vesti/republika-srpska/lukac-nakon-nereda-u-banjaluci-skupovi-pravda-za-davida-na-trgu-krajine-zabranjeni/tw1rwdn

32 https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/29675546.html

33 https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/jugosfera/3020186-zabranjeni-protesti-grupe-pravda-za-davida-policija-ce-hapsiti-sve-koji-prek-se-ovu-odluku

34 https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/vazno/13029/

called it a »shed« and claimed that the new one would be bigger and better equipped.[35] Edi Rama called the protesters »professional troublemakers«, claiming that the same group of people is hiding behind every protest against projects in Tirana. He also accused those against the demolition of the National Theatre of simply »not liking development.«[36]

The practical actions of the government against the movement consisted of a violent suppression of peaceful protests.[37] The government also used the situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in order to demolish the National Theatre without any major opposition by the citizens.[38]

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All the movements emerged in semi-authoritarian states like Serbia or states with deep political conflicts like Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in most cases the focus of their actions quickly expanded from addressing a concrete problem to protesting the overall undemocratic tendencies and state capture in their respective countries. The governmental responses of to their claims is usually verbalized by the authoritarian leaders and the incumbent political parties through the regime-controlled media channels. The authoritarian context is a fertile ground for narratives brand protestors as conspirators that promote someone's interests. Framing the movements as enemies of the country and the nation is used to justify all possible types of coercive measures including violence against protestors.

35 https://exit.al/en/2018/09/30/the-alliance-for-the-protection-of-the-atre-fights-to-preserve-albanias-cultural-heritage/; https://apnews.com/article/3d6da80184a5060cb1b4069341beea37

36 https://www.dezeen.com/2020/05/19/protests-tirana-ahead-big-al-banian-national-theatre-demolished-news/

37 https://balkaninsight.com/2020/05/17/albania-premier-edi-rama-de-stroys-national-theatre/

38 https://apnews.com/article/3d6da80184a5060cb1b4069341beea37

5

CHANELLING BOTTOM-UP ENERGIES TOWARDS THE POLITICAL

FROM CONTENTIOUS INITIATIVES TO POLITICAL PLATFORMS: *MOZEMO!* AND *NE DAVIMO BEOGRAD*

Since the end of single party rule, civil society, protest, and social movements in Southeastern Europe have largely organized in response to the perceived shallowness and inequity of the broader post-socialist transition. The path of political development in the region has been profoundly distorted by the legacy of communist and 1990s authoritarian regimes, economic liberalization which was massively abused for economic gain by the ruling elites, and state capture. While confronting such tendencies on the municipal, regional, and national level, civic activists have deliberately distanced themselves from their expected allies exemplified in mainstream left-wing and social democratic parties, which they have seen as complicit in the worst aspects of post-transition governance.[39] Finally, activists have increasingly come to recognize that structural change in their respective societies is difficult to achieve without them eventually taking their struggle to the realm of electoral politics. Two principal ways to enter the political arena for civil society activists in social movements are through joining proxy social democratic parties or by means of creating their own electoral platforms.

This section looks more closely into the establishment of two such platforms, namely *Možemo! (We can!)* from Croatia, and *Ne Davimo Beograd* (literally Let's not drawn Belgrade, but also an allusion to We will not give up on Belgrade) from Serbia. Both started by addressing the idea of the Right to the City, invoking a long tradition of urban opposition to neoliberal city transformation, first captured by Henry Lefebvre in the 1960s,[40] understood as the collective right to intervene to reshape the urbanization process.

Popular and scholarly attention regarding contemporary cycles of protest in Southeast Europe have witnessed a growing cycle of contention focused around the common banner of the Right to the City since the mid-2000s. Prominent examples include the Initiative for the Protection of *Peti Park* in Belgrade, followed by student protests and occupations in Zagreb and Belgrade in 2008 and 2009, violent protests against the Maribor mayor in Slovenia in 2012, *Park is ours* protests in Banja Luka in 2012, Gezi Park

protests in opposition to the reconstruction of the Ottoman era Taksim Military Barracks in Istanbul in 2013, violent riots across Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2014, as well as the 2015 anti-government protests in North Macedonia. What distinguishes the present case studies, however, is their gradual growth into the main source of opposition to neoliberal city transformations, subsequent institutionalization of contestation, and finally its transfer to the national level.

Briefly summarized, the present section conceptualizes, observes, and compares activist platforms that emerged in Zagreb and Belgrade over the past decade in order to identify their characteristics and to trace how their nature changed over time in the light of augmented efforts for inclusion in decision-making affecting the restructuring of their urban, and/or national habitat.

RIGHT TO THE CITY INITIATIVES

Choosing the local level of government as an entry point, Zagreb's Right to the City and Belgrade's *Ne davimo Beograd* drew inspiration from Barcelona en Comú and other experiences that »focus on the municipality as a strategic site for developing transformative and prefigurative politics«.[41] In both cases, these initiatives sprung from right to the city groups engaged for years in activism against aggressive urbanism, the rampant privatization of public spaces, and anti-corruption platforms.

Zagreb's Right to the City first started in early 2000s as an initiative established by several civil society organizations in the field of independent culture and youth who, after joining forces with a voluntary association of citizens for environmental protection, the Green Action, engaged in a campaign for the preservation of public space in Zagreb's city centre. Their campaign was motivated by the City's systemic mismanagement of public space and public resources to the benefit of private investors. Concretely, their campaign was directed against modifications of City of Za-

39 Bieber, F. and D. Brentin. (2019). *Social Movements in the Balkans: Rebellion and Protest from Maribor to Taksim*. Routledge.

40 Lefebvre, H. (1968). *Le droit a la ville* (Paris, Anthropos).

41 Milan, C. 2019. From the streets to the town halls: local governance and municipalist platforms in Croatia and Serbia. Available at https://minim-municipalism.org/magazine/from-the-streets-to-the-town-halls-local-governance-and-municipalist-platforms-in-croatia-and-serbia.

greb Masterplan that allowed for redevelopment of historic *Cvjetni trg* public square (Flower Market Square) in order to suit the needs of a private investor who planned to build a shopping mall and an underground garage, thus, as claimed by the initiative, destroying the City's pedestrian zone and protected heritage buildings. Their call against the marginalization of the public in the matters of urban development has accomplished high social mobilization between 2006 and 2010, whereby more than eighty public actions were undertaken, including mass rallies or several citizens' occupations of the nearby Varšavska street, aiming primarily at drawing public's attention and raising the issue to the level of public debate. Although the campaign did not succeed in stopping the project, the initiative managed to protract its realization for four years, cut it in size by half, and force the City Mayor to revert all changes to the Masterplan.

The *Ne davimo Beograd* initiative was set up in 2014 to oppose the controversial Belgrade Waterfront project, and the way the process of its planning and implementing was carried out. The Belgrade Waterfront, labelled an endeavour of national importance by the Serbian government, is an approximately 2.7 billion Euro ongoing investment into a brownfield part of Belgrade, aiming to transform it into upscale apartment blocks and shopping centres on the riverbank. The project itself remains contested not only by local architectural associations concerned with the viability of foreseen mega-construction, but also by citizens who bring into question the lack of transparency in a controversial joint venture contract between the government of the Republic of Serbia and a private company from the United Arab Emirates. The initiative has already been raising objections towards the project for over a year, when during election night between April 24 and 25, 2016, the illegal demolition of several sites on the Belgrade riverbank in the Savamala district's took place in order to pave the way for the Waterfront project. The demolition was carried out by masked people armed with baseball bats, using unmarked cars and excavators. However, even more shocking was subsequent lack of response by the Belgrade police, which has purposely declined numerous calls made by the assaulted citizens to investigate events in Savamala. In reaction to the failure of the state to protect rights of its citizens, but also the government's shady business deals, the media cover-up of the incident, and finally threats against independent state institutions investigating the event, *Ne davimo Beograd* staged the first out of eight massive rallies in Belgrade under the title ›The Masks have Fallen‹, demanding *inter alia* the resignations of a number of state officials. In addition, the initiative has explored other means of fighting for the public interest of citizens, such as actions, prevention of evictions, analysis of strategies, conversations in local communities, the organization of concerts and exhibitions, etc. Nevertheless, the lack of clearly verbalized demands, but also the authoritarian setting under which the initiative's activists have continuously been exposed to police monitoring, phone tapping, involved in large number of court processes and smear campaigns in the tabloid media close to the government circles, did not manage to stop the Belgrade Waterfront project.

Despite the apparent failure of both Right to the City and *Ne davimo Beograd* initiatives' primary goals, namely to prevent large private investment projects that aimed to privatize public space and infrastructure in Zagreb and Belgrade respectively, both have managed to attract a number of independent organizations, experts, lawyers, academics, journalists, architects, and urban planners. By creating such broad network of contacts dedicated to fostering the issue of popular participation in the development of the city, these initiatives have created large avenues for a prospective political evolution. At the same time, by gathering more people at the political protests than any opposition party in the last ten years, they have sent a strong message to the mainstream opposition that they might no longer represent the only credible contender to political power, at least in Croatian and Serbian capital cities. Furthermore, the Right to the City and *Ne davimo Beograd* have introduced an innovative approach to civil society campaigning, based on continuous public presence and tactical actions against the closed media environment of capital-dominated and populist politics. Finally, the Flower Square and Savamala became nation-wide symbols of corrupt urban development plans. This, in turn, encouraged citizen groups and initiatives outside capitals to engage publicly against similar mismanagements occurring in their local communities.

The echo of Zagreb protests was immediately heard in Dubrovnik, where the Right to the City has provided support to *Srd je naš (Srdj is ours)*, a local initiative that organized a referendum campaign opposing the construction of luxury golf resorts, as well as in Istria, where the *Volim Pulu (I love Pula)* initiative protested against the extensive commercialization of the city's coastline. In Serbia, numerous local initiatives addressed the mismanagement of public space and public resources in their communities, for example, the Local Front, an initiative from Kraljevo, the Association of Presidents of Tenant Assemblies, an initiative from Niš, the Multi-ethnic Center for the Region's Development Danube 21, in Bor, Defend the Rivers on Stara planina initiative, etc.

By joining forces with the workers of Zagreb-based *Kamensko* textile factory in disclosing details on the systemic mismanagement of factory due to the privatization blunders,[42] the Right to the City made an effort to improve collaboration between urban and social justice actors. Ultimately, the biggest breakthrough for the Right to the City came in 2014, when together with seven unions and seven civil society organizations, the initiative launched a country-wide petition for a referendum campaign against the privatization of Croatian Highways.[43] By collecting almost half a

42 Sven Milekić, Fallen Croatian Textile Company Weaves New Future, *BalkanInsight*. April 7, 2016. See https://balkaninsight.com/2016/04/07/fallen-croatian-textile-company-weaves-new-future-04-06-2016/

43 Sven Milekic, Half a Million Croats Petition Against Highway Sale, *BalkanInsight*. October 30, 2014. See https://balkaninsight.com/2014/10/30/half-a-million-signatures-against-croatian-highway-concession/

million signatures, the Right to the City has received nationwide recognition which opened up new potentials to consider popular participation in political life.

THE FORMATION OF POLITICAL PLATFORMS

Over the last several years, both the Right to the City and *Ne davimo Beograd* underwent transitions from conventional NGO structure to more or less formalized political movements which a self-understanding as new leftist parties or the new left in the Balkans. Volunteer activism has served as a useful mean of initial mobilization and attracted project-based funding which than could have been spent for wider political aims, however this platform has become »either irrelevant, (or) part of the problem«,[44] as amidst the semi-authoritarian setting it has failed to produce substantive social change. Without clearer personal, financial, and logistical infrastructure that organizations secure for movements, they risked that their voluntarism would burn out, and the movement would lose its capacity to mobilize. Facing the dilemma of institutionalization or radicalization as possible trajectories for social movements' trajectories as proposed by Tarrow[45], the Right to the City and Ne davimo Beograd concluded that the growth of the movement inevitably necessitated organization-building and hence deeper bureaucratization.

Avoiding the trap of losing the public trust in their movements once they become institutionalized as political parties, the transition had to be carefully balanced between »robustness necessary to structure contention and flexibility that ensures vitality«.[46] As explained by leaders of the Right to the City, conventional institutionalization of the new left movements in the region was based on two explicit principles, namely the principle of »tactical shapeshifting« whereby an organization is understood as a »framework rather than as being embodied in an institution«[47] and secondly, »tactical networking« with actors and organizations of civil society, but also with trade unions and other institutional actors. While needed, the organizational bureaucratization of movements also had to prevent them from eventually becoming conventional players in the political arena, thus no longer posing a challenge to the status quo. The solution to this matter was sought in employing principles of participatory and democratic participation in decision making regarding targets, repertoires of contention, chosen framings, and potential partnerships that newly established movements would make.

44 Bilić, B. and Stubbs, P. (2015) »Unsettling ›The Urban‹ in Post-Yugoslav Activisms: Right to the City and Pride Parades in Serbia and Croatia«, in Jacobsson, K. (ed) (2015) *Urban Grassroots Movements in Central and Eastern Europe*. (Farnham and Burlington, Ashgate: 127.

45 Tarrow, S. (2011). *Power in Movement. Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

46 Dolenec, D., K. Doolan and T. Tomašević. (2017). Contesting Neoliberal Urbanism on the European Semi-periphery: The Right to the City Movement in Croatia, *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 69, issue 9, 1401–1429: 1419.

47 Ibid.

Based on these principles, the *Zagreb je NAŠ* (Zagreb is OURS!) political platform was formed in February 2017 by activists, cultural workers, trade unionists, social entrepreneurs etc., many of whom were already active in Zagreb's social movements. In April 2017, the Platform formed the *Lijevi blok* (Left Bloc) coalition with four left and green parties in Zagreb, creating for the first time an alliance of progressive political organizations in Zagreb. Capitalizing on years of activism, participating in municipal elections held in Zagreb in May 2017, the coalition won 7.6 percent of votes earning four out of fifty-one seats in Zagreb City Assembly, twenty-one seats in city districts, and also forty-one seats in local councils.

On the other hand, the *Ne davimo Beograd* initiative simultaneously engaged with economic and political topics, arguing that the citizens of Belgrade are experiencing not only economic exploitation but also exclusion from decision-making processes. The initiative started internal organization-building process seeking to actively involve citizens in the elaboration of its political program. It pledged to promote a participatory approach which combined in-person assemblies and meetings in the neighbourhoods with online forums, however, without forsaking the NGO format. After losing the momentum of massive protests against the Waterfront project, the initiative reverted to more conventional forms of participation to address the city's disregard of their demands. During the 2017 presidential elections, the initiative supported an independent candidate, former Ombudsperson Saša Janković, who won 16,35 percent of vote. However, the first major test of initiative's undertakings were 2018 Belgrade assembly elections in which the *Ne davimo Beograd* participated independently under the electoral list called 'Initiative do not let Belgrade drown – Yellow duck – Whose city, our city - Ksenija Radovanović', introducing their political platform for the first time. The initiative received 3.44 % of votes, which was not enough to meet the 5 percent threshold for entering the city's assembly. Nevertheless, positive results in three central Belgrade municipalities have left enough ground for optimism regarding the initiative's political future.

NATIONAL CONTESTATION

Both the Right to the City in Croatia and *Ne davimo Beograd* in Serbia began by engaging in urban social struggles. However, the urban environment from which these groups initiated their struggle represents at the same time their strength and their weakness. While the urban context offers a breeding ground for mobilization over municipal inequalities and rising costs of living, on the other hand it risks limiting their support base to predominantly urban middle-class living in capital cities. Hence, both municipal organizations are presently succeeding in uniting a broader coalition of actors at the national level.

In Croatia, *Zagreb je Naš* further expanded its visibility on national level by establishing Možemo! (We can!) as a na-

tional political platform. Ahead of the 2020 Croatian parliamentary elections, the party presented a joint program and lists of candidates including other green-left coalition partners which consisted of *Nova ljevica* (New Left), *Radnička fronta* (Workers' Front), *ORaH* (Sustainable Development of Croatia), and *Za grad* (For the City). *Možemo*, defined as an eco-socialist and social progressive political party, was officially founded with primary areas of interest being education, health policies, social and gender equality, support for migrants, renewable sources of energy, and sustainable agriculture. In July 2020 parliamentary elections the coalition won 6.99 percent of votes and 7 seats in parliament, with more than 48 per cent of votes coming outside of the city of Zagreb.

In Serbia, *Ne davimo Beograd*, along with seven other authentic local movements formed a national level coalition called the Civic Front. Citing the lack of conditions for free and fair elections, the coalition has decided to boycott the 2020 early parliamentary elections, and has instead continued forming alliances with related movements, such as former mayor of the city of Šabac, Nebojša Zelenović's movement *Zajedno za Srbiju* (Together for Serbia), Civic Democratic Forum, and the initiative Together for Kragujevac. Their joint political platform presumes efforts for creation of conditions for fair elections, and reflects principles of solidarity, equality, social security and tolerance for the removal of authoritarian rule, the democratization of society, the fight against poverty, and the preservation of public and natural assets.

6

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL

WHY SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND GRASSROOTS INITIATIVES ARE THE DECISIVE FACTOR FOR DEMOCRATIC CHANGE IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

Since 2008, it has been social movements and civil society that have advanced genuine progressive causes in Southeast Europe, rather than the respective party establishments.[48] Starting from the grassroots, these movements have shown huge transformative potential for triggering social change in their countries, and have already played an important role in destabilizing authoritarian political landscape in the region. Activists have recognized that structural change in their societies is impossible to achieve without taking their struggle to the realm of electoral politics and developing genuine platforms for political change. Bearing in mind the authoritarian nature of some of the countries in the region, it is crucial that international institutions and policy makers continue working with civil society representatives from Southeast Europe, both within and outside of established national institutions.

The vivid scene of social movements and bottom-up initiatives in Southeast Europe is a particularly important societal arena with potential to create different political actors and contribute to change of political culture and institutionalization of the more participatory models in institutional system. Expanding theoretical claims of Haunss and Leach that movement scenes or networks can function to support movement progress, we conclude that the Southeast European movement scenes are the *only* arena providing true political space and serving: (1) as a mobilization pool; (2) as a social space in which movements can experiment with new organizational structures, deliberative styles and modes of interaction; (3) as a »free space« for political debate and the exchange of information, in which new ideologies and collective identities are constructed and reproduced.[49]

One of the biggest challenges in societies in Southeast Europe is how to renew the modes of democratic representation, which are currently limited and controlled by dominant political parties and structures. This renewal and even (re)building new arenas for legitimate and authentic representation can only happen in a manner that opens up representation for ordinary citizens, their needs, desires and hopes. As Hélène Landemore argues in her recently published book *Open Democracy*, this renewal can only happen through openness as an umbrella concept for general accessibility of power to ordinary citizens.

> *Whereas representation, especially of the electoral kind, always creates the risk of robbing the people of the right to participate in law-making, an open system guarantees that citizens can make their voices generally heard at any point in time and initiate laws when they are not satisfied with the agenda set by representative authorities. Openness prevents the closure and entrenchment of the divide between represented and representatives that inevitably accompany representation. Openness means that power flows through the body politics, as opposed to stagnates with a few people.*[50]

It is precisely the contrast between power that stagnates with a few people or is usurped by the few to the power which flows and resonates with common citizens. While the former stands for the authoritarian power the latter stands for the genuine democratic power – the power of people.

In this study, we discussed various types of contentious movements and bottom-up forms of participation. We called them »calls for democracy«. The movements that managed the transformation towards political parties do stand for a different, more open, inclusive, and equal approach to politics. The examples of Možemo in Croatia or NDB in Serbia prove it, even though NDB operates in country with an authoritarian regime. Other bigger movements and protests in the region, like Bosnia's 2014 revolution, Colourful Revolution in Macedonia, Justice for David, or 1of5million not only allowed anger and disappointment to find their way to the surface and become political, but also managed to set new frames, challenge the powerful, and even introduce and popularize new modes of participation. Last but not least, various smaller and locally rooted civic struggles and informal citizens' protests and actions do stand for a new alternative system of checking and controlling politics and decision-making processes on the local level. All of them are radically embedded in the ideas of democratic engagement, openness, and genuine accessibility of power to ordinary citizens.

48 Bieber, F. and D. Brentin. (2019). Social Movements in the Balkans: Rebellion and Protest from Maribor to Taksim. Routledge.

49 Haunss S. and Leach D. K. (2007). *Social Movement Scenes. Infrastructures of Opposition in Civil Societies and Social Movements. Potentials and Problems.* Routledge. 71–87: 82.

50 Landemore, H. (2020). Open Democracy. Reinventing Popular Rule for the Twenty-First Century, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford: 11

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Gazela Pudar Draško is a director at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory at the University of Belgrade and an Executive Board Member of the Institute for Democratic Engagement Southeast Europe.

Vedran Džihić is a Senior Researcher at the oiip (Austrian Institute for International Affairs), Executive Board Member of the Institute for Democratic Engagement Southeast Europe and co-director of Center for Advanced Studies Southeast Europe at the University of Rijeka.

Marko Kmezić is lecturer and senior researcher at the Centre for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz, and Coordinator of the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group.

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(UNHEARD) CALLS FOR DEMOCRACY FROM BELOW

Social and protest movements and potentials for democratic renewal

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Most contemporary social movements in Southeast Europe are ad-hoc spontaneous self-organized initiatives. They arise »overnight« through the spontaneous mobilization of citizens around some usually local problem or goal. These movements have a certain level of authenticity and autonomy in their activities and they are not created by other »external« actors or out of already existing organizations and movements. They are often informal or unregistered and can range from small local neighborhood initiatives to large social movements that organize mass demonstrations.

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All the movements emerged in semi-authoritarian states like Serbia or states with deep political conflicts like Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in most cases the focus of their actions quickly expanded from addressing a concrete problem to protesting the overall undemocratic tendencies and state capture in their respective countries. The governmental responses of to their claims is usually verbalized by the authoritarian leaders and the incumbent political parties through the regime controlled media channels. The authoritarian context is a fertile ground for narratives brand protestors as conspirators that promote someone's interests.

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The path of political development in the region has been profoundly distorted by the legacy of communist and 1990s authoritarian regimes, economic liberalization which was massively abused for economic gain by the ruling elites, and state capture. While confronting such tendencies on the municipal, regional, and national level, civic activists have deliberately distanced themselves from their expected allies exemplified in mainstream left-wing and social democratic parties, which they have seen as complicit in the worst aspects of post-transition governance.

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