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Social movements in Southeast Europe: from urban mobilisation to electoral competition

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ABSTRACT

This special issue explores the role of grassroots activism and social movements in creating counter-spaces of democratic learning and resistance to authoritarianism in Southeast Europe in the 2020s. It investigates the role of social movements and new political actors on the Left in containing democratic decline as well as their attempts to strengthen democracy from below. The contributions to this special issue demonstrate how social movements, which emerged across Southeast Europe in the last decade, can be conceived as spaces of innovation resistance, and also act as important bulwarks against democratic backsliding. Furthermore, the articles delve into the factors that foster the engagement of social movement actors in electoral politics, exploring the trajectories that political parties take when they enter into the electoral arena.

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Introduction

Contemporary scholarship has been concerned with democratic backsliding in Southeast Europe (Castaldo 2020), characterised by rising authoritarian trends and a series of political, economic, and social crises over the last decade (Bieber 2019; Kapidžić 2020). Nonetheless, the role of grassroots activism and social movements in creating counter-spaces of democratic learning and resistance to authoritarianism has been given scant attention so far. To fill this gap, this special issue investigates the roles that social movements and new political actors on the Left play in containing democratic decline, as well as their attempts to strengthen democracy from below. In so doing, we aim to offer an alternative position to the mainstream accounts of Southeast Europe that view the region as mainly a space of backsliding, illiberalism, and stabilocracy. We do this by exploring the challenges to authoritarian trends that emerge from the grassroots level, looking at the different forms these movements and organisations take, ranging from street protests to political campaigns and, in certain cases, the creation of electoral platforms. The contributions to this special issue show that the social movements which emerged across Southeast Europe in the last decade can be conceived as spaces of innovation and resistance, constituting important bulwarks against democratic backsliding.

As a starting point, this special issue draws on a crucial insight by Dimitrova (2018), who argues that a more sound assessment of the future of democracy in post-socialist

Europe must include two dimensions frequently missing in existing analyses: (1) an understanding of the political economy that shapes state-society relations and (2) a bottom-up perspective accounting for the ways in which democracy emerges from below and advances through mass mobilisation that pushes elites to make concessions to popular demands. As guest editors of this special issue, we thus invited contributors to reflect upon how these dimensions of democracy develop and interact in post-socialist Balkans. Several of the studies included in this volume provide a careful assessment of political economies in the region, maintaining a particular focus on Croatia and Serbia (see Doleneć, Kralj, and Balković 2023; Vukelić and Pešić 2023). Evidence suggests that the Great Recession brought about a substantial worsening of circumstances in already impoverished societies characterised by existential insecurity regarding employment and housing, resulting in social crises. This condition of deprivation sparked social mobilisation all over the region, bringing about the emergence of social movements and new political actors that, in several cases, entered the electoral arena in the aftermath of these protests. Therefore, another set of articles explores the trajectories of these movements – namely their evolution from urban movements, as they were at their onset, to political parties – and the demands they put forward (see Dinev 2023; Kralj 2023; Pajvančić-Cizelj 2023; Staletović and Pollozhani 2023).

As evidenced by the case studies consulted in this volume, mass protest waves occurred in many cities across Southeast Europe in the last decade: in Zagreb in 2011 and 2015; in Maribor and Ljubljana in 2012; in Skopje in 2016; and in Belgrade and other Serbian cities in 2017 and 2019. Popular mobilisation did not occur simultaneously across the region because the density of social movements, coupled with their varied networks, are different across states. Yet, during the decade of the Great Recession, a large number of popular mobilisations gave rise to new social movements everywhere in the region. Though they cannot be equated with the anti-austerity protest wave that swept Western and Southern Europe between 2011 and 2015, these mobilisations shared a very important feature with other protest waves across Europe: a distrust of political elites and a demand for more democracy. Regardless of different contextual features, all of these mobilisations shared an anti-establishment sentiment, voicing distrust towards the political elites, condemning political corruption, and demanding more democratic control. In 2014, protestors in North Macedonia campaigned to get involved in the urban redevelopment project of the capital, while in the 2016 Colourful revolution protestors demanded the end of elite corruption, mobilising in defense of the rule of law (Staletović and Pollozhani 2023). In Slovenia, the 2012 protest movement took an anti-establishment stance against the conservative government of Janez Janša (Dinev 2023). In Serbia, the social mobilisations erupted in 2014, 2017, and 2019 all addressed the authoritarian nature of the Serbian elite, criticising their illiberal policies (Kralj 2023; Pajvančić-Cizelj 2023; Vukelić and Pešić 2023). In Croatia, anti-eviction actors framed evictions and debt within a broader anti-establishment rhetoric (Doleneć, Kralj, and Balković 2023).

Furthermore, the articles explore the extent to which mass mobilisations in Southeast Europe have created openings in the political opportunity structure, and propelled a strategic realignment among social movement actors, towards entering party politics and contesting elections. In Croatia and Slovenia, the decision to take the electoral route was the prevailing strategy of social movements, ultimately leading to their

representation in parliament through election (Dinev 2023; Milan 2023). In Serbia, by contrast, a turn to electoral politics was not the main strategy chosen by movement actors. Their initial attempts were rather unsuccessful – until the green-left coalition *Moramo* (*We must*) entered both the National and City Assembly in 2022. The contributions to this issue address thus the phenomenon of the “electoral turn” that has been witnessed across the region, evidenced by the examples of Slovenia, all the way across Croatia and Serbia, stretching to North Macedonia, where social movement actors have decided to move from the streets to the electoral arena by forming political parties. Another goal of this special issue is to delve deeper into both the decisions of social movement actors to enter party politics, and to explore their underlying reasons for pursuing this path. The cases analysed show an interesting variation in whether and when social movement actors attempt to enter the electoral field in the first place, and whether this endeavour results in parliamentary representation after.

We will proceed as follows: first, we trace the evolution of urban movements in the region, scrutinising their features. Second, we look at their evolution (or lack thereof) over time, following their metamorphoses into political parties (or not).

Zooming in on urban movements in Southeast Europe

As mass popular mobilisation in the region reemerged in the 2010s after a period of standstill, scholarship became focused on the contextual factors explaining its resurgence. Amongst others, Horvat and Štiks (2015) shed light on the appearance of radical politics in the region, exploring groups and movements’ struggles to create their radically democratic visions for society. Some scholars focused on the emergence and development of regional urban movements in the aftermath of the Great Recession (Bieber and Brentin 2018; Dolenc, Doolan, and Tomašević 2017; Fagan and Ejduš 2020; Milan 2018; 2023), while others analysed and compared these mobilisations to forms of activist citizenship in Southeast Europe (Fagan and Sircar 2017). Relying on empirical cases, these studies moved the debate forward by arguing that, in a region that has always been portrayed as having “weak” civil societies and scant civic participation, there was actually a wealth of activism happening, largely outside professional non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Complementing more recent studies which focused on social movements in the region as a response to authoritarian and non-democratic tendencies (Draško, Fiket, and Vasiljević 2019), the contributions to this special issue add to the existing scholarship by showing that contemporary movements have not only expressed distrust towards institutions of liberal democracy, but have been fuelled by a drive toward democratic innovation, going beyond standard forms of association and representation. To that end, this special issue takes a step forward by investigating the challenges they face, thereby exploring their evolution into political subjects.

Laying to rest conceptions of post-socialist Southeast Europe as “catching up” with mature liberal democracies in terms of civil society activism and social movement development (Fagan and Sircar 2017), this special issue advances the scholarly agenda in two main directions. Firstly, it poses the question of whether these urban movements have faced and met the challenges of expanding operations beyond the city level, widening their support base beyond large urban centres. On the one hand, this concerns the question of scaling-up from urban centres such as Belgrade or Zagreb to the national political

arena, addressed by Pajvančić-Cizelj (2023). On the other hand, it relates to the socio-political profile of demonstrators. Were these mobilisations supported mainly by middle-class urban groups or have they been able to break out into mass mobilisations and “eventful protest”? The article by Vukelić and Pešić (2023) in this issue show how the answers to these questions have an impact on the resonance of movement demands.

Another set of questions that this special issue tries to answer concerns the triggers of mass mobilisation. The broader context of the Great Recession aggravated social conflicts, creating particular conditions in post-socialist Balkans. These conditions are as follows: the liberalisation of housing and urban policy, inadequate policies of urban planning, insufficient production of social housing, rising rents, and the broad-scale privatisation of public space (Jacobsson and Korolczuk 2020). When viewed from this perspective, it becomes clear why many of the movements analysed in this special issue initially emerged out of conflicts that stemmed from gross government encroachments onto public spaces or the inability of people to service debts related to basic housing needs (which implied a lack of government support). As Bieber and Brentin (2018) emphasise, though popular mobilisation and protest in Southeast Europe are broadly pro-democratic, more specific grievances pertaining to how authorities administer the common good, public space, and the state, are also identifiable; the authors adopt a particular focus on cases where the state has been captured by predatory political elites. The popular mobilisations analysed in this special issue fall almost exclusively under the rubric of urban movements, with organisational origins very often in capital cities.

Previous scholarship has already described social movements in the region as largely urban phenomena concerned with struggles over public space (Dolenec, Doolan, and Tomašević 2017; Jacobsson 2015; Vilenica et al. 2021) and in some cases, later developed into citizen engagement in municipalist initiatives (Milan 2023). As Goodfellow and Jackman (2020) argue, capital cities function as central sites in the “production of authoritarian dominance” and at the same time manifest as sites of massive resistance against state-generated repression. Cases of blatantly disrespectful encroachment onto public space, like the Belgrade Waterfront project, the project Skopje 2014, or Zagreb Manhattan, situated within the dense matrix of urban space, serve as lasting reminders of when business interests capture the state.

In this regard, Harvey (2013) draws our attention to the complex impact of urban movements, since, on the one hand, they are often understood as local, reformist attempts to deal with specific issues, while on the other hand they actually contain revolutionary potential because they use the *specific* as being emblematic of the *systemic*. Fundamentally, urban movements aim to establish democratic control over how urbanisation surplus is deployed (2013); as such, they are organised around a local issue. Nevertheless, the scale at which they operate, as well as how quickly they can transform, is more open-ended. In this issue, Pajvančić-Cizelj (2023) argues that going beyond the city, or “scaling up” as she theorises it, should be thought of as a maturation from problem-driven reactions to systemic political alternatives. To this insight, we add that it is also worth thinking about how the transformation of urban movements, through maturation in political organising, can change from a campaign logic to a stable organisational logic.

Notwithstanding the successful transformations that have occurred on the political left where urban movements have turned into parliamentary parties, urban movements, as a more general rule, have had a hard time scaling up, as well as having difficult experiences

with expanding beyond the urban spaces of capital cities. There are many reasons for this, and the contributions to this special issue shed new light on several factors that hampered their efforts to shift their operational and influential scales. First, as these studies show, urban movements on the political left strove to change the topics of mobilisation, trying to move the conversation away from the main cleavages of the particular region, namely, nationalism-cosmopolitanism and conservatism-secularism. As Kralj (2023) argues, in Serbia the dominant cleavages centre on perceived legacy of the past regime and unfinished state-building projects. Conversely, the initiative *Ne Davimo Beograd* (Don't let Belgrade drown, hereinafter NDB) put forward discourses which relied on the concepts of public good and the commons, aiming to re-signify the meaning of politics as popular engagement rather than a corrupted activity of the few. Nonetheless, ignoring established cleavages means that the claims advanced by movements of the urban left run the risk of being less "culturally resonant" (Snow and Benford 1988), thus running the related risk of being less likely to mobilise bystanders, as Staletović and Pollozhani emphasise in their contribution concerning North Macedonia. Along similar lines, Vukelić and Pešić argue that in contexts of massive unemployment and generalised social crisis, grievances expressed about large, but specific, redevelopment projects do not garner wide public traction and might fail to mobilise the wider public.

Second, with this greater clarity it becomes apparent that these urban movements attracted mainly the educated and the middle classes, as the rich empirical material provided by Vukelić and Pešić reveals. Relying on surveys of protesters in the 2017 and 2019 protest waves in Belgrade, the authors show how in both cases very few people belonging to the lower classes participated in the protests. The 2017 protest wave in Serbia mobilised mostly the younger – mainly student – population and the highly educated, middle-class professionals. By contrast, the 2010s mobilisations witnessed a clear dominance of the middle classes, i.e. the so-called civic elite – educated, employed, mostly working in the private sector. Similarly, Dinev (2023) maintains that in Slovenia, *Levica* (the Left), the party of the left that emerged from the protest cycle in 2012, is supported mostly by urban Slovenians, with the core of its voting base composed of the educated youth and middle classes. In a similar vein, in their contribution, Staletović and Pollozhani (2023) reveal how month-long protests during the Colourful Revolution remained squarely within the city centre of Skopje, perceived by those outside the city as elitist exercise aimed at boosting the sociopolitical profile of its participants.

The fact that the urban movements analysed in this issue have a largely middle-class base and that the dominant frames they have employed were articulated around political grievances – elaborating on the lack of democracy, weak rule of law, and corrupt elites, rather than concerns with socioeconomic hardships affecting the large majority of the population – are clearly connected. According to Vukelić and Pešić (2023), the middle-class base of the movements is the underlying factor responsible for the framing of grievances around the ousting of democratic institutions rather than economic grievances and social crises. In their contribution, the authors point to a lack of class solidarity on the part of the middle classes, attributing this to a host of factors: the middle classes are less affected by the economic crisis; neoliberalism is the dominant political-economic discourse in Serbia; the clientelist networks in business and government, composed of a substantial number of people, whose jobs depend on the loyalty to the regime; and that

working class people are perceived as loyal supporters of president Vučić – a phenomenon they view as originating from the long standing cleavage between the First Serbia and the Other Serbia. These two competing narratives identify, respectively, the conservative, anti-European Serbia (the “first”) opposed to the post-Milošević, cosmopolitan, and pro-European Serbian identity (the “other”) (Russell-Omaljev 2016). Finally, the authors point out that protesters in 2017 and 2019 run parallels between themselves and the anti-Milošević protesters in 2000 who took part in the demonstrations that culminated in the fall of government, rather than identifying themselves with global anti-austerity movements occurring at the time. Vukelić and Pešić interpret this as a sign that the protests remained localised and incapable of creating meaningful connections with transnational initiatives.

The contributions to this volume offer insights into alternative arguments as to why it is difficult for social movements and newly formed left-leaning parties of the region to expand their voter base and influence beyond the city. First, since several contributions provide careful genealogies of social movements in Slovenia, in Serbia, in North Macedonia, we learn quite a lot about the so-called “latent phase” of social movement development, which happens before and between mass protest events and protest cycles. The cases illustrate the gradual emergence and the politicisation of initially small radical left groups, their mutual influences, and overlapping membership that enables spillover, a building of trust, and the lesson-learning emerging from the creation of alliances. Staletović and Pollozhani convincingly elaborate on the stages of the latent phase of social movement organising during which movements themselves needed to develop faith in organising and mobilisation, and in standing up to the regime, explaining how this erupted with the Colourful Revolution several years later. This echoes Flesher Fominaya’s (2015) description of the long-term processes of network and organisation building that underpin the “spontaneous” eruptions of protest as they are described in and by the media.

This also stresses how resources matter, as well as the experience of working together and building trust. Several contributions to this issue – in particular Kralj, Staletović and Pollozhani, and Dinev in this issue – provide evidence that collaborations among initially small protest groups over time can develop into larger networks able to formulate new frames that resonate more broadly with the wider population, thus becoming capable of capturing national attention. In that sense, apart from the favourable political opportunity structure analysed in the following section, an equally important precondition for larger mobilisation, and for the transformation of social movements into electoral parties, is the slow building of a network of organisations with shared experience and mutual trust. Without this, eruptions of mass mobilisation might produce a considerable amount of energy which does not get channelled into political or institutional change.

Urban movements in Southeast Europe: from social mobilisation to electoral competition

Another aspect that the contributions to this special issue address concerns the reasons why social movement actors seek to form political parties. Namely, the contributors look at the factors that foster electoral engagement, also exploring the trajectories that parties take when they enter into the electoral arena. Recent transformations from municipal,

urban-based movements to national platforms, apart from the world-famous Spanish platform *Barcelona en Comu* (Barcelona in Common), include *Možemo!* (We can) in Croatia, which grew from a municipalist platform founded in Zagreb in 2017 to a party in government in 2022, with parliamentary representation and national voter support of around 10% (Sarnow and Tiedemann 2023). Similarly, as Dinev explains in his contribution, in 2012, Slovenian radical left-wing groups utilised mass protests to transform themselves from a coalition of social groups into a political party, *Levica*. *Levica* entered parliament in 2014 and has maintained parliamentary representation ever since; the party is currently the junior coalition partner in Slovenian government. Their choice to form a political party appears to follow the so-called “democratic turn” that social movements undertook after the 2008 crisis (Flesher Fominaya 2015) which resulted in a renewed engagement with the state.

The contributions here explore two set of factors that facilitated this shift from the contentious to the institutional arena. The first set concerns exogenous factors such as institutional openness of the system. The second regards the depth of agency of movement actors, in particular their perception of political opportunities. In considering the first of the two factors mentioned above, Dolenc, Kralj, and Balković (2023) stress the crucial role of the institutional openness of the system to new challengers (Tilly and Tarrow 2006), which, they claim, has facilitated the entrance of social movements into the political arena. The authors operationalise institutional openness as having three key aspects: the presence of free and competitive elections; formal regulations for new entrants seeking entry into the party system; and a degree of openness in the system in which party alignments can change to accommodate new entrants. For instance, in Croatia, parliamentary elections are territorially organised in multiple electoral districts; in Serbia, the whole territory serves as a single electoral district. Generally speaking, smaller and more regionalised parties have a better chance of reaching the minimum electoral threshold when a country is segmented in several electoral districts (Bochsler 2008; Vučićević and Jovanović 2015). If they are prohibitive, rules on political party registration may present further obstacles for new entrants, as in the case of Serbia. In Croatia, a hundred citizens can register a political party virtually free of charge, whereas the Law on Political Parties in Serbia has created demanding legal barriers for party registration, creating prohibitively high organisational and financial burden for potential new entrants into the party system (Jovanović 2019). As a result, instead of registering a political party, the Serbian civic initiative NDB entered the ballot as a list of candidates submitted by a group of voters, bypassing the cumbersome and prohibitive Law on Political Parties.

Partly because of differences in regulations, but partly as a function of the overall level of political openness, countries in the region have experienced different dynamics of party realignment that have either facilitated or hampered the access new political actors have had in national political systems. In Croatia, the weakening of the “duopoly” between the two main political parties created an opening in the political opportunities for new actors to challenge the system (see Dolenc and Širinić 2017; Dolenc, Kralj, and Balković 2023). In Serbia, the strong dominance of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) in the political system has closed off the political competition since 2012 (Stojiljković and Spasojević 2018). Concerning institutional openness, it is evident that regimes across Southeast Europe vary substantially, ranging from consolidated democracies such as Slovenia to the competitive authoritarian regimes of Serbia and

North Macedonia. Contemporary Serbia is classified as a competitive authoritarian regime (Bieber 2018; Bieber 2019) with clear evidence of democratic backsliding (Bochsler and Juon 2020). Analysts stress that manipulations of the electoral framework, attacks on the opposition, parliamentary boycotts, and a general absence of a level playing field for political competition have all negatively affected democracy in Serbia. North Macedonia qualifies as a semi-authoritarian regime, described as a country slowly moving towards authoritarianism, characterised by strong party patronage and high polarisation (Bieber 2019). Though Croatia may be criticised for various aspects of the quality of its democracy, Slovenia and Croatia both provide substantially stronger safeguards for open and free political competition compared to Serbia and North Macedonia. In conceptualising regime types on a continuum based on the extent to which liberal democratic safeguards are present, the contributions to this special issue suggest that in Slovenia and Croatia protest mobilisations encounter fewer obstacles in forming organisations and networks, thereby encouraging these protest movements to shift their focus to the electoral arena (which is not as viable in the contexts of Serbia or North Macedonia).

The contributors have considered other factors internal to social movements to explain why movement actors decided to enter the realm of political competition. Kralj (2023) adds an important element to this analysis by focusing on the changing perceptions of actors in relation to the political field, leading to their decision to compete for elections. In his contribution, he stresses the importance of how the 2016 and 2017 mass protest waves in Serbia altered movement actors' perceptions of the political opportunity structure, thereby compelling these movement actors to transform their discourse to one that more closely resembled that of a political party in order to communicate their electoral turn to their constituencies. The Left in the region has a history of organising as part of civil society, so entering party politics was not only a shift of strategic adaptation, but also a challenge for the activists' identity. The author reminds us that actors are historically and discursively grounded in their own routines and legacies (Doherty and Hayes 2018). Relying on McAdam's (2013) concept of cognitive liberation, Kralj argues that activist participation in mass protests changes their interpretation of a situation – which is also an aspect of activist participation that Dinev stresses in his contribution to this issue. In his explanation of how the new Slovenian left entered the parliamentary arena, Dinev ascertains that the perceived opening of political opportunities catalysed the transformation process of protest movements transitioning into legitimate political actors (political parties). Specifically, he argues that movement actors seized the moment: an opening of political opportunities simultaneously presented themselves during a period in which the traditional centre-left parties of the Slovenian political arena had collapsed; at the same time, left-populist forces, such as *Podemos* and *Syriza*, gained electoral success all over Europe.

Conclusions

To sum up, the contributions to this special issue provide a series of innovative insights that help us understand contemporary social movements in Southeast Europe. These contributions trace these social movements evolutions over time, an approach that, at this time of writing, had not been undertaken in a comprehensive manner.

By examining the role of protest mobilisations and social movements in the cases scrutinised by the contributors, it becomes clear that similar triggers sparked protest waves in other states across the region, and that the same demands were directed towards the political elite. All the contributions also noted a certain difficulty to scale upwards, mobilising beyond the city level, and that getting individuals from social demographics outside the urban middle-classes involved in the protests was difficult. By contrast, the contributors found that different factors served to catalyse or dissuade social movement actors in deciding on whether or not to enter the electoral arena by forming political parties. In all cases, social movement actors created electoral platforms with the goal of increasing democracy by entering the arena of electoral competition, challenging the partitocratic system from inside, and thus serving as bulwarks against democratic erosion. With the aim of restoring agency to citizens, they showed the number of possibilities available to them, and countered the sentiment of “feeling small” in front of the governing elite, a sensation described by a participant in the protests who was interviewed about their opposition to a gigantic urban redevelopment project: Skopje 2014 (see Staletović and Pollozhani 2023).

Nevertheless, notwithstanding widespread concerns about democratic authoritarianism in the region, Southeast Europe is not homogenous in terms of established democratic standards. Arguably, worrying trends of democratic erosion have been present both in Slovenia, which is often regarded as the poster child for the region, and in more obvious cases such as Serbia or North Macedonia. Therefore, the varied foci of the contributions in this issue enable us to understand how both individual countries, as well as the region more generally, can benefit from social movements and their related demands. In comparing the case studies of Serbia and North Macedonia, as well as Slovenia, we are able to see the types of political opportunities social movements have to access in the contexts of different political arenas.

Finally, this issue demonstrates the strength social movements in Southeast Europe carry in terms of re-signifying the meaning of politics by moving away from corrupt partitocracy to politics intended as a form of public engagement. Social movements in the region deliberately mobilised with the aim of rebuilding trust in democracy and to encourage political participation in largely apathetic societies by re-locating the locus of politics to the immediate, local setting, starting at the (mostly) urban scale. These contributions have also introduced new topics to the public discourse, mobilising populations by creating new political cleavages in their societies. The extent to which social movement actors are able to shape political systems in the region will be the focus of future research.

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