

Reclaiming the cities in the Western Balkans: from right to the city groups to municipalist platforms

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Abstract

In recent years, the privatization and commodification of natural resources, urban space and public services have inspired political mobilizations and protests in many places around the world. Various forms of urban mobilizations emerged in the last decade also in the Yugoslav successor states, often leading to the creation of Right to the City groups. Originating from these citizen initiatives, some Right to the City groups decided to move from the contentious field to the electoral arena by forming political platforms inspired to the global “new municipalist” movement. Municipalist platforms were formed and run for elections in Zagreb and Belgrade, the capitals of the former Yugoslav republics of Croatia and Serbia, to reclaim local autonomy on societal, environmental, economic and political matters. In Zagreb the attempt to move from the squares to town halls proved successful, to the extent that members of the municipalist platform entered first the city assembly and later the National Parliament. By contrast, in Belgrade the platform did not manage to reach the necessary threshold.

Inspired by the Spanish citizen platforms such as Barcelona en Comú, municipalist platforms in Croatia and Serbia at the same time dig into the legacy of the socialist era to retrieve and reappraise the historical experience of socialism and of self-government tools that were in place back then. In particular, they attempt to revive instruments for citizens’ political engagement and decision-making at the local level. They thus rethink and retrieve the complex and at times contested socialist heritage to inform their political imaginaries. In fact, the distinct type of municipalism they promote is at the same time rooted in the past socialist tradition and inspired (and influenced) by present municipalist experiences worldwide.

This article explores the strategies and trajectories of two municipalist initiatives, namely “Zagreb is ours” (*Zagreb je naš*) in Zagreb, Croatia and “We won't let Belgrade d(r)own” (*Ne davimo Beograd*) in Belgrade, Serbia. Based on ethnographic work, document analysis and a series of in-depth interviews with activists, the article investigates the ways in which these electoral platforms prefigure a different model of local governance and the extent to which they drew inspiration from the global municipalist movement, while at the same time being rooted on the domestic historical socialist experience.

Introduction

The last decade witnessed a growing momentum for grassroots local democratic initiatives aimed at seizing institutional power at the local level (Russell 2019). The idea to “subvert state-centrism” (Thompson 2020, 3) through local level of governance, that of municipalities, city governments and local councils, to radically transform it, is grounded on the vision of the municipality “as the best place to implement profound socioeconomic changes” (Dogliani 2002). The global new municipalist movement aims thus to “re-form the state at the municipal scale or prefigure a different kind of polis, rooted in the urban” (Thompson 2020, 3). Inspired to the principles of libertarian municipalism theorized by Murray Bookchin, based on self-governance communities (Bookchin 1995), the movement reclaims local autonomy on societal, environmental, economic, and political matters, as well as more transparency on political participation. The municipal is thus framed as a “strategic front” for developing a transformative politics of scale (Russell 2019). In Europe the new municipalist movement found its main expression on the Spanish citizen platform *Barcelona en Comú* (Barcelona in common, hereinafter BeC), the exemplary “fearless city” (Thompson 2020). Started as a locally-based social movement in defense of social rights and participatory democracy (Eizaguirre, Pradel-Miquel, and García 2017), BeC transformed into a governing coalition in May 2015, when it won the Barcelona city elections. As a political confluence amongst anti-austerity social movements and parties, BeC elected as a mayor Ada Colau, a candidate expression of social movements, activist and funding member of the anti-eviction housing justice platform PAH (*Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca*, Platform of Mortgage victims). Following the example of BeC, similar coalitions emerged in several cities in Spain in the following period. Most often they reunited grassroots groups opposing gentrification, evictions, privatization of city services, and succeeded in electing mayors expression of social movements. This shift from “occupying the squares” to “occupying the institutions” has been attributed to “the exhaustion of traditional routes to claiming rights from the state” (Thompson 2020, 3). Colau’s election as mayor of Barcelona represents the tangible outcome of almost a decade of grassroots opposition to austerity policies in Spain (Eizaguirre, Pradel-Miquel, and García 2017), and of a cycle of mass protests that swept Spain since 2011 – like the 15-M Movement or Indignados (Portos Garcia 2016; Portos and Masullo 2017). Besides Barcelona (Blanco, Salazar, and Bianchi 2020; Font and García-Espín 2019), between 2015 and 2019 municipalist coalitions gained office in Madrid (with the coalition *Ahora Madrid*, “Madrid now”) (Janoschka and Mota 2020; Rubio-Pueyo 2017), Valencia, Zaragoza, as well as in other Spanish cities where new political formations were created. In an attempt to foster governance change, BeC authored a guide showcasing the municipalist movement which lists some “organizing tool-kits” and practical advice about the different opportunities that the local governance offers for citizen engagement (Barcelona en Comú, Colau, and Bookchin 2019).

The new municipalist surge points at the centrality of the urban scale and of the city as strategically crucial sites for the organization of transformative social change (Roth and Russell 2018; Agustín 2020). New municipalism imagines in fact new institutional formations that “embody urban rather than state logics” (Thompson 2020, 2). This originates from the growing importance of the city over the years as a “powerful public sphere where new definitions of citizenship emerge” (Eizaguirre, Pradel-Miquel, and García 2017, 426). As some scholar noted, the urban space became the primary site of social conflict within contemporary capitalism (Brenner, Marcuse, and Mayer 2012; Mayer

2018). Nevertheless, creating alternatives at the city level does not mean to remain anchored to local politics. On the contrary, it is intended to increase the chances to address national and transnational political problems (Caccia 2017). “New municipalism necessarily implies an attempt to radically re-invent democracy’s meaning and practice” (Caccia 2017) through what BeC calls “citizens protagonism”. To avoid falling into the trap of “particular localism”, the local scale of governance is not conceived as inherently more democratic and progressive than other scales, but it is rather “framed as a ‘strategic front’ for developing a transformative politics of scale” (Russell 2019).

Besides Spain, citizen platforms inspired to the global municipalist movements were formed all over the Global North, such as Cooperation Jackson in Mississippi (Thompson 2020). Also the post-Yugoslav space was hit by the new municipalist wave. In a context characterized by executive capture and increased authoritarian trends, both at the local and state level (Bieber 2019; 2018; Castaldo 2020), between 2017 and 2018 municipalist platforms competed in city elections in the capitals of Croatia and Serbia. To oppose rising centralization and respond to democratic backsliding, they strove to enter in the arena of representative politics by running for mayoral positions and city assemblies. Discursively combining green-left ideals with the democratic autonomy of municipalities (from here the moniker “eco-socialist”), these platforms were mostly spearheaded by political activists with a long-term experience of engagement in Right to the City (hereinafter RtC) groups and domestic urban movements. Whereas urban changes and urban activism in the post-Yugoslav space have been so far analyzed in literature from different perspectives, sparking a proliferation of studies dealing with the opposition to the Belgrade Waterfront Project in Belgrade (Grubbauer and Čamprag 2019; Fagan and Ejodus 2020; Matković and Ivković 2018; Petrović 2019; Draško, Fiket, and Vasiljević 2019; Lalović, Radosavljević, and Djukanović 2015; Perić 2020) and right to the city movements in Zagreb (Razsa 2015; Dolenc, Doolan, and Tomašević 2017; Bilić and Stubbs 2015), little scholarship has so far devoted attention to the shift from urban social movements to the engagement in institutional politics. Green-left platforms in the former Yugoslav space, where they constitute a new and very recent phenomenon, have been so far little explored in extant scholarship, with some notable exceptions (see Milan and Dolenc, forthcoming 2022, Tiedemann 2019).

This article aims to fill this gap in literature by exploring the trajectories of two municipalist platforms emerged in the area, precisely “Zagreb is ours” (*Zagreb je naš*, hereinafter ZjN) in Zagreb, Croatia and “We won't let Belgrade d(r)own” (*Ne davimo Beograd*, hereinafter NDB) in Belgrade, Serbia. The article contributes to a body of research into urban citizenship, while at the same time it brings into conversation social movements literature with critical urban theory. Based on ethnographic work and in-depth semi-structured interviews with activists of both platforms and elected to municipal office local councillors of ZjN, the article analyses the factors that brought urban activists to form green-left platforms, disclosing the reasons why they decided to embrace new municipalist ideas as strategic ideological positioning. The article strives to answer to the following question: Why did green-left platforms choose new municipalism as ideological articulation and discursive strategy for electoral mobilization in the post-Yugoslav region? I argue

that this choice stems from two factors: the embeddedness into European activist networks, and the resonance of new municipalist ideas with the decentralized system of self-management of socialist Yugoslavia. In a nutshell, I maintain that the green-left-platforms in Croatia and Serbia drew inspiration from the global municipalist movement, while the past socialist tradition informed new political imaginaries. The platforms' initiators therefore partially reappraised the historical experience of socialism and its unrealized potential. This article explores also the participatory mechanisms and tools that the platforms deployed to address democratic deficits in traditional party politics and propose alternative forms of democratic decision-making— such as for instance neighborhood assemblies and digitally-mediated citizen platforms. I thus look at the potentiality of new municipalism to prompt novel governance approaches, and at the possible transformative capacities it may enact in a highly centralized context holding a self-managed, decentralized legacy.

The article proceeds as follows. Next section focuses on the methodology that was employed throughout the article, and on the cases under study, while the following one outlines the peculiar context in which municipalist platforms emerged and developed. The remaining sections deal with the choice of municipalism as ideological articulation, explaining that this stemmed from the resonance of municipalist ideas with the socialist heritage, and the embeddedness of the activists in transnational networks such as the “Fearless cities”. The final section presents some concluding remarks and outlines future research directions.

Methodology and case studies

This article relies on twenty semi-structured interviews with social movement activists and key figures of urban social movements, right to the city groups and municipalist platforms in Zagreb and Belgrade, as well as with local councillors¹ (namely officials at the city, district and neighborhood level)² elected in the framework of the ZjN platform. The interviews have been conducted in different rounds in Zagreb, Belgrade and online (owing to travel restrictions stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic) between 2017 and 2020. Interviews were combined with other sources of information – the analysis of documents, electoral programmes (2017 in Zagreb, 2018 in Belgrade), flyers, articles published on websites and newspapers. Moreover, this article relies on my participation to the “Fearless cities network” summit taking place in Belgrade in June 2019, which included meetings with activists, roundtables and open discussions, as well as on-site observations of the Belgrade Waterfront Project guided by NdB activists. All interviews have been recorded and transcribed. I opted for the pseudonymization of personal data given the vulnerability of activists in a system like the Serbian (and, to a lower extent, Croatian) one, where they are often the target of personal attacks on tabloids, in particular dealing with their private sphere.

¹ In Zagreb, I have interviewed one city district's councilor, three local committees' councilors, one activist who currently serves as MP for *Možemo* in the National Parliament, and three activists who participated in the local election campaign in 2017 without holding position in city's governing bodies.

² The city of Zagreb is split into 17 administrative divisions, called city districts (*gradske četvrti*), which are in turn composed by local committees (*mjesne odbore*), the second level of self-government in the city.

For what concerns the municipalist platforms under study, the Initiative *Ne davimo Beograd* was formed in 2015 by a group of cultural workers, urbanists, architects, and activists engaged in the collective *Ministarstvo Prostora* “the Ministry of Space”. Concerned about the neoliberal shape that the urban development of Belgrade was taking, the Ministry of Space engaged in the occupation of spaces for cultural production and in the struggle for urban commons since inasmuch “as artists needed new spaces for production, working and exhibiting, citizens desired spaces for freedom and solidarity”³. The Belgrade-based collective organized also educational workshops, lectures, and trainings, together with public actions aimed at drawing attention to the problems of space in the capital. When in 2012 it was announced the Belgrade Waterfront project, an urban redevelopment plan that envisaged the demolition of the riverbank Savamala neighborhood to make room of a controversial plan of urban renewal, the Ministry of Space voiced its opposition. To that end, in 2014 the *Ne davimo Beograd* initiative was created to deal with the contestation of the project, which would turn the capital’s historic city waterfront into a space for luxurious buildings. NdB voiced its opposition in a variety of ways, resorting both to lawsuits and confrontational tools, keeping the project under close public scrutiny. Small-scale actions were followed by mass protests in 2015 and at the beginning of 2016. 25 April 2016 marked a watershed for the initiative, as a group of unidentified masked men demolished overnight a number of buildings in the Savamala district which the government had announced to clear for reconstruction (Balkan Insight 2016). The following days, citizens showed up in great numbers to protest, demanding resignations and laying criminal responsibility at the door of officials. The Savamala incident marked a turning point in the activity of the movement, contributing to reinforce the position of the NdB group as opponent of the government (back then led by Aleksandar Vucic) and of its policies. In the months to come, NdB organized ten major protests to demand clarifications on the episode. At the height of the protests, 20,000 people took to the streets of Belgrade⁴ – the biggest civic protests since those that toppled Slobodan Milošević in 2000. Following this episode and the popularity the group gained, in 2018 NDB decided to form a list to enter the electoral arena, while at the same time not stopping to engage in street actions and creative performances⁵. With the intention “to bring the fight from the streets to the city parliament”⁶, NdB formed thus an electoral list than run for the Belgrade City Assembly elections in March 2018, with the slogan: “Change is coming” (*Promena dolazi*). The list managed to garner 3,48% of share, for a total of 28,500 votes⁷, not enough to reach the 5% threshold to enter the city assembly nor to elect any councilors in the city parliament/assembly.

The second case study is the municipalist green-left platform *Zagreb je naš* (Zagreb is ours). Unlike NdB, it managed to gain office in the 2017 municipal elections (for the city and municipal councils of Zagreb). Also in the case of Zagreb, the idea of the platform originates from urban activists involved during the last decade in the struggle for spatial justice and against aggressive urbanism. After years of battle in defence of common spaces, such as that the central Varsavska street and the

³ <https://urbanalternatives.org/map/belgrade/ministry-of-space/details/>

⁴ Interview with X

⁵ Interview with X

⁶ <https://nedavimobeograd.rs/english/> (retrieved 14 November 2019).

⁷ <https://nedavimobeograd.rs/english/> (retrieved 15 February 2021).

Flowers square (Dolenec, Doolan, and Tomašević 2017), in 2017 the members of ZjN decided to form a coalition that incorporated four left and green parties – the political party *Za grad* (For the city), *Nova Ljevica* (the New Left), *Održivi razvoj Hrvatske* (ORAH, Sustainable Development of Croatia) and *Radnička Fronta* (the Workers' front) (Rilović 2017). The coalition won 7,6% of votes at the municipal elections of May 2017, which resulted in four seats in the Zagreb City Assembly, 21 seats in city districts and 41 seats in local councils. Many youths were elected as councillors with almost no prior experience in institutional politics, although coming from a long tradition in social movement engagement. Formed in April 2017, this alliance of progressive political organisations described itself as a municipalist platform that adopted as role model BeC. In their policy agenda, ZjN advocated for the return of the decision-making process to citizens, to empower neighbourhoods in city-planning policies and safeguard public services and utilities from privatization. It furthermore promoted participatory democracy and the return of “decision-making powers to citizens, democratic public institutions”⁸ while at the same time safeguarding public services (such as schools, kindergartens...), halting the privatization of public utilities (waste management, for instance), and envisioning Zagreb as a socially just, green, and multicultural city.

In both cases, the initiators of the platforms belong to the broad middle-class group, composed of activists, cultural workers, and many others who had been for long active in the social movements scene in Zagreb and Belgrade. Throughout the campaign, they managed to politicize issues related to the use of space, succeeding in building urban movements of resistance from below. Inspired by the new municipalist movement, both green-left platforms promoted – and engaged with – values of inclusiveness and equality, which they adopted as practices within deliberative and participatory conceptions of democracy. For instance, the electoral programmes of both platforms were elaborated by consulting citizens through digital means, which allowed registered subjects to express their opinion and set the priorities for their neighbourhood by means of a web survey. For the 2017 electoral campaign, ZjN adopted a participatory approach through a public web platform with five policy proposals that everybody could vote for and attribute importance to⁹. Furthermore, they could indicate the neighbourhoods’ priorities and proposals to deal with the issues at stake. The same approach was adopted in the occasion of the 2021 Zagreb city elections, when an online “needs survey” amongst the inhabitants of the neighbourhoods was organized in the form of an online forum. Also in this case citizens could put forward solutions and priorities that local policies should tackle¹⁰. More than 2000 people participated in the elaboration of the 2021 electoral programme, with about 10.000 citizens who filled in the online survey. Afterwards, some experts drafted the programme taking the results of the survey into account. This participatory effort aimed at including as many people as possible in the drafting of the electoral programme¹¹.

The idea of using this participatory mechanism stems from the intention to “have a model of citizen participation already in the process of creating the program, not just the presentation of the

⁸ <https://urbanalternatives.org/map/zagreb/zagreb-je-nas-zagreb-is-ours/details/>

⁹ Interview with X

¹⁰ https://www.zagrebjenas.hr/anketa/?utm_source=zjn&utm_medium=web&utm_campaign=anketa (access 19 February 2021), interview with X

¹¹ Interview with X

program”¹². To foster local level governance, also NdB involved the inhabitants of neighborhoods and blocks, and attempted to revitalize the community centres that are located there, transforming these underused infrastructures in “a really lively center of the community”¹³. In sum, both groups strove to personify a meaningful alternative within the realm of representative politics.

Authoritarianism, democratic backsliding, and urban transformations in the post-Yugoslav space

Before the appearance of these platforms on the political scene, no institutional subjects were ever in play in the Left panorama of post-socialist Yugoslavia (Kralj forthcoming). As Dolenc explained, in the region “there is no articulation of leftist idea in the public space” (Danas 2020). The only Left force to enter the Parliament in the region was the *Levica* party (the Left). Founded in 2017, it managed to gain eight seats in the National Assembly in 2018. Similarly, the eco-socialist political platform *Možemo* (We can), which unites *Možemo* and the New Left party, entered in the Croatian parliament for the first time in 2020, when it elected five MPs in the national Parliament. Nevertheless, the green-left political actors in the Western Balkans face a series of social, political, and institutional challenges. Both platforms under study act in a context characterized by democratic backsliding and increasing authoritarian trends at both the national and local level. At the national level, the context is characterized by a combination of democratic institutions and authoritarian rule (Dolenc 2013). The rulers in the Western Balkans correspond to the description of autocrats, since they combine autocratic mechanisms of rule with a formal commitment to EU accession and democracy (Bieber 2019, 9). In particular, Serbia under the rule of Aleksandar Vucic can be defined an autocratic country, given “the centralization of power and the pressure on independent institutions” (Bieber 2019, 7). The year 2012, when Vucic came to power, marked a return to semi-authoritarianism in the country (Bieber 2019), as it ushered a period of almost total control of his party, the populist Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), on the media and on the political and public life, which included also brutal attacks on media and threats to political opponents. Similarly to Serbia, Croatia experienced a decade of semi-authoritarian rule in the 90s, characterized by a “nationalist atmosphere in which the opposition was systematically accused of disloyalty” (Bieber 2019, 79). Nowadays the situation in the country is depicted as *conservatism without authoritarianism*, as it intertwines high polarization with strong nationalist and conservative trends. Against this background, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) party has been the hegemonic party for thirty years.

Also the contexts of Zagreb and Belgrade present many similarities. Zagreb has been ruled by the controversial mayor Milan Bandić for the past 16 years, until he suddenly passed away in 2021. Once belonging to the centre-left Social-Democratic Party, Bandić gained popularity following major corruption scandals, his rule defined as a “fusion of populism, authoritarianism and clientelism” (Bilić and Stubbs 2015, 125). Similarly, Belgrade has been governed by the mayor Siniša Mali of the SNS party between 2014 and 2018. Both mayors resorted to undemocratic governance practices, disregarding citizens’ demands and approving urban projects which entailed the enclosure of public

¹² Interview with X

¹³ Interview with X

space for the sake of public interests, inaugurating a season of neoliberal transformation of urban space. Both mayors approved and implemented plans of urban renewal that fit the definition of aggressive or authoritarian urbanism “which benefits capital at the expense of the urban working population” (Kuymulu 2018, 49). Those projects encountered the fierce opposition of movements that triggered the mobilization of political opponents, often forming right to the city groups (Dolenec, Doolan, and Tomašević 2017). The privatization of public space and services triggered mobilization all over the Western Balkans (Milan 2021) to the extent that the opposition to neoliberal urban development has been defined a “fundamental post-socialist struggle” (Bilić and Stubbs 2015, 124).

Right to the city movements and urban activism in the Western Balkans should thus be understood within (and at the forefront of) the contemporary struggles to resist the neoliberal transformations of the contemporary cities. The emergence and spread of right to the city activism, which includes also housing activism (Vilenica 2017), in the post-Yugoslav space points at the fact that the resistance to neoliberal transformations is a wider, global phenomenon that does not involve only the Global North, where the majority of studies are located, but also the Global East, where, actually, neoliberal urban development policies hit stronger (Shin, Lees, and López-Morales 2016). As Mitchell stresses, “the city must be at the heart (but not at all the exclusive focus) of any struggle for a progressive, socially just world” since “most of the world’s population is now urban, cities have become the command and control centers of the global economy and of the practices and policies that are transforming the global environment” (2003, 38) and under continued population growth we will witness “increased rather than decreased urbanization” (2003, 38). Nevertheless, opposing the processes of neoliberal urban development in the Western Balkans is a quite recent phenomenon, whereas “the political disconnect between citizens and elites [that] reaches back much further” (Fagan and Sircar 2017, 1339).

Why choosing new municipalism as ideological articulation? Transnational connections and the embeddedness in activist networks

Why do we stick to municipalist ideas? Because we really believe that if we want to mobilize, [if we want] that citizens participate in policy making, then of course that place is where people live and where they are in direct contact with the problems they want to solve. It is the level of either a city or a municipality or a village or a neighborhood and so on. So, we see that politics must be done from below if we want people to participate. (...) Because that is the greatest mobilization potential you can realize at that level, not globally.¹⁴

With these words, a MP now elected in the framework of the *Mozemo* political platform stresses the importance of the local scale of action, inspired to the municipalist movement that reaffirms “the democratic autonomy of municipalities over political and economic life vis-à-vis the nation-state” (Thompson 2020, 1). *Mozemo* emerged from ZjN, since the inception attempting to enter in

¹⁴ Interview with X

the municipal government, as “the municipal is conceived as a strategic entry point for developing broader practices and theories of transformative social change” (Russell 2019, 991). In a similar vein, the activists of NdB follow the municipalist trend, stating openly to be “part of a growing wave of local municipalist movements”¹⁵. Why did both platforms decided to adopt municipalism as ideological positioning/articulation? I argue that one of the factors accounting for this stems from the embeddedness of activists in a dense network of like-minded initiatives and movements reflecting upon the importance of commons and local governance regionally and worldwide. For what concerns the regional level, the debate on the commons has revived across the region’s activist networks since the 2010s, with publications enriching the debate delving in both on the socialist Yugoslav idea of social property, so far mostly disregarded, and on practical, concrete experiences of commoning in the area (Milan 2021; Tomašević et al. 2018). The discourse on the commons has been elaborated and discussed in several occasions, such as the “Subversive Festival” of Zagreb (in particular in the Balkan Forum section), an event of “progressive and critical theory, activism and culture” (Tomašević et al. 2018, 68) which took place annually in the Croatian capital since 2008. Other events, such as the “Green Academy”, a summer school taking place since 2010 and organized first by the German foundation Heinrich Boell Stiftung and since 2016 by the Institute for Political Ecology, gathered and connected intellectuals and activists. Also the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory from Novi Sad elaborated on the topic, launching the “Studies of Commons” in 2016 (Tomašević et al. 2018). Following a wave of commodification and privatization of space and services in the region, some “commons struggles”, as Tomašević et al. (2018) defined them, emerged, starting from the Right to the city (*Pravo na Grad*) initiative in Zagreb in 2006 (Dolenec, Doolan, and Tomašević 2017; Horvat 2018), followed by the movement about the dismantling of a green area in Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina, in 2012 (Milan 2020). As Tomašević et al. 2018 noted, all these struggles were to some extent initiated by NGOs and grassroots groups that had been reflecting and working upon the notion of commons as a framework for governance innovation. ~~It was in the second decade of 2000s that these right to the city groups involved in commons struggles decided to form political platforms informed by the global new municipalist movement.~~

At the international level, both ZjN and NdB partake in the “Fearless cities” network, which allowed them to encounter new municipalist subject across the world and to engage in a mutual sharing of experiences. For instance, a locally rooted initiative such as NdB is connected with other similar international citizen platforms in cities across Europe. The “Fearless cities” summits, promoted and coordinated since 2017 by BeC, are international gatherings aimed at strengthening the ties amongst municipalist groups across the world, providing opportunities to encounter and debate new municipalist ideas, while at the same time sharing the lessons learnt from experiences in government. I argue that these transnational connections (Juris 2008) informed the adoption of municipalism as ideological strategy, for it allows the local and the international levels to converge, as an activist of ZjN explained with the following words:

[The choice of employing new municipalism] has to do with networking at the European level, with a history of networking at the European level of older NGOs, that enters the

¹⁵ <https://nedavimobeograd.rs/english/>/(accessed 20 April 2021).

ZjN political organization. Because all these NGOs, like *Pravo na grad*, like *Zelena akcija*, which is the leading environmentalist organization in Croatia, and members of international network Friends of the Earth, as well, all of these organizations that participated in shaping the ZjN political platform have been connected with similar organizations in Spain, in Barcelona and Madrid before everything that happened at the municipal level there, and in other in other countries in Europe through participating in the conferences and in organizing and shaping projects together. [...] The same people from a series of organizations have been meeting in the last ten or more years. So, all the topics that are included in the municipalist values and ideals have been known and well understood and shaped in some kind the policy proposals and publications by the people, activists, and members of the civil society scene, of NGOs in Croatia¹⁶.

Likewise, an activist of Belgrade sheds light into the importance of networks in which the organization is part of and drew inspiration from, as well as into the learning experience that took place at the region level. In the region, Zagreb represented a role model to follow, for the context in which it operates is more similar to that of Belgrade than that of Barcelona:

We were inspired by BeC for sure and we learned a lot from them. We took some of the models that were done by them, we had similar strategy of structuring the organization, but our model as a municipalist movement is ZjN for sure...Our colleagues and friend from the independent art scene that we are partially from but also from the green movements. (...) if you look at BeC, that is fine, but in the end, they have a larger election budget. Barcelona is one of the major cities in the world and they have sort of better media and stuff like that. You can go towards them, but it's still way too far from Belgrade. But in Zagreb we had someone that had the same problems as we do. We were learning from each other and it was a really great exchange¹⁷.

To strengthen the networks between the municipalist groups, some activists of NdB travelled to Spain to follow closely the municipal elections. In fact, the main sources of inspiration were the cities of Barcelona and Madrid, as an activist from ZjN explains in the following excerpt:

Our mayor role models were BeC and Ahora Madrid. And as activists, especially those that initiated the whole thing, we have a good, good relations with NDB, also with BeC. I personally was on a few conferences where members of BeC were talking about their experience, so it became something close to us, so we had this kind of cooperation, international corporation of activists that are running for office in their cities. And we try to do that and that's why I personally said: "Okay, let's do it, we can try together".¹⁸

Building on the socialist past: the resonance of municipalist ideas with the Yugoslav socialist self-management

In what follows, I argue that the second factor accounting for the choice of new municipalism as ideological positioning is its resonance with the socialist self-management heritage. This is in line with the attempt done in the 2010s in the post-Yugoslav movement sphere to revive and retrieve the historical experience of socialism (Kurtović and Sargsyan 2019). In spite of the contested heritage of the socialist period, in the last decade the debate upon "the unrealized potentials of

¹⁶ Interview with X, Pravo na Grad

¹⁷ Interview with X

¹⁸ Interview with X, local councillor elected with ZjN

Yugoslav socialism”(Kurtović 2019, 20) has thrived amongst intellectual circles, influencing and informing the visions of the activists that formed the green-left platforms. According to the respondents, the initiators of the platforms strove to articulate a municipalist discourse having “a regional flavour” by delving into the participatory mechanisms that were in place in socialist Yugoslavia, a federation of which both Croatia and Serbia were part of. Therefore, when looking for mechanisms and practices able to foster citizens’ participation into the decision-making process and the elaboration of political proposals, on the one hand green-left platforms found inspiration in the experiences and practices of municipalist-based local governments emerged in the Global North, thanks also to their transnational connections – as explained in the previous section. On the other hand, they delved into their history of community self-management of the region, referring to the socialist practice of local self-government. Although partially unrealized, self-governing socialism constitutes an important point of reference as it envisioned an emancipatory model based on self-management experiments and self-governance practices (Milan 2021). For instance, the socialist regime foresaw self-managing interest groups (*Samoupravne Interesne Zajednice*), planning bodies that gathered together producers and users of public service companies to grant direct citizen participation in the urban economy (Kasoff 1976). Similarly, the 1963 Yugoslav Constitution introduced a unique system of local governance through *mjesne zajednice* (local councils), “administrative units below the municipal level [that] allowed citizens to organise collectively and address many of the local day-to-day governance issues that directly affected their lives” (Belloni 2008, 118). As local and “largely self-governing institutions” (Belloni 2008, 118), *mjesne zajednice* provided useful tools to involve citizens in the planning and financing of local infrastructure. Furthermore, Tomislav Tomasevic, already opposition member in the Zagreb City Council for ZjN and running for the position of mayor of the Croatian capital in 2021, stressed that also the very same “perception of the commons is very connected with the historical legacy of our country” (Jeanmougin and Porche 2019, 17).

While problematizing but at the same time “approaching postsocialism as an intersectional experience and geopolitically sensitive form of knowledge” (Kurtović and Sargsyan 2019, 2), the initiators of green-left platforms in the post-Yugoslav space rethink socialism as an emancipatory experience to draw inspiration from. This position is line with a general revival of the socialist experience in the region’s activist scene. As some scholars noted, “socialism is increasingly endorsed positively in post-Yugoslav societies, slowly turning a popular nostalgia into a potential source for political claims. This memory-production turned into political claim-making in 2014” (Kalb and Mollona 2018, 24:19). The unrealized potential of the socialist system constituted thus a vantage point from which activists could think and elaborate a model of participatory democracy that “harness the traces of socialist-era political organizations” (Kurtović and Sargsyan 2019, 7). At the same time, also socialist associationist practices and back-then instruments of participatory democracy are critically retrieved and reappraised to envision a new model of democracy in which citizens could be protagonists.

Resorting to an already existing, although partially unrealized and delegitimized, governance system grounded on the institution of local communities/councils (*mjesne zajednice/cetvrti*), the lowest

level of government, informed the political imaginaries of green-left platforms, which cross-fertilized new municipalist visions with the socialist legacy, for it to resonate to a post-socialist population, as the following quote elucidates:

When we are talking about municipalism, I personally think the movement around it was more, more inspired by the legacy of socialist Yugoslavia. The self-governance model with the community centres, and that kind of system where the lowest levels of self-governance units, which we call *mesna zajednica* (in Croatia *mesne četvrti*), were constitutionally based way how the system and the state is functioning¹⁹.

As it emerges from the interview, the importance of the municipal scale as the main “entry point” for transformative political action resonates with the historical experience of self-governing socialism. Municipalism has thus been chosen to address democratic deficits in party politics and to propose alternative forms of democratic decision-making. What is peculiar in this case is that alternative forms of citizens participation are partially retrieved from the socialist past. Although adopting a critical stance towards the socialist period, but at the same time recognizing the potentialities of the self-government model implemented back then, the activists in both groups resorted to it as a valuable point of reference to build a new model of participatory democracy, a way to advance democracy and to help citizens to take back power, without referring uncritically to the past, as an activist of NDB elucidates in the following quote:

The heritage of Croatia and Serbia are the same, its socialist Yugoslavia and we could continue from there. (...) There is a huge positive heritage from Yugoslavia that has been forgotten or the system is trying to make us forget. And of course, there are a lot of problems...I have no idealistic view of Yugoslavia, but it is incomparable to the situation in which we are living now. One of the examples we refer to as good experiences is to try to advocate for returning of community centers on the local level, in the neighborhoods, in the blocks²⁰... Every block, or every neighborhood in former Yugoslavia, had something called *mjesna zajednica* which is a Community Center of that part. And you could use the space, that's like basic infrastructure, chairs, space, audio equipment and stuff like that for the meetings and so. And also there were elections for these little parts of local government. This was something that we wanted to see in Belgrade also, and we tried to revive it.²¹

When it comes to the importance of the local level of governance, the same respondent explains that the local scale has a transformative potential:

Our experience is that this level of really going to the people and speaking to the people is something that is the most dangerous for the ruling party and they see this, and this is something they are doing. That is how they rule, they rule by the force of fear, blackmail and so on...But this level is really important to them and you can see this wherever we tried we could see a strong resistance from the regime. And this gave us really, sort of a sign, this is something that...we are on a good trail and we will show up in different community centers (MZ) and they would mostly, our event would be forbidden, they would sabotage us, wouldn't let us in... But then we would stand on the doors and speak there. The thing is that besides this there was a lot of a different ways of involving citizens

¹⁹ Interview with X

²⁰ New Belgrade is divided into blocks

²¹ Interview with X

into the decision making, then there was a famous self-governance, which was the sort of, one experiment of workers participating in the decision-making of their companies which had its own problems, but the idea that you should make decisions even though you are just a worker is something should be continued and developed and taken in consideration.²²

Another activist explained how retrieving and reappraising the socialist heritage is a recent phenomenon that still needs to be worked upon, for instance changing the terminology, to transform what has been termed “a burden for the Left” into a potential resource:

The problem is that we spent the last 30 years destroying all these ideas, destroying this [socialist] heritage, making it taboo, making it something that was pressing us. I think maybe we don't have a chance to go back to this terminology. But these ideas are something that people from Western Europe are coming to Serbia to speak about and to research. (...) If you look at NDB, you will not hear a leftist vocabulary, you will not see a star, you will not see this reminiscence of glorious past of Yugoslavia and stuff like that. But the thing is we want to use these ideas in a modern way, in modern times and also really important for people to see its benefits first, and then have these declarative, glorifying concepts. Because I feel that's something that was really a burden for the Left because there was so many talks about stuff, and there are concrete ideas on how to use them in the environment around you. But, let's be fair, it's not easy to do it also on the city levels. So what we wanted, is to do this...worker's rights, solidarity, tolerance, the idea of taking care of those who are most endangered, on the city level. That was what our initiative was doing, and I feel the people really responded well to this. I don't think there should be no ideology in the movement, but if you bring the ideology to the people, something they can feel could be real and in everyday life, then we are speaking about making a real change. So, for us, we will continue to develop these ideas and go more to the Left, but always trying to show the people, exactly how it would look in the daily life.²³

Conclusions

This article explored the factors accounting for the decision of urban activists in Croatia and Serbia to form green-left electoral platforms to seize power at the local level. Specifically, it investigated their choice to adopt new municipalism as ideological positioning in the electoral campaigns in 2017 in Zagreb and 2018 in Belgrade. In this study, Croatia and Serbia are investigated as part of the postsocialist world. Therefore, the article delved into the specificities of the context in which they emerge and operate. I argue that the choice of new municipalism stems from two factors: firstly, the transnational connections and embeddedness of the green-left platforms in municipalist networks influenced their choice to embrace new municipalist ideas. Secondly, the focus on the local level of governance resonates with the historical experience of socialism, informing the decision to adopt a municipalist ideological positioning. To sum up, this article showed that green-left platforms prefigured a model of local governance that drew inspiration from the global municipalist movement, while at the same time being rooted on the domestic historical socialist heritage. Despite the different electoral outcomes that the platforms obtained the first time they run for local elections, they represent a novelty in the political panorama of the post-Yugoslav space.

²² Interview with X

²³ Interview with X

A novelty in terms of policy proposals, organizational forms and also candidates who epitomised a rupture with the previous system. Often the elected councillors do not have prior experience of party politics, but hold a long-term activist experience in social movements.

Further research could investigate the factors accounting for the different electoral outcomes of the two platforms, while additional research could explore the reasons why other similar local groups in the region – in Bosnia Herzegovina, for instance – did not form electoral platforms to run for elections (although persisting in their activities aimed at fostering citizens' participation at the local level). A promising avenue of research would be to explore municipalist platforms in action, meaning to assess the policies implemented and the governance transformations triggered by ZjN since it served in the city council as opposition (2017-2021). The transformation of local municipalist platforms into national political parties (defined "movement parties" – Kralj forthcoming) to run for national elections to scale up from the local to the national arena has not been studied systematically, hence it warrants further inquiry. Finally, an idea for global comparison could be to explore the manifold participatory mechanisms and tactics deployed to address democratic deficit in party politics and to propose alternative forms of democratic decision-making, like for instance people's assemblies and/or online forums in a range of countries, from Spain to the post-socialist world.

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