

Democratic civic engagement in the Western Balkans. Environmental concerns as new sites of contentious politics

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I

There has been a proliferation of civic and protest initiatives in the Western Balkans over the past decade. They have focused on a variety of issues, ranging from the destruction of urban space, environmental destruction, to corruption scandals, and even unresolved murders. Whereas their success has varied, they showed that many citizens in the region are deeply dissatisfied with the lack of accountability of the ruling regimes, and ready to actively engage in their societies. To a certain point this is undoubtedly part of a global trend, as civic initiatives demanding more democracy and democratic accountability – from anti-austerity movements to ecological justice movement like Fridays for Future – are on the rise globally. Within the context of the Western Balkans, civic and protest initiatives need to be understood against the background of failed expectations from the post-socialist transition: instead of bringing the EU membership, rule of law and better economic standard, the three decades of transitioning from one-party rule to political pluralism and economic liberalization also brought widespread corruption, the rise of inequalities, abuse of political and economic power, and as of recently, in many WB countries, large-scale state capture and significant democratic backsliding.¹

¹ Maarten Lemstra, *The Destructive Effects of State Capture in the Western Balkans: EU Enlargement Undermined*. Clingendael Institute, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/resrep26429. Accessed 27 Mar. 2021.; Castaldo, A., 2020. "Back to Competitive Authoritarianism? Democratic Backsliding in Vučić's Serbia", *Europe-Asia Studies* 72(10): 1617-1638.; Bieber, F. 2018. "Patterns of competitive authoritarianism in the Western Balkans", *East European Politics* 34(3): 337-354.

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When assessing the state of civic engagement in WB and its democratizing capacities, two observations are crucial. First, the traditional network of civil society and non-governmental organizations is less and less perceived as the running engine of democratization and Europeanization, the role it once assumed. Its donor- and project-oriented work, often focused on partial institutional reforms rather than on systemic issues, and its cooperation with local and central governments has turned it into a less trustworthy actor and has diminished its capacities to channel and articulate citizens' dissatisfactions and grievances. Second, while undoubtedly there has been an upsurge of protests and citizens' public mobilization demanding respect of fundamental rights and democratic principles, these events continue to be sporadic, intense but short-lived, fluid and scattered, with different outcomes, and thus still with unclear long-term democratizing potential. However, they continue to occur, and together with numerous examples of smaller-scale, mostly local, civic initiatives we are going to describe briefly, they constitute a new attention-worthy field of civic engagement in the region. The principal question is what the potentials of this civic engagement for democratic consolidation and renewal in the region are.

In examining this question, we will firstly outline some of the major and most impactful – in terms of mobilization of citizens, outcomes, or public attention – examples of civic engagement in the region that reveal what urges citizens to (re)act, which factors incite civic engagement and what are the trends in this respect across the region. Then we will juxtapose this mapping with the recent IPSOS opinion poll survey, which took place in autumn 2020, and which studied, among other topics, the WB citizens' attitudes towards protests and other forms of civic engagement. After presenting these two perspectives on civic engagement in the region, which at times seem to be conveying a different message, we will summarize the main points and outline a path which could potentially strengthen democratizing capacities of bottom-up engagement.

Civic engagement and protests in WB

The last decade has seen some of the biggest anti-government/anti-regime protests in the region since the 1990s, but also new types of protests, focused on local community problems, usually struggling against the urban or environmental degradation.

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One of the first massive wave of protests erupted in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2014 and came to be known as the “Bosnian Spring”. The protests started in Tuzla as a reaction to the announcement of insolvency in four privatized factories. Protestors organized themselves in the so-called *plenums (plena)*, invoking the tradition of the Yugoslav self-management working units, and the movement quickly spread throughout the Bosnian Federation. Citizens assembled to discuss various topics, from unemployment, corruption, to neglect of public institution and public good in general. After several outbursts of violence and slow dissipation of the movement that lasted for about three months, the plenums finally died out, however leaving significant mark in the society of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The “Colourful revolution” in North Macedonia led to a regime change in 2017. It still serves as an example of successful tight cooperation between CSOs, bottom-up local activists and political parties.² In Serbia the biggest cycle of protests against the regime of Aleksandar Vučić began in 2018, with *#1of5million* protest against the political violence. It spread across Serbia and lasted for over a year, though significantly losing the number of protestors over time, and was characterized with unclear relationship between the protest leadership and main opposition parties. The largest protest gatherings in contemporary Montenegrin history (with more than 20.000 people) took place in 2019 when the self-organized, horizontal movement *Resist (Odupri se)* was formed as a reaction to the so-called “envelope affair”, which exposed massive corruption in the regime. Later that year the new cycle of protests carried on, this time against the newly adopted religion law which envisaged the transfer of the ownership of church buildings and estates from the Serbian Orthodox Church to the Montenegrin state.

Apart from these large-scale, anti-systemic protests the region has seen the rise in citizens’ interest to protect their local communities, their urban heritage and their environment. The biggest single-event protest in Belgrade since 5 October 2000 was held in April 2016, when a local initiative *Don’t let Belgrade D(r)own* (which will later turn into a party-movement and participate in the city elections) organized a protest as a reaction to the illegal demolition on Hercegovačka street, executed to clear up space for the controversial project *Belgrade Waterfront*. In Tirana in Albania, prominent civic protests, under the name *The Alliance for the Protection of Theater*, erupted when the Albanian government made the decision to demolish the old building of the National Theater in Tirana and to build a new one in its place. Actors, directors, artists and activists have joined forces and protested together since June

² G. P. Draško et al., 2020, “Big dreams and small steps: comparative perspectives on the social movement struggle for democracy in Serbia and North Macedonia”, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 20(1): 199-219.

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2018 till July 2019, when they even occupied the building to prevent its demolition. The building was finally demolished in May 2020.

Possibly the most interesting types of local civic engagement, taking place across the region and clearly showing a common denominator, are environmental struggles, most of which are directed against the construction of mini hydro power plants (MHE). The most recent example of one such local civic mobilization took place in the Bosnian city of Jajce, against the plans to construct MHE just 300 meters from the landmark waterfall on the river Pliva.³ Local residents and activists organized a petition against the construction, and in just four days it was signed by 6,000 people. Due to public pressure, the investor has temporarily withdrawn the request for the issuance of the concession. Probably the most notable initiative of such kind, also from Bosnia-Herzegovina, is “the Brave Women of Kruščica movement”,⁴ which saw self-organized women from this region, protesting against the MHE construction on Kruščica river, and blocking the local bridge with their bare bodies for more than 500 days. The women from Kruščica even suffered the police violence but persisted in their struggle which resulted in the Cantonal Court in Novi Travnik annulling the construction permit. Similar examples of local residents turning into activists and alarming wider community about the impeding environmental damage coming from the state-backed investment plans occurred in Rakita village in Serbia, when united villagers and activists jointly dismantled the metal pipes from the local riverbed, put there previously in an attempt to construct the hydropower plant ‘Zvonce’;⁵ or in Kosovo town Štrpce, where resident Albanians and Serbs joined together in the defence of the common source of drinking water.⁶

Štrpce initiative showed how mobilizations around tangible, daily-life related issues bear the capacity to transcend ethnically divided communities and unite citizens around the common concerns and demands for accountable democratic governance. Similar power was exercised by the movement “Justice for David”, initiated in Banja Luka in March 2018, after 21-year-old David Dragičević was found dead in a river six days after went missing. Officials ruled his death

³ <https://environmentsee.eu/a-hydro-power-plant-to-be-built-near-the-famous-waterfall-in-bosnia/> (last accessed 28/03/2021)

⁴ <https://www.euronatur.org/en/news/detail/news/brave-women-of-kruscica-honoured-for-river-protection/> (last accessed 18/02/2021)

⁵ <https://www.euronatur.org/en/news/detail/news/activists-in-serbia-get-hands-on-in-fight-against-hydropower/> (last accessed 18/02/2021)

⁶ <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/a626865-srbi-i-albanci-protiv-izgradnje-mhe-u-strpcu-protest-zbog-hapsenja-komsije/> (last accessed 28/03/2021)

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an accident but the contradictory statements of the officials and the general lack of transparency in the investigation process provoked major public protests gathering thousands of citizens first in Banja Luka, then in other cities in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The protest united with the similar initiative launched in Sarajevo, protesting the unresolved murder of a young man ("Justice for Dženan"). *Justice for David* resonated throughout the region and later turned into a political platform *Justice Movement*.⁷

Opinion poll survey findings

Listed examples testify to WB citizens' genuine need to engage in public, to defend their rights and to demand accountability and rule of law. But it is difficult to assess true dimensions of this mobilizational potential and its democratizing effects: how many people actually do get involved? What are their perceptions about the political and social change and actors capable of bringing it about? Can civic engagement renew democracy in the region, and can it be done outside the traditional party electoral arena? Recent IPSOS opinion poll findings about citizens attitudes towards elections and protests lead to following observations:

Majority of citizens **do not participate in protests** (70% of respondents in Serbia, 81% in Kosovo, 78% Bosnia and Herzegovina, 62% Montenegro...). They also only moderately believe that public protest could contribute to social, economic or political changes. The exception in this final regard is Montenegro, where this difference in perception can be contributed to the recent change of government and the waves of protests that preceded it. On the other hand, citizens in great numbers **regularly participate in elections** (79% in Serbia for example, although obviously the percentage given in responses does not match the actual recent electoral turnouts), and majority of citizens in Albania, Montenegro and Serbia **do not support boycotts** as means of political struggle (opinions regarding this are divided in North Macedonia). Additionally, majority of citizens also believe that **public elections can contribute to** actual social, economic or political **changes**, although, they are less prone to believe that the government can be changed through elections (ranging from 38% to 56 %, with the exception of Montenegro, where 80% of respondents believe so – again, difficult not to conclude that recent political developments modelled this attitude).

⁷ <https://www.dw.com/bs/pokret-pravde-za-pravdu/a-51603508> (last accessed 28/03/2021)

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Following these results, we can see the citizens of WB do not favour protests and boycotts to more conventional models of political behaviour, like elections. They also believe that elections can bring about social and political change. Potentially supporting this idea is the correlation in positive answers given to the following questions: *Do you believe that the government can be changed through elections?* and *Do you believe that public elections can contribute to actual social, economic or political changes?* Moderate positive correlation exists in all WB countries, but in the cases of Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina the correlation is strong.

Notwithstanding the fact that the two questions even intuitively may appear as correlated, in this particular case we could further relate this to predominantly negative attitudes towards boycotts (with Serbia being the lead here), to prevailing abstinence from protests (70% in Serbia, 78% in Bosnia-Herzegovina have never participated in a protest), and to a belief that the elections could bring changes. In other words, **citizens predominantly expect social and political changes to come from conventional political parties and through regular institutional channels like elections**. It appears that citizens are more likely to invest their political trust in traditional political parties and models of political participation. Or, perhaps, given the recent, somewhat surprising, electoral success in Montenegro, the key to achieving political change is through **party-movements alliances**.

Before making some final remarks about the democratic potential of new civic engagement in the region, we need to be reminded of the general illiberal equilibrium in the region⁸ and weakening of the perspective of EU accession as a potential external motivation for democratic reforms. Both illiberal tendencies and weakening of the importance of joining the EU have increased during the pandemic times. Despite the continuing trend of support for joining the EU, the citizens are getting increasingly sceptical of ever achieving that goal – with one third of population in Serbia thinking they will never become an EU member, and 28% in Bosnia and 26% in North Macedonia sharing the same view.⁹ The Western Balkans thus need a new democratization narrative and strategy.

⁸ Maliqi, Agon, 2020. TRANSITION TO WHAT? Western Balkans democracies in a state of illiberal equilibrium, Prishtine: Sbunker.

⁹ <https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place-English-1.pdf>

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Local civic initiatives and new forms of civic engagement prove to be worthy of further attention for exploring democratizing potentials in the region. With their focus on tangible and concrete issues, affecting the daily lives of citizens, they have high mobilization potential and ability to cut across ethnic divides and enhance citizens' sense of agency. Even with limited impact achieved or fast dissipation, they nevertheless create a new momentum in the public discourse and collective memory, and thus open new opportunity structures for future possible changes.

The similarity of motives and topics inciting various movements across the region speak of the necessity to establish a platform for their networking, cooperation, horizontal learning and mutual reinforcement. Attaining a regional character could help them exercise more political pressure on their local and national governments; this could also help them achieve stronger visibility and influence.

Developing cooperation with existing political parties and other political actors seems to be the likely scenario for many civic initiatives if they are to achieve greater political success or bring about social and political change. As has already happened in North Macedonia, Montenegro, but also Croatia, many of the actors arising from the protest movements and civic initiatives will realize that structural change will not be possible without entering the electoral arena, either through coalitions with already established political actors, or through creating their own electoral platforms.

II

Potentials and problems of environmental engagement

The global rise of green activism and environmental movements should surprise no one, given the acuteness of environmental degradation and climate change related catastrophes taking place all over the world. However, geopolitical contexts surely matter, and the claims that today's environmental issues are inseparable from the growing degradation of socio-economic and political rights urge us to consider the political weight of concrete environmental struggles, within their specific socio-political contexts. What we propose is to read contemporary green activism in the Western Balkans not solely as a response to

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environmental degradation, but as an indicator of the possibilities arising from specific forms of popular contentious politics addressing the democratic backsliding in the region. For this purpose, we will provide a brief contextual description of some of the most popular environmental struggles in the region, namely the popular revolts against small hydro power plants.

The construction of small hydro power plants has been the focus of heated debates for some time. Initially praised for their ability to produce clean energy, it soon became clear that their damaging effects were much greater than the potential benefits. Using the power of small, fast mountain streams, such generation of power indeed does not pollute the environment. But the construction of small hydro power plants significantly impacts the entire ecosystem, by stopping river flows and fish migration, by inducing morphological changes in the ground, and by affecting nearby flora and fauna.

The whole region of the Western Balkans, with its many mountainous areas, has been envisaged for the construction of some 3,000 small hydro power plants. On top of that, the majority of them are planned to be constructed in protected areas, in mountain forests with rich and fragile flora and fauna, in rivers which serve as reservoirs for drinking water, and even within National Parks.¹⁰ This has caused affected citizens to protest the construction of small hydro power plants, and some of these protests have caught the attention of the general public and media as already mentioned in the first part of the paper.¹¹ An additional problem the protesters have to address is the close linkage between investors and politicians in power, which reveals the lucrative background of the small hydro power plants building plans in the Western Balkans. Namely, one of the main drivers of their expansion in the region is the availability of public financial support in the form of state-sponsored feed-in tariffs. “Originally foreseen as a means to boost all forms of renewable energy, including solar and wind, in the Western Balkans feed-in tariffs have been disproportionately directed towards small hydropower plants”, notes a report by the CEE Bankwatch Network.¹² The report condemns corruption and nepotism in the renewables incentives system and urges a more

¹⁰ <https://www.lupiga.com/vijesti/mini-hidroelektrane-mala-korist-za-veliko-unistavanje-prirode>.

¹¹ <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/a626865-srbi-i-albanci-protiv-izgradnje-mhe-u-strpcu-protest-zbog-hapsenja-komsije/>.

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/bih-kruscica-nagrada-euronatur/30101398.html>.

¹² <https://bankwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/who-pays-who-profits.pdf>.

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transparent renewables support system, in line with the EU's Guidelines on State Aid for Environmental Protection and Energy.

As the general public and the institutions of the EU, such as the Energy community, became increasingly aware of this issue, so too, did some of the Ministries in the WB countries, responsible for the field. But, despite the fact that, for example, the Ministry of Environmental Protection of the Republic of Serbia in 2018 announced a ban on the construction of small hydro power plants in protected areas so far no changes in the legal framework have occurred to enable this decision. The working group of the National Convention of the European Union in Serbia, responsible for chapter 27 – environment, published an analysis of the water resources in Serbia in the same year, stating that the construction of “small hydropower plants has progressively devastating effects on the environment, bringing almost no economic or social benefits to local communities, benefiting only investors.”¹³

On 15 August, several hundred activists and concerned citizens gathered in a small village of Rakita in southwest Serbia. They came from different parts of the country to perform what at first glance seemed an act of vandalism: they joined together with the aim of dismantling the metal pipes from the local riverbed, put there previously in an attempt to construct the small hydropower plant ‘Zvonce’. Oddly enough, their action was entirely in accordance with the official decisions, issued 20 months ago by the Ministry of Environmental Protection and the Institute for Nature Conservation of Serbia, which ordered the investor of ‘Zvonce’ to discontinue any further construction work and to pull out the pipes due to the irregular and nature-damaging way they had been placed in the very bottom of the riverbed. However, not only did the investor ignore the decision, but it was later granted a final use permit for electric energy production. Feeling betrayed by the state institutions, and determined to act upon the official decisions on their own, the local authorities and the environmental initiative *Odbranimo Reke Stare Planine* issued an open call to all concerned citizens to come to Rakita and jointly help in manually pulling the pipes out from the river. Recognising the political potential of this popular revolt, the call was answered not only by activists and environmentalists, but also by some political figures from the opposition.

This event succinctly illustrates various aspects of the nexus between corrupted power and citizens' agency in a captured state, including many potentials and challenges inherent to civic

¹³ <https://eukonvent.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/OASIS-Vodni-resursi-RS-analiza-stanja.pdf>.

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resistance and activism. However, several points are worth further examining: 1) environmental concerns are increasingly capable of mobilising citizens to protest against corruptive and clientelist regimes, as they refer to tangible, life-threatening issues and their capacity to polarise protestors is low. 2) Ecological issues, like air pollution or small hydro power plants, are becoming a common concern for the whole region of the Western Balkans. There is a potential for joint strategies, which could hopefully migrate to other political domains, and this could also signal to the EU that a synchronised, unique approach is needed. 3) As well as potentials, many challenges are present too: these protests and concerns clearly signal the citizens' willingness to be included in the political decision-making processes, to make their voices heard and to be taken into account. At the same time, this important democratising potential provides a suitable terrain for populist and right-wing forces to flourish. Bearing this in mind, it is important for progressive stakeholders to engage closely with environmental struggles. Furthermore, this is a unique opportunity for: a) new democratic social movements and citizens' initiatives to build their presence, strategies, and alliances, and to address heterogeneous citizens' grievances with the progressive political agenda; b) the EU not to overlook these problems, but to take them as a palpable manifestation of democratic backsliding in the region, and as potential arenas where new democratic players could emerge, but one where new right-wing, identity-based claims could also easily be put on the agenda in the absence of an alternative, firm and coherent progressive programme.