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Activist Citizenship in South East Europe

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The contributions to this volume on protest and activist citizenship in South East Europe (SEE)¹ delve far beyond discussions about the efficacy and legitimacy of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and social movement organisations that have dominated the study of civil society in post-communism. They focus instead on how certain types of citizenship – most notably ‘activist citizenship’ – are forged or not forged; how citizens are drawn into ‘acts of citizenship’ (Isin 2008, 2009) other than through joining or supporting established NGOs. The articles illustrate what political scientists find it difficult to uncover – non-institutionalised and non-formal modes of collective action; symbolic politics, cultural challenges, acts of citizenship and participation that defy notions of ‘weak civil society’ (Howard 2003; Crotty 2003; Rose 2001) or the NGO-ization of civil society spaces (Jacobsson and Saxonberg 2013).

They each critique the NGO-ization thesis – the dominance in post-communist states of externally funded, apolitical and non-participatory professional organisations focused on policy and governance (Mandel 2002; Wedel 2001; Quigley 2000) - by illustrating the activism that takes place outside of NGOs or completely separate from them. They thus contest the assertion of NGOs having colonised the civil society space and interrogate the notion that a premature institutionalisation of civil society organisations has killed-off political activism and any vestige of radicalism.

Each case study highlights the extent to which a rejection, or at least a suspicion, of the institutions of liberal democracy as the mechanisms for political participation underpins much of the activism. This in itself does not make the SEE states under scrutiny here particularly unusual. Cultural protest and non-institutionalised forms of activism have long been seen in established western democracies (cf. Melucci 1988) and have, as Dolenc et al. observe, become a global phenomenon since the financial crisis of 2008.

What, then, is surprising or specific about contemporary activism in these countries? First and foremost, it is that this level of civic engagement and activist citizenship are occurring in countries that we were told had ‘weak’ civil societies and very little civic participation (Petrova and Tarrow 2007). Citizens were apparently politically timid due to the lingering legacy of Soviet-style authoritarianism, because of their failure to fully grasp democratic politics, or through the engendered passivity of liberal democratic institutions. There has been barely any dissent from the assertion that citizens of post-socialism have neither aptitude nor appetite for radicalism or protest.

¹ In this volume, South East Europe will be understood to mean Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, and former Yugoslav territories (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia).

Second, this collection of scholarship finally lays to rest the notion of post-socialist semi-peripheral Europe 'catching-up' with the hinterland of mature liberal democracies in terms of civil society activism and social movement development. The implicit assumption in much of the extant literature of post-socialist states emulating a model of western-inspired activism based on channelling participation through liberal institutions and deploying the strategies of conventional social movements as a primary stage prior to the likely emergence of more radical and 'progressive' forms of activism is a myth squarely debunked. The activism of SEE is clearly not a stage behind; an immature or amateur version of what we may find in the UK, France, Spain, or Greece. The countries and their activists studied herein are potentially trailblazing forms of activist citizenship that fundamentally challenges the core-periphery power relationship that has dominated post-socialist studies for three decades. What seemingly gives their activism poignancy and fervour is a disillusionment with the institutions of liberal democracy that stretches back much further than the financial crisis of a decade ago. The message from each contribution is loud and clear: these countries should not be considered as being a step behind the west, nor are they necessarily emulating their patterns of activism; the local contexts are giving rise to expressions of activist citizenship that are certainly similar to what has been seen across the rest of Europe, but some of the mobilizations appear to be genuinely innovative.

A third contribution made by these authors is to emphasise the significance of what James C. Scott (1990) refers to as 'infra-politics', forms of activism that are often dismissed as occurring below the parapet, as an elementary stage in the emergence of institutionalised civil society, and having little impact on the formal political sphere. What each of the contributions illustrates is how vital are the cultural challenges or the incidents of symbolic 'everyday' activism that occur often on a very small scale, in the bookshop cafes of Serbia (Goldstein) or the photographs and fabricated images on billboards in rural Montenegro (Baća). This is not treated here as evidence of an immature or immanent civil society, but as vital life-blood for a civil society that cannot be reduced to the number of registered NGOs.

All the contributions draw on Isin's notion of 'activist citizenship'. For Isin (2008, 2009), *active* citizenship is when an individual performs her / his duties within the (democratic) polity, such as voting, taxpaying, and adhering to the legal order. On the other hand, *activist* citizenship necessitates individuals to break with prevailing routines and practices in order to bring into being new claimants of justice (Isin 2008; Isin 2009). Activist citizens do this through "acts of citizenship", which are acts that constitute what is meant by "citizens" (insiders) as different from "aliens" (outsiders) (Isin 2008).

In a nutshell, the focus in this volume is how citizens across SEE are, in the context of semi-authoritarian or partially democratic contexts, learning and developing their citizenship. Supporting a western-funded NGO by making a donation, attending a meeting or demonstration is not an expression of activist citizenship; it may well be a valuable precursor, but it tells us relatively little about the substantive interaction between citizens and elites, between the powerful and the powerless. NGOs can be weak, poor and ignored by swathes of citizens, but activist citizenship and political contestation may well be very developed and effective. Likewise, the NGO sector and formal civil society could be strong,

established and highly prominent without any challenge whatsoever to the power of capital or corrupt elites emerging from citizens or marginalised voices.

The over-arching question that emerges from the volume – and the focus of future research, no doubt – is whether the emergence of this sort of activist citizenship in a small corner of Europe is best understood as a ‘local’ response to a much broader crisis of representative institutions of liberal democracy, or whether there is in fact something much more specific and noteworthy emerging that challenges our theoretical and empirical understanding of contemporary activism. What each contribution seems to conclude is that there is indeed something more that has been unearthed. For Dolenc et al., the rights to the city movement in Zagreb is indeed ‘part of a global phenomenon of resisting neoliberal transformations, (but)... its local configuration relates to the context of the post-socialist semi-periphery’. But, by highlighting the particularly aggressive reconfiguration of public spaces and the corrupt processes surrounding privatization, she encourages us to directly question the idea that protest in the Balkans and the activism in cities is best studied as just a local manifestation of a global phenomenon. The intensity of the crisis and the response to it in SEE brings greater clarity regarding what types of activist citizenship exert the most impact.

The imprint of the post-socialist, semi-peripheral European ‘local’ resonates through each of the contributions. To interpret SEE manifestations of activist citizenship simply as part of the ‘global crisis’ fails to acknowledge how the legacies of authoritarianism, combined with the two decades of post-socialist, post-conflict development have led to a particular depoliticisation of these countries. This may well have become accentuated by the 2008 crisis and the austerity that followed, but in the case of SEE, the political disconnect between citizens and elites reaches back much further. For the Montenegrins, Serbians or Romanian activists, their democratic institutions have not suddenly started to degenerate or lose their capacity to channel societal interests to elites. Rather, electoral democracy and formal structures of civil society have arguably *never* been perceived to fully exist or function. The protests in SEE may look the same as that which is occurring elsewhere, but the empirical cases we are introduced to in this volume are less about liberal institutions in crisis and more about the myth of liberal institutions having been consolidated in countries where established elites have maintained a steadfast grip on power, through privatization, ‘democratization’ and Europeanization.

Contributions to the Special Issue

A recurrent theme across the contributions in the special issue is the evolutionary and strategic nature of the acts of citizenship explored. Although supposedly “leaderless” horizontal movements, it is crucial to reveal forms of authority and agency provided by (formal or informal) leaders which significantly affect trajectory and outcomes (Aidukaitė 2016). Hence, one must not assume the “spontaneity” (Dalakoglou 2012; Flesher Fominaya 2015) to explain the start of citizen-led movements, since this buys into the mythology of the protest which activists may want to portray (Polletta 1998).

A second feature of the contributions is the complementarity of the literatures of radical politics and social movements in exploring the post-2008 protest movements in SEE and in

other parts of the world. Isin (2017) highlights that performative citizenship rests on claim-making related to rights that is central to framing of social movements and episodes of contentious politics (Tilly 2008). However, these theories focus less on the structural conditions which allow certain moments of liminality (Turner 1969), conditioned by changes in political opportunity and resource mobilisation, to allow for the subjects to break habitus and bring the new actor into being. On the other hand, social movement studies often closely explore the contextual factors which facilitate or impede the development of protest movement. There is also a focus on identifying who protests, and della Porta (2015) identifies the citizen as the subject of anti-austerity protests. However, there is little theoretical focus on the acts that brought into being the “99%” (the citizen) in contrast to the “1%” (predatory elite), or the tensions between the claims to justice and the methods used to address them. It is here that the radical politics literature is crucial.

Chiara Milan investigates how the 2013 and 2014 protest cycles in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and illustrates how they differ, since they are both instances of citizen-led mobilisation (that are beyond the practices of “active citizenship”). The author complements Isin’s (2017) notion of performative citizenship with Leach’s (2013) concept of “prefigurative politics”. In other words, the means employed by social movements shape the ultimate objectives. For example, in the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the establishment of direct-democratic citizen-led assemblies in 2014 prefigured the aim of creating a more egalitarian society (in contrast to 2013 demonstrations). In 2013, participants protested the lack of a nationwide law on ID cards (which prevented a critically ill infant from seeking medical care abroad) by organising protest marches. One year later, violent protests in response to the closure of privatised factories in the eastern city of Tuzla soon gave way to the establishment of citizen-organised popular assemblies (“plenums”) similar to those set up during the Indignant anti-austerity protests in Spain and in Greece. As in the cases of Croatia (Dolenec et al.) and Montenegro (Baća) examined in this special issue, participants in Bosnia-Herzegovina experienced a learning process by which they gradually used more radical and disruptive modes of dissent across waves of protest. However, unlike these other cases, the protests in Bosnia-Herzegovina did not trigger the construction of a new type of de-ethnified citizen resting on a right-based notion of citizenship.

Astrid Reinprecht looks at student protests in Serbia since 2005, which predated the other instances of citizen-led mobilisation studied in this special issue. Student protest movements in former Yugoslavia were amongst the first in the region to recognise the connection between the adverse effects of neo-liberalisation and the post-socialist transition (Baćeović 2010). The trigger for student dissent was the signing of the declaration to become part of the European Higher Education Area (commonly known as the “Bologna Declaration”). At the end of 2005, activists from the University of Belgrade carried out a number of protest actions, including blockades, demonstrations in front of government buildings, and performances. However, these activities did not result in significant public support or media coverage. In subsequent actions, student activists occupied the University of Belgrade Faculty of Philosophy (2006) and Faculty of Arts (2007). By conducting interviews with activists, the author shows that the two dominant frames devised for the occupations were ones of commercialisation and of direct democracy. Critics of the Bologna Process across Europe claim that the objective to create unified standards for university degrees is at best unnecessary bureaucratisation and at worst marketisation of higher

education. However, activists could not invoke the 1968 Belgrade university occupations without accusations of Yugo-nostalgia. Nor could they connect to the legacies of the anti-Milosevic protests in 2000 from liberal activists whilst critiquing neoliberalism. Ultimately, the Belgrade activists drew on the frames (commercialisation) and repertoires (occupation, popular assemblies) of student activism in Western Europe, particularly the UK, France, and Greece. The occupations in Belgrade inspired similar actions in Zagreb (Ćulum and Doolan 2015) and other places in former Yugoslavia, and via direct contacts (e.g., at the Subversive Festival) and indirect emulation, through which a new student manifestations of ‘activist citizens’ were constituted (Baća 2017).

Lasse Thomassen and Alen Toplišek critically assess the concept of horizontality (Sitrin 2012; Sitrin 2014) underlying the direct-democratic frame highlighted by Reinprecht which was at the heart of the popular assemblies in SEE and elsewhere in the post-2008 period. The authors investigate the case of Slovenia, which stands out in SEE as the only case where an anti-austerity movement formed the basis for a political party (the United Left) that not only formed in the wake of the protests, but also garnered sufficient support to earn parliamentary representation. As such, it is the only example of a successful Podemos-like “movement party” (Kitschelt 2006; della Porta et al. 2017) in SEE. The authors conclude that, contrary to prevailing views by Sitrin and other political philosophers, it is impossible to disentangle horizontality and verticality. This is because, despite the insistence on a leaderless movement, there are informal leaders who come to represent or embody the movement externally (see Ana in this volume for the Romanian case). Moreover, for horizontality to function in the protest committees, it was necessary for some verticality (e.g., authority of a chairperson) to guarantee the preservation of the horizontal guiding principle. Once elements of the movement formed into the United Left, the party sought to preserve hybridity between verticality and horizontality by having elected representatives in legislatures and leaders like other parties, yet also having more informal features such as working groups and local committees. It remains to be seen whether this delicate balance between horizontality and verticality can be preserved in the United Left.

Danijela Dolenec, Karin Doolan, and Tomislav Tomašević examine the trajectory of the Zagreb Right to the City Movement. In particular, the authors question the “iron law of oligarchy” posited by Michels (1968), and empirically validated by Rucht (1999) and others. According to Michels, social movements that institutionalise into conventional forms of political participation (i.e., parties) de-radicalise, become co-opted into the political system, and lose the potential to trigger fundamental social change. This resonates with Tarrow (2011), who differentiates between trajectories of institutionalisation (as Michels does) contrasted with radicalisation. Tarrow further argues that social movements who wish to stay true to their radical values eventually burn out due to the challenges of sustaining anti-establishment mobilisation without strong bureaucratic structure. However, the authors show how the Right to the City in Zagreb problematises this “iron law”. Using interviews with activists triangulated with primary and secondary materials, the authors show how the movement began as a constellation of NGOs willing to collaborate with city authorities (“active citizenship”), and gradually began to employ more “illegal” actions when their efforts were thwarted (“activist citizenship”). The Right to the City crystallised around plans to build a shopping centre and luxury residences on one part of “Flower Square” in Zagreb. In addition to occupying the space, activists devised performative and creative actions to

highlight injustice, such as: affixing a fake street sign reading “Victims of [Mayor] Milan Bandić Square” (parodying “Victims of Fascism Square” in Zagreb) and putting up yellow “crime scene” tape around the Ministry of Environment, Planning, and Construction to highlight the conflict of interest of the responsible minister. The movement further developed in response to plans to construct on one part of the Square, on Varšavska Street. Activists again organised occupations of the disputed space, as well as creative actions, such as building a large Trojan Horse (to underline that elite pronouncements of “public interest” were self-serving). Eventually, the fight was lost, but the movement did not burn out (contra Tarrow), but rather supported similar actions elsewhere in Croatia, as well as in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Serbia.

Bojan Baća explores how acts of citizenship initially started by residents of Beranselo, a small settlement in northeast Montenegro, protesting the process determining the location of a regional landfill unintentionally brought into being a new political subject of the *Beranselac* (i.e., resident of Beranselo, pl. Beranselci). Although the actions were never done under the banner of a unified social movement, the acts of citizenship in this rural setting were the first in a process of accretion whereby the political subjectivation of the “Beranselac” became the actor (“we are all Beranselci”) highlighting injustice by predatory and exploitative elites across the country. Using interviews with three of the most visible activists and supported by secondary sources, Baca shows how the Beranselo “movement” can be understood using the stages of political subjectivation, developed by Rancière, to performatively assert equality from an initial position of inequality: 1) disagreeing with the existing modes for registering grievances; 2) creating new scripts for political participation; and 3) recognition by other exploited parties as symbolic of their own plight. As in the case of the Zagreb Right to the City movement (Dolenec et al., this volume), residents in Beranselo initially pursued existing scripts as “active citizens” to highlight their grievance. They only pursued writing new scripts when they felt unjustly impeded by authorities. Most interestingly, Baca concludes that the accretion of acts of citizenship was not purposeful (contra Isin), but rather a result of uncoordinated everyday acts of micro-resistance, such as the sharing of parody images about Beranselo on social media.

Focusing on instances everyday activism also examined by Baća, **Goldstein** seeks to identify instances of activist citizenship that are largely hidden away from the public gaze by studying what the author calls “discreet activism” with a longer-term horizon and less radical perspective than the other cases presented in this special issue. The author conducts participant observation of independent café-bookshops (alongside interviews with the owners) in Novi Sad (the capital of the autonomous Serbian province of Vojvodina) by using Lefebvre’s (1991) notion of the “counter-space” where citizens can resist the dominant meta-narrative of the capitalist city at the micro-level, and thus impacts on the “everyday”. Goldstein finds that many of these bookshops do not prioritise profit-making, but rather focus on creating spaces for social engagement alongside more “public” forms of activism. Moreover, the spaces and scripts created are not done so solely by the proprietors of the bookshops, but mainly through a process of co-creation in which participants are actively involved. These “everyday utopias” (Cooper 2014) may be ephemeral, but the alternative scripts created can accrete over time and provide a “preamble” for more public activism.

Ana disentangles the role of feminist activists during the 2012 Romanian protests in order to recover their voice during the mobilisation. The author conducted interviews with a number of feminist activists involved in the protest, as well as observing the 2012 protests, and investigated the process (and impediments) of constituting the feminist citizen. To do this, Ana uses the concept of “perspectival dualism” developed by Fraser and Honneth (2003) that appeals to justice in social movements rest on claims related to recognition and redistribution, which are inter-linked. This perspectival dualism is complemented with Ferree’s focus on the role of power relations exercised through structures understood both as the individual’s autonomy for self-determination and the role of collective authority (Ferree and Gamson 2003). Since these forms of power are themselves interlinked with class and race, then they are also connected to justice related to recognition and redistribution (Ferree and Martin 1995). The notion of citizenship (as a form of recognition) at the heart of this special issue was understood in two ways. On the one hand, the existing notions of citizenship allowed women to participate fully in the protest movements as “active citizens”. However, a second group of feminists saw claims through prevailing ideas Romanian citizenship as inadequate, since they did not question the status quo and thus did not have the potential to trigger a rupture and reconstitution of the political (“activist citizenship”).

The authors thus position themselves at various points within the realm of infra-politics – for Thomassen and Toplišek this is the juncture or interface between horizontal protest networks and the vertical manifestations of protest, including parties and more established formal iterations of civil society in Slovenia. For Dolenc et al., it is the physical location of the city. Each vantage point offers insights into forms of activist citizenship that do not entirely reject parties and NGOs, but organise their activism separately from the institutionalised civil society; deploy different tactics, logics and strategies; and fundamentally challenge the tacit assertion that the only activism or politics that matters is that which takes place ‘formally’, within the contours of ‘the system’ and its institutions. From the realm of infra-politics and below the parapet of the formal political sphere, ‘capacity building’ (training), the availability of material resources (project grants), access to elites (policy consultations and round table negotiations) all become less relevant. Making demands on the state, challenging it and seeking to influence political elites is not absent or lost, but the vertical interaction between activists and the state is merely one dimension of these forms of action.

The contributions are interested in how activist citizenship develops – is there a temporal dimension in the sense that the movements or incidents of protest learn from previous examples? How important in this cumulative learning is the dissident movements that challenged socialism in the late 1980s and early 1990s? (Milan, Reinprecht) Do activists learn from what occurs in neighbouring (Balkan) states? If so, how and under what circumstances? If there is transnational or even global ‘learning’ and ‘sharing’ taking place, where do the activist movements of South East Europe sit within this? Are they somewhat passively copying or reflecting activism learnt elsewhere, or are they actually initiating and innovating?

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