

# Resetting Liberalism in Southeastern Europe: What Role for Civic Activism?

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## Introduction

The Balkans have long been described as the “other” of Europe (Todorov 2009). This has always been a flawed argument. However, it is more so today, when it is possible to observe in different parts of Europe political views and behaviors common in the Balkans since the fall of Communist party rule. These include the substantial power of national populist parties; party rhetoric and use of state resources designed to mobilize a narrow group of citizens and demobilize many citizens who seek effective governance; and widespread citizen disaffection with governing elites and institutions viewed as corrupt, ineffective, and often hostile toward civil liberties.

A host of factors, including elite and party behavior, weak formal institutions, global economic forces, and external authoritarian actors contribute to the strength of illiberal regimes in the region (Krastev 2016, Keil 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Youngs 2018, Bassuener 2019). However, the role that citizens and civil society in Central and Eastern Europe might play deserves consideration.

Civic activism in the region does not look like what many Western scholars expected 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. This does not mean that citizens in Central and Eastern Europe necessarily fit the common characterization of societies in the region as “civically passive” (Marchenko 2017). Instead, civic activism in the region frequently does not conform to Western expectations of either focusing on liberal democratic ideals or occurring through institutionalized modes of collective action (Fagan and Sircar 2017).

Understanding how and why citizens participate in Central and Eastern Europe has important implications for democratic governance in the region. Some scholars argue that the dearth of participatory activism in the region is significantly made up for by transactional activism in which civil society activists work together to affect policy change (Petrova and Tarrow 2007; Marinova 2011). However, if civic activism does not gain the support, much less, the engagement, of substantial portions of citizens of Central and Eastern Europe, then habits of participation will not develop. In addition, the longevity of the policy change that transactional activism promotes (Danković and Pickering 2017) and the legitimacy of its actions can be called into question. Legitimacy is a particularly important in Europe today, where many citizens, particularly youth, have expressed deep disillusionment with what they view as dysfunctional, elite-dominated democratic institutions (Grzymala-Busse 2017, Jusić and Lavrič 2019).

## Concepts and Context

This paper conceptualizes civic participation broadly as engagement in public action other than voting, drawing on Welzel et al. 2005. Civic participation includes membership in and volunteering for voluntary associations, as well as participation in non-institutionalized forms of community involvement such as boycotts, strikes, demonstrations, petitions, and public debates. This definition does not assume that civic activism is supportive of liberal democracy and instead treats the normative focus of civic action to be an empirical question.<sup>2</sup> A strong civil

society could help deter the return of autocracy to East Central (Deegan-Krause 2018). However, a strand of conservative activism could also support illiberal rule (Greskovits and Wittenberg 2018, Youngs 2019). In fact, Dimitrova (2018, 267) argues anticorruption protests and mobilization of citizens for conservative and nationalist policies in Central and Eastern Europe are evidence of the different, potentially interacting trends of democratization or de-democratization.

Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) provide a window into the evolution of the forms and content of civic participation in in Southeastern Europe. Political history suggests that civil society development and civic participation would be more challenging in these countries in than in other parties of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). After the fall of one-party Communist rule, they experienced the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia and began their transformation away from state-socialist political, economic, and social systems only later, in 1996 in BiH and in 2000 in Serbia. National populist parties<sup>3</sup> have dominated rule since the 1990s, only modestly “dressing up” their parties since 2000 to be able both to seek EU integration and to spread fear of “others” (minorities, refugees) and of change. They do so in order to demobilize citizens seeking improved governance (Gagnon 2004, Skendaj 2014) and distract from policy failures regarding citizens’ priority concerns – socio-economic opportunities (IMPAQ 2018, Turčilo et al. 2019).

After making some progress toward deepening their democratic institutions in the 2000s under Centrist parties, Serbia and BiH under national populists since 2010 have experienced democratic backsliding (V-Dem 2019). The economies of BiH and Serbia are still reeling from violent, corrupt, and incomplete transitions from state socialism, on-going corruption, and de-industrialization. These forces contribute to low levels of external efficacy (Taleski et al. 2015). A nationally representative survey conducted in 2017 in Serbia and BiH found more than half of respondents –56%--disagreed with the preposition that citizens and CSOs are able to scrutinize government (RCC 2017). In addition, young people express high levels of desire to exit.<sup>4</sup> The EU, through its pre-accession process, is the most powerful regional actor. Yet, the EU’s internal turmoil and prioritization of stability over democracy in the former Yugoslavia (Bieber 2018); the U.S.’s withdrawal; and Russia and Turkey’s increasing intervention (Bassuener 2019) into the region have facilitated the current hybrid regimes.

## **The Evolution of Civic Activism**

### ***Forms***

Since 1989, the forms of civic activism in CEE appear to multiplying, occurring beyond formal Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). This is despite the fact that civil society played a significant role in removing communist-party rule in parts of CEE (Bernhard 1993) and in spearheading electoral revolutions that significantly contributed to the downfall of hybrid regimes—including in Serbia-- in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Bunce and Wolchik 2011).

Citizens perceptions of civil society organizations grew more skeptical as they became aware of the negative, if unintended, consequences of Western aid to civil society in post-socialist CEE. These include large numbers of hierarchical, Western-oriented organizations (Carothers and Ottaway 2000; Kostovicova and Bojicic-Dzelilovic 2013); organizations led by elites (Wedel 2001), and focused more on donors’ than citizens’ needs (Mendelson and Glenn 2002, Grodeland 2006, Sperling 2006, McMahon 2017, Danković and Pickering 2017). Only 14 percent of Bosnians in a 2018 survey agreed that local civil society organizations in BiH could mostly be trusted to do the right thing for people in BiH (IMPAQ 2018). A similarly low

percentage of Serbians— 16 -- expressed trust in Non-Governmental Organizations (CeSID 2017).<sup>5</sup> Few participate in NGOs (IMPAQ 2018, CeSID 2017).

Frustration with formal civic organizations has led a portion of progressive citizens who seek to be active on issues of shared concern to do so in more informal and loosely networked, less hierarchical ways. (Saxonberg 2013, Polanska and Chimiak 2017, Vandor et al. 2017, Jacobsson and Korolczuk 2017). Social media often greases this non-institutionalized activism. University students have engaged in plenums, sit-ins, and protests against educational reforms and corruption (Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Macedonia, BiH), citizens have mobilized to help victims of flooding in 2014 (BiH, Serbia), and others have joined in loosely organized anti-development protests in Belgrade, Zagreb, Skopje, and Tivat (Morača 2016, Kurtović and Hromadžić 2017, Kosturanova 2017, Santora 2019).

### ***Content***

The content of civic activism in the region also seems to be evolving in unexpected ways. The first type of content animating recent civic activism is focused on tackling *concrete issues* that make a difference in people's everyday lives (Gladarev and Lonkila 2012). Norris (2003, p. 16) found European youth often engaged in "cause-oriented" actions, which call attention to specific, often local, issues and policy concerns, rather than in citizen-oriented actions related to elections and parties. A global assessment of civil society activism in 2018 (State of Civil Society 2019, 10) found that many protests in 2018 related to basic, everyday issues, rather than to lofty appeals to abstract goals.

Surveys of youth in Serbia and BiH show that the most commonly reported types of volunteer activities focus on community-based issues (Taleski et al. 2015). In Serbia and North Macedonia, field research found civic activists have been able to mobilize citizens when they depict concrete, single political issues as symbolic of bigger problems such as widespread corruption, captured institutions, or regime pressure on society (Pudar et al. 2020). This is similar to a pragmatic "local first" approach among activists in BiH (Puljek-Shank 2018). This approach focuses on issues that are local and concrete, but also have broader symbolic meaning and resonance. These concrete issues, such as helping victims of floods, opposing the closing of a hospital, supporting the restarting of a worker-managed factory, and preserving public spaces and rivers speak to larger problems of public corruption and governments' abandonment of perceived responsibilities to take care of citizens' basic socio-economic well-being (Jusić and Lavrić 2019). In Serbia, activists of successful mobilizations have opposed Belgrade waterfront's opaque urban renewal, heating problems in Niš, factory bankruptcies, and the decision of a municipality to purchase real estate belonging to the municipal president's family (Pudar et al. 2020). In both countries, plans to build mini hydroelectric power plants on rivers have provoked protests by rural and urban communities concerned by greed that threatens drinking water sources and tourism (Ć. 2016; Pudar et al. 2020).

A different type of content that seems to mobilize citizens encompasses *conservative issues*. Increasingly strong conservative CSOs<sup>6</sup> advocate ethno-national visions, stability, and sometimes blaming those who have the fewest rights for citizens' understandable concerns about insecurity, inequality, poverty, and isolation from power (Grzymala-Busse 2017, Youngs 2018, State of Civil Society 2019). For example, content analysis of media coverage of activism in Hungary in the 2000s found Fidesz built up and mobilized conservative civil society organizations to assist in their 2010 parliamentary victory and subsequent development of illiberal rule (Greskovits and Wittenberg 2018).

A number of conservative groups in Serbia and in BiH's Republika Srpska have been supported by extremists in Russia and view the liberal, uni-polar post-Cold war order as corrupting genuine national and cultural identities (Dević 2019). The Serbian *Nasi* (Ours) group has advocated for liberation and then unification of all Serbian territories occupied during the 1990s wars, a ban on foreign-funded NGOs, and a 100-year ban on LGBTI public activities. The Sarajevo-based NGO Islam Bosna has focused on providing a web platform for discussion of Islam, values, and citizenship, while also portraying favorably armed jihad in Syria and Iraq (Wentholt 2019). Bosnian Croat and Bosnian Serb nationalist associations also advocate ethno-nationalist visions and support co-ethnics convicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

### **Implications for Illiberal Rule**

Research suggests that civic engagement in Southeastern Europe is better described as different in form and content than expected by Western scholars (Pietrzyk-Reeves 2008, Fagan and Sircar 2016, Eikhart and Foa 2017) rather than as weak (Howard 2002). Forms are often non-institutionalized. The goals of domestically driven, rather than Western-donor driven, citizen participation include concrete, local issues that affect their community members' everyday lives, as well as ethnonational and socially conservative policies.

What does this mean for illiberal rule? Ironically, the success of mobilizations in Niš about heating prices illustrates a challenge for social mobilizations in Serbia – transcending the initial problem and directing activism into the wider one it symbolizes (Pudar et al. 2020). This raises the question about whether a local first approach around everyday concerns can solve concrete problems *and* build habits of activism among citizens who can scale up this engagement to affect higher-level governance. The lack of citizen trust and engagement in rights-based NGOs favored by Western donors suggests a local first approach is worth a try. Others argue this type of participatory activism, particularly if it emphasizes horizontal decision-making, could detract from efforts to strengthen democracy. Mobilizations against Serbian President Vučić's illiberal regime in 2017 died out partly because they did not connect to a strong opposition party, as successful mobilizations against the national populist VMRO-DPMNE did in North Macedonia (Pudar et al. 2020). Weekly anti-government protests in Serbia since December 2018 may have a better chance of affecting political change. Though organized by a leaderless civic movement, the protests have spread to 30 cities and engaged political oppositionists (CIVICUS Monitor 2019). Understanding the impact of citizens' (non) participation on illiberal regimes in Central and Eastern Europe requires closer attention to the varieties of civic activism that citizens support and engage in 30 years after the fall of one-party rule.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Organizations that use violence are beyond the scope of this investigation.

<sup>3</sup> I use Pop-Eleches' (2010) definition of national populist parties: parties that feature nationalism as a prominent element of their electoral appeal and claim to represent the interests of an idealized national collectivity

<sup>4</sup> Primarily due to poor economic opportunities, 27% of young people in BiH and 30% of young people in Serbia express a strong or very strong interest in leaving the country for at least 6 months. Of those young people interested in leaving, 58% in BiH and 40% in BiH are interested in leaving for at least 20 years (Jusić and Lavrič 2019). A UN official in BiH expressed concern about the recent accelerated exodus of youth from BiH and noted examples of where programming to support youth participation in local peacebuilding programs were disrupted by departures of prominent youth leaders (interview conducted in Sarajevo in June 2019).

<sup>5</sup> The wording "NGOs" (*nevladine organizacije*), which Serbs tend to connect with Western donors, rather than CSOs or civil society organizations (*organizacije civilnog društva*), may increase levels of distrust.

<sup>6</sup> Youngs (2018, 8) defines conservative civil society as "that which promotes any one or a combination of the following: conservative social values, religious values, strong national identities, exclusionary ethnic identities, traditional or customary identities and institutional forms, illiberal political ideology, or a curtailment of liberal personal rights."

<sup>7</sup> The project, "21<sup>st</sup> Century Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe: 30 Years After," (Pietrzyk-Reeves, McMahon, Sundstrom, and Pickering) seeks to do this first by conducting nationally representative surveys and semi-structured interviews with civic activists in six countries: Poland, the Czech Republic, BiH, Serbia, Ukraine, and Russia.