THE NEW BALKAN LEFT

STRUGGLES SUCCESSES FAILURES

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Impresum

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Publisher: Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Southeast Europe

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Reviewers: Ankica Čakardić, Asim Mujkić, Žiga Vodovnik

Photos: Vanco Dzambaski, Organizata Politike, Velija Hasanbegović, Irfan Brković, Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Southeast Europe, Robert Crc, Ivana Ivković, Tomislav Medak, Boris Kovačev, Marko Rupena, Uroš Abram, Levica, Nina Đurđević/Možemo!, Nemanja Cvijanović, Luka Klikovac.

Editing: Kimberly Storr

Graphic Design: KURS

Font: Rubik, Gentium Book Basic

Circulation: 400

Print: Standard 2, Belgrade.

Year of Publishing: 2021

ISBN 978-86-88745-46-8

ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG
SOUTHEAST EUROPE

Supported by Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Southeast Europe with funds of the German Federal Foreign Office.

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Belgrade, 2021

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Preface and acknowledgements

This book discusses one of the most politically significant and yet underreported developments in the contemporary Balkans: the re-birth of the Left. Our focus is on the new Balkan Left that has formed throughout the last decade (after initial signs of its reawakening appeared in the 2000s) as an anti-systemic and counter-hegemonic movement. Thus, it is not surprising that it has been usually only marginally acknowledged by the existing political and economic system and by mass media.

This publication is intended to illustrate the diversity of struggles associated with the new Left in the post-socialist Balkans, especially in post-Yugoslav states. It is directed towards readers who may be somewhat unfamiliar with this political and social movement, within the Balkans and internationally; but also to activists who may not be aware of the breadth of struggles similar to their own taking place in their own neighbourhood, as well as to researchers, journalists, and the general public. Our aim here is to praise successes but also acknowledge failures.

As activists, observers, or scholars, both of us have been involved to various degrees in many of the struggles we describe here. In other words, this cannot be an impartial study. On the contrary, while we advocate causes of the new Balkan Left, we are also committed to examining it critically.

Many friends, colleagues, and comrades have helped us make this analysis as relevant as possible. We want to thank Jana Tsoneva, Artan Sadiku, Stipe Ćurković, Filip Balunović, Belgzim Kamberi, Anej Korsika, Jelena Vasiljević, and Stanimir Panayotov for their insight, comments, and criticisms. Needless to say, any errors are our own.

Finally, the re-birth of the Left would never have been possible without individuals prepared to invest their lives, energy, resources, time, and hope into a project that continues to inspire us, even in the 21st century, to believe that another world is possible and worth fighting for, in the Balkans as anywhere else.

Igor Štiks and Krunoslav Stojaković,
February 2021

Zagreb, Croatia.
Protest against the opening of the shopping centre in Varšavska street, 17 April 2011. Photo: Ivana Ivković.

Introduction

The re-birth of the Left in the post-socialist Balkans

On the morning of 15 April 2009, students of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (*Filozofski fakultet*) in Zagreb interrupted classes to declare a blockade (*blokada*) of the premises. What began as just another student strike against the rampant commercialisation of higher education would become the day the Left was born—or rather re-born—in the post-socialist Balkans. Inspired by a short-lived student occupation that had taken place in Belgrade in 2006, the students in Zagreb organised their struggle around a goal (free education), a method (blockade and occupation), and a form (plenary assembly, or the *plenum*). This cocktail, along with enthusiastic support extended immediately from a variety of civil society, academic, intellectual, and cultural actors in Croatia, as well as across the region, transformed this student occupation into a political earthquake. It would foreshadow all the

hallmarks of the new Balkan Left: a broad alliance of left-wing and progressive actors, a struggle for the commons (in this case, education), the elaboration of anti-capitalist critique of the post-socialist condition, and last but certainly not least, the use of horizontal and participative democracy.

Anyone vaguely acquainted with the interminable 'transition' of post-socialist societies towards free market economies and liberal democracies since 1989 will recognise at once how out of place and even shocking these events in Zagreb were to people in this region, where both the ideology and modern political movement of socialism were meant to be fated to the dustbin of history (Horvat and Štiks 2015; Buden 2009). The collapse of the socialist bloc had not only wiped entire political systems off the map, but also the organisational structures and cultural traditions of socialist and communist labour movements. Literally overnight, the advocacy of these movements for solidarity and social equality—including the struggle for free health services, housing, and education—was subject to political, social, and cultural marginalisation. The material symbols and ideology of former regimes were hastily erased through the destruction and removal of monuments, the re-naming of streets, and changes in public vocabulary.

Socialist regimes differed considerably when it came to their origins, political organisation, social and economic policies, and methods of repressing dissent, but collectively they came to be seen as an unwanted historic break, an aberration alien to national traditions. The global *zeitgeist* of the 1990s, generally dismissive of socialist ideals, bordered on anti-communist hysteria in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe. A rage against Stalinist paternalism and oppression involved also a historical revisionism that in some countries was open, or only barely veiled, in its reaffirmation of collaborationist, fascist, and Nazi movements and personalities. The domino-like collapse of socialist regimes eroded any notions of possible alternatives, or of a path for these societies now stuck between the defeat of state socialism and the triumph of neoliberal capitalism. No one spoke any longer, as former dissidents had, of 'socialism with human face', as everyone hoped instead for 'capitalism with human face'—something closer to the image of Swedish social democracy in its heyday than to the deep social inequalities of British and American societies. Either way, the idea of a society based on solidarity and social and economic equality, and thus on a critique of capitalism, had no role to play in this new world order. The proclamation by neoliberalism that capitalism is

the 'only game in town' and the liberal delusion of the 'end of history' both echoed instantly in parts of the Balkans, in Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania; and, after a series of devastating wars, in the countries that once formed Yugoslavia.

Not infrequently, elements of the former communist *nomenklatura* stood in as a new *comprador bourgeoisie*. Together with political newcomers who were brought to power on the shoulders of democratic movements, they rushed to privatise and even shut down entire industries (Becker 2014). The economic and social problems that ensued were primarily interpreted as consequences of previous socialist mismanagement, and by no means as the result of privatisation policies and market deregulation, which were understood and accepted by almost everyone, from politicians to scholars, as the only plausible approach to economic strategy. Even thirty years after the end of socialist regimes in the region, significant portions of the political, intellectual, and economic elite, but also much of the general public, still argue that capitalism in its pure form has simply not yet found its way to Southeastern Europe. To explain the pain and misery experienced by a majority of the region's population in the post-socialist decades, we continue to be told that the culprit is actually 'bad capitalism' tainted by clientelism and

corruption, which is blocking the development of a true, fair competitive capitalist economy. Sometimes this is framed as a problem of the post-socialist—and especially the 'Balkan'—mentality, but sometimes it is the 'communists' themselves who are said to be the real puppet masters, deeply hidden within state structures and still actively fighting against the capitalist mode of production (Stojaković 2016).

Only since the early years of the 21st century has new space opened for the critique of neoliberal capitalism and its global consequences, as well as for the social and political articulation of new progressive and left-wing movements and parties. In Germany, the political Left was able to re-emerge as a relevant voice after the Electoral Alternative for Labour and Social Justice (WASG) and the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) merged to form *Die Linke* (The Left). At the same time, neo-Marxist theories of state, economy, and society, previously stifled by intellectual silence, resurfaced with a momentum that could not be ignored even by neoliberal media, especially after the financial crash of 2008. In this way, the biggest economic crisis of our time—the effects of which are felt to this day, well into this new crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic—created mental and political space for a new global discussion; making it possible to imagine alternatives to 'disaster capitalism',

rising inequalities, the environmental emergency, and diminishing democracy. The 2008 crisis quickly reached the post-socialist Balkans as it resonated around the world, and the student community, which had already raised its voice against the commodification of higher education (in protests and occupations of the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade in 2006, and in Zagreb in 2008 and 2009), formed a political vanguard in their articulation of social discontent.

In order to understand the emergence of ideas, actors, and organisations on the Left in this region, it is important to distinguish—and we will continue to do so throughout this analysis—between the post-Yugoslav space, in which the resurgence of the Left is most developed, and other post-socialist Balkan countries such as Albania, Bulgaria, and Romania.[1] The reasons for this are historic, but also cultural and linguistic. Despite the brutal break-up of Yugoslavia, the societies of former republics, with the partial exception of Albanian-speaking Kosovo, are still bound by

1 Hence, this analysis will dedicate most space to post-Yugoslav region, with the exception of Kosovo. We will discuss some of the most significant developments in Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, and Kosovo as well, but our analysis of events in these countries is limited due to our personal experiences and linguistic barriers.

having shared a state, a common language—spoken in Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, but understood by most Slovenians and Macedonians, many of whom use it—and personal and professional ties. Moreover, when it comes to the Left, another crucial difference separates these once-Yugoslav states from other former socialist countries, as Yugoslavia's self-managing socialism was arguably the most prosperous socialist state in the 20th century. The Communist Party of Yugoslavia, led by Josip Broz Tito, enjoyed significant popular support, having formed the most successful anti-fascist movement in Europe, almost singlehandedly liberating Yugoslavia from the Nazis and then separating from Stalin's USSR and the Eastern bloc in 1948. Combined with Tito's charisma, the independent and influential foreign policy of Yugoslavia (especially through the Non-Aligned Movement), the rapid modernisation of almost the entire country, elevated standards of living, the self-management system—including workers' control of factories and firms via economic democracy (although never fully realised)—and free movement and open borders helped build a legacy that has prevented the political Left and this socialist history from being entirely delegitimised and demonised

in post-Yugoslav countries.[2] Obviously, this differs markedly from Albania, where society almost collapsed after decades of isolationist rule under Enver Hodxa; Romania, which must yet come to terms with the legacy of Nicolae Ceaușescu's dictatorship, and its brutal end; and Bulgaria, still facing the troubled legacy of its own socialist regime.

As noted, the 2008 financial crash and its global nature facilitated a gradual re-popularisation of anti-capitalist critique—in the media and public sphere, but also through various social and political actions—after two decades of near absolute dominance by neoliberal and right-wing ideologies and actors. When the new Left appeared on the scene, its ideas were immediately met with broad interest, curiosity, and even support among populations exhausted by years of capitalism, neoliberal

2 The literature on socialist Yugoslavia, its system, politics, economy, society, and culture, but also its anti-fascist resistance and communist movement, keeps growing in the region and internationally. Among others, see the publications of Darko Suvin, Vladimir Unkovski-Korica, Dejan Jović, Chiara Bonfiglioli, Hilde Katrine Haug, Tvrtko Jakovina, Hrvoje Klasić, Milan Radanović, Igor Duda, Radina Vučetić, Marie-Janine Calic, Ivana Pantelić, Sanja Petrović Todosijević, Vjeran Pavlaković, Paul Stubbs, Branislav Dimitrijević, and Dragan Markovina.

restructuring, austerity, mass violence and discrimination against minorities, extreme nationalism, and authoritarian ruling elites. In post-Yugoslav states, citizens had experienced a series of devastating wars in the 1990s that claimed up to 130,000 lives[3] in campaigns of ethnic cleansing, mass atrocities and war crimes, with millions more displaced, leaving them without homes and jobs.[4] Post-war 'recovery' had come in the form of privatisation campaigns, offering lucrative deals for foreign companies and banks and giving rise to a new economic oligarchy, tightly connected with and often indistinguishable from the post-socialist political elite. What remained of the economy, and any domestic production capacities, was diminished or destroyed by de-industrialisation, privatisation, and import-based trade. This imposition of a capitalist mode of production, the enforcement of destructive privatisation policies, and the progressive dismantling of any remnants of the welfare state have had a lasting impact on societies in

3 See the Humanitarian Law Centre's human losses database: http://www.hlc-rdc.org

4 It is estimated that 3.7 to 4 million people left their homes; more than 800,000 of whom emigrated to various European countries and the US. For more details, see: 'Balkan Vital Graphics', https://www.grida.no/publications/253

Southeastern Europe. The partial exception to this rule is Slovenia, the only country in former socialist Europe that took a different 'transition' path in the 1990s and early 2000s. Still, the entire region espouses an economic strategy based on attracting foreign direct investment and, where possible—such as in Croatia and Montenegro—on 'touristification'. To seduce foreign companies and overcome neighbouring states in the race for this foreign investment, corporate taxes have been reduced, wages subsidized or cut. However, in most cases, the jobs that result from this investment are in the low wage sector and are either short-term or of an uncertain duration.

It was these conditions, coupled with the global recession, that ushered leftist thinkers and ideas back into the public forum and made it possible for a re-birth of the Left in the post-socialist Balkans (Štiks 2015; Stojaković, forthcoming 2021). To define this new post-socialist Left, though, we must clearly distinguish it from both the 'old' communist and the 'established' post-socialist Left. In former Yugoslav republics, the 'old Left' refers to the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, established in 1919 as the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and renamed in 1952 to reflect its new anti-Stalinist spirit. The League was progressively federalised along with the country itself, from 1945 to 1990, until it disintegrated amid internal nationalist

tensions into its federal components. In each Yugoslav republic, the League of Communists was then formally replaced with what we are calling the 'established Left' of the post-socialist period, which simply rebranded as 'social-democratic' or 'socialist' parties while fully embracing parliamentary multi-party democracy and a free market economy. Some of these parties were defeated in the first democratic elections in 1990, as in Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Macedonia; yet would sometimes win later elections in all these countries. In some places, these parties held power until 2000, as in Serbia where the autocrat Slobodan Milošević was eventually deposed through popular uprising; but his Socialist party of Serbia soon regained ground and has participated in every governing coalition since 2008. And in Montenegro, the Democratic Party of Socialists ruled the country for three decades until 2020, when it had to cede the government to an opposition coalition; however, at the time of this writing, its founder and leader Milo Đukanović remains president of the country.

The ideological shift of these nominally-left parties towards the centre, and their acceptance of neoliberal doctrine, is now complete. At best, they have become 'third-way' parties; at worst, they have moved decidedly to the right, keeping the symbols of the Left, such as the colour red, but becoming

immersed in nationalist rhetoric and warmongering, as with Milošević and his SPS. Nonetheless, all of these parties have retained significant support, largely due to persistent emotional and ideological attachments to the 'old' Party. In some countries, this is also driven by opposition to nationalist and conservative right-wing politics. Indeed, except where Milošević's legacy continues to blur the right-left divide and plague any attempts at genuine leftist politics, these parties are generally seen as non-nationalist and more open to the demands of ethnic or sexual minorities. Thus, it is mostly the neoliberalism of this 'established Left' that is contested by the new Left, which also takes a critical and balanced look at the 'old' communist legacy, tending to praise this 'old Left' mostly for its social achievements, especially its generous welfare provisions, which so sharply contrast current capitalist realities.

So, what *is* the new Balkan Left? We use the term here to encompass not only organisations that openly define themselves as belonging to the Left but also progressive political and social movements that share many if not all the values and goals of the Left. In other words, we are referring to events, actions, initiatives, movements, groups, and actors that are not necessarily a clearly defined and fully organised political entity. Further, some social injustices lead to expressions of

indignation and opposition in which protesters do not openly align themselves with the Left. That said, a variety of social actions, public engagement, and protests, as well as the radicalisation of some protesters and parts of the general citizenry, have contributed to the rise of the new Left and to the dissemination of its core tenets, which can be summarised as:

- A critique of electoral democracy, coupled with experiments in or advocacy for direct, participatory, and horizontal democracy.
- A critique of the neoliberal capitalist transformation of post-socialist societies that has resulted in gaping inequalities and massive unemployment and poverty.
- A critique of the conservative, religious, patriarchal, and nationalist ideological hegemony that has accompanied and facilitated that transformation.
- A defence of common, public, and natural goods and resources, including remnants of the socialist welfare state, against privatisation and profit-oriented exploitation.
- An internationalist, anti-nationalist, and antifascist approach to the Balkan region.
- A critical reappropriation and application of Marxist theories, in connection with international intellectual debates.

- An open resistance to widespread historical revisionism in the region related to the course and outcome of the Second World War and its ideological implications for contemporary Balkan societies.

The new Balkan Left can thus be found where we encounter these ideas, attitudes, behaviours, and rhetoric. It continues to develop in a region now divided into EU member states (Slovenia, Croatia, Romania, and Bulgaria) and EU aspirant states (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Macedonia,[5] Montenegro, and Kosovo[6]), with the European Union encircling these non-member

5 Hereafter, we will use the term Macedonia, which is still colloquially used in the region to refer to the country that renamed itself in February 2019 as the Republic of North Macedonia. As used here, the term Macedonia does not imply the Greek part of the historic Balkan region of Macedonia, which is outside the scope of the post-socialist Balkans and this analysis.

6 Despite the ongoing dispute between Serbia and Kosovo, and the international status of this one-time province now partially-internationally recognised state, we will treat the Republic of Kosovo separately from Serbia here, due primarily to their different political dynamics and processes. Due to language difference, but also recent history, communication between Serbian and Kosovar actors and organisations on the Left has unfortunately been limited.

Western Balkan countries in a sort of ghetto in the midst of Europe. Despite its internationalist view, the position of the new Balkan Left towards the EU oscillates between critical reservation and rejection. Some of the Left's growing scepticism about the EU and its institutions can be attributed to the Troika's authoritarian policy towards the Syriza government in Greece, which had served as a beacon of hope to many across the Balkans, but even more sobering has been the social and economic hardship suffered by so many in EU member states. One study found, for example, that in 2015, the difference in GDP between the poorest EU member state Bulgaria and the richest, Luxembourg, was 1:14, and 1:7.6 between Bulgaria and Denmark with the second highest GDP per capita in the EU (Becker 2017, 843, 845)—meaning that EU accession had not delivered immediate recovery to new post-socialist members. At best, it has brought much-needed infrastructural funding to some states; but a lack of anticipated post-integration economic growth has pushed tens of thousands of people to leave their countries. Croatia, Romania, and Bulgaria are all losing their populations at rising rates, and a similar migratory pattern is now impacting Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, and Macedonia (see Judah 2019).

In new member states, EU accession has also failed to contain the threat posed by neo-conservative, nationalist, and right-wing political actors, some of whom openly employ historical fascism to inspire support. The trend to institutionally accommodate revisionism regarding the history of the Second World War is particularly worrisome in Croatia, where it is strongly promoted by neo-Ustasha and radical Catholic organisations; but also in Bulgaria, where right-wing extremists often populate the government. And in EU candidate Serbia, the collaborationist Chetniks have been officially redefined as a 'second antifascist movement' alongside the Partisans. It should be of little surprise, therefore, that the Balkan Left perceives the EU with ambivalence (Ćurković 2014). Nevertheless, in Balkan EU member states, actors from the new Left do take part in European Parliament elections and are working to form pan-European alliances.

In the seven short chapters that follow, we will trace the unexpected rise of this new Left in the post-socialist Balkans, especially in post-Yugoslav countries, by describing and analysing its various struggles, rather than by focusing only on particular events, movements, or countries. We first examine the role of the Left in street activism during mass popular protests that were often sparked by poverty, corruption, and authoritarianism. We

then discuss the struggles for education at all levels that sparked the resurgence of this new Left in the first place, resulting in widespread social support for progressive politics. Struggles for the commons, often linked to urban issues and the protection of natural resources, have also become activist ground for the Balkan Left in the 21st century; and because these issues can incite a strong and sometimes mass response from previously apathetic citizens, ideological confusion can emerge as many shy away from identifying with 'leftism', preferring to see themselves as anti-corruption protesters or use the rhetoric of 'rule of law' and 'rights'. Workers' struggles have returned to the top of the Left's agenda as well, as traditional but long-neglected and now-ideologically contested terrain. The new Left has also been relatively successful in launching multiple counter-hegemonic struggles in the fields of media, academia, culture, and art, opening up much-needed space for the broader acceptance of leftist theories and arguments. Many of the actors we will discuss in this context frequently engage in what we call solidarity struggles, offering ad hoc support to people fighting eviction or the burden of debt, to refugees escaping through the Balkans and migrants on their way towards the West, and to LGBTQI+ communities. We will also discuss the transition made by some

left-wing actors from street protests and single-issue activism to the sphere of institutional struggles.

These struggles offer points of comparison, both similarities and differences, concerning the various national contexts that strongly influence the positioning and political weight of the new Left in Balkan countries. In our view, this re-born Left, with all its successes and many failures, is a growing social, cultural, media, and intellectual force in contemporary Balkan societies, but one that must yet impose itself as major political force.

Tuzla, Bosnia-Herzegovina.
Protest in front of the Cantonal Government,
7 February 2014. Photo: Irfan Brković


SODASO
STOP
NACIONALIZMU

Skoplje, Macedonia.
Colourful Revolution. Demonstration on 19 April 2016.
Photo: Vanco Dzambaski.

Chapter 1

Struggles in the Street

The popular eruptions of discontent and mass protest that have recurred in the region over the last decade have attracted diverse elements of the new Balkan Left. The issues that typically mobilise protesters are the corruption of the ruling elite, the abject poverty of citizens, electoral manipulation, political authoritarianism, unpunished crimes, and general social despair; but the specific trigger for action often depends on the national or local context. The part played by the Left in street protests has been varied, ranging from directly organisational or support roles with a visible presence and mobilisation, to having only a marginal presence limited to a few flags and banners. This is because mass protests necessarily assemble a spectrum of ideological actors, often chaotically, and the resulting hodgepodge of people sometimes includes elements leftists are uncomfortable marching together with, such as right-wing actors also enraged by political cliques or corruption (Stoyanova 2018).

This was true in Croatia when anti-establishment protests erupted in February 2011. Citizens were called to the streets via Facebook and up to 10,000 people protested in Zagreb for the whole month, marching past state institutions, corporations, the headquarters of political parties, and the homes of politicians. Strong anti-systemic and anti-capitalist messages were prominently displayed and many left-wing activists, some of whom were also participating in student occupations, took an active role in shaping the direction of the protest; but they often had to compete with right-wing elements.

It was also in 2011 that Slovenia had its Occupy movement, inspired by the global reach of Occupy Wall Street. An encampment in front of the Stock Exchange in Ljubljana had an active assembly (including public discussions, workshops, and gatherings) from 15 October 2011 to 15 May 2012 (Razsa and Kurnik 2012). In November and December 2012, what are now known as the Slovenian 'uprisings' were triggered by a revolt in the city of Maribor against the corrupt local mayor (Kirn 2014).[7] The protests spread rapidly around the country, involving

7 See the documentary by Maple Razsa and Milton Guillen, *The Maribor Uprisings* (2017). Available at: http://mariboruprisings.org.

10–15,000 people in Maribor, 20,000 in Ljubljana, and thousands more in smaller cities. These were the largest protests in recent Slovenian history, and were clearly targeted not only at the right-wing government but at the entire political elite. Various actors on the Left were prominent in the uprising, which spawned a number of local activist networks and gave rise to a key left-wing political party.

Maribor, Slovenija.
"The Third Maribor Uprising", 3 December 2012. Photo: Ratipok, wikimedia.org

The most surprising and most radical protests in the region took place in Bosnia-Herzegovina, however, in 2014. In the northeastern city of Tuzla, unpaid licensed workers in the local detergent and furniture industries joined with students, the unemployed, and other discontented citizens in demonstrations that swelled in number between the 4th and 7th of February. Eventually, the protests turned violent, as protestors clashed with police and a local government building was set on fire. Before long,

Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina.
Protest in front of the Parliament against the ethnic division of the country, June, 2013. Photo: Velija Hasanbegović.

protests spread to every major city in the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, one of the country's two entities. In the capital of Sarajevo, the municipal building and the state Presidency building were also set aflame. These dramatic events, followed by a series of local government resignations, marked the most significant challenge to the stability of ethnically divided Bosnia-Herzegovina in the post-war era. The most notable feature of these protests—as was true in the 2013 'Baby-revolution' in Sarajevo, which protested the absurd ethnic division of every aspect of Bosnian life, including citizen ID numbers, to the extent that it led to the death of a baby—was their civic, or to put it more clearly, *non-ethnic* character. Indeed, this focus of demonstrators on social justice issues resulted in widespread calls for solidarity across ethnic lines. Protesters soon established plenums, or citizens' assemblies, as a form of spontaneous self-organising in cities large and small. Ethno-nationalist elites and the international community were taken by surprise.

Over the course of three months, this Bosnian protest and plenum movement grew, before eventually losing its initial energy. But these events fuelled a series of movements and struggles for social justice across the country and inspired a new generation of Bosnian activists, even in the Republika Srpska, where

protests did not develop in 2014. For the first time in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina, issues such as social inequality and unemployment, and privatisation and corruption, were overshadowing ethnic politics (see Arsenijević 2014; Milan 2019; Balunović 2020). Several years later, the brutal killing of a young man named David Dragičević—whose body was found near the Vrbas River in Banja Luka, the administrative centre of the Republika Srpska—triggered a mass movement

Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Protest in front of the Parliament against the ethnic division of the country, June, 2013.
Photo: Velija Hasanbegović.

demanding 'Justice for David' as well as for Dženan Memić, who was killed under suspicious circumstances in Sarajevo. The alleged involvement of police, politicians, and mafia members in these killings united people across ethnic and entity lines. Perhaps the largest protest in Banja Luka's history occurred on 5 October 2018, when some 40,000 people gathered in the city's main square to support David's father in his demands for an investigation into the circumstances of his son's death. Over time, while the calls of protesters remained focused on the need for this investigation, they were supplemented by increasingly open anti-regime rhetoric and even a striking socio-political component related to the question of social justice (Stojaković 2018). Banja Luka's main square was later closed to protest and this movement was brutally repressed by the police; while David's father was forced to take refuge in Austria. Both David's and Dženan's killings remain unsolved.

Similarly, Macedonia saw significant protests against the authoritarian government of former prime minister Nikola Gruevski in 2011 after the police murder of Martin Neshkovski. But rising social discontent—articulated by actors on the Left such as *Solidarnost* and *Lenka*—didn't develop into mass protests against the right-wing government until the spring of 2015, when the opposition released taped

recordings that proved the extensive corruption and criminality of the governing nationalist party and its leading figures. Street protests were reinforced by a student movement, and demonstrators included citizens from all ethnic backgrounds. Of even more consequence in Macedonia were protests that erupted in April 2016 under the slogan *protestiram* (I protest), which developed into what is better known as *Sharenata revolucija* or The Colourful Revolution (Draško, Fiket and Vasiljević 2019). Protesters threw paint bombs at government buildings, the facades of which had been refurbished to resemble the neo-classic style supposedly common in ancient Macedonia. Paint was also thrown on a considerable number of the monuments erected by the nationalist government during its years in power; as this so-called *antiquisation* project (Vangeli 2011) had only exacerbated the country's conflict with Greece over its name and over the heritage of the geographic region of Macedonia that is divided between Greece, Bulgaria, and (the Republic of) Macedonia. The Colourful Revolution was supported by the Social-Democratic Union of Macedonia and its leader Zoran Zaev (who would win the 2016 election) but also by the newly formed *Levica* (The Left) party and a number of progressive and left-wing organisations, and it brought about the defeat of Gruevski. This led many movement leaders to join the new social-democratic

government of Zaev, which undermined their political independence.

In Serbia, relatively recent mass protests have had a similar anti-authoritarian aim and have targeted autocratic president Aleksandar Vučić—the undisputed strongman of Serbia since 2012—along with his right-wing Serbian Progressive Party, which maintains an unchallenged hold on power, public life, and the media. In 2017, protests erupted under the

Skoplje, Macedonia.
The Colourful Revolution. Demonstration on 16 May 2016.
Photo: Vanco Dzambaski.

banner of *Protiv diktature* (Against Dictatorship) after the Presidential elections were marred in controversy over manipulation of the voter register and the electoral process itself. The next year, a nationwide protest first dubbed 'Stop Bloodied Shirts' and then *#1od5miliona* (#1of5million) followed a brutal attack on an opposition politician.[8] For months, in late 2018 and early 2019, tens of thousands of protesters filled the streets of Belgrade, briefly occupied the national TV station, and demonstrated in almost every large city in Serbia.[9] As is typical of anti-establishment protests focused on an authoritarian president and his corruption, the *#1of5miliona* movement attracted

8 Interestingly, the politician who was attacked, Borko Stefanović, was the leader at the time of a small party, *Levica Srbije* (Serbian Left). He had departed from the centrist Democratic Party to fill the vacuum on the left by putting forth a social-democratic programme, but he failed to attract the support of left-wing organisations and the wider public (at the national elections the party gained just below 1% of the vote).

9 A similar protest occurred in February 2019 in Montenegro against its president Milo Đukanović, who has ruled the tiny Adriatic republic uninterruptedly for 30 years, over a major corruption scandal directly involving Đukanović. It brought several thousand people onto the streets of Podgorica under the banner *#oduprise* (*#Resist*).

support from across the political spectrum, including from marginal left-wing forces. But many progressive actors were alienated by the involvement of the nationalist right-wing *Dveri* party and its leader. Progressive groups and movements cautiously supported anti-government protests in the summer of 2020 after Vučić declared yet another curfew due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet again, right-wing and nationalist groups were in the first rows of protesters. A brutal police response, which included the use of heavy vehicles and cavalry, took place within a climate of general confusion that obscured who was actually responsible for violence in the streets. These events illustrated the degree to which the new Left in Serbia must struggle for public space (Pešić and Petrović 2020), given that nationalist groups which oppose the autocratic rule of the right-wing President are themselves using the language of social justice.

Over the last decade, sizeable anti-government protests have taken place in other parts of the post-socialist Balkans as well. In 2013, Bulgaria experienced what was probably its largest and most protracted protest movement since 1989, triggered at first by excessively high electricity bills that exemplified the clearly increasing inequality of Bulgarian society. Initially, this social upheaval forced the conservative GERB government to resign, which brought the

Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) to power in May; but almost immediately following parliamentary elections, a new protest movement formed nationwide with tens of thousands of participants, to oppose the obvious cohabitation of Bulgaria's political elite with its mafia. In early elections held in October 2014, a right-wing conservative government again led by GERB returned to power (Stoyanova 2018, 98-99). A fresh wave of protests swept Bulgaria in 2020 in opposition to the government of Boyko Borisov, accused of corruption and authoritarianism.

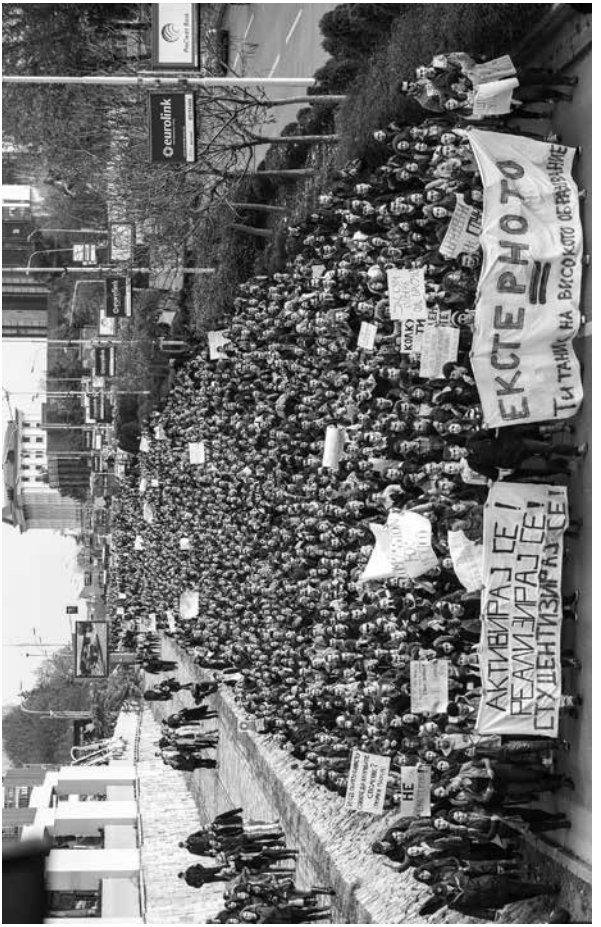
In Romania, the first significant post-1989 protests occurred in January and February of 2012 when thousands turned out to demonstrate against austerity measures, confronting police and forcing members of the government to resign. Mass anti-corruption and anti-establishment protests also took place in 2017, and were by far the biggest since the 1989 overthrow of the communist regime. Then, in 2018, protests led by mostly liberal forces demanded respect for the rule of law, anti-corruption measures, and institutional reforms.

While anti-government protests in the Balkans have generally lacked a leftist narrative and left-leaning actors have often been marginal, new leftist organisations and groups have in some cases become very visible elements in social uprisings in

the region such as in Croatia in 2011, Slovenia in 2012, Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2014, and Macedonia in 2016.

Maribor, Slovenija.
Protest against the austerity measures,
9 March 2013. Photo: Uroš Abram.

Zagreb, Croatia.
The plenum of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Spring 2009; Photo: Boris Kovačev.



Skopje, Macedonia.
Student protest march against the announced external testing in higher education, 17 November 2014. Photo: Vanco Dzambaski.

Chapter 2

Struggles for education

The opposition of students, professors, and the public to the commercialisation of higher education has provided the most fertile ground for the reappearance of the Balkan Left. Assaults on the fundamental right to an education through neoliberal reforms have added insult to injury in the post-socialist engineering of unequal societies. The right of all to access education without additional financial burden resonates even among government supporters and right-wing voters who have themselves been humiliated in the 'transition' process. By defending the idea that education is a common good, a strong student movement has developed in almost every post-Yugoslav state and Albania.

In the wake of the 2008 financial shock, there was a much greater tolerance for open criticism of capitalism. Practically overnight, the media made space for voices daring to question the capitalist transformations of their societies and suggest alternative approaches to common and public goods and the allocation of public money, without being promptly

muzzled by the usual name calling ('socialist', 'commie', 'yugo-nostalgic', etc.). The occupation of Croatian universities mentioned earlier, in April and in November of 2009, became a crucial turning point; and was where plenums—general assemblies of students, professors, and citizens—were first used to articulate both the movement itself and a general critique of political oligarchies, representative multi-party regimes, and the capitalist economy (see *The Occupation Cookbook* 2011; Horvat and Štiks 2010; Balunović 2020). The occupation, which was itself inspired by a 2006 occupation at

Belgrade, Serbia.
Protest of students from the University of Art in Belgrade and the University of Belgrade, 27 November 2009. Photo: Luka Klikovac

the University of Belgrade,[10] provided both the political rhetoric and organisational tools for all future student struggles in the region. Its expression by an innovative, subversive, loud-mouthed, playful movement, and one that was surprisingly advanced in its political and theoretical communication, was a novelty in the post-socialist world.

Similar occupations occurred later in Ljubljana in 2011,[11] Belgrade in 2011 and 2014, and Macedonia in 2014–15. In Macedonia, students and professors not only protested *en masse* in the streets against government reforms of the educational system, but also used what was by then an established common model across post-Yugoslav states—the occupation of all university faculties, the establishment of plenums, and the declaration of 'free autonomous zones'. The *studentski plenum* in Macedonia would become key in initiating and energising the Colourful Revolution.

10 In Serbia, up to 17,000 students from the University of Belgrade participated in various protests against the Bologna Process in the autumn of 2006, culminating in a blockade of the Faculty of Philosophy on 22–28 November 2006 (see *Borba za znanje* 2007).

11 The subsequent founding of the socialist student organization *Iskra* marked a defining moment for the formation of the Slovenian Left (Furlan, Slukan and Hergouth 2018, 5).

Student protests against cuts in education budgets have also occasionally taken place in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Kosovo, as well as in Romania and Albania, most recently in Tirana in 2018–19.[12] As in Macedonia, the student movement in Albania has had a significant social and political impact. *Organizata Politike* (The Political Organization)—that self-identifies as leftist and emphasises social issues, the rights of workers and minorities, and the use of direct democracy—launched the *Universiteti në Rrezik* (The University in Danger) campaign in 2012 and in 2014 *Lëvizja per Universitetin* (The Movement for the University) against the draft law on higher education. The student activists highlight deteriorating autonomy and quality within higher education institutions in Albania, which were rife with the usual scandals endemic across the Balkans: plagiarised diplomas for high state officials, tuition fee hikes, and the

12 Notable, too, is the long occupation of Sofia University's premises in the fall of 2013 during massive protests against the centre-left government. Ideologically volatile students, mostly ranging from anti-corruption liberal activists to 'anti-communists', with a small left-leaning contingent, expressed their strong opposition to the oligarchic establishment but also raised a number of social issues inherited from the post-socialist 'transition'.

public financing of private educational institutions. The 2018–19 protest movement in Albania staged mass demonstrations against rising tuition, low standards of living for students, and their inadequate inclusion in decision making processes (Qori 2018); and it got results, when the Minister of Education resigned and a series of new reforms were proposed by the government.

Student movements often serve for many activists as their first experience of social struggle, later

Tirana, Albania.
Anniversary of the Student Movement "For the University",
2 June 2019 at the Logu i Shkendijes social centre.
Photo: Organizata Politike.

transferred to other fields such as workers' rights, and the fight for the commons or the media and cultural spheres. The problems to which these movements draw attention, such as the unending assault of neoliberal privatisation and austerity, the deteriorating working and living conditions facing a vast majority of the population, and the deficit of democracy in post-socialist political systems, have a tendency to turn activists towards other forms of social and political organising after they leave universities.

In some countries, educational matters in general have the power to mobilise quite a few citizens. Some of the most sizeable protests in post-war Croatia have been directly related to educational questions such as the reform of elementary and secondary curricula. In 2016, around 40,000 people protested in Zagreb's central square, along with many thousands more in other cities across the country, to declare their support for a progressive curriculum reform package (*kurikularna reforma*) that had been stopped by the new nationalist government. The protest ended up serving as a platform for wider discontent with the government's authoritarian inclinations and blatant historical revisionism about the Second World War. In this case, liberal, left-leaning, and leftist actors joined forces in opposing a traditionalist and religiously-tainted education system

in the name of progressive values. Thousands turned out across Croatia once again in November 2019 to support the national teachers' strike, with around 30,000 people protesting in Zagreb alone.

Belgrade, Serbia.
Protest of students from the University of Art in Belgrade and the University of Belgrade, 27 November 2009. Photo: Luka Klikovac

Belgrade, Serbia.
Protest against the Belgrade Waterfront Project, 11 June 2016. Photo: Marko Rupena.


SLOBODE

Zagreb, Croatia.
Protest against the building of a shopping centre on Cvjetni Square and in Varšavska Street, 19 July 2010. Photo: Tomislav Medak.

Chapter 3

Struggles for the commons

The privatisation, neglect, and destruction of public and common goods continues to galvanise public opinion, often prompting significant reaction throughout the post-socialist Balkans. No matter their ideological positioning, many citizens are ready to join hands when faced with limited access to public services, education, and health facilities, especially when combined with their declining quality of life in urban spaces undermined by rampant privatisation through real estate speculation or 'regeneration' projects, and hazardous air pollution (The Commons Working Group 2014). Hence, the expanding exploitation of the region's abundant natural resources, from rivers, to mineral stores, to forests, has provoked unexpected resistance.

The question of accessing the very space where one lives—especially squares, parks, streets, sports fields, playgrounds, and riverbanks—should probably be expected to stir strong emotional and

political responses. In this vein, the *Pravo na grad* (Right to the City) movement, which engaged in activities in Zagreb as far back as 2006, grew significantly from 2009 to 2011 in opposition to a major real estate development project that altered the use of the central pedestrian street *Varšavska ulica* and a main downtown square, *Cvjetni trg* (Dolenec, Doolan and Tomašević 2017). Protesters denounced corruption that was tied directly to the all-powerful mayor of Zagreb Milan Bandić (elected first in 2000, he remained in power until his death in February 2021), alleging misuse of public money and a reliance on clientelist networks, as well as gentrification and urban enclosures. Several mass demonstrations and sit-ins led by left-wing and green organisations elaborated a sophisticated 'repertoire of actions' alongside a critique that challenged both corruption and existing system. The movement was successful in radicalising ordinary citizens in defence of urban public spaces, and although it could not prevent buildings from been erected or stop the enclosure of the street and square, an entirely new activist front had been opened.

More radical factions of the movement thought it obvious that the acute problems of everyday urban life cannot be separated from capitalist exploitation, requiring a strong communal response. The student movement and the Right to the City movement thus

became a backbone for the growing new Left in Croatia. The activities of Right to the City continued through a network of urban initiatives (*Nacionalni forum za prostor*, 2010-13) that provided help to similar struggles, such as one in Dubrovnik, and which launched a 2013 referendum proposal against the privatisation of Croatian highways (Dolenec, Doolan and Tomašević 2017, 18). Some of the activists involved in these struggles became prominent members of the left-green coalition that first entered the Zagreb city assembly in 2017 and then orchestrated a political shakeup in 2020 by entering the Croatian parliament with seven deputies, and, furthermore, by winning the municipal elections in Zagreb in May 2021.[13]

Given the regular communication between progressive and leftist activists across the post-Yugoslav space (and especially between Zagreb and Belgrade), it is no wonder that protest methods, techniques, performances, and rhetoric similar to that used by the Right to the City movement were employed in Serbia's capital in demonstrations against development of the grandiose Belgrade Waterfront project. With the full support of the Serbian government under control of its right-wing strongman Vučić, an Emirati investor has started to transform an

13 See the final chapter, "Electoral struggles".

enormous part of downtown Belgrade, on the banks of the Sava River, into a haven of luxurious apartments, shopping venues, and services. The project has been marked by a number of dubious irregularities and illegalities, including an incident involving masked men who bulldozed through several objects on a street destined to be a future building site without any reaction from the police. The mobilisation around the *Ne da(vi)mo Beograd* (Don't Drown Belgrade or We won't let Belgrade Drown) initiative began in earnest in 2015 with public critiques, both of the policies that attracted neoliberal investors and of the privatisation and destruction of urban spaces and infrastructure in Belgrade and other parts of Serbia (Čukić and Timotijević 2020, 66–77). Many marches and protests were subsequently organised (some attracting up to 20,000 people), as well as petitions and actions against the erasure of public spaces, the destruction of parks and woods, the privatisation of river embankments, and the misuse of city funding through a clientelist network directly linked to the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and its chairman Vučić.[14]

14 Besides *Ne da(vi)mo Beograd*, many other local and ad hoc initiatives and groups have formed in Belgrade to fight against similar practices. These include *Sačuvajmo zelenu Zvezdaru* (Keep Zvezdara Green), *Sačuvajmo nas parkić* (Save our little park), *Vratimo trolu 28* (Bring back Trolley

Inspired by similar initiatives such as *Barcelona en comú* or *Zagreb is Ours*, *Ne da(vi)mo Beograd* developed into a force that sought a visible institutional presence in municipal and national politics. Confronted with the same problems in other Serbian cities, a myriad of local initiatives had emerged, including the Local Front in Kraljevo and the United Movement of Free Inhabitants in Niš, and together with these groups, *Ne da(vi)mo Beograd* formed a joint national political platform in 2019, The Civic Front.

It is often in heavily polluted cities that we see local ad hoc mobilisations related to urban commons and green spaces. In Belgrade, one pioneering local struggle—the Initiative for the Protection of Peti Park—was a fight to preserve a green common space with sports facilities and a playground against a classic corruption scheme involving an investor who was backed and then abandoned by politicians and city officials. In this case, the activists won, thanks both to their vigilance and actions and to the mediatisation of their case, which eventually made the project too politically costly. Along the same lines, a movement grew in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2012 to oppose the destruction of Picin Park in Banja Luka and its development into a housing complex; as in

28), and *Za naš kej* (For Our Quay).

Zagreb, however, this movement failed to stop the project from going forward. Still, the mobilisation for this cause—the first of its kind in Banja Luka—represented an important initial public challenge to the political regime of the entity, and support from anti-nationalist NGOs helped develop a small left-wing movement that would become more vocal in the years to come. In Sarajevo, which often tops the list of the world's most polluted cities, widespread real estate construction and speculation has been promoted by the political oligarchy with utter disregard for existing environmental regulations and concerns, endangering and limiting existing public and green spaces. A group of activists under the banner *Jedan grad, jedna borba* (One city, one struggle), comprising progressive and left-leaning civil society actors, concerned individuals, and neighbours, struggled for years to protect one of the few remaining parks in Sarajevo's city centre (*Hastahana*), to no avail. In the end, the municipality sold it to the Central Bank of Bosnia-Herzegovina as a construction site.

As we noted above, when the nationalist government that ruled Macedonia between 2006 and 2016 undertook a massive refurbishment of the capital Skopje, it erected a series of controversial monuments. Under its Skopje 2014 initiative, the government drained public funds to deposit an enormous statue of

Alexander the Great in the main square (which infuriated Greece), for example, along with others dedicated to select national heroes. New buildings were constructed as well, such as the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle for Independence and Statehood—which houses the Museum of VMRO and the Museum of the Victims of the Communist Regime—and the facades of existing buildings were reimagined in a kitschy neo-classicist style. This *antiquisation* project was an openly revisionist attempt at symbolic state building, with a strong nationalist twist; and what's more, it simultaneously served as the basis for an enormous corruption scheme. Defence of the urban physicality of Skopje—especially its modernist socialist heritage such as the GTC building that citizens defended with human chain in 2013—thus became closely intertwined with the struggle against the government that led eventually to the Colourful Revolution.

Over the last decade, multiple initiatives have emerged in the region to fight the destruction and exploitation of natural resources, too. In Croatia, the *Srdj je naš* (Srdj is ours) movement, active from 2010 to 2013, attempted to prevent the privatisation of parts of Srdj Hill in Dubrovnik and the development of golf courses there. An investor's project was delayed, and ultimately, a concession agreement involving Srdj Fortress was annulled in 2020. In the

meantime, activists who drove this initiative have entered the city assembly, where they continue the struggle. In October 2020, they established a local, green-left political party.

Across the Balkans, but especially in Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the expansion of hydropower has become a big business; and in some places, the construction of new 'micro hydropower plants' has inspired a strong activistic response. With more than 3,000 plants planned from Slovenia to Greece, 856 of which are to be built in Serbia alone (see Čukić and Timotijević 2020, 87), it has become clear that governments are prioritising the need to attract investment over the health of local populations and ecosystems. National and local officials alike have offered the usual promise of new jobs, as well as assurances that environmental standards will be respected and nature unaltered, but citizens have discovered dry riverbeds, transformed natural environments, and the disappearance of fauna—which endanger their properties and livelihoods. Some experienced local activist networks, such as Bosnian Spring, which formed in Bihać during the 2014 protests and plenums, have managed to succeed in preventing this commercial exploitation of natural resources; in their case, of the Una River. But in other parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina, we have witnessed impressive struggles by activists with no

previous experience or ideological positioning, such as women in the village of Kruščica who came together to protest the construction of a plant on the Kruščica River. They first prevented its construction physically (some were even beaten and arrested by police), and finally won their battle legally.

In Serbia, a group known as *Odbranimo reke Stare planine* (Let's defend the rivers of Stara Planina [the Balkan mountain range]) also gathered local citizens to protest the construction of micro hydropower plants, in 2017. Then, in July 2020, citizens in the city of Pirot stopped the construction of 84 plants that were planned in their area (in Čukić and Timotijević, 2020, 84-95). In August 2020, hundreds of activists from across Serbia responded to a call from Pirot, arriving there to physically remove pipes from riverbeds. A similar struggle recently took place in southern Kosovo, too, in the municipality of Štrpce, attracting quite a bit of media attention because it was a rare example of unity between Serbs and Albanians, who jointly defended their river. Elsewhere in Kosovo, the *Mos ma prek Lumbardhin (*Don't touch our Lumbardhi) initiative was formed in this same spirit in Peja/Peć, in February 2019, to protest the construction of a hydropower plant on the Lumbardhi River. Considerable support for this effort by citizens of that area successfully brought the project to a halt.

It is hardly surprising that struggles of this kind are occurring almost everywhere in the post-socialist Balkans. In fact, the largest such mobilisation has been to protest a planned gold mining project in the Roșia Montana in Romania, which took place in the autumn of 2013 when tens of thousands of people staged a month-long protest. Specifically, demonstrators objected to the use of a highly toxic cyanide process, and they managed to stop the project in its tracks. Protesters came to this movement with a shared goal but were from various ideological backgrounds, mostly liberal but also nationalist. While left-wing activists participated in the protests, they had little significant political impact (Poenaru 2014).

This is not unlike a liberal-leaning movement that has developed in Bulgaria in defence of natural commons and resources. In 2007, a group once known as EcoGlasnost, which has its roots in late socialism as an anti-regime movement, came to prominence again during a campaign to protect the status of Strandja Mountain as a natural park. The protests involved street clashes with police. Then, in January 2012, thousands turned out across Bulgaria for demonstrations against fracking and, later that year, activists occupied the Eagle Bridge in downtown Sofia to protest changes in forestry laws; in both cases, important concessions were won (Kenarov 2012).

Finally, concerns about air pollution and waste management have alarmed citizens across the region, given their palpable effects on people's everyday lives and health. In Tetovo, Macedonia, Eco Guerilla has led a number of successful actions on this front, not only raising awareness but also forcing local government to act. Citizens in a village close to Berane in Montenegro have also launched a successful struggle against illegal waste deposits that pollute the environment, forming a small movement that employs innovative actions which challenge ethnic divisions while also advocating this environmental cause (Baća 2017). In Bosnian cities like Sarajevo and Tuzla, where the winter months present an ever-growing health emergency generated by the remaining industry, traffic and fossil fuel pollution from home heating, the additional problem of industrial waste dumping is now threatening soil and water. Combined with the negligence of foreign investors unconcerned about the impacts of these environmental risks to the country, these larger trends have the very real potential to make life in Bosnia-Herzegovina—already impoverished by war, as well as by post-war capitalism—virtually unbearable.[15]

15 Recently, the "platform for ecological humanities" *Earth-Water-Air* (*Zemlja-Voda-Zrak: platforma za ekološku humanistiku*) was launched by activist and scholar Damir Arsenijević, a prominent actor of the plenum movement in Tuzla; see more at http://zemljavodazrak.com

Tirana, Albania.
Protest of the miners, 26 January 2020.
Photo: Organizata Politike.

Tuzla, Bosnia-Herzegovina.
The protest in front of the Cantonal government,
7 February 2014. Photo: Irfan Brković.

Chapter 4

Workers' Struggles

In 2015, the popular Croatian rock band *Hladno Pivo* released a song about the post-socialist privatisation of factories and firms that had previously been owned by workers themselves under the Yugoslav system of self-management. It included the refrain:

God, Homeland, Nation!
All freeze,
This is privatisation!
Free up space,
For 'Two hundred families'[16]

These lines do a good job of summarising the right-wing nationalist ideology (*God, Homeland, Nation*) that demobilised opposition (*All freeze!)* to the state-run privatisation process in Croatia, particularly when the country was faced with war. The final outcome

16 '*Bog, domovina, nacija / Svi na pod / Ovo je privatizacija / Napravite mjesta / Za obitelji dvjesta*'. See Hladno Pivo, 'Firma', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uFQIPl5kT-k

of this process, as famously declared by nationalist president Franjo Tudjman, was supposed to be the creation of two hundred of the wealthiest families. Of course, these 'two hundred families' were all close to Tudjman's party and the properties bequeathed to them had all been previously socially owned and were provided nearly for free or through dubious means such as preferentially-awarded state bank loans.

As industries collapsed across the former Yugoslavia (except in Slovenia), workers were laid off and former factory buildings and office spaces were mostly sold as real estate assets. The scenario was essentially the same everywhere, with any differences resulting from the political and social contexts in each country and the various timing of these 'reforms'. During the war years of the 1990s, privatisation policies were only occasionally resisted (Musić 2013). Unions were either corrupt, too close to ruling parties, or simply incapable of leading meaningful workers' struggles; even in Croatia, where quite a few protests and strikes took place, they were organisationally and politically weak (Grdešić 2015; Ivandić and Livada 2015; Working Group on Workers' Struggles 2014).[17] However, the post-war 2000s were marked by a rush to implement

17 For a detailed overview of labor struggles in Croatia, see http://arhiv-radnickih-borbi.org/

structural reforms through a new wave of privatisation campaigns, especially in Serbia, which provoked a number of workers' strikes and mobilisations (Popov 2011; *Deindustrijalizacija i radnički otpor* 2011; Novaković 2017: 294-321). As the first decade of the 21st century drew to a close in the midst of a global reckoning with neoliberal policies, workers' struggles again became more prominent in the region. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, workers and students led the rebellion in Tuzla in February 2014 that, as we mentioned previously, ignited protests in almost every major city in the country. That same year, neoliberal labour laws were opposed in Serbia through street protests in which workers made it clear they were acutely aware of their condition, and similar protests took place in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2015. In other words, an entirely new phase of labour activism and an alternative form of organising has been observed over the last decade, as some workers' initiatives have joined forces with student and urban movements, leftist groups, and prominent individuals, artists, and intellectuals who are championing a shared cause (Working Group on Workers' Struggles 2014).[18]

18 Activists from Albania, for example, have founded a militant trade union organisation in co-operation with the workers at an international telecommunications giant; a unique event in Albania's recent history and an important reminder that workplace organising is a core of leftist politics. In the

Workers in privatised or bankrupt firms and factories have typically staged public protests and marches to alert the public to their plight. But at the same time, they require the judiciary and state to respond, to ensure they are paid their wage arrears and pension contributions, or to re-start production. For the most part, workers have met little success and continue to struggle for improved salaries and working conditions. This is a battle fought by workers everywhere, but especially in the Balkans, where governments compete among themselves to attract foreign investors by promising low wages. Thousands of qualified workers are leaving the region for Germany, Austria, and other EU countries like Slovakia in search of better living standards. This presents a demographic challenge to remaining industry and service sectors, which are badly lacking skilled workers.[19]

meantime, it has been possible to establish new, radical grassroots unions in both the Albanian mining and textile industries.

19 For some contextualization of worker shortages in Serbia, Croatia, and Bulgaria, especially in the health sector in the COVID-19 era, see the analyses by Krunoslav Stojaković, Jana Tsoneva, and Ana Vračar published in the online dossier 'Solidarity against the Coronavirus', at: https://www.rosalux.de/en/

Now, workers' strikes and protests against deteriorating workplace and living conditions occur almost daily across the post-socialist Balkans. Protections for workers are sometimes so rudimentary that news reports of work-related deaths have become quotidian. One need only look at Serbia to see the severity of this issue. There, 440 workers died between 2006 and 2018 in incidents related to worksite safety, often on construction sites (Stojaković 2020).[20] Cases of self-harm and hunger striking have also been reported, as well as degradation and humiliation—especially of women in the textile industry who produce goods for foreign brands such as Benetton, and who are not allowed heating during the winter or air conditioning during the summer in some places.[21] Indeed, Serbia has offered generous subsidies to foreign investors such as the South Korean company Jura, which pays workers a minimal wage of 300 to 400 euros and does not allow them to use the toilet

20 'Veća kazna za rad na crno nego za smrt radnika', *B92*, 9 February 2019, https://www.b92.net/biz/vesti/srbija.php?yyyy=2019&mm=02&dd=09&nav_id=1503608 (accessed 10 December 2020).

21 Sanja Kljajić, 'Kapital ne priznaje fiziološke potrebe', *Deutsche Welle*, 16 May 2019, https://www.dw.com/sr/kapital-ne-priznaje-fiziološke-potrebe/a-48761136 (accessed 10 December 2020).

during their shifts, literally forcing workers to wear diapers during working hours.[22]

This chapter will highlight only some of the most prominent regional struggles for workers' rights. One example is the case of female workers at the Kamensko textile factory in Zagreb, who were victims of a common scheme in which a previously successful firm is intentionally brought to its knees by mismanagement and manipulation, tolerated by state institutions (Milat 2012), with the aim to stop production, lay off workers, and in this case, squeeze profit out of the centrally-located position of the Kamensko factory itself; which became eventually the site of a real estate development project. Workers at the factory fought back in 2010 with hunger strikes and protests that enjoyed wide public support, including from students. And though the Kamensko workers failed in their attempt to win their workplace back, this public support for their struggle helped them to re-organise and establish the Kamensko Association, through which they continue to produce high-quality textile products.[23]

22 Lj. Bukvić, 'Ne daju im da idu u toalet, teraju ih da nose pelene', *Danas*, 27 April 2016, https://www.danas.rs/ekonomija/ne-daju-im-da-idu-u-toalet-teraju-ih-da-nose-pelene/ (accessed 10 December 2020).

23 See https://udrugakamensko.hr

The old Bosnian industrial stronghold of Tuzla is the only municipality that manged to retain its multi-ethnic composition throughout the war, at least to some extent, and where the Social Democratic Party remained in power as the successor to the League of Communists of Bosnia-Herzegovina. It has become the theatre of some of the most intensive workers' struggles in the country since the war's end in 1995. These struggles have intensified over the years and, as we previously described, culminated in massive protests in February 2014. Playing a key role in this struggle were workers from the Dita detergent factory. Even during the war, Dita had manged to maintain production, so when it was subjected to a post-war privatisation process that led to bankruptcy, workers refused to accept the situation, taking over the premises, repairing machines and buildings, and re-starting production on their own with the remaining materials. But Dita workers recognised the importance of exerting sustained political pressure to facilitate normal functioning of the factory through much needed investments, and this helped them succeed where others failed. Further, they combined several tactics, from the takeover to marches and protests, and were also successful in forming a strong local coalition with other workers, students, intellectuals, and even

many ordinary citizens who were frustrated by the dismantling of industry and by endless corruption schemes.[24] Eventually, Dita workers were able to preserve their machinery, persuade the judiciary to act, and keep the factory from closing.[25] Owned by the Bingo Company since 2017, it is still producing at high levels; this was especially true in 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic created a growing need for disinfectants both domestically and regionally, pushing the factory to full capacity.

Another worker takeover that occurred in northern Croatia was emblematic of many such struggles. In 2005, faced with the closure of the Itas-Prvomajska factory, which produces machine tools, workers occupied it. Since the company owed them back salaries, they gained ownership and made the decision to introduce the self-management model—the first example of this anywhere in the former Yugoslavia since the end of workers' self-management

24 See a firsthand account of this struggle by Dita worker and leader Emina Busuladžić, titled *Why?* (in Arsenijević 2014, 11-27).

25 Elvira M. Jukić, 'Workers' Takeover Saves Iconic Bosnian Firm', *Balkan Insight*, 1 July 2015, http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/workers-takeover-saves-tuzla-s-iconic-detergent-company (accessed 10 December 2020).

in the early 1990s. They filed a lawsuit against the previous owners for criminal destruction of their firm and re-started production, promptly receiving many orders, mostly from abroad, allowing them to employ more people. But in early 2020, they faced financial difficulties and account closures due to accrued debts. International commissions have given them hope, that their self-managed factory will ultimately survive.[26] However, in early 2021 the company filed for insolvency. The story of these workers is a reminder that the success of workers' struggles at one point in time cannot immunise against all future shocks.

In Serbia, the Jugoremedija pharmaceutical company in Zrenjanin also opted for a workers' shareholding model in an attempt to salvage the company from a botched privatisation process, though workers there eventually lost the battle.[27]

26 Dragan Grozdanić, ‹Proizvodnja se nastavlja›, *Novosti*, 22 February 2020, https://www.portalnovosti.com/proizvodnja-se-nastavlja-fotogalerija (accessed 10 December 2020).

27 Another important regional example is the Petrokemija fertilizer factory in Kutina, Croatia, which was also the site of intensive struggles beginning in 1998 (Ivandić and Livada 2015). There, workers fought to keep the state as majority owner of the company, with strong workers' representation on the management board. For more on both the Jugoremedija and Petrokemija cases, see Kraft (2015).

In 2002, this once prosperous company was reduced to ruin and then sold to a Serbian businessman who had engaged in a number of suspicious activities. The workers rebelled, occupied the premises, and went on strike. In August 2004, when they clashed with police and private security officers, their struggle resonated widely in Serbia as scenes of police forces attacking unarmed workers provoked indignation. The state finally suspended its contract with this controversial businessman in 2007 (and in 2019, sentenced him to four years in prison for charges related to the Jugoremedija case), so that the factory was run by workers as majority stakeholders. But in 2012, the director, elected by and from the workers, was arrested and jailed, and to this day, mismanagement charges against him have not been fully adjudicated. The company soon entered the liquidation process, and in September 2020, Jugoremedija was sold to a Czech fund that specialises in buying and selling assets in the sector, without any guarantee that production will ever re-start. Despite eventually losing their battle for the factory itself, many workers have remained active in political and social causes. They have established the *Ravnopravnost* party in Zrenjanin, which entered the local assembly at one point and later joined the Social Democratic Union; and have also formed the Zrenjanin Social Forum, the

Rosa Association for the working rights of women, and the Workers' Video Club—through which former Jugoremedija workers Branislav Markuš and the late Robert Fai produced and directed a series of documentary films on social issues.

Belgrade, Serbia.
The Mayday March of the Left Summit Serbia on 1 May 2014.
Photo: Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Southeast Europe.

Zagreb, Croatia.
Audience at the Subversive Festival in Zagreb, 16 May 2013.
Photo: Robert Crc.

Chapter 5

Counter-hegemonic struggles: media, academia, culture, art

The public presence of the new Balkan Left throughout the 2010s sits in stark contrast to its relatively limited political influence. Rather than in formal political organisations and processes, most of the key actors in this new Left have become influential through media and public discussions, in intellectual, artistic, and academic circles and in the NGO sector. Since 2008, the counter-hegemonic ideas of the Left have (re-)gained wider acceptance in the region, especially in Slovenia and Croatia, and to some extent in Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Macedonia. And these ideas have reappeared at the margins of the social, cultural, and political life of other Balkan countries as well. The global resurgence of anti-neoliberal, progressive, green-leftist movements that focus on urban and natural commons, along with the impact of the Occupy phenomenon and electoral successes for the Left in Spain

and Greece, have resonated strongly in the Balkans—where media has responded by opening space to critical voices and alternative approaches.

After the end of socialism, the scene has been mostly dominated by two mainstream ideological competitors, conservative nationalism and liberalism. They sometimes collaborate on projects of neoliberal transformation but sometimes clash openly over the goals of the post-socialist transition. The focus of liberals is on human rights approaches, tolerance for minorities and alternative lifestyles, and accession to the EU; whereas nationalists, powered by religious institutions, advocate ethno-national purity and promote the patriarchal values of traditionalism. For years, Marxist, neo-Marxist, or critical theory approaches were almost entirely discouraged, and topics that evoke the common tropes of the former socialist regimes (such as poverty, inequality, workers' rights, and revolutionary struggles) were effectively pushed to the margins. Now, somewhat unexpectedly, new actors inspired by old ideas—especially critical theory (Balunović 2020)—have started questioning the ideological assumptions of both liberals and nationalists.

Anti-hegemonic struggles have had to be waged in the media and in the public sphere, where the argument of the Left regarding disastrous economic

policies and non-representative political systems found an echo in impoverished and frustrated societies. The ability of the Left to mount a counterattack has primarily been due to the emergence of left-oriented media, including newspapers and websites, and unavoidably in recent years, the use of social networks. This growing leftist media universe encompasses established weekly publications such as *Mladina* in Slovenia, the regionally influential *Novosti* in Croatia, and the local editions of *Le Monde Diplomatique* in Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Kosovo, and Albania; web portals like the regional *Novi Plamen*, Croatia's *Forum, Slobodni Filozofski*, *Antifašistički vjesnik, Zarez, voxfeminae*, *kulturpunkt.hr*, and *Bilten*, *Kosovo 2.0* in Kosovo, *Mašina* in Serbia, and *Barikada*, *dVersia,* and *Dokumentalni* in Bulgaria; the theoretical journals *Stvar* (Serbia), *3K: kapital, klasa, kritika* (Croatia), *Up&Underground* (Croatia), and *Crisis and Critique* (Kosovo); and the English language website *LeftEast* (based in Romania but a communication space for all of the Balkan Left). These outlets have introduced regional readers to leading progressive thinkers who are grappling with the character of contemporary capitalism and familiarised audiences with an entirely new cohort of regional writers and analysts. They also track and promote new groups and movements and their actions. Additionally, they have reintroduced Marxist and neo-Marxist thinking, regularly

engage in reaffirming the anti-fascist struggle of the Second World War in the face of incessant historical revisionism, and last but not least, have re-opened the question of the socialist heritage.

The new Left gains some social visibility through operational structures as well, including political organisations, platforms, networks, collectives, NGOs, and self-managed social centres. Just some of the most active of these are the Initiative for Democratic Socialism in Slovenia (2014–17), which merged with other groups into The Left party; BRID (*Baza za radničku inicijativu i demokratizaciju*, or the Organisation for Workers' Initiative and Democratization), the curatorial collective BLOK, the Association for Media Democracy, and the Centre for Workers' Studies in Croatia; Marks 21, the Anarcho-Syndicalist Initiative, the Centre for Politics of Emancipation, and the Zrenjanin Social Forum in Serbia; the Banja Luka Social Centre BASOC, *Front Slobode* (Tuzla), and *Crvena* (Sarajevo) in Bosnia-Herzegovina; the Collective for Social Interventions and Solidary Bulgaria in Bulgaria; the Institute for Critique and Social Emancipation in Albania; and the leftist Solidarity movement and the Institute for Social Sciences and Humanities in Macedonia. Autonomous social centres play a particularly significant role as meeting places, artistic spaces, and

hubs of shared political and socio-cultural identity. In Ljubljana, the spaces in *Metelkova* have been active since the 1990s and a squat at the old Rog bicycle factory since 2006;[28] in Sofia, there is Xaspel (*Хаспел*); in Zagreb, Multimedijalni institut (MI2)/Klub MaMa and Baza; in Banja Luka, Basoc; in Tirana, vibrant centre for left-wing activists Logu i Shkëndijës (The Spark's Place); and in Belgrade, Cultural Centre REX, the Centre for Cultural Decontamination (CZKD), Kabinet, Magacin, and Oktobar. All have provided crucial space for the development of various social and political initiatives of the new Balkan Left. All of these organisations, networks, and community centres lack stable finances and durable infrastructure, however, and some of them had to close down. They are often dependent on project funding in partnership with foundations and donors that have overlapping values and missions, or on support from national and European grants.[29]

28 As we were concluding this book in January 2021, activists were forcefully evicted from the Rog squat on the orders of the right-wing government.

29 Most of the progressive, left-leaning, and leftist organisations described here cooperate with and often receive funding from the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, the Olof Palme Foundation, the Open Society Foundation, the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, and CCFD-Terre Solidaire.

As discussed in Chapter 2, educational and academic institutions in the region have also been, and remain, extraordinarily fertile ground for the counter-hegemonic initiatives and mobilisations of the Left. In the past ten years, we have seen a proliferation of academic literature on the topics of neoliberalism, social justice, inequality, citizenship, social movements, and activism, together with historical, sociological, cultural, and economic examinations of socialist regime—especially in post-Yugoslav states. The pact of silence among academics and intellectuals started unravelling after 2008. Many scholars suddenly discovered an entire missing continent. This meant confronting the fact head-on that, for thirty years, academia had been busy reproducing two dominant hegemonic narratives: the inevitability of capitalist restoration—through the lens of which even Keynsian policies are seen as leftist radicalism—and the necessity to build ethnically-defined, mythologically-constructed nation-states after socialism, regardless of the human costs. Over the course of the 1990s, the few dissonant voices had been expelled from universities, marginalised, or in the case of the former Yugoslav republics, had left the region. The recent return of scholars inspired by Marxist theories, world-systems analysis, cultural materialism, Marxist feminism, and critical theory

to universities, research institutes, and independent NGOs in Southeastern Europe has brought with it an open interrogation of the liberal economic and conservative nationalist consensus.

In post-socialist societies, educational and academic hegemony represented a crucial pillar of 'transition'. The appearance of prominent progressive universities and faculty members have predictably faced political pressure from both the state and right-wing actors. Universities, faculties, and research institutions that continue to produce new cohorts of leftist students, intellectuals, and groups were supposed to have been neutralised by administrative takeovers and the implementation of conservative and traditionalist curricula. The very faculty where the 2009 occupation occurred in Zagreb, *Filozofski fakultet*, was itself targeted in this way by the University of Zagreb's rectorate; a crisis provoked by the University's effort to merge this faculty with the Faculty of Theology, which is under the direct control of the Catholic Church. The *Filozofski fakultet* has so far managed to resist multiple attempts at such a takeover by generating new coalitions of dissident students and professors (Bogdan 2019).

Political pressure on academic work and research has resulted in the formation of organisations such as the Academic Solidarity in Croatia, as well as the Network for Academic Solidarity and Engagement in

Serbia—formed in 2019 amid a pressure campaign on academic institutions by the governing party. This campaign endeavoured to impose strict control over the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory in Belgrade in 2019 and 2020, due to its international significance and progressive profile. The Institute finally managed to repel this attack after months of struggle, partly thanks to an international mobilisation involving some four hundred academics who signed a letter of support, including such diverse figures as Thomas Piketty, Noam Chomsky, Francis Fukuyama, Judith Butler, Etienne Balibar, and Ivan Krastev.

Other counter-hegemonic efforts that aim to re-legitimise leftist discourse among the population at large have come in the form of popular festivals and public gatherings which combine cultural content (cinema, literature, and art) with political debates. Some of the most notable events of this kind have been the Subversive (Film) Festival in Zagreb, the Fališ Festival of Alternatives and the Left in Šibenik, and the Korčula After Party in Korčula (Croatia); the Open University in Sarajevo and the Workers' University in Tuzla (Bosnia-Herzegovina); the School for Politics and Critique in Ohrid (Macedonia); and the Workers and Punks' University, with its May Day School (Slovenia). They have long served, and still serve, as intellectual hubs for the new Left. In its heyday, the Subversive

Festival in Zagreb hosted global leftist luminaries such as Slavoj Žižek, Zygmunt Bauman, Tariq Ali, Chantal Mouffe, Samir Amin, Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, Saskia Sassen, Oliver Stone, David Harvey, and Yanis Varoufakis, and brought thousands to Zagreb from across the country and the region, as well as commanding significant media coverage.

The social mobilisations around a progressive agenda, together with these hegemonic struggles within civil society, have naturally influenced cultural and artistic sphere as well. It had a huge impact on artistic production,[30] but have also increased the on-the-ground activism of artists and cultural workers. While occupations of cinemas, theatres, and cultural institutions have not been as standard an element of the struggles for common and public goods in the Balkans as in Italy and Greece, it is worth shedding light on several notable actions. Between 2011 and 2015, a group of activists led by Belgrade-based collective The Ministry of Space occupied the vacant premises of the

30 Among others, we should mention the works and performances of Igor Grubić, the KURS collective, Milica Ružičić, Vladan Jeremić and Rena Rädle, Gjorgje Jovanovik, Filip Jovanovski, Ivana Vaseva, Adela Jušić, Nada Prlja, Nemanja Cvijanović, Bojan Đorđev, Olga Dimitrijević, Selma Spahić, Boris Liješević, Olja Lozica, Goran Ferčec, Igor Bezinović, Saša Ban, and Senka Domanović (see Štiks 2020).

former Inex Film company, left to rot after its privatisation (see Čukić and Timotijević 2020, 47). Then, in November 2014, again in Belgrade, activists and artists occupied the privatised and shuttered Zvezda (Star) Cinema in an action that attracted significant media attention, at home and abroad. The occupation even earned an article in the *New York Times* and a visit by then Greek prime minister Alexis Tsipras. Although some leading occupiers rejected the idea that they belonged to the Left, the methods they used, their protest iconography, and the questions they raised about the privatisation of culture as a common good placed the action broadly within the contours of the new Left as described here. Unsurprisingly, the Zvezda occupation attracted many leftist groups in Belgrade; but it also created a deep rift on the Left between those seeking to limit their activism to the cultural sphere and those hoping the occupation would be seen as a general critique of the neoliberal system and a platform for other social struggles.[31] In the end, activists who preferred to view the action as single-issue struggle won the day, but their victory was fleeting, as the occupation eventually lost its political potential.

31 The conflict between these groups, and the subsequent demobilisation and political failure of this occupation, is effectively captured in Senka Domanović's documentary film, *Occupied Cinema* (2018).

The case of the National Theatre in Tirana must also be mentioned in any discussion of the use of occupation as a tactic and form of struggle. In 2018, the planned demolition of the iconic building, which was constructed by the Italian occupying authorities in 1939, provoked passionate protest that included violent clashes with police. The 'socialist' government of Edi Rama, himself an artist-turned-strongman, supported building a new theatre and multifunctional space through a public-private partnership. The battle to save the Theatre lasted for two years and included an occupation by actors and artists, until the building was finally bulldozed on 17 May 2020, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic.

Some artists have inserted themselves even more directly into ongoing social and political struggles, such as in Croatia, where hundreds of artists and writers joined together in the activist group *Kulturnjaci* in 2016, after Zlatko Hasanbegović—an open historical revisionist with a neo-fascist past and pro-Ustasha statements to his name—was nominated as the Minister of Culture in the right-wing government. *Kulturnjaci* immediately demanded his resignation but also engaged in a series of public performances, such as readings of Umberto Eco's text on 'eternal fascism' that were held in 25 cities. In other examples, the Belgrade-based KURS collective

(Miloš Miletić and Mirjana Radovanović) used the Itas-Prvomajska factory in Croatia as a canvas for their mural, *Factory to the Workers!*, painted as an homage to this lone example of workers' self-management in the region today. In Macedonia, a group of artists led by Filip Jovanovski and Ivana Vaseva established the Tekstil Cultural-Artistic Centre in 2016 in order to offer direct support to the struggle of textile workers in Štip. And finally, also in Macedonia, a series of protests in April of 2015 were organised by non-unionised precarious workers against the taxation plans of the government, which would have unjustly placed a heavier burden on these workers than on the employers that contract their services. As a result of this mobilisation, and networking during the protests, a new Independent Union of Cultural Workers was established that now represents most of these workers in the Macedonian cultural sector.

Lastly, our tour of these counter-hegemonic struggles is only complete if we mention the Declaration on the Common Language published on 30 March 2017.[32] After a series of conferences on language and nationalism, organised by the literary association Krokodil, a group of writers, journalists, linguists, and public intellectuals from the countries

32 See https://jezicinacionalizmi.com/deklaracija/

that share a common language (Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, and Montenegro) drafted the Declaration, which was initially signed by 200 prominent figures and eventually attracted more than 10,000 signatories. The Declaration sparked a political and cultural scandal of rather vast proportions in post-Yugoslav times, and provoked furious reactions from nationalist politicians and linguists alike, from all sides, many of whom assert the linguistic independence of Croatian, Serbian, Bosnian and Montenegrin, or claim that one standard variant is dominant over the others. While the Declaration was not prepared or signed solely by progressives and leftists, its aim to confront three decades of nationalist manipulation regarding language policies, to ease linguistic conflicts and divisions (which take on an institutional form in Bosnia-Herzegovina's 'two schools under one roof' system), and to reject the political pressure on ordinary speakers in the name of free and mutually enriching expression places this initiative on the ideological spectrum that ranges from anti-nationalist liberal to openly leftist.

Pula, Croatia.
Solidarity with the workers of the Uljanik shipyard, 27 August 2018,
Photo: Levica.

Chapter 6

Solidarity struggles

Solidarity may be the word used most often among leftist theorists and activists. It is both a call for action in societies where many people live without a sufficient social safety net, and an ideal for future societies worth fighting for. It implies not only a humanitarian gesture or an act of charity, as it is rooted in the more profound moral principle of enduring commitment to others—especially to the most vulnerable—and should thus inspire continuous social and political engagement.

Multiple solidarity struggles have helped solidify the re-birth of the Left in the post-socialist Balkans, and have shown that a critical mass of activists are prepared to take rapid action in the spirit of empathy, internationalism, and humanism. It is often individuals already engaged on several political and social fronts who we see on the front lines of solidarity efforts to aid others in dire need, and they are frequently joined by citizens who want to help but do not necessarily have a leftist worldview. These joint actions are not only an ethical undertaking but

a cry for a different society. In this way, solidarity struggles are similar to the struggle for the commons, providing a space for political articulation, political socialisation, and radicalisation. Here, we will focus on several major solidarity actions, including efforts to provide aid during natural disasters, protect people against debt burdens and evictions, shelter and support refugees and migrants, and promote the rights of sexual minorities.

The major floods that hit Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia in May 2014 activated a depth of regional solidarity and mutual empathy not seen since the Yugoslav era. Thousands of people volunteered to collect donations and support relief efforts on the ground, and many leftist organisations mobilised in the affected countries. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, for instance, activists who were participating in the recently established Bosnian plenums were also active in flood relief. As in other cases, a network built through previous struggles had been easily mobilised when the emergency occurred; and tireless activists in plenum discussions became quite capable at collecting and distributing aid and supporting other professional agencies.

A man-made calamity that has generated a cyclical emergency for post-socialist citizens is indebtedness, especially from bank loans denominated

in foreign currency such as the Swiss franc. Many individuals, usually in the middle class, obtained these bad loans without recognising the problems they posed until the recession laid them bare. Many of these issues were due to fluctuating currency exchanges, the loss of property values or, in some cases, personal difficulties related to reduced income or health. Organisations were formed to tackle the crisis of tens of thousands of families losing their homes in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Serbia (Rodik 2019), and anti-eviction initiatives proliferated throughout the region.[33] These include the left-wing joint actions of *Krov nad glavom* (Roof over your Head) in Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Subotica, in which activists often physically confront police, eviction agents, and even hired thugs. In 2018 and 2019, they managed to save some 60 families from losing their homes (see Ćukić and Timotijević 2020, 97–107). Furthermore,

33 Here, we cannot fail to mention that this field of social struggles involves actors that do not necessarily espouse leftism. The anti-eviction campaign of *Živi zid* (Human Shield) in Croatia, for example, brought significant attention to the group—which oscillates between promoting alt-right tropes, anti-globalism, and conspiracy theories—and has even had members elected to the Croatian parliament (2 representatives) and later to the European parliament (1 representative).

these activists not only defended former workers of the Trudbenik construction company from eviction,[34] but have opened The Trudbenik Workers' Museum with the goal to celebrate the old glory of the company, which constructed thousands of apartments and buildings in Yugoslavia and abroad. The Museum offers a space for artistic interventions as well, and for discussions about ongoing struggles (Radnički muzej Trudbenik 2019).[35] Also in Serbia, the Solidary Kitchen (*Solidarna kuhinja*) in Belgrade distributes food regularly to anyone in need under the banner 'Solidarity – not charity!' The initiative is animated by left-wing activists who practice direct democracy in running their collective, and who believe that solidarity and mutual aid unmask structural socio-economic inequalities, unlike charity or philanthropy. In Bulgaria, similar work is undertaken by the Sofia chapter of Food not Bombs.

34 The company was destroyed through one of 24 corrupt privatisation schemes that was even questionned by the European Union. Workers resisted the scheme but failed to save the company. See the documentary film, directed by Ivan Zlatić, *Od minus 18 do plus 30* [*From -18°C to +30°C*] (2011). Available on YouTube at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qacQssRW4ww (accessed February 9, 2021).

35 See the documentary film by Rena Rädle, *Radnički muzej Trudbenik* [The Workers' Museum Trudbenik] (2019), available at: https://vimeo.com/332051584 (accessed February 9, 2021).

Since 2015, thousands of migrants and refugees seeking to reach Western Europe have used the so-called Balkan Route. What is often referred to as a 'migrant crisis' has only been intensified by people having been forced to cross barbed-wired borders and face violent police 'pushbacks', keeping many people in the Balkans for much longer than they would like; where they are relocated to camps and makeshift centres if they are lucky, or left to sleep on streets and in abandoned buildings if they are not. The humanitarian urgency of this crisis has mobilised many activists in the countries on the Balkan Route, which criss-crosses EU boundaries, leading from Greece into Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Croatia, before finally reaching Slovenia. Various organisations (such as Are you Syrious? and The Centre for Peace Studies, both in Zagreb) and autonomous social centres (such as Rog in Ljubljana, Dunja in Skopje, and the recently opened Compass071 in Sarajevo), together with a number of civic initiatives (such as the TransBalkan Solidarity Group or Info Kolpa in Slovenia), have persisted in helping refugees and migrants, despite frequently finding themselves squeezed from every direction—on one side, by police and border patrols who are ordered to prevent refugees from crossing into the EU no matter the means; on another, by international organisations such as IOM and UNHCR; but

also by local populations, sometimes charitable but often frustrated and even hostile (see Stojić Mitrović, Ahmetašević, Beznec and Kurnik 2020).

Finally, since the Street represents a crucial theatre for progressive action, it is worth mentioning here the support of the Left for feminist and LGBTQI+ struggles in the Balkans. Pride marches in the region were initially met with physical violence, with incidents in Zagreb, Split, Sofia, and Belgrade, but have later been reframed as acceptable festive gatherings; sometimes, as in Serbia, even receiving the blessing of the conservative ruling party. Still, in some Balkan countries, the struggle of the LGBTQI+ community for social and political acceptance has been a much longer and more difficult road, such as in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Hence, the first Sarajevo Pride, held in September 2019, carried special weight and had important social impact. In the face of threats of violence, it took place under police protection and in the presence of high-profile diplomats as several thousand people marched through the streets in support of LGBTQI+ rights. Notably, unlike similar events, this landmark Pride event in Sarajevo directly related the struggle for sexual freedom with other urgent social crises, questions of social justice, and anti-fascism. As a result of growing support for progressive

causes, and influenced by local leftist actors, Pride marches were also organised in Skopje in 2019 and Pristina in 2020, and went off without incident.

Zagreb, Croatia.
The green-left coalition celebrates its success at the parliamentary elections, 5 July 2020.
Photo: Nina Đurđević/Možemo!

Ljubljana, Slovenia.
The founding congress of the Left party, 24 March 2018.
Photo: Levica

Chapter 7

Electoral struggles

After occupations, protests in streets and squares, single-issue campaigns, and numerous social initiatives, the new Balkan Left, as was true elsewhere in Europe, faced the issue of its own participation in electoral politics and the need to form electoral alliances, coalitions, lists, platforms, and political parties. Thus, some leftist actors have embarked down this institutional road, despite mostly limited resources and almost non-existent infrastructure, while others are determined to remain outside electoral processes and institutional politics altogether.

Becoming a movement-party is always potentially on the horizon for any broad social movement and can manifest in a variety of ways, usually creating tension and schisms along the way between those seeking to stay closer to the base, its current struggles, and the activist ethos, and those favouring a more formal approach to politics on the premise that real political and socio-economic change cannot be implemented from outside state institutions. The thorny question of how to organise diverse actors and

fractions in a party structure often opens up further conflict between those who want a classic model with defined rules, internal organisation, and procedures, and those who prefer looser platforms and coalitions. In the background, intra-party democracy itself is often a contentious subject on the Left, as the traditional hierarchical model is now challenged by direct democratic demands. One should never underestimate the degree to which ideological disputes hinder organisational efforts on the Left and result in painful splits that, to outsiders and the general public, appear incomprehensible. All of these problems arose in the Balkans as the new Left re-emerged, and are probably here to stay, at least as this new Left develops institutionally in the coming years. To date, the transformation of new Left movements into political parties and successful electoral campaigns has been successful only in Slovenia and (recently) Croatia.[36]

36 An entirely different case is that of the Self-determination Movement (*Lëvizja Vetëvendosje*) led by Albin Kurti in Kosovo, which used to have a strong parliamentary presence before it won the 2021 elections by a landslide (it won 13.5% of votes in the parliamentary elections in 2014, 27.5% in 2017, 26.3% in 2019 and even 50% in February 2021). Kurti previously formed a government on 3 February 2020 that was voted out of office on 3 June 2020 after political manoeuvring by Kurti's coalition partner and

Of all the post-communist states of Southeastern Europe, it is Slovenia's Left that rests upon the most stable organisational structures. Slovenian trade unions have managed to remain politically important actors over the past thirty years, despite making some more recent compromises that have proved disadvantageous to workers. In the 1990s, trade unions were especially important in preventing capitalist shock by successfully mobilising to negotiate the rights of workers and secure minimum social standards

international pressure (notably by the US). *Vetëvendosje* began as a broad popular movement. But its leftist social and economic programme, anti-corruption zeal, rejection of foreign supervision, and opposition to privatisation (it has regularly organised protests that sometimes turn violent) is coupled with nationalist rhetoric, such as demands for the unification of predominantly Albanian-speaking areas in the region with Albania, the protection of the Kosovo Liberation Army members accused of crimes against humanity in The Hague, and insensitivity towards minorities, especially Serbs. The ambiguous ideological positioning of *Vetëvendosje* (the party wants to present itself as social democratic rather than radical left) and this nationalist rhetoric place Kurti and his party outside our analysis. Obviously, the party rests upon its charismatic leader who manages to skilfully combine national issues with social sensitivity and even leftist rhetoric. He has attracted strong support from voters frustrated by the 20-year rule of former war commanders of the KLA, who are responsible for widespread corruption.

(Becker 2014). This Slovenian model, known as the 'coordinated market economy' or 'neo-corporative capitalism', came under attack when the country joined the EU in 2004, finally giving way to neoliberal dogma in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis (Bembič 2015, 171; Becker 2017). But mass protests against austerity, coupled with a series of corruption scandals among the country's leading politicians (including Prime Minister Janez Janša, the former mayor of Ljubljana Zoran Janković, and the mayor of Maribor Franc Kangler), radicalised the Slovenian political scene in 2012 and 2013. One new leftist actor particularly caught the public's eye, and the Initiative for Democratic Socialism (IDS) was able to confidently assert a socialist platform (Furlan, Slukan and Hergouth 2018, 7).

In 2014, the United Left (*Združena levica*)—inspired by parties such as Podemos and SYRIZA—was formed out of three small leftist initiatives and parties in Slovenia (IDS, the Democratic Labour Party, and The Party for Sustainable Development of Slovenia). In the European elections that year, the United Left won 5.5% of the vote, too little to enter the European Parliament; but just a couple of months later, the party achieved 6% in the Slovenian elections and gained 6 parliamentary seats. The party, renamed simply The Left (*Levica*), then won 9.3% of the vote and

9 seats in the 2018 parliamentary elections, giving it the opportunity to support the minority government and directly influence certain governmental policies, such as those to raise the minimum wage and constitutionally protect water resources. In November 2019, when *Levica* departed the coalition due to major political disagreements, the party's popularity only grew. It continues to advocate a 'Europe of the people, not of capital', thus taking a clear stance against nationalist rhetoric, the European border regime, and the neoliberal policies promoted by the European Commission and the European Central Bank. Armed with a full-fledged programme, parliamentary experience on the national and municipal levels, and membership in the European Left,[37] the party is now a role model for the new Left in other former Yugoslav states, in terms of its organisation, agenda, and actions.

In Croatia, myriad initiatives and strong leftist activism developed in the 2010s finally brought about similar electoral success in the 2020 parliamentary elections. Prior to this, the Croatian Left, formed through struggles for public spaces, the commons, and education, had focused their efforts at the municipal

37 However, it failed to secure a seat in the European parliament in 2019, despite the fact that its president Violeta Tomič was the European Left's *spitzenkandidat*.

level. In the 2017 municipal elections in Zagreb, for example, the green-left alliance *Zagreb je naš* (Zagreb is ours) received 7.6% of the vote, claiming 4 seats in the municipal assembly. It formed the Left bloc and mounted tireless campaigns against the corrupt mayor of Zagreb and his nearly unchecked rule (see Buble, Kikaš and Prug 2018, 12). In 2019, an official Green Left electoral coalition was formed for the European elections, but gained only 1.8% of the vote, mostly concentrated in the capital. In the meantime, the radical left Workers' Front party nominated Katarina Peović as their candidate in the 2019 Croatian presidential elections. Peović attracted quite a bit of media attention and 1.1% of the vote while openly espousing socialist views and engaging in uncompromising polemics with right-wing leaders. The Workers' Front was part of the green-left bloc that was finally formed on the national level in 2020, out of six parties positioned from green progressive to radical left, also including: Možemo! (We Can!), Zagreb is Ours, Nova ljevica (New Left), ORaH - Održivi razvoj hrvatske (Sustainable Development of Croatia), and Za Grad (For the City). The recent organisational and electoral success of this new coalition—unexpectedly winning 7 parliamentary seats—confirm that an organic merging of consolidated political movements through parties and platforms, together with continuous integration into social movements, can pay off (Jagić 2020).

Indeed, years of political and social mobilisation and a balanced strategy of organisational development have given rise in Croatia to this promising political platform, to the left of social democracy. It is a necessarily heterogeneous coalition, combining municipalism, a de-growth approach, feminism, a green agenda, and climate justice with horizontality and democratic socialism, and does not shy away from explicit references to Marxism, workers' movements, or a socialist future. The programmes of coalition members complement each other, and the green-left bloc in the Croatian parliament has managed to address a wider range of topics of concern to the people. On top of this, it has demonstrated a clear commitment to feminism, which above all considers the economic context of reproductive work, but also puts forth an explicit defence of Croatia's anti-fascist heritage against rampant historical revisionism. Nonetheless, recent splits within this bloc have not come as a surprise. At the end of 2020, with a view towards municipal elections in 2021[38], the Workers'

38 Just before this book was sent to print, the green-left coalition and Možemo triumphed at the municipal elections in Zagreb in May 2021. Tomislav Tomašević as candidate for mayor won by a huge margin (63,87%) against the right-wing candidate. The green-left coalition also dominates the city assembly. This is by all means the biggest success of the new left in the post-socialist Balkans.

Front was excluded. It is a textbook case of the political tension between the strategic assumption that it is a necessity to form coalitions with the established centre-left (Social Democratic Party), and the imperative to preserve ideological coherence and maintain a principled rejection of mainstream parties. As in many similar contexts, the making and unmaking of leftist coalitions is likely to be a permanent feature of engagement by the Left in electoral struggles.

Rijeka, Croatia.
Electoral campaign of the Workers' Front, showcasing the work of Igor Grubić 'Scarves and Monuments' (2008). 26 March 2021.
Photo: Nemanja Cvijanović.

The successes of leftist actors in Slovenia and Croatia have echoed in Serbia, among similar movements. However, as we noted earlier, the national political climate in Serbia is less favourable to the Left—not only because the autocratic rule of Aleksandar Vučić and his right-wing Serbian Progressive Party has managed to neutralise any meaningful political opposition, but also because the toxic legacy of Slobodan Milošević and his nominally 'socialist' party still taints any genuine attempt to re-establish the Left as a significant political force. But there are some noticeable shifts towards the consolidation of progressive and left-leaning forces in Serbia anyway. In 2018, the *Ne da(vi)mo Beograd* campaign made an innovative attempt to enter the city parliament in the Belgrade municipal elections. They gained only 3.4% of the vote, but moved on to build a large alliance within the Civic Front (*Građanski front*), which clusters various local initiatives across Serbia. The *Ne da(vi)mo Beograd* has been in the process of political development at both municipal and national level. In addition, the small Social-Democratic Union (SDU) party attempted to bring diverse leftist actors and organisations—such as The Left Summit of Serbia and Diem25— under one umbrella, in preparation for the next parliamentary elections. In September 2020, SDU changed its name to The Party of the Radical Left (*Partija radikalne levice*),

which marked its symbolic departure both from the liberal heritage of the SDU and from the 'established Left' represented by the Socialist Party of Serbia. However, numerous internal disputes over its ideological course have resulted in splits within the party.

Further south in Macedonia, various leftist movements have participated directly in regime change, but without becoming a new political force. Mainstream parties, especially the ruling Social Democratic Union, have successfully harvested these efforts of the Left, though. During mass protests in 2015 and 2016, actors on the Left, as we noted, played a leading role in articulating pressing social problems and in mobilising activists. Leftist collectives such as *Solidarnost* became important points of contact, especially for dissatisfied youth and students, and the protests—along with the influence of the Left—spread to universities. Still, serious conflicts over political strategy arose early, at the founding of the *Levica* (The Left) party. And the party could not stand its first major test, taking a noticeable rightward turn in its opposition to the Prespa Agreement between Macedonia and Greece that, among other things, introduced the new name, The Republic of North Macedonia. This led to a split within the party, and during the 2020 elections, *Levica* joined the right-wing populist camp. It won two seats in the parliament for

the first time, with a mix of socio-political demands and nationalist resentment, especially directed against the Albanian minority (Sadiku 2020). As in the case of Serbia, local political contexts, party politics, and contingencies play a large part in how the new Left can articulate its agenda and social impact, as well as how it can be institutionalised within the existing political eco-system.

Rijeka, Croatia.
Electoral campaign of the Workers Front, showcasing the work of Nemanja Cvijanović 'The Monument of Red Rijeka: the Self-Defensive Monument' (2020) . 26 March 2021.
Photo: Nemanja Cvijanović.

While national contexts across the Balkans necessarily vary, the main principles and goals of the new Balkan Left are the same everywhere. With this in mind, and in the midst of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, the Social Democratic Union in Serbia joined together with the Slovenian Left and two Croatian parties, the Workers' Front and the New Left, to adopt a Declaration on Regional Solidarity. The Declaration was subsequently signed by a number of prominent public figures in politics, culture, art, literature, and sport, as well as by some two thousand other individuals, from almost every part of the former Yugoslavia.[39] It has had a surprisingly significant effect in media, and on the public. It is a short but clear document that formulates criticisms of the post-communist 'transition' in these former Yugoslav countries, but then posits major principles of regional solidarity, a list of policies and processes the Left should resist and, finally and importantly, goals *for* which the Left should fight going forward. In our view, the Declaration[40] represents the possi-

39 This includes Kosovo as well, where the Declaration was openly supported by the Social Democratic Party.

40 We have republished this brief document, translated by Tiana Bakić Hayden, in full, below. The Declaration is available in Bosnian/Serbian/Croatian (in both the *ekavian* and *ijekavian* versions), and in Slovenian, Macedonian, and Albanian. See: http://regionalnasolidarnost.info

ble nucleus for a common programme for the 21st century Balkan Left and is thus a key reference for future struggles.

In light of the unprecedented crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the profound economic, social, and political challenges now facing our societies, we put forward the following

DECLARATION ON REGIONAL SOLIDARITY

For the majority of people in the countries that formerly comprised the territories of Yugoslavia, the last thirty years have been marked by nationalist disputes, widespread suffering, impoverishment, the privatisation of public and social goods, and austerity measures, as well as an ongoing pattern of mutual conflicts and competition. The introduction of capitalist relations in this region has brought about deindustrialisation, deepening class inequalities, emigration, and population decline. Neoliberal policies have targeted and decimated public health infrastructure and capacity, leading to high costs for individuals, increased mortality rates, and the mass emigration of healthcare workers.

Although it has been over thirty years since we formed part of one country, our societies continue to share many common social and economic challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting containment measures

have only exacerbated and intensified these pre-existing problems. The pandemic will certainly come to an end, yet our socities will not be the same. The global economic depression we face thus presents us with two choices: either we passively observe the continued decline in living standards and working conditions, and the dependence on local tycoons and transnational capital interested solely in its own profits; or we stand up and fight for the basic needs of the majority of the population to be met. Such a struggle is only possible through collective effort and regional solidarity.

The model of regional solidarity that we propose is based on:

- *social justice and equality*
- *gender and sexual equality*
- *national and ethnic equality*
- *the preservation of the environment and its resources*
- *anti-fascism*
- *mutual collaboration and peacebuilding*
- *empathy and mutual aid*

Guided by these principles, we, the undersigned to this Declaration, commit ourselves to actively fighting, within our respective societies as well as regionally,

against

- *the destruction and neglect of public and common goods, and the continued contravention of the*

general public interest

- *the privatisation, marginalisation, and commodification of health, education, and scientific research*
- *the auctioning of natural resources, strategic infrastructures, the energy setor, urban public space, and agricultural lands*
- *debt bondage, for our countries as well as their populations*
- *the incitement of conflict, inter-ethnic hatred, and other threats to good neighborly relations*
- *militarisation and the proliferation of arms*
- *discrimination on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, or religion*
- *xenophobia towards migrants and refugees*
- *historical revisionism and the public rehabilitation of defeated fascist and Nazi forces and their collaborators*
- *the relativisation, minimisation, and glorification of mass crimes commited against civilian populations.*

In addition to actively resisting the above mentioned, we commit ourselves to fighting

for

- *mutual aid in contexts of economic crisis, natural disaster, or other emergencies that threaten our populations*

- *the revitalisation and development of public health as a collective priority, which guarantees that every individual, regardless of citizenship, has unfettered access to free, high-quality healthcare*
- *the restoration of publicly owned economic and industrial resources that are essential for social progress and survival, ranging from agricultural, pharmaceutical, and medical capacities, to mining, construction, shipbuilding, and digital technologies*
- *the protection of natural resources and the environment, and investment in publicly owned, renewable energy infrastructure*
- *the renewal and improvement of regional transport infrastructures*
- *intensive academic collaboration in the development of university programmes and scientific research projects, through the pooling of resources and staff exchanges*
- *labour regulations and working conditions that protect the interests of workers rather than profits*
- *social, economic, and political democratisation through models based on participation and collective decision making*
- *the legal regularisation of collective ownership and the development of self-managing co-operatives*
- *freedom to move, live, study, and work without restriction within the region*

- *regional cooperation on questions related to refugees, migrants, asylum, and settlement*
- *the support of all official and informal initiatives that foment connection, collaboration, peace, and mutual respect among the peoples and nations of the former Yugoslav territories, as well as their neighboring countries.*

Conclusions

The successes and failures of the new Balkan Left

There is no question that the new Left has stepped on to the political, social, and cultural stage in the post-socialist Balkans. Its first success is simply its very existence. Against all odds, this new internationally-connected, Balkan Left, in all its forms, is prepared to struggle against the post-socialist predicament, the disasters of capitalist restoration, and the chronic social and economic crises that plague the European periphery. The re-birth of the Left was a surprise in this region, marked by a legacy of defeated socialist regimes, a disintegrated Yugoslavia, brutal wars, ongoing nationalist conflicts, a punishing capitalist 'transition' leading to deindustrialisation and impoverishment, and demographic devastation.

While the Balkan Left has been relatively ineffective when it comes to institutional politics, some notable successes should be underscored:

- plenums were formed, and functioned as general citizens' assemblies, at universities across the region and in Bosnian cities, and opened a space for horizontal democratic experiments and models;
- movements struggling for the commons—urban, natural or cultural— developed across the region, with a notable following;
- significant street protests occurred and at least temporarily shook the established order;
- the nationalist, conservative, patriarchal, and neoliberal hegemony, undisputed since 1989, has unquestionably been challenged, and space opened for the public presence of leftist ideas in media, academic work, and the cultural sphere, and at festivals and large civic gatherings;
- and, finally, in Slovenia and Croatia, the Left now has a say in parliament, where it opposes not only nationalist right-wing forces, neoliberal pressures, and liberal currents, but also centrist social democracy.

Over the last decade, we have witnessed street protests across the region that have championed political agendas, messaging, and aims clearly associated with the social and political Left, for the first time since 1989. The 'uprisings' in Slovenia in 2012–13 were

dominated by leftist actors and eventually provided the impetus for the formation of the most successful leftist party in the post-socialist Balkans (and, generally, in Eastern Europe). Macedonia remains the only regional country where leftist social movements and prominent civil society actors played a crucial if not decisive role in actual regime change. One could also say that mass protests in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina emboldened the new Left that was emerging in these countries and offered a public stage for its articulation.

Protests for free and accessible education, and for better school and university conditions, became a springboard for the expression of strongly progressive messaging and offered real on-the-ground political training for leftist activists. It is now typical for activists to flow between student movements and various struggles for the commons (especially related to urban issues), workers' rights, and general labour conditions. In concrete ways, these movements have slowed neoliberal reforms and have created much-needed space for intellectual and academic counter-hegemonic struggles that have been crucial, especially in the post-Yugoslav context, to facilitating the penetration of leftist ideas into the mainstream.

The creation of broad alliances inclusive of actors from left liberals, to social democrats, to

progressives, to ecologists, to leftists have proven to be an effective means of enhancing the weight of smaller left-wing actors in protest actions. The Croatian *Ne damo naše autoceste* (We won't give up our highways) campaign, protesting the 2014 privatisation of the country's highway network, is a case in point. Support from trade unions, civil society, and actors from the radical Left helped the campaign collect some 530,000 signatures, attract significant media attention, and gain valuable political experience.[41] At the local and municipal levels, coalitions between left, progressive, and green political actors have in some cases brought unexpected political successes, demonstrating the potential of such alliances to disrupt municipal politics as usual and even propel the new Left—in all its ideological variety—to the national stage. The question of parliamentary participation is obviously strategically important in this context, and the initial refusal of many leftist

41 The same holds true for the Bulgarian campaign Да спрем машината за неравенство [Stop the engine of inequality], which was backed by a broad alliance of actors from across civil society and the extra-parliamentary left. The left-wing Collective for Social Interventions (KOI) joined the initiative and help draft a political position paper that was unanimously adopted as the campaign's official position on Bulgarian tax reform issues.

movements to engage in electoral struggles has now largely given way to more pragmatic approaches. Parliamentarism should not be the only field of action for the Left, which must never forget that its power and energy comes from social movements and ongoing social struggles, but parliaments must also be recognised as places of real political negotiation and conflict in liberal democracies. Appreciating the delicate balance between formal politics and social struggles, and understanding concrete national and local circumstances, will be crucial to ensuring the success of the new Balkan Left in both domains.

The failures of this new Left are obvious, and there have been many. Still, it is not surprising that single-issue struggles in the region—though important to the development of various actors—are not all *politically* connected among themselves. Urban initiatives are typically uninvolved in workers' struggles; the protection of natural resources can become ideologically diffused and confused; artists and cultural workers are often haphazardly mobilised; and students and professors frequently fail to reach beyond the academe. But if it can manage to find a suitable political framework through which the common political and social power of these actors can be demonstrated, the articulation of these various struggles may be fruitful for the Left. One way to

achieve this is through the long and painful process of coalition building, notwithstanding ideological differences, as in the case of Slovenia and Croatia, and another is through the creation of temporary platforms for social action.

So far, except in Croatia and Slovenia, the Left has met failure or only fragile success in its attempts to build a sustainable, wider movement or stronger political parties that are truly capable of challenging the established order or influencing municipal, regional, and state politics. Any achievements of the new Balkan Left must be tempered by the reality that it is, at best, a vocal marginal force in most Balkan societies and, at worst, almost non-existent. Across the region, many social movements remain local in character or were initiated as an explicitly local response to a concrete problem. Still, despite the diversity of issues these movements address, it is safe to say that they all tackle two main dilemmas: the appropriation of urban and natural commons by political and business elites, and the exclusion of ordinary citizens from decision-making processes.

While leftist parties, NGOs, movements, platforms, and alliances are indeed on the rise across Southeastern Europe, and are learning quickly from their early mistakes, they often lack a wider socio-political relevance and an audience beyond

their own milieu or beyond a brief and temporary period of public interest for a cause. Most striking is the lack of organic connection between this new Balkan Left and the working class. No matter how scattered this class may appear or may be portrayed these days, one of the central ideological concerns of all leftist organisations and movements should be the critique of material inequalities that result from the fundamental conflict of the capitalist economic order; that is, between labour and capital. However, except in its discursive form, leftist actors in the region have mostly failed to articulate this conflict within the social class that has been hit hardest. For the Left to fulfill its mandate to represent and fight for the exploited and oppressed, it must establish a much stronger connection to and communication with both factory workers and precarious workers in all segments of the economy.

Further, while struggles for publicly funded education and free universities have radicalised various social groups, from teachers and professors to students and parents, even important victories have not generated the kind of movement continuity one might expect. Often, after the initial student vanguard receive their degrees and move into different struggles, there is an obvious failure to transmit their ideals and experience to a new generation. On

top to this, catastrophic demographic trends—due to the mass emigration of young and educated citizens to wealthier EU members such as Germany, Italy, and Austria—have drained regional populations of both former and potential future student activists. With many state-sponsored (and thus free) university campuses now relatively empty, the student movement in the Balkans is in an entirely different position than it was only a decade ago.

Across the region, co-operation among leftist groups and movements occurs without formalised relations, often through loose networks of support, solidarity, and friendship—especially within former Yugoslav states. Sometimes, even intra-national networking is rather weak, though, or co-operation comes at a very slow pace for various reasons, including a lack of durable infrastructure and logistical support (after all, a majority of activists work for their movements and groups in their spare time, and mostly for free), and the strong dominance of groups and actors in capital cities.

Our hope is that this short overview and analysis informed readers about the courageous struggles, surprising successes, and many failures of the new Balkan Left since its re-emergence in 2009. These failures have largely been due to political inexperience and the complexity of local contexts;

but as the Left came of age during the 2010s, leftist actors learned through trial and error, as well as by importing experiences from global struggles. As has been true elsewhere and was certainly the case in previous eras, the new Balkan Left has travelled here and there, traversing various forms of radical resistance and activist experimentation, confronting ideological infighting to build coalitions and affect institutional politics. In the 2020s, the potential of the Balkan Left should be maximised through better networking, greater public visibility, and the more effective exchange of knowledge and experiences across the region. Indeed, the Declaration on Regional Solidarity should be a guide to bridging marginal differences among assorted leftist political agendas to facilitate joint actions and strategic alliances with other progressive forces. If the Balkan Left wishes to effectively address the conflict between capital and labour in the region, and struggle proficiently for social emancipation and democratisation, it will have to impose itself as a fully-developed social, cultural, and political actor. It must be capable not only of offering sophisticated analysis and critique, creative protest, and emphatic indignation, but of bringing real change to the Balkans.

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Krunoslav Stojaković is a historian and head of the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung offices in Belgrade (Serbia) and Tuzla (Bosnia-Herzegovina). His main areas of interest are the history of the labour movement, fascism, and anti-fascist resistance, especially in Yugoslavia, as well as left-wing movements and parties in Southeastern Europe. His publications include *„für eminent kommunistische Grundsätze". Die politisch-kulturelle Avantgarde in Jugoslawien, 1960-1970* (forthcoming in 2022); and he has collaborated with Elfriede Müller and Titus Engelschall on *Revolutionäre Gewalt. Ein Dilemma* (2019); and with Boris Kanzleiter on *1968 in Jugoslawien. Studentenproteste und kulturelle Avantgarde zwischen 1960 und 1975. Gespräche und Dokumente* (2006).

Designe info

Paper
Sora press 80gr
Remake 250gr

Fonts
Gentium Book Basic
Rubik

CIP - Каталогизација у публикацији
Народна библиотека Србије, Београд
329.055.4(497)"20"
316.334.3(497)"20"

ŠTIKS, Igor, 1977-

The New Balkan Left : struggles, Successes, Failures / Igor Štiks, Krunoslav Stojaković ; [photos Vanco Dzambaski... [et al.]]. - Beograd : Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Southeast Europe, 2021 (Beograd : Standard 2). - 152 str. : ilustr. ; 17 cm

Tiraž 400. - A Note on the Authors: str. 128-149. - Napomene i bibliografske reference uz tekst. - Bibliografija: str. 139-147.

ISBN 978-86-88745-46-8

1. Krunoslav, Stojaković, 1978- [аутор]
а) Левица -- Балканске државе -- 21в

COBISS.SR-ID 41368073