

Southeastern Europe's New Left

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Challenges and hopes during political reconstruction

The collapse of the socialist bloc during the early 1990s not only wiped entire political systems off the map. The organizational structures, the cultural traditions of the socialist and communist labour movement, the concept of solidarity, the socialist project and its conceptions of society were all exposed to a process of decline that only gradually slowed and finally came to a halt in the early 21st century. In Germany, the political left was only able to re-emerge as a relevant voice in society after the Electoral Alternative for Labour and Social Justice (WASG) and the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) merged to form the party Die Linke—a process that was accompanied by a wave of justified criticism. Similarly, the Marxist theory of state, economy and society had to pass through a “valley of intellectual silence” before it resurfaced with a momentum that could not be ignored any longer, even by the bourgeois feuilleton. In this context, the implosion of the Yugoslav model of socialism was flagrant: as the state fell apart in the throes of bloody civil wars, the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, until then internationally respected for its courage and determination, dissolved into a cluster of separatist national parties. In Croatia, for instance, most members of the League of Communists joined Franjo Tuđman's nationalist Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ); meanwhile, the League of Communists' official successor, the Social Democratic Party of Croatia (SDP), was lost between nationalism and reformism. Across the border, the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) emerged with Slobodan Milošević at its helm. It was thus one of the main actors during the Yugoslav Wars and remained in power throughout the period, except for the years between 2000 and 2008. In Slovenia, Bulgaria and Romania, the Communist parties also shifted gears to become, at best, proponents of the Third Way. The socialist left remained homeless, lacking any infrastructure and marginalized in society and the media.

The emergence of a New Left in Southeast Europe—varying from state to state in terms of its impact—can be traced back to the financial crisis of 2008. [1] Following two decades of ideological hegemony under neoliberal and neoconservative political actors, the crisis gradually created spaces for the public articulation of anti-capitalist criticism throughout the post-socialist Balkans. The spectrum of left-wing political actors that has since then formed—and, in part, continues to form—ranges from more informal alliances in the context of concrete political and social struggles to radical left-wing non-governmental organizations that emerged from Southeast Europe's active student movement, to smaller party-style organizations to more or less stable political parties and party coalitions, especially at the local level. In the following, we will try to provide an overview.

Basic Political Premises

Southeast Europe's New Left is predominantly critical of present-day parliamentarianism, advocating a direct, participatory and horizontal form of democracy. Building on an internationalist, i.e. anti-nationalist and antifascist agenda, it criticizes the so-called post-socialist “transition”, which has led, and continues to lead, to enormous inequality as well as massive unemployment and poverty; it opposes the dominant conservative, religious, patriarchal and nationalistic ideology; it pushes for the protection of commons and public goods (including natural resources), and defends

the remnants of the Socialist welfare state against increasing privatization and exploitation.

Despite its fundamentally internationalist approach, the New Left's stance towards the EU oscillates between reservation and rejection. In public discourse, the trite-sounding narrative of so-called "European values" such as peace, justice, tolerance and prosperity for all has lost its appeal. Neither EU member states such as Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania and Slovenia, nor accession candidates such as Serbia seem particularly convinced by this discourse, which has been repeated to the point of absurdity. However, the social left's growing scepticism towards the EU and its institutions cannot be solely attributed to the Troika's authoritarian policy towards the Greek Syriza government between 2013 and 2015, which had acted as a beacon of hope to many in Southeast Europe. The social and economic hardships suffered by many Southeast European societies—which EU accession has only exacerbated—have been far more dramatic. Similarly, EU accession has not helped to contain the threat posed by neoconservative, right-wing populist political actors, some of which even invoke historical fascism. In fact, quite the opposite has been the case: In countries such as Bulgaria (with right-wing extremist Krasimir Karakachanov as defence minister) or Croatia (large influence of fascist veteran associations and neoconservative NGOs), the political establishment has been ready to accommodate anti-democratic movements—a trend which is not limited to Southeast Europe. Socio-economic upheavals, an instrumentalist understanding of democracy and the rise of right-wing populist movements—the resumé of EU's integration policy in Southeast Europe is sobering. It is, therefore, of little surprise that left-wing actors perceive the European Union as an ambivalent institution at best (cp. Ćurković 2014).

Organizational Phase

Over the past ten years, several spontaneous movements have formed to oppose social injustice and specific governmental policies including privatization, corruption, poverty, commodification, and the neglect and destruction of the commons. Initially, these movements and protests often expressed outrage and indignation without necessarily being grounded in a coherent left-wing agenda. However, the radicalization of some of the protesters and parts of the public has fuelled the emergence of new left-leaning organizations, groups, media and even political parties. In Slovenia, for example, the left-wing coalition *Združena Levica* [the United Left] formed as a merger between the Initiative for Democratic Socialism (IDS) - which had arisen from the students' movement - and two further parties, gaining six seats in parliament during the 2014 general elections (cp. Cerjak et al. 2014). This coalition in turn led to the formation of the party *Levica* [the Left], which received over nine percent of votes in the 2018 elections. Thanks to the results of the Slovenian general election, the party was able to tie its support for the minority government to certain sociopolitical demands (successive increases in the minimum wage from 2019 onwards). In *Croatia*, protest movements gave birth to many left-wing NGOs with a focus on economic democracy and media democracy, such as the Organization for Workers' Initiative and Democratization (OWID) and the "[Association for media democracy](#)". Similar groups were founded in Romania, such as the left-wing web portal *Critic Atac*, while the [Collective for Social Interventions \(KOI\)](#) and others emerged in Bulgaria. In the course of this text, we will outline the potentials of the New Left along with the challenges it faces by examining its distinctive practices of resistance as well as its mobilization strategies.

Street Protests and the Social Question

In early 2011, over 10,000 protesters took to the streets in Croatia (most of them mobilized via Facebook) to protest against the former conservative government under prime minister Jadranka Kosor. For one month, marchers gathered every evening. Their central demands were directed against the government's crisis policy and its adoption of austerity measures, which only exacerbated the already tense socio-economic situation faced by most Croatian citizens. In

November and December 2012, thousands of people protested in the Slovenian city of Maribor against their corrupt mayor Franc Kangler, and several other cities across the country registered growing resistance against the economic and social policies of the political establishment.

In Bulgaria, people have been holding weekly protests in over 30 cities since November 2018. Similarly to the Gilet Jaunes protests in France, these demonstrations initially opposed increases in fuel prices, but soon widened to address overall social and economic deprivation. While these protests continue to lack a left narrative—with the exception of Slovenia, which we will discuss later—left-wing organizations and groups have become an important element in social uprisings, at least on the periphery.

The Struggle for the Commons

Free access to public space is a concern for large sections of society. In 2010, the movement “Pravo na grad” [right to the city] was founded in Croatia in opposition to a major urban development project that targeted the Zagreb pedestrian zone and one of the busiest inner city squares, Cvjetni trg. The protestors spoke out against corruption, gentrification and the enclosure of public spaces, as well as the close ties between private capital and the city government. Although the activists failed to save the city park from destruction, the protests profoundly influenced the emergence of a green left political milieu which has continued to organize and generate publicity for the various forms of resistance against commodification trends within the Croatian capital.

Similar constellations could also be observed in Belgrade, where, under the slogan “Ne da(vi)mo Beograd” [Let’s not give away Belgrade/Let’s not drown Belgrade], local activists have been fighting to stall an urban mega-project called Belgrade Waterfront for several years (Christoph 2016). The project, which is backed both politically and financially by the Serbian government, is set to cover an immense area along the banks of the river Sava in close proximity to the city centre and envisions the construction of luxury apartments, a shopping mall, a casino, etc. Overshadowed by a trail of irregularities and illicit deals, this project has provoked broad public resistance and mass protests in Belgrade.

In similar ways, several grassroots initiatives have surfaced to preserve natural resources. Between 2012 and 2013, the Dubrovnik-based movement “Srđ je naš” [Srđ is ours] attempted to prevent the privatization of a portion of the hill Srđ and its transformation into an elite golf course, and local initiatives are cropping up in several Southeast European states to oppose the planned construction and installation of hundreds of small hydropower stations along river banks throughout the region.

In autumn 2013, tens of thousands of people staged month-long protests against the planned gold mining project in Roşia Montana in Romania. The protests, which objected to the use of a highly toxic cyanide process, were successful, stopping the project in its tracks. Here, too, left-wing activists participated in the protests, albeit without developing significant political impact.

The Struggle for Education

Arguably, the most crucial movement for the New Left is connected to resistance against the commercialization and privatization of higher education. The fight to defend general and free access to education sparked the development of a wide array of more or less influential student movements in almost all post-socialist states, which experimented with different forms of direct democracy in the process. A key example is the occupation of universities in Croatia during April and November 2009, where student plenary sessions were formed as general assemblies of students, instructors and citizens. These occupations would later provide the political and organizational toolkit for nascent student struggles across the region (cp. Milan 2013). Similar struggles for education took

place in Ljubljana in 2011, in Belgrade in 2011 and 2014, in Bucharest in 2012, in Sofia in 2013, in Skopje in 2015 and most recently in Tirana in 2018. Although educational policy, or rather, the resistance against the progressing commercialization and commodification of education, was central to these movements, it would be reductionist to claim that the students only addressed educational policy issues. These movements defined themselves as critical voices within a pervasive neoliberal mainstream, and gave rise to the majority of currently existing and active organizational contexts within the radical left.

The Struggle for Work

In the meantime, workers' activism has entered a new phase over the last decade: several workers' initiatives joined forces with existing student and urban movements, left-wing groups, prominent individuals, artists and intellectuals, while the employees of privatized or bankrupt firms and factories staged public protests to draw attention to their situation. In the case of the Itas-Prvomajska factory in northern Croatia, following the company's bankruptcy the employees occupied the factory, took independent control of production and began to adopt self-management practices and direct workers' control. In other cases, such as the Petrochemie factory in the Croatian town of Kutina, employees fought to retain majority ownership by the state. These struggles are flanked by left-wing grassroots organizations, the majority of which emerged in the wake of the student movement. For example, the workers of the above-mentioned Itas-Prvomajska factory were able to develop self-organization models with support from the Centre for the Development of Workers' Participation (CRRP). In Slovenia, the Centre for Social Research (CEDRA) cooperates closely with workers' collectives and left-wing trade unionists to increase the political agency and level of organization of trade unions by providing seminars and cooperative assessments between activists and workers.

Elections and Electoral Campaigns

As indicated above, the only country in which such short-lived—and occasionally quite spectacular—movements have been able to transform into political parties and successful electoral campaigns is Slovenia, where the Levica party secured over nine percent of votes in the 2018 elections. Levica performed particularly well in the capital Ljubljana and other urban centres, reflecting a Europe-wide trend according to which left-wing parties appeal to a younger, urban constituency in particular.

In Croatia, left-wing actors are currently focusing their mobilization efforts on the municipal level. During the 2017 municipal elections in Zagreb, the green-Left political platform Zagreb je naš [Zagreb is ours] received 7.56 percent of votes, claiming four seats in the municipal parliament. The question of what direction this coalition will take in future, whether and in what form it will participate in the upcoming European elections, remains unclear at present. What is certain, however, is that the New Left is gradually shaking off the post-1990s paralysis that the socio-political left had fallen into, and not just on a parliamentary level.

The Post-Yugoslav Left: Accomplishments and Setbacks

Since 2008, the actors of the New Left have entered a phase in which their political and social struggles have become publicly visible. The results of collaborative efforts between different actors as in Croatia or Slovenia have been impressive and created friction within the dominant political mainstream. The New Left has challenged the nationalist, conservative and neoliberal hegemony and, by way of its own organizational structures, left-wing media outlets and public assemblies, created a channel to bring left-wing ideas into the public sphere.

Still, there is much need for improvement, as many of these single-issue struggles remain isolated from one another. Urban initiatives are not always interested in workers' struggles, while the efforts of students and professors usually do not extend beyond their own scientific fields. So far, attempts to create a sustainable and broader movement, or stronger left-wing political parties that could either challenge established political organizations and structures or reshape municipal, regional and state-level policies have proved to be too ambitious, except in Slovenia and, to a lesser extent, Croatia.

Regarding its relationship to the European Union, what Southeast Europe's New Left—and the European Left in general—lacks is an alternative left-wing narrative that goes beyond merely criticizing the European Commission's institutions or its mode of governance. Isolated attempts to break free, as recently seen in Greece, are not tolerated by the ruling neoliberal power bloc and are met with sanctions - an observation that holds particularly true for poorer states located at the periphery. A successful counter-strategy cannot merely limit itself to criticizing the EU and envisioning its potential dismantlement or disintegration. Left-wing socialist policy must find ways to promote its own Europeanization and internationalization: after all, only a socialist counter-narrative to the EU and its institutions has the potential to generate the international solidarity needed to make a socialist transformation feasible again. However, Southeast Europe's New Left cannot, and will not, be able to tackle this task by itself.

The 2019 European Elections

An independent political force in its own right, the Slovenian left-wing party Levica will definitely be participating in the European elections. With a full-fledged programme, parliamentary experience on the national level and as a member of the European Left, the party acts as somewhat of a role model for the radical left in former Yugoslavia in terms of organizational policy. In its party programme, Levica advocates a "Europe of the people, not of capital", thus taking a decided stance against the neoliberal policy promoted by the European Commission and the ECB and rejecting the European border regime. The party speaks out in favour of a radical departure from the EU's current political trajectory, and explicitly denounces a return to nation-state promises of salvation.

In what constellation the urban coalition Zagreb je naš will participate in the European elections still remains to be seen: a reprise of its original line-up can be ruled out due to strategic and ideological differences. So far, the European Union has - not surprisingly - played no role in the coalition's municipal agenda. In Bulgaria, Българската левица [the Bulgarian Left] constitutes another well-consolidated left-wing party in the likes of Levica in Slovenia, although it has not reached the same politico-organizational stage. Although Българската левица is also a member of the European Left, the party presently does not play a distinctive role in Bulgarian society—and the upcoming European elections are unlikely to change this.

Outlook

Left-wing parties, NGOs, movements and alliances across Southeast Europe are on the rise. However, they usually lack socio-political relevance and an audience beyond their own milieu. Achieving these two points is the major challenge at hand, and the radical left seems willing to seriously question its current centrifugal tendencies in order to seek out new ways to build alliances. In straightforward terms, these new strategies operate on three different levels: 1) alliances arising in the context of concrete solidarity and protest actions, 2) coalition-building on the local or municipal level, 3) strategy-focused debates aimed at forging collaborations in the field of organizational policy.

In the context of concrete solidarity and protest actions, such alliances have proven to be an

effective means in enhancing the ability of smaller left-wing actors to take action. The Croatian campaign *Ne damo naše autoceste* [We won't give up our highways] against the privatization of the Croatian highway network is a case in point. Thanks to support from trade unions, civil society actors and actors from the radical left, the campaign was relatively successful in attracting media attention and was thus able to gain valuable political experience for future political campaigns. The same holds true for the Bulgarian campaign *Да спрем машината за неравенство* [Stop the motor of inequality], which was backed by a broad alliance of actors from across civil society. The left-wing Collective for Social Interventions (KOI) not only joined the protests, but also drafted a political position paper that has now been unanimously adopted as the campaign's official position on Bulgarian tax reform issues.

As shown in the case of Zagreb, local and municipal-level coalitions between left and green political actors can bring about unexpected political success. However, for the left-wing actors involved in such coalitions, the potential inherent in such alliances is dependent on the internal power relations and, consequently, on the degree to which concrete socialist policies can be implemented. The stronger the left-wing elements are in these alliances, the greater their political legitimacy and ability to bring about a tangible change in policy. As a partner in such coalitions, the Left must set clear red lines, both in order to consolidate its own politico-organizational policies as well as vis-à-vis potential coalition allies. Otherwise, the left runs the risk of forfeiting its own political perspective, i.e. the gradual popularization of the socialist project, which could in turn trigger new political divisions and politico-organizational debates. Alliances must not be an end in itself.

It is these challenges linked to the persistence of inner-left divisions and splinter organizations that make these ongoing strategic debates necessary. The aim is to bridge the frequently marginal differences between individual left-wing political agendas in order to at least establish a platform for taking joint action. Often, the high degree of sectionalism within the left political field is less a question of prevailing political differences, but rather a product of the accumulated baggage of historical organizational divisions. If the left truly wishes to further address the contradiction between capital and labour and work towards achieving comprehensive social emancipation and democratization, it will have to solve this recurrent inheritance.

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Footnotes

[1] Although we speak of the “New Left” in Southeastern Europe, both limitations of space and our thematic focus on the 2019 European elections force us to concentrate on those countries that are EU member states: Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania and Slovenia. However, similar developments and fields of action of the New Left can be observed in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Macedonia.