

## **EUROPEAN UNION AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL ACTORS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PROGRESSIVE SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN SERBIA AND FYROM**

*\*This Paper was submitted to the Call for Papers on "Balkan 2025 – What Kind of Future Can We Expect?" to be presented at the Belgrade Security Forum 2018*

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August 2018

### **1. Introduction**

This paper is based on the empirical research of new social movements and protest culture in two Western Balkans countries, conducted during the summer of 2018. The principle research aim was to map emancipatory potential of grass-root movements in the Western Balkans, by initially focusing on Serbia – a country where political movements are perceived to be weak, in terms of influencing political developments – and FYROM – where recent democratizing developments were highly influenced by various citizen-led movements. Our general goal is to compare similarities and differences between movements, within and across two country case studies, in order to

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better understand potentials of bottom-up movements to influence political orders and developments in this part of Europe. In this paper, our focus is particularly on the analysed movements' orientations towards, and evaluation of, foreign actors and powers. We hope that these results, together with the further findings of our on-going research, could serve as guiding lines in drafting new approaches to strengthening civic engagement in the Western Balkans.

As our principle research and policy-oriented concern was with the rising populism and authoritarian tendencies, decrease of citizens' participation in political processes, and threats to overall democratization of the region, the movements we wanted to analyse fell into the camp of the so-called *progressive movements*, characterized by openness, inclusionary rhetoric, and focus on democratizing changes, as well as on the public good and quality of life of all concerned citizens. Acknowledging the great variation of working definitions of *social movements*, with additional difficulties in agreeing upon the precise definition of the so-called *new new social movements* (reliance on social media, localized initiatives, greater participation of youth, reaction to austerity measures after the 2008 financial crisis, anti-systemic orientation... see: Feixa, Pereira and Juris 2009), our research team selected movements to be studied according to the following criteria (beside progressive rhetoric and values): beyond institutional collective agency; orientation of goals and values towards the enhancement of collective good; certain

degree of organization; duration in time (to exclude ad hoc initiatives and protests) (Snow, Soule and Kriesi, 2004).

The material has been obtained through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 32 activist (22 from Serbia and 10 from FYROM) from 15 movements, during the months of August and September 2018. The movements in question are:

**From Serbia:**

*Ne davimo Beograd* (Don't let Belgrade D(r)own, Belgrade), *Združena akcija (ZA) Krov nad glavom* (Collective Action A roof over head, Belgrade), *Studentski pokret Novi Sad* (Students' movement, Novi Sad), *Inicijativa za Požegu* (Initiative for Požega, Požega), *Lokalni front* (Local Front, Kraljevo), *Efektiva* (Belgrade), *Samo Jako* (Mladenovac), *Zrenjaninski socijalni forum* (Social Forum of Zrenjanin), *Tvrđava* (Smederevo), *Udruženi pokret slobodnih stanara* (Association of free tenants, Niš) i *Sačuvajmo reke Stare planine* (Let's preserve the rivers of Stara planina mountain, Pirot).

**From FYROM:**

*Studentski plenum* (Students' plenum), *Leftist Movement Solidarity*, *Colourful revolution* and *Eco-guerrilla*.

## **2. Commonalities and overlapping goals and values**

Depending on the particular research question one would like to tackle, these movements could be said to be both mutually similar and very different – either when compared within the same country or across the two countries. The differences mainly stem from the fact that they are mostly issue-oriented and issues in question are specific to local contexts and political dynamics. However, given our main focus, in this paper, on orientations towards, and evaluation of, foreign actors and powers, it is useful to start with the discussion of their common characteristics.

1. Most of the movements in question were formed and initiated as a *reactive response to a concrete* event or political decision, often depicted as a “tip of the iceberg” , meaning the irritable and clearly observable manifestation of deeper systemic problems. In reacting, in protesting, and fighting these issues, they claim the direct link with the “ordinary people” , their rights, needs, and interests – seen as opposed to the interests of corrupted political/economic elite responsible for the triggering events, and for the violation of democratic principles.

2. Even though they were initially formed around specific, concrete (context related) issues, with their primary actions focused on local communities and pragmatic results, their activists feel the need to stress that their core values and ultimate goals are social justice and wider participation of citizens in general political and decision-making processes. Oftentimes made remark and critique of the political elite is that it is not only responsible for dubious, sometimes illegal moves and projects, but that it generally

ignores citizens' interests, prevents citizens from wider participation in politics, by minimizing the role and function of the existing democratic procedures. Having this in mind, the analyzed movements often perceive themselves as fighting for *more democracy*, and for *bringing citizens back to the public sphere*.

3. With regard to expressing ideological orientation and positioning on the political specter, they all clearly state their antifascism and, often, anti-right wing position. But most interviewees, especially in Serbia, are hesitant in expressing clearer position and stance, often adding that they wish to be *open to as many citizens as possible*. It could be said that clear political positioning is seen as part of *mainstream, systemic* politics, which is, in turn, seen as exclusive and dividing. In their argumentation they prefer simpler terms, closer to the everyday life of all citizens, such as: the quality of living, the ripping off of budget money, benefits for the few instead for all, etc. Additionally, when using these notions, they ascribe them to very concrete, tangible problems, and examples citizens encounter in their everyday life.

4. They are open to networking and cooperation with other citizens' movements and organizations from the country but also from the region. In this regard, many of them already collaborate and in various occasions form "ad hoc alliances" that usually revolve around specific emerging issues. The nature of alliances is far from being openly political, or based on any clear ideological platform, rather tending to promote non-exclusive values with the goal of solving specific problems of the communities.

### 3. Perception of international actors – comparative overview

In this closing chapter we will present an overview of the movements’ dominant perceptions and narratives about international organizations, initiatives and figures, taken to be preliminary indicators of the movements’ political stance and ideological positioning. The focus of our questionnaire was on the European Union, Berlin process, Russia, NATO and UNDP.

The results show substantial differences between the movements from FYROM and Serbia, where the latter exhibit much more negative attitudes towards the international factors.

1. While European Union is criticized, as a project in crisis, in both countries, representatives of FYROM show clear support towards EU, its core values and accession process, notwithstanding declared weaknesses. Serbian representatives primarily associate EU with the disappointment and a desperate need for change. In very few exceptions, they stress legal security and quality of life.

<p><b>EU</b></p> <p><b>Serbia – first associations</b></p>	<p><b>EU</b></p> <p><b>FYROM – first associations</b></p>
<p><b>Need for change</b></p>	<p>Family that we want to take part in</p>

<b>Dying out</b>	Political and economic union bind by interests
<b>Potential</b>	Human rights and free movement of people
<b>Greek referendum</b>	Post war ideal
<b>Abstract entity</b>	Too much bureaucracy
<b>Ouch, no!</b>	Tall wall difficult to change, but better to be inside than outside
<b>Bureaucracy</b>	Exclusive club
<b>No.</b>	A mastodon that needs restructuring
<b>Hypocrisy</b>	Hypocritical player
<b>Coalition of neoliberal capital in Europe</b>	Ideological destination of FYROM
<b>Disappointment</b>	Strict ecological standards for the living environment
<b>The afterthought of EU as an idea</b>	Better standards and better quality of life
<b>Legal security</b>	
<b>Solidarity and quality of life</b>	

2. Berlin process is investigated as a key process related to Southeast Europe, going parallel with the accession negotiations. This push reinforces the role of Germany in this region, trying to exploit the model of Franco-German cooperation and reconciliation

after WWII. In general, interviewees do not think of Berlin process as something relevant for them, especially in Serbia where many respondents are not fully acquainted with the meaning of it. Again, the difference between the movements from FYROM and Serbia is visible; the former generally consider the process to be *a good idea* but *an unused potential*, due to unwillingness of the national elites to engage more substantially into meaningful regional cooperation. On the other hand, Serbian representatives almost unanimously reject it as questionable and (ab)used by great powers.

Berlin process Serbia – first associations	Berlin process FYROM – first associations
Something to question	Regional office for youth cooperation
Unclear	Negotiations
Without real participation	Idea for enlargement of the EU with the countries from the Balkans
No.	Declarative support
Suppression	Unused potential
Fooling around	Vague initiative
Game for great powers	Ideas that were used to form the EU, now offered to Balkans



	Cooperation between the countries of Southeast Europe
	Greater cooperation

3. Immediate associations related to mentioning of Russia, as an international player and factor, are very similar across different movements in both countries: it mainly provokes the idea of authoritarianism and propaganda, but also an image of the actor who doesn't really act. However, it is recognized as a strong international player, necessary to balance out other economic and political powers, even if its own motifs are questionable and problematic. An interviewee from FYROM said the following (capturing many similar responses by different interviewees): "Russia is a friend who always says they will be there for you, but always disappoints. It's not the enemy, but a friend who is never there for you."

<b>Russia Serbia – first associations</b>	<b>Russia FYROM – first associations</b>
<b>Misconceptions, conservatism</b>	Strong international player
<b>Friend – not a role model</b>	Values different than ours
<b>Something to change</b>	Political force and authoritarian rule
<b>Red Army as leftist association and Putin as something worse (??)</b>	Autocratic regime

<b>Capitalist opposition to Western capitalism</b>	Authoritarian country; Autocratic rule of Putin
<b>Was good, once upon a time</b>	Balance to the other forces
<b>Military force</b>	Too much noise for noting
<b>Imperialistic project I don' t want to be associated with</b>	No developmental agenda
<b>Ambivalence</b>	Authoritarian regime and dangerous populism
<b>Propaganda</b>	Oligarchs connected to the government
<b>Re-stabilized monarchy</b>	
<b>Export of agricultural products</b>	

4. NATO, perhaps expectedly (due to 1999 bombing), provokes quite different impressions with the movement representatives from Serbia and FYROM. All associations in Serbia are negative and focused on force and aggression as dominant characteristics of the alliance. The excessive usage of military force is heavily criticized and participation in alliance is not seen as desirable. On the other hand, representatives from FYROM tend to critically assess NATO, but they almost unanimously express desire for FYROM to join the alliance. The only exception concerns representatives of *Solidarnost*, a radical left movement. This positive stance is connected with the fear of FYROM remaining an undivided country in the future. They perceive

NATO as “a safety umbrella that protects the borders of the member states” . Some interviewees see NATO membership as being even more relevant for weak countries, such as FYROM, countries with “a weak military and corrupt government that cannot deal with those issues on its own” .

<b>NATO Serbia – first associations</b>	<b>NATO FYROM – first associations</b>
<b>Empire</b>	Association for security
<b>Bully alliance</b>	A step forward to the EU
<b>Unnecessary</b>	Big military machinery
<b>No way!</b>	Militaristic organization
<b>Military</b>	Reminds me of fascism
<b>Bombing</b>	The solution to our vulnerable region
<b>Wars</b>	More safety for small states like ours
<b>Coalition of Western capitalism</b>	Law enforcement, balance and stability
<b>EU defence</b>	
<b>Even worse nightmare (then Russia)</b>	
<b>Spearhead of neo-colonialism</b>	
<b>Force</b>	

5. Finally, we have investigated the perception of UNDP as a UN agency that is present in both countries and whose involvement was linked to the policies that

should serve citizens wellbeing, especially on local levels. However, this agency' s work is not widely known among movement representatives, which is a point for concern regarding the visibility of UNDP actions. Additional point of concern is the many negative associations, seeing UNDP as a bureaucratic, not so easily accessible organization. Serbian movement representatives tend to disregard the agency as irrelevant for the national context. Representatives of FYROM, familiar with its work, acknowledge the assistance that has been delivered, and relevant data acquired in cooperation with researchers. However, they are also critical of their bureaucracy and absence of more substantial involvement. Several representatives criticized ideological background of UNDP programs and lack of tighter cooperation with civil society.

The following quotation from the sample from FYROM very well summarizes the attitudes of many interviewees: "It is a huge organization with massive bureaucracy and closed eco-system of employment which makes it so ineffective and has no public image and support. They have great access to institutions, but most people are not aware they exist. They have power to influence the institutions but have no direct feedback from citizens."

<b>UNDP Serbia – first associations</b>	<b>UNDP FYROM – first associations</b>
<b>Conversation</b>	Lot of projects and donations to schools
<b>Assistance</b>	Development and protection

<b>Colourful showroom of what NATO is really doing</b>	It means nothing
<b>Some organization</b>	Should work with the society on a more intensive level
<b>Beautiful building where nothing happens</b>	Good programs
<b>Bureaucracy</b>	Good cooperation with scientists and intellectuals
<b>Need for reorganization</b>	A schema of aristocracy and bureaucracy ready to jump and implement the ideology
	Good analyses that address societies
	Unfair competition to civil society
	Dead body that contributes hardly anything
	Too bureaucratic and exclusive organization
	Used to be useful on the local level