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Big dreams and small steps: comparative perspectives on the social movement struggle for democracy in Serbia and North Macedonia

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a comparative analysis of social movements' characteristics and capacities to struggle against illiberal tendencies and incite political change in Serbia and North Macedonia. First, we discuss the illiberal elements of political regimes in the countries in question, Serbia and North Macedonia. Then, we provide a comprehensive overview of progressive social movements in the two countries, formed and organized as a response to different authoritarian and non-democratic tendencies. Finally, we point to some differences in their organizing, coalition-forging and issue-defining principles, which, we believe, may help to explain the relative success of social movements in North Macedonia in producing relevant political outcomes, compared to the weak political impact of social movements in Serbia. Empirical data were collected during the summer of 2018 through in-depth interviews with members of social movements in North Macedonia and Serbia.

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1. Introduction

Serbia and North Macedonia¹ are the focus of this study because of similarities in their current or recent political regimes, which have exhibited many features of illiberal politics. The two countries offer two compatible yet different socio-political scenarios, reflecting and encompassing many diverse elements of democratic crisis, experienced in other southeast European countries as well. However, after the regime change in N. Macedonia in 2017, the two countries seem to be heading in opposite directions, with N. Macedonia consolidating its democratic course, while Serbia is exhibiting ever-stronger autocratic tendencies. The role of social movements in democratization is becoming ever more important: their active involvement in protests has led to regime change in N. Macedonia, and their increased visibility and presence is fuelling the growing resistance to the ruling regime in Serbia. The main goal of this paper is to comparatively analyse these social movements' capacities to produce political outcomes, that is, to bring about political, or outright regime change in the two countries (Bosi et al. 2016).

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Recent regime change in N. Macedonia was arguably the result of a joint effort by multiple actors struggling against the illiberal politics of the former Prime Minister, Nikola Gruevski. Namely, after the December 2016 elections and a turbulent political process, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), led by Zoran Zaev, managed to form a coalition government in May 2017. This moment has been praised for breaking with the authoritarian regime of Nikola Gruevski. More importantly for our study, it came about as a result of a significant degree of coordinated cooperation between social movements and the political opposition. The synergy of political and civil society actors has been impressive, and this coalition of democratizing forces has proven to be a major agent of democratic political change in this country (Schenkkan et al. 2018).

Contrary to the case of N. Macedonia, autocratic tendencies in Serbia still have not produced consolidated and substantial cooperation among different political and civil society actors, despite an overall consensus that democratic freedoms are severely threatened. The most recent Freedom House report (2019) placed Serbia among partially free states, recording a substantial decline over the past 4 years in terms of political rights and civil liberties. Only quite recently, with the launching of the *#1od5Milliona* [one in five million] protests, has the regime faced an organized form of dissent². Although taking place every Saturday since late 2018, the protests' concrete effects and potentials to mobilize different social actors are yet to be seen.

Social and protest movements have received renewed and heightened attention since the economic crisis of 2008 (Della Porta 2014, 2015; Della Porta et al. 2017). However, the region of southeast Europe is still understudied in this respect, in spite of the series of movements and short-term initiatives that have spread across the region – from the 2012–2013 Slovenian protests, the Croatian *Right to the city* movement, the eruption of *Citizens' plenums* in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2014, several scattered movements and locally focused protests in Serbia, to the so-called Colourful revolution in N. Macedonia.³ Building on very few studies in this domain (Horvat and Štiks 2015; Fagan and Sircar 2017; Bieber and Brentin 2018; Bieber 2018a; Mujanović 2018), this article offers the first qualitative comparison between social movements in two Western Balkan countries, with seemingly very different political impact. The aim of our research is to understand the characteristics of the movements in Serbia and North Macedonia, and to try to explain the relation between the observed differences between them and the (different) political outcomes they produced.

Our analysis of the social movements of Serbia and N. Macedonia is primarily based on empirical findings obtained through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted during the summer of 2018.⁴ However, given the almost complete lack of data on specific social movements in these countries, we have also drawn upon other sources, helping us to better understand the context in which the movements have emerged and elaborate in more detail the comparative ground of our analysis. Our empirical research therefore also relies on participant observation of the 2017 protest waves in Serbia, interviews with key informants of the 2014 mass protests in N. Macedonia (the so-called Colourful Revolution), as well as analyses of the social movements' programmes, press releases and articles when available. We provide new empirical evidence and use it to support the view – up until recently somewhat neglected in the literature – which links democratization and social movements. Our initial premise is that given the

blockade of other channels of political action within the context of captured states (Bieber 2018b), social movements in Serbia and N. Macedonia should be seen as relevant and necessary actors of democratization. However, it should be noted that the democratization literature focuses mainly on institutional actors that pursue democracy as a goal, overlooking social movements or perceiving them mainly as potential threats to democracy (Tarrow 1995; Bermeo 1997). On the other hand, the literature on social movements mainly focuses on democratic countries of Western Europe, where the opportunities for social movements to organize and act were qualitatively and quantitatively bigger, therefore seeing democracy as a prerequisite for social movements. Only recently have the social sciences recognized the importance of social movements for democratization of authoritarian societies (Della Porta 2014; Trejo 2012; Almeida and Cordero Ulate 2015).

Relying on the thesis that progressive social movements play an important role in pursuing and strengthening democratic values, we focused our comparative analysis on detecting and understanding the role of those values in the analysed social movements' agendas and various spheres of action. Our empirical analysis, therefore, focuses on 1) the movements' organization, motivation and proclaimed goals, 2) wider beliefs and ideas that guide the movements' actions, and 3) their internal structure and organization. We put particular emphasis on the comparative perspective, looking at both similarities and differences in the approaches of the Serbian and N. Macedonian movements, with the aim to assess their overall potential to challenge illiberal political tendencies.

2. Explaining the context: challenges to democracy and decline of political trust in Serbia and N. Macedonia

The countries of the Western Balkans are seemingly reliving competitive authoritarianism that characterized much of the region in the 1990s. However, the ruling regimes of today are structurally different from those of the 1990s (Bieber 2018a), and they reflect both local specificities of the democratization process in the region and the global rise in illiberal political trends. These trends connect formal democratic procedures with authoritarian tendencies and ruling parties' and figures' (institutional and extra-institutional) efforts to remain in power indefinitely. Authoritarian leaders have learned to become more effective in manipulating democratic institutes of elections, parties and legislature to enhance power-prolonging effects (Kendall-Taylor and Frantz 2014). 'Toxic leaders' have various instruments at their disposal to build and preserve dependence of different actors by providing advantages such as clientelism and patronage (Džihic and Hayoz 2016, 7). 'Captured institutions' and widespread clientelism are major indicators of illiberal and autocratic tendencies, and as Cengiz Günay and Džihic (2016) have shown ruling parties in both Serbia and N. Macedonia primarily act as machine parties, central to gaining and maintaining power with the aim to (ab)use state resources. The overall situation is largely supported by the indefinitely delayed accession to the European Union and preference of its leaders for *stabilocracy*, rather than liberal democratic development in the region (Kmezić and Bieber 2017).

After initial success in improving the state of democracy, evidenced in increased freedom of elections and press, paving the road towards joining the EU, the illiberal

trend can be said to have begun in the late 2000s. The process of the Europeanization implied aligning national policies with EU standards and *acquis*, in general, inspired by liberal democratic discourses and neoliberal economic concepts (Cengiz Günay and Džihić 2016; Lazić 2011). However, progress has slowed down. Symptomatic changes came in different forms for different countries in the Western Balkans: political instabilities in Serbia revealed themselves most dramatically with the assassination of the Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić in 2003; in N. Macedonia, the instalment of the populist government of Nikola Gruevski marked a new political turn for this country (Bieber and Ristić 2012). In 2010, both countries were below the cut-off point of \$6000 GDP per capita – the level of economic development that contributes positively to democratic survival and development. With \$5056 and \$4201, respectively, Serbia and N. Macedonia joined Albania as the only 3 of the 13 post-communist countries below the threshold (Dolenec 2013, 59).

At the time, the Global Democracy Ranking placed both countries among those with medium scores, with N. Macedonia as a country with significant decline in ranking over the previous few years (Democracy Ranking 2016). Similarly, the World Press Freedom Index (2014) evaluated the freedom of press in N. Macedonia as the worst in the region placing it 123rd (out of 180) with slow improvement until 2018 (109th place). According to the same source, the Serbian media freedom had been slowly deteriorating in the past years, from 63rd place in 2013 to 76th in 2018.

Both countries have open ‘identity’ issues, manipulation of which enables even more manoeuvring space for ruling elites to suppress freedoms and pluralist values. In Serbia, the ongoing disputes about Kosovo and its unresolved status provide fertile ground for emotional mobilization of citizenry and effective discursive tool for diverting public attention from socio-economic problems. The name issue in North Macedonia has gained peculiar momentum through ‘antiquisation’ of identity and claims to heritage of ancient Macedonia, causing the dispute with Greece. The ruling elites have been using the state of the ‘ethnic condominium’ of ethnic Macedonians and Albanians to further suppress liberal values and democracy (Crowther 2017). This is especially emphasized through political competition within ethnic blocs, and the absence of a party that would break across ethnic lines – something the present ruling party is trying to counter (for more, see Daskalovski and Trajkovski 2017). Additionally, as a result of ‘EU enlargement fatigue’ and slow integration process, which are causing popular dissatisfaction, the ruling parties in both countries increasingly use nationalism to distract the voters from growing economic problems.

In explaining the context in which social movements became active on the political scene of N. Macedonia and Serbia, one should equally take into account the differences between the two countries’ political landscapes. In Serbia, change in political power in 2012 led to the dissipation of the previously ruling coalition: at present, the ruling party is on one side, with many small and weak parties on the other. N. Macedonia is a different case, as a country with a strong two-party system – or four-party system, if we take into account the two major Albanian parties. The Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), which prior to 2017 was the key opposition party, engaged heavily with social movements and supported citizens’ street protests before coming to power in 2017. The Serbian opposition scene is scattered and has been unable, until recently, to mobilize citizens’ deep dissatisfactions with pervasive and authoritarian ruling

structures. Unlike in N. Macedonia, the social movement and protest organizers in Serbia have so far refused to enter into coalition with political parties, indicating a lack of trust in political organizations and existing parties.

Another important element of the general socio-political context contributing to growing relevance of social movements is the issue of *mistrust*, i.e., the growing distance of citizens from political institutions, which are perceived as corrupt and solely in service of politicians' interests. Trust in political parties and non-governmental organizations is very low in Serbia. In 2010, only 17.6% of citizens trusted political parties, while NGOs enjoyed the trust of 22.2% of the population. With the exception of the (ICTY) Hague tribunal and NATO, parties and NGOs were the least trusted institutions in Serbia (Bešić 2011, 125). More recently, CESID (Centre for Free Elections and Democracy, Serbia) polls show even further deterioration of trust in political and non-governmental organizations, with findings that only 11% of citizens trust political parties and 16% trust NGOs (Centar za Slobodne Izbore i Demokratiju (CeSID) 2017, 35). A recent study (Fiket et al. 2017) emphasized that citizens' attitudes and feelings towards politics and politicians in Serbia are most accurately described as *loathing* and *contempt*. Parties are seen as organizations whose sole function is to serve the interest of the corrupted elite, with no distinct ideology or values. Having such attitudes towards politics and politicians, and largely perceiving the whole political system as malfunctioning, citizens often choose not to participate in formal political arenas.

N. Macedonian citizens, in general, showed similar levels of mistrust in their political organizations and institutions. Two N. Macedonian institutions in which citizens had very little trust in March 2017 were the State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption (trusted by 15% of the people), and political parties (at 16%) of recorded trusting citizens (Macedonia National Public Opinion Poll 2017). The erosion of trust in political parties is evident when compared to 2010, when 23.3% of citizens trusted parties (Klekovski et al. 2010). The context of overall mistrust is evident also among 65% of citizens stating that their country is moving in the wrong direction (National Democratic Institute (NDI) 2017). However, in 2010, compared to Serbia, N. Macedonian citizens exhibited a much higher degree of trust in non-governmental organizations – 42.5%. The highest trust was recorded among students (55.1%) and young people aged 18 to 29 (50.5%) – comprising the majority of active citizens engaged in protests and social movements in N. Macedonia. Although we lack more recent hard data on N. Macedonia, indirectly we can draw some conclusions and say that citizens in N. Macedonia are more trusting and politically efficient as the RCC (Regional Cooperation Council) polls reveal that almost half (47%) of N. Macedonian citizens believed that citizens' and civil society organizations could effectively scrutinize the government and make it accountable to citizens (compared to only 35% in Serbia; RCC 2017, 128).

Such general political mistrust (as in the Serbian case) can be an indicator of a crisis of democracy; but it can also serve, to a certain degree, as a protective mechanism for the interest and values of the civil society (Rosanvallon 2006, 9). Della Porta (2012) notes that social movements often attract critical, mistrustful citizens, who challenge institutions and build new spaces for articulation of social trust.

Finally, an important factor in understanding the social movements' role in channeling mistrust of political organizations towards trust of other forms of organizing is the

possibility of citizens to participate effectively in local political arenas. This is especially relevant for Serbia, as it is larger and more highly centralized than N. Macedonia. Citizens are marginalized and their capacity to influence local institutions, even as envisaged by the law, is reduced to consultations without decision-making powers, therefore contributing additionally to citizens' alienation and mistrust (Đorđević 2006). In addition, the electoral system is structured in such a way that political representatives of local communities are almost entirely dependent on political parties, instead of being responsible to their local electorate (Đorđević 2011). At the same time, opposition democratic parties in Serbia seem to be failing at building connections with the populace and at formulating creative, authentic and realistic responses to problems faced by the population. This has opened the opportunity for local civic initiatives and movements to fill the 'trust gap' and position themselves as new political actors responding to tangible, local needs of citizens.

3. The contentious political arenas and progressive social movements in Serbia and N. Macedonia

The lack of trust in institutional political arenas and political parties' inability to channel and manage citizens' discontent has opened the space for the creation of the non-institutional political arenas; namely citizens became actively engaged in different forms of contentious politics, most notably through new waves of mass protests and the emergence of new social movements.⁵

The first mass protests since the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević happened in Serbia in 2017.⁶ The protests were apparently non-organized and were rather a spontaneous reaction to the usurpation of political power, conveniently embodied in Aleksandar Vučić's shift from one position of power (prime minister) to another (president). Protestors claimed that the elections were not fair, free and regular in many aspects, especially regarding the media space that Vučić took during the campaign. The protest was known in public as a 'Protest against Dictatorship', the title of the Facebook page functioning as the main communication channel while the protests were taking place. Some organized groups, such as the police and army unions, also joined.⁷ The principal common denominator was disillusionment with the political elite and political institutions. Among the demands of protesters were: abolishing the 'dictatorship' and the complete removal of the political elite headed by Aleksandar Vučić, fair and free elections, free media, de-capturing the state, decentralization, shift in priorities of economic and social policies, protection of labour rights and improved status of all workers, protection of living standards and entirely publicly financed educational and health system (Babović et al. 2017; Petrović and Petrović 2017; Fridman and Hercigonja 2016). Protestors claimed to be apolitical underlining that they did not want leaders or a specific political party to lead them (although three presidential candidates and most opposition parties stated their support for the demonstrations; Pešić 2017). From Belgrade, the protests spread to other cities such as Novi Sad, Niš and Kragujevac, Subotica, Sombor, Kraljevo, Kruševac, Zrenjanin, Leskovac, Požarevac and Bor, primarily via social media. The lack of any kind of substantial coordination disabled the protesters from connecting the various protest sites to include populations from other urban centres and from rural areas, which would have possibly have allowed the protests to grow and

sharpen. Further, the heterogeneity of the participants holding different ideological and political preferences also prevented the protests from growing and becoming more articulate. Consistently ignored by the authorities and lacking a clear and coherent agenda, they slowly died out after 2 months without becoming a movement. The most active protestors faced charges in February 2018 for organizing unauthorized gatherings.⁸ All other protests that have taken place in Serbia, since the power shift in 2012, were local – city – initiatives led by movements that are included in this research study.

The N. Macedonian arena of contentious politics opened in 2014 with student protests (followed shortly by the professors' protests) against the reform of the university enrolments politics and for greater university autonomy (Pollozhani 2016). Soon afterwards, the smaller protests grew into a massive protest movement 'Protestiram' (I protest), after citizens' strong reactions to president Ivanov's decision to pardon high government officials accused of corruption and abuses of power (see Milan 2017; Stefanovski 2016).⁹ Protests were organized every day in several N. Macedonian cities contributing to the feeling of greater political efficacy among citizens from day-to-day. After paint bombs were thrown at different buildings built as part of the project 'Skopje 2014', to express citizen rage in a peaceful way, the protest movement became known as the 'Colourful Revolution' (Reef 2017). The dissatisfaction in N. Macedonia was channelled towards the urban €600 million project – Skopje 2014, whose objective was to make Skopje more 'ancient' (Dimitrov et al. 2016).¹⁰ Unlike in Serbia where protests organized by local movements and 'Protest against Dictatorship' demanded the removal of all visible signs of political parties, the protest organizers in N. Macedonia cooperated closely not only among themselves but also with the main opposition party SDSM.

In the following sections, we will more closely examine, through a comparative perspective, progressive social movements as the main actors of contentious political arenas in Serbia and N. Macedonia. In selecting the sample, we followed Snow et al.'s (2004) definition of social movements that focuses on collectives acting 1) with some degree of organization and continuity¹¹ 2) outside of institutional channels, for the purpose of 3) challenging or defending extant institutionally based authority, and adding the criterion of 4) universal inclusiveness. Movements included in this research are the following ones: Studentski plenum (Student Plenum), Solidarnost (the leftist movement, Solidarity), Protestiram (I protest) and Ecoguerilla from N. Macedonia, and Ne davimo Beograd (Don't let Belgrade d(r)own), Združena akcija za Krov nad glavom (United action: roof over head), Studentski pokret Novi Sad (Student movement from Novi Sad), Inicijativa za Požegu (Initiative for Požega), Lokalni front Kraljevo (Local front Kraljevo), Zrenjaninski socijalni forum (Zrenjanin social forum), Tvrđava Smederevo (Smederevo fortress), Udruženi pokret slobodnih stanara (United movement of free tenants) and Odbranimo reke Stare planine (Defend the rivers of Mt. Stara Planina) from Serbia.¹²

4. Commonalities and shared characteristics between the social movements in Serbia and N. Macedonia

When asked about the reasons for their activism or events that have triggered the formation of their movements, our interviewees mostly stated concrete and specific events. For instance, in N. Macedonia those were: police brutality and the President's acquitting corrupt politicians (Protestiram), proposed changes to the law on higher

education and imposition of rigorous state exams (Studentski plenum), extreme pollution in the city of Tetovo (Ecoguerilla).

In Serbia, some of the issues that triggered the movements to organize were: sudden and unexplained removal of the director of the Cultural Centre of Kraljevo (Lokalni front Kraljevo), the urban rejuvenation project Belgrade Waterfront followed by illegal demolition on Hercegovačka Street in Belgrade executed to clear up space for the project (Ne davimo Beograd), the local municipality's decision to purchase a piece of real estate co-owned by the spouse of the president of the Municipal Assembly at price of 100,000 € (Inicijativa za Požegu), a plan to build mini hydroelectric power plants that would endanger the rivers in eastern Serbia (Odbranimo reke Stare planine).

As mentioned in the introduction, we start from the thesis that social movements play an important role in pursuing and strengthening democratic values. More precisely, we focused our analysis on detecting those values in 1) movement organization motivation and stated goals, 2) beliefs and ideas that guide their actions, and 3) their internal structure and organization.

4.1. The movement organizations' motivation and stated goals

One of the most common characteristics of the analysed movements was that they were largely established in response to a concrete event or political act by the governing elites, deemed undemocratic and illegitimate. The types of reactions and events in questions largely shaped the initial goals and *raisons d'être* of the movements. Thus, at least when discussing their initial phase, most of the analysed movements could be called single-issue (Jacobsson 2015).¹³ However, the movement members, when discussing these concrete, single political issues, described them as 'the tip of the iceberg', as evoking and symbolizing wider issues, like widespread corruption, captured institutions, regime pressure on society, controlled media, or undemocratic decision-making: 'It is the drop that overfilled the glass (...) so before that, we have first of all a wider context of the state, so everything that happens to us is so much corruption, so much impoverishment and so much humiliation of the citizens;¹⁴ 'Our focus is [more democratic and efficient] local government. But in the wider sense, it is precisely that we need citizens within the political arena where they must see themselves as participants and not spectators.'¹⁵

In the public discourse there was only information from the media (...) completely controlled by the ruling party (...) and the ruling party was not accepting anything different from what they imagined. (...) Society was completely apathetic. A depression from which there was no escape. Probably that was the reason why so many people who previously protested against the government decided to join under one goal.¹⁶

Even though initially formed as a direct reaction to specific issue and related undemocratic conduct of the governing elites, the need to engage politically was very often articulated by the representatives of the movements. This need in the narratives of the activists is strongly associated with urgency to find solutions to social problems in a less authoritarian way, contrary to what governments do. A common theme was the call for more democracy through inclusion of citizens into the political arena, especially when it came to the goals of

the movements, whether stated in their official documents or given in interviews by their activists.¹⁷ In this regard, the dominant vision of democracy is a kind of social democracy with a strong participatory element: ‘And here [in our goals] we come to socialism, democratization in decision-making on the management of public goods, especially those affecting all citizens or at least a large number of citizens.’¹⁸

Our movement fought against state exams that were seriously undermining the autonomy of the university. Besides that, we were fighting against the undemocratic rule of the VMRO-DPMNE because they tried to shrink the political space.¹⁹

4.2. General beliefs and ideas that stand behind the movements’ actions

Along with the movements’ motivations and goals, most often mentioned in the narratives of the activists were the principles that guided their actions: equality of all under the law, freedom of speech and media, government responsive to citizens, a strong welfare state. In the words of one of the activists:

A good society [for which we are fighting] is a society where people can freely manifest their freedom, satisfaction, dissatisfaction, (...) (where citizens) have knowledge of how to organize and lead debates (...) where there are no big economic and social divisions (...) based on solidarity (...) which treats all members of society equally and there is justice for everybody. A society where there is good education, good health system, social system and a society where the citizens are active (...) inclusion of the people in the process of creation of politics.²⁰

The democratic ideal that could be drawn from the movements’ motivations and goals is extended to the deliberative model of democracy (Fishkin 1991; Habermas 1996; Dryzek 2000), stressing here the importance of equality of participation and the value of debate: ‘Every voice [must be] heard and respected (...) we have social responsibility to be active members of society. That means to debate, to emancipate, to mobilize people;’²¹ ‘We lack a culture of debate. A culture of presenting arguments, listening to the other side and then drawing conclusions [making decisions].’²²

However, the movements here explored do not convey an elaborate critique of representative democracy and strong advocacy of deliberative models, which is characteristic of many contemporary social movements belonging to, say, ‘real democracy’ movements (Roos and Oikonomakis 2014).

4.3. Internal structure and organization of the movements

The relevance of the deliberative model of democracy for the movements here considered is additionally confirmed through their reflections and internal debate on ‘the most democratic way to organize’ and attempts to respect deliberative standards in their decision-making procedures as well as their modes of communicating their messages to other citizens.

Every single participant in the research underlined the importance of inclusion of all movement members in taking decisions. Being, on the other hand, aware that this goal cannot be reached in larger communities, most of them defined flexible ways in which decisions could be made and would allow modifications, thus providing the opportunity to change in specific situations.

Still, no matter how specific ways of decision-making across the movements were (such as, for example, working groups dedicated to specific issues or areas that facilitate decision-making by framing the issues to be debated by the all members of the movement), they all insisted on horizontality, openness and most importantly debate. They avoided the aggregative model of decision-making (Benhabib 1996; Knight and Johnson 1994), so the voting procedure was used very rarely. Instead, their main modus operandi was discussion among equals where argumentations and not numbers count. It should be noted, however, that the activists are highly aware that sometimes the price to pay for such demanding procedure is efficacy.

Finally, inclusivity and dialogue also guided their communication with other citizens. Their messages and public announcements were crafted with competence and time resources of citizens in mind: terms they use are quite simple and quotidian. Very often, these movements operate inventively, involving a public action that is inviting for citizens and therefore opening the possibility for others to join: 'We insist on versatility in our performance, messages should never be sent only through one person, because we need a different approach for different target groups.'²³

5. Mapping the differences between social movements in N. Macedonia and Serbia

At first glance, the difference between the role and engagement of social movements in challenging illiberal regimes in N. Macedonia and Serbia is more than obvious. Street protestors, student movement, 'novice' activists, as well as civil society veterans, all joined forces with opposition parties and gave their share in toppling Gruevski's regime in N. Macedonia. Doubtlessly, EU's change of policy played a part as well (Dimitrov et al. 2016). All in all, relatively peaceful regime change, overwhelming international support for the new government's course, and the new composition of the Parliament (Sobranie) – now comprising several MPs coming from the ranks of the activist movements²⁴ – are good reasons to consider the N. Macedonian social movements' struggle a success. On the other hand, Serbia's President and absolute holder of all power in the country, Vučić, still seems to be leading the game, despite the on-going weekly protests in several Serbian towns (the protests started in December 2018). Social movements are scattered, their cooperation seems to be only in the inception phase, while cooperation with opposition parties is very loose and weak, resembling the state of those parties themselves – still looking for a way to consolidate and coordinate their tactics against the regime.

However, to look at the differences in outcomes, or trajectories of social struggles in the two countries, only through their social movements' capacities to engage and cooperate would, of course, be overly simplistic. Internal political constellations, history and dynamics of the two countries are very different. This is not to mention the role of external factors, especially the EU, whose politics of supporting *stabilocracy* in the region had its own rationale in supporting change of Zaev, and conversely, to refuse to deny support to Vučić (CIRSD 2018). Additionally, there is the timeframe that puts another caveat on any comparative perspective: challenging Gruevski's regime in a coordinated and strategic manner started some time ago, and time itself may have been the factor contributing to success; similar struggles against Vučić's regime have only just begun.

Having said all that, we still believe that juxtaposing the two contexts, mapping the scene of active movements in N. Macedonia and Serbia, and finally drawing some comparative conclusions, may help us better understand conditions, potentials and constraints to bottom-up civic engagement for democratization in the Western Balkans.

5.1. Transcending the constraints of 'single-issue oriented' struggles

As already observed, the majority of movements from both countries were formed around concrete events that served as a 'trigger' not only for the creation of movements but also for our interviewees' desire to become engaged and 'do something'. These events, thus, often described as 'tip of the iceberg' also had an *indexical* significance, appearing as a tangible manifestation of larger, deeper, systemic and pervasive political and societal problems, compelling them to collective (re)action: unlawful acquittal of politicians accused of corruption by the President of the Republic ('a slap in the face to the Macedonian public'); extreme pollution in the city of Tetovo; imposing rigorous state exams on students; building mini hydroelectric power plants endangering the rivers in eastern Serbia; corruptive deals made with the local assembly to buy illegal real-estate owned by the spouse of the President of the Assembly, etc.²⁵

For Macedonian activists, there seemed no difficulties in relating the initial, 'activating' problems with what later (or in parallel) evolved into a joint struggle against Gruevski's regime: 'Our movement was fighting against the state exams which were seriously undermining the autonomy of the university. Besides that, we were fighting the undemocratic rule of the VMRO-DPMNE.'²⁶

Statements like this one were often found in narratives of N. Macedonian activists, emphasizing at the same time a concrete issue, a bigger issue and a single, unifying frame of struggle. Serbian activists, on the other hand, despite making similar claims about direct links between 'initiating issues' and the 'bigger picture' (and despite effectively addressing, through their activism, multiple issues at once) often reflected in the interviews on the problem of how to transcend the initial cause and how to stream it into a larger (coalitional) struggle against the regime:

The fact is, despite everything, we still are a single issue movement, we are perceived as such ... We were established as a reaction to something, and we're lacking a plan about where we are going and why ... it's mainly responsive, not proactive.²⁷

Some initiatives from Serbia had been formed around concrete issues, which have become over time either obsolete or resolved, forcing them to change focus on their own. Zrenjanin Social Forum, for example, was established as a platform for the struggle of Jugoremedija factory workers. After the factory went completely bankrupt, the Forum started reorienting itself towards connecting different workers' struggles into a broader coalition. The United Movement of Free Tenants initially grew out of the struggle over heating prices in Niš, which now seems to be resolved. But the Movement has continued to exist and has even become one of the most vocal opponents of the regime, without changing its name. Sometimes it is difficult for the external observer to connect and inter-relate such movements' formative periods, events that happened in the meantime, and presently occurring reorientations towards a more general anti-regime stance.

5.2. Legacy or burden of previous protests

The history of protest activities – that is, what took place prior to the analysed movements – goes hand in hand and overlaps with the previous issue of (overcoming) the initiating moment. Because, as it turns out, it is not only the triggering event that forms a movement: equally important is the history of different activisms.

Almost all N. Macedonian activists talked about their movements as building on previous waves of protests: ‘against police brutality’ (the case of Martin Neskovski),²⁸ ‘AMAN’, ‘tax raise for intermittent contracts of employment’, etc. These not only helped pave the way to consolidation of movements, but also served as initial grounds for forging alliances between activists, NGOs and opposition parties, something that would later prove to be of the utmost importance.

Serbian activists told a somewhat different story, which had two important elements. One is that no similar collective protests shaped the recent history of movement forging: struggles were dispersed, local, and were never able to capture the wider interest, let alone forging broader coalitions (up until the very present moment). Second – and this is an important peculiarity of the Serbian case – the type of past activism most often mentioned, as sort of a specific legacy, was involvement in anti-Milošević protests from the 1990s: ‘I was beaten by police as early as 1991, it is then that I started my war, so to speak.’²⁹

Activists of Local front from Kraljevo had been active in the anti-Milošević youth organization Otpor! (Resist!), and had been at the time often derogatorily described in public as Otporaši (resisters). Such experiences from 1990s Serbia, as an illustration of past activism, is of course very different from the N. Macedonian case. This is primarily because they refer to a different type of civic activism, one that took place in a very different social and political context. And second, because younger generations of activists (mostly belonging to the left) are very critical of 1990s citizens’ engagement against Milošević, seeing it as having been too narrow, naively focused on liberal democracy instead of on social and economic rights, etc. This generation gap then additionally burdens the possibility for common visions and joint struggle of activists from different generations. Sometimes, the older generation look at the present regime as repetition, an unresolved problem of autocracy that already existed in Milošević’s 1990s. On the other hand, the younger generation is more prone to look at the present situation as a local manifestation of the global trend of crisis of democracy and authoritarian tendencies.

5.3. Orientation towards external factors, most notably the EU and NATO

Probably the biggest and most striking difference – partly expected – between the movements in N. Macedonia and Serbia, can be found in their activists’ attitudes towards the EU and NATO. A round of questions in the interviews aimed at our interviewees’ attitudes and reflections on several international players, among which the EU and NATO were perceived to be crucial. In general, for activists in N. Macedonia, the two organizations mostly received positive qualifications and were often described as necessary consolidators in the region. Critical voices were moderate and few. For instance, an activist from the leftist movement stated: ‘Small countries like Macedonia in the current economic and

political constellation will always be on the periphery ... I perceive the EU as a tall wall and although I know this wall is difficult to change, it is better to be inside than outside.³⁰

Other critical voices note that it was the EU who supported Gruevski for a long time, stressing its hypocritical role. NATO is mostly seen as a security safeguard, as a guarantor of peace in the region.

The narratives of Serbian activists reveal more ambivalence and sharper criticism. The attitudes towards the EU vary significantly – from describing the Union in terms of ‘solidarity and good quality life’, ‘good potential’, to ‘too much bureaucracy’, and simple responses like ‘oh, not good’, ‘oh, no’ – to more elaborate, yet still negative characterizations like ‘coalition of neoliberal capital exponents’. Similar ambivalence and mistrust is observable in attitudes towards the enlargement politics and the so-called Berlin process. However, unanimously negative attitudes were expressed towards NATO. Even though not all interviews held reflections on the 1999 NATO military campaign and bombing of FR Yugoslavia, it stands to reason to associate the explicitly negative views of our respondents (‘even worse horror [than the EU] ... alliance of bullies ... empire ... wars’) with the general negative assessment of NATO by Serbian citizens that has been recorded in surveys for a longer period (Beogradski centar za bezbedonosnu politiku (BCSP) 2017).

We believe this observation to be indicative of broader differences between the situations in which the movements of the two countries find themselves. Cooperation with political parties, civil society organizations (CSOs) and external actors are much more likely to happen if some crucial political agendas, which have been shaping the whole region of the Western Balkans, have not previously provoked polarizations and strong emotional responses among citizens. The case of Serbia seems to open some problems in this respect, given not only highly ambivalent attitudes towards the EU and strong negative emotional responses to NATO, but also due to many ‘open’ questions, suitable for ‘emotional exploitation’ and thus political manipulation – like the status of Kosovo and thus state borders and sovereignty – all of which potentially obstruct the consolidation of any anti-regime coalition. Contrary to this, the relative congruence of attitudes towards EU and NATO in N. Macedonia seems to solidify a coherent narrative about the need for ‘westernization’ or Euro-Atlantic integration of the country, which acts as a powerful driver for political change.

5.4. Other differences regarding internal organization and positioning in relation to other movements

As noted in the previous section, one of the most salient features of all analysed movements in both countries, or at least the most frequently mentioned characteristic by their activists, is the movements’ radically democratic internal organization. Some movements insist on their horizontal structure (described by some as ‘the movement’s biggest value and achievement’), organized around ‘working groups’ of equal importance, while others emphasized leaderlessness, consensual decision-making, high degrees of openness, inclusivity, etc. Naturally, a few disclaimers also followed these statements consisting of admittance that some individuals act or feel as belonging closer to the ‘core group’ of the movement, or that such non-hierarchical structure poses an obstacle in some situations. Observable in the N. Macedonian narratives is contemplation and critique of internal disagreements, mostly around principled decisions, like

whom to support in elections, whether to join the parties or not, and how to delegate members. These issues seem to belong entirely to a set of problems observed among horizontally organized movements in general (Sitrin 2016; Maeckelbergh 2011).

For Serbian activists, the problem of 'structurelessness' and proclaimed radical equality of members opened different problems to ponder: 'It is a gang of friends who have known each other for a long time ... sometimes it's an advantage ... but these strong social connections prevent us from getting things done, because responsibility is only presupposed, but then never upheld.'³¹

The phrase non-hierarchical organization is here connected with intimacy, close friendship and similar world-views. It reveals much needed *personal trust* among activists, but potentially stands in the way of transforming a movement into an effective and reliable political actor that would deserve political trust of citizens. The fact that these stories are more prominent among the movements in Serbia could imply that they are simply 'younger' than N. Macedonian ones, not in terms of their inception date, but in terms of their involvement in continuous and cooperative struggle against the regime. Also, when asked about their movements' greatest achievements, N. Macedonian activists mostly enumerated their concrete victories, including, of course, the regime change. In Serbian activists' narratives, real, tangible successes are mostly mentioned second (if at all) – with the exception of the organization A Roof Over Our Heads, whose activists did underscore successful preventions of evictions. Mentioned first were: 'the change of atmosphere', 'affecting other people', 'making them become activists themselves', and building togetherness and new forms of movements. All this seems to further imply that the social movement struggle in Serbia is only in its inception phase against illiberal politics – not only due to concrete political factors but also in terms of the 'maturity' and efficacy of movements themselves.

An oft-mentioned topic in discussions about the regime change in N. Macedonia has been the intimate cooperation (not always without problems) between the movements and civil society organizations (CSOs). In Serbia, the situation is somewhat different, despite the fact that some of the activists also work in the NGO sector, and despite some occasional cooperation. The predominant attitudes of our interviewees towards CSO actors reveal (critical) distance, cautiousness and sometimes mistrust. Like in the case of attitudes towards external political actors, this may be connected to growing distance Serbian citizens are expressing generally towards both the politicians and CSO actors.

6. Concluding discussion

This article has sought to comprehensively map one important part of the nascent activist scene in the Western Balkans – through a comparative perspective of both similarities and differences between social movements in Serbia and N. Macedonia. In this concluding chapter we wish to further discuss some of the main factors contributing to the achievement of relevant political outcomes in N. Macedonia compared to, so far, weak political impact of social movements in Serbia. By focusing on the social movements active in the period from 2014 to 2017, prior to the demise of Nikola Gruevski, we have been able to capture retrospective reflections of the N. Macedonian movements' activists regarding the struggles that led to political change in the country,

and compare their narratives to those of the activists from Serbia presently struggling to achieve similar political effects.³²

The movements' representatives in both countries emphasized similar goals and values, like social justice and rule of law. They also expressed commitment to 'bringing citizens back into politics' and to practicing and promoting deliberative democracy – through attempts to respect deliberative standards in their own decision-making processes. Such arenas that have been developed within movements represent significant experimental sites that could feed participatory values into institutions. However, it remains to be seen to what extent transfer of human capital from movements to institutions that happened in N. Macedonia (and potentially could happen in Serbia) indeed produces systemic democratic change in the political arena.

When we look at the differences, our major finding is that the movements in N. Macedonia acted as part of a wider network of political actors, collaborating closely with opposition parties, which enabled the articulation of demands on a larger scale and opened space for a unifying frame of struggle. Activists from social movements in Serbia, on the other hand, are still struggling to find a way of streaming their diverse sites and issues of struggle into a larger (coalitional) front against the regime – despite effectively addressing different issues at once, and articulating direct links between 'initiating issues' and the 'bigger picture'. Only recently some local movements in Serbia have started to collaborate with each other and to insist on broader alliances.

Two issues should be taken into consideration when reflecting on the incapacity of social movements in Serbia to build coalitions with other oppositional political actors. Both are related to the context of historical legacy and levels of trust in political institutions and organizations. First, an important factor for opening/limiting manoeuvring space for social movements in N. Macedonia and Serbia to forge and strengthen alliances with other relevant political actors is the (recent) legacy of social movement activism. N. Macedonian movements were building on previous, but fairly recent waves of protest that not only provided relevant political experience but also promoted alliances between movements, political parties, NGOs and other political actors. This has not been the case in Serbia, which has not experienced any major political outcomes of the movements' mobilizations since the fall of Milošević.

Another factor hampering the potential of social movements in Serbia from joining forces with other political actors and becoming a relevant political actor is the mentioned overall mistrust in politics, often described by citizens as 'a dirty business where no one can act and stay credible' (Fiket et al. 2017). Some of this rhetoric has been appropriated by the movement members themselves, leading to a situation where many social movements are hesitant about getting involved in politics proper. They are balancing between *acting* in a political arena and wanting to be recognized as *non-political or a-political actors*. This can be effectively observed in the current wave of protests in Serbia, where a majority of the analysed social movements mostly stand aside, restrained from active and visible participation in the protests. The social movement scene in Serbia is, thus, characterized by very low levels of trust in established political actors (parties), and by building interpersonal trust among the movements' members instead. However, the move from interpersonal trust, closed in the movements' core circles, to building trustworthy mass movements that could articulate political demands is very slow. Lack of professionalization and weak cooperation

between different movements in Serbia potentially stand in way of transforming the movements into influential political actors. For similar reasons, it is hard to expect that they will provide a pool of human resources for weak opposition parties, as was the case in N. Macedonia.

Further, recent political history in Serbia is such that the overall political culture is permeated with mistrust towards international players and institutions, most notably the European Union and NATO. This compounds the difficulty of forging coherent narratives and ideological stances among different political actors (institutional and non-institutional), and, additionally, may have enduring consequences for external recognition of social movements in Serbia as trustful partners deserving of support.

In N. Macedonia, a variety of movements at one period of time, synergistically streamed into a single movement against Gruevski's regime. In Serbia, strong mistrust in political actors, combined with a weak opposition scene stands in the way of building stronger political coalitions. The struggle of social movements against illiberal politics in Serbia seems to be only in its inception phase. It seems as though this process, still very much in the making, will much more likely lead to the emergence of a new political actor than to a coalition of movements, political parties and NGOs, as was the case in N. Macedonia. Mistrust of the current opposition party coalition, the centrist/right-wing Union for Serbia, is evident among representatives of social movements who refuse to join it – political (and social) change in Serbia will then, presumably, follow a different path.

Notes

1. From here onwards, N. Macedonia.
2. As will be explained later in the text, several protest initiatives took place before the #1od5Milliona protest, but they were mostly of a local character, or focusing on very specific issues.
3. This, of course, goes for the post-2008 political landscape. It is, however, worthwhile reminding oneself about the region's dynamic anti-war, and anti-regime (especially in Serbia and Croatia) protests of the 1990s.
4. Our sample consists of 33 interviews in total. We interviewed 20 representatives of 9 movements from Serbia, and 13 representatives of 4 movements from N. Macedonia.
5. Protest and social movements, in this context, overlap significantly as most of the newly emerged movements primarily act in public through protests, and many mass protests were organized by the (coalition of) social movements, as will become clear further in the text.
6. The protests that ousted Milošević occurred on 5 October 2000, following his reluctance to resign after loosing the presidential elections.
7. RTS. 2017. Šesti dan protesta u Beogradu. [The sixth day of protest in Belgrade]. 8 April. <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/2694286/protest-poceo-pred-zgradom-vlade.html>.
8. RTS. 2018. Deo opozicije podržao studentkinju Tijanu Hegić. [A part of opposition gave support to student Tijana Hegic] 23 February. <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/2728/izbori-2018/3048636/djilasova-koalicija-podrzala-studentkinju-hegic.html>.
9. Rizaov, G. 2016. Protests in Macedonia Gain Momentum as New Round of Political Negotiations Is Announced. Global Voices, 19 April. <https://globalvoices.org/2016/04/19/protests-in-macedonia-gain-momentum-as-new-round-of-political-negotiations-is-announced/>.

10. Similarly to Belgrade protests organized by the initiative *Do not let Belgrade d(r)own* [Ne da(vi)mo Beograd], as shall be soon discussed. The objective of the project Skopje 2014 was to rebuild the face of Skopje, capital of N. Macedonia, so that its architecture could testify to its supposed antiqueness.
11. Regarding this criterion, we focused on movements that have shown continuity in organizing protests and similar interventions in the public sphere, and that have managed to gather considerable number of followers.
12. It is worth noting that the following facts explain some specificities of certain movements: Protestiram was a citizens' movement principally responsible for organizing the so-called Colourful Revolution, but many of its activists also participated in other social movements in N. Macedonia; Local Front (from Kraljevo, Serbia) is the only social movement from our sample that takes part in governing structures (some of its members are representatives in the local assembly).
13. Even in cases of social movements that were formally organized before a certain 'triggering event' took place, their public visibility and engagement became prominent only afterwards.
14. Personal interview with activist M.N., August 2018, Serbia.
15. Personal interview with activist D.V., August 2018, Serbia.
16. Personal interview with activist M.P., September 2018, N. Macedonia.
17. It should be noted, however, that a minority of movements here explored have an official programme of the movement.
18. Personal interview with activist J.P., August 2018, Serbia.
19. Personal interview with activist T.P., September 2018, N. Macedonia.
20. Personal interview with activist I.S., September 2018, N. Macedonia.
21. Personal interview with activist T.P., September 2018, N. Macedonia.
22. Personal interview with activist M.P., September 2018, N. Macedonia.
23. Personal interview with activist M.N., August 2018, Serbia.
24. Glasnik. 2017. По членовите на HBO-ата, на ред за вработување се активистите на Шарената револуција. [After being the members of the NGOs, the 'Colourful Revolution' activists are in line for employment] 7 July. <http://glasnik.mk/posle-clenovite-na-nevladinite-na-red-za-vrabortuvanje-dojdoa-aktivistite-na-sarena-revolucija/>.
25. An exception to this were the narratives of activists from the Student organization in Novi Sad and Collective action Roof over head (Belgrade), which state 'a desire to be proactive in our community' and 'an inherent need for engagement ... to help the vulnerable,' implying a more general sense of social engagement.
26. Personal interview with activist T.P., September 2018, N. Macedonia.
27. Personal interview with activist J.P., August 2018, Serbia.
28. Marusic, S. J. 2011. Macedonians Protest Over 'Fatal Police Beating', *Balkan Insight*, 7 June. <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonians-protest-after-police-murders-youngster>.
29. Personal interview with activist D.K., August 2018, Serbia.
30. Personal interview with activist with M.P., September 2018, N. Macedonia.
31. Personal interview with activist D.V., August 2018, Serbia.
32. The first mass protests in Serbia since Aleksandar Vučić's de facto coming to power in 2012, started in November 2018, several months after the finalization of our fieldwork. The protests, which take place in various towns across Serbia, have activated and animated all the movements from Serbia analysed here.

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