

# Social Engagement and Personal Activism: Some Research Reflections and Fieldnotes from Conversations with Activists in Two Belgrade Protest Initiatives

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## Introductory caveat

In this paper, I wish to describe the reflections, insights, and doubts I had following the preparatory and initial stages of ongoing research about solidarity and protest movements in Serbia. Thus, it should be read as a subjective, still-in-process contribution to the study of *social engagement*, to which this volume is dedicated. Let me stress from the outset that the aspect of social engagement I am primarily concerned with is the *lived experience* of collective mobilization and organization. I am interested in personal and group narratives about coming together around shared ideas; about expanding and negotiating these ideas and managing their transformation into organizational forms; about forging short- and long-term alliances; and also about experiencing distancing, factions, and burnouts. I am especially focused on the ways individuals and groups experience and inter-

pret the dynamic relationship between reflections on values (*ethical orientation*) and reflections on situational context (*pragmatic orientation*).

Within these general inclinations and affinities in researching social engagement, I have developed a research project that examines emerging protest movements in the region. The scholarship on these recent protest movements is only in its inception phase, just like the very object of study (Horvat and Štiks 2015, Fagan and Sircar 2017, Bieber and Brentin 2018).<sup>126</sup> My research, with a preliminary emphasis on two protest initiatives in Belgrade, is meant to be a first step within broader research that aims to map the landscape of protest movements in Southeast Europe, where I am particularly interested in *personal narratives* of activists and the role *solidarity* plays in their activism, both on the level of direct action and as a guiding political principle.

What follows is a “confessional” exposé of a research process, encompassing my fixation on a problem/research idea, the development of a research plan, and a slight detour from the anticipated research path. In short, this is a theoretical-methodological contemplation about a work in progress.

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My interest in protest movements is principally motivated by my broader research interest in the topic of solidarity. Solidarity has received heightened attention in scholarly writings in the last couple of years, due to the multiple crises we are experiencing at all levels: the crumbling of welfare economies; a refugee humanitarian crisis; and “post-democratic” and populist tendencies that have urged

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<sup>126</sup> Due to the fact that this form of contentious politics is a fairly recent social phenomenon within this region, and with limited and specific mobilizing effects, I believe they should be termed protest movements, rather than social movements.

us to rethink the impact of institutions, states, and concrete policies on the ability of citizens to maintain (or obtain) basic living standards, have their rights met, and secure a sense of belonging to a wider community. Emerging literature on solidarity – covering topics from the *solidarity economy movement*, self-organized aid to refugees, and citizens' attitudes toward state-redistributive mechanisms, to social ontological questioning of the notion itself – amply testify to the growing public and academic interest in the subject (Rakopoulos 2014, Cabot 2016, Greenberg and Spasić 2017, Banting and Kymlicka 2017, Lahusen and Grasso 2018, Laitinen and Pessi 2015).

My approach to solidarity is threefold, and I will briefly outline it here. On a theoretical level, I am interested in two questions: How do we differentiate solidarity from other pro-social and emphatic behaviors (with a focus on its presumed political character, see Arendt 1990 and Scholz 2008)? And, how do we interpret the problem of scale; meaning, do intra-group, intergroup, and humanitarian solidarity belong to the same phenomenon (is solidarity a group-bounded concept, and does the size of the group matter; see Bayertz 1999)? Secondly, I am interested in how solidarity is employed for *discursive* purposes, when its rhetoric is used to mobilize people and to legitimize certain social and political agendas (what do we ask of people when we call upon solidarity?). And, finally, I am interested in *lived experiences* of solidarity: How it is performed, by whom, and when and with what goal? Is it a situational or a lasting choice? And what are its (social and personal) transformative effects?

It was mostly this third line of inquiry that captivated me when initially designing my research about emerging protest movements in Serbia. However, it could not be detached from the second, as discourses inevitably influence

the attitudes, norms, and values that incite individual and group actions. To construct a theoretical framework linking research interests in solidarity and in new protest movements, I relied on the notion of *citizenship agenda*, as put forward by de Koning, Jaffe, and Koster (2015),<sup>127</sup> and based my research on the claim that the current *neoliberal citizenship agenda* – which frames desired subject-citizens as “entrepreneurial actors” (Mavelli 2018; see also Sparke 2009, Van Houdt, Suvarierol and Schinkel 2011) – renders the notion of solidarity highly ambivalent.

The “do-it-yourself” imperative is emblematic of neoliberal structural reforms and ideology, which expects citizens to be “proactive” and entrepreneurial (in all aspects of their lives, not only in business) and even engaged in mutual cooperation in order to overcome whatever obstacles they may encounter in their daily lives, without seeking help from the state (thus “curing” them of “state-dependency syndrome” – an oft-raised topic in post-socialist countries). In this respect, it can be said that examples of solidarity among citizens are welcomed by new political elites in the region, because they can be seen as an impulse toward acceptance of new political realities. Indeed, some examples of mass solidarity in this region (which often crosses the borders of post-Yugoslav states) – such as helping victims of disastrous flooding in May 2014 that affected Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia; self-organizing to help refugees crossing the Balkan route; or raising money via text message donations for children who need urgent medical treatments abroad (a practice especially widespread in Bosnia and Serbia) – testify

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127 “We define citizenship agendas as normative framings of citizenship that prescribe what norms, values, and behavior are appropriate for those claiming membership of a political community. These agendas are concerned with defining the meaning of membership in explicitly normative ways that go beyond conventional, legal-formal citizenship status. Citizenship agendas prescribe relations between people and larger structures of rule and belonging, which are often but not exclusively nation-states. Such citizenship agendas invariably imply models of virtuous and deviant citizens, favoring particular subject-citizens over others, and suggesting ways to transform the latter into the former” (de Koning, Jaffe and Koster 2015: 121).

not only to the readiness of “ordinary” people to come to each other’s aid, but also to the incompetence or unwillingness of state institutions to offer crucial support. Therefore, however unintentionally, this *situational* solidarity becomes complicit in normalizing a new order in which citizens’ self-organized actions fill the gaps left by retreating institutionalized solidarity, and the notion itself is drained of its political connotations.

I contend that demands for *political* and institutionalized solidarity are instead to be found in emerging *protest movements* in the Western Balkans, which have started to appear in reaction to growing authoritarian tendencies and a lack of accountability for local political and economic elites in the region. It can be argued that these movements represent forms of *activist* citizenship (Isin 2008, 2009), capable of bringing “into being new political subjects making justice claims” (Fagan and Sircar 2017). Further, it could be said that they belong to globally developing “*new, new*” social movements (Feixa, Pereira and Juris 2009) and to the *contentious politics* of the post-2008 global crisis (Tarrow 2011, Mew 2013), which often promote the idea of *political* solidarity, demanding institutional and lasting responses to issues of exclusion, alienation from decision-making processes, poverty, etc.

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My primary intention, therefore, was to initiate research on solidarity that determines how it is used as a mobilizing tool, how it is enacted as a political principle, and how it is lived through activism in several Belgrade protest movements. However, the research process thus far has led me away from a sharp focus on solidarity and closer to a mapping of the motivating and constraining factors that influence the activists themselves. I began this process by an-

alyzing two movements: Don't let Belgrade D(r)own (*Ne davimo Beograd*) and United Action "A Roof over Your Head" (*Združena akcija Krov nad glavom*). Don't let Belgrade D(r)own (NDBGD) is probably the largest and best-known protest initiative in Serbia, originally focusing on resistance to a large-scale urban renewal project, the Belgrade Waterfront, which is backed by real estate investors from the United Arab Emirates and has been mired in multiple corruption scandals. The initiative evolved into a social movement similar to Right to the City and even participated in the 2018 Belgrade City Assembly elections. NDBGD focuses on issues related to urban commons, public spaces, and participative democracy, but also on housing problems including the right of citizens to affordable housing.

It is this last issue that directly links NDBGD with United Action "A Roof over Your Head" (ZA), which principally protests to prevent evictions. ZA has so far organized a couple dozen collective actions, gathering and mobilizing activists and concerned citizens to stop private executors<sup>128</sup> from forcefully evicting tenants – a practice that has gained a sinister momentum since recent changes to the Law on Enforcement and Security Interest afforded private executors greater authority and tenants less legal protection (a majority of cases have involved rightful homeowners who have fallen victim to investor fraud or other dubious activities, yet have been ordered to vacate their homes despite ongoing and unresolved legal battles). ZA's social engagement employs several approaches and tactics: primarily, their activists mobilize as many people as possible to physically prevent evictions from taking place; and secondarily, they advocate for the right to housing as a basic human right, pushing for a political agenda that relies on solidar-

128 The Law introduced an efficiency mechanism whereby private executors – who are licensed by the state – were instituted to carry out the work of the courts at a faster pace. These private executors are thus responsible for enforcing evictions.

istic principles to order and control private interests. They are thus committed to turning the energy of mobilization into a political platform where solidarity acts not only as an ad hoc remedy to social injustice, but as a political principle guiding citizen engagement.

Though they use different strategies to mobilize their activists and raise their concerns in the public, both NDBGD and ZA focus on social justice and citizen engagement by addressing urban space concerns, the right to housing, and the general growing neglect of citizens' concerns and rights. Through in-depth interviews with activists, I sought to learn more about their motivation for participating in these initiatives (and for those who are active in both, to determine whether they follow different motivations, and if so, how), as well as how this participation impacts and shapes their identity as activists.

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Aiming to record the personal narratives of activists, my main research tool was a semi-structured questionnaire; and I carried out in-depth interviews with 15 activists. Additionally, I employed participant observation in many more informal conversations and to observe interpersonal communications and behavior among activists. I also consulted online material, including the webpages and Facebook pages of each initiative, along with press statements and interviews with activists by media.

The insights and information collected in this first phase of research, drawn primarily from interviews with a relatively small number of activists, led me to slightly modify

my initial research plans, as both the research process itself and the data informed me of new problems, venues to be explored, and constraints. I realized that exploring the rhetoric and practices of solidarity requires further, and continuous, research that is largely based on participant observation; whereas, the information I have collected so far only enables me to comment on *attitudes* towards solidarity, not to establish a solid hypothesis on how it functions as a political principle and transformative experience. Still, the materials I collected compelled me to think about and problematize issues that were not initially in my focus, but which are helpful in better understanding protest movements in Belgrade and relations among activists, as well as their personal reflections on their own engagement. This is valuable when it comes to mapping the activist scene in Belgrade, and in wider Serbia to some extent, and for understanding personal, political, and organizational networks in the making (these are all very recent movements, after all). Beyond a doubt, this will aid future research on solidarity as well.

Finally, the research also guided me to divert my attention from just the two protest initiatives that were originally in my sights. Interviews with activists from NDBGD and ZA, intended to help me draw comparisons between the two, revealed a much more *intertwined and thicker matrix of relations* than I anticipated, not only between these two movements but with other initiatives as well. ZA was actually formed by several NDBGD activists, and the two initiatives support each other in ways that transcend mere political support stemming from the fight for similar goals. The nascent activist scene in Belgrade is vibrant and diverse, but also relatively small in terms of numbers of devoted activists. Almost all of the activists I interviewed or had informal conversations with are involved in numerous



initiatives with similar goals and agendas, but employing different strategies of action and mobilization and different approaches to sensitizing others to their causes.

It turns out that these different *activist outlets* – a notion on which I intend to further elaborate in future research – also serve the needs of activists themselves to express different, sometimes conflicting, attitudes and ideals of political action. For instance, several interviewees I spoke with are active participants in *three* movements: NDBGD, ZA, and 7 Demands (*7 zabteva*), the latter of which emerged out of the spontaneous April 2017 protests that followed the presidential elections. As activists explained, each initiative nourishes a different identity and uses different tactics to address political problems – although never to the point of imperiling complementarity – and they feel proud they are involved in all of them. They described NDBGD as the “most open,” “citizen-oriented,” and ideologically non-polarizing movement, “involving ecological themes.” ZA, they said, is direct-action oriented, open to cooperation with different political subjects (“if right-wingers want to join in stopping the evictions they are welcome... the most important thing is to stop unjust evictions”), and committed to raising awareness of growing social injustices. And 7 Demands was characterized as the “most politically mindful” movement, “oriented towards the workers” and “sharply self-identified as left;” although, they admitted that the initiative is “facing much bigger problems in attracting new members, or widening its scope of actions” than others.

Shifting my attention from initiatives to the activists themselves, and to their personal narratives, helped me appreciate the psychological-functional role various initiatives play in channeling, giving shape to, and sometimes providing feedback on the ideological views of activists, as well as on their desires to be proactive and to be recognized as

activists in various fields (ideological, political, legal, etc.). In a way, these activist outlets allow activists to test their capacities and comfort zones when engaging in different modes of political protest.

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Following the initial phase of research, I found it useful to organize findings into several topic clusters, which informed the most salient questions for further exploration. Here I will outline several, briefly commenting on insights they generated.

1. *Becoming an activist*: Early exposure to socially polarizing, contested issues is important; activism is influenced in the family or immediate surroundings; many experiences of volunteerism and working in civil society were cited (a very frequent theme here: splitting from NGOs, or channeling NGO activism in a certain direction); concrete, “decisive” experiences are significant (for instance, the blockade and occupation of the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade, for a younger generation of activists); and exposure to new literature and involvement in reading groups and discussion forums is impactful.

2. *From “friendship core” to practicing horizontalism*: In a majority of cases, strong friendships preceded initiation into activism; problems are faced when “enlarging” the group, including issues of trust, delegation, commitment, etc., all of which challenge proclaimed ideals of horizontalism; implementing/imposing bottom-up organizations creates paradoxes; and close friendships help build a sense of “fraternity,” solidarity, and “common goals,” but can constrain engagement with new people and limit the cultivation of horizontal networks with them.

3. *Polarizing issues*: The joining of coalitions, or joint actions with other initiatives; “disputes on the Left,” i.e. liberalism vs. leftism; theory vs. praxis; and difficulties reaching consensus about *when* and with *what means* to act in public.

4. *Generational gaps*: This unexpectedly proved to be an extremely important topic, deserving of further research. Growing up in different political environments builds different attitudes and ideas about social engagement. In Serbia, activists born between about 1978 and 1983 had their formative political experience in opposition to the Milošević regime, and the regime change of 2000. For younger activists, their first formative experiences of engagement were related to austerity measures, the commercialization of higher education (the raising of tuition fees), and the recent global upsurge of protests (reanimating the academic and political Left).

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5. *Gendered experiences*: This is another extremely important topic, for which explorations of personal accounts are especially worthy. As one activist explained: “sexism on the Left has a very peculiar form... because leftists have learned what the socially desirable attitudes and behaviors are... they know that they can no longer think of women as mothers, sisters, lovers... but they still don’t really appreciate a woman as a person... but it happens in subtle ways... it becomes observable when relationships (between activists) break up... I doubted myself many times after these experiences...”

To briefly conclude, I wish to underline several things. First, in-depth interviews and informal conversations with activists, coupled with participant-observation, resulted in only a limited understanding of the role solidarity plays in organizing movements and orienting their social engagement. This will require more extensive research over time, but also a combination of methodological approaches – includ-

ing extensive desk research and probably discourse analysis – to capture the mobilizational and rhetorical potential of solidarity. However, exploring the personal accounts of activists brought forth many new and insightful perspectives through which emergent protest movements can be analyzed. Interviews revealed intricate connections between movements and organizations, defying the assumption that they could be studied in isolation; and shifting focus from initiatives/movements to activists themselves revealed how the former can be seen as *activist outlets* for the latter – raising the issue of how *different* movements serve to fulfill the personal needs of activists to exercise *different* forms of social engagement. Finally, the *clustering* of themes proved an effective method of classifying materials obtained in the research, and some clusters – such as *generational gap*, or *gendered experiences* – seem especially deserving of concentrated study in the future.

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