

## Resurgence of Authoritarianism and Civil Resistance

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21985/n2-zygp-8c23>

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With the coronavirus pandemic, the entire planet is now living through a unique moment. Globalized societies have deserted the economy, work, and leisure to combat the virus. They went from power struggles to the goal of collective survival.

That said, it seems difficult not to observe that in this uncertain moment there was a change in the political atmosphere that surrounds us. Worse for some, better for others.

It was, however, only a transitory photograph of the world. Soon after the first blow that provoked a rapid increase of the number of infected and dead people, the play of power struggles reappeared at both the global and national levels. Internal policy measures worsened the pandemic in countries exhibiting profoundly anti-democratic tendencies. Given that authoritarian climates combine with the

destruction of academic freedom, it is important to also mention this section of public life with the goal of identifying the political stakes of the pandemic era.

Serbia is among the main European instances of extreme authoritarian power drift, especially since 2014. Beyond the control of the totality of the mainstream media, the newly wealthy and, in general, the hegemonic economic class which possesses an enormous chunk of the country's overall wealth—the main foundation of the presidential regime is its stranglehold on the “popular classes.” The party in power established its control over these social classes mainly by subjecting them to blackmail and intimidation, sometimes by dangling in front of them the possibility of obtaining a random job instead of falling below the poverty line. Serbia being among the countries with the lowest employment rate in Europe, the main lever of horizontal and vertical social mobility, as well as recruitment in public and private companies—dependent on the state—is membership in the ruling party or at least proximity to it.

Sociological studies on the topic show that the only social categories benefiting from real economic autonomy are made of graduates living in urban areas and working in the high-technology sector as well as universities and public research centers. This is why, these past few years, the governing elites have attempted to silence the intellectual critiques formulated by the employees of these institutions through all sorts of means. To do so, they have recourse to legal procedures allowing for the nomination of scientific overseers very close to the dominant political party in executive positions at research and teaching institutions. The case of the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory in Belgrade (IFDT) offers an overview of the situation in this regard.

Because of its history and after having publicly supported last year's social movement against the government's antisocial, authoritarian, and antidemocratic tendencies, recognized as the heart of liberal, left, and critical thought in the Balkans, the IFDT has been severely impacted by the repressive measures taken

over the past year by the Serbian government. To take control of the Institute, the Serbian government thus nominated a new supervisory board made of several very controversial political figures. The minister of education then appointed an interim director to the IFDT—the only one in the entirety of the Serbian scientific system to not have been elected by the employees of the Institute, but who came as an outsider, and, one could say, freely imposed.

The pandemic has encouraged the authoritarian regime to declare an unconstitutional state of emergency, allowing itself to make numerous maneuvers which in normal times could be considered illegal and illegitimate. After the announcement of the state of emergency in Serbia, the imposed director decided to suspend all payments for the projects conducted by the Institute. In the context of the great uncertainty engendered by the SARS-Cov-2 crisis, this move was perceived as a new act of repression against researchers united in the pursuit of saving this critical space built over the last decades.

Realizing that their last chance to preserve the Institute's mission and program hung on international support, the researchers launched an appeal to stand in solidarity with the Institute which was signed by over five hundred of the most famous academic worldwide including Jurgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, Judith Butler, Noam Chomsky, Martha Nussbaum, Nancy Frazer, Jeffrey Alexandre, Antonio Negri, Yanis Varoufakis, as well as in France : Etienne Balibar, Thomas Piketty, Barbara Cassin, Jacques Rancière, Marc Crépon, Frédéric Worms, Pierre-Michel Menger, Michael Lôwy, Patrick Boucheron, François Héran, Jean-Louis Fabiani, Christophe Charle, Christian Lequesne, Michel Wieviorka, and Loïc Wacquant.

It was clear that the academic community, knowing no borders, would not accept being reduced to silence. The solidarity displayed during this event, through international exchange and cooperation networks, resulted in the Serbian government renouncing to impose an administrative board controlled by the state at the IFDT.

These kinds of initiative that cross borders and are able to orient political action, instill hope by showing that collective awareness and the reversal of authoritarian tendencies is always possible. It was the greatness of the collective reaction, arising from a sense of collective duty, patience, civic-mindedness, and unruliness, that won and of which we are today so proud. We want this success to inspire other individuals fighting against democratic decline. This unprecedented mobilization, along with the current moment, paradoxical vector of hope and worry, comfort the idea already instilled by other great planetary movements: humanity is a great shared public space.

The sum of the initiatives taken to make up for the failures of public authorities, overwhelmed or impotent, is a necessary and urgent reminder of individual responsibility and its ability to protect and maintain academic and democratic freedoms. It is not only a matter of feeding the struggle between scientific and political powers, but more broadly between national and international sovereignty—the proof of existence of moral cosmopolitanism—and the possibility of victory for a community beyond borders and social constructs. The national sovereign is no longer the only guarantor of law because reality itself has become cosmopolitical.

Some consider that international law undermines democratic sovereignty. Some see in it a positive change. What is certain today, is that these tensions between the sovereignty of states and the normative goals of a cosmopolitical world generate unprecedented possibilities.

As such, cosmopolitanism does not indicate a privileged attitude, but rather a field of unresolved contrasts; between particular attachments and universal aspirations; between the multiplicity of human laws and the ideal of a common rational order; and between belief in humanity's unity and the antagonisms generated by human diversity.

This text was written to secure the memory of this international struggle which was a priceless victory not only for the IFDT but also for a more cosmopolitical world and

for democracy. It was the first victory for democratic forces, and a reversal is extremely important for Serbia and the Balkans more broadly.