Norma Tiedemann

Post-Yugoslav municipalism: dis/obedient democratic initiatives in Zagreb and Belgrade

Abstract

New municipalism as a political-strategic approach is a reaction to the authoritarian management of the deep and multiple crises of capitalism after 2008. From their base in Spain, municipalist platforms have extended elsewhere across the globe, including in the south-east European periphery in Zagreb and Belgrade – via Zagreb Je NAŠ! and Ne Da(vi)mo Beograd – both of which have subsequently transformed themselves into political movements. This article analyses these two initiatives guided by three questions: in which conjuncture and in the context of what kind of state did these municipalist platforms in Zagreb and Belgrade emerge? What is the character of new municipalism in Serbia and Croatia? And what is their emancipatory potential? The article concludes that the platforms, and the new parties into which they transformed, are not experiments in radical democracy but are characterised by an intention to establish the rule of law and democratic freedoms. As such, the turbulence they create is providing a challenge to the prevailing, widespread system of patronage and thus questioning the current regimes.

Keywords*: new municipalism, social movement research, patronage networks, state apparatus, liberal democracy, disobedient democracy, self-management socialism*

Introduction

From 2015, a wave of democratic political struggles at local state level spread from Spain across the world under the name new municipalism (Caccia 2016; Rubio-Pueyo 2017). Municipalist platforms are hybrid actors composed of movements, trade unions, individual activists and parties. Amongst many cities in Spain which saw municipalist platforms entering the local institutions, Barcelona and Madrid have been governed for a while by such actors with the aim of implementing left-wing policies and changing urban institutions without becoming traditional parties (Rubio-Pueyo 2017). Such an approach conceptualises the local state or city as entry points into the state fortress 'for developing broader practices and theories of transformative social change' (Russell 2019: 991) and as potential spaces in which a face-to-face democracy might flourish.

Municipalist platforms have, however, also been founded in south-east Europe, specifically in Zagreb and Belgrade: Zagreb Je NAŠ! (ZJN; Zagreb is OURS!) and Ne Da(vi)mo Beograd (NDB; We are not giving up on Belgrade/We are not letting Belgrade drown). Both initially local initiatives have been since transformed

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into new green-leftist parties – *Možemo!* (We Can!) and the *Zeleno-Levi-Front* (Green-Left Front) – that have participated (successfully) in local as well as national elections. This is the first time since the collapse of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the civil wars of the 1990s that progressive forces, rooted in social movements, have made it into the institutions of the local and national state in Croatia and Serbia.

This article explores both initiatives and is structured as follows. The first section briefly introduces the methodological and theoretical framework before the development of ZJN and NDB, the two actors of interest, is sketched in the second. Thirdly, the article proceeds to reflect on the specificities of post-Yugoslav patronage statehood and the connected conjuncture of social and political conflicts before turning fourthly to a discussion of the dis/obedient democratic character of ZJN and NDB and finally to consider what meaning their presence on the state terrain might have for emancipatory change. The article ends with a short conclusion.

Critical grounded theory and theoretical starting points: analysing conjunctures

All municipalist initiatives, just as all political forces that engage with the state, are confronted with what Karl Marx called the 'state machinery' (1871/1973: 336). Municipalists aim to reform this machinery instead of bending to its logics. But the state, which municipalists perceive as a target of transformation, does not look the same everywhere and the societal formation of which it is a part always produces spatiotemporally specific conflicts and phenomena. The new municipalist platforms themselves are such spatiotemporally specific phenomena, i.e. they emerged from particular contradictions and confront different state machineries depending on where they are located. Asking about their strategies and the conflicts they engage in, can lead us to these contradictions. In other words: social movements can be understood as an 'epistemological window' into underlying social conjunctures (Tiedemann 2024: 110).

The aim of the PhD research on which this article is drawn was to understand municipalist practices in south-east Europe in connection with the kind of state these actors oppose and, at the same time, target with their political practice. Methodologically, critical grounded theory (CGT) offers a useful framework to combine the investigation of state structures and conjunctures as well as the character of social movements and political actors (Belfrage and Hauf 2017). CGT is based on the idea of a stratified reality along the lines of critical realism (Bhaskar 2008). With this framework, short-lived phenomena such as social movements can be related to mechanisms that structure societies over longer periods of time and across extensive geographies such as the capitalist world market. Conjunctures in the context of historical-materialist theory comprise spatially concrete social constellations and their struggles and contradictions at a specific point in time; these are, in turn, related to the more fundamental social structures of capitalist formations, but do not reflect them one-to-one. Consequently, they:

> reflect structurally inscribed tendencies, relations of forces, institutional and ideological formations, and circumstantial factors. (Gallas 2017: 257)

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The confrontation between municipalist actors and local state institutions as circumstantial conflicts thus offers a key to understanding contemporary social formations in Croatia and Serbia.

The bulk of this article's underlying empirical data was collected during frequent field trips for a PhD written during 2018-2022 on post-Yugoslav municipalist platforms. Overall, 56 semi-structured, problem-centred interviews (Döringer 2020) were conducted with activists from green-left networks in Serbia and Croatia (feminist, right-to-the-city, ecological and trade union activism) from both municipalist platforms at different levels, employees of environmental NGOs, NGO workers concerned with international networking, journalists and researchers (for details see Tiedemann 2024: 431). Beyond that, the PhD engaged in political-ethnographic research (Benzecry and Baiocchi 2017) during several protest events as well as international gatherings, while the data thus drawn was complemented with secondary research literature, documents and media reports.

CGT encourages a start by making 'critical observations or experiences of a social problem', succeeded by an 'initial phase of deskwork' during which 'the researcher turns to proto-theories' (Belfrage and Hauf 2017: 259). The subsequent research process is characterised by a retroductive process of theory-oriented and problem-centred qualitative analysis (Belfrage and Hauf 2017: 261). The initial starting point for this research analysing new municipalism in south-east Europe was studies published mainly about Spanish municipalist experiences as an institutionalised aftermath of the large-scale protest movements of the early 2010s (Baird 2015; Blanco et al. 2020; Brunner et al. 2017; Kubaczek and Raunig 2018; Rubio-Pueyo 2017; Zelik 2015).

The complicated relationship between actors in extra-parliamentary movements and state institutions is reflected in movement studies and state theory, both of which formed important theoretical starting points for the PhD's endeavours. Most municipalism research discusses such platforms as a radical democratic alternative to liberal democracy, ridden as it is by multiple crises, and which has thus entered a post-democratic age (e.g. Russell 2019).

Returning with these interpretations to Zagreb and Belgrade, it became evident that post-democracy or radical democracy are concepts and insights which do not appropriately describe the context and practices of municipalist actors in south-east Europe. Liberal democracy's history and present is different in the post-socialist countries of Europe, such that the diagnosis of a post-democratic situation for Croatia and Serbia is inaccurate. Moreover, the new progressive actors that emerged as municipalist initiatives in Zagreb and Belgrade are falsely understood as radical-democratic. The research thus formed a dialogue with materialist state theory and social movement research to adapt both to a context with different social and political conditions than are found in European core countries. This theme is returned to in the later sections sketching the concepts of the post-Yugoslav patronage state and dis/obedient democracy. First however, the two municipalist platforms in Zagreb and Belgrade are introduced.

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Municipalism in south-east Europe

Zagreb je NAŠ!

Croatia is not a stable, liberal democracy. Political corruption, i.e. the abuse of public power for private gain, is widespread. EU accession has not changed this; rather, it has correlated with a renewed deepening of the problem (Transparency International 2021). In addition, extreme right-wing Croatian nationalism has hardly lost any of its influence. Critical engagement with the history and presence of Croatian fascism remains superficial. The trivialisation of the fascist Ustaša regime as well as the crimes of Croatian nationalist units in the wars of the 1990s is repeatedly accompanied by the deliberate reproduction of false information (Hopkins 2020; Serb National Council 2020). Political liberties and social rights have both been under intensified threat since the 2008 financial and economic crisis in response to which the Croatian government cut public spending and pushed for further market liberalisation. Crisis management and its socially devastating consequences were met by protests and social movements around education, housing and labour rights (Balković 2019), while new democratic practices developed, such as the occupation of squares (Dolenec et al. 2017), factories and universities.

After around ten years of such extra-parliamentary organising, a group of people founded ZJN shortly before the local elections in May 2017 with an eye to the Spanish examples of placing 'one foot in the institutions, the other on the streets' (Rilović 2017). Through an online platform and discussions with local residents, ZJN developed its programme of democratising the city and ran an intense and unusual election campaign (Rilović 2017). Together with other small green and left lists (Za Grad, Nova Levica, Radnička Fronta, Orah), they entered the institutional terrain as a small opposition and constituted the 'left bloc' in the city parliament with four deputies overall (7.6% of the vote), although only one was actually from ZJN. In the district councils, ZJN had 21 councillors and 41 in the neighbourhood councils.

The former activists tried to transfer their experience, knowledge and political style into a field they regarded mainly as one of deadlock, producing corruption scandals without consequences for the ruling elites. In these years, they oscillated between acting as troublemakers to break up stiffened routines and presenting themselves as a better option for government, i.e. contributing to parliamentary debates with constructive policy proposals. Only by experiencing the profane workings of the institutions from within were the activists able to understand what they had previously assumed as an extra-parliamentary watchdog: after twenty years of government by the same networks, Zagreb's local government administration was predominantly constituted according to patronage patterns and exclusive loyalties (Hoffmann et al. 2017). To stir these up, they ensured that the city council agenda was not simply voted through but that there was a debate on every point, thereby considerably extending the time in which parliamentary sessions and discussions took place. Furthermore, within the neighbourhood and district councils they created new dynamics, generated knowledge about the clientelist veins of the local state system and won smaller defensive battles through the interaction between institution and self-organisation. They supported residents who, for example, were demonstrat-

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ing against the destruction of the last green space in their neighbourhood and tried to revive the basic democratic instrument of the neighbourhood assembly, which dates back to Yugoslav times.

The response this provoked was reflected in the 2021 election results. However, shortly before ZJN's first institutional cycle ended, in February 2021, long-term mayor Milan Bandić died of a heart attack before competing for a seventh term. In the regular local elections of May 2021, ZJN considerably increased its electoral share, holding 23 out of 47 seats in the city assembly, while the ZJN candidate, Tomislav Tomašević, received 65.25% of the vote in the second round of the mayoral election.

Moving into the leading role at the top of the communal hierarchy meant another transformation of ZJN as a political actor – from activism to parliamentary opposition to the full responsibility of governing (Stubbs 2022). ZJN faced new problems that called for solutions, such as the crumbling building stock whose years-long neglect had become strikingly apparent with the earthquakes in and around Zagreb in March 2020. In addition, the impenetrable machinery that the local state turned out to be challenged ZJN and its goal of reprogramming the local state apparatus to make the institutions serve the public and common interest. It changed the set-up of the new city administration, which now has significantly fewer departments and which it has sought to fill with personnel not attached to the former ruling party of Bandić. It has also created new communications channels between the central city bureaucracy and the neighbourhood and district councils in order to give the lower levels more chances of having an impact.

But this restructuring also takes a significant amount of time. Furthermore, it is not particularly visible and comes at the expense of concrete policies in the areas of transport, waste disposal, kindergartens, labour rights, etc. for which the platform stands and which are demanded by its electorate. Consequently, leading personnel are worried that they will not be able to achieve results quickly enough. The next elections in Zagreb will take place in less than a year – national elections have already been held in April 2024 – and conservative parties and the mainstream press do not miss any opportunity to accuse ZJN of fraud, embezzlement of funds or undemocratic abuse of power.

Ne da(vi)mo Beograd

Serbia today is a competitive authoritarian state with a populist leader and a party that dominates the state institutions as well as society. Srpska Napredna Stranka (SNS; the Serbian Progressive Party) is held together less by shared values or a common ideology than by the hope of its members to receive social or political benefits or be protected from repression (Pavićević 2017: 33). In the past, the party has also pressured public employees either to vote for it or otherwise lose their jobs (European Parliament 2019; Pavlović 2021: 22). Despite the demise of political freedoms and the soaring social inequality, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić continues to enjoy great popularity. However, over the years, Serbia has also been marked by various protest cycles which have spawned the emergence of new

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green-left political actors (Rajković 2022). These include a municipalist initiative in Belgrade.

NDB, originally a small civil society, urban-political initiative, developed over eight years into a widely respected and serious opposition force within Moramo, the broad green-left alliance. NDB's roots reach loosely back to the student protests of the mid-2000s and to the later struggles for the urban commons, opposing the capitalisation of the urban space. The initiative was formed in 2014, taking its name as a movement against a gigantic urban renewal project (Vasiljević 2022). In 2018, it took part in the local elections, although without evident success: the governing SNS was able to confirm its local result with 64 seats in the city parliament, whereas the NDB vote, at 3.4%, left it below the threshold for getting any seats (Veselinović 2018). It was only with the regular elections in 2022 that it managed to obtain representation in the city assembly as well as the national parliament, as part of Moramo, with 13 seats in each case. In order to broaden its base and democratise its internal structures, it founded its own party in summer 2023 – Zeleno-Levi-Front (N1 2023).

Activist practices before setting foot in the institutional arena in April 2022 ranged from the production of an alternative public sphere, through newspapers, podcasts and noisy demonstrations during the temporarily strict coronavirus lockdowns, to the use of public consultations, complaint mechanisms and legal battles, to organising residents at neighbourhood level as well as supporting ecological struggles in more rural and mountainous areas.

Driven by the optimism that ZJN's election victory sparked, NDB paved the way for the considerable hope that organising resistance against Serbia's authoritarian-neoliberal regime could have an actual impact. As in the case of Zagreb, former activists have now been fighting for a democratic, social and ecological transformation on the terrain of the local and national state for two years. They are using the instruments guaranteed to the opposition by the constitution to establish public accountability of the government while continuing, at the same time, to rely on street protests and self-organisation. In the city parliament elections in December 2023, it was the results of both the right wing, but also the progressive opposition, which brought the ruling majority almost to the brink of collapse (Dragojlo 2024a).

Since NDB's emergence, its activists have changed the political discourse in Serbia and exposed the deeply anti-pluralistic and undemocratic practices of the current regime (Piletić 2022). Due to the large-scale criticism of electoral fraud on the streets and from various groups and institutions, as well as the difficulties in forming a stable government, new elections in Belgrade have been held in June 2024 (Dragojlo 2024b). Hence, the continuous electoral mobilisation of the country has not come to an end. The permanent pressure has led to a split within the opposition, paving the way for the SNS to secure its majority again (Reuters 2024). On the one hand, the ceaseless electoral battles have been draining the resources of smaller political forces such as Zeleno-Levi-Front but, on the other, their persistence has also been making life uncomfortable for the president and his allies.

The municipalist platforms in south-east Europe are interesting and relevant phenomena by themselves. Understood as epistemological windows, however, they

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also facilitate an analysis of the underlying societal constellations and contradictions. This article therefore turns next to answering the first of the three questions on which it is founded, concerning the conjuncture and the form of statehood in which ZJN and NDB emerged.

Post-Yugoslav patronage statehood

In the post-Yugoslav region, the municipalist practice of democratising the (local) state, feminising politics and shaping the economy according to the principles of solidarity encounters a specific state form and societal conjuncture, producing unique challenges. In municipalism research, however, often influenced by a post-structuralist and micro-sociological approach, the specific materiality of the state apparatuses and of the social contradictions targeted by municipalists is not sufficiently reflected (Tiedemann 2024: 23ff.).

In order to locate the new municipalisms in the context of the crisis-ridden, post-transition conditions in the former Yugoslav countries, which have intensified over the last thirty years, materialist analyses of bourgeois statehood ('bürgerliche Staatlichkeit') are essential. These analyses assume a relational autonomy of the political (Buckel 2007: 243f; Jessop 1999; Poulantzas 2014); i.e. that there are disputes in the political sphere that are not determined by economic necessities and interests and that are carried out in the mode of hegemony – principally via the struggle for compromises and consensus that go beyond the summation of particularistic interests, though always backed by coercion (Gramsci, Notebook 13: 1610).

Even if by constitution, Serbia and Croatia are liberal-democratic countries, they are de facto marked by a widespread authoritarian tendency, a decline in democratic freedoms and a state apparatus that has been 'captured' (Pavlović 2021) by the ruling parties: SNS in Serbia and Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica (HDZ; Croatian Democratic Union) in Croatia. The governing practices established by SNS and HDZ are often described as patronage (Petrović 2020).

The concept of the post-Yugoslav patronage state emerges as a means of describing statehood in Croatia and Serbia, and with reference to discussions about post-colonial, post-socialist and authoritarian forms of political rule (cf. Ataç et al. 2008; Evers 1977; Jenss 2016; Pimmer 2017; Poulantzas 2014; Schlichte 2006). In this, the relational autonomy of the state and politics in the mode of hegemony are not the dominant feature. The concept builds on the theory of rackets from critical theory (Fuchshuber 2019; Horkheimer 1985) and party-patronage state capture (Petrović 2020) from empirical research into peripheral statehood. While the analysis of rackets and racketeering as a decayed form of liberal rule, where tight-knit groups aggressively fight to monopolise power and implement their particularistic interests, is located in materialist social theory, but remains often abstract and vague, the discourse on state capture is usually not connected to social-theoretical reflections on capitalist relations of domination. However, the concept is empirically productive. The term 'patronage' refers to relationships that are constituted through the direct exchange of favours and mutually personal dependencies (Graziano 1976). Party-patronage describes how, particularly in post-socialist states, a dominant political party takes hold of the entire state apparatus by forging loyalty through individual

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privileges. The theoretical considerations and empirical observations of both strands converge in the concept of the post-Yugoslav patronage state.

Patronage statehood is characterised by:

- a conflation of economic and political elites. State apparatuses are used for rent extraction and profit appropriation on a case-by-case basis or otherwise they are used to shield the credit-financed exploitation of labour from competitors
- a dominance of economic and political elites, organised as rackets within the state, that are monopolising privileges. They form a group of actors similar to what Hartmut Elsenhans has described as the state class in third world countries (1981: 118f.). This means they differ from the understanding of a bourgeois class of capital owners who, under the threat of economic demise, are under constant pressure to reinvest in order to remain competitive through technical and organisational innovation
- a personalised and thus particularistic mode of creating social cohesion instead of organising hegemony and broad consensus
- the investment of resources mobilised through corruption in patronage relationships to secure loyalty on a selective basis. A patronage-state is thus built on ruling via the clientelist allocation of resources and not via abstract, universal laws
- a high level of irrationality within political disputes as limited media pluralism makes it difficult to discipline the discourse by negotiating diverse positions
- widespread apathy, political alienation and a lack of perspective. There is little collective organising because the chances of implementing organised interests from below seem slim.

Thinking this kind of statehood in materialist and not in cultural terms means understanding patronage statehood in Croatia and Serbia as the result of a conflictual development from 1990 to the present that can be designated a post-Yugoslav transitional conjuncture.

This conjuncture is the condensation of at least three dimensions of the transition after socialism:

1. the peripheralisation of the region mediated by core European capital interests and international organisations since at least the 1970s (Unkovski-Korica 2015). Both Croatia and Serbia are economically 'peripheral' and dependent since they have been integrated into the political economy of Europe as a source of cheap labour and of agricultural and other simple industrial goods and services (OECD 2019: 88ff.)
2. the transformation in the 1990s and 2000s, dominated as it was by local economic and extreme-nationalist political elites. During the war years, the isolated owners of private companies, together with segments of the socialist nomenklatura, parastate and criminal actors, developed into a military-political elite. This conglomerate transformed into patronage networks within the apparatuses of the successor states of the socialist federation. The ruling classes in the patronage state primarily reproduce themselves through their privileged access to public budgets and shares in the foreign capital inflows anchored within the

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state; they are only partially controlled by a capitalist class organised outside the state or by strong democratic institutions

3. the high level of economic dependency, the profound consequence of the global financial and economic crisis and the ongoing recession from 2008 onwards. In the crisis after 2008, the south-east European periphery proved to be particularly dependent on imports and capital inflows from the capitalist core (OECD 2019). Economic output collapsed, the austerity agenda led to a massive deterioration in working and living conditions and opened up a new cycle of authoritarian state development (Pavlović 2021: 19). In the context of crisis management, the ruling parties were able to carry out further privatisations to the benefit of their networks while defending state property elsewhere.

The extensive and dense network of party patronage and racket networks that constitutes the state apparatus in Croatia and, even more so, in Serbia cannot be compared with phenomena like competing parastatal organisations, such as the mafia in Italian cities, or with the widespread corruption in German municipalities. Since SNS came to power in 2012, the state, the party, organised crime networks and economic elites have been gradually conflating (Günay and Dzihic 2016). In Croatia, racket-shaped structures of political rule have particularly developed at the local level (Hoffmann et al. 2017). In Zagreb, the political, cultural and economic centre of the country, these structures enabled the almost twenty-year government of Milan Bandić whose authoritarian-neoliberal regime ZJN, the municipalist platform, opposed.

The concept of the post-Yugoslav patronage state describes the reproduction of a constellation that does not conform to the ideal of the liberal-democratic rule of law and which is paramount to understanding the societal conditions from which emerged the municipalist platforms analysed here. It also sheds light on the difficulties they have to confront when entering the institutional field of politics and how they deal with these. Their own relationship to liberal democracy as the hegemonic, but unrealised, ideal and to the actually existing democratic institutions that they tackle is what constitutes their democratic character. This is addressed in the following section.

Dis/obedient democracy

New municipalisms are often described as radical democratic experiments in the context of the crisis of representative democracy (Tiedemann 2024: 23ff.). However, the municipalist platforms in Zagreb and Belgrade are not particularly well characterised in this manner and thus there is a need to establish a different concept. Especially in their early phase of transforming from a movement into a formally institutionalised political force, they are better characterised as examples of

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dis/obedient democratic practice.[1] The term is intended to describe their ambivalent relationship with the idea of liberal democracy and with the actually existing democratic institutions in Croatia and Serbia.

Radical democratic theory (e.g. Badiou and Rancière 2014; Lefort 1988; Süß 2020) often refers to the establishment of something completely new; that is, to:

> … those revolutionary moments of overthrow and constituting that stand at the end and beginning of political orders. (Celikates 2010: 276)

Social movements are understood as genuinely democratic practices, but with no emancipatory perspective that goes beyond the permanent cycle of overthrow, self-invention, constitution and another overthrow. Radical democracy thus rhetorically implies an opposition to liberal democracy as well as to projects of democratic socialism (Celikates 2010: 274). Dis/obedient democracy, on the other hand, unfolds rather in the tension between a criticism of liberal democracy on the one hand and recurring reference to its rules and normative ideals – freedom and equality of all, rule of law, parliamentarism – on the other.

Both ZJN and NDB have their roots in the student protests between 2005 and 2009, whose political practice of occupations, plenary sessions of direct democracy and solidarity with striking workers opened up a new democratic horizon in the countries of the former Yugoslavia (Subversive Forum Team 2013: 87). At the centre of the student protests was a generation of left-wing activists who had critically distanced themselves from the civil society opposition of the 1990s since they found their demands 'too narrow and naively focused on liberal democracy instead of social and economic rights' (Pudar Draško et al. 2021: 204). However, activists did not reject explicit engagement with the formally existing institutions of liberal democracy. The final declaration of the Subversive Forum in 2013 hints at the later municipalist strategy:

> At the current historical moment, left-wing political forces should consider models in which democratic pressure from below and the independence of horizontally organised movements and actors link up with the utilisation of existing structures of the current representative system. (Subversive Forum Team 2013: 87f.)

Even in the early days of the networks from which the later municipalist platforms emerged, democracy acted as a utopian escape point, with activists building on the promises of the democratic-capitalist transition instead of rejecting them as a whole.

1 The term 'disobedient democracy' has been explicitly used in the 'Disobedient Democracy Project', which examined urban protests between 2000 and 2017 in Barcelona, Lisbon, Belgrade and Zagreb (Disobedient Democracy 2017). The project asked what role movements play in the deepening of democracy in the context of austerity politics and the crisis of representation. Due to the primarily quantitative-empirical focus, the concept of disobedient democracy was not elaborated further in terms of democratic theory, but it resonates with the radical democratic opposition to constituted orders.

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ZJN and NDB are, however, also characterised by a disruptive political style and institutional disobedience. They have developed a concept of democracy that goes beyond a narrow liberal understanding – for instance when making references to institutions of socialist self-management. The new green-left actors are struggling for a society oriented towards meeting people's needs and they want to strengthen local council structures and to demand democratic control over production and reproduction, i.e. for housing, care and energy infrastructure and natural resources to be put into collective forms of management. Even so, they exhibit moments not only of a 'radically democratic' disobedient practice, but also of an 'obedient democratic' one.

'Obedience' in this sense serves as a contrast to the idealisation of constantly interrupting what exists and endlessly re-establishing social order, as formulated in radical democratic conceptions. In contrast, the municipalist platforms are concerned with the permanent establishment of a self-reflective political order based on the democratic production of the universal laws to which state apparatuses are bound. In the context of an authoritarian, party patronage-based formation of society, the platforms are seeking to establish liberal democracy as a starting point for progressive politics. They strive to establish a relatively autonomous political sphere, adhere to the discourse on 'good governance' and aim at popular sovereignty. In this conception, the self-legislating, politically defined 'people' is the basis of power and thus sovereign (cf. Maus 2019: 347). Obedience, then, means respecting democratically generated laws and is the counter-model to arbitrary rule in patronage states. According to Rousseau and other democratic contractarians, such 'obedience to self-given law' is the core of political freedom (2011: 23). In the face of an executive, that is decoupled from democratic decision-making, they defend the idea and institutions of liberal democracy against a regressive destruction of political space and represent the idea that people can and should govern themselves in a context of widespread apathy and political alienation.

Both dimensions – 'obedience' and 'disobedience' – define their democratic character while both elements are inextricably linked to one another in municipalist practice: they can exist simultaneously in different fields of action, develop sequentially in shorter or longer phases, flare up in individual moments and shift dynamically.

In order to interpret these ambivalences, the research ultimately turned to the question of the emancipatory potential of dis/obedient democracy in the context of patronage statehood in south-east Europe.

Emancipatory potential

While radical democratic theories want to maintain unconditionally both openness and indeterminacy in terms of content, a critical materialist democratic theory asks about the possibilities of deepening democracy in the sense of an 'emancipative project' that:

> … goes beyond the democratic organisation of bourgeois-capitalist rule and strives for the dismantling of that rule itself. (Schaffar 2018: 165)

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Accordingly, emancipation can be understood as a processual project. Against this background, the actions of ZJN and NDB appear ambivalent.

They navigate between transformation and an affirmation of the liberal-democratic framework that the capitalist transition promised but never honoured. They affirm it in the sense that their goal to establish the rule of law and fight against corruption also serves the interests of capital owners regarding enhanced investment security where it is not also accompanied by fundamental democratisation. That brings ZJN and NDB close to the discourse on good governance favoured by international bodies, which aim for liberalised markets with private ownership structures that are protected by 'strong institutions'. Their insistence on good, open, law-bound institutions consolidates liberal-democratic ideas. Within the new green-left parties, how far societal change should go is a matter of debate; not all would openly argue in favour of e.g. an ecosocialist democracy.

ZJN and NDB are not projects of a radical rupture, with a post-capitalist future on the horizon. They have encountered a specific form of statehood and political landscape and have developed their own ways of dealing with it. However, in view of authoritarian consolidation and the unbroken patronage networks that characterise Serbia and Croatia, their emancipatory potential lies in the defence of political democracy against the unmediated imposition of the particularistic interests of the ruling elites. With their institutional disobedience, these municipalist initiatives in Croatia and Serbia have been breaking through the political apathy of the past decades, developing while they have been doing so a practice that could act as an emergency brake on authoritarianism in the south-east European periphery.

(Liberal) democracy has been central to the municipalist platforms and the new parties because neither the state as a relationally autonomous sphere nor political democracy have effectively emerged in Serbia and Croatia, even if the conditions for parliamentary democracy formally exist. Democracy has been one of the promises of capitalist transition. It remains not only unfulfilled, but has lost its appeal the more obviously has the post-socialist transformation of the economy and the state served particularistic interests.

Conclusion

From the perspective of materialist state and democracy theory, this article has examined the relationship between the contradictions of the post-Yugoslav constellation and the political and social struggles of what, initially, were municipalist movements in Croatia and Serbia. It has focused on the conjuncture, their character and their emancipatory potential.

Municipalism in south-east Europe did not emerge in a post-democratic context, but in a post-Yugoslav transition conjuncture and within the contradictions of patronage statehood. Liberal democratic institutions do exist in Serbia and Croatia, but the political sphere is hardly constituted as relationally autonomous and politics are based on clientelist loyalty rather than on organised hegemony. The municipalist platforms in Zagreb and Belgrade, and the new green-left parties into which they transformed, are not experiments in radical democracy. They are characterised by their dis/obedient democratic practices aiming at the establishment of the rule of law

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and democratic freedoms. Such a practice stands in opposition to widespread patronage as a systematic form of reproducing political and economic elites within the institutions controlled by the respective national ruling parties. Municipalist projects and the new progressive actors represent the idea that people can, and should, govern themselves in the context of apathy and political alienation in Croatia and Serbia. In consequence, they are creating political turbulences that do call into question the current regimes in both countries.

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