

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# RADICAL POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

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The level of divisiveness and polarization we are witnessing today demands a more careful consideration of the social processes driving the radical forms of political engagement, of the dynamics of radicalization and its embeddedness in pressing social and political issues.



With the EU and international attention focused on the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic, SEE political actors are less constrained to flirt with anti-migrants sentiments of the public, sending signals that the ongoing anti-migrant radicalization might go full steam ahead.



New forms of emancipatory radicalism are necessary to continue an active struggle to sustain an open-ended perspective towards the future, thus enabling true political alternatives.



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# IN THE NEED FOR THE RADICAL CHANGE

VEDRAN DŽIHIC AND GAZELA PUDAR DRAŠKO

The region of Southeast Europe (SEE) has for a long time been in focus as an almost traditional realm of potential political radicalization. The stability discourse inherent in the concept of »stabilocracy« was recently challenged by the political trends that drew power from the tensions surrounding political and national identities: the situation regarding Kosovo, the North Macedonia's »name dispute«, the Prespa Agreement, the long ongoing political tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or even territorial disputes between Croatia and Slovenia.

The renewal of the discussion about redrawing the region's borders – exemplified by the proposals for territorial exchanges between Serbia and Kosovo (and the potential secession of Republika Srpska and its unification with Serbia) – presented a novel political moment which threatened to destabilize the region, as well as to provoke a political radicalization that could lead to potential violence. The border debate came as the finale of a long and destructive nationalist regression that has taken place in all SEE countries, which only was continued in the context of COVID19 pandemic. Issues around names, borders, disputes from the past and new forms of divisions between the notion of »Us« and »Them« radicalize the political and mass media agendas and threaten to trigger circles of violent escalation of extreme political and ethnoreligious beliefs.

The consequences of this regression may not be immediately visible, but they can last for a long time. Radicalization takes the form of rising ideological exclusivism and corresponding intolerance towards others, which can periodically escalate into violence. The process occurs on various levels, affecting everything from ethnic and race relations, regional identities, gender relations, and even relations between age groups. Perhaps the most incendiary is ethnic and religious radicalization, as they have the potential to lead to violent extremism. The rise of populism and ethnonationalism in contemporary European politics sets the stage for profitable political mobilization strategies that precipitate radicalization (Rydgren 2008). This is where the rise of far-right movements and parties, described as »far-right fascist International« (Boris Buden), puts an additional burden and challenge on states and societies in Europe in general but also very strongly in Southeastern Europe.

On the other hand, in the last decade we have seen at least some sort of a collective commitment toward left-wing radical movements. Greece, Slovenia, and Croatia have had at least in one point in time a political organization that claimed to aim to achieve some sort of radical social change. Nonetheless, their success both in the parliamentary race and the overall dominance over concrete social issues in the public sphere has remained rather limited. This has led to numerous debates about whether radical solutions are in fact a good political strategy, and if they are, how is this »emancipatory radicality« going to be enacted.

With the outbreak of the COVID19 pandemic, all these issues became only exacerbated, since the radical contingency seems to call for more radical actions. We saw this most clearly with the police violence against George Floyd, where long-lasting domination was almost instantly deconstructed due to the fact that pandemics has highlighted the interdependence and racially caused precariousness of African American population – thus issuing a tide of radical social engagement. The pandemic has had similar social consequences in the SEE countries (although on a much smaller scale). For example, after the most repressive and legally dubious lockdown measures, Serbian government in June triumphantly declared »victory« over the coronavirus in order to prepare for parliamentary elections (even though the official numbers of newly infected raised suspicion of a foul play). When in July the Serbian public was confronted with the »second peak« of the pandemic, and at the potential of the second rigorous lockdown demonstrations broke loose in major cities in which demonstrators clashed with the police (and in turn faced police brutality). Although these demonstrators were far from ideologically homogeneous, a significant number of younger generations converged on the idea that only radical changes can make any meaningful difference in their lives.

Given the high stakes of the rise of radicalized political engagement, the academic community needs to tackle more thoroughly the implications of this process. Moreover, the level of divisiveness and polarization we are witnessing today demands a more interconnected relation between pressing social issues and research done in the confines of academia. In that regard, this small volume will hopefully help us to better understand social processes driving the radical forms of political engagement, but also provide us

with some useful insights into how academia could provide additional inputs into the dynamics of radicalization and become more situated in pressing social and political issues.

In her contribution titled *Europeanization and Radicalization Side by Side? Bottom-Up Anti-Migrant Mobilization in Serbia*, Tijana Rečević tries to investigate how Serbia's initial positive approach to the migrant crisis of 2015 – which was nonetheless framed through the government's narcissistic discourse of »extraordinary benevolence of Serbia« – gradually subsided and in turn gave space to the bottom-up anti-migrant organizations. Some of the most recent instances of anti-migrant engagement are, according to her, becoming more radical and violent in nature. Moreover, she also tries to show that the resilient everyday resentment toward migrants is deliberately left unaddressed by the current regime to further consolidate its power among the more conservative population. According to Rečević, this raises a concern that the anti-migrant radicalization could spring both from the level of the official power structures and the level of everyday life. This potential turn of events could further endanger the process of Europeanization – which was always integrated vertically by the Serbian government, and at the same time systematically neglected as a value within the daily life of citizens.

Kostis Karpozilos in his text *Redefining Radicalism: Defending Change* tries to see in which way radicalism could be reframed in a manner suitable for today's emancipatory progressive political action. Karpozilos, thus, tries to understand a complicated paradox: there are currently many social issues (i.e. climate change) for which various actors could concur that they demand a radical solution, and yet any kind of radical organization seems to be destined to fail. Given this complexity, Karpozilos urges us to be careful not to conflate right-wing with the left-wing radicalism. He maintains that advocating for new forms of emancipatory radicalism does not necessarily imply that we are faced with the return of »grand narratives«, but rather an active struggle to sustain an open-ended perspective towards the future, thus enabling true political alternatives.

In the last paper of the volume *A new era of Hungarian identity politics* Oszkár Roginer tries to tackle the radical changes in the identity politics occurring recently in Hungary. While conventional accounts of ethnic identity see the state as a »container of ethnicity« and therefore borders as a »natural boundary« of identity politics, Roginer sees a new model emerging in Hungary situating ethnicity within a network of state-sponsored programs largely disregarding these types of »natural boundaries«. This new model entails educational, security, media, and financial programs that consolidate the »(self)perception of communities« in the neighboring states firmly »within the networks of cultural, institutional and financial commodities« that are sponsored and controlled by Budapest. This is why Roginer warns us to not to look into these changes as mere variations or hybrid forms of political accounts of ethnic identity but rather to develop a form of social critique, protest, and

boycott that will try to go beyond these common and widespread understandings of identity politics found in the last century.

# EUROPEANIZATION AND RADICALIZATION SIDE BY SIDE? BOTTOM-UP ANTI-MIGRANT MOBILIZATION IN SERBIA

TIJANA REČEVIĆ

A top-down nature of the European integration process has often allowed the domestic political elites to fulfil the unpopular EU demands by simply keeping the »veto« part of population dormant and persuaded that the unwanted reforms are nothing but a »necessary evil« which Serbia needs to comply with until it joins the EU. The reservoir of citizens' beliefs and practices susceptible to radicalization and violent extremism have thus remained almost intact by technocratic reforms and elites' tropes on the alleged »Europeanization« of Serbia. While they usually restrain from openly promoting ideas opposite to the European values and norms, the political elites opt to mask, ignore and oftentimes benefit from the bottom-up grievances and resentments which tend to boil into radical and non-democratic ideas. Understanding the interplay between the top-down and bottom-up cues that could lead to radicalization is necessary for proper addressing of its true drivers and fighting the puzzling simultaneity of the Europeanization and radicalization processes in Serbia and entire Western Balkans region. One of the last warnings on the adverse effects of the disconnect between the vertical interpretation of Europeanization by political elites and horizontal nature of the radicalization processes has been the migrant crisis in Serbia.

## »WAIT, THE SERBS ARE NOW THE GOOD GUYS?«

While its history of conflicts with the Muslim populations in the region could make one assume that Serbia would rapidly join the anti-migrant frenzy in Europe, the Serbian government took a strong stand against erecting any walls on the borders from the very beginning of the crisis in summer 2015. Although encountering tremendous challenges to enable registration and necessary humanitarian relief to thousands of migrants transiting its territory daily, the government managed to improve its reception capacities with the international support and retain a rather responsible approach to the crisis. Widely praised by the international actors for its »very constructive role in managing the migration crisis« (European Commission 2016) and »teaching a lesson to some of the EU Member States,«<sup>1</sup> Serbia seemed to have

improved its image in the first months of the migration crisis more than it had done for decades of democratic reforms. The EU portal *Politico* captured this sudden de-stigmatization success of Serbia in the article sarcastically titled: »Wait, the Serbs are now the good guys?«.<sup>2</sup>

Aiming to alleviate the citizens' rising anxieties and potential resistance to the government's »open-door« policy, the Serbian officials kept portraying the unwanted migration situation as only temporary by repeating that Serbia was nothing but a transit country for migrants who only wanted to reach Western Europe as soon as possible. Even when the EU – Turkey Agreement in March 2016 left thousands of migrants »stranded« in Serbia, the government kept claiming that Serbia would by no means become »a parking lot« for migrants. The almost insignificant number of asylum applications in Serbia has indeed supported such claims. Therefore, by constantly refusing the worst-case scenario as impossible, the statements about Serbia being only a transit country aimed at making the current unwanted situation at least tolerable.

Moreover, strengthening the citizens' sense of pride and positive biographic continuity, the officials' narcissistic narrative on extraordinary benevolence of Serbia and its people served to make this situation even palatable. Repeatedly claiming that Serbia had always demonstrated empathy for other peoples' sufferings and recalling Serbia's own refugee history – even then Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić once put forward his own refugee background<sup>3</sup> – the political elites were hoping to counter-fight the rising angst in the communities most affected by the mass inflow of migrants. This »projective phantasy« (Chernoborov 2014) in which Serbia was extraordinary humane to refugees, but also generous to Europe, was omnipresent in everyday statements, culminating with the PM Vučić's statement about Serbia being »more European than Europe itself.«<sup>4</sup>

1 »UNHCR chief says it is »absolute nonsense« to blame refugees for terror«, 17 November 2015, <https://www.unhcr.ca/news/unhcr-chief-says-it-is-absolute-nonsense-to-blame-refugees-for-terror/>

2 »Wait, the Serbs are now the good guys?«, 18 September 2015, <https://www.politico.eu/article/serbia-croatia-hungary-orban-migrants-schengen-crisis/>

3 Vucic: Izbjeglice su ljudi, a ne vanzemaljci«, 19 September 2015, <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/vucic-izbjeglice-su-ljudi-ne-vanzemaljci>

4 »Vučić o migrantskoj krizi: Evropskiji smo od Evrope«, 3 July 2019, <http://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/337167/Vucic-o-migrantskoj-krizi-Evropskiji-smo-od-Evrope>

Mainly because the government banned all anti-migrant protests already in 2015, but also because no mainstream political party took an openly anti-migrant position in the first two years of the crisis, it seemed that such twofold top-down narrative was successfully hindering the potential for anti-migrant radicalization in Serbia. Nevertheless, a series of anti-migrant outbursts throughout Serbia soon signalled that citizens' interpretations of the situation might have been more immune to the elites' pro-migrant narrative than it was assumed.

## LOCALS' RESENTMENTS RESILIENT AND RISING

The first significant anti-migrant protest outbreaked in Šid in September 2017, confirming how critical the perception of the temporality of the situation was for the absence of anti-migrant mobilisation. The immediate reason of the protest was the decision of the Ministry of Education to include migrant children into the regular education system which the locals interpreted as the newest signal of the permanent resettlement of migrants in their community and, therefore, a threat to »the future of our children« (Rečević 2018). Although the decision was not revoked, the protest led to the closure of one of three reception centres in Šid. Despite not being massive in scale, this first outburst of locals' resentments was a clear signal that micro-securitization and micro-radicalization continued flourishing through neighbour-to-neighbour and peer-to-peer everyday interactions, as well as via social media. For the first time since the beginning of the crisis, it became clear that the elites' narrative was doing little to alleviate the rising anti-migrant sentiments.

A series of new protests which erupted one after another in 2019 in several other towns, such as Subotica, Paraćin and Sombor,<sup>5</sup> in a way confirmed a new rise in anti-migrant attitudes (CeSID 2019). Countless appeals for different kinds of self-organization posted on social media channels dedicated to the local migrant situation would usually transform into an anti-migrant protest once a local incident with migrants occurred – sometimes even fully fabricated. Claiming that they did not belong to any political party or organization, but were simply concerned and angry citizens who were worried for their children, women, parks and cities, the gathered citizens were urging people to stand up and unite against migrants for the »future of Serbia«.<sup>6</sup> Although the number of people in the streets was never extraordinary high, open anti-migrant messages echoed loudly and clearly.

The most recent alarm on the rising anti-migrant radicalization came in May 2020, when a man violently broke with his

car into the reception centre in Obrenovac.<sup>7</sup> While this incident speaks for itself, perhaps even more worrying was a high level of compassion and approval which flooded the anti-migrant social media channels, showing that the initial pride for »extraordinary benevolence« of the Serbian people has been replaced by comments about Serbs being »crazy« to tolerate the migrant situation. Moreover, the fact that the attacker turned out to be a member of one of the newly established right-wing movements »Levijatan« – whose leader immediately justified this violent act as understandable and almost self-defensive<sup>8</sup> – confirmed that the rising bottom-up resentments started receiving stronger feedback from the far-right organizations and political parties.

## RACE TO THE BOTTOM

Among the first to ride this anti-migrant wave was the right-wing party »Dveri«, whose leader got far louder with xenophobic statements than ever before during the migrant crisis.<sup>9</sup> While this was not exactly a surprise, what indicated that the upcoming parliamentary elections accelerated this competition for cheap political points was the anti-migrant turn of »Enough is Enough«. Although entering the parliament in 2016 with one of the most liberal programs, this party ended up being among the most persistent anti-migrant voices on the recent political scene. In addition to these two parliamentary parties, several smaller right-wing parties also strengthened their rhetoric against the migrants in Serbia and even took it to action. In February 2020, the initiative »No Surrender of Kosovo and Metohija«, supported by a network of right-wing parties and organizations, gathered groups of its supporters into self-proclaimed »people's patrols« which went out to the Belgrade streets and openly threatened migrants they encountered.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, the most worrying change is that the ruling majority itself seems to be less immune to the anti-migrant appeals. In the last few months, the special police forces and army have been far more involved in the migration management even though the situation on the ground does not seem to be significantly different than at the beginning of the crisis. In February 2020 and again May 2020, upon the appeals of the »upset citizens« – as the President Vučić said himself, the gendarmerie and military police were sent to Šid to deal with the allegedly rising migrants' crimes.<sup>11</sup> Then, not only

5 »Info Park: Srbija Međunarodni dan migranata dočekuje uz hajke i proteste u Pirotu i Somboru«, 17 December 2019, <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/info-park-srbija-medjunarodni-dan-migranata-docekuje-uz-hajke-i-proteste-u-pirotu-i-somboru/>

6 »Protesti ispred centra za migrante i izbjeglice u Pirotu«, 9 December 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKJf3ur3\\_WM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKJf3ur3_WM)

7 »Kolima probio ogradu i uleteo u Prihvatni centar za migrante u Obrenovcu«, 7 May 2020, <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a596797/Kolima-probio-ogradu-i-uleteo-u-Prihvatni-centar-za-migrante-u-Obrenovcu.html>

8 »Slučaj Obrenovac, u vezi Filipa Radovanovića, jedina istina, saopštenje«, 7 May 2020, [https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=537726896917538&ref=watch\\_permalink](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=537726896917538&ref=watch_permalink)

9 »Moj stav: Obradović: Migrantska kriza,« 18 February 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u-LU54cqiEA>

10 »Narodne patrolne: Ko patrolira Beogradom u potrazi za migrantima«, 9 March 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-51761864>

11 »Vučić: Od sutra Žandarmerija i posebne jedinice policije u Šidu posle upada migranata u kuće«, 28 February 2020, <https://www.danas.rs/politika/vucic-od-sutra-zandarmerija-i-posebne-jedinice-policije>

that migrants could not leave camps during the state of emergency evoked in March 2020 because of Covid-19 pandemic, but it was the military who got in charge of the situation in the camps and, on one occasion, even shot in the air to »prevent migrants' escape«. <sup>12</sup> Later announcements of the purchase of barbed wire for fencing the reception centres by the Ministry of Defence only confirmed this worrying trend.

With the EU and international attention focused on the COVID19 pandemic, the Serbian government seems far less constrained to flirt with anti-migrants sentiments of the public, once again demonstrating that most of the »Europeanization« reforms in Serbia rely on keeping the non-democratic and radical appeals dormant instead of truly addressing them. Having in mind the strengths of both formal and informal networks through which the ruling party keeps important »veto players« and the public in line with the party politics, its tacit approval of rising anti-migrant appeals signals that the ongoing anti-migrant radicalization might go full steam ahead from both directions.

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je-u-sidu-posle-upada-migranata-u-kuce/. »Vučić poslao vojsku na migrante, analitičari tvrde – predizborni marketing«, 16 May 2020, <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/vojska-srbije-migranti-vucic-sid-ej-dus-lunic-bcpb/5422555.html>.

**12** »Def Min: Army shoots in the air to prevent migrants escape from camps in Serbia«, 21 April 2020, <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a591339/Def-Min-Army-shoots-in-the-air-to-prevent-migrants-escape-from-camps-in-Serbia.html>



# REDEFINING RADICALISM: DEFENDING CHANGE

KOSTIS KARPOZIOS

In July 2021 New Democracy, the right-wing ruling party in Greece, proposed a new law on the regulation of public protests. Following a lengthy period of social and political upheaval the proposed legislation aimed at reforming the existing framework by imposing strict regulations, restrictions, and a systematic distinction between »legitimate« and »illegal« social protests. Not surprisingly the legislative reform included a provision of state action against »various forms of violence, such as radicalization«. Here the term »radicalization« appears as the equivalent of violent extremism, thus being labeled as a dangerous ideological and political trend that should be monitored and curtailed. This piece of legislation precisely mirrors the predominant understanding of radicalism as a direct threat to the democratic order. However, the country's social and political history offers a much more nuanced and dynamic trajectory of the term, one that is worthwhile considering when we speak about radicalism and radical politics.

Following a popular trend across liberal democracies, political parties and social movements have been using the term »radical« to describe their desire for a decisive break with the past. In an ironic twist of history, the predecessor of New Democracy, the right-wing party that dominated the field in Greece until military coup in 1967, heralded the tradition of political radicalism as it is implied by its title: National Radical Union (Ethniki Rizospastiki Enosi). If one follows a strict understanding of the aforementioned legislative agenda, then the activities of at least two legitimate political parties in Greece would necessarily fall under state scrutiny. The Communist Party, represented in the Greek parliament since 1974, was publishing a daily newspaper entitled Rizospastis [The Radical], while behind SYRIZA, the former ruling party that came to power in 2015, stands the acronym »Coalition of the Radical Left« (SYnaspismos RIZospastikis Aristeras). These are just two illustrations of the often very contradictory and paradoxical understandings of radicalism. The dominant and rather popular understanding conceptually recognizes and classifies »radicalism« as a synonym for a negative disruption of historical time. According to this understanding radicalism and radicalization are exclusively seen as intrinsic threats to the political and societal order. What is particularly striking here is the usage of the term »radicalism« without any historical or political contextualization and in a rather arbitrary and labeling way that points at violence and fanaticism.

On the other side we can argue that the world we live in has been enormously shaped by the positive imprint of political and social movements that shared the quest for radical and profound change of the current power relations and dominant political order. The genealogy of the term points at a very rich and diverse tradition that spans from the radical parties and political thought of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the emancipatory platforms of mass participation that led to revolutionary uprisings, anti-colonial struggles and social movements. Radicalism in this understanding spoke in the name of human rights, social equality, and freedom. By reminding ourselves of this line of understanding of radicalism, one which is rather excluded in the dominant negative notion of radicalism today, we open up the possibility to reclaim the emancipatory meaning of the notion of »radicalism« and start engaging in a collective effort to reclaim the term. By reclaiming the term and placing the radical political action within the framework of progressive political and social action, while at the same time addressing major social and political problems and inequalities of the present. Such a new framework is a prerequisite for emancipating political imagination in general from a rather conservative framework that demonizes any idea of change.

There is a decisive paradox here – most current accounts of pressing issues the planet faces today emphasize the need of change and rapid, concrete action »before it's too late«. The case of climate change is possibly the first one that comes to mind, along with the future of the common European project, the overarching question of social equality (even more in the context of COVID19 pandemic), the rise of the far-right, etc. The severity of the situation would logically imply an analogous response, a response that would contemplate the prospects of a decisive breach with the existing reality, a radical disruption. Yet the dominant understanding of historical development suggests that any political platform that promised radical change has by default led to catastrophic consequences.

The recent Greek crisis offers an illustration of this paradox. The 2008 financial crisis transformed the social and political setting in Greece. At the same time this »episode of instability« in the European periphery soon challenged the premises of the common European project. What followed was the proliferation of a conservative agenda that promoted a Greek version of »stabilocracy« over any prospect of social

change. The most celebrated analogy was that of the Weimar Republic; the German interwar crisis became a favorite point of reference in the language of politicians and commentators who suggested that painful stability is the only way to go, in order to prevent the rise of the »radical extremes«. What I find extremely interesting is how this anti-radical platform expressed by various center-left and center-right intellectuals made no distinction between the anti-democratic far-right and the rising party of the radical left. They were both almost with automatism perceived as »extremes« pointing at the dangerous radicalization of the Greek society.

Fast forward to 2016 elections in the USA. Donald Trump promised a radical breakthrough by employing the prospect of a return to a seemingly harmonious past. His famous slogan »make America great, again« indicating his vision of a revival of a lost utopia »again«. On the other hand, the Democratic Party responded by emphasizing the perils of populism while offering no alternative vision of a different politics and society. The self-referential slogan »I am with Hillary« exemplifies the immanent lack of political imaginary allowing Trump and reactionary forces to appear as the sole defenders of the idea of »change«, radical steps included. Here is the moment where we should reconsider the way of entrapping ourselves in a self-fulfilling prophecy: we fail to offer an alternative since we have discredited the idea of radicalism. In turn we appear puzzled by the success of radical agendas coming from the nationalist and far-right forces.

Let us investigate a very recent example and make my point clear: the Prespa Agreement. The name-dispute between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia was a triumph of nationalism on both sides of the border. The nationalistic politics of the Greek State were promoted by parties of the 1990s that did not belong to the extremes: it was the social-democratic PASOK that imposed the 1993 embargo and it was the mainstream right-wing New Democracy that had spurred the first wave of popular rallies under the slogan »Macedonia is Greek«. Since the late 1990s diplomatic stability was the synonym for a stalemate. In this context, the Prespa Agreement was a decisive step forward; it challenged the premises of nationalism by offering a reconceptualization of »national rights« and promoted a strategy of solidarity and mutual understanding. Most importantly the Prespa Agreement underlined the prospects of a positive change in a reality characterized by the rise of nationalism. At the end of the day one could wonder: isn't this a case in which progressive politics managed to reclaim the idea of radical change by altering a seemingly invincible and unchangeable status-quo?

There is no doubt that the failures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the defeat of revolutionary thought have left a deep imprint in the way we speak about the future, have resulted in limited confidence in grand narratives, and in our cautionary approach to radical political agendas. Yet, reclaiming »radicalism« from the far-right and ethno-nationalists of all sorts, and giving it its emancipatory meaning would open up the space for political and social alternatives.

# A NEW ERA OF HUNGARIAN IDENTITY POLITICS?

OSZKÁR ROGINER

Unlike more manifest topics of the Hungarian public arena, such as academic and press freedoms, welfare and labour regulations or the idea of illiberal democracy, Hungarian identity politics rarely reaches a wider attention. Despite the fact, that it is not only congruent with Hungarian foreign, economic, sport, educational or demographic policies, but it structurally alters and legitimises the political, cultural and financial landscape of the domestic and inter-state level as well, this »new era« is generally disregarded in an international perspective. It is therefore, used here more as a working metaphor to emphasise the difference, novelty, and homogeneity of the new paradigm, as well as to encourage future inquiry and critical assessment.

Misguided by externalities of Hungarian society, such as financial subsidies, institutional mutations, government programmes, awards, executive positions, monuments, speeches, rallies or vocabulary, the epochal novelty of their systemic preconditions evades us. International interpretation of contemporary Hungarian society is therefore, often misguided into misconceptions of merely late-modern cosmetic differences, reactionary anomalies, conservative exceptions from a European mainstream, or into a simple anachronism of regressive visions of society. The conceptual paralysis of focusing on these externalities disables however, critical, and effective political engagement. It often disapproves demonstrations of power, which have been long hollowed out by the regime and are marginal to it. It blurs political radicalisation into a mere erosion of democratic values and condemns to a large degree only the social flows, which can be described as 20<sup>th</sup> century models. Realising, that identity politics is a centrepiece of a profoundly new paradigm and not a contemporary irregularity, and seeing it accordingly as a benchmark of a new time, and not as a mere restoration of an old one is therefore crucial. Because, it not only has explanatory potential, but is able to shed considerable light on the possibilities of systemic opposition.

One of the most important shifts in 21<sup>st</sup> century Hungarian identity politics thus far was in this sense, a radical turn in self-perception, organisation, and interpretation of society. Although it is misleading, that the geo-historical and symbolic field of references resembles models of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, it often evades academics, activists, and opposition leaders equally, that these references are organised in a vastly different way. Furthermore, it is also unprecedented

how the landscape of Hungarians in Hungary and the Hungarian minorities in the neighbouring states is levelled, thus establishing a uniform system for disseminating ideas, commodities, and transforming the models for an interpretation of all collective experiences. Penetrating the public sphere from the early 2010s with conceptual, institutional and financial support of the ruling Fidesz-KDNP government, these identity politics reorganised and re-distributed all understandings of the national chronographic and geographic plain, while reinventing the political discourse and redefining social relations respectively. Consequently, due to the expanding stability of the current political establishment in Budapest and its links to partners abroad, as well as the futility of domestic and inter-state opposition, this model solidified rather rapidly. However, while critics condemn how these elites are not following the rules of the game, they usually fail in noticing, that the game they set out to analyse has long been abandoned for another.

Current Hungarian identity politics is discontinuous with all post-socialist and state socialist models, and although tempting, the comparison with processes of the interwar era – especially with the radicalisation waves of the 1930's – is also a misleading simplification. Not only because they are enacted by using technologies and legal forms of today, but because they are enabled by different objectives and political goals in mind. Homogenising memory politics, press politics, cultural politics, literary politics, as well as fiscal politics through alternate channels of education, media and economy, this model allowed for connecting Hungarians across state borders, regardless of citizenship. Furthermore, supported also from 2010 by the possibility of dual citizenship without residency in Hungary, these identity politics acquired a new legislative standard as well. Yet, despite the active involvement of these identity politics in rearranging the experiences of Hungarians in the neighbouring states, this proactive agency – unlike in the previous century – caused hardly any inter-state frictions.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, it even facilitated political alliances on an inter-state level, especially with Croatia, Serbia and the V4 countries.

<sup>1</sup> Aside from a few commemoration incidents in Romania, the contestation of dual citizenship in Slovakia, and a few other matters, foreign relations have been largely peaceful, the latest notable example being the absence of reactions to the unveiling of the Trianon centenary memorial in Budapest (monument made by Balázs Zimay and Sándor Mohácsi).

While previous conceptualisations viewed the state as a container of ethnicity, and borders therefore, as the boundaries of identity politics, current identity politics introduced a new perspective, giving primacy to ethnicity and a networked view of society. Diverging from 19<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian expansionism, territorial revisions during the interbellum, the fragmented and compartmentalised inter-state order of state socialisms, and consequently the liquid ambiguity of landscapes of the 1990s and 2000s, national identity is nowadays less dependent of arguments on historic geography. Although it emphasises ›hard borders‹ when creating the ›others‹, it employs (ethnic) communities instead of landscapes, when referring to the category of what once was regarded as the ›national‹. Traceable from public addresses of Viktor Orbán to institutional logistics of various foundations or associations of the regime, the Hungarian political elites of the 2010s expanded these networks between ethnic communities and individuals, while creating and delimiting others both parallel to and beyond this structure. Orbiting around a system of coproduction termed ›NER‹ this model consists of educational, security, media, mnemonic and financial programmes, thus merging and solidifying the (self) perception of communities in the neighbouring states with Budapest into networks of cultural, institutional and financial commodities.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, while the imagination of inhabited space, both within and beyond Hungary, prior the turn regarded borders as accepted or contested limits of political conduct, and devised identity politics in relation to these ›solid‹ concepts, elites by 2020 are completely indifferent to borders. Constructing a centralised and internally undivided structure within an ethnically defined Hungarian society is therefore largely devoid of a terrain. Accompanied by digital administration, dual citizenship, a coherent system of government and a corresponding media landscape, the exchange of goods and services not only relies on and interlocks within this conceptually devised web, but it also enables its reproduction.

By creating a model of political agency, which perceives all Hungarians – both in Hungary and in the neighbouring states – as part of a single network regardless of the borders drawn in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these identity politics established the possibility of a non-territorial, soft expansion of a vision of Hungarian society within the state and beyond. An argument, which prioritises networks of human resources over territorial contingencies. Even though these identity politics relied largely on already existing systems, which were historically tied to geo-political interests, the motifs of their arrangement today are assessed in a radically new way – with geography playing only a secondary role. Restructuring intra- and interstate Hungarian communication into a levelled and tightly intertwined web, all regions and minority communities are linked culturally, institutionally, administratively, and even financially into a single system, with Budapest as its metropolitan centre. Based on atomised local communi-

ties, their extensive mutual interconnectedness and intensive relation to the capital, enabling an enclosed flow of commodities, and transforming the landscape from ›territory‹ into a resource pool of citizens, voters, students, and labourers. Shaping them into mobile and dynamic subjects of Hungarian society. Other landscapes – although traditionally present in historic imagination, but beyond these operative networks of ethnicity – are not in the active registers of identity politics.

Emphasizing a discontinuity with all nation- and state-building projects of the past, Viktor Orbán often points out the novelty of how this new approach reorganised Hungarian society in its entirety. Furthermore, by establishing an integrated network of political agency and communication, how this perception not only performs and recreates the discontinuity with all previous models of identification domestically, but how it disrupts the understandings of symbolic content in the minority settings as well. Homogenising the interpretation of historic and contemporary political experiences by implementing identity politics in education, media, business or memory, this turn enabled a unified view and performance of public life, both within Hungary and in the neighbouring states. This presence redefined, integrated, and intensified internal relations, extended flows of material and symbolic goods, while placing the institutions of Budapest in central positions of power.

In terms of effective conduct nevertheless, new cores of representation had to be established and old ones restructured. Others had to be marginalised to pacify opposition. While the latter gained considerable media coverage in cases of the Central European University, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences or the decline of media freedoms, promotion of alternative institutions for science, art, education and media compatible with new visions of society are internationally less known. In order to expand this network, institutions such as the Veritas Research Institute and Archives, the Hungarian Academy of Arts, the Petőfi Literary Museum or the MTVA media trust not only employ, finance, perform and reproduce these new identity politics. They are part of the monopoly. Interrelating Hungarian communities within these fields of references, as well as expanding their influence to the communities in the neighbouring states, identity politics creates therefore, not only a shared historical consciousness, but provides tools for an interpretation of contemporary political life as well. Nevertheless, this integrated web detaches the Hungarian minorities a great deal from the identity politics of the states where they live, creating a mutually exclusive experience of the same public arena. However, since identity politics is individualized and perceived a private matter, thus distributed within one's own network, this is rarely a source of domestic conflict.

To engage in a radical critique or analysis of contemporary Hungarian society, one has to diverge from the perception of these flows as merely a continuation or revival of old patterns. Although they synthesise some of the old political agency, they are new in their nature, execution, and goals, and they will also have a different impact on Central Europe

2 NER (Nemzeti Együttműködés Rendszere) – System of National Cooperation. A colloquial term used widely by contemporary Hungarian elites orbiting around Fidesz, their political associates and often by Viktor Orbán as well.

as well. Mistaking these principles of conduct therefore, for mere variations or hybridised forms of previous models, not only paralyses radical criticisms of today, but it will continue to disable it when these new forms radicalise these societies even more. Accordingly, critique, protest, and boycott in 2020 must not focus on how unorthodox these patterns are from a viewpoint of conventional modernism, but how they form a new coherent system beyond the forms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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## THINK ENGAGED: ACADEMIA IN DIALOGUE

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ongoing series of events has aimed to provide a framework for critical reflection on the societal challenges connected to the crisis of democracy in Southeast Europe. In order to make these exchanges available to a wider audience, some selected contributions are being published in this curated format.

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## RADICAL POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE



The level of divisiveness and polarization we are witnessing today demands a more careful consideration of the social processes driving the radical forms of political engagement, of the dynamics of radicalization and its embeddedness in pressing social and political issues.

With the EU and international attention focused on the COVID19 pandemic, SEE political actors are less constrained to flirt with anti-migrant sentiments of the public, sending signals that the ongoing anti-migrant radicalization might go full steam ahead.



Hungarian case moves beyond usual ethno-territorial borders, by situating ethnicity within a network of state-sponsored programs, largely disregarding »natural boundaries«. The new model entailing educational, security, media, and financial programs consolidates and transcends physical borders of the ethnos and builds an ethnic community for XXI century.



However, we need to remind ourselves that radicalism, albeit excluded in the dominant negative notion today, needs to be reclaimed and its emancipatory meaning revived. New forms of emancipatory radicalism are necessary to continue an active struggle to sustain an open-ended perspective towards the future, thus enabling true political alternatives.

Further information on the topic can be found here:  
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