Introduction:

Contentious Politics and International Statebuilding in Southeast Europe

Nemanja Džuverović
*Faculty of Political Science, University of Belgrade,
Serbia & Northwestern University, Evanston, USA*

Julia Rone
Université libre de Bruxelles

Tom Junes
*Department of History and Civilization, European University Institute,
Florence, Italy*

In February 2016, the Citizens' Initiative "We Deserve Better" in North Macedonia (until recently Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) organized a peaceful protest called "How many shoes were left unworn" leaving in front of the government building the shoes of people who had emigrated from the country. Two months later, massive protests started in North Macedonia that ultimately led to government change and to paving the way for the country's membership in the European Union (EU) through the historic deal to change the country's name. Protesting among monuments of Alexander the Great and other newly constructed buildings glorifying the ancient history of North Macedonia, student protesters and opposition parties welcomed the intervention of international actors in order to break the political impasse. The same year a flagship development plan called "Belgrade Waterfront" drew widespread criticism from thousands of Serbian protestors that declared their right to the city and formulated a more general criticism of international statebuilding efforts in Serbia that brought neither prosperity nor democracy to the country. These two very different protests that unfolded in neighboring countries in the same year point, on the one hand, to the increasing political tensions in the region and the mobilization of bottom–up indignation, and on the other, to the very different forms that local protests could take and their different attitudes to international statebuilding efforts in the region.

The articles in this special issue explore critically the interactions between "contentious politics" and international liberal statebuilding efforts led in particular by the EU. In doing so, the issue explores four country cases in Southeast Europe: Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Romania, and Serbia. These countries are either in various stages

on the path to the EU or have acceded to the EU in 2007 after extensive efforts in capacity building, and statebuilding more generally. The case for a special issue with a regional focus on Southeast Europe rests on a few core tenets. Firstly, Southeast Europe, or the Balkans, has long been the subject of orientalizing tropes in popular and media discourses. The notion of "Balkanism" can be seen in many approaches and critiques vis-á-vis the region.[1] After Bulgaria and Romania's accession to the EU (though not without problems as the continued existence of the Control and Verification Mechanism suggests) in 2007, and Croatia's accession in 2013, the remaining countries from the region in the EU's "waiting room" are regularly referred to as the "Western Balkan Six"—a reference to their incipient "Europeanization." Secondly, the issue focuses on countries in Southeast Europe that in divergent ways underwent a transition from state socialist regimes, thereby discarding other significant cases like Greece and Turkey. Finally, the post-communist countries in the region under discussion in this issue have all been plagued by persistent problems of corruption and authoritarianism, which have not only raised questions about their statebuilding capacities along liberal democratic lines according to EU benchmarks, but have also triggered widespread protest movements in recent years. Therefore, these above commonalities warrant, in our view, a topical cluster of case studies.

Hybridization from Below

When it comes to international statebuilding, the point of departure for this special issue is different from the prevailing approach in the field. So far, a substantial literature has focused on international statebuilding in the region,[2] but only a few studies have focused on hybridity[3] as the result of international interventions. This special issue argues for a perception of social movements, in Visoka's[4] words, as public practice of hybridization where through their actions locals can comply, but more importantly resist, adapt, or reject policies that are offered or enforced on them. This "exercise in conceptual scoping"[5] is especially pronounced in the two Western Balkan countries where international interventions had (and still have) a heavy footprint. Additionally, the analysis offers a more refined understanding of international interventions in the region, transcending the understanding that these actions are a priori implemented by coercive instruments, implying the consensual nature of the endeavor (shown in the cases of North Macedonia and Romania). This point takes the analysis one step further, by introducing the process of Europeanization as a statebuilding practice with varying results depending on the approach the EU has taken towards different countries in the region. As such, this contributes to existing debates on the so-called "EU peacebuilding framework"[6] for post-conflict regions such as the Western Balkans. Within this multi-layered approach, the findings of the four cases studies prove useful in furthering our understanding of the "local turn" in international relations.

Eventful Protests in Response to (Failed) Statebuilding

What was most surprising about the recent protests in Southeast Europe was not mass mobilization per se but rather why it took so long for citizens in these countries to mobilize. Low levels of mobilization in the region and Eastern Europe more broadly have been usually explained through the cultural heritage of socialism (the experience of authoritarianism) or with the transformation thesis—the idea that the neoliberal organization of the state combined with high levels of unemployment had restricted democracy to civic rights and formal procedures.[7] Nevertheless, it seems that popular patience seems to have run out,[8] with "eventful protests"[9] in Southeast European countries turning into a transformative experience of empowerment for old and young generations of activists alike.[10]

The mobilization wave in Southeast Europe led to a surge of research focusing on a wide range of topics, from the rise of populism from below[11] to, most recently, the depletion of the commons.[12] By focusing on the ways in which activists in Southeast Europe have reacted to the policies, discourses, and consequences of international statebuilding, we add an important new perspective and a way of understanding these "eventful" protests. What is more, this issue provides a theoretical contribution to the field of social movement studies that has so far explored the interaction between contention and statebuilding primarily in the light of Western historical experience.[13] Connecting contemporary social movements to (failed) statebuilding efforts in Southeast Europe is a response to recent calls to venture beyond the Western "time-space bias" in social movement studies whose theoretical apparatus has been abstracted, to a large extent, from the concrete empirical experiences of Western European countries and the United States.[14]

While the protests of recent years in Southeast Europe have been undoubtedly part of the global wave of contention in the past decade,[15] they differ from "paradigmatic" protests in Europe's Southern Periphery (Spain, Greece, Portugal, and Italy) in important ways, including the political and discursive opportunity structures they faced,[16] the ideology of protesters,[17] their framing and protest repertoires.[18] As analysis of the Bulgarian protests has shown, it is difficult to explore these particular protests with the same theoretical framework of "movements against austerity" that has often been applied to recent movements in Western Europe.[19] Street protesters and trade unions in countries such as Belgium, France, Greece, Portugal, and Spain were indignant at the "betrayal" or "corruption" of democratic capitalism by neoliberal policies, leading to the decline of democracy.[20] However, as Gagyi notes, in East and Central Europe, democracy came with austerity and other neoliberal economic policies. In many cases, there was no democracy before austerity.[21] The same holds equally true for the states of Southeast Europe where statebuilding efforts by international actors have been often accompanied by harsh economic conditionalities and policies of restructuring.[22] Thus, while the protests in Southeast Europe were part of the global wave of contention, they differed in many important ways because of their particular historical experience of statebuilding and their position in the world system.

Varieties of Responses to Statebuilding in Southeast Europe

While the social movements analyzed in this issue can be conceived as agents of hybridization responding to international statebuilding initiatives, we need to emphasize that the particular policies of statebuilding, as well as the agency of local actors, have varied among the cases, leading to a situation in which there are a lot of similarities between the political opportunity structures in these countries, but also important differences. Institutional settings differ strongly between states, with Balkan countries being poignant examples of "states in impasse." Even EU member states in the region such as Bulgaria and Romania can at best be described as "weak states."[23] In addition, there are substantive differences between the strict conditionalities and mechanisms of control for the countries that are not yet EU members and those who are. A lack of control mechanisms for post-accession countries plagues both Bulgaria and Romania—a phenomenon described as "post-accession hooliganism."[24] Similarly, while all countries discussed in this issue have experienced the democratic backsliding characteristic of the broader region,[25] polarizing memory politics and the constellation of the ensuing conflicts and representations by political elites are quite different.[26] Unlike Bulgaria and Romania, Serbia and North Macedonia are countries that are still recovering from violent conflicts.

The protests analyzed in this issue often arose as a response to a dire economic situation. In part, this is unsurprising considering that one of the main components of transition and statebuilding in the region has been the heavy reliance of international statebuilders on comprehensive market liberalization and trade deregulation, leading to what Pugh describes as "reduction of the role of the state, the squeezing of collective and public space, a quest for private affluence."[27] However, what is interesting in the Southeast European case is the dramatically different response of social movements to this issue. While in Serbia (and to some extent Bulgaria) the movements framed present socio-economic conditions as the result of ill-fated international projects in the region, in the case of Romania and North Macedonia the solution for the protracted economic crisis has been to favor more reliance on international actors (mainly the EU).

Despite differences between the cases, in all of them there have been increasing tensions between different types of local actors. In the mobilizations analyzed here, grassroots protesters distanced themselves not only from political parties but also from NGOs, revealing an increasing tension between social movements and NGOs. This was fueled by longstanding suspicion and resentment towards foreign-funded NGOs as "colonizers" or promoters of Western interests.[28] While civil society was conceived in the beginning of the transition period as a broad-church, non-institutionalized form of living together and living in truth,[29] actors in some of these protests tried to portray civil society as an essentially elitist concept excluding people interested only in material concerns such as their electricity bills. Spontaneous grassroots movements in Bulgaria coined terms such as "people's civil society" merging nationalist and civil society rhetoric, while remaining suspicious of institutionalized NGOs.[30] In a sense, these protests marked an eventful comeback of participatory activism at the expense of

transactional activism represented above all by the NGOs that had dominated the political scene as the preferred form of international statebuilders. While the outcomes of this "limited" radicalization from below have varied in different contexts, it has opened space for new types of political actors and led to the formation of types of activist networks that are both transnational and strongly locally embedded.

It should also be noted that all protests discussed in this issue have taken place in countries that are marked by high levels of youth emigration and brain drain. Thus, one of the questions the issue explores is what happens to protest activists in the case of migration. Contrary to what the classic Hirshean perspective on "exit" and "voice" would suggest, it seems that migration does not necessarily lead to a decrease in the personal engagement of activists. One of the reasons for this is the wide use of digital media to follow protest at home and participate despite distance. But digital media not only have been used to maintain transnational networks, they have also been actively employed to organize, coordinate, and transmit information to the public in national contexts where the mainstream media have been captured by oligarchic circles and established political parties.[31] It comes as no surprise that creative uses of digital media have often accompanied initial attempts at democratic experimentation, including independent spaces for cultural and political exchange in Serbia.

In light of the above, this special issue consists of four contributions, each on a specific country case. Two articles are dedicated to cases within the context of the former Yugoslavia, also known as the Yugosphere. In their article on Serbia, Džuverović and Milošević discuss the "Don't Drown Belgrade" movement and the series of protests this movement organized in Serbia's capital in 2016, portraying social discontent with the socio-economic outcomes of the post-conflict phase. Conversely, Stefanovski investigates the impact of the "Citizens of Macedonia" platform on the policy outcomes of the Przhino Agreement brokered by international actors and aimed at reintroducing democracy in the North Macedonian captured state. The remaining two articles of this special issue deal with social movements in the countries of Southeast Europe that are member states of the EU. Junes and Rone take stock of the protests in Bulgaria in 2013 and 2017 and examine if and how political participation continued when protest activists decided to go abroad. Subsequently, Gubernat and Rammelt analyze the "We want a country like abroad!" movement, which was prevalent in Romania for the past six years aiming to re-create a value-based discourse around the idea of belonging to the European Union. By bringing these cases together, we hope to provide a broad and in-depth reflection on protest mobilizations in reaction to international statebuilding in Southeast Europe in recent years.

ORCID iDs

Nemanja Džuverović iD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8186-3670

Julia Rone iD https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0937-0270

Tom Junes iD https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5832-2502

Notes

1. M. Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); D. Mishkova, *Beyond Balkanism: The Scholarly Politics of Region Making* (London: Routledge, 2019).

2. N. Lemay-Hébert, "The 'Empty-Shell' Approach: the Setup Process of International Administrations in Timor-Leste and Kosovo, Its Consequences and Lessons," *International Studies Perspectives* 12, no. 2 (2011): 190–211; G. Visoka *Shaping Peace in Kosovo: The Politics of Peacebuilding and Statehood* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); S. Kappler, "Divergent Transformation and Centrifugal Peacebuilding: the EU in Bosnia and Herzegovina," *International Peacekeeping* 19, no. 5 (2012): 612–27.

3. O. Richmond, "Becoming Liberal, Unbecoming Liberalism: Liberal–Local Hybridity via the Everyday as a Response to the Paradoxes of Liberal Peacebuilding," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 3, no. 3 (2009): 324–44; R. Mac Ginty, "Hybrid Peace: The Interaction Between Top-Down and Bottom-Up Peace," *Security Dialogue* 41, no. 4 (2010): 391–412.

4. G. Visoka, "Three Levels of Hybridisation Practices in Post-conflict Kosovo," *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 7, no. 2 (2012): 23–36.

5. Mac Ginty, "Hybrid Peace," 392.

6. See O. Richmond, A. Björkdahl, and S. Kappler, "The Emerging EU Peacebuilding Framework: Confirming or Transcending Liberal Peacebuilding?," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 24, no. 3 (2011): 449–69.

7. T. Spöri and F. Jaitner, "The Recent Protest Movements in Eastern Europe as an Indicator for Multiple Crises?," *Austrian Journal of Political Science* 45, no. 4 (2017): 1–6.

8. M. R. Beissinger and G. Sasse, "An End to 'Patience'? The Great Recession and Economic Protest in Eastern Europe," in *Mass Politics in Tough Times: Opinions, Votes and Protest in the Great Recession*, ed. N. Bermeo and L. M. Bartels (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 334–70.

9. D. Della Porta, "Eventful Protest, Global Conflicts," *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 9, no. 2 (2008): 27–56.

10. C. Milan, "Sow Hunger, Reap Anger'": From Neoliberal Privatization to New Collective Identities in Bosnia Herzegovina," in *Global Diffusion of Protest. Riding the Protest Wave in the Neoliberal Crisis*, ed. D. della Porta (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 167–89.

11. D. Brentin and T Pavasović Trošt, "Populism from Below in the Balkans," *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 3, no. 2 (2016): 1–16.

12. F. Bieber and D. Brentin, "Introduction—Social Movements and Protests in Southeastern Europe. A New Tragedy of the Commons?," *Social Movements in the Balkans Rebellion and Protest from Maribor to Taksim*, ed. F. Bieber and D. Brentin (London, Routledge, 2019).

13. S. Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); L. Ginzberg, "The Nation's Mission: Social Movements and Nation-Building in the United States," *Social History* 33, no. 66 (2000); M. Hannagan, "State Building and Social Movements," *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements* (2013).

14. See A. Gagyi, "Social Movement Studies for East Central Europe? The Challenge of a Time-Space Bias on Postwar Western Societies," *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics* 1, no. 3 (2015): 16–36.

15. della Porta, *Global Diffusion of Protest*.

16. L. Bruszt and V. Vukov, "Making States for the Single Market: European Integration and the Reshaping of Economic States in the Southern and Eastern Peripheries of Europe," *West European Politics* 40, no. 4 (2017): 663–87.

17. F. Kostelka and J. Rovny, "It's Not the Left: Ideology and Protest Participation in Old and New Democracies," *Comparative Political Studies*, 52, no. 11 (2019): 1677–1712.

18. G. Piotrovski, "What Are Eastern European Social Movements and How to Study Them?," *Intersections: East European Journal of Society and Politics* 1, no. 3 (2015): 4–15; J. Rone, "Left in Translation: The Curious Absence of Austerity Frames in the 2013 Bulgarian Protests," in della Porta, *Global Diffusion of Protest*, 137–67.

19. Rone, "Left in Translation."

20. D. della Porta, *Social Movements in Times of Austerity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015); H. Kriesi, "Political Mobilization in Times of Crises: The Relationship between Economic and Political Crises," in *Austerity and protest: popular contention in times of economic crisis*, ed. M. Giugni and M. Grasso, 19–33 (Burlington, UK: Ashgate, 2015); H. Radice, "Enforcing Austerity in Europe: The Structural Deficit as a Policy Target," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 22, no. 3 (2014): 318–28.

21. Gagyi, "Social Movement Studies for East Central Europe?," 22.

22. J. Mujanović, ed., *The Democratic Potential of Emerging Social Movements in Southeastern Europe* (Sarajevo: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Dialogue Southeast Europe, 2017).

23. D. Bohle and B. Greskovits, *Capitalist Diversity on Europe's Periphery* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

24. V. Ganev, "Post-Accession Hooliganism: Democratic Governance in Bulgaria and Romania after 2007," *East European Politics and Societies* 27, no. 1 (2013): 26–44.

25. B. Greskovits, "The Hollowing and Backsliding of Democracy in East Central Europe," *Global Policy* 6 (2015): 28–37; L. Cianetti, J. Dawson, and S. Hanley, "Rethinking 'Democratic Backsliding' in Central and Eastern Europe – Looking beyond Hungary and Poland," *East European Politics* 34, no. 3 (2018): 243–56.

26. J. Navrátil, K. Lin, L. Cox, "Movements in Post/Socialisms: Editorial," *Interface: A Journal for and about Social Movements 7*, no. 2 (2015): 1–8.

27. M. Pugh, "The Political Economy of Peacebuilding: A Critical Theory Perspective," *International Journal of Peace Studies* 10, no. 2 (2005): 25.

28. A. M. Esteves, S. Motta, and L. Cox, *"*Civil Society versus Social Movements: Editorial," *Interface: A Journal for and about Social Movements* 1, no. 2 (2010): 1–21; A. Gagyi and M. Ivancheva, "The Rise and Fall of Civil Society in East-Central Europe," in *Understanding Central Europe*, ed. M. Moskalewicz and W. Przybylski (London: Routledge, 2017); J. Hemment, "Colonization or Liberation: The Paradox of NGOs in Postsocialist States," *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 16, no. 1 (1998): 43–58.

29. Hemment, "Colonization or Liberation."

30. J. Tsoneva, "Vectors of Ex/Inclusion in Bulgarian Civil Society Post-2013," J. Mujanović, ed., *Democratic Potential of Emerging Social Movements*, 11–16.

31. Ž. Lekić-Subašić, "Social Media and the 'Balkan Spring,'" in Bieber and Brentin, *Social Movements in the Balkans*; D. Mercea, "Transnational Activism in Support of National Protest: Questions of Identity and Organization," *Global Networks* 18, no. 4 (2018): 543–63.

Nemanja Džuverović is Associate Professor in Peace Studies at the University of Belgrade, Faculty of Political Sciences, Serbia. He is co-editor of the *Journal of Regional Security*. His research areas include sociology of international relations, welfare in post-conflict environments, political economy of liberal peacebuilding and international statebuilding in the Balkans. He has published articles in *Ethnopolitics, Peacebuilding*, and *Southeastern Europe* and a range of book chapters relating to peace and conflict studies.

Julia Rone is a Wiener-Anspach postdoctoral fellow at the Université libre de Bruxelles. She has a PhD from the European University Institute in Florence with a thesis on mobilizations against free trade agreements. Julia has taught at the University of Florence, the University of Sofia, and the Heinrich Heine

University in Düsseldorf. In 2018, she was a visiting fellow at the Weizenbaum Institute for the Networked Society in Berlin and the Centre for Advanced Internet Studies in Bochum. Julia's current research explores contestations over sovereignty in the United Kingdom, Poland, and Belgium. She has written on hacktivism, digital disobedience, and more recently, the rise of extreme right media in Europe.

Tom Junes is a historian and a Marie Sklodowska-Curie Fellow at the Department of History and Civilization at the European University Institute in Florence. His research interests cover Eastern European history and the history of student movements. He is the author of Student Politics in Communist Poland: Generations of Consent and Dissent.