

Danijela Dolenc

## **DISOBEDIENT DEMOCRACY: A Comparative Analysis of Contentious Politics in the European Semi-periphery**

***Disobedient Democracy is a 5-year (2016-2021) comparative research project implemented at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb. It explores how contentious politics advances democracy by investigating contemporary social movements in four cities of the European semi-periphery: Zagreb, Belgrade, Madrid and Lisbon.***

### *Research Question*

Contemporary democracies are suffering a profound legitimation crisis; that much is evident irrespective of which European country you come from. Since the onset of the economic crisis in 2008, we have witnessed a new cycle of contention against institutional politics (Tarrow 2012). Titles such as *Can Democracy Be Saved?* (Della Porta 2013), *Ruling the Void* (Mair 2013) or *Undoing the Demos* (Brown 2015), as well as scores of academic conferences, testify to a tectonic shift happening to how we engage in politics. Though people never really trust politicians, this is not the same as distrusting the entire political system (Hay and Stoker 2009). Ours is a time marked by a retreat from conventional politics, evident in falling electoral turnout and volatility, dwindling party loyalty and membership, as well as declining trust in political institutions (Mair 2013).

Why is this happening? Some suggest that for many ordinary citizens national politics has become irrelevant (Mair 2013). Others argue that citizens remain impassioned by politics, but their prevailing feeling is anger (Rosanvallon 2006, Hay and Stoker 2009). Contemporary social science has failed to adequately address the sources of this democratic malaise, though both are troubling. The first because it signals a growing dislocation of power into the hands of non-elected institutions (Crouch 2004); the second because history teaches us that popular anger can be channelled in many destructive ways. Jowitt (1992) argued that the failure to foster productive economies and equitable societies breeds „movements of rage“. While today such movements are more visible on the fringes of Europe – **disappointment with democracy seems omnipresent**.

If so, then the fundamental task of social analysis is to explore how this anger is organized and transformed through social struggle. Unfortunately, theories of democracy have cemented a separation between its constitutional and popular dimension, highlighting checks and balances and the rule of law, but downplaying the importance of broad popular participation (Mair 2013). When political participation is considered, it is stripped down to voting (Fung and Wright 2003, Crouch 2004). In contrast, this project argues that **transformative democratic practices are to be found in social struggles and institutional experimentation** that citizens and social movements undertake to enhance popular control over collective decisions (Fung and Wright 2003). Historically democracy advanced by „forcing open the gates of the city“ (Isin 2011). According to this conception, **disobedience lies at the heart of democracy**. The main research objective is therefore to explore ways in which contemporary social struggles advance democratic practices and offer the promise of democratic renewal in Europe.

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The project investigates contemporary democratic practices **in the European semi-periphery**, for at least two reasons. Analyses of contentious politics have mostly focused on Western Europe (Hay 2009, Mair 2013, Della Porta 2013 etc.), while processes on the fringe of Europe remain under-researched. More importantly, European semi-periphery is understood not primarily as a geographical location, but as a distinctive economic and political space (Wallerstein 1979; Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997, Domazet and Jerolimov 2014), where the contradictions of “democratic capitalism” are particularly pronounced. Innovative experiments with deepening democracy occurred in Southern Europe (Hughes 2011, Taibo 2012, Castaneda 2012, Castells 2015) as well as in the „desert of post-socialism“ (Horvat and Štiks 2014, Dolenc and Doolan 2013, Dolenc, Doolan and Tomašević, forthcoming). Finally, the project **focuses on cities**. The urban dynamic is considered as epitomizing larger processes of political and social change.

### *Research Design*

The project will implement a **comparative case study of four cities in the European semi-periphery: Zagreb, Belgrade, Madrid and Lisbon**. By focusing on contentious democratization and analysing societies outside Western Europe, the project rectifies two glaring silences identified in contemporary social science (Della Porta 2013). Regarding methodology, it employs a **mixed-method research design** that utilizes the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative analysis (Creswell 2009) and enables both **within-case and cross-case comparison** (George and Bennett 2005). The period under study is **2000 – 2015**, so as to create a „before and after“ design that enables drawing causal inferences (George and Bennett 2005). The year 2008 when the economic crisis started is the threshold between the period of relative economic stability, and the later period of still-evolving economic recession and crisis.

The four cities are selected to create two paired comparisons: Madrid and Lisbon versus Belgrade and Zagreb. Comparing pairs assumes that many potentially relevant contextual factors are fairly similar, while comparison across pairs is intended to highlight theoretically relevant differences (Przeworski and Teune 1970, Gerring 2007, Tarrow 2010). The pairs share structural conditions as well as historical legacies which set the parameters for political action (Kirchheimer 1965, Diamandouros and Larrabee 2000, Ekiert and Hanson 2003, Dolenc 2013). Next, neighbouring countries exhibit diffusion of ideas and action repertoires (Kopstein and Reilly 2000, Beissinger 2007, Tarrow 2011) as well as trans-border links between organizations and networks of activists. Regarding differences, an important distinction is the length of democratic experience (1974 versus 1991) and manner of transition to democracy: from revolution in Portugal, inter-elite pact in Spain and democratization through war in Croatia to reluctant adoption of pluralism in Serbia. Finally, Southeast Europe emerged from state-socialism, which entails political and economic legacies important for subsequent democratization (Kitschelt et al 1999, Ekiert 1991, 2003, Darden and Grzymala Busse 2006, Dolenc 2013).

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The first specific objective of the project is to map political participation and contention in the four cities, understood to encompass conventional political participation, recourse to citizens' petitions for referenda and other forms of direct democratic practices, as well as the repertoire of contentious actions such as demonstrations, occupations and blockades. The second specific objective of the project is to explore how key factors relate to these disobedient democratic practices: character of democratic regime, legacy of previous regime type, diffusion of ideas and action repertoires across Europe, the EU policy framework, and the impact of austerity policies.

### *Impact*

The project will ensure dynamic communication with the wider scholarly, political and activist community in Europe. It will rely heavily on its website and other social media tools for dissemination and communication, as well as participate in European events relevant for project objectives.

An outreach mechanism that ensures long-term sustainability of the project is **the establishment of the Urban Hub**. The Urban hub will build a network of scholars who work on urban issues from various academic disciplines and professional backgrounds, and its main objective will be to promote interdisciplinary research on *the city*, facilitate collaboration and public outreach, and support public engagement of academics in advancing progressive social change. The project website will be the online location of the Urban Hub.

### *Project Team*

In addition to the Principal Investigator (Danijela Dolenc), the project will employ two full-time employees - **research associates** - for the duration of the project. Research Associates are expected to design PhD dissertations in line with the project research priorities. The project ensures funds for their mobility during the PhD programme, as well as relevant methodological training. In addition to pursuing dissertation work, research associates are expected to implement data collection and take on organizational tasks such as preparing project meetings, organising dissemination events and maintaining the project website. Given that PhD students will organise, co-supervise and implement data collection, the project will help them acquire essential research skills, develop their dissertation topics and author first publications under the purview of the project.

In addition, the project will assemble an **interdisciplinary team of post docs, students and civil society activists** involved in developing and implementing various project activities.

Given that the project will be implemented in four countries, during its first year the project will establish cooperation with experts and institutions in **Serbia, Spain and Portugal**, and aim to establish cooperation with academic institutions in these countries.

### *Global Expertise*

The project relies on cooperation with the Minda de Ginzburg Center for European Studies at Harvard University (US), the Centre for Research on Direct Democracy (Switzerland), the Center for

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