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Post-Yugoslav Everyday Activism(s): A Different Form of Activist Citizenship?

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Abstract

Activism is typically associated with work within charities/NGOs or participation in social movements. This essay highlights activism different from these forms in that it happens without funding or mass mobilisation. Instead, it is powered by the longer-term perspective and day-to-day efforts of 'activist citizens'. Based on interviews and participant observation in bookshop-cafés and other donor-independent initiatives in Novi Sad, Serbia, the essay argues that such 'everyday activism' is significant not only because it supports the development of other, more visible, forms of activism, but also in its own right, as a counter-space contributing to social change.

Activism in the post-Yugoslav context tends to be examined from two perspectives. On the one hand, some studies focus on 'civil society' understood in myriad ways, but usually explored through research on non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Helms 2003; Jeffrey 2007). On the other hand, other studies are concerned with social movements and popular protest (Fagan & Sircar 2013; Jacobsson & Saxonberg 2013; Sardelić 2013; Štiks & Horvat 2014). This essay aims to supplement these two understandings of activism by looking at forms of activism which are less obvious because they seek neither financial support (which distinguishes them from NGOs), nor recognition (which distinguishes them from social movements and popular protest). These forms of activism aim to create counter-spaces and counter-practices gradually and discreetly.

The essay scrutinises everyday, discreet activisms, that is, alternative forms of activism in contexts where other forms of activism appear unsatisfactory or ineffective, and where

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activists choose a less radical and more long-term approach. My interest is threefold: to what extent these activisms form, for engaged individuals, a stage between (or perhaps beyond) engagement in NGOs and social movements in 'genealogies of activism' (Stubbs 2012); whether they are performed independently of such engagements; and whether they form a link between different activisms or catalyse them. Examples of such activisms include efforts aimed at goals similar to those of NGOs and social movements (for example, opposing growing social inequalities, nationalism, and capitalist usurpations of public space) but take on different organisational forms or remain altogether informal.

Theorising everyday activism

The activist citizen and her 'sites'

The starting point of this essay is the 'figure of the activist citizen' developed by Engin F. Isin (2009). While active citizenship has been traditionally connected to interest and engagement in the political affairs of one's country (Kearns 1995; Marinetto 2003) or, more broadly, to economic activity or any other 'productive contribution to society' (Fuller *et al*. 2008, p. 157), Isin's activist citizens go further.[1] They not only fulfil their civic duties and responsibilities (Carens 1986; Deigh 1988) but also 'make claims to justice … break habitus and act in a way that disrupts already defined orders, practices and statuses' (Isin 2009, p. 384). The actions of an activist citizen are stimulated not only by responsibility but also by 'militant commitment' (Balibar 2004, pp. 49–50).[2] Robert Putnam used two Yiddish terms to distinguish between *schmoozers*—people who are engaged by talking (*schmoozing*) about things—and *machers*—'those who do', that is, engage in community projects, vote, and protest, for example (Putnam 2000, pp. 93–4). An activist citizen is a *macher*, one who makes things happen, and it is her or his acts (Isin 2008, 2009, p. 372), whether grand (starting a revolution) or (seemingly) small (blogging), that allow us to recognise him/her as an activist citizen.

Isin's activist citizen operates within 'sites' and 'scales' of citizenship. Sites are 'fields of contestation around which certain issues, interests, stakes as well as themes, concepts and objects assemble' (Isin 2009, p. 370). 'Scales' in turn denote the focus of such contestation: 'cities, empires, nations, states, federations, leagues' (Isin 2009, p. 372). It is through sites, scales, and their own acts that '"actors" claim to transform themselves (and others) from subjects into citizens as claimants of rights' (Isin 2009, p. 368). It is important to stress that sites and scales, more often than not, are conceptual rather than physical, and that they often overlap and depend on each other (Isin 2009, p. 372). In the context of protest and/or contestation of the dominant order, sites in particular become conceptually close to Henri Lefebvre's 'counter-spaces'.

Counter-spaces

For Lefebvre, 'counter-spaces' are 'spaces occupied by the symbolic and the imaginary'; 'forces that run counter to a given strategy'; an 'initially utopian alternative to actually existing "real" space' (Lefebvre 1991, pp. 366, 367, 349). In the context of the ever-present

[1] For a less traditional treatment of active citizenship, see Goldstein (2016).
[2] See also Isin (2009, p. 383).

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commodification of public space, counter-spaces become an important element of activist de-commodification of the city. These are more and less temporary, physical and non-physical 'spaces' which, as Fran Tonkiss put it, 'refuse a predatory logic of capital' (Tonkiss 2005, p. 64). Lefebvre explains:

> What runs counter to a society founded on exchange is a primacy of *use*. What counters quantity is quality …. When a community fights the construction of urban motorways or housing developments, when it demands 'amenities' or empty spaces for play and encounter, we can see how a counter-space can insert itself into spatial reality: against the Eye and the Gaze, against quantity and homogeneity, against power and the arrogance of power, against the endless expansion of the 'private' and of industrial profitability; and against specialized spaces and a narrow localization of function. (Lefebvre 1991, pp. 381–82)

Similarly to acts of citizenship, counter-spaces must not be grand. On the contrary, Lefebvre himself asserts that one should not see them as an extreme, as a total opposite of desires of political power, a grand counter-force. He argues that 'everything (the "whole") weighs down on the lower or "micro" level, on the local and the localizable—in short, on the sphere of everyday life' (Lefebvre 1991, p. 366). The power of counter-spaces lies not in their ability to turn things upside down in an instant, but in that they 'open up cracks in the totalizing logic of the capitalist city' (Tonkiss 2005, p. 64).

Everyday utopias

Focus on daily practice is also characteristic of what Davina Cooper (2014) calls 'everyday utopias'. She uses this term for

> networks and spaces that perform regular daily life … in a radically different fashion. Everyday utopias don't focus on campaigning or advocacy. They don't place their energy on pressuring mainstream institutions to change, on winning votes, or on taking over dominant social structures. Rather they work by creating the change they wish to encounter, building and forging new ways of experiencing social and political life. (Cooper 2014, p. 2)

Examples of such 'everyday utopias' include spaces as diverse as a feminist bathhouse in which volunteers teach fellow women to appreciate and enjoy their bodies, a time-trading scheme in which participants exchange services rather than currency, or the Speakers' Corner in London. According to Cooper, the function of these spaces is twofold. On the one hand, 'against the assumption that anything outside the "normal" is impossible', they reveal their own possibility (Cooper 2014, p. 4), and on the other hand, they constitute spaces 'from which to critique the world as it currently is' (Cooper 2014, p. 5). As such, one could argue, even if they seem not to be particularly successful in creating a sustainable alternative to the current order, they can still be perceived as successful in creating a starting point for further action but also, like Lefebvre's counter-spaces, in 'opening up cracks' and undermining the universality of the current state of affairs.

Micro-politics/infrapolitics

Finally, this essay engages with two theories which foreground non-evident, less visible, and not particularly dynamic, yet significant, avenues forming an integral part of citizens'

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engagement in broader political change. These are Jeffrey C. Goldfarb's theory of politics of small things, or micro-politics (Goldfarb 2006, 2008) and James C. Scott's theory of infrapolitics (Scott 1990). Goldfarb's theory arose from his study of student theatres in Poland in the late 1970s and his observations of various everyday practices which escaped full control of the state, such as clandestine poetry evenings in private apartments at that time (Goldfarb 1980, 2006). In the late 1970s, both the work of student theatres, formally controlled by the state, and practices such as poetry readings seemed completely insignificant. However, argues Goldfarb, a couple of years later, during the upsurge of the *Solidarność* (Solidarity) movement, it became clear that this movement would not have been possible without the 'electricity' created by the multiplicity of seemingly small and insignificant actors and practices, such as those he studied. Similarly, Scott points to historical examples of subordinate groups engaging in activities such as 'poaching, squatting, desertion, evasion, foot-dragging', as well as more symbolic ones, such as creating folktales of revenge. He calls such activities 'infrapolitics', because infrapolitics create the 'cultural and structural underpinning of the more visible political action' (Scott 1990, pp. 183–84) in the same way that appropriate infrastructure is indispensable for any serious business. Both authors argue that the less visible, not particularly dynamic, and seemingly insignificant practices on which they focus are in fact extremely important. They argue that such practices are not a 'safety valve' or a substitute for real anger and real action, nor are they necessarily direct stimulators of change. Instead, in their multiplicity and diversity, they form an environment without which change would not happen.

Place and method

The research on which this essay is based was conducted in Novi Sad—Serbia's second biggest city (with a population of about 340,000) and the regional capital of Vojvodina, an autonomous province of Serbia that has for centuries been part of various Hungarian kingdoms and Austria–Hungary. Novi Sad is a relatively young city (hence *Novi*—new—in the name) established in the time of Austria–Hungary, as a result of cooperation between local Danube Swabians, Hungarians, and a large Serbian minority. Despite large population shifts after World War II and throughout recent conflicts, the city remains multi-ethnic: it is now home to a Serbian majority and a multitude of minorities, most notably Hungarians, but also Croats, Ruthenians, Romanians, Slovaks, Roma, Jews, and others. Unlike many other cities across the western Balkans it was not directly affected by fighting during the recent Yugoslav wars. Novi Sad's bridges were bombed, not by civil fighting, but by NATO, an external enemy. It would be wrong, however, to think of Novi Sad as untouched by war—many of the city's men were incorporated in the Serbian army and a huge influx of refugees became the root of many of today's conflicts. Minorities have experienced 'low-level violence' (Bieber & Winterhagen 2006), enough to incur long-lasting resentment and mistrust. The psychological trauma is only a part of what makes Novi Sad a post-war city. Here, as elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia, the wars have shaped post-communist 'triple transitions'—political, economic, and the nation-building that has seen the emergence of powerful national elites (Offe 1991 p. 871). In the new successor states of the former Yugoslavia, even more than elsewhere in Eastern Europe, the situation was 'replete with opportunities … to improve one's "original endowment," or to take revenge' (Offe 1991, p. 872). The rise of nationalism went hand-in-hand with non-transparent privatisation and the development of *nouveau riche* elites. Today, the wars of

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the 1990s remain for the inhabitants of Novi Sad the key point of rupture between a better past and an insecure present. For many, an invisible map of unwanted monuments, changed street names, and businesses which they know flourished as a result of the arms trade, other war-profiteering, or corrupt processes of privatisation, is a constant remainder of the conflicts.

Method

The core of the data for the research presented here was collected between January and June 2014 through interviews and ethnographic observation.[3] The research first focused on bookshop-cafés—places which, during an earlier four-year project (2009–2013), appeared to be particularly important for activists in Novi Sad—and later included other similar initiatives. Regular participant observation was conducted in two bookshop-cafés, while four other similar venues were visited less regularly. The managers or owners of most of these venues were interviewed, as well as some of their customers. These data were complemented by a follow-up visit and participant observation in November 2015, interview and ethnographic data collected during earlier research visits to Novi Sad between 2010 and 2013, and by information obtained online.

Not for profit

This study started from the author's astonishment at the operations of some of Novi Sad's bookshop-cafés. These venues operate as businesses but, because of their ambitious choice of books, they have little chance of being successful in economic terms and therefore could also be seen as charities. The observed bookshop-cafés sold books by respected foreign and local authors, books on philosophy, books tackling current social and political questions, dictionaries of the local minority languages, and books for children which aimed not only to entertain but also to educate and instil values in the youngest generation.[4] Some of these books sold slowly and some (such as books in Hungarian—the language of the city's largest ethnic minority) seemed not to sell at all. In relation to local pay, books in Serbia are expensive and even more so if they are published by independent publishers. In the UK, a new copy of Plato's *Republic* sells for approximately the equivalent of one hour's work on the minimum hourly wage; in crisis-hit Spain or in Poland, for approximately two hours of such work. In Serbia, however, a copy costs the equivalent of over seven hours of minimally paid work.[5] At the same time, as in many other post-communist countries, the cultural capital typical of Western middle-, upper-middle-, or even 'upper' classes—a taste for poetry, an inclination towards books on difficult subjects, a distaste for television (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron 1990)—often does not correlate to the financial resources typical of such classes in the West (Eyal *et al*. 1998; Goldstein 2011; Cvetičanin *et al*. 2012; Salmenniemi 2012). Thus, what could seem a well-thought-out marketing plan—the use of books as symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1984) able to attract the well-read who are at the same time well-off—is not an effective strategy in Serbia. That is because the well-read and the well-off are to a

[3]The interviews were originally conducted, transcribed, and encoded in Serbian. Citations for this essay were translated by the author.

[4]That is, books such as *Winnie the Pooh* or *The Little Prince* or even more ambitious titles such as *Why Do People Make War?* rather than, for example, books with protagonists from current television series.

[5]Using prices from some of the most popular online bookshops in these countries. Author's own calculations.

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large extent two different groups.[6] In this context, stocking shelves almost exclusively with quality, hard-to-sell books seemed to be a naïve business model. Indeed, during the course of my research, several of the places I observed went bankrupt, changed owners, or were forced to leave their premises, subsequently selling their stock online. However, for the owners of these bookshop-cafés, their choice of books, the location of the venue, and even the size of their shop, were all part of a struggle. They considered their activity as a struggle against the primacy of quantity over quality, the reduction of value to profitability, the occupation of central spaces in the city by banks, chain-stores, and shops for the super-rich, and the commodification of public space. Thus, while the method they chose was very different as they did not expect instant change, the claims that they made were in many respects similar to those of protesters on Varšavska Street in Zagreb (see Dolenec, Doolan and Tomašević's contribution to this collection) or other Right to the City movements. These claims were also very political: in a post-Yugoslav region which for more than two decades has been undergoing a 'seemingly endless transition to liberal democracy and neoliberal economy' (Štiks & Horvat 2015 p. 1) and where the word 'transition' has 'brought into both public and political discourse quasi-biblical connotations of acceding to the "land of plenty"' (Horvat & Štiks 2012), to question the rules of the free market or the ethos of making ever-growing profits is fundamentally political.

Books as tools and symbol

In some cases, the very choice of venue for the bookshop-café was meaningful. *Serendipiti* was, for instance, a large, three-storey modern bookshop-café located in the most central part of the city, surrounded by banks and expensive restaurants. Roman, the owner, believed that the books he wanted to offer deserved to be in the most central part of the city, even if this was not the best idea business-wise. At the same time, he saw being in the centre as a way of reaching a wide audience and playing a role in changing local society. He declared that he was happy even when people only read the books in the bookshop without actually buying them.[7] When he started the business, he also tried to encourage reading (also among those who only came for the coffee) by leaving books on all coffee tables, and using them as menu-holders. This had to be stopped, as many people hesitated to come in, believing that the tables were reserved. For Roman, the ambitious choice of books that he offered and his various efforts to get the books read were about 'building taste' in the local community. He did this in opposition to bookshop chains:

> Bookshop chains participate in creating taste. In the same way as we experience 'tabloidisation' of media, we have in the same way the 'tabloidisation' of publishing, because books that people look for, these are books of low profile, these are hits, these are books which are completely meaningless … and all these tastes are dictated by licensing agencies, through their branches here, that's it![8]

[6]At the time of my research, there was at least one café-restaurant in Novi Sad that did use books as symbolic capital—part of a larger marketing and interior-design plan. In that restaurant, books, alongside expensive Italian or Spanish ham, cigars, and quality wines, contributed to the overall elegant ambience of the venue. In fact, these books were placed too high to be accessible and their choice, which clearly showed that they were chosen for their covers and not for their content, indicated that this was a very different place from the ones that I investigated.

[7]Interview #8, Roman, owner of *Serendipiti* bookshop-café, Novi Sad, 18 June 2014.

[8]Interview #8, Roman, owner of *Serendipiti* bookshop-café, Novi Sad, 18 June 2014.

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Engin F. Isin points out that citizenship 'involves practices of making citizens—*social*, *political*, *cultural* and *symbolic*' (Isin 2008, p. 17, emphasis added). Roman's activity involved a variety of such practices: providing books on social and political topics, providing space—the top floor of his venue—for cultural events, and bringing all these into the city centre to symbolically break the dominance of banks, exclusive shops, and other sites of consumerism.

Lemi, owner of *Lemijeva Knjižara* (Lemi's Bookshop), used ideologically similar but in reality very different practices for 'making citizens'. His was a small family business, a bookshop with new and second-hand books, where he and his closest family would treat some of the guests to a cup of coffee and/or a glass of *rakija*, sit with them, and discuss books, art, politics or, as I observed during one of my visits, his and his guests' experiences of activism. The place was very modest, located in a residential neighbourhood away from the city centre. There seemed to be two main types of visitors to the bookshop: people from the neighbourhood, mostly schoolchildren passing by with their parents; and seasoned readers (including Novi Sad's activists), some of whom would come to the bookshop from other parts of the city or even other cities. Similar to Roman, Lemi presented his idea of a bookshop in contrast to the chains and saw it as something necessary for the city, for both authors and society:

> I wanted to keep one ordinary bookshop in Novi Sad. Ordinary, in the sense that it would not be led by this commercial moment. To say … there are some publishers which … are completely not known but which do some very interesting things. And if these things, if they are not found by someone from this commercial sphere and if they are not offered to potential buyers, to literary magazines, to readers, then they remain unknown …. You know, if someone works with poetry today … this may sound, who knows how, but … this is very important, it is important for the whole society. There should always be these … these dear lunatics who … who write poetry and those who read it, who appreciate it in any case.[9]

It is instructive to ask whether these activities should really be taken as micro-politics or infrapolitics. Without a doubt, being an ineffective businessperson is not itself a form of activism. Asef Bayat calls for distinguishing between everyday resistance and simple everyday coping (Bayat 1997, p. 70). Similarly, Roger Mac Ginty who examines everyday peace, which comprises uncoordinated everyday practices allowing for the creation of 'islands of civility' in conflicted societies, stresses that 'in order for everyday peace to be taken seriously as a meaningful practice, it needs to be conceived of as more than an aggregation of coping mechanisms' (Mac Ginty 2014, pp. 11, 12). But the activities of Roman and Lemi went beyond coping: they had the potential to make more money and were aware of it. For instance, Lemi could sell coffee instead of offering it for free and Roman could easily have installed television screens during the 2014 football World Cup to attract more customers. However, both of them argued that such compromises would hurt the ethos of their respective places.[10] When balancing between the 'commercial moment' and creating spaces which, in their eyes were socially, culturally and, in the longer term, politically enriching their city, they chose the latter. It is this choice which allows us to see them as activist citizens, ones who are actively resisting, not just coping.

[9]Interview #6, Lemi (Miljenko), owner of *Lemijeva Knjižara*, Novi Sad, 17 June 2014.

[10]Interview #8, Roman, owner of *Serendipiti* bookshop-café, Novi Sad, 18 June 2014; interview #6, Lemi (Miljenko), owner of *Lemijeva Knjižara*, Novi Sad, 17 June 2014.

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As with other independent booksellers examined during the research, Roman and Lemi intended to sell books in local minority languages, particularly Hungarian. Despite the fact that the city has a relatively large Hungarian minority (officially around 4%, but probably more), these books are hardly ever bought.[11] This might be due to the fact that many of Novi Sad's Hungarians do not actually know Hungarian; also, that those who do read it are used to buying books online, during trips to Hungary, or directly from the local publisher. Nevertheless, both Lemi from *Lemijeva* and Roman from *Serendipiti* felt that it was important for them to have books in minority languages. Having books written in Hungarian was only insubstantially related to potential sales. However, as Roman explained, they were there out of respect towards the city's largest minority: 'we keep these books because we consider it a question of respect to have books in Hungarian in Novi Sad. This is normal. I wish we also had books in Romanian'.[12] For Lemi too, keeping books in Hungarian was simply the 'right thing to do',[13] as was almost certainly the case for managers of *Knjižara Gradska* (City Bookshop), another large bookshop-café in the very centre of the city, which went bankrupt before *Serendipiti* opened. *Knjižara Gradska* had an entire section devoted to books in Hungarian, and kept a very large (and very expensive) Romani–Serbian dictionary in the most prominent place in the bookshop. Just like the people participating in the 'everyday utopias' studied by Cooper, for owners and managers of these places, these practices were simply 'normal and right' (Cooper 2014, p. 5).

The efforts of these bookshop-café owners to keep the languages of the local minorities visible in the bookshop space can be seen as symbolic statements. Such symbols may have little immediate significance, but they do create a counter-voice to that of ever-growing nationalist sentiment on the one hand, and the primacy of what Lemi called 'the commercial moment' on the other.[14] In fact, the two seem to be interconnected, particularly in Novi Sad where commercialisation of the public space often goes hand-in-hand with erasing the city's multi-ethnic and multicultural heritage. The German cemetery, the Jewish cemetery, and the centrally located Armenian Church had already been destroyed during communist times to make space for wider streets and buildings of 'public utility'. The post office constructed in 1961 was built diagonally between the octagonal grid of buildings and made so high that it obscures the view of the otherwise very large synagogue from both the main pedestrian area and the road from Belgrade running through the city centre (Stevanović 2013). More recently, sites testifying to the city's multicultural heritage have been destroyed in the name of making space for commercial development. In March 2016, the marble gravestone of an Armenian family erected in 1790 was destroyed to make space for the construction of a 13-storey building.[15] The grave was not only the last material testimony to the former Armenian community of Novi Sad, but was also a centrally located and highly visible reminder

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[11]According to the 2011 census (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2012, pp. 36–7) there are 3.9% of Hungarians in Novi Sad. However, according to the same census 9.25% of citizens of Novi Sad declared their ethnicity as 'Yugoslav', 'Other', 'Regional affiliation', 'not known', or did not declare it. It is likely that also some of the city's Hungarians adopted these categories.

[12]Interview #8, Roman, owner of *Serendipiti* bookshop-café, Novi Sad, 18 June 2014.

[13]Interview #6, Lemi (Miljenko), owner of *Lemijeva Knjižara*, Novi Sad, 17 June 2014.

[14]For discussion on this and other 'narratives of diversity' see Goldstein (2015).

[15]'Počela gradnja solitera: Srušena zaštićena zgrada, uklonjen stari jermenski spomenik', *mojnovisad.com*, 26 March 2016, available at: http://www.mojnovisad.com/vesti/pocela-gradnja-solitera-srusena-zasticena-zgrada-uklonjen-stari-jermenski-spomenik-id8655.html, accessed 28 April 2016.

that at one time Novi Sad was so multicultural that German and Latin words, alongside Serbian names written with Hungarian spelling, could all coexist on a single tombstone. In this context, maintaining public spaces where the multilingual heritage of the city is exposed and promoted is distinctive and potentially empowering from the perspective of minorities and those who care about their city's multi-ethnic character.

(Counter) space

The abovementioned *Serendipiti*, *Lemijeva*, and *Knjižara Gradska* were not the only places in Novi Sad that combined books and coffee with a social mission. *MaTerra Mesto* was a joint initiative of a second-hand bookshop—*Prostorija* (Room)—and Novi Sad Lesbian Organisation (NLO)—an organisation known not only for promotion of LGBT rights but also for its broader activist engagement in the city, for example, with questions of freedom of artistic expression or the rights of ethnic minorities. The house, formerly a film studio, was rented to the NLO for a symbolic amount of money by Želimir Žilnik, a well-known film director and public intellectual. Apart from the bookshop, a gallery managed by *Prostorija* and a café and Lesbian Reading Room Lepa Mlađenović (*Lesbejska Čitaonica Lepa Mlađenović*) both operated by the NLO, it also hosted a music studio used by a collective of local musicians and rooms for artistic residencies. At the time of the fieldwork, these rooms were occupied by a group of German artists who transformed books into sculptures and artistic installations, and worked on other artistic projects in the city. For the NLO, running the place together with a bookshop and turning it into an independent cultural centre was part of their activism, no less important than the protests or events that they would regularly organise. Their cooperation with a bookshop was by no means incidental. According to Jelena, an NLO leader, 'the books themselves and the idea of reading, I think one does not need to comment on how important they are'.[16] Like Roman and Lemi, and also the theorists of the role of education for democracy such as Martha Nussbaum (2010), Jelena had no doubts about the importance of promoting readership in general and in the arts and humanities in particular, for a healthy and peaceful democracy. Nussbaum argues that the arts and humanities play a crucial role in developing a society which is critical of populism, open to difference, and prepared for constructive political dialogue, because they develop both the skill and the inclination to ask questions, to take account of different perspectives, and to argue rationally (Nussbaum 2010, pp. 27–77). Focusing on such potential, long-term results rather than immediate and quantifiable outcomes motivated the NLO activists to cooperate with *Prostorija*. This cooperation was also about gaining a 'door' which was always open to the outside world and always welcoming, to bring people from the wider community to the activities and resources of the NLO. Jelena was convinced that cooperation with *Prostorija* was a good choice. She argued:

> It opens our space to the outside, to the street—this one, one with many passersby—Futoška …. It simply welcomes all types of people, there is no selection, there is no 'what is that?' [as compared to a lesbian organisation] …. What I want to say is that different types of people enter a bookshop. I think strategically it is good for the [entire] venue.[17]

[16]Interview #2, Jelena, one of the leaders of Novi Sad Lesbian Organisation, *MaTerra Mesto*, 26 February 2014.

[17]Interview #2, Jelena, one of the leaders of Novi Sad Lesbian Organisation, *MaTerra Mesto*, 26 February 2014.

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While the café attracted mostly people who knew very well where they were going (a venue co-run by an activist lesbian organisation), the bookshop did serve as an entry point for people not connected in any way with the world of activism. Having entered, they would typically first browse the books in the first room (occupied exclusively by *Prostorija*), then notice the café and the fact that the place was a cultural centre offering exhibitions and events, and then find their way to the second room of books, where books sold by *Prostorija* were mingled with those of the Lesbian Reading Room and a collection of leftist and anarchist publications. It is hard to say whether such an encounter with a library full of books on social and political activism (in most cases, an encounter limited to noticing the existence of that library) had any lasting impact on such accidental visitors. One thing is certain, however: the accessibility of this space and its everyday existence made it different from the often over-professionalised, event-centred and, for many people, altogether inaccessible 'NGO world' (Belloni 2001; Grødeland 2006).

Other than being accessible, *MaTerra Mesto* was probably the most visibly socially engaged of the places studied. It hosted a number of exhibitions, presentations, lectures, and evenings of Serbian and Hungarian poetry, as well as providing artistic residencies, like that of the abovementioned German artists who made book-art. As one regular visitor to *MaTerra* told me, it was a place where 'one could come, sit, communicate, set up an organisation, [an] exhibition … [and it was a] place created to be multicultural and multidisciplinary'.[18] In many respects, *MaTerra* was a counter-space, an 'initially utopian alternative to actually existing "real" space' (Lefebvre 1991 p. 349). It was a space exhibiting a number of distinguishing features: books on the LGBT community were not hidden but readily accessible; shelves full of books in Hungarian testified to the city's multi-ethnic character; people from the neighbourhood could meet seasoned activists; and joint readings of contemporary Serbian and Hungarian poetry took place where everyone spoke their own language and each word, not only the poetry but also comments and discussion, was translated. This space developed its path towards self-sustainability[19] against the belief, widespread among NGO activists, that external funding is necessary for socially engaged work to happen regularly and achieve its goals.[20] It was a space that, like other 'everyday utopias', revealed its own possibility 'against the assumption that anything outside the "normal" is impossible' (Cooper 2014, p. 4) and in effect empowered its visitors to keep planning and engaging in further activism.[21]

[18]Interview #14, anonymous middle-aged Novi Sad activist who regularly visited *MaTerra Mesto*, Novi Sad, 20 June 2014.

[19]*MaTerra Mesto* was established with the help of a small grant which the NLO received from its long-standing partner organisation from Sweden, with the aim of developing into a self-sustainable entity. The place had only existed for five months before the institutions and collectives using it were expelled on the premise of conflicting legal claims to the property that they occupied. Although such a short period was not enough to develop full self-sustainability, *MaTerra* was about 'half-way' to it when it was closed and the gradual development of its turnover suggested it would have developed into a completely self-sustainable entity in the not too distant future (follow up Skype interview with interviewee #2, Jelena, one of the leaders of Novi Sad Lesbian Organisation, *MaTerra Mesto*, 12 May 2016).

[20]I base this observation on my conversations with NGO/charity activists in Poland, Hungary, Serbia, and the UK. When, asked about my research, I explain that I focus on organisations/groups which exist without external funding, this is typically met with a mixture of surprise and scepticism, often manifested in the question 'But, how do they manage?'. Leaders of 'typical NGOs' (Goldstein 2016, p. 142) in particular see applying for project grants as an unfortunate (because of its unpredictability, effort needed to prepare applications, and in their eyes often awkward donor requirements) but still most readily available and reasonable way of fundraising for their organisations.

[21]From just a few informal follow up talks conducted in 2016, I learned that at least one frequent visitor to *MaTerra* had started her own, self-sustainable activist space and that evenings of Hungarian–Serbian poetry which started at *MaTerra* continued to take place regularly in various venues across the city.

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Beyond books and coffee

Despite all the opportunities relating to combining books and a café/meeting-space with social engagement, this is by no means the only possible form of everyday activism. One example of a not-for-profit initiative in Novi Sad which is neither an NGO nor a typical protest movement—and has nothing to do with either books or coffee—is *Free Team Pokret* (Free Team Movement), a 'group of friends' who organise different types of free initiatives.[22] They give away 'Free Hugs' and organise 'Free Salsa', 'Free Yoga', 'Free Film Screenings', and other free events. Such activities may sound trivial, but it can be argued that most of these events are important to the local community and could potentially attract international donor funding. Free salsa, yoga, dodgeball, and cinema keep young people occupied, away from drugs, alcohol, and other problems; on top of that, such activities facilitate new friendships and 'networks of trust' (Putnam 1992). In addition to organising different types of free activities for the general public, *Free Team Pokret* has also organised small performances and games for children with autism and those suffering from cancer, and they regularly work with children and adults with Down syndrome.[23] However, like Lemi and Roman, who had the potential to make their businesses more profitable but decided not to do so, the people from *Free Team Pokret* have decided not to make it an NGO or look for sponsors, so as not to compromise their principles. They used an argument similar to that of Roman and Lemi: why would they spend their time translating their website into English, looking for sponsors, writing evaluation reports, and other such tasks when they could use that time doing what they want to do? As one of *Free Team Pokret*'s (informal) leaders told me in an interview:

> Many organisations have offices, and there are two–five people in the office every day, but what are they doing? … If nothing comes out, they get paid to be there, you know, come at eight, leave at four, it's a work day. It's not an activity in the same sense as an action on the street. I'm a street person …. We organise but we are not an organisation.[24]

Consequently, they have chosen to organise events with no budget or on very low budgets and, when necessary, earn funds to support them by their own work.

Many of the events organised by *Free Team Pokret* seemed to be about setting an example. Rather than organise seminars or training on living without alcohol, the importance of trust or 'non-violent communication', instead, they would organise a vegetarian meal, not accompanied by alcohol, in a flat where several of them lived, to which they would invite young people whom they had recently met. One such meal which I observed in November 2015 was followed by games. It was an excellent example of an encounter characterised by fun, friendship, and respect, without alcohol or drugs. For *Free Team Pokret*'s new friends, this example, which they themselves had a chance to experience, might have been not less (or maybe actually more) convincing than the leaflets or training they could have received from a professional NGO promoting the same values.

[22]Quote from interview #21, anonymous interview with two of *Free Team Pokret*'s informal leaders, Novi Sad, 17 August 2010. For more examples of what could be seen as everyday activism see, for example, Jacobsson (2015), Polanska (2013), Polanska and Chimiak (2016).

[23]'Humanitarni Rad', *Haos Animatori*, 2015, available at: http://www.haosanimatori.com/avanture/#humanitarni-rad, accessed 12 May 2016.

[24]Interview #21, anonymous interview with two of *Free Team Pokret*'s informal leaders, Novi Sad, 17 August 2010.

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Fun and play have always been at the centre of *Free Team Pokret* activities. This should not be seen as insignificant and not connected with activism. As Asef Bayat argues:

> Fun, whether foreign and commoditized or indigenous and innocent, can be subversive …. Fun disturbs exclusivist doctrinal authority because, as source of instantaneous fulfilment, it represents a powerful rival archetype, one that stands against discipline, rigid structures, single discourse, and monopoly of truth. It subsists on spontaneity and breaths in the air of flexibility, openness, and critique—the very ethics that clash with the rigid one-dimensional discourse of doctrinal authority. (Bayat 2010, p. 148)

In addition to this everyday activism, *Free Team Pokret* also engages in even more obviously political and activist actions. In December 2011, approximately 100 citizens of Novi Sad, coordinated by a well-organised but not formally registered collective of NGOs, associations, informal groups, and individuals, in what they called 'illegal but legitimate' action, broke into, cleaned, and occupied former army barracks to convert them into *Društveni Centar*—a social and cultural centre. *Free Team Pokret* was at the site with music, from a speaker plugged into a small, petrol-powered electricity generator, and offering free hugs.

Hipster activists?

At this point one may think that the people involved in the work of *Free Team Pokret* or the others mentioned in this essay are 'hipster activists' engaged in a 'comfort-zone activism': that they do things not-for-profit because economic circumstances are not important to them.[25] According to my observations and interviews, the opposite was true: their activism was often at a high personal cost. Some of them would supplement their activist work with another 'real' job (or multiple small jobs), others would simply live on a shoestring. In any case, their work was not informed by a studied indifference to material comfort underpinned by affluence, but rather the readiness to earn less, or at times to not earn at all, in order to engage in what they believed was more important than profit. It was this readiness—far from obvious in a country undergoing an economic transition in which success is often measured in one's ability to become rich—that allows us to see their commitment as radical.

Networks and entanglements

Historically, Central European literary coffeehouses, precursors of today's bookshop-cafés, created, as Steven Beller argues, a '"free-floating" network, of connected "spaces of freedom" that provided the setting, the space of Central European culture, making that space inclusive of many points of view, a pluralistic space, open to the possibilities and varieties of human thought' (Beller 2013, p. 57). In many respects, the bookshop-cafés which I have listed so far created such a 'free floating network' of independent spaces; however, they were not the

[25]This argument is related to a similar one, that western Balkan civil societies are a 'middle-class phenomenon' (Grødeland 2006, p. 239) and thus are detached from local communities (Belloni 2001, p. 177; Stubbs 1997, p. 58). In my earlier investigation of civil society, broadly defined, in Novi Sad and Mostar, through quantitative data from over 70 NGOs, associations, informal groups, and movements, I was able to show that in reality different strata of the local population are well represented within the civic sector (Goldstein 2013, pp. 146–89). It is also instructive to ask whether, in twenty-first-century Europe, terms such as 'middle class' or 'hipster' do not encompass too broad a variety of circumstances to remain useful.

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only ones of this type. *Radio Café 021*, a space combining a bookshop and a café with an independent local radio station and a foundation, was another. The place was very openly socially engaged. The radio presented itself, first of all, as a place where 'we can do some minimal corrections of the world in which we live'.[26] Here, as in *Serendipiti*, *Lemijeva*, *Knjižara Gradska*, and *MaTerra*, books were carefully chosen and this choice was 'part of a larger project',[27] a project of 'not accepting cultural and political populism'.[28] Two other similar places were *Izba*, not a bookshop but a café-bar with a small art gallery filled with books (not for sale) that were easily accessible to anyone interested, and *NuBlu*, once home of *Prostorija* and now a café-bar run by a *de facto* cooperative of three young women who rent part of the space to a bookshop and organise a full programme of recreational activities.[29]

This 'free-floating network' was very important for activists in Novi Sad. It offered free space for meetings whenever funding for office space ran out; space for events when no funding to rent a place was available or when space was needed quickly and going through the process of applying for grants was out of the question; and many opportunities to network, 'spontaneously' meet other activists, and discuss questions related to politics and social engagement. The importance of this network for a particular organisation can be illustrated through the example of *Ogledalo* (Mirror), an independent activist theatre group. *Ogledalo* is known for approaching questions of discrimination and violence against women, physically impaired, and other oppressed groups through theatre performances, workshops, and festivals and happenings in the city space. The theatre has frequently changed offices and places to rehearse and perform throughout the 20-plus years of its existence. When at one point it lost its office altogether, its meetings moved to *Knjižara Gradska*, *NuBlu*, and some of the other aforementioned sites. When in 2012 it needed a performance space, the group was given the opportunity to use the basement hall of *Izba*. A couple of years later, the leader of the theatre was hired by *Radio 021* to work in the radio's newly established foundation. There she brought in her experience and contacts while gaining a new environment and resources for her activism. Other people engaged in the theatre's work met regularly in *Izba* and in other places within this 'free-floating network'.

This network was not a network in the sense of interconnectedness: even if owners of these different places knew each other, they did not formally cooperate. It was, rather, a network of spaces offering autonomy from both state and international donors (with their own policies, ideas, limitations, and interests), spaces similar to what Hakim Bey (2011) calls 'Temporary Autonomous Zones' (TAZs). According to Bey, a Temporary Autonomous Zone

> is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerrilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen [sic], *before* the State can crush it. Because the State is concerned primarily with Simulation rather than substance, the TAZ can 'occupy' these areas clandestinely and carry on its festal purposes for quite a while in relative peace. Perhaps certain small TAZs have lasted whole lifetimes because they went unnoticed …. (Bey 2011, p. 70)

[26]'O nama', *Radio 021*, available at: http://www.021.rs/O-nama.html, accessed 25 March 2015.

[27]Interview #16, a manager of *Radio Café 021*, 20 June 2014.

[28]'O nama', *Radio 021*, available at: http://www.021.rs/O-nama.html, accessed 25 March 2015.

[29]While the place had formal management structures required by law, the three women said that they actually took decisions and operated as if the place was a cooperative (interview #10, the three owners of *NuBlu*, 18 June 2014).

Through such a lens, *Free Team Pokret* constitutes a TAZ, a type of discreet activist resistance which does not engage directly with the state. It is one which fulfils different needs from bookshop-cafés but is similar in the claims it makes (opposition to consumerism and the commercialisation of public space, concern for the education of future generations, opposition to political and cultural populism). Similarly to bookshop-cafés, it might be facilitating activism, but it is not merely a 'preamble' to a 'more real' activism. It is activism in its own right, different from the more visible activism of NGOs or within protest movements, but not necessarily any lesser for it.

Activist citizens

In March 2016 a construction company demolished the last Armenian gravestone in Novi Sad. An informal group called *Pokret Uličnih Čitača* (Movement of Street Readers) was one of the first groups to protest, which they did by reading Armenian poetry aloud in public where the gravestone once stood. At the forefront of *Pokret Uličnih Čitača* were Lemi, his wife, and some of the readers (Lemi refused to call them 'customers') who came regularly to the bookshop. This illustrates two important characteristics of the (counter) spaces presented in this essay. Firstly, for the engaged individuals, more often than not, they constitute just another type of activism, often practised in parallel to other forms of activism, such as participation in protests and NGO work. Indeed, Roman, the owner of *Serendipiti*, was also a founding member of the Association of Publishers of Vojvodina (established in 2001) and of Centre for New Media (established in 2008). When I asked if he had a plan for if *Serendipiti* went bankrupt, he replied without hesitation that he might engage in the 'promotion of the civic society [*građanskog društva*] and human freedoms, in some other way'.[30] Similarly, Lemi, when asked about his past, replied: 'I have been in the bookstore business already for 25 years. Before that I was, in some other way, stimulating [cultural life in] this city … through, through … play' and went on to describe his past activist experience.[31] For people like Lemi or Roman, running their place was not a 'warm up' before real activism, but activism proper, in a form which they believed appropriate.

Secondly, these spaces should not be looked upon as a struggle by only a few engaged owners and managers. Most of these spaces were co-created by a number of people whose joint efforts brought them into being and who often continued to co-create them by employing solidarist forms of management. In some cases, such as that of *MaTerra Mesto* and *NuBlu*, their existence was facilitated by the owner of the venue who agreed to rent it for a very low fee because she or he believed that it was important for such space to exist in the city. Drawing on Isin, we can see such acts as acts of citizenship because 'to act, then, is neither arriving at a scene nor fleeing from it, but actually engaging in its creation. With that creative act the actor also creates herself/himself as the agent responsible for the scene created' (Isin 2008, p. 27). Similarly, all of those people who allow *Free Team Pokret* to use various spaces across the city (in parks, schools, and universities) free of charge, sometimes breaching the formal rules of hiring these spaces, practise their own (activist) citizenship through these acts and become co-responsible for making *Free Team Pokret* the (counter) space that it is. Finally, the customers/readers/participants co-create them and facilitate their existence by choosing these spaces rather than others (which many do very consciously) and by actively engaging in their

[30]Interview #8, Roman, owner of *Serendipiti* bookshop-café, Novi Sad, 18 June 2014.
[31]Interview #6, Lemi (Miljenko), owner of *Lemijeva Knjižara*, Novi Sad, 17 June 2014.

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activities. For *MaTerra Mesto*, *Lemijeva*, and *Free Team Pokret*, all of which combined very limited resources with ambitious goals and intensive programmes, activism was part of their everyday existence, powered by 'an interaction between friendship, ideas, and ideals' (Bilić 2011, p. 316), or something that Hirschman (1984) would call 'social energy'.

In this context, we can see activism as something not limited by the lifespan of a particular bookshop-café or another initiative, group, NGO, or movement. For those involved, activism is a lifelong affair for which different initiatives and spaces function as 'sites' of citizenship (Isin 2009, p. 370). Individuals may move from one to another, be involved in several at the same time and take on different roles: that of formal leader, informal facilitator, owner, supporter, or participant. Thus, the lack of sustainability of specific initiatives should not be lamented. Despite being temporal, in their multiplicity they provide an avenue for engagement and, hopefully, change.

Conclusion

This essay has considered forms of activism that are different from both professionalised and often donor-dependent NGOs, and independent, but usually short-lived, protest movements. The forms considered are not networks of the type seen by Stubbs (2012) as generational precursors to NGO and protest-movement activism in the Western Balkans. Rather, these are spaces which exist in parallel to NGOs and movements and constitute an alternative way of performing activist citizenship. What makes these spaces unique are their day-to-day operations shaped by the social activism of people who constitute them. For some of these people (for example, members of *Free Team Pokret*), these activisms form an alternative to NGO work, while for others (for example, Roman, the owner of *Serendipiti*) they complement it. For many, they go hand-in-hand with active engagement in movements when opportunity or need arises. The engaged individuals are activist citizens (Isin 2009): people who want to change their local reality and who, in their 'militant commitment' (Isin 2009, p. 383), move between different available forms of activism or create new ones.

Still, it might be intuitive to think of the bookshop-cafés or 'free' initiatives analysed in this essay as spaces for activism, as a 'preamble' to activism, rather than activism proper. Theories of counter-spaces (Lefebvre 1991) and of everyday utopias (Cooper 2014) help us understand these activisms as spaces (physical or not) which, by creating alternative realities, standing in opposition to commodification of public space and to populism, nationalism, or xenophobia, constitute activism on their own and not merely spaces for other, supposedly more 'real', activism. The (counter) spaces studied were in most cases completely independent of NGOs and movements, but at the same time strongly inter-connected with both. For some of the NGOs and movements and also for individual activists, they provided an infrastructure for activist work and/or for more day-to-day micro-politics or infrapolitics (Scott 1990; Goldfarb 2006) in which the activists engaged. This combination of resources and ethos often translated into real-world actions carried out by NGOs and movements. Everyday activism appeared to be a catalyser for other activisms while at the same time being a form of activism in its own right.[32]

[32]It is important to note that this essay assessed a range of, by-and-large, progressive activisms. It is instructive to ask whether it is inevitable that everyday activism is progressive, or whether similar dynamics could (or perhaps already) happen within the sphere of nationalist, xenophobic, and other 'uncivil activisms' (as discussed in Kopecký & Mudde (2012)). Further analytic and empirical research is needed to answer this question.

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Recognising discreet, hard-to-notice forms of activism like those analysed in this essay might be particularly important in the context of (South) Eastern Europe. As Alla Marchenko noted in her article, 'one of the most common visions of civic engagement in Europe is that countries of the post-Socialist bloc demonstrate a relatively low level of civic engagement' (Marchenko 2016, p. 12). Perhaps the problem lies not only in the civic engagement itself but also in the way we assess it. A focus on the everyday rather than on quantifiable (NGOs) or extraordinary (protest movements) activism could bring new insights to our understanding of activism in the region.

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