KARLO KRALJ

REVIVING PARTY DEMOCRACY IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE THROUGH NEW LEFT MOVEMENT PARTIES: REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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1. Introduction

The notion of the crisis of democracy seems to be ubiquitous in contemporary social research. Over the past two decades, various analytical narratives have attempted to explain this complex phenomenon, giving birth to different names for the current condition, such as *audience democracy* (Manin 1997) and *post-democracy* (Crouch 2004). More recently, especially in the West, indicators such as lowering electoral turnout, increasing voters' volatility, and drop in party membership are often taken to be proof of the "void" that has been broadening between voters and their representatives (Mair 2013). Increasing economic inequality and concentration of wealth, a trend that has been slowly unfolding since the 1980s, have reached historical dimensions (Harvey 2005; Streeck 2011). In parallel, nation-

states that have been developing within the neoliberal paradigm for a very long time (Hay 2007) were recently confronted with their lack of capacity to handle a variety of crises, most recently and most blatantly the Covid-19 pandemic and post-pandemic recovery (Durand 2023).

Although many of the abovementioned narratives claim that there is a crisis of democracy, what we actually see is the crisis of its historically specific type – parliamentary party democracy (Urbinati 2016). Indeed, *contemporary democratic decline can be closely associated with the dysfunctionality of political parties and their capacity to represent citizens* (Mair 2013). In this essay, I deal with the specific predicaments of contemporary party organizing and reflect on the ways in which political parties might be revived as spaces of democratic organizing. I do so in three steps. First, I look at the overall problems faced by contemporary political parties, with special attention to the issues of their internal democratic organizing. Second, I give an overview of the current situation in Southeast Europe with regard to the development of new left movement parties. Third, I offer a set of specific recommendations for activists that could help in reviving democratic party organizing.

2. Conceptual background: From cartel parties to movement parties

Social researchers in the 1990s, Richard Katz and Peter Mair famously noted a change in the organization of political parties, making a claim that contemporary democratic politics is dominated by a new breed of political parties: a cartel party (Katz & Mair 1995). This new party type denotes a tendency of major political parties to become programmatically similar and overall less contentious in their claims. Motivated by the emergence of professional career politicians, cartel parties collude

with each other, lose their footing in the social base, and become increasingly dependent on state resources (ibid). Cartel parties are significantly different from three previous party types that historically used to dominate representative institutions, such as (elite) cadre parties, mass integration parties, and catch-all parties. While historically the elected officials maintained their power either through party membership or by relying on the party bureaucracy, the cartel party is characterized by an increasing predominance and autonomy of parties' top elected officials from both party membership "on the ground" and the central party office (Katz, Mair 1993).

The idea that political parties are both central players and the main enemies of democracy is not a new idea. Relatedly, in his classical reconstruction of the concept of the political party, Sartori showed how over the centuries many thinkers tried to preempt problems coming out of politicians' self-interested behavior. Political parties were conceived as collectives that could serve the public interest and help organize political representation and were therefore distinguished from factions and factionalism that was used to label self-serving power struggles used exclusively for advancing private interests (Sartori 1976).

Contradictions and problems arising from the crisis of political parties are well mirrored in contemporary political research. The most widely used "minimalist" definition of political parties, which dominates contemporary empirical political science, claims that a political party is any group that aims to gain power through electoral competition. As White and Ypi warn, although it facilitates the comparison of political parties across time and space, this kind of definition, when taken for granted, strips the concept of political party from any normative preoccupations (White, Ypi 2016).

Can social researchers get out of this conundrum and offer a new vision of political parties? Can society re-imagine how political parties work? Part of the answer might be found through empirical assessment of another party type – movement parties. Movement parties are a hybrid type of political parties, typically defined as "coalitions of political activists who emanate from social movements and try to apply the organizational and strategic practices of social movements in the arena of party competition" (Kitschelt 2006: 280). Unsurprisingly, the researchers' increasing interest in this ostensibly new party type might be associated with an increasing opening that the democratic decline represents for new actors (Hutter *et al.* 2018).

3. Re-emergence of new left movement parties: global and post-Yugoslav perspectives

In parallel with the increasing sense of crisis, especially in the aftermath of the Great Recession, a number of left-wing actors across the globe tried to reclaim political parties as organizational devices (Della Porta 2015; Della Porta *et al.* 2017). Indeed, many of the most well-known social movements that emerged in response to the Great Recession have subsequently contributed to the emergence of new political parties (e.g., Podemos, Syriza, La France Insoumise) or the revival of left-wing mobilization within previously existing parties (e.g., Labour Party under Corbyn). In addition to the prominent electoral actors, many smaller left-wing municipalist civic platforms have been observed in Spain (Rubio-Pueyo 2017) but more recently also in France (Dau 2020), the United Kingdom (Ball 2019) and Italy (Alagna 2019).

The emergence of the new electoral left can equally be traced across post-Yugoslav space, with a series of newly

emerging electoral actors: the Initiative for Democratic Socialism (2013) and subsequent Left (2017) in Slovenia; Workers' Front (2015), New Left (2016), Zagreb is Ours (2017), and We Can (2019) in Croatia; Do Not Let Belgrade D(r)own (2014/ 2018), Party of Radical Left (2020) and Green-Left Front (2023) in Serbia.[1] In the rest of this essay, I specifically focus on Left (Slovenia), Možemo (Croatia), and Green-Left Front (Serbia). Although the three contexts are significantly different, these actors share several important characteristics. First, they are an outcome of the long-term development of left-wing activism that, since the beginning of the democratic transformation in the 1990s, has mostly maintained its activity through various NGOs, initiatives, and other similar non-electoral types of actors (Stubbs 2012; Kralj 2021). Second, they emerged as a consequence of the rise of new forms of activism and new political priorities over the past two decades (Dolenec *et al.* 2017), especially as articulated through mass protest events in Slovenia (2012-2013), Croatia (2011, 2016) and Serbia (2016), all of which signalized the opportunities for electoral mobilization (Kralj 2023). Third, they were all established as challengers to the previously established left-wing and liberal political parties, mainly of social-democratic origin. In other words, along the lines of radical left parties in other parts of Europe, they can be defined as positioned "to the left of social democracy" (March 2011: 2).

New left movement parties' specific position of left-wing challenger comes with an important complexity – they all find themselves in party systems with relatively unified and

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[1] It is also relevant to mention the case of Levice in Macedonia, which was established in 2016, but ideologically soon took a rightward turn (Bosilkov 2021).

strong right-wing political parties: Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) in Slovenia, Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) in Croatia, and Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) in Serbia. Notwithstanding the divergence of the three right-wing parties in their relative importance across the three party systems, their strength in all three countries imposes specific pressure on the coalition dynamics of liberal and left-wing political parties, putting new left movement parties in a complex dilemma. They are pushed to collaborate and, at least when necessary, enter coalitions with left-wing and liberal parties in order to weaken the position of right-wing actors. At the same time, however, they have to keep a distance from these very same left-wing and liberal political parties if they want to maintain their specific policy positions and ideological identity.

New left movement parties, however, also deal with a specific set of tensions arising from contradictions internal to all movement parties. Given that their structure attempts to combine movement-based horizontalism, which follows the principles of broad participation and deliberation, and party-based verticalism, which focuses on the hierarchical relations between the state, the parties, and the voters (Toplišek, Thomassen 2017), movement parties face specific problems of internal democracy. The problem of internal party democracy, especially its oligarchizing tendencies, has been addressed in detail by a number of classical authors, such as Weber, Michels, and Ostrogorski (see: de Leon 2013). Indeed, as noted by Kitschelt, movement parties are initially characterized by relatively low levels of investment in resolving problems of collective action, i.e. organizing membership, securing inclusive participation, and motivating collaboration (Kitschelt 2006). Can they push beyond these initial conditions?

In the fourth and final section of this essay, I would like

to focus on specific problems that movement parties on the Left have been facing in their internal organizing. Based on each of the problems, I will offer brief reflections on possible steps that new left movement parties in Southeast Europe can undertake to mitigate the potentially negative consequences for party democracy.

4. After the entry: recommendations for reinforcing democracy in new left movement parties

Based on the overview of experiences of recent cases of movement parties on the left, we can identify a few specific but closely interrelated problems.

Even though movement parties claim to be able to bridge the vertical and the horizontal logic of decision-making, parties tend to go in the opposite direction – that of party leadership concentrating all the power in its hands. This does not mean that oligarchization is an essential feature of political parties – a claim that is often substantiated through the so-called "iron law of oligarchy", a pseudo-axiomatic statement based on a widespread misinterpretation of Robert Michels's analysis of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (Michels 2016 [1911]) – but simply that complex organizations, including political parties, demonstrate an overall *tendency* to take the course towards oligarchization (Diefenbach 2019). Such a *tendency* can bring to non-responsiveness and lack of accountability of the party leadership with respect to its base, i.e. its movement.

The lack of leadership accountability is particularly important due to the administrative and economic obstacles that, once in power, movement parties have to confront. Confronted on a daily basis with problems, party leadership might develop a deep understanding of the status quo and simply give up on radical political change.

In the recent history of the European left, probably the most dramatic was the case of Syriza and its compromise with austerity-imposing international actors, which made the Syriza government administer harsh austerity measures (Ovenden 2015; Katsourides 2016). More recent and less extreme cases can be located in municipalist movement party governments in Barcelona and Madrid. While successful in pushing for environmental sustainability policies and transparency, both cases showed very limited capacity to enact any ambitious change in policies related to the right to housing (Feenstra, Tormey 2021). Although it is still too early to evaluate the mandate of Možemo (and Zagreb je naš) in Zagreb, the party has already confronted criticism about its compromising with neoliberal discourse and governance (Stubbs 2022).

The limited capacity of actors to undertake substantial political change might have a negative influence on the sense of political efficacy shared by social movements and even those activists close to political parties. Put simply, the final consequence of the party leadership's lack of responsiveness is the activists' disillusionment and negative perception of the party's capacity to enact its own priorities. In the long run, this can bring to the overall loss of membership or at least movement-based membership.

While objective limitations to enacting political change certainly can seem overwhelming, there are at least three possible specific recommendations related to party organizing that could serve movement parties in ameliorating the abovementioned tendencies.

First, *movement parties need to institutionally encourage the accountability of the party leadership.* In order to achieve this, echoing the cartel party thesis, Bickerton and Invenizzi Accetti propose strengthening the position of the party's mid-ranking membership. By

strengthening the intermediate stratum of activists, the party leadership should become more responsive, as mid-ranking members are strategically best positioned to communicate the members' and the voters' positions with the party leadership (Bickerton, Invernizzi Accetti 2021).

Second, *left-wing activists should maintain a proactive collaborative relationship with multiple organizations and types of repertoire in their immediate environment.* This recommendation can be derived from the recent work of Rodrigo Nunes who claims that the Left needs "to shift from thinking organization in terms of individual organizations to conceiving it ecologically: as a distributed ecology of relations (…)" (Nunes 2021: 164). This does not imply that the party needs to be an all-controlling coordinator of different groups and organizations, but rather that movement parties need to rely on organizational ecologies. In short, successful organizational ecologies come from the existence of "several actors that combine the ability to intervene at certain key points of the chain with the capacity to think the chain as a whole" (ibid.: 169).

Third, *movement parties need to continuously expand and innovate their capacity for the recruitment of new activists.* In order to keep in touch with their main principles, new left actors need to especially think about recruitment strategies that attract individuals beyond the class background of their existing membership. Some indications of a possible course of action were given by Jane McAlevey, who as a seasoned trade union organizer offered a set of specific suggestions and techniques on how to attract and organize politically disengaged individuals at the level of the community (McAlevey, 2016).

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