

## **Nonviolent struggle and its application in new social movements: an interview with Srdja Popović**

**Gloria Novović**

### **Abstract**

*In a personal interview conducted on February 12 2014, Srdja Popović, a co-founder of the Center for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies and one of the founding members of the Serbian resistance movement Otpor, offered his assessment of the different nonviolent strategies of the most recent movements. He talked about the achievements and challenges of the Arab Spring, European anti-austerity movements and Occupy Wall Street. Furthermore, he examined the growing role that social media, the occupation tactic as well as horizontal organizing play in new social movements.*

**Keywords:** nonviolent action, Serbia, Gene Sharp, CANVAS, Otpor

### **Srdja Popović — from Otpor to Canvas**

With the eruption of the Arab Spring, the Slovenian anti-austerity protests and Occupy Wall Street, global media rushed to link the uprisings with Otpor, the Serbian movement of national resistance that helped oust Slobodan Milošević in 2000 (see, e.g.: Cartalucci 2011, Sacher 2012, Stahel 2012, Chossudovsky 2011). The famous image of a closed fist, popular slogans as well as the rhetoric used by many movements of color<sup>1</sup> and Arab Spring protests were remarkably similar to those of Otpor, whose members formed a non-government organization – CANVAS (Center for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies). This Belgrade-based organization, which dates back to 2004, has guided activists from all over the world through the theory of nonviolent resistance. It has organized educational workshops for activists in the Philippines, Georgia, Bahrain, Egypt and many other countries as well as produced approachable booklets that take the activists, step by step, through the most important notions of power, civil disobedience and social movement framing. The organization addresses also various theoretical approaches to the nonviolent struggle, and offers lectures in many U.S. universities and an entire graduate program at Faculty of Political Science at Belgrade University. Practical work of the organization focuses on workshops and trainings for activists. The Center has worked with activists from Ukraine, Georgia, Kuwait and, recently, from Egypt and Tunisia.

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<sup>1</sup> *Color revolutions* describe a series of revolutions that took place in the countries of the former Soviet bloc in the process of a transition toward a more democratic society. They are called ‘color’ as most revolutions are associated with a color or a flower representing a revolutionary movement (eg. Ukrainian ‘Orange Revolution’, Georgia’s ‘Rose Revolution’ etc.).

Their teachings are based not only on their own experience in Serbia but also on teachings of many academics, primarily those of Gene Sharp, the founder of Albert Einstein Institute, whose book *From Dictatorship to Democracy* represents a true cornerstone for studies of nonviolent struggle. Gene Sharp, however, does not consider himself an activist. Instead, he perceives himself as a theorist, and his work is focused on theoretical aspects of power and oppositional strategies. Sharp's theory is focused not only on mechanisms of power and strategies of its disintegration, but also on an analysis of the instruments required for a peaceful transition towards democracy and national unity. The Serbian revolution became a successful case study that followed Sharp's teachings, and Otpor quickly turned into the Serbian brand. Since its founding, CANVAS has collaborated with activists from over 46 countries, organizing more than 200 workshops (canvasopedia.org). Due to its support of various countries from the ex-Soviet bloc as well as several nations of the Arab Spring, its members have repeatedly been accused of serving foreign interests and private agendas of NGOs such as the International Republican Institute which is closely linked to the U.S. Department of State.

However, despite CANVAS' undeniably strong contribution to the diffusion of ideas and strategies of nonviolent action, it soon became evident that no single organization could be the cause of the most recent popular upsurges around the globe. Otpor deployed interesting strategies, efficient and unique media and field campaigns, and the language of nonviolent yet offensive approach. CANVAS also studied many revolutions and protests as well as helping educate activists from all over the world. This makes this organization and, consequently, its co-founder – Srdja Popović, an interesting interlocutor in the analysis of the most recent popular protests. While CANVAS helped educate some Egyptian groups and their collaborators, Marović spoke to the General Assembly in New York, the organization has not had close or direct contacts with most anti-austerity movements in Europe (with the exception of Slovenia where Popović gave speeches only after the protests were well underway), nor was it involved in the planning of the Occupy Wall Street protests. Still, Popović's reflections concern these latter movements as well and he offers a historical and a methodical analysis of their strategies and dynamics. Furthermore, he also addresses possible mistakes that activists made and the lessons future activists could learn from these experiences.

During the interview, this Otpor veteran offered his take on horizontalism, democratic and inclusive movements as well as the most appropriate tactics and instruments a movement should apply in order to exercise more pressure on society and bring about change. Just like CANVAS books, many of which Popović wrote or co-wrote, my interlocutor's outlook on theory tends to be rather practical. For example, he dismisses my predominantly symbolic interpretation of Otpor's horizontal structure which highlights the importance of individual ideas and inclusive attitude towards marginalized groups and/or persons. He sees horizontalism as only one of many possible movement structures alongside those that focus on charismatic leaders. Charismatic leaders may be symbolic figures (for example, Gandhi) or effective organizers or "general managers", to

use Popović's term (for example Martin Luther King). He believes that every movement structure serves specific purposes and under any given circumstances, it may be the best structure possible. The key is, as he argues, to choose the structure congruent with the movement's needs and purposes. Horizontal structure is only one of the options that movements have at their disposal:

A movement should choose the structure, organization and the command system that suits the movement best, or that helps its approach to the identified enemy – like Otpor did; it worked on the level of its founders and local branches top-down in the student protests of 1996 and 1997 and then the general mobilization worked from the bottom up. [The movement] worked based on the program and also on symbols – creating unity – both to ensure the right connection with general public as well as the enemy. Some [members] were more active but there were no top decision makers.

He is proud of Otpor's local branches that were independent and self-organized, yet completely compatible with the national movement. The overall structure and tactics applied by the movement were an outcome of the student protests that started in 1992 and ended in 1997, following a 100-days-long protest in over thirty towns that Popović himself describes as “massive and serious” while Antić, a historian and a participant, defined as “morally correct, moderate, wise and peace-loving”(2006). This student protest quickly turned into popular protests that did not, however, reap the same success due to the overall incoherence among the protesting groups and strong police repression. Popović argues that he and his friends from Otpor tried to overcome these weaknesses and find ways to unify the dissenting crowds but also to keep the movement protected from severe police repression.

Disappointed with the lack of organised opposition on the part of political elites and recognizing the lack of “unity” that Sharp himself declared one of the three keys to success (the other two being careful planning and, of course, nonviolent techniques), the movement chose non-political affiliation and addressed the general public in a direct way. This is when the horizontal structure helped. Popović claims that Serbia of 2000s was experiencing the same “deficit of trust” in the political elites that is currently present across the Middle East, Europe and the United States. It is in these places now that “groups of outsiders gathered with an idea, energy and strategies and started mobilizing people who were just as unhappy with politics as we were.” He stresses the importance of a correct mentality-evaluation when deciding on different movement structures and organizational mechanisms. Individualism and self-interest of the Serbian people worked well with a horizontal movement in Milošević's Serbia where youth, in particular, embraced the idea that there is a movement they can help to shape. “Serbians are big teenagers who don't like to be told what to do,” Popović jokes, “to motivate people (...) it is better to create a movement where everyone can be a leader.” In fact, Otpor members often introduced themselves with their names, followed by the famous phrase “I am one of 70 000 leaders of Otpor.” This created a sense of protagonism as well as national-based solidarity. This Otpor leader believes that linguistic innovations of new social structures and social dynamics motivated people and created

strong connections among activists, even among those from different local branches. Also, dealing with a repressive regime, horizontalism and the independence of local branches helped the movement's resistance to police repression since arrests in one city did not automatically undermine the movement's activity in other parts of the country and it was very difficult to identify the "leaders" when all the members could claim to be leaders.

The second reason for choosing horizontalism was linked to Otpor's direct political opponent. While Milošević had no problems with publicly prosecuting some opposition leaders, it was difficult to do that with single members of Otpor for many reasons. Not only was it difficult to identify one person in charge of the movement or at least the face of the movement, but also the general public reacted negatively to movement repression. Many Otpor leaders were young people, in some cases minors, whom community perceived as weak and optimistic youth that were getting crushed by armed and aggressive police officers. Police brutality made older generations to immediately side with young Otpor activists. As Popović remarked with a smile:

These grandparents, who were generally voting for Milošević, started changing their minds when they had to spend hours on the phone with the police officers, demanding the immediate release of their grandchildren, imprisoned for organizing silly street actions or putting up a few posters.

In fact, it was these "silly" strategies that had a great impact on the public appeal of Otpor but also on diminishing respect for the authorities. Popović refers to the technique of organizing humoristic and symbolic skits and street actions for movement promotion and raising awareness as "laughtivism."<sup>2</sup> Otpor used symbols and thought-provoking campaigns that were catchy, thus attracting people's attention and making any aggressive reactions from the authorities seem exaggerated and unjustified. Additionally, many campaigns involved celebrities and artists, which helped raise the movement's visibility and overall popularity.

Overwhelming support of the general public strengthened the movement, allowing it to adapt a more aggressive approach to the established opposition. The latter, lacking political strength and citizens' support, had to accept Otpor's ideas about inter-party unity in fighting Milošević, that involved creating a single opposition campaign that all opposition parties would support. The credibility and integrity that Otpor used as its main weapon came from the trust it earned from the people or as Popović put it: "Otpor was the only hope of overturning Milošević and the voters recognized Otpor as [the movement that] can say what is right and wrong." He talks about an unofficial campaign when the opposition was "conditioned" to work together, supporting a single opposition block and attacking Milošević. "We needed to turn the elections into a referendum – for or against Milošević, that was the only way to defeat him." In fact, the political coalition created in 2000 was peculiar because it combined parties with very

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<sup>2</sup> Activism based on laughter and comic relief, used as a political strategy to undermine dictator's power and ridicule him/her.

different ideological convictions and programs. Those who refused to listen, like one politician - Vuk Drašković - learned the lesson the hard way – his election results were at an all-time low. This particular aspect of the Serbian revolution and of most color revolutions (i.e. exerting influence on the opposition parties) was severely criticized. First of all, it questions the democratic values of the revolutionary movements; second, it feeds the fears of foreign influences on the political development in weaker countries; and finally, it contributes to the fact that most color revolutions never saw the emergence of new political leaders; the power-holders who replaced dictators ousted by these movements were no dilettantes. On the contrary, they were politicians with prior political engagement and personal interests. In fact, it is important to understand that Popović does not propose a cultural or structural change such as Occupy Wall Street or *Indignados*. He proposes political action that is strong enough to affect economic and social change through reforms and other political activities. People's empowerment should help guarantee the duration of a democratic state.

When I mention the unions, Popović reminds me that under Milošević, most unions were very closely connected to the government and, therefore, reacted late when their members were already applying non-cooperation tactics. This made them realize that “the workers would go on strike one way or another because the entire vibe in the society was – ‘He is finished’.” Their biggest contribution was the final general strike following the rigged elections when a national total strike sent a very clear message to the president announcing popular riots.

During the bombings of 1999, the entire territory of Serbia and now-independent republic of Montenegro were bombed by the NATO allies as a response to Milošević's action in Kosovo, thus causing numerous civilian victims and great material damage. Popović remarks that people united under Milošević's leadership, fomenting nationalism, and giving credit to the regime's propaganda that there were foreign plots against the Serbian nation. In fact, when fighting against Otpor, the government used the “foreign plot card,” which was also often seen in the Arab Spring revolutions and the most recent Turkish uprising. Otpor members were described as traitors who had sold out their country to foreign interests. Otpor, however, fought against nationalist forces by organizing often-criticized<sup>3</sup> patriotic campaigns such as “Otpor – because I love Serbia,” street actions and media propaganda that insisted on civic participation and patriotic values. This shows us that nonviolent action is always about understanding the opponent and crafting collective actions based on these lessons, which is also the core of Sharp's teachings.

Popović's Zeitgeist speeches<sup>4</sup> focus on promoting non-violent struggle. He

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<sup>3</sup> See Naumović 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Zeitgeist Speeches are organized by Google as a part of the Zeitgest project, aimed at exploring socio-political, economic and cultural problems. Most speakers are well-known leaders or thinkers. Popovic gave two Zeitgeist speeches: in 2012 and 2013.

suggests that movements should start fighting their enemies on a more theoretical level and avoid armed conflicts where authorities have incomparable advantage. To put it bluntly, do not try to fight with Mike Tyson, try playing chess with him instead (Zeitgeist Americas 2013). In this way, he strongly advises against the use of force against any type of political or social opponent not only for ideological but for primarily practical reasons, namely because it doesn't work. Popović also eagerly cites Maria Stephan and Erica Chenoweth's study *Why Civil Resistance Works*. He quotes their findings which show that up to 7% of the population actively participates in nonviolent protests and that 53% of nonviolent struggles are successful, as opposed to 26% in case of violent conflicts, which also show a lower number of involved participants (2011). He insists on the "social education" that many Argentinian activists talk about when describing their social movements that sprang up a year after Otpor: "The effect of participation is very important. In nonviolent struggle the elites are not active so it is very difficult to put the genie back in the bottle (...) it is a mental change that occurs in people." In this sense, Popović seems to refuse the dichotomy between a movement's success or failure, crediting many movements with an important role of awareness-raising. He also emphasizes his organization's own focus on the promotion of the concept of people's power rather than the ideas of anti-regime protests. Even faced with criticism that most color revolutions seem to be rather hasty and bring instability rather than structural change, Popović stresses their role in raising consciousness about people's power and power mechanisms in general.

### **A movement with a vision**

When talking about more recent movements and comparing their strategies and techniques, Popović has mixed feelings. He acknowledges their function of responding to the popular need for social justice and reformative if not radical changes, yet he finds that these movements made many "wrong moves." They were very different from the color revolutions and although they self-organized and displayed people's power, they also perpetuated many misconceptions. First and foremost, Popović insists on the need to have a general vision for the movement, which, according to him both Arab Spring uprisings and Occupy Wall Street lacked.

It is important to build around a vision, not around a person...when it comes to Otpor we talked about freedom, political direction of Serbia that involves the United Nations, European integrations, improvement of relations with neighboring countries – our struggle wasn't merely about toppling Milošević; it was about living in Serbia where the media is free and human rights are respected, where we have good relations with Bosnians, Croatians and others – and when you are fighting for a vision and not for individuals [you avoid outcomes such as those] in Egypt where they declared 'game over' too soon because no one planned a transition, a vision and focused on a leader. You have to ask yourself – What about tomorrow, what about next Friday, once the dictator has fled?

My interviewee insists on the need for looking beyond challenges and working

on new solutions to a current problem. This idea is not limited to repressive regimes only – it does not matter if the opponent is political, economic or social – it is always about having an exit, just like an entrance, strategy. In this sense, a question emerges of why CANVAS doesn't deal with the process of long-term planning that these movements obviously lack? To my question whether social movements have the responsibility to form a sort of a watchdog organization following the insurgency, as Otpor did, and if that played an important role in the Serbian transition, he points to the facilitating factors Serbia had such as: some degree of political liberty the opposition did enjoy under Milošević, describing his regime as “half-dictatorship” and recognizing the pro-UN political program that included abrogation of 10 repressive laws etc. as viable political programs developed by the opposition as well. Serbia, according to him, had minimal yet crucial predispositions that helped its people create a political and, to some extent, an economic plan that went beyond toppling Milošević's regime.

He did take part of the credit, reminding me of Otpor's watchdog campaign directed at the newly-formed government following Milošević's ousting that was called “We are watching you closely” (*Samo vas gledamo* in Serbian). The message of the campaign was “Serbia counts 4723 bulldozers and about 6 million registered drivers,” alluding at the final mass riot where people all across Serbia went to the national parliament in Belgrade, some even entering with bulldozers, (quite literally) clearing the roads towards a new democracy. Popović says about this message:

The campaign's message was – this was not for you, this was about the emperor's shoes, so don't even try and find out how comfortable Milošević's shoes really were. And this is not a Serbian trait; in Ukraine we got that – an elite that replaced an elite. But it is not about the elites; it is about a system. In Serbia, Otpor pressured new elites to “behave” and also help them make people “swallow some bitter pills.” The society wasn't for Milošević's extradition to the court in Hague, which was important for the transitioning phase.

He partly agrees with the criticism directed at color revolutions by Haring and Cecire who claim that “successful revolutions also embrace the rule of law” and imply that the protests in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan do not represent successful uprisings (2013). According to them, these revolutions did not go through the hard process of building of civil society and therefore lack appropriate tools to form democratic state. Popović admits this last function is the most challenging one, since “it is very difficult to make ten thousand people without political experience involved in democracy building: “[The question we asked was] how to include these people? When you steal people's voice, they become political activists because it is something personal that goes beyond politics.” Popović identifies transitional mistakes activists in Egypt made: “The ‘goose egg’ (...) was toppling Mubarak and not democracy-building and this is why people went home when Mubarak was down and it gave the military and Muslim Brotherhood space to get power. Otpor, on the other hand played a watchdog role when the revolution was over and it was not a trivial role. A movement needs to have a vision that most color revolutions, for example, lacked.” The CANVAS co-founder, however, does not completely reject these

revolutions as complete failures, insisting on the importance of awareness raising. He also warns me against a Cold War perspective that is based on geopolitical interests: “People tend to ask me if a country is now more aligned with Russia or America and I tell them I’m interested in [a nation’s] development of human rights, finding out if people lead better lives according to some realistic standards, is there more democracy?”

## **A social revolution**

Popović recognizes the strong political orientation of color revolutions. Hence, he sees them very differently from the Arab Spring, anti-austerity and Occupy Wall Street protests that were important because of the “social reason behind it.” He argues:

protests were not led by political elites because Egypt didn’t have any while Slovenian and American ones, for example, lacked popular trust. This is why we can recognize they had different tipping points but the background was social and not political. In Tunisia, social outrage was transformed into a political one because the former was not allowed, but still, it was the social outrage that moved people. Looking at the Bosnian protests the rebels are the starved, not the enchained and this is what unites these movements.

While Popović shows enthusiasm for the bottom-up movements we have seen recently, he criticizes some implementations of horizontalism as well as the “shallow media-coverage” that helped create some dire misconceptions of these protests:

What is leaderless – not having a charismatic leader or creating a Facebook movement and then saying you had nothing to do with its actions? Before, you needed an organization to get to high numbers [of participants] – that is no longer necessary with the new media but the dangerous things can happen when people, for example, set Tuzla [Bosnia] on fire. There is not a list of demands...all we have is rage and that is a big problem because it is difficult to channel it. Nothing good comes out of rage alone. Movements need to mix rage with hope. Otherwise all you get is destruction.

He warns against media misconceptions that presented these upsurges as spontaneous, instant revolutions greatly aided by technology and practices of occupation, which Popović finds very harmful for the organization of these movements that, in reality, require long and patient planning and organizing:

A lively association of human rights fighters and Muslim Brotherhood had been working on the revolution since 2008 when Mubarak was going to pass his power to his son. We talked to them in 2009 and they thought it was a good moment to react and let the elite know that [Egyptian] people are not sheep you have to look after... plus, the military was against him because of his business cronies etc. This is why it is important to know that Tunis was a spark and not a cause for Cairo because it was going to happen anyway. Tunis just speeded everything up. Since no one did a complete research, then the media painted a wrong picture – as if people occupied a square for long enough, the regime would fall. But it does not work that way! You should never use only one tactic, and besides, an occupation is



the worst one, because you lose numbers easily, you need a lot of people and the enemy has time and all the other conditions on their side (rain, snow, low temperatures...). And it is difficult to keep going. It is an exclusive tactic, not a lot of people can join you all the time. If I have to go to work, that's what I'll be doing, and even if I want to, I cannot leave everything behind and join you at the park. This is where Occupy made a mistake. The nature of nonviolent struggle is to attract people — and people join because they want to be active so you have to find something for everyone, a tactic that can keep many people involved. You need to be creative — to lower the bar so that everyone can join and get away with it — that is very important too, considering how to keep your members safe from repression. It is difficult to keep the momentum going with an occupation because you lose numbers. So your tactics need to be changing and they need to be fun and have 'low participation entry', for example putting stickers everywhere, wearing badges — the tactics that keep your numbers up...you can't focus on the tactics global media is transmitting.

### **New social movements and their relation with the new media**

When talking about new media, Popović recognizes their importance, quoting Dr. Shirky and his three key benefits of the new media: (1) cheaper struggle that requires less time and less people, (2) a possibility to record, and in this way discourage, direct repression, (3) easier trainings for new activists. Popović tells me that in 2009, CANVAS had 17 000 downloads of their booklets from Iran only...

I don't like to say that something is impossible but that it is almost impossible, and it is the future of the organization. If you can train people online, you have greater participation and lower risk. There are no airline fees, no visas to neighboring, more friendly countries, and no one is risking their lives trying to cross a border or smuggle forbidden books into a highly repressive state.

On the other hand, this fast learning, he warns, can be harmful because people simply copy strategies instead of trying to understand the idea of a nonviolent struggle:

I went to talk to some people from Occupy Wall Street (...) and asked them — why occupying a park? The banks love that idea because you're out of their way. Why not answering their business reply mail<sup>5</sup> with a brick — if 70 000 people sent a brick to a bank, banks would lose more than 70 000 dollars. You need to choose tactics that work well against your [specific] enemy...it would have made the 99% stronger and more people would have joined.

Also, as many others, he agrees with the statement that Facebook and other social networks facilitated police hacking and using social media to target protesters but also facilitated the phenomenon of clicktivism:

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<sup>5</sup> Popović is talking about business reply mail in the United States, which is entirely covered by the sender. These commercial offers are sent to potential clients and the response to this mail is automatically covered by the banks who sent the letters in the first place, should the clients decide to mail their reply. In this way, sending heavy objects would force the banks to lose money covering post fees of this mail.

We all have Kony 2012 T-shirts and we 'liked' so many posts but Kony is still out there in Africa and he is not threatened by our T-shirts in any way. It's good to have the numbers and educate them online but it cannot end online because you will lose the numbers quickly and it will not bring you effective results.

## Lessons learned

Apart from these issues, Popović still finds lack of a clear vision the biggest mistake of all recent movements, including Occupy Wall Street, which according to him "couldn't say what kind of America they wanted:"

Is it a consensus until the end? This insisting on a lack of strategy and that everyone has the same right to decide no matter how much they'd put into the movement [doesn't work]. Democracy is great in the decision-making processes [but] in decision-implementation, it turns to anarchy. We cannot all agree on everything. That's not how movements work. How are you going to coordinate 11 000 people with no organization and with people not knowing what you [as a group] want and with that answer depending on what entrance of the park you choose? Slovenians, on the other hand, were very different when it comes to these problems. They had clear ideas: 'we don't want Kangler, we don't want Janša, and Janković is not good either'. Are they happier now than before? I can't tell but they had more chances for success because they had various techniques [organized] on different levels, no top-down organization but there was more organization than in Occupy...they mobilized different groups of people.

In the end, Popović makes his own three points to indicate possible mistakes of these movements: lack of vision, inability to move forward due to their emphasis on consensus, and sticking to one tactic "they saw on television." He does not share a vision of *agora* and collaborative definition of a movement. This is how he elaborates on the problems with occupation as a single technique:

That is a concentration strategy and it doesn't work all the time. Dispersion works better because that is how you use movement's resources better and for longer periods of time. Concentration is your last step. That's the endgame – something you do when everything else is achieved, then you occupy the parliament with two million people<sup>6</sup>, once all pillars of power have been taken down and everyone knows what is going on. You don't occupy and then decide how to proceed. Half of the time you are building, and the other half keeping the momentum going. [Occupy Wall Street] is a historical chance with a lot of people, which failed like Tiananmen. (...) They really had a chance to organize a good movement in America, all they needed to do was to formulate their demands better and move towards negotiation. But there is still a lot of space for protests, they recognized the need for social justice, they just weren't able to do something real with it.

Despite these mistakes, Popović describes the movement as successful since it "opened a dialogue about issues that were not discussed at the time and showed there is space for social justice in developed democracies." Still, he adds, they need to learn about how to organize better:

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<sup>6</sup> He is referring to Otpor and the occupation of Serbian parliament on Oct. 5th, 2000.

We can't all drive the bus at the same time. We need to know who is doing what and even in participative democracy, you need to answer the question when you're asked what you want. What makes a movement? A set of values. You cannot have a successful movement without the planning, the unity and the vision. That is what history teaches us.

## **The game of sanctions**

While most participants of Occupy Wall Street and anti-austerity protests insist on the dual value of horizontalism, understood not only as an instrument of struggle but also a value that helps the group connect and create alternative forms of power, Popović's horizontalism is instrumental. He believes in shifting power to the hands of the people, not in redefining the concept. When talking about assemblies that operate on the basis of consensus and informal gatherings of the most recent movements in the U.S. and Europe, Popović defends the modern notion of representative democracy and underlines the importance of a strategic organization and effective resistance mechanisms. This CANVAS leader doesn't seem to be completely convinced by deliberative democracy or direct action leading to the creation of parallel institutions of power. To my question whether the future still lies in electoral revolutions, he shrugs and adds

The world has not found a replacement for democracy – the one where the majority makes decisions and the minority obeys. It may not be perfect but it's the best one we've got. However, we need to know who is making the decisions on behalf of the citizens and fight against the corruption. When you wake that genie up, it is difficult to keep the people from demanding their rights and controlling every little step their government makes; this is what is going on in Turkey and I am very optimistic about it. (...) If there is a possibility of organizing free elections that would be the best option. If we are talking about Russia, then we probably need to find a different system. But we need to ask ourselves if the values are clear and move from there. For example in South Africa, they almost bankrupted the government to get equal rights. There is a historical example when someone was in a situation similar to yours so you can study what is it that they did and work from there. Indignados got some of it right – taking the money from the two worst banks, fighting capitalism with money, that's where the strategies need to focus. The game of sanctions – can I take away from you more than what you can take away from me? And if you can, you will always win.

Popović's career as a street activist is over and now he focuses on theory and education. However, his activist background needs to be taken into account when considering these remarks since his vast on-the-ground experience, and perhaps even his educational background in natural sciences, leads him to rather practical and very concrete conclusions about how a social movement, or a political movement for that matter, should be framed. He disregards new attempts of redefining the concept of power and creating a system of parallel institutions as something difficult to achieve and not well delineated. However, easily adaptable both to more democratic and open societies as well as authoritarian regimes with higher repression dangers, his ideas amount to a rich practical guide for nonviolent activists as well as researchers. Turning

sophisticated and valuable theoretical lessons into approachable and organized trainings and educational material, CANVAS has contributed to the education and organization of many movements in the past and their booklets still represent useful sources of information for activists around the world. While Popović's approach to deliberative democracy and strictly-horizontal organization represent a part of a debate on most recent social movements, his practical strategy on defeating the enemy with wit and innovation represent an interesting and perhaps useful point of reference for both activists and academics.

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### **About the author**

Gloria Novović is an M.A. student of International Relations at Roma III University in Rome. Her dissertation is focused on anti-austerity and Occupy Wall Street movements and their comparison and collocation in the general context of social movements, as well as their differentiation from those of color or Arab Spring movements. While she is interested in bottom-up and solidarity oriented movements and their relations with the established power-holders, her field research is particularly focused on anti-austerity protests in Slovenia. She can be contacted at [glooriaa AT gmail.com](mailto:glooriaa@gmail.com)