



COMMUNICATING CITIZENS' PROTESTS, REQUIRING PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY:

Case studies from Albania,
Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia

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The RRPP promotes social science research in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia). Social science research aids in the understanding of the specific reform needs of countries in the region and in identifying the long-term implications of policy choices. Researchers receive support through research grants, methodological and thematic trainings as well as opportunities for regional and international networking and mentoring. The RRPP is coordinated and operated by the Interfaculty Institute for Central and Eastern Europe (IICEE) at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland). The programme is fully funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

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**COMMUNICATING CITIZENS' PROTESTS:
EXPLORING OPPORTUNITIES AND
CONSTRAINTS, CALLING FOR SOCIAL AND
MEDIA REFORMS**

Sanela Hodžić and Mojca Pajnik

Introduction

Over the last several years, the region of South-East Europe witnessed quite a few large-scale protests in which citizens demanded government accountability and expressed their discontent. While protests were not that rare before¹ – small-scale citizens' protests in particular were almost a constant in some of the parts of the region – the protests that have taken place after 2013 involved a wide range of communication opportunities and challenges pertaining to their focus, scale, range of participants, the overall socio-political environment, but also the changing technological environment and media use. The aim of this publication is to examine the communication practices during recent cases of protest, recognising that communication is relevant not only in terms of the construction of a symbolic realm but mostly in its impact on actual mobilisation and the impact of social movements.

The cases of protests included in this research vary in their thematic focus and range of protest actions, but they also share some similarities in terms of the structural and contextual circumstances in which they emerged and in how communication unfolded during the protests. These protests involved important novelties. In Albania, the protests against plans to dismantle chemical weapons on its territory managed to escape political instrumentalisation and involved a large number of participants. The protests of February 2014 in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) also saw a large number of participants and soon expanded thematically beyond the initial focus on disempowered workers, to include a wide range of social issues across the country and to some extent also across the ethnic divides. The protests involved a strong anti-government component, including demands for resignations and the establishment of alternative governance. In Macedonia, the student protests of 2014 against announced education reforms were the first of their kind since demonstrations in 1997, and also broke

¹ It is worth mentioning that the region saw massive protests in the 1990s, most notably the anti-war protests in Sarajevo in 1992, and anti-government protests in Serbia in 1996-97.

new ground with their expression of strong anti-government sentiments, which culminated in the political crisis of 2015. These protests were also unusual for Macedonia since they did not focus on ethnic issues and sentiments. The recent protests in BiH and Macedonia also involved the launch of 'plenums' – another first in the history of protests in either country. The plenums served as a novel form of gathering to stimulate the exchange of citizens' concerns, aspiring to achieve horizontal communication which involved new considerations of democratic processes and held important implications for communication practices. The plenums that took place in the region in recent years resemble similar movement strategies that have been evolving globally since the Battle of Seattle in 1999, where global movements have gathered to oppose the corporate and political power of the elites. More recently, the 'Occupy' movement of 2011 known for its slogan "We are the 99%", saw similar 'sit-ins' organised as a form of protest and as a way of movement communication.

Research on communication processes during the citizens' protests in the SEE region has been scarce, and insights into the role of the media and of communication platforms in framing the protests and in mobilising for action remain limited. This collection of papers aims to contribute to filling this gap. It focuses on the communication practices during recent cases of protests in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia, while trying to answer the main research questions: a) how were the protests *framed* by the mass media and b) what was the *perceived role* of both mass media outlets and alternative communication platforms in informing citizens and mobilising them for collective action, and specifically c) how was the notion of accountability framed in mass media content, and d) what is the perceived notion of public, in particular government, accountability in light of the recent citizens' protests. While exploring the content and the perception of communication, this research also contributes to our understanding of how these communication practices hindered or promoted citizen initiatives and government accountability, which role the mainstream media played in reporting the protests, how officials responded to the new communication context, and how the protesters communicated during the protests. In sum, the aim of the research is

to contribute to a better understanding of content and dynamics of communication during the citizens' protests, and to provide a better understanding of the citizens' quest for public accountability. The research also yields recommendations for media outlets, officials, and activists/citizens on lessons learned for further communication strategies.

At the beginning of this publication, we first present some insights from theories of social movements and communication studies concerning the role of communication during protests, including inherent constraints and opportunities, after which the results of research will be presented in more detail.

I. Theoretical background and results of previous research

This research design was developed based on interdisciplinary insights and includes references to social movement theories and political science on the one hand, and communication studies on the other. The role of media and communication in the course of collective citizens' action has for a long time been neglected, yet some authors (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993) point to the role of media in the mobilisation of political support for social movements. This publication takes as its starting point the recognition of the relevance of media and communication for protests and social movements in terms of their role in the symbolic and discursive realm in which protests emerge, but also as part of the structural dimensions, including the socio-political context, that determine the course and the outcomes of civic movements.

Structural dimensions are encompassed by Cammaerts' concept of "mediated opportunity structures" (2012),² comprising three mutually interlinked and influenced structures: media opportunity structure, discursive opportunity structure, and networked opportunity structure, each including inherent opportunities but also many structural constraints for social movements. *Media opportunity structure* refers to the role of mainstream media in the mobilisation of political support, the legitimisation and validation of the demands of social movements, and the contribution to widening the scope of contestation beyond the likeminded. *Discursive opportunity structure* refers to structural dimensions that determine discursive frameworks on certain phenomena. And finally, the role of ICTs in organising, mobilising, recruiting, and coordinating actions and in disseminating alternative frames independent from mainstream

² Cammaerts believes that communication is relevant to protests in several ways – for "framing processes in mainstream media and by political elites, the self-representations by activists, the use, appropriation and adaptation of ICTs by activists and citizens to mobilize for and organize direct actions, as well as media and communication practices that constitute mediated resistance in its own right" (B. Cammaerts, "Protest logics and the mediation opportunity structure", p. 118). Also see on the concept of political opportunity by Eisinger 1973, in Opp 2009.

media is what Cammaerts calls *networked opportunity structure*. Concerning massive protests such as the Arab Spring or protests in Turkey and Brazil, a body of research has been focusing on the role of the technological environment in a social movement's ability to mobilise, recruit, and coordinate actions, and to communicate views about the government (and the social movement itself) independently from the mainstream media and official sources (see for example Bennett et al. 2008). All three aspects of mediated opportunity structures set opportunities and limits to protest actions and determine the repertoire of contentious actions³.

With regard to the role of mainstream media, the literature suggests that the success of social movements depends on whether and in which manner mainstream media legitimise and verify their demands and broaden their scope and whether and to what extent media content is mobilising political support. A large body of research points to the negative bias of mainstream media against protests, including a focus on spectacular events and acts of violence and favouritism towards political and economic elites,⁴ with some authors considering media the ideological apparatus of the state and capitalist interests (Althusser 1970, McCurdy 2010). Other sources contest such a notion of media as adversaries of social movements by pointing to the opposite practices, i.e., the favourable treatment of social movements by mainstream media.⁵ The dominant focus of mainstream media on violence and protests involving spectacular features such as a large number of participants is often explained by the criteria of newsworthiness that mainstream media regularly adhere to. This is why social movements and protest coalitions across the globe are now regularly adopting

³ For example, networked opportunity structure through ICT enables new forms of resistance. Constraints inherent in mediation are for example the mainly negative bias of mainstream media, limitations related to the usage of technology, etc. The protest movements have to overcome these constraints in order to have a major impact.

⁴ See for example McChesney 2008; McCurdy 2010; Halloran et al. 1970; Gitlin 1980; and Eldridge 1995.

⁵ See for example DeLuca and Peeples 2002; Cammaerts and Carpentier 2009; and Van Zoonen 1992. The most frequently mentioned cases in terms of favourable media coverage were the anti-war protests or the women's rights movement, or the anti-WTO protests in Seattle.

communication strategies, including strategic planning and to an extent adaptation to media logic, by actively promoting messages on the protests, giving statements, conceding interviews, granting access to journalists, managing websites, and actively engaging on social networks, all while establishing an organisational structure of sorts, including spokespersons. These practices also include counter spins, or turning the media logic to their advantage, for example by hijacking elite events or creating their own spectacles.⁶

The strategies may be less conventional in some cases, with some social movements adopting acts of violence as an important part of their strategy of contestation, which also has an effect on media attention. The data and interpretations provided about these protest actions is also crucial for protest movements, given that they are confronted with conflicting data and interpretations by the state, for example large differences in the reported number of protesters, in reported damage, or in report on police violence, and so on.⁷ Apart from mainstream media, social movements also create their own media,⁸ in particular online, as platforms that enable self-mediation, with the aim to inform, to debate issues, and to connect and mobilise people interested in their cause. With the

⁶ Such hijacking happened for example at G8 summits and WTO meetings; similarly, culture jamming and political jamming is inspired by the logic of bearing witnesses and the tactic of 'serious parody' aiming to intrude into the mainstream public sphere (Cammaerts 2007). De Luca (2005) points to the central role in environmental activism of image events staged for mass media dissemination.

⁷ Della Porta and Diani (2006) argue that the repertoire of actions of protesters is determined by the protest logic, which includes: the *logic of numbers* (the larger the protests are, the more the dissent becomes visible); the *logic of damage* (political violence has been pivotal in struggles for change, but it is often strongly judged by the media, the authorities, and protesters themselves; some argue political violence discredits the legitimacy of protests since it caters to the 'violent mob' frame the media are looking for (Donson et al. 2004); however, others believe that property damage (but not violence against people) is a legitimate form of resistance (Jazz 2001, in Cammaerts 2012), and/or that violence provokes police reactions that disclose the violent face of liberal democracy; and finally the *logic of bearing witness* to injustice, which is staged in civic disobedience, consumer boycotts, and similar actions.

⁸ Community radio stations have in other contexts also often been relevant for social movements, but the sector is strikingly underdeveloped in South-East Europe.

use of online tools, the production of protest artefacts has become easier (YouTube, social network profiles, etc.), allowing protesters easily to create and share ideas concerning the protests.⁹ While most of the available sources point to the democratic potentials of online platforms, some stress that passive engagement, critiqued as ‘clicktivism’ or ‘slacktivism’ (Morozov 2009) does of course not always lead to active engagement, although it may facilitate it.¹⁰

Social movements are a form of “political confrontation with elites, authorities and opponents that involve mounting, coordination and sustaining ... against powerful opponents” (Tarrow 2011, p. 6). They are, however, not viewed as fixed entities, but rather as processes that involve transformations over a certain period of time.¹¹ In this sense, we should emphasise that in this research we are focused primarily on the “short-term temporality” (Mattoni and Trere 2014) of social movements, i.e., periods of intense protest events and mobilisation in the region. Mattoni and Trere also make a distinction between the social groups participating in movements, which often “lack formal hierarchies, adopt decision-making processes based on participation and value the first-person commitments of activists...” and employ loose organisational routines in daily life, and on the other hand the social movement organisations, which tend to have “formal hierarchies, employ decision-making processes based on delegation...” and have stricter organisational routines regulating their daily life (2014, pp. 257-258).¹² Some authors

⁹ One should also mention use of ICTs as an instrument of actions per se (hacktivists, Open Source Movement, etc.). But online content can be deleted, the privacy of users can be violated, accounts closed down, so online platforms are not secure and carry significant risks for activists.

¹⁰ It can also be highly relevant in relation to citizens unable and unwilling to engage in ‘active’ activism on an everyday basis, and can thus bear witness to injustice by contributing to global awareness and building collective identities (Kavada 2010, in Cammaerts 2012).

¹¹ See for example Della Porta and Diani 2006, and Blee 2012.

¹² Different authors also speak about social movement coalitions and networks, the first including straighter organisational routines and more formal communication channels, and the second including looser organisation and more informal communication (See Mattoni and Trere 2014).

differentiate social movements from other forms of contentious reactions based on the existence of organisation, but Tarrow also points to the development of “organisational hybrids” (2011, pp. 123-139), which involve challenges of sustaining social movements while relying on the fragile balance between a heterogeneous movement and its centralised organisation.

When it comes to the role of the media, our research relies in particular on the concept of mediation that is generally defined as a social process in which media supports the flow of discourses, meanings, and interpretations in society (Silverstone 2002). The concept involves the notion of everyday appropriation of media through which social actors endorse resistance to hegemonic meanings and structures. Mediation is understood as a situated process that intertwines with different social activities, including protests. It pertains to the use of technologies and the production of media messages, but also implies a reconfiguration of technologies and changing and creating new meanings (Lievrouw 2011). The use of both mainstream and alternative platforms in communication practices of protest groups and social movements thus carries important implications concerning the appropriation of technologies in the process of subversion and changes of meaning. *Mediatisation* should also be mentioned as a related concept,¹³ used to “analyse critically the interrelation between changes in media and communications on the one hand, and changes in culture and society on the other” (Couldry and Hepp 2013, p. 197). Mattoni and Trere suggest that mediatisation can be a useful concept in exploring the “interplay between media and social movement processes through a cross-time perspective, in order to grasp the emergence of specific combinations of ‘discursive, media and organizational structures’ (Stainberg 2004, p. 125)” (2014, p. 261). Mediatisation is also related to the notion of public accountability in the sense that it connotes the permeation of media with politics and politics with media, i.e., it provides space for critical reflection of political parallelism

¹³ Mediation focuses on the concrete act of communication by a medium in a specific context, while mediatisation refers to “more long-lasting process, where social and cultural institutions and modes of interaction are changed” (Hjarvard 2008, in Mattoni and Trere 2014, p. 261).

when the (mainstream) media agenda, instead of judging the value of news in relation to the public, echoes the speeches of representatives of political and economic elites. Current political elites impersonate mediatised politics, a politics that lost its autonomy and is dependent on the functioning of the mass media, just as the media is dependent on the functioning of the political elites (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999, p. 251). Processes of mediatisation have also led to a “spectacularization of political communication” (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999, p. 251).

1.1 Research on communication practices concerning protests in the three countries

Research on communication concerning the protests in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia is scarce. In general, secondary sources about the media sector in the region for the most part point to the negative structural conditions that limit the media’s democratic role. Various reports accentuate the political parallelism and increasing economic pressure on the media.¹⁴ The public service role and pluralism of mass media is constantly being questioned with reports about biased reporting, lack of investigative and niche reporting, lack of alternative views and criticism of the government, and so on.¹⁵ The government’s grip on the media is also a common denominator of media systems in the three countries, although it is especially strong in Macedonia; television still remains the main source of information for citizens in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia.

With the constant growth of internet use, online media outlets have also received more attention. Across the region, the online sphere has seen a mushrooming of online media, some of which have become very popular and sustainable thanks to commercial income, but few were considered to be a journalistic success. Some online platforms are seen also as oases

¹⁴ See Petković (ed.) 2014. See also yearly IREX Media Sustainability Index reports.

¹⁵ Ibid.

of critical journalism, but others are believed to be merely poorly disguised platforms for political or business promotion. The increased internet access of citizens in all three countries was closely followed with growing numbers of users of social networks, of which Facebook has been by far the most popular. However, there are still few insights into the extent to which the increased use of online platforms has been intertwined with growing political engagement and citizen mobilisation. Some earlier reports suggest that alternative platforms in the region had been lacking political potency and upward influence on policies (Dekić 2010),¹⁶ and the actual contribution of these platforms to overall communication practices in the three countries is still reportedly limited.¹⁷ However, in light of the experience of recent protests, some of which were highly dependent on online platforms for mobilisation and organisation, this research aims also to provide a contribution to re-examining the interactions between the protesters and different communication platforms. The rare accounts of the role of mass media in the recent protests in the three countries paint a bleak picture and point to a lack of media professionalism. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, some analyses published primarily on several online platforms of civil society organisations (such as media.ba or zastone.ba) condemned the media coverage of the protests in BiH that began on February 6, 2014, suggesting that the dominant initial focus of the media on violence was largely ignorant towards the causes, motives, and messages of the majority of peaceful protesters who articulated criticism of government actions and demanded change and public accountability.

¹⁶ This is much in line with the conclusions of Hurwitz that online activism has been increasing the availability of political information for citizens (netizens in fact) but that it has been less successful in creating “stable audiences for the information and commanding the attention of decision makers” (p. 102). Hurwitz also claims that online platforms increase opportunities for political action among those who are already the most politically active and informed (in Jenkins and Thorburn 2003, p. 103).

¹⁷ See IREX Media Sustainability Index reports.

2. About this research

The aim of this research project is to contribute to insights into both the content of mass media concerning the protests and the views of major stakeholders about the communication processes and their implications for the notion of accountability in the country (in particular government accountability, implicated in the protest demands), while re-examining the patterns previously indicated by researchers, such as favouritism of mainstream media towards political elites, or the limited political potential of alternative platforms in the region.

While the theoretical background relies on social movement theories, the research is based on case studies of the most recent protests in the three countries in the region of South-East Europe,¹⁸ and of the related plenums in BiH and Macedonia. The life-span of the analysed cases of protest did not exceed a few months; they were limited to the short term or barely reached the medium term. The protests were specific instances of social contestation, some of which involved the development of daily practices of resistance over an issue in a certain period of time. The protests can only partly be explained with the theory of social movements, given that most of them did not include networks capable of sustaining the contentious politics, exchange of information, and practices of resistance beyond the time-span of few days or months, which according to some authors (cf. Tilly 1989) is a prerequisite for social movement activities.¹⁹

¹⁸ More about the specific selection of the cases and sampling for each of the countries can be found in the three national chapters in this publication, while here we will present the common criteria and principles of the research. In each country, a team of at least three members was engaged in the development of a common methodology and in the research process for that country.

¹⁹ Temporality is also barely reached in the protest cases encompassed by this research. As suggested by Mattoni and Trere (2014), the long-term temporality refers to “cultural epochs of contention (McAdam and Sewell 2001) in which certain templates for collective actions are available to protesters who select their contentious performance within specific ‘repertoires of contention’ (Tilly, 1978, 1995)” (p. 257).

There are different definitions of protest in literature,²⁰ but for the purposes of this research, we define protests as collective actions aimed at achieving certain goals by trying to influence decisions of a target group (Opp 2009, p. 44). Moreover, the research is focused on political protests, a specific type of collective actions – mass demonstrations – and a specific target – the government and political actors. We also refer to Girling (2004) and his idea of mass demonstrations as an expression of the “symbolic power of anxiety, anger and distrust” (p. 146) due to the feeling of being ignored and unable to influence decision-making processes.

Some authors set social movements apart from other forms of contentious reactions based on the social networks capable of sustaining contentious actions, but Tarrow (2011) also states that sustaining social movements relies on a fragile balance between decentralisation and centralised organisation. Individual cases of protests included in our research and analysed in this publication vary in this sense – some relied on a specific social movement organisation, while others relied also on the participation of unorganised groups and individuals. This carries important implications for the communication processes, with the recommendations provided at the end of each country chapter being potentially relevant for organised groups only.²¹ The most visible novelty of protests in the region are the plenums

²⁰ Some of the definitions are: “... protest activity is defined as a mode of political action oriented toward objection to one or more policies or conditions, characterized by showmanship or display of an unconventional nature, and undertaken to obtain rewards from political or economic systems while working within the system” (Lipsky 1968, in Opp 2009, p. 35); and “an act of protest includes the following elements: the action expresses a grievance, a conviction of wrong or injustice; the protestors are unable to correct the condition directly by their own efforts; the action is intended to draw attention to the grievances; the action is further meant to provoke ameliorative steps by some target group; and the protestors depend upon some combination of sympathy and fear to move the target group in their behalf” (Turner 1969, in Opp 2009, p. 35).

²¹ Similarly, while the protests in some of the analysed cases made visible to the general public the contentious issues raised by particular activists and activist groups (such as student organisations in Macedonia), in other cases the protests were more dispersed with mobilisation of a multitude of participants through dispersed communication channels (such as the February protests in BiH).

that emerged as forums for debate, where ideas were discussed and tested at the point of possible consensus among protesters. The plenums emerged at the intersection of the ‘classic’ offline sit-in discussion aspiring to horizontal communication and online media engagement communicating plenum ideas to the public. The plenums appeared not only as forums to shape protest demands and media messages but evolved also as spaces for media-making or, in other words, for “being the media”.

The major research questions are:

- How are protests framed by the mass media, i.e., what is presented as a major social problem in the course of the protests, who is framing the problem, and who is affected?
- How is the accountability (primarily government accountability) framed in the content of mass media (how often is accountability referred to in media content, who is considered responsible for which problems and which solutions)? This research does not offer an analysis of government performance per se. Rather, it addresses the accounts of how accountability is debated, promoted, or hindered in media content (by employing the method of content analysis), but also as perceived by the protesters, journalists, and officials (by employing in-depth interviews with journalists, citizens/activists, and party/government officials).
- What is the perception of different stakeholders of the protests, the communication processes in the course of the protests, as well as the notion of public accountability in light of the protests?

Underlying research issues and related questions include:

- the *role of the mainstream media* during the protests, the process of communication with protesters and government (not only the already mentioned framing of the protests in media content, but also questions related to the processes behind it: how open were the media for the protesters, how proactive were they in providing information, questioning government accountability, engaging in investigative journalism, etc.);

- the *role of alternative communication platforms* in the course of the protests (what is the perceived role of different online platforms during citizen protests, their focus, reach, relevance, political influence, and role in mobilisation and dissemination of information);
- the *communication practices of government officials* (perceived responsiveness, channels of communication, timing of media appearances, active/passive approach, reflections on accountability, perception of how government framed the protests); and finally
- *communication by the protesters themselves* (how did the protesters communicate and through which platforms, what were their relations with journalists, did they attempt to adapt to mass media logic – creating media spectacles, counter-spin – and to manoeuvre by creating own platforms).

The sections within each national report are organised in accordance with the four issues listed above. In the introductory pages of each country report, a short overview of both the communication environment and the history of protest actions is provided. At the end of the national reports, the authors attempted to provide recommendations on how to improve the communication practices of each of the three major stakeholders during the protests: protesters, media, and the government. The researchers recognise that communication during protests takes place in an environment that is inimical to extensive strategising and with the participation of non-organised groups, and point out that the applicability of the recommendations will be limited to organised groups that have the time and organisational structure that would enable an organised approach to communication. On the other hand, recommendations to the government/party officials, but also to the media, should be taken merely as indicators of what is missing in the current practices and what would ideally need to be changed, rather than realistic recommendations on how problems can be actually solved, given that they cannot address the systemic problems that determine the systemic responses to citizen protests. The chapters addressing national peculiarities will, however, address some of the structural constraints and opportunities for better communication during the protests and recommendations on best use of both mass media and different online platforms to that end.

2.1 Countries included and cases of protest analysed

The research includes protest cases in three countries of South-East Europe: **Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia**,²² which ranged in focus from environmental issues to wider social questions to education reforms.

There are similarities in the media environment across the three countries, involving inter alia strong political parallelism and lack of transparency of ownership and financing. The authors provide an overview of the media environment stating the trend of increased use of ICTs, while the mainstream media, in particular television, remain the major source of information in all three countries. Furthermore, while Internet use is growing, there is a lack of research that would show how developed the “tradition of online discourse” (Hurwitz, 2003, p. 101) is, which would enable the consolidation of public opinion and organisation of political actions through online platforms. There is in particular a lack of research on communication practices in mainstream and alternative platforms during citizen protests. Several protests emerged in recent years in the three countries, with large numbers of people participating and demanding changes in Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, while in Albania the protests have been rare and smaller in terms of number of participants. The need for research of communication derives from the relative neglect by social movement studies of the role of media and communication in general, but even more so from the fact that there are still very few major accounts of these issues in these three countries, where the protest culture seems to be rising. The focus of recent protests in the three countries largely correspond to global and EU trends – with concerns predominantly about social issues, labour relations and rights, as well as education, environmental problems, and different aspects of government performance.

²² The selection of the countries is not based on specificities of the countries or selected cases, but simply as an accidental limitation of this research. Research on protests in other countries of the region would be equally interesting.

The *common criteria for the selection of cases* of protests in these three countries are primarily their timing (from 2012 onwards), the high number of participants in comparison to other possible cases, the involvement of different profiles of protesters and/or a focus on issues that go beyond the motives of narrow interest groups, and finally the socio-political relevance of these protests, taking into account the specific national context. Although each country research involved three cases of protests, only one protest per country was thoroughly investigated (referred to as the primary case), while two others were addressed only partially, for the purpose of comparison.

2.2 Research methods and sampling

To enable insights into communication practices during the protest movements, we employ a *qualitative research design*, involving:

- **Secondary research** on theoretical concepts and trends in communication practices during citizen initiatives (relevant books, reports, etc.), as well as *country-specific* secondary research on both the media environment and on the newer history of protest movements in the country in question (relevant reports, analyses, media sources on social movements/protests: motives, initiators, results; sources on audience reach of media – especially media whose content was analysed, etc.). Secondary research made it possible to outline trends in terms of communication processes during citizen protests in specific countries, and their relation to issues of accountability.
- **Frame analysis** of mass media content. The aim of content analysis was to provide insights into how the protests and accountability were framed in media reports on the protests. The limitations of this research did not allow for analysis of content across different media platforms, and the analysis was confined to selected TV and online media outlets (given that TV media outlets are still a major source of information for the citizens, while online news sources are playing an increasing role in all three countries; political affiliations of online media outlets compared to

other media sectors are also reported to be more diverse;²³ both audience reach and political affiliations were the major criteria for selection). Two media sectors were involved in the analysis also in order to partly avoid what Mattoni and Trere called “one media bias” (2014, p. 254), i.e., a focus on either mainstream media or social and alternative platforms. Social media have not been systematically analysed, but referred to through interviews with stakeholders.²⁴ With regards to the selection of specific TV and online media outlets for analysis, the minimum common criteria in all three countries were: *inclusion of different types of media* (public/private), *audience reach* (TV and online outlets with major audience reach included), proximity to the government (pro-government and pro-protest media²⁵). In each country, at least 50 TV news items and at least 30 online news items were analysed.

In each country, content published on the most eventful dates was included in the analysis, and the analysis was limited to central TV news programs, and pieces published by online media. As a final note, the selection was not meant to assure a sample that is representative of the large body of media content concerning the protests, but to enable in-depth insights into various indicative patterns of media reporting on the protests. For these reasons, the sample of analysed media content for Bosnia and Herzegovina had to be significantly increased to also include content of media of a more local character, given that the protests were dispersed, emerging in different cities and under different dynamics which as expected involved specificities in terms of communication.²⁶ The notion of accountability (primarily of the government) was one of the aspects of our analysis of how the media framed the protests.

²³ See the chapter on Macedonia especially.

²⁴ One should note that such selection implies obvious limitations of the research, which does not encompass insights into communication during protests across all available platforms. Further research that would shed more light on the communication content across platforms would be welcomed.

²⁵ The selection thus depended on the best assumptions of the researchers familiar with the specific contents.

²⁶ More on sampling for each country can be found in the country reports.

While trying to minimise the influence of the analytical imagination of the researchers and their personal frames²⁷ in the process of frame analysis, a systematic procedure of identifying specific elements and signifiers of meanings was established.²⁸

- **In-depth interviews** were meant to provide insight into how communication during protests is perceived and how constraints and opportunities are identified by different stakeholders (activists, government, and journalists).²⁹ The interviews were semi-structured, following common interview guidelines but allowing adaptations to specific country contexts and individual interviewees. While the limitations of this research did not enable analysis of the content of alternative online platforms used by the protesters, the issues concerning alternative platforms (content, purpose, production processes, management, use, effects, etc.) were, inter alia, included in the interviews.³⁰ In addition, while the research did not involve research of actual

²⁷ Some authors point out that framing analysis does not assume presence of frames in the text, which is independent of the reader; quite the opposite, the news text is seen as “consisting of organized symbolic devices that will interact with individual agents’ memory for meaning construction” (Pan and Kosicki 1993, p. 58).

²⁸ Relying on the notion of Pan and Kosicki about the validity of framing analysis (1993, p. 58), the analysis was organised in a way to follow a detailed guide, in which each category was elaborated in detail. The instructions to the researchers included staying as truthful to the original text as possible, identifying meanings with exact quotes in the text, clear and detailed explanations for any meanings not captured by the quote, clear and formalistic description of images. Thus, the results of the analysis were based on their manifestations and implications in particular phrases, images, sources, keywords, etc. The use of exact quotes and detailed explanations also enabled control and corrections of the results of the analysis during the process of analysis of the results.

²⁹ At least 20 interviews per country have been conducted, or more, depending on a general rule for setting the number of interviews: the number of interviews is increased if: a) new information from stakeholders keeps appearing after 20 interviews; b) relevant information/evaluation is missing (additional purposive sampling); c) relevant profiles of respondents are not adequately included. In-depth interviews will also be a basis for identifying the main alternative communication platform used by the protesters/citizens relevant to the protests.

³⁰ Some of the authors however analysed some examples of content on different platforms, to illustrate some of the patterns of communication.

indicators of government accountability in the course of the protests, the interviews provide insight into how **government accountability** is perceived, notably whether its perception changed in the course of the primary case of the protests, and when compared to previous cases of protests.

2.3 The concept of framing and frame analysis employed in this research

The concept of **framing** relies on the notion that we all actively classify, organise, and interpret our life experiences to make sense of them (see Goffman 1974) and that the way in which observations are framed and categorised evokes particular realities out of the “kaleidoscope of potential realities” (Edelman 1993, p. 232). The different authors have pointed not only to the relevance on framing for how reality is understood, but also to its influence on behaviour.³¹ Framing strategies are relevant not only for ideological positioning, but they also, as Benford and Snow (2000) believe, affect recruitment, mobilisation, and readiness for action.³²

³¹ For example, Edelman (1993) suggests that the elements that are highlighted in media coverage of a social movement will be critical for the movement’s ability to influence public opinion and policy. In his view, mass media are crucial for conveying messages to the mass of potential supporters and for recruitment. The growing use of Internet platforms was seen to have an increasing importance for political life in terms of access to information, people’s choices in elections, communication between candidates and constituencies, setting the topics that are highest on the public agenda, and finally efforts of activists to convey their messages. Jenkins and Thorburn (2003, p. 4) mention the example of indymedia.org, which began during the protest in Seattle against the World Trade Organization started as a clearinghouse for ideas and news on the protest while using a multimedia approach (posting reports, photos, sound recordings, video footage).

³² The research might reflect on the extent to which the experiences, symbols, and models of social movements/protests were creating a sort of “epistemic communities” (Lipschutz 2005), feeding the struggle and transferring knowledge to communities within and outside national contexts, especially through online platforms.

The construction of meaning³³ concerning social movements through the framing process involves diffuse networks of actors and different ways of framing and transforming of collective beliefs. Social actors may at times deliberately attempt to use persuasion to construct meaning, but the dominant frames in a particular society may also simply be reproduced³⁴ or the dominant meanings discussed and questioned. Social movement scholars agree that social movements take on shared meanings (called frames, ideological packages, or cultural discourses) that inspire collective actions (Tarrow 2011, p. 31). In times of social movements or of other forms of contentious politics, these meanings are competing with opposing frames. The struggle over meaning is thus an important part of contentious politics.³⁵ Tarrow indicates that one of the main factors of maintenance and success of social movements is "... their capacity to link inherited understandings to the imperative for activism" (2011, p. 266).

Mass media are believed to play the critical role in shaping which frames will become more dominant in society. Framing is considered also an inherent part of journalistic routines (Gitlin 1980).³⁶ The frames in the media news normally reflect the power relations and reveal the actors and interests that are competing to dominate the text. Dominant frames in society influence what is considered to be a newsworthy news framing. With regards to the way that

³³ Klandermans (1992) believes that there are three interconnected processes in the construction of meaning about social movements: public discourse, persuasive communication, and consciousness-raising (in Johnston and Klandermans 1995, p. 10).

³⁴ Certain frames can reach a self-reinforcing status, and as for example Gamson (1992) points out, they can become encoded in specific terms that gain wide usage (an example might be the word 'agency'). When this happens, the communicator who uses a different term risks not being understood or might be perceived as lacking credibility.

³⁵ While doing so, Tarrow claims, social movements are rarely not in a disadvantageous position given that the state has at its disposal the instruments for construction of meaning (2011, p. 32).

³⁶ Gitlin connects the concept of framing directly to the production of news, stating that frames "enable journalists to process large amounts of information quickly and routinely [and to] package the information for efficient relay to their audiences" (1980, p. 7).

media normally frame social movements, Entman and Rojecki (1993) believe that framing judgments which journalists make when conveying information about a social movement are heavily influenced by elite sources. They also point to journalists' ambivalence towards mass movements – in theory supportive, journalists are suspicious of mass movements once they organise to exert political power (Gitlin 1980, in Entman and Rojecki 1993, p. 156)³⁷. Others however put more emphasis on the transformative potentials in the framing processes and interaction in the construction of meaning.³⁸ Through the “complex interplay between mass media and social actors such as movements, countermovements, political parties and authorities, and in interpersonal interaction in social networks and friendship groups — meaning is constructed and reconstructed” (Johnson and Klandermans 1995, p. 10). The protests incite dominant discursive frameworks but are also fertile ground for challenging old perceptions and conducts, i.e., for contesting the dominant discursive frameworks, as well as for the (re)construction of collective identities (Melucci 1996). In the course of protests, different framing strategies are used to present the government performance, as well as the motives, manifestations, and goals of the protests. The role of social movements, internal agreements, and outward communication with mainstream media and through their own platforms, should not be neglected when considering the communication constraints and opportunities for social movements.³⁹

³⁷ While Entman and Rojecki (1993) found framing judgements against movements, framing judgments about foreign policy elites were generally not conveyed by journalists in the course of the US anti-nuclear movement.

³⁸ Social movements are on one hand shaped by the aspects of dominant culture but on the other hand tend to break with dominant social codes and also reshape the dominant culture (see for example Johnston and Klandermans, 1995). McGee believes that social movements are changing the meanings of the world and redefine reality (McGee 1975, p. 243). Also see Livingstone (1990). One must be aware of the implications for the reliability of the results of a frame analysis as such, given that the way the frames are identified in a particular text during the frame analysis is influenced by the personal frames of the researcher. We cannot claim to have excluded such influences, but we have taken measures to assure the researchers have a common understanding of the categories of the analysis.

³⁹ See McCurdy, 2010.

The frame analysis employed in this research is based on a theoretical understanding of framing as a process that involves diagnosing on the one hand and commending particular solutions on the other. Gamson (1992) for example speaks of diagnosing, evaluating, and commending particular solutions in the ways that social reality is framed. Entman defines the framing process along the same line: “To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described” (1993, p. 52). The analysis in the course of this research is thus focused on these two major categories: a) the way that a certain problem is defined and understood (in a word: diagnosis) and b) how the prognosis/solution of that problem is presented in media content. Within these main categories, the analysis also involved identifying the actors affected, the actors who identified the problem/solution, and finally the norms and judgements that support the particular diagnoses/prognoses.⁴⁰ Here we have followed definition of Verloo (2005, p. 20), who understands frame as an “organizing principle that transforms fragmentary or incidental information into a structured and meaningful problem, in which a solution is implicitly or explicitly included.” In other words: each text can be analysed in a way to determine which problem(s) it addresses and what is offered as a solution to the problems identified.

To partly capture the interplay between different aspects of communication and provide different views of how the protests were framed and the communication was unfolding, the method of frame analysis of mass media (TV and online) was combined with in-depth interviews with participants in the communication process: citizens/protesters, journalists, and the government/party authorities.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Of course, not all categories of framing were necessarily identified in each text.

⁴¹ The research, however, does not elucidate relations of frames in news to the intentions and frames of particular communicators, nor does it involve research about how the frames informed the attitudes and behaviour of the protesters and other stakeholders.

3. Major results of the research in three countries: An overview

3.1 How are the protests framed by the media, how are they perceived by the interviewees?

The opinion predominates among the interviewees that the protests are a demonstration of democracy, a legitimate way to express the will of the people and their discontent about the performance of elected officials, to stop or demand policy changes, and to pursue higher standards of government accountability. They are viewed as particularly critical in circumstances of dysfunctional governance, when protests become “the only legal solution”. In this sense, a few respondents also see the protests as an indicator of a lack of democracy, in view of the notion that in functional democracies citizen engagement is already formalised in the decision-making process and thus protests become unwarranted. Another favourable view of protests is focused on the unifying power of protests for common demands: in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Macedonia, they transcended existing ethno-national divides. The protesters were united in their criticism of public policies and government conduct. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, this criticism revolved around social issues and the impoverishment of citizens resulting from the conduct of a political class alienated from its constituency. As one of the activists in Bosnia and Herzegovina said, the implicit message of the protests of February 2014 was: “I couldn’t care less for nationalism, I want the factories to work, that workers decide about them again...” On the other hand, as research reports indicate, ethnic divides did not cease to exist in the way the protests were mediated, with media framing and officials’ perceptions working to reinforce them in some of the analysed cases.

However, the interviewees, primarily officials, some media representatives and occasionally the protesters themselves, toned down their positive views when commenting on the specific

cases of protest included in this research. Overall, there are three dominant frames under which the role of these protests is questioned:

- the frame of political instrumentalisation of protests for the interests of particular political groups or a party, most often the opposition party, sometimes also foreign elements;
- the frame of deficiencies within the protest groups (lack of organisation, capacities, and know-how). An illustration of this frame is the claim that protesters in BiH lacked knowledge about the political system which prevented a substantial impact;
- the view of the structural constraints inherent in the political (and to an extent, the media) system that necessarily make the protests unsuccessful and disables top-down policy changes. The interviewees, in particular in Macedonia and BiH, pointed out that these protests did not bring the changes they sought, due to the lack of accountability of the government.

Media frames of the analysed case of protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia to an extent correspond to these contestations of the protests themselves. The frame of political instrumentalisation in particular is dominant in the media framing of the protests. In the way the media framed the cases of protest⁴² one can easily discern the dominant underlying ideologies under which the well-established strategies of delegitimisation are readily and easily evoked by the media. Georgievski, Adonov, and Trajkoska noted that in Macedonia, rather unsurprisingly and very directly, media known for their pro-government editorial stance have often poorly presented the protesters' motives and demands and/or discredited them, often under the frame of political instrumentalisation by the opposition party and by international imposters embodied in the Soros organisation. As shown in the analysis by Cvjetičanin, the sub-framing of the February protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina under the general frame

⁴² When similar syntax is used throughout the publication, we do not imply that it refers to all media content. As noted earlier, the insights are not meant to be generalisable, but rather to outline some of the indicative patterns of media reporting concerning the protests.

of political instrumentalisation was particularly diverse, mirroring the complexities of the administrative organisation of the country and the related ethno-national divides, and focusing more on ethno-political than on party-political instrumentalisation. There was a clear pattern of framing the protests as an attack against the national interests of one of the three dominant ethno-national groups, i.e., against the level of government closely related to the specific group's identity and interests. The results of the research in Bosnia and Herzegovina are in part in line with the previous research on the dominant focus of media on protest violence.⁴³ Namely, the violence by the protestors and destruction of government property was the dominant frame especially in the first days of the February protests in BiH, and one of the dominant frames in the overall sample. Cvjetičanin finds that especially the visuals concentrating on this violence persevered in media content throughout the duration of the protests.

In Macedonia in particular, the authors noted a dominant divide between pro-government media and media that reported more favourably on the protests, i.e., media normally considered to be unaffiliated with and more critical towards the ruling political parties. They provided more space to the presentation of the protest's motives and rationales, covered the work of plenums more extensively, and to some extent criticised the government for its poor performance. In terms of the framing of the student protests in Macedonia, Georgievski, Adonov, and Trajkoska write: "The media that are critical towards the government dominantly framed the reforms [contested education reforms imposed by the government] as ones that are rash, unproductive, and in violation of university autonomy."

The case of protests against dismantling chemical weapons in Albania in 2013 differed significantly in terms of communication practices from the protests in BiH and Macedonia – the news reports predominantly focused on the conduct of protests and the protests' demands, with official sources appearing only rarely. As indicated by Londo, media outlets almost

⁴³ See, for example, McChesney 2008; McCurdy 2010.

uniformly and regardless of their political affiliations, provided an implicit legitimisation of the protest demands. The reasons are presumably twofold: firstly, the protests barely involved general criticism of the government while only one issue and a related government decision were at the centre of attention, and secondly, officials made few public comments on the issue and thus left more space for the protesters to voice their concerns. Under these circumstances, in contrast to the protests in BiH and Macedonia, the reporting actually focused on the issues raised by the protests: the media focused on the possible problems of dismantling chemical weapons on Albanian territory, framing it mostly as a safety threat, and to an extent as a problem of lack of government transparency and accountability concerning the decision on the planned dismantling. And while the frame of political instrumentalisation was reported to be dominant in other cases of citizen protests in Albania, in this case it was present only rarely, and even then more in the form of the danger that the opposition might instrumentalise the protests, sometimes implying the solution to that problem should be banning politicians from the protests. The solutions to the problems were equally straightforward, framed mainly as a rejection of the dismantling of chemical weapons in Albania, and more transparent conduct and accountability of the government about the issue.

The perception of the media coverage of citizen protests in all three countries was overall negative, in particular the perception by the citizens/protesters themselves. The overall opinion is that the media coverage ranges from the dominant politicised reporting of protests to a politically correct but superficial reporting that fails to provide in-depth insight and overview of protest-related issues (such as an analysis of unemployment or of corruption in BiH, or an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of the proposed education reforms in Macedonia).

The common input from the interviews in all three countries is that the online media sphere is seen as more open for presenting the protests, mirroring the perception that other media spheres are more uniformly affiliated with the government, particular political parties, and other centres of political and economic power.

The authors of the research reports also noted that the framing of the protests differed from case to case. For example, in the case of protests against the arrest of Tomislav Kezarovski, a Macedonian journalist, officials and the media, both pro-government and critical, seemed to have departed from the frame of political instrumentalisation of the protests, which the authors of the research report attribute primarily to the fact that the protesters were mostly journalists and that the framing of the protests was shaped by professional solidarity. Media considered pro-government did not discredit the protests, while media more critical of the government are reported to more actively back efforts to release Kezarovski. Another possible reason is that the protests were less anti-government than the student protests, but given that they were focused on a small range of particular government actions they did not involve a more comprehensive criticism and thus were not as threatening to those in power. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the protests against the destruction of a city park in 2012 are reported to have been largely marginalised by the main mainstream media in Republika Srpska, which either reported only on rare occasions or only in the form of short news items retrieved from news agencies. The protests relied on the support of small independent media and on communication through online platforms, which the respondents thought were insufficient to achieve stronger support.

3.2 How is government accountability framed by media and narrated by interviewees?

The general observation derived from all three research reports is that media reporting on the citizens' protests involved to some extent references to accountability. However, the way that accountability is made topical is rather limited. The three national reports published here discuss several aspects of media reporting on the protests: the practice in which accountability was rather generalised and not addressed to specific institutions, parties, or officials (which was more specifically identified in BiH), and the practice of limiting references to accountability to what was voiced by major sources of information, the latter being even more problematic given the fact that officials have better access to media compared to protesters. In such

circumstances, the spin against protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina was comprehensively and uncritically reported by the media, involving false information about large amounts of drugs being distributed among protesters or about the robbing of a shopping mall. As indicated by the results of the content analysis, in particular in Macedonia, mainstream media considered to be pro-government mostly omitted the issues raised by the protesters, and thus failed to discuss government accountability, all behind the façade of framing of political instrumentalisation of the protests.

However, in the case of both BiH and Albania, the results of the content analysis show that the actor appearing in the media as being responsible for the identified 'problem' is indeed most often the government. In the case of BiH, calls for accountability are typically rather generalised and directed against political elites, but in some cases also against different government institutions, political parties, and/or individual political figures; accountability is framed as accountability for social problems that lead to protest, or as accountability for inadequate official reactions to protests, due to which the protests escalated. In Albania, it is specifically the Prime Minister and the government that are framed as responsible for the 'problem' of "endangering public health and safety by considering the request (52 occurrences) and also for its lack of transparency (20 occurrences) and accountability (2 occurrences)," as Londo noted. In Albania, accountability directly corresponded to how the problems were framed by the media, with the government largely viewed as responsible for its inactivity and lack of transparency in the case of dismantling chemical weapons, the solution being the government to reverse its decision and to refuse the dismantling on Albanian territory. Greater divergence in how accountability was framed was noted in the case of the February protests in BiH. The government accountability, under the frame of bad governance, was defined as a need for more accountability in general, for resignations, early elections, constitutional change, public administration reform, job creation, revising criminal privatisations, abolishing officials' privileges, including citizens in the decision-making process, etc. Moreover, the government was in some cases seen as responsible for solving a problem of jeopardised national interests,

i.e., of keeping the protests from spreading to RS or of jeopardising cantonal governments. In another version, the responsibility falls on the ethnic group – to stand united in defence of national interests. In addition, the media also frame the citizens' responsibility as a solution for stopping the violence but also for uniting against bad government.

In Macedonia, there was a general lack of references to government accountability in media reporting on the student protests. Also, a clear difference was noted between two groups of media in this regard, with Telma, Alsat-M, novatv.mk and plusinfo.mk referring most often to accountability of the government and the Ministry of Education for the proposed reforms and lack of transparency and accountability, and, by contrast, Kanal 5, MTV1, TV Sitel and Kurir.mk referring to the opposition SDSM and Soros, the students and the 'opposition' media as responsible for unwarranted protests. References to responsibility of the citizens/protesters in Albania took a rather different form, with only a few references to their responsibility for what was framed as uninformed and unreasonable protest, and a minority referring to their responsibility for greater mobilisation. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, in media reports that focused on the problems within the protests themselves, mostly the protest violence, the protesters were held responsible mostly for the destruction of public property. Cvjetičanin concludes especially that the lack of accountability of political elites is manifested in the lack of self-reflection by officials in the analysed media sample, while they mostly referred to responsibility of protesters for property damage, or to the responsibility of a broad category of 'others' (ranging from the leaders of opposition parties, ethnic camps, foreign agents, etc.) for the politicisation of protests or for jeopardizing ethno-national interests. However, in the entire media sample in BiH, officials are by far the most frequently identified actors for delivering solutions, most often for the socio-economic problems that caused the protests.

In all three countries, the interviewed respondents overall indicate that there is a clear lack of government accountability and that the government's communication during the protests was a sign of that lack of transparency and accountability. A part of the interviewees point

out that the protests themselves are a manifestation of this lack of government accountability. A common observation from the interviews is also that in the course of the citizen protests, the notion of government accountability mainly remained unchanged. The interviews point to two sets of issues that resulted in such failure to boost accountability, the first being related to the protests themselves (insufficient mobilisation, lack of persistence, uninformed, poorly articulated, or unrealistic demands, etc.) and the second to the entrenched and persistent lack of accountability by the government, which proved to be stronger than the challenges that the protests posed. In such circumstances, the reactions of the government to the protests in the three countries were unsurprisingly systemic. They ranged from ignoring the protests or creating narratives against the protests and protesters (involving claims of political instrumentalisation or criminalisation of the protesters) to pointing fingers at other parties, ethno-political camps, or officials (this mainly in BiH) all the way to the rare occasions where changes were introduced, albeit considered without much substance and in a sense 'extorted' under the strong pressure and fear generated by the protests. Parts of interviewees' narratives vividly illustrate the patterns of officials' reactions to protests: "The public officials usually are not very active towards protests, they move slowly, barely listen to you, or just pretend to ask you or consider you, always if the protesters are sufficiently persistent to bother them. Even when they make some public statements they are not responsive enough. The statements are mostly rhetorical and do not even consider the solutions or alternatives offered by the protesters."⁴⁴ Or in the words of Cvjetićanin, the insights from the interviews indicate that in fact officials demonstrated a lack of accountability through "‘politics of ignorance’, ‘politics of arrogance’, and even ‘disgust with the people who elected them’".

Inputs from the interviews in all three countries indicate that in the recent protests, officials rarely, if at all, engaged in two-way communication through media or in direct contacts with the protesters. In the case of the proposed dismantling of chemical weapons in Albania,

⁴⁴ Interview with Sazan Guri, environmentalist in Albania, 17 May 2015.

officials did not communicate with the public at all in the first days of protests. The Prime Minister issued a statement through Facebook only days later, while televised communication took place even later, after the online announcement.

As for the content of officials' comments, they often included strong paternalistic elements. The statements of officials in Albania manifested this paternalism in claims that the protests were erroneous, merely the result of a lack of information and of an unjustified lack of trust that the government would act in the public interest. Similar claims were disseminated through media about the students' protests in Macedonia. In BiH, the interviews point out that officials sought to discredit the protests in different ways, often through the evocation of wartime relations, with fear and ethno-national sentiments mixed in. Finally, in Macedonia, despite the general secrecy of the government and its refusal to meet the students, there were a few controversies that illustrated the lack of accountability, presented by media critical of the government: the claim that the state exam was discussed months before it was disclosed to the public, as well as the information that the location for a public meeting with university representatives was changed abruptly and covertly.

The authors of the three country reports indicate that mainstream media underperformed in terms of substantial investigation and questioning of public accountability, mainly taking a rather passive approach of providing a platform for a limited number of sources, or merely presenting different views on protests and government accountability. The media reports overall involved calls for government accountability as voiced by the protesters, but rarely involved direct confrontation with officials or substantiation and investigation of identified problems.

Finally, the interviewees in all three countries are utterly pessimistic about the possibility of change when it comes to government accountability. A few protesters go further to indicate that a greater threat to governments and a bigger demonstration of power by the protesters is the only way for the protests to yield better results including, finally, better accountability.

While some of them refer to the performative power of mass demonstrations and the notion of 'lynch mob' they evoke, others indicate that some forms of violence would be a legitimate part of the protest strategy. Some of the respondents in Macedonia also suggested that this power can be asserted through simultaneous, different pressures by different citizens' protests. Some of them believe that recent simultaneous initiatives may have had an overlapping positive effect, urging the government to open talks with the students and to release Kezarovski from prison. Some of the interviewees in BiH indicate that the way the recent protests unfolded in fact have encouraged the continuation of current government practices, given that the authorities are now more prepared to deal with similar citizen contestations in the future.

Interviewees in BiH also reflected on what they perceived as an increase of civic consciousness, citizen engagement, and empathy that unified citizens across ethnic divides – in a word, they narrated about the rise of the political subjectivity of citizens. Several interviewees also believe that the protests had put the issue of social justice and anti-corruption back in the political discourse, but Cvjetičanin on the other hand concludes that the national discourse was also strengthened in the process through the evocation of ethno-national divides in the way the protests were framed by officials and some of the media.

3.3 Role of the media and communication practices of journalists

A common conclusion of all three country reports is that mainstream media outlets are considered an indispensable communication platform in the course of protests. Respondents in each country indicate that the coverage in mainstream media is directly related to the success of the protests, due to their pivotal role of putting particular issues on the public agenda, of raising awareness and informing citizens, and finally of determining the readiness of citizens to act. This especially goes for television, still the main source of information for citizens in the three countries. Moreover, insights from the interviews conducted in BiH suggest that the media played a crucial role in the demise of the protests.

Mainstream media are primarily valued for the potential opportunity to amplify the voices of protesters. However, there is an overall skepticism in all three countries about the performance of the media, stemming primarily from the observed political parallelism in the media sector, with media content seen mostly as a manifestation of the interests of the government, certain political parties, and business centres, which determine the financial sustainability of media outlets. A majority of the interviewees in BiH, for example, believe that the mainstream media showed bias against the protests and favouritism towards government sources and perspectives. Our content analysis confirmed such a bias only in part, however. In particular, Radio-Television of Republika Srpska (RTRS) showed favouritism towards official sources connected to the RS government; the reporting of the other two public service broadcasters, BHRT and FTV, also showed a prevalence of official sources and a dominant focus on violence, but they also paid considerable attention to the protesters' demands, and gave voice to civil society, protesters, and other relevant actors, especially in the later days of protests. The focus on official sources also resulted in media transmitting the spin against the protests, relying on ethno-national and entity divisions, or simply on reports of alleged criminal behaviour of protesters. However, the overall results of the content analysis in the BiH sample do not confirm the dominance of official sources of information, given that the protesters appear slightly more often as sources of information in the media. Yet, the presence of spokespersons for the protests was not confirmed per se as an indicator for reporting that necessarily sympathises with protesters' causes. This is even more evident in the case of chemical weapons in Albania, where the voices of protesters were by far the most present in the media and, furthermore, the media did not appear to be siding with the government.

In the case of student protests in Macedonia, however, there was a clear division between two camps of the media, thus confirming the overall media polarisation in the country, the authors conclude. Pro-government media heavily framed the protests as being instrumentalised by the opposition party, while protesters' demands and motives were largely ignored. The media critical of the government provided the public with more information about the protests and

gave more voice to protesters, framing the protests dominantly as gatherings that unified the protesters across partisan and national interests.

Some of the interviewees also report that media coverage was affected by other factors, including the customary patterns of news production; the respondents in BiH and Albania pointed to patterns of news production in which journalists refer to already known sources and report on available information but rarely engage in investigative journalism. Under these circumstances, information is uncritically transmitted and the actual content depends more on the dynamics of the protests and the communication efforts by officials and protesters than on clear editorial engagement. This is backed by the results of the interviews – in all three countries, reporting on the protests is perceived as superficial, lacking in-depth information, detail, and nuances on issues relevant for the protests. As noted by Londo, instead of in-depth investigation, the prevalent formats were debates and presentations of opposing opinions. In the words of an Albanian journalist: “Our job often finishes when the protesters go away, and we run to cover the next story, lacking the time, effort, and sometimes the will or possibility to dig further into the story.”⁴⁵ These routine practices are also mentioned by Londo and Cvjetičanin as a possible reason for the fact that the protesters who appeared in the media more frequently were representatives of civil society organisations that participated in the protests, or other persons already known to the media, while persons who had not been similarly exposed in public were less frequently contacted as sources. Another reason mentioned by the authors is the reluctance of protesters to expose themselves in the media. Finally, some of the features of the protests might work to their advantage as they follow the media logic. A large number of protesters in particular is mentioned by Londo as a factor attracting media attention. Violence seems to have an ambiguous effect: while it has provided undivided media attention to the February protests in BiH, its strong resonance in media reports even after the violence ceased may have interfered with subsequent protest

⁴⁵ Interview with Klevis Saliqaj, ATN TV, 16 May 2015.

messages. Limited resources and capacities of media is mentioned only by some respondents as a possible contributor to a lack of in-depth and quality reporting, but is generally believed not to be decisive. Finally, the interviewees from Bosnia and Herzegovina indicate that part of the reason that the media did not perform adequately had to do with the complexity of the February protests with their numerous happenings and various demands involving complex issues, which were not always clearly articulated by the protesters.

The authors of the BiH research report also note the differences between respondents' preferred roles for the media. Some respondents, among which a majority of journalists, imply that the media should provide objective reporting, defined as "not taking sides" and presenting "multiple views". Others however imply that media *should* show accountability which in their view requires engaged accounts about the protests and "taking sides".

In all three countries some online media platforms in particular are commended for their relevant contribution to the overall communications about the protests, i.e., for greater attention to protests (such as Reporter in Albania, or Žurnal and AbrašMEDIA in BiH). The authors of the Macedonia chapter mentioned both online media Novatv.mk and Plusinfo.mk and TV stations Telma and Alsat-M as platforms that provided more information on the protests.

The research results overall hardly suggest differences in media professionalism between the three countries. The comparison with two other cases of protests shows differences in media reporting within a particular country as well. The differences in how media were reporting the protests were rather the result of different dynamics of communication during the protests, including the way that officials did or did not communicate, and the way that protesters took up opportunities for communication. Most notably, the unusually correct reporting on protests against chemical weapons in Albania was the result of circumstances in which communication by officials was almost entirely missing, which allowed for the protesters to occupy more of the media space.

3.4 Social media – a controversial counterpart to mainstream media

The three country studies all point to the relevance of social media, mainly Facebook, in informing and mobilising people to protest. It was common for several FB profiles to emerge during the time of a specific protest, with one or two profiles developing into main reference spots where individuals and communities received up-to-date information. For example, in the Albanian context, the Alliance against the Import of Trash (AKIP) became a visible FB reference, gathering environmentalists and human rights groups, informing the community about recent developments, but also suggesting next steps the movement should take in order to progress towards the goal of blocking the dismantling of chemical weapons in Albania.

It was typical for most of the cases of protests to witness a proliferation of FB profiles; several were usually in operation gathering different groups with similar interests. This may be interpreted as a reflection of amorphous movements that engage many people without an established formal leadership. If environmental activists were more directly targeting expert communities in Albania, the FB profile that was opened by a few students evolved into the main site mobilising a larger public, i.e., 'one million Albanians against the destruction of chemical weapons in Albania'.

Reflecting on the role of social media in the protests in all three countries, the interviewees, however, considered mainstream media coverage as an essential tool to communicate the protests to the public, recognising the reach and impact of televised communication in the region. The importance of televised communication across the three countries was on some occasions also recognised by the activists, whose communication then embraced the opportunities across the continuum traditional media-new media – while being active in their own online communities, protesters also worked with more traditional media trying to shape the representations of protests.

FB profiles and groups as such were of little interest to traditional media, and even though media to some extent used FB as a source of information on protests, the content taken from

these platforms was not considered sufficient for favourable and substantial representation of protests; for that reason, activists also tried to engage to ensure that their voices were being heard in the traditional media.

Representations highlighted by social media contributed to mobilisation, while TV representations were considered to be creating reality, and thus playing a pivotal role for the unfolding and the outcome of citizen protests. Thus, interviewees in all three countries viewed social media mainly as a mobilisation tool. If it takes time for traditional media to shape news, FB profiles were ahead of time, constantly sharing immediate information. Student movement activists in Macedonia and Albania highlighted this role of social media as the main form of communication to organise and mobilise for protest actions.

In addition to serving as an organisational platform, FB was also used to disseminate reflections on the meaning of protests, i.e., FB profiles created distinct representations of protests, usually highlighting the importance of their cause for the wider public. On some occasions, social media representations were explicitly countering the representation found in traditional media; for example in protests in BiH at times when the mainstream media predominately framed the protests as a form of violence. Social media countered traditional media representations also by denouncing the trustworthiness of some of the news – in Sarajevo, protesters urged the public not to trust news on plenums unless they were confirmed by the official plenum website. As a consequence, the frames of representation often differ between traditional and online media – if violence frames were prevalent in traditional media, then cases of police brutality were reported on social media platforms. At times, social media platforms appeared to be the only media space where cases of police brutality were reported. Traditional media avoided the topic, while personal testimonies and citizens' reports that found no space in traditional media were the only evidence of police brutality.

Social media thus appeared as spaces providing alternative narratives. Yet at times, as some respondents claimed, they suffered from questionable credibility of information. Not

meeting professional journalistic standards, produced by unknown people, some felt that the information on platforms was not necessarily credible. Also, some respondents in BiH claimed that these platforms were occasionally hijacked by political parties who infiltrated the networks. State surveillance was mentioned as a potential threat to social network communication in both BiH and Macedonia, with comments to the effect that we should recognise the fact that state or party informants are nowadays very much present online.

3.5 The communication practices of citizens/protesters

The interviewees who reflected on the February protests in BiH highlighted the dispersion of communication of protesters and activists, something that occurred in some of the other cases as well. The dispersed communication actually mirrors the general absence of structure in the protests, their horizontal organisation, as well as the absence of leadership or elected representatives. In relation to traditional media, these characteristics that actually constitute movements have at times proven to hinder their communication with third parties.

Experiences from all the cases show that traditional media required spokespersons, representatives of plenums, that they asked for information that clearly defines the strategies of movements and for the articulation of consistent messages. We have seen that operating strategies that constitute movements might have worked against the movement, which failed to meet the demands of traditional media communication patterns and, as a consequence, contributing to the distorted representation of protesters' causes. However, we should not only criticise the missing professionalism of the movements but also the traditional media's lack of understanding and effort to adapt to the circumstances. Thus, when reflecting on the communication practices of protesters, we should not only review their own communication but see this in relation to (mis)understandings of traditional media representatives. The country reports show how traditional media on several occasions failed to bother to get to the bottom of the ideas of the movements. Several times, they were simply content with

contradictory messages without trying to explore and understand their meaning. Uncritical dissemination of political spin damaging to representations of protests was especially frequently mentioned in BiH. It was also observed that journalists presented news featuring protesters as weak or inarticulate, and there were cases of media chasing after celebrities in protests, which were all practices that diminished the importance of protests.

What needs to be mentioned here are examples of alliances between protesters and journalists. When professional journalists were also active protesters (most notably in protests against the arrest of journalist Kezarovski in Macedonia), their understanding of the protests was seen as more comprehensive and their news was of better quality.

The traditional media's gaps in understanding the protests had an effect on protesters' communication strategies in relation to the media. While the Albanian cases show a strong commitment by protesters to work with journalists, examples from the protests in BiH and Macedonia show cases where protesters refused to cooperate with the media, due to past experiences of distorted communication; sometimes for lack of communication experience and mere fear of media distortion, as in the case of Student protests in Macedonia; or even fear for their safety or dismissal from work (in particular in BiH). Student protesters in Albania, for example, have shown a pragmatic attitude in their relations with the media – media were viewed as a channel to spread information to the public. To spread the message some groups, such as the Movement for the University in Albania, have developed public relations strategies that include issuing press releases, keeping in touch with journalists, and exchanging information. In the case of protests against the dismantling the chemical weapons in Albania, the representatives of the AKIP alliance already had good relations with the media and thus assured media representations of the protests similar to those mediated through their FB page. Other examples, such as the initial behaviour of the student plenum, show the opposite picture, i.e., protesters investing in internal communication while shutting off communication with traditional media that demanded adaptation of protesters. As time passed, the plenum participants became much more open to contacts with the media.

Some of the protesters from BiH also stress the importance of visual identity of the February protests, which they considered insufficient, especially compared to the powerful visual representation of the JMBG protests (a fist emerging from a baby dummy); indeed, the visual identity of particular plenums and the visuals shared by the protesters seemed to be lacking appeal for the media and thus could not displace the images of violence that had been dominant in the media representations of the protests.

4. Concluding remarks

The communication challenges facing both the protesters and the media in the course of the protests are numerous and some of them are closely related to the core characteristics of the protests, such as the horizontal communication lines and lack of organisation structures among the protesters, the fact that some protests did not produce representatives, the participation of groups with a multitude of identities and interests, and the related diversity and inconsistency of protest messages, as well as, at times, a lack of experience in communicating with the media. On the other hand, the systemic obstacles entrenched in the media system itself are related to the political parallelism that is considered to be a dominant factor across the three countries, considerably affecting the way that media are reporting about the protests. While some of the protests overall received more favourable media coverage than others, this seemed to be due to the fact that they did not involve strong criticism of the government. This was the case with the protests focused on preventing the dismantling of chemical weapons in Albania or the release of a jailed journalist in Macedonia, which were focused on narrow issues and were less anti-government in character than for example the protests of February 2014 in Bosnia and Herzegovina or the student protests in Macedonia, which attracted more controversial media coverage. In this view, in the protests against chemical weapons in Albania, the dominant media frame largely corresponded to the claims of the protesters – the dismantling of chemical weapons was framed as a *security threat*, which was made possible partly because criticism of the government was limited to its communication during these specific protests only. In the analysed protests in Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, on the other hand, the dominant media framing departs from the one voiced by the protesters and involves rooted strategies of delegitimisation, first of all through a frame of political instrumentalisation of protests. The specific form of this general frame depended on the dominant ideology in the country, and while in Macedonia it was based on claims of party-political affiliations of the protesters, in BiH it more often took the form of claims about ethno-political instrumentalisation, i.e., portraying the protests as an attack against the national interests of one of the three dominant ethno-national groups or against the level of government linked to a specific group's identity and interests.

In sum, the results of the analysis in the three countries confirmed that the media responses to protests did not break with the usual patterns determined by political affiliations and clientelism. Even when particular media provided professional reporting on the protests and enabled protesters to express their demands, the media reports were deemed to be superficial, lacking in-depth insights and analyses and substantial demands for government accountability.

Instead of offering comprehensive insights on the issues relevant to the recent protests, the media for the most part acted instead as a platform for competing voices, showing more or less favouritism to one or the other side. The manner in which the protests were reported differed within and between the three countries, ranging from pro-government bias to superficial reporting lacking depth (in all three countries) all the way to pro-protest reporting.

A feature of the protests that played into the media logic inasmuch as it ensured media coverage (although not necessarily of the required quality) was their size – the larger the protests were, the less likely they were to be ignored by the media. Size was a strong media message in itself. Another feature of the February protests in BiH, initial damage to government property in the first days of the protests, also attracted undivided media attention; this might in fact have been damaging for the overall representation of the protests, given that the issue of violence, in particular in the visual representation, persisted in the media throughout the protests, and may have overshadowed subsequent protest messages.

Furthermore, while in BiH there was a range of different media approaches to protests, varying from pro-government favouritism through a somewhat more balanced approach to the favourable representation of the February protests, in Macedonia the authors noted a fairly clear-cut division in how media reported on student protests, with pro-government media on one side, and media critical of the government on the other, the latter providing more information on the protests and voicing protesters' views.

Online platforms (social networks and some websites) are indicated as a space that provided more opportunities for self-mediation by the protesters and for accounts of protests independent from government representations, with some examples of online platforms being the only source of information about instances of police brutality. Communication through online platforms, primarily Facebook groups and protest websites, proved to be crucial for the dissemination of information among the protest participants and for the mobilisation for protest actions. However, beyond these immediate results, the online platforms seem to have had a limited impact in terms of the construction of meanings, i.e., framing reality, confirming that mainstream media, above all television, still play a more decisive role. Interviewees, including the protesters themselves, are well aware of the importance of attracting media attention in order for the protests to gain greater impact and long-term sustainability.

None of the country research reports indicates any relevant change in the accountability of officials in the course of the recent protests, or in how accountability was discussed in the public sphere. The reactions of officials to the protests were far from the desirable – from almost complete silence and ignoring the protests (in particular in regard to the possibility of dismantling chemical weapons in Albania) to claims of political instrumentalisation (in BiH and Macedonia) and spin (in BiH: criminalisation, placing problems solely in other administrative units and ethnic communities, claiming they are an attack against the state, entity, or canton), and finally to appropriating the protest agenda (with some officials in BiH declaratively aligning with the protest demands while failing to take political actions to meet them). During the protests, officials engaged almost exclusively in one-way communication (statements, TV appearances, FB posts) with only a few examples of direct talks with protesters or participation in interactive media formats. Similarly, media outlets are reported to have underperformed, to say the least, uncritically transmitting problematic statements and failing to actively re-examine government accountability in the light of the contestation by citizens. In sum, the results of the research indicate that the response to protests by both media and the government was rather systemic, with both failing to act in the public interest and to promote government accountability.

In all the three countries included in this research, the mere fact that the protests took place was welcomed as a democratic step. The respondents recognise the potential source of power in the communication opportunities offered by both mainstream and alternative media platforms. Within the limited communication opportunities, the protesters in some cases found ways to assert their position and challenge dominant frames. In Albania, the opportunity partly arose from the government's silence in the first days of the protests against the dismantling of chemical weapons, which left more space for protesters to assert their claims in the mainstream media. In the case of the February protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina, some media outlets were identified as supportive of the protests and protesters largely relied on them to transmit information ignored by most other media. By drawing circles around their FB photos, the protesters in Macedonia mimicked a strategy of pro-government media in its intent to label them as politically instrumentalised, and thus in a simple way transformed a discrediting tool into a tool for self-mediation and self-promotion. There have been examples of successful communication and attempts to utilise different communication platforms, to introduce new actions and forms of protests (mainly plenums), thus contributing to "cultural familiarity" (Tarrow 2011) with a wider repertoire of contested actions that can influence future citizen initiatives. Some opportunities but also many constraints have been outlined and might serve as a background for future citizen protests. In the event of future citizen protests, which some respondents see as inevitable (in particular in BiH and Macedonia), the protesters will most likely be faced with similar challenges over the construction of meaning and the utilisation of communication opportunities under existing structural constraints. The authors of the country reports offer recommendations for each of the relevant stakeholders: media, political officials, and the protesters themselves, but these recommendations are presented with strong reservations, given that the likelihood of their implementation is highly limited by the existing political culture – a structural factor in the media environment – as well as the extent to which the level of organisation of protests allows for deliberation and a strategic approach to communication. The bottom line is that substantial changes would be possible only if they involve the structural level and substantial social and media reforms.

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List of interviewees

Sazan Guri, environmentalist in Albania, 17 May 2015.

Klevis Saliaj, ATN TV, 16 May 2015.

**BETWEEN MAINSTREAM AND SOCIAL MEDIA:
COMMUNICATION PRACTICES
DURING THE PROTESTS IN ALBANIA**

I. Media environment

Albania's media landscape is rich in numbers, compared to the country's small population of about 3 million. The exact number of media outlets is not known, since print and online media are not required to register. At the moment there are 23 daily newspapers and many more publications with other schedules, for an estimated total of 250 print media outlets¹.

The situation is clearer for audiovisual media outlets operating in the country, given their obligation to obtain a license and register with the regulator. Currently there are two national commercial television stations, 71 local TVs, 83 local cable TVs, and two commercial multiplexes.² There are 63 local and two national radio stations³.

When it comes to online media, their number, way of operations, funding, and staffing is almost totally unknown, given the lack of regulation. In terms of websites, there is still a heavy presence of portals run by massmedia, as the main television stations and newspapers in the country have adapted to the demand for online content. Often websites of traditional media rank higher in popularity than online-only news media⁴; differences in reaching their audience appear not so pronounced between traditional and online media.

The overall media environment indicates that there exists a rich variety of sources of information. These sources are easily accessible and the costs are considered generally affordable. "There is a generous offer of sources of information, from all kinds of media.

¹ IREX, *Media Sustainability Index 2015*.

² AMA, list of licensed operators is available at: http://ama.gov.al/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&cid=21&Itemid=75&lang=sq, accessed October 2015.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Alexa.com rankings.

Even the most remote and poorest areas of Albania receive TV signal, have cable TV and can access news online,” observes the Balkan Media Barometer.⁵

There is no doubt that Albania has a rich and vivid media landscape in terms of number and diversity of media types, with new media outlets opening frequently. However, there is very little transparency in the way the market functions. As mentioned, the readership, circulation, and sales of print media are not known. At the same time, there are no publicly accessible and verified data on radio and television audience. In the last two years there have been a few initiatives to measure the audience, but the data is not public. Even the recently conducted measurements do not include all the media and many media owners or managers are not interested in knowing the data and using it for their business plan.⁶

In this context, the respective market share and the overall market size are a matter of speculation. As one study put it: “Although the media market has been liberalized for 23 years now, only limited progress has been made in terms of public, systematic, and reliable data on media market and media finances. The reasons for this situation are complex, but they stem mainly from the failure to have a functional media market, the lack of interest of media actors to have a transparent media market, and failure of state and commercial actors to guarantee and implement fair rules and competition for all media players. Accordingly, the ranking of Albanian media outlets can only be a judgment based on popular perceptions rather than on accurate data or audience measurements, which, even when they exist, are not public data.”⁷

In addition to the lack of data on media share and ranking, there is also a lack of transparency regarding the advertising market. While some market research companies monitor and

⁵ R. Lani (ed.), *Balkan Media Barometer: Albania*, 2013.

⁶ Interview with Thanas Goga, R&T Advertising, 15 May 2013, qtd. in I. Londo, “Albania”, 2014.

⁷ I. Londo, “Albania”, 2014.

estimate the size of the market, their data is not public and, in the best case, remain just estimates. “In some cases the data coming from different sources are conflicting, which adds to the overall confusion.”⁸ The 2013 estimates for the advertising market seem to suggest that the advertising market size has decreased compared to the 2012 estimates, from 54 million Euro in 2012 to 37-39 million Euro in 2013.⁹

The advertising revenue for 2014 was estimated at about 37 million Euro, compared to 39 million Euro in 2013, a decrease of 5%. The estimates for 2015 show a further decrease in advertising by at least 10%.¹⁰ These data mark a continuous decline in revenues for print media and radio, while television is still the most widely preferred medium by advertisers. Apart from commercial advertising, the media can also benefit from public funding. The law does not stipulate state subsidies for media, but media companies benefit from state funding in the form of advertising, public awareness campaigns, cultural projects, funds redistributed through advertising agencies, and others.¹¹ Since funds are distributed in many forms and by different institutions, it is difficult to track the overall spending on media by the state.

Recent years have witnessed an increase in internet access, which has been estimated at 60.1% of the population. This has led to a boom of new online media, blogs, and news portals, as well as in the use of social networks. At the same time, online platforms of traditional media have also been established, but the content is not necessarily different from traditional media content. On the other hand, there are cases when websites have managed to publish investigative reports which then found their way into the massmedia. An example is BIRN, a Balkan regional network specializing in investigative journalism.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ O. Liperi, “Garapermilionat e publicitetit”.

¹⁰ O. Liperi, “Bie tregu i reklamave: televizionet dhe gazetat ne krize”.

¹¹ I. Londo, *Nurturing Client Based Media Practices: State-media Financial Relations in Albania*.

Wider internet access has also led to a significant increase in the use of social networks. Facebook certainly reigns supreme in this regard, with the number of profiles reaching 1,340,000 in 2015¹². The other most popular social network in the country is Twitter, but its use remains limited; the user with the greatest number of followers – some 150,000 – is the Prime Minister Edi Rama. This figure is significantly lower compared to the most popular pages on Facebook.¹³ The second most popular social media in Albania seems to be YouTube, which ranks fifth among most visited websites by Albanians.¹⁴

According to a 2014 survey,¹⁵ Albanians still follow television more than any other type of media, spending 2 hours and 40 minutes each day watching TV, and on average one hour navigating the internet. In fact, TV is the most trusted source for Albanians, with a 73% rate of approval, compared to 43% for print media and 46% for internet sources. In addition, 84% of Albanians said they use TV to follow political news, compared to 10% who use the internet for that purpose. They were also sceptical of news coming from online and social media: 52% said they did not trust these media; at the same time, 67% viewed these platforms as a good way of expressing themselves.

¹² Albania Facebook statistics, Statistikat e Facebook, 2015.

¹³ R. Zguri, *Online media in Albania – an overview*.

¹⁴ Television is the information channel Albanian citizens spent most time with. Thus Albanians spend on average 80.9 hours each month (2 hours 40 minutes per day) watching television. The second information channel used for long hours is the internet accessed from computers, for an average of 29.8 hours per month (1 hour per day). Other most used information channels are Facebook (27.6 hrs/month), internet on mobile (24.9 hrs/month), YouTube (13.6 hrs/month), printed newspapers (9.4 hrs/month), WhatsApp (4.9 hrs/month), online newspapers (4.8 hrs/month), Instagram (2.9 hrs/month) and internet on tablet PC (2 hrs/month). (OSFA, *National Survey on Perceptions & Expectations towards a Potential EU Membership of Albania*).

¹⁵ OSFA, *National Survey on Perceptions & Expectations towards a Potential EU Membership of Albania*.

2. Citizen protests and indicators of government accountability

Trust in government and in public institutions in Albania is not particularly high. “What is immediately noticeable in Albanians’ institutional trust level is their high distrust. While distrust in public institutions has been a widespread symptom of post-communist transition, institutional distrust is still a very persistent phenomenon in the Albanian society.”¹⁶ Different studies and surveys on trust in institutions over the years indicate that this is a persistent phenomenon. A 2010 survey found that the trust score for all institutions evaluated was 43.8 points, on a 0-100 scale where 0 means “Do not trust at all” and 100 means “Trust a lot”.¹⁷ Another perception survey in 2012 revealed that Albanians do not trust the institutions. In fact, the most credible institution by far in their view is the international community,¹⁸ in which 30 percent of the respondents have a lot of faith and another 37 percent have “some faith”.¹⁹

The public’s trust in the capability of institutions to perform public services has been consistently low over the years. Courts and political parties are consistently ranked as the least trusted, indicating the two major concerns of the Albanian public – adequate enforcement of the rule of law and dissatisfaction with the dynamics of the political establishment. So, in the corruption perception index conducted from 2005 to 2010,²⁰ the institutions that scored among the lowest were the political parties, parliament, various courts, and the government. In particular, an enduring feature of public opinion is its low trust in political parties. A

¹⁶ S. Lleshaj and A. Cela, *Albanians and the New European Model: Towards a Redefinition of the Social Contract*, 2014.

¹⁷ IDRA, *Corruption in Albania: Perception and Experience: 2010 Survey*.

¹⁸ International community is commonly used to denote the representatives of international and inter-governmental bodies (UN, EU, OSCE, etc.) as well as the representatives of (mainly Western) governments in the country.

¹⁹ A. Rakipi, *Albania in the Next Ten Years: Politics, Economy, Society - Perceptions*.

²⁰ IDRA, *Corruption in Albania: Perception and Experience: 2010 Survey*.

2012 survey found that “only a third of respondents say that they trust the two main political parties, the Socialist Party and the Democratic Party, while an average of 60 percent of people are disillusioned with them. One can say that there is a certain degree of exhaustion with politics, which is also reflected in the low levels of credibility towards the main parties.”²¹ This is a sentiment that also resonates with the young generation, who has grown increasingly disinterested in politics or simply sees politics as a way of advancing their own career, rather than as a means for making important changes for society.²²

In terms of public trust in various institutions, a significant and consistent feature is the relative trust placed in the media, especially in their contribution to fighting corruption. The media were each year seen as one of the least corrupt institutions in surveys conducted in 2005-2010.²³ Similarly, in 2012 the media were ranked as the second most trustworthy institution, after the international community, with 18% of respondents having a lot of faith in it, and a further 45% having some faith.²⁴ Data from 2014 also indicates that the media continue to rank low on the distrust scale when compared to other institutions and organisations.²⁵

A significant part of the distrust in government and in public institutions is also linked to the perceived level of corruption, which has persisted in the transition period and is considered one of the great problems of Albanian society. Albania ranked 110th out of 175 countries in the Corruption Perception Index of Transparency International in 2014. Similarly, there is also a generally low satisfaction regarding the provision of basic public services, with 57% of

²¹ Ibid.

²² A. Cela et al., *Albanian Youth 2011: Between Present Hopes and Future Insecurities*.

²³ IDRA, *Corruption in Albania: Perception and Experience*, Surveys 2005-2010.

²⁴ A. Rakipi, *Albania in the Next Ten Years: Politics, Economy, Society - Perceptions*.

²⁵ S. Lleshaj and A. Cela, *Albanians and the New European Model: Towards a Redefinition of the Social Contract*

respondents saying they believe the public services are hardly, if at all sufficient.²⁶ Coupled with the perception of high levels of corruption in the executive and especially the judiciary, is also the perception of relatively low transparency of these institutions. In the surveys of public opinion in 2005-2010 the perception of overall transparency was low.²⁷ Reports on implementation of FOIA requests from both media and citizens indicate that the response rate is no lower than 60%, and the information provided is not necessarily the one requested.²⁸

In spite of the dissatisfaction with the performance of government and public institutions through the years, public protests in the country have been very rare and there is hardly any mobilization of society in public events. With the exception of political parties, which have their own mechanisms of mobilising support, other organisations have rarely succeeded in creating strong and visible public protests and movements. Similarly, initiatives of citizens have also been rare and unsuccessful. The reasons for this prolonged passivity are complex, but a great part of the explanation lies in the legacy of the previous regime. In Albania the regime change was not significantly backed and shaped by an active civil society, let alone civil resistance. After the 1990s, civil society had to be mobilised and created from scratch, faced with the lack of tradition of civic organisation, participation, and engagement. Oppression of all forms of social resistance, a legal ban on independent organisations practically since 1956 and the creation of front organisations to communicate the party line contributed to an ossified social space in which party and society were indistinguishable. As a consequence, the idea and practice of civil society in Albania lacked the normative attributes it gained in other post-communist countries as an important actor of regime change.²⁹ According to

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Perception of overall transparency of the judiciary and the government was below the average score of nine institutions considered in 2010 survey. IDRA, *Corruption in Albania: Perception and Experience*, Surveys 2005-2010.

²⁸ AMI Monitoring Reports 2015, 2014, 2013, 2012.

²⁹ BTI, *Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2012: Albania Country Report*, p. 22.

official data, at the end of 2014 there were 2,378 NGOs and international organisations in the country. However, they are not seen as particularly successful in initiating grassroots movement or engaging public support regarding various topics and actions.

Civil society organisations and their effectiveness still face a lack of trust among the Albanian public, while civil society itself seems to be often politically divided. Albanian non-governmental organisations are often considered to be biased and are to a large extent divided between supporters of government and opposition.³⁰ According to another source, “current associations have still to assert their political autonomy against an increasing trend of politicization, as many NGOs often serve as political auxiliaries rather than autonomous public entities”.³¹ Albanian NGOs are also invariably dependent on foreign funding, often lacking sufficient financial and human resources. Since 2009, state aid is also available for NGOs through an agency set up for this purpose. This agency has been criticised by civil society for the allocation of funding; civil society actors are claiming that loyalty to the government is the main criterion for awarding funds.³²

Although civil society organisations are not particularly strong and lack mobilising power, they organise protests focused on their field of work quite frequently, usually related to social issues. Among the most frequent protests are those related to gender (domestic violence, gender balance in politics and other fields, equal opportunity, etc.), children (protection, education), and disabled persons. On the other hand, other organised interests, mainly trade unions, army officials, or war veterans, also seek to improve their situation through

³⁰ U. Stern and S. Wohlfield, *Albania's Long Road into the European Union: Internal Political Power Struggle Blocks Central Reforms*, p. 11.

³¹ BTI, *Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2012: Albania Country Report*, p. 23.

³² U. Stern and S. Wohlfield, *Albania's Long Road into the European Union: Internal Political Power Struggle Blocks Central Reforms*, p. 12.

street protests, lobbying the parliament, lobbying for legislation, and awareness campaigns, among other things.

With the spread of the internet and greater use of Facebook, new forms of protests have appeared. For example, in 2013, before the general elections, a campaign started on Facebook to put in a no-vote, a vote against the political establishment, by calling on all those disappointed by the current political class to put in a spoiled ballot paper, rejecting all candidates. Another Facebook-born protest was the gathering of a group of protesters in front of the Central Bank, calling for the arrest of the governor, after it emerged that a large amount of money was missing from the treasury. There are also spontaneous attempts to organise gatherings or protests through Facebook in cases of murder, serious accidents, or national disaster, but they tend to fail to mobilise a significant number of people.

3. Cases of protests in the period 2013-2015

This research presents an analysis of communication practices during protests using three case studies. The main rationale for selecting these cases has been the perceived lack of affiliation with political parties of persons or groups that stand behind the protests. In the primary case of the protests against chemical weapons, no particular political group appeared to be sponsoring the protests, and the same is true for the protests against the building of flats by the lake in the capital. Even when the organisers of protests clearly have political convictions, they are usually opposed to the political establishment in the country. For example, in the case of the student protests, some of the protesters also are left-wing activists, but have clearly opposed the ruling left-wing party and all other parties in their public statements. In this context, these three cases are among the few cases of protests taking place in Albania that are not organised or supported by political parties or well-known civil-society organisations.

The persistence of protests was another factor considered in selecting the cases. It has been the norm for protests to fizzle out after a one-day event. But at least two of the selected cases do not fall in this category. The chemical weapons protests grew and persisted every day for two weeks, until they reached their aim. The student protests have been an exercise in persistence, turning into a movement: students have been protesting regularly for the entire years 2015, in various forms, such as street protests, occupation of buildings, hijacking of events, etc.

A final factor considered in choosing the case studies was the number of people involved in protests. Although there are no clear figures being provided by officials, the media, or protesters, the protests against chemical weapons were not only persistent, but also quite large, with many people occupying the main streets in the capital (no accurate estimates about the number, some say more than hundred), as well as in other cities in Albania. The student protests, although much smaller in size and limited to a particular category of protesters, have also been substantial and events have been organised regularly. Given that in the last 20

years the rallies of political parties had been the only events to mobilise crowds of people, it was important to analyse these particular cases, since they made a difference in this respect.

Currently the student protests are still ongoing. The main focus is still the law on education reform and education-related issues. In some cases the protests have also attempted to include a more social component, such as a fare rise for public transport and decisions to build parking lots, among other issues. The protests against building blocks of flats seem to have faded after a court ruled that the flats should not be built. However, the case is still in court and it remains to be seen if further rulings will affect the protest. On the other hand, the protests of the main case study ended in November 2013, with the government deciding in favour of protesters' request. The following is a description of each protest as a case study, with its goals, dynamics, and development.

Protests against proposal to dismantle Syrian chemical weapons in Albania

In October 2013, unconfirmed reports emerged that the United States had offered Albania as a host for the dismantling of chemical weapons removed from Syria. The government remained silent and neither confirmed nor denied the rumours. As a result of the alarming news and the total lack of official information, panic started to spread and an online movement sprang up on Facebook, titled "One million Albanians against destruction of chemical weapons in Albania," mainly made up of students and activists. Soon groups of protesters started gathering in front of the government building. Starting out with no more than fifty, their number continued to grow in the total silence from the government. The protesters were organised through Facebook, in the common protest page, as well as by public figures participating in the protests, such as environmentalists, journalists and editors, and civil rights activists. As tension grew and the government remained silent, protesters decided to camp out even during the night. The protest ended on November 15, when the Prime Minister announced in a news conference his decision not to accept the US offer. After the protests of the early 1990s that had brought about the end of the socialist regime, this was the first large public protest that

was not organised by political forces. Hence, it is important to study why this is an exception and what were the communication features that sustained such a massive protest.

“For the University” student movement against change of legislation on education

In October 2014, students at the public University of Tirana began protesting against a government decision to raise tuition fees for master’s degrees in higher public education. Protests took place through the existing student councils and as public demonstrations and petitions in front of the government building; in some cases teachers were prevented from entering the university, a sort of ‘Occupy’ movement. In the first week of November, the protests came to the attention of public opinion and the media when the Prime Minister left a government session to inform the protesters in front of the building of the process. The protests continued on university premises, in the streets, and in front of the government building and the parliament. Another notable episode took place on December 8, 2014, when some students ‘infiltrated’ a public event attended by the Prime Minister, shouting at him and holding slogans against the fee hike and changes to the funding model in public education. The main organiser of the protests is “For the University,” a movement of students at the public University of Tirana, which works mainly through Facebook, as well as real-life meetings. They also launched a monthly newspaper “For the University” as a forum of opinion among the movement participants. This is the first case of organised and continuous protests among students in the last 20 years, and is hence important for our study.

Protests against construction of blocks of flats near Tirana lake and city park

The third case involves a movement opposing plans to build a block of flats in the largest green area in Tirana. Green areas have been disappearing from the city each year, due to continuous, often irregular construction. While expansive and intensive building activity, frequently bending or violating the rules of architecture and urban planning, has been ongoing

for more than 20 years, this case has become particularly sensitive given its effect on Tirana's main park, especially in light of plans to further expand this building area at the expense of the largest green area in the capital. Construction began in February-April 2015, sparking protests from a group of citizens. They have staged several protests at the construction site and in front of the government building, demanding that construction be stopped. Their protests have been covered in the media; they work mainly through a Facebook page and e-mail, and by giving interviews to mainstream media. The protests stopped after a court ruled that the building permit was invalid. However, it remains to be seen how further court instances will decide on the matter and if this will spark new protests.

4. Sampling

The research aims to analyse the communication practices in the context of citizen protests and to consider how these practices relate to public accountability. In this context, the research focuses on three main areas. The first area focuses on the role of media outlets in the communication practices during protests, addressing the question of how media performed during the protests and whether they were influenced in their coverage by other actors. The second area relates to the communication practices of activists and citizens, focusing on the way they related to massmedia and how they employed different platforms to mobilise and organise. The third area focuses on the communication practices of the local authorities during the protests, exploring the way they related both to massmedia and protesters, and the methods and tools used. Finally, all of these questions lead to an analysis of any possible impact the protests and the communication practices might have had on the accountability of public institutions.

In this framework, a qualitative research design was employed. The research is based on examining three case studies, where the primary case was studied both through media content analysis and interviews, while the other two cases were addressed by interviewing relevant actors. Twenty in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with journalists, protesters, and officials, in order to obtain their observations and perceptions of the communication practices during protests. The interviewees included seven protesters, seven media representatives, and six officials from the police, ministries, and political parties. However, the division was sometimes blurred, as a few journalists had also actively participated in the protests, especially the largest one against the dismantling of chemical weapons in Albania. Among the media representatives were those from public television and the two national commercial television stations. In addition, bloggers and editors of online media were also interviewed, given the rising importance of new media as a forum for public debate and a provider of news.

The interviewees on the final list did not request anonymity. However, four persons, all of them party officials or representatives of the state, refused to take part in the interview, citing lack of time amid the ongoing election campaign in the country. A representative of the police stated that he was not the right person to provide information for past protests, since he was not in office at the time.

In addition to interviews, the research findings are also based on media content analysis in the case of the protests against chemical weapons. The common sampling of the entire research was based on the selection of media with greater reach, but in the Albanian case this is a difficult task given the lack of official and public data on audience and readership. As a result, when it comes to TV stations, the analysis included the public broadcaster and the two national commercial TV stations in the country, since these are supposed to have the greatest reach among the population in terms of area coverage. The other two stations were chosen based on a general perception of importance and reach among the population, as well as on the nature of their content: Vizion Plus TV is one of the main generalist TV stations after the national commercial TVs, while Ora News TV is one of the main all-news channels in the country. The selection also took into account the ownership and editorial policy of the media stations. While News 24 TV is also a major news station, it is part of the same group as the online news portal Balkanweb, and it was considered more appropriate to include the online website since it is one of the most popular in the country. Regarding online media, the selection was made based on rankings provided by alexa.com, a website providing commercial web traffic data and analytics. While it is a source whose credibility is disputed frequently by online media representatives, there is no other way of ranking online media in the country at present, since online media do not disclose more reliable data on their reach.

In total, 50 TV news items and 30 online items were analysed. The selected media included the following:

- Radio Televizioni Shqiptar (RTSH), the public television

- Top Channel TV, national commercial television
- TV Klan, national commercial television
- Vizion Plus TV, one of the main commercial televisions
- Ora News TV, one of the main news channels
- Balkanweb.com, one of the main online news media
- Albeu.com, a news portal
- Lajmifundit.al, a news portal

The analysis included content published during the whole protest period, from October 30 to November 15, 2013. It should be noted that a few traditional media did not cover the news from the very start but one or two days later, after other media, also due to the fact that the original news was taken from an article published in foreign media and there was no official confirmation. In addition, the collection of media content presented some difficulties, since the case was already two years old and some media clips were no longer available. However, this was solved through contacts with the respective media, mainly public broadcaster RTSH, and the coding process took place accordingly.

Since the period covered by the protests was almost 15 days and the coding content would include 10 news items from each media, a selection was made of the most important moments to be included in the analysis, including the peaks, but also the start of the protest and days when there were new developments drawing greater media attention, such as the first news on the whole issue, the few reactions of officials, and the environmentalists' events that preceded the street protests. Monitoring content included reports on the start of the protests, the growing number of protesters, the government's first reaction, the peak of street protests, and the final government decision and the response from the protesters.

5. Research results

5.1 The protests: media framing and perception

The way protests were perceived by the interviewees on the one hand and framed by the media coverage on the other hand, allows us to compare insights and explore the role of media in creating the public perception of protests and in shaping the opinions of those who closely followed the protests. In this context, this section addresses the general perception of the interviewees of the nature and role of protests, followed by a content analysis of the way protests were framed in the media.

General perception of the role and characteristics of protests

The research results show that the protests are perceived as a vital tool in a democracy and their absence would turn democracy into a rusty mechanism.³³ Protests were seen as the most peaceful and democratic tool to exert and demand respect for human rights. None of the interviewees, whether protester, journalist, or official, associated the protests with violence, neither in their general perception and idea of protests, nor in the specific cases or particular protests. This may be due to the fact that protests in Albania have almost never been violent, except for a few rallies of political parties. In addition, other interviewees considered the protests themselves as an indicator of the health of democracy in a country: “Protests are an irreplaceable tool in democracy. No matter how advanced a democracy is, protests remain essential and are held frequently.”³⁴ One of the interviewees even sees them as a power in their own right: “The role of protests in democracy might come as a power of its own, right after

³³ Interview with Erion Kristo, activist, 21 May 2015.

³⁴ Interview with Blendi Salaj, journalist, Club FM Radio & protester, 6 June 2015.

the media and the judiciary, namely the power of citizens.”³⁵ However, there were also a few suggestions that protests should not be glorified when appraising the democratisation of a society. “Protests are a way of articulating problems that the bureaucratic machinery fails to articulate. However, they are a very clear indication of the absence of democracy, because in developed countries ‘radical’ forms of reaction have been formalised and have become part of the decision-making process, as, for example, in the cases of direct referenda.”³⁶

The research revealed a common perception of the interviewees on the relation between protests and accountability, too: protests are a way of communicating concerns to the elected or nominated representatives in power, of telling them that they are not representing the will, desires, and demands of the population and that this has to change. “Protests are very important in their aim to change wrong directions that might lead to violation of citizens’ rights and failure to fulfil their will,” said one of the journalists interviewed.³⁷ A representative of the protesters also agreed: “Protests are necessary and are a good method for expressing the problems and indignation of a society at a time when the delegated representation is dysfunctional and peaceful protests remain the only legal solution.”³⁸ Using the same indicator of democratic representation, one of the protesters thought the protests were even more important than elections: “Elections happen once every four years, while protests are an opportunity for permanent civic engagement.”³⁹

The overall impression about the practice of protests in Albania is coloured by widespread suspicions about their political instrumentalisation. Interviewees doubted both the motives

³⁵ Interview with Sazan Guri, environmentalist, 17 May 2015.

³⁶ Interview with Ervin Goci, protester, professor of journalism at University of Tirana, 3 June 2015.

³⁷ Interview with Klevis Saliaj, ATN TV, 16 May 2015.

³⁸ Interview with Rakip Belishaku, student, protester, 27 May 2015.

³⁹ Interview with Arlind Qorri, professor, protester, May 2015.

and the effectiveness of protests in the country. The common thread running through the perceptions of all those interviewed was that the politicisation of protests was the main factor in turning protests into a trivial event, or that they have been delegitimised altogether. This perception is closely related to the fact that the large stand often the only protests in the last 25 years were started either directly by the main political parties or with their significant involvement.⁴⁰ “Albania is characterized by vague protests, with little civil diversity, with too much politics in them, with very few young people, and even fewer intellectuals or elites protesting; above all with very little involvement from the students.”⁴¹ This is a sentiment echoed not only by protesters, but also by journalists. “Unfortunately in Albania the largest protests have been only political, conducted by political leaders, and there have been only a few social protests related directly to services to citizens or similar aspects.”⁴² Another journalist points out different examples of initiatives that supposedly started out with citizens and then transformed into political movements or parties.⁴³ Other interviewees also see protests as evolving mainly around political factors and as initiated by political actors, which led to the saturation of the population with these kinds of protests.

Lack of accountability and general lack of results from protests is another factor that discourages people from protesting, according to the interviewees. While in general the right to protest has been guaranteed and respected by state authorities, protesters’ demands often get no reaction from the same authorities, which leads to the perception of protests as a

⁴⁰ “In Albania the concept that citizens themselves control those who govern and can thus determine the country’s direction has not been fully established. This is also evidenced by the fact that demonstrations and referendums occur selectively and mostly at the local level.” U. Stern and S. Wohlfield, *Albania’s Long Road into the European Union: Internal Political Power Struggle Blocks Central Reforms*

⁴¹ Interview with Sazan Guri.

⁴² Interview with Klevis Saliaj.

⁴³ Interview with Gjergj Erebara, BIRN reporter, 30 July 2015.

useless exercise. “Protest is the most democratic form of demanding one’s own rights, but these civic initiatives have rarely succeeded.”⁴⁴

The interviewees’ perception of the three particular cases did not differ from their perception of protests in general: they were seen as a democratic means of expressing particular concerns to the government and decision-making bodies in general. The only differences were related to the size of the protests and consequently to the representative power of the protesters. Most interviewees considered the massive protests against the dismantling of chemical weapons in Albania as the broadest protest, uniting many groups and people and one of the most representative of Albanian people as a whole. “This protest united people from different backgrounds and representing different social groups, but they all voiced the concern of most of Albanian society at the time.”⁴⁵

Media framing of the protests

In order to explore how the media framed the problems addressed by the protests, an analysis of diagnosis-prognosis frames was carried out. The themes of the media coverage (Table 1) of the protests during November 2013 feature predominantly the conduct of protests and the description of protesters’ demands and their justifications for these demands.

Theme	Frequency
Protesters’ demands and reasons	33
Protest events	20
Conduct of institutions	27
Total	80

Table 1: *Main themes in media on the protest*

⁴⁴ Interview with Rezar Balla, editor-in-chief of RTSH News Department, 10 June 2015.

⁴⁵ Interview with Blendi Salaj.

The main theme in 33 of the 80 news items monitored focused on articulating the protesters' demands and their reasons for protesting. In this category the media coverage focused mainly on statements of protesters, on their opposition against dismantling chemical weapons in Albania over safety and public health concerns and a lack of capacity, as well as questioning the lack of transparency and accountability from the government on such an important decision. Another 20 articles and stories from the 80 monitored media items was related to the protest events and the scale and development of the protests, describing their spread to different cities, the involvement of different groups, interaction with police, and so on. By contrast, 27 out of 80 media items featured as the main theme the conduct of institutions in this protest, featuring mainly a brief explanation from the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ditmir Bushati, the interaction of the Speaker of Parliament, Ilir Meta, with protesters, and the final decision as voiced by Prime Minister Edi Rama. In a way, this division of themes was dictated by the dynamics of the protests and the almost total silence of the government on the proposal it had received, the state of negotiations, and the implications for the country. So, in this respect, it can be said that media coverage mirrored the development of the protests in the ground, as well as the role of specific figures and institutions in the whole affair.

Problems and solutions as framed in the media

The analysis identified three main frames under the diagnosis (Table 2): the two dominant ones are the safety threat from the dismantling of chemical weapons and public concerns with apparent bad governance in this affair. A third, minor one is related to the manipulation and politicisation of protests: protesters viewed with unease attempts by the opposition to join the protests, while the Prime Minister thought the protests were fuelled by speculation.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis main frames	N	Diagnosis subframes	N
Safety threat	81	Lack of safety in the process	66
		Lack of capacities/expertise	8
		Lack of legal framework, lack of legality of the possible dismantling of chemical weapons	7
Bad governance	66	Lack of transparency	11
		Lack of accountability	30
		Lack of pursuing public interest	25
Manipulation and Politicisation of protests	8	Potential instrumentalisation of protests by opposition	5
		Speculation and lack of information among the citizens on the issue	3
Total	155	Total	155

Table 2: *Diagnosis frames*

The two dominant frames are found in almost all news items analysed, usually at the same time, indicating the two main concerns of protesters, the **threats to public health and safety** (81) from dismantling chemical weapons and the perception of **bad governance** (66). In the table 2 the sub-frames within each of the frame are presented, as well as their frequency in the analysed sample.

Protests: in the name of safety

The dominant frame, the lack of safety in the process of dismantling chemical weapons in Albania, is supported by three sub-frames, which specify the problems posed by the potential

destruction of such weapons in the country to do with technical risks. More specifically, frequently used arguments included the difficult and rugged Albanian terrain, which makes the safe transportation of the weapons problematic. Another argument was related to the potential lethal risks such weapons carry, often referring to media reports on the effects of such weapons in Syria. The other element supporting this frame was the environmental damage that such a process would pose, especially at a time when generally high hopes have been placed on Albania's nature and its landscapes as keys to the country's economic development. So, apart from addressing the fears that the process would be highly unsafe, there were also concerns expressed on the long-lasting impact it would have on the country's future.

While failure to guarantee a safe process of dismantling the weapons in Albania was the main subframe, two other subframes also supported the main frame (lack of safety). So, several reports emphasised the lack of expertise of the Albanian state in such difficult processes, also highlighting previous similar experiences, where dangerous toxic waste had not been properly disposed. Finally, the lack of a legal framework to support such a complicated procedure, and the indication that laws were being broken, also supported the main frame - the dangerous nature of the whole process, with difficult implications for such a small country. Overall, the most pronounced feature of the diagnosis main frame was the security risks posed by the process of dismantling the weapons in Albania.

The second major frame identified in the diagnosis analysis is that of bad governance, based on the perception that the government was not being responsible or accountable to its citizens (see section on accountability, below.) A third, minor frame was that of the manipulation of protests. The problem in this case was twofold. On the one hand, there was the coverage of protesters' concerns that the opposition would instrumentalise their protest. This was of major importance to the protesters, as expressed in the media coverage of the protests and in later events, since they emphasised that the protest was not directed against political parties but against the risk posed by chemical weapons. On the other hand, the problem with the protests, as expressed mainly by the Prime Minister, was that the protesters lacked the necessary information and the protests were

being fuelled by speculation. This subframe was based mainly on populist rhetoric, referring to such values as protection of national interest, the guarantee of good governance, and the need for citizens to trust the government, as it would never go against their interests. In addition, the role of important allies, above all the US, was also used as an argument to calm down the protests without offering any information on the process. The US, it was said, had only the best interests of Albanians at heart, as evidenced by its important role in Albanian history.

Prognosis

The prognosis also consists of three main frames, two of which were dominant and largely corresponded to the diagnosis frames (Table 3). For example, if safety was observed as a problem, then rejecting the dismantling of the weapons was seen as a solution to the problem.

Prognosis main frames	N	Prognosis subframes	N
Public health and safety	79	Reject because of lack of safety	48
		Legal violation	8
		Albania will turn into Syria	16
		Albania will turn into a trash bin	4
		Long-term effects	3
Government conduct	61	Increased transparency and accountability	30
		Improve public trust in government	10
		Pursuing national interest	21
Avoid instrumentalisation of protests	3	Ban politicians from protests	3
Total	143		143

Table 3: *Prognosis frames*

The dominant frame is identified as the need to guarantee public health and safety. Although several subframes could be identified in this regard, the solution that tied them all together was that the government should listen to protesters and reject the offer made to destroy weapons on Albanian territory. The second dominant frame was related to government conduct, separated into subframes of increased transparency and accountability, improving public trust in government, and pursuing the national interest. Even in this case, the solution was common: the government should be transparent and explain the issue to the Albanian people, as well as reject the deal, as it went against the national interest. The third frame was related to the need to avoid instrumentalisation of protests, where the solution identified was to ban politicians from protests, for fear of manipulation.

The prognosis is dominated by the need to reject the offer to dismantle chemical weapons in Albania, giving safety the top priority (79 occurrences). The solution identified most frequently is rejecting the deal offered because of safety risks involved (48 occurrences). The second most identified prognosis subframe is the threat that Albania will turn into Syria (16 occurrences) if the deal is accepted. This was mainly voiced by a Syrian girl living in Albania who participated in the protests, but since almost all media included her in the coverage, this was one of the main subframes. Other subframes also support the same argument: imminent ecological disaster and the long-term effects of such a process. Thus, the frame is a combination of safety arguments and fear – the comparison with Syria and doubts over Albania's future.

The second most identified prognosis frame is related to government conduct (61 occurrences), mainly suggesting increased transparency and improved accountability of government (see separate section on accountability, below). The third frame identified (3 occurrences) is the need to save the integrity of protests, which is perceived as endangered by attempts of the opposition to join. This frame is again built on the value of clearly separating the protests from the political establishment, since one of the elements that

provided one of the strongest values of the protests was its representation of people, separate from the political parties.

Considering the pairing between diagnosis and prognosis frames, there is a clear consistency between them (table 4):

Diagnosis main frames	N	Prognosis main frames	N
Safety threat	81	Public health and safety guarantee (by rejecting the deal)	79
Bad governance	66	Government conduct improved (transparency and accountability)	61
Manipulation and politicisation of protests	8	Avoiding manipulation (by keeping politicians out and avoiding speculation)	3
Total	155		143

Table 4: *Diagnosis-prognosis coherence*

The coherence in pairings between diagnosis and prognosis show a relatively uniform framing of the problems and solutions offered, as identified by media content analysis. This uniformity occurs across different media outlets and there are no particular nuances or differences in coverage depending on media affiliation or editorial policy. The primary explanation for this is the fact that the main identified frames in the media were provided by journalists or protesters and that the government did not offer a counter-narrative at a time when Albania was faced with such a grave decision; there was virtually no official information on the whole affair. Furthermore, another explanation might be that in some cases the protesters made it clear they were interested in the outcome of this specific case and the protests were not against the government's overall conduct. At the same time, the opposition remained generally quiet until some point towards the end of the protest. All of these factors led to a situation where the need for political instrumentalisation of the media was not particularly strong.

News sources specifying the problem	N	News sources specifying the solution	N
Protesters (civil society, ordinary people, journalists as protesters)	69	Protesters (civil society, ordinary people, journalists as protesters)	64
Politicians (PM, Speaker of Parliament, opposition, MPs)	52	Politicians (PM, Speaker of Parliament, opposition, MPs)	52
Experts	9	Experts	6
Journalists	40	Journalists	22
Total	170		144

Table 5: *News sources specifying problems and solutions*

This coherence is even more evident if we look at the actors identified as specifying the problems and the solutions. Table 5 depicts a clear trend: the frequency in news reporting of a specific type of source for the identification of a problem largely corresponds to the frequency of the same sources when the solutions are identified. The slight difference indicates that some texts do not specify a solution. Overall, the protesters are the largest group in terms of sources, followed by politicians. However, having in mind that politicians also include the opposition, as well as politicians trying to maintain a neutral stand vis-à-vis the protests (e.g., the Speaker of Parliament), protesters are clearly the main source appearing in the media coverage of the protests.

In sum, the legitimacy of the protesters and their struggle was largely accepted and as a result, the protests themselves were not identified as part of the problem. The only exception is in the initial statements of the Prime Minister, where he identified the lack of information of protesters as the main factor fuelling the protests (3 occurrences). However, even in this case, he stated that this lack of information was being manipulated by political opponents: he was trying to paint the protests as politicised, precisely what the protesters were trying to resist. At the same time, in a few cases protests were seen as part of the solution (5 occurrences). This

came mainly from civil society leaders or random protesters, who indicated the solution was in mobilising greater numbers of protesters, so that they could pressure the government to give in to their demand to refuse the chemical weapons deal. Given the major presence of protesters as sources, i.e., as the actors that appear to have specified the problems and solutions in media reporting, and having in mind that the two dominant frames are related to the demands of the protests (guaranteeing public health and safety and demanding transparency), it can be said that the protests were implicitly legitimised through media coverage. Naturally, this must also be viewed against the background of the general silence of the authorities vis-à-vis the protests and the lack of official information and transparency.

Comparing coverage across media outlets

The protesters who were interviewed on the media coverage of protests in general agreed overall that it ranged from politicised reporting in the worst case, to politically correct but limited and superficial reporting of protest events.⁴⁶ These opinions were in line with the opinions of journalists and officials interviewed. “In Albania you can rarely find balanced coverage of protests, since the media is politicised.”⁴⁷ Interview with journalists also indicate that political interest is a factor that determines whether protests will be covered in the media.⁴⁸ In addition, the protesters in general had a better opinion and experience with online media as compared to traditional media, viewing the latter as deeply connected and subservient to political and economic power.⁴⁹ However, the frame analysis of media content did not reveal any striking differences between media outlets on the protests of November 2013 (Table 6).

⁴⁶ Interviews with protesters.

⁴⁷ Interview with Arlind Kote, Forca Rinia movement, 5 May 2015.

⁴⁸ Interviews with journalists.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Frames	Public health and safety (n)	Accountability	Transparency	Politicisation of protests	Good governance	Public and national interest	Right to protest	Legality of the process
Media								
Lajmifundit.al	3	9	2		5	4	2	
Albeu.com	9	1	3	1	3	1	2	
Balkanweb.com	7	3	5		5	3	1	4
TV Klan	9	7	4	1	2	1	3	4
Vizion + TV	7	6	2	1	5	3	1	
Top Channel TV	5	4	2		3	3	2	1
Ora News TV	7	5	3		5	1		
TVSH	7	2	3		4	1	1	3
Total	54	37	24	3	32	17	12	12

Table 6: Identification of frames according to media outlets

First of all, the texts monitored from the three online media were more or less identical, which is a very common occurrence on Albanian news portals, where one can find the same text in several, unrelated and rival news portals. The media themselves commonly challenge accusations of copying content, but it is a persistent practice nonetheless. As a consequence, the major difference in online coverage appears to be regarding references to accountability, with one of the portals referring to it heavily compared to the other two. However, this difference in coverage is more likely attributable to the selection of analysed texts rather than the dominance of one frame over the others in one particular medium. In fact, a major shortcoming of analysed texts in this case was the fact that at the time of the analysis the protests were already two years old, and hence not all media content on the protests was available from online media and TV stations.

In the same spirit, the coverage of the protest events did not present any particular surprises

or differences between the five TV stations monitored for this study. While the “copy/paste” practice is widespread among news portals, the uniformity of topics covered, of sources of information, and of the angles used also affect traditional media, with the exception of events of particular political or economic interest. However, the peculiar feature in this case was that the involvement and reaction from government and politicians was virtually non-existent, especially in the first week of the protests. At the same time, the voice of the opposition was also missing, probably due to its reluctance to side with the protesters and possibly also out of fear of alienating a strong ally, the U.S.⁵⁰ Hence, in a way, the silence of the government and of political figures, be it from the ruling majority or from the opposition, and the increasing size of the protests directed the media’s attention to the protesters as the only voice on the whole affair.

The only major deviation from this pattern was the coverage of RTSH, the public broadcaster, which was shorter and less substantive than that of the commercial operators. For example, at its peak the protest was taking place less than 100 metres from the RTSH headquarters and all TV stations were broadcasting live frequently, while RTSH carried on with its scheduled programs and only briefly mentioned the news in its main edition. Another difference was related to the more active way of giving voice to protesters employed by media closer to the opposition at the time than to the government. For example, TV Klan, which at the time was closer to the former Prime Minister, broadcast more interviews of public persons protesting against the government and pressuring it to reject the weapons deal. However, these were merely nuances, as the protests in general were equally covered by all TV stations, describing the protest events, interviewing protesters, broadcasting their public calls and statements, the spread of the protests, and so on.

In addition, the media coverage in this case was almost uniform across all media outlets, independently of their political alignment or editorial policy. Even the same experts and sources were cited most of the time, with the same group of persons being rotated from one

⁵⁰ The opposition leaders tried to join the protests in the last two days, but up until then the opposition had remained silent on the matter.

TV studio to the next. In the same way, online media did not provide any point of departure from traditional media in this case, and there was no visible difference, as the information provided was more or less the same. The tabloid depiction of news and events from one media to the next seems to be one of the main features describing media coverage at the moment, with many news platforms and media tending to copy or replicate each other.⁵¹

5.2 Accountability: media framing and perception

The research indicates that in general the media tended to report the events and the different voices in the protests and beyond, but failed to launch on their own a discussion of greater government accountability and to follow up on this issue. Overall, the media coverage of the protests addressed the issue of accountability, or in the case of protests against chemical weapons, the lack of accountability of government vis-a-vis protesters. (Table 7).

Diagnosis main frame	N	Diagnosis subframes	N	Prognosis main frame	N	Prognosis subframes	N
Bad governance	66	Lack of transparency	11	Government conduct	61	Increased transparency and accountability	30
		Lack of accountability	30			Improve public trust in government	10
		Lack of pursuing public interest	25			Pursuing national interest	21
Total diagnosis main frames	155			Total prognosis main frames	143		

Table 7: *Diagnosis-prognosis for main frame related to accountability*

⁵¹ IREX, *Media Sustainability Index 2015*.

The diagnosis-prognosis analysis shows a rather coherent framing of the protests in terms of accountability. Table 7 shows how media reports about the protests included references to the problem of bad governance in the form of lack of transparency, lack of accountability, or failure to pursue the public interest. The solution identified for these problems lies in modifications to government conduct (see table for details).

Media content analysis revealed that accountability was addressed primarily by providing space for protesters or civil society to seek transparency and information on the current state of affairs with the proposal to destroy chemical weapons in Albania. There were numerous interventions of protesters in TV live broadcasts, as well as in studio interviews with protest leaders who expressed their concerns.⁵²

Within the diagnosis part of our frame analysis, we sought to identify the problems within the news content, as well as the actors mentioned as being responsible for causing the problem, as shown in the table 8:

⁵² For the sake of fairness, the fate of the protests and of the proposal was the key topic in talk shows in the week that preceded the public statement of the Prime Minister on his decision to refuse the destruction of chemical weapons in Albania. However, since this analysis includes media content of the main news editions on the topic, it cannot be said that the topic of accountability was actively pursued by the media on its own initiative, although the protesters were provided the opportunity to voice their concerns.

Problem	N	Responsible for causing the problem	N
Threat to public health and safety	81	The technical side of process of dismantling weapons	20
		Government for considering the request made by US	52
		US request to Albania	14
		Police for questioning legitimacy of protests	2
		News in foreign media on the US offer to Albania	2
Lack of accountability and transparency	66	Government for not asking citizens about the process	2
		Government for lack of transparency	20
		Secrecy imposed by talks with allies	6
		PM for decision and silence	6
Politicisation of protests	8	Opposition for instrumentalising the protests	6
		Protesters against US for making such a request	2
		Protesters for their lack of information	6

Table 8: *Responsibility for causing the problem*

Depending on who is speaking in the media, the focus on who is causing the problem also changes. For example, in six cases the opposition was identified as responsible for the problem, after some of its members decided to join the protests in its last days. This was seen as a problem both by the government, which saw this as a ploy to incite the protesters while lacking the information to make such a decision, and by the protesters. In fact, when the former Prime Minister and the current head of the opposition joined the protests in the last day, the protesters drove them away, for fear of the protest being politicised, shouting “No

politics here!” As one of the protesters recalls: “It had to be clear that the protest was above politics and was not affiliated with any political wing.”⁵³ In the same way, the Prime Minister and other officials, on the few occasions they spoke about the protests, also blamed the citizens, protesters, and environmentalists for relying on speculation and fuelling the protests. So, in six of the cases monitored, it appeared that they were the root of the problem, as they were urging the people to come out in protests while lacking the necessary information and expertise to consider the destruction of weapons and its dangers.

These protests for the first time marked a public display of opposition and disagreement with the United States – a novelty for Albania, which is one of the most pro-American countries in the region. However, since the proposal to destroy the chemical weapons in Albania came from the US, it and other allies were also considered part of the problem by some protesters, which found its reflection in media content. Thus, in 14 out of 138 actors identified as responsible for the problem, the request, and implicitly the US, was included: they were making demands on Albania and put the country in a difficult position. In fact, for the first time there were protests in front of the US Embassy, which also caused a debate on its own, with experts and analysts describing the protesters’ move as immature and risking to upset our most important ally.

However, Table 8 clearly shows that the actor identified in media content most often as responsible for the problem is the government. The government, according to media content analysis, was responsible for endangering public health and safety by considering the request (52 occurrences) and also for its lack of transparency (20 occurrences) and accountability (2 occurrences). In media content the government (i.e. Council of Ministers) and Prime Minister are used interchangeably to denote the actor responsible for causing the problem. However, in terms of specific responsible actor identified, the Prime Minister was identified six times, both for threatening public safety and for remaining silent toward its people. On

⁵³ Interview with Blendi Salaj.

the other hand, the government members, in the rare cases they made public statements, justified the silence and lack of transparency through the secrecy imposed by negotiations with allies (6 occurrences).

Responsible for solving the problem	Frequency	Solution	Frequency
Government/PM	54	Reject the deal	54
Government/PM	15	Be accountable and transparent	2
Government/PM	13	Act in best national interest	13
Government/PM	4	Accept the deal	4
Politicians/opposition	4	Refrain from politicisation	4
Protesters	21	Persist until government hears them	21
Public, citizens, protesters	15	Have trust in government and wait for decision	15
Total	126		113

Table 9: *Responsibility for solving the problem*

It is no surprise that the government was seen as both the body that was causing the problem and the one that should provide the solution. This is because the overwhelming part of the complaints and protests were against the government, but also because technically it was the duty of the government to take the decision. Another explanation is that most of the media coverage consisted in the description of events and of the demands and statements of protesters, whose attention and expectations rested on the government. Thus, the government was identified as the solution to the problem of protests in 86 cases out of 122 solutions identified in media content. Another part of the solution are the protesters themselves (21 occurrences), sometimes referred to as protesters and sometimes as people or citizens. This was mainly in those reports that featured protesters or protest leaders who

aimed to mobilise a greater number of people to join the protests. However, the protesters and citizens were also mentioned as a solution to the problem of supposedly uninformed and unreasonable protests by the officials that made statements (15 occurrences). The main implication, evident mostly in the Prime Minister's public interventions, was that the protesters should trust the government, as it was acting only in the best interest of the country. In return, the Prime Minister and government officials declared that the public's only choice was to trust them and wait for them to be able to inform the country, claiming that they were bound to secrecy by the allies. In addition, this trend, with added notes of disappointment from the Prime Minister that the citizens even doubted his good intentions, were highlighted several times in the 30-minute statement he gave on November 15, communicating the decision to reject the offer to dismantle chemical weapons in Albania. So, the essence of the request for accountability and transparency from the protests is dodged, while the Prime Minister shifts the discussion to a more emotional level: questioning the trust the public has to put in the government. In fact, two years later, there is still no transparency and information on what exactly happened and on what the deal offered entailed, which sheds considerable doubt on the accountability and communication practices of the government vis-à-vis its citizens.

Accountability practices according to interviewees

The question of public accountability was a major concern for all respondents, and they often explained the protests with the need for greater accountability, saying that there would not be as many protests if the government were sufficiently accountable to citizens.⁵⁴ "When public accountability is lacking, protests are necessary to force state officials to be more transparent and to address the citizens' requests and concerns."⁵⁵ The same sentiment is echoed in other

⁵⁴ Interviews with protesters, officials, and journalists.

⁵⁵ Interview with Rakip Belishaku.

interviews: “The lack of public accountability from those that are supposed to be accountable leads to protests: accountability and protests are cause and effect.”⁵⁶

However, protests rarely achieved their aim, was the feeling of most interviewees. As expected, there are some differences between interviewees depending on their position. Party and state officials thought that there is a direct link between public accountability and protests, but preferred to speak of it in principle, rather than addressing the current situation in the country.⁵⁷ Some of the protesters, mainly belonging to the environmentalist movement, given their relatively long experience in this field, thought that public accountability is still weak but that it is improving. Most interviewees, however, were less optimistic in this respect. “There is some kind of ridiculous relation between protests and accountability. Often the spokespersons act towards the protests with arrogance and verbal violence, issuing aggressive statements, independently of whether the protests are civic or political.”⁵⁸

The interviewees, mainly the protesters, offer different explanations for the failure of protests to hold officials accountable or to force the government to respond in a satisfactory and responsible way. One of the protesters, a leader of the student protests against education reform, attributes the lack of reaction from the government mainly to the failure of protests to achieve massive mobilisation of the population or of the group whose interests are at stake. “In principle, protests are among the main forms of encouraging and improving public accountability. However, in Albania the failure to achieve massive participation in independent protests and the practice of ignoring them has weakened the principle-based relation between protests and public accountability.”⁵⁹ Another protester sees this failure in

⁵⁶ Interview with Klevis Saliaj.

⁵⁷ Interviews with state and party officials.

⁵⁸ Interview with Erion Kristo.

⁵⁹ Interview with Arlind Qorri.

the hijacking of the protests as an institution by the political establishment: “There is a relation between protests and public accountability, but it is still forming. The institution of protest is in some kind of crisis since the main protagonists are the political parties that have hijacked this civic instrument. In this context, citizens will need a long time before building a credible cause, with reliable figures, as well as to find the adequate space to communicate.”⁶⁰

Communication practices of officials during the protests

The lack of a culture of communication and accountability between officials and the people was named as one of the reasons for usually vague and sparse protests from citizens or civil society. “There is a tendency to ignore the protesters. The officials know that at the end the protest will last only half an hour, and they do not move. In very few cases, especially when naming and shaming is involved, they are forced to react, but in a limited way. What prevails is the tendency to shut off the public, to control the information. The government’s Code of Ethics⁶¹ is also problematic. While it is valid for ministers, it also signals to the whole administration how to act and take permission to respond to questions, and this is all a great regress.”⁶² The general tendency to avoid responding to protests is also confirmed by other respondents, including protesters: “Public officials usually are not very active towards protests, they move slowly, barely listen to you, or just pretend to ask you or consider you, always if the protesters are sufficiently persistent to bother them. Even when they make some public statements they are not responsive enough toward protesters. The statements are mostly rhetorical and do not even consider the solutions or alternatives offered by the protesters.”⁶³ In fact, a respondent also questions the

⁶⁰ Interview with Ervin Goci.

⁶¹ The Code of Ethics of government stipulates among other things that the ministers or other officials should coordinate their public statements with the PM’s office first, so that the position of the government is agreed upon and there are no equivocations.

⁶² Interview with Gjergj Erebara.

⁶³ Interview with Sazan Guri.

validity of public statements or so-called news conferences: “You can no longer call these things press conferences. It is just the spokesperson or some public officials reading a statement and taking no questions or comments at all. This cannot be called communication.”⁶⁴

The communication practices of government and officials have been specific to each case, ranging from almost total silence to personal involvement of the Prime Minister. However, the general tendency has been that of ignoring the protesters or just denying their claims as unwarranted and based on misinformation.

More specifically, in the case of the largest protest (against dismantling chemical weapons in Albania), there was a total lack of information and statements from the government, until protests became too important to ignore in terms of the number of participants, the spread to cities beyond the capital, and the persistence of protests for almost two weeks, which was a rare occurrence for protests up to that point. Even then, there was no direct communication from state officials. For example, an interview in *Le Monde* with the Minister of Foreign Affairs that also mentioned the possibility of chemical weapons being destroyed in Albania was quoted in the media, as well as a hearing he had with a parliamentary commission on this matter. His statement was published first on November 5, several days after the start of the protests. Under pressure from the growing presence of protesters, the Prime Minister finally said on November 12 that it was true that Albania had been offered the possibility to dismantle weapons, but that this was still under consideration; he emphasised that the best possible decision would be made. He mainly used Facebook to communicate this, and the fact that the final decision would be announced on November 15, avoiding direct communication with protesters or with the media.

One of the few direct contacts between officials and the protesters was that of the Speaker of Parliament Ilir Meta, who dropped by trying to calm them and to suggest that only the best

decision would be made. Finally, the decision on chemical weapons was communicated in a televised statement from the Prime Minister, without any questions allowed. Overall, there was total silence on the deal offered, its terms, or the way the decision was made. Although at the time the few statements highlighted that the deal was under total secrecy imposed by NATO membership and a request by the allies, this remains to this day shrouded in secrecy. “The government almost did not communicate at all during protest, becoming deaf and mute as never before. Even ministers, mayors, journalists close to the government had a total lack of information on what was going on. This deafness and muteness and the absolute ignoring of the public concern for days in a row led to massive protests and to a point where the communication practice of the government was totally out of its control.”⁶⁵

The case of the student protests presents almost the same situation and practices in communication. The Minister of Education and the Prime Minister have rarely addressed the protesters’ demands. They have preferred to talk about the reform in general in TV shows or interviews. The only exception was a limited episode, when on the insistence of a group of students in front of the government building, the Prime Minister went out to meet them. However, even in this case, the communication was focused on how they were wrong to protest, as they did not have the right information and they were spreading lies, while the Prime Minister also sought to calm them down by assuring them that it would all be resolved. Similarly, the protests against the building of flats by the lake (our third case study) also prompted no public official reaction. The same pattern of communication and rhetoric is repeated in all three cases.

Bleak prospects for change in accountability practices

The respondents were generally skeptical regarding any possible changes in accountability practices during and after protests. The most dissatisfied with the accountability of the

⁶⁵ Interview with Blendi Salaj.

government so far have been the protesters of the student movement, who did not notice any change or reaction. However, even in other cases, the reaction has been deemed minimal and not necessarily addressing the demands of protesters. For example, one of the environmentalists protesting against the building of flats at the city lake stated that there was some reaction in the form of procedural measures in overseeing some institutions⁶⁶, but that the demands of the protests had been social rather than procedure-related and the government had failed to address those.⁶⁷

Some of the respondents referred to the protest against chemical weapons as a success case, as the government decision coincided with growing pressure from protesters to prevent the dismantling of these weapons in Albania. However, none of the respondents noticed any long-lasting effect or change in the notion of accountability. “In the long term the protest did not contribute significantly to the notion of accountability. Perhaps it just became clear for those in power that you cannot ignore the public in an endless manner.”⁶⁸ Other respondents also share this opinion, attributing the success of the protest against chemical weapons to the pressure of citizens, citing it as the first case in Albania when the government backed down after citizen protests.⁶⁹

A few respondents went even further and saw a direct correlation between poor accountability and lack of reaction of institutions to protests; they saw protest itself as a driving force in provoking government responsiveness vis-à-vis the population. “The notion of a lynch mob is becoming one of the most credible threats to governments. For example, this worked in the case of chemical weapons, it worked in the arrest of the former governor of the Central Bank, but it is not working

⁶⁶ Mainly procedural changes related to the role of AKPT (The National Agency of Spatial Planning) in identifying violations of INUK (National Urban Construction Inspectorate).

⁶⁷ Interview with Ervin Goci.

⁶⁸ Interview with Blendi Salaj.

⁶⁹ Interview with Klevis Saliqaj.

for the students. However, all of this is an element that tells us that Albania is becoming a country where institutions react only because of the force of the mobs and protesters.”⁷⁰

Nonetheless, the respondents were very pessimistic about any visible, foreseeable change in the overall practice of accountability, be it regarding transparency, communication practices, or the behaviour of other actors such as the public, the media, and officials in general.

5.3 Role of media and communication practices of journalists

The media has an important role providing information on the protests. However, its practices in covering the protests are affected by many factors, resulting frequently in correct, balanced, but superficial reporting. The following section addresses the main features related to the media role in covering the protests, based on findings from the interviews and the media content analysis.

Relevance of massmedia for the protests

The research results confirm the relevance of mainstream media for the protests. The general opinion that permeated all interviews was that it was unlikely for protests to ever succeed without having media coverage. This was the case for journalists, protesters, and state officials. “The role of the media is vital, necessary, and unavoidable. Protests are done to be heard and to find support among other citizens and political actors. In order for the protests to be amplified it is essential that they are covered in the media. A protest that does not find media coverage is worthless,” said one of the protesters interviewed.⁷¹ Another protester, also a journalist, said that it is almost impossible for

⁷⁰ Interview with Gjergj Erebara.

⁷¹ Interview with Rakip Belishaku.

protests to reach their aim if they lack media communication, be it mainstream media or online media.⁷²

Similarly, all interviewees highlighted that the role of the media coverage is essential in raising awareness about the protests and almost a pre-condition for the protests to succeed. Since mainstream media, mainly television, are still the main source of information for the general public and still enjoy the greatest reach among the population, their power is still considerable. Especially the protesters agreed that the mass media in theory provide a huge opportunity to amplify the voices and efforts of protesters, although in practice this not always happens. “We all know the problems our media has with independence and professionalism. However, it is a fact that it remains the main tool for putting an issue on the agenda, and causing actors to move, to react, to do something.”⁷³

Coverage tainted by vested political and economic interests

Protests do not always enjoy media coverage, indicating that media interest in the protests is not necessarily guided by the public interest but rather by vested interests, mainly the interests of media owners. The prevailing model of media ownership in the country is that of media owners with considerable businesses in other areas, and it is difficult to keep the media separate from the interests of these other businesses.⁷⁴ “Media owners often exert pressure to ensure that their editorial policies are in line with their political and economic interests, while self-censorship among journalists is facilitated even by the fact that a great number of journalists continue to work in informal conditions, lacking both individual and collective work contracts.”⁷⁵

⁷² Interview with Blendi Salaj.

⁷³ Interview with Ervin Goci.

⁷⁴ See I. Londo, “Albania”, 2014.

⁷⁵ IREX, *Media Sustainability Index 2015*.

Journalists also admitted that the reporting on the protests was not always of the highest quality. “The role of the media is key in covering what is happening, but the depth of the reporting and its interpretations often have ample room for improvement.”⁷⁶ However, most of the interviewees, including protesters and journalists, agreed that while the media coverage of the protests may often be superficial, it is still essential. They saw this role mainly in terms of informing a broader public of the protesters’ demands, increasing the chances that these demands shape the public agenda, and possibly also serve as a mobilisation tool. However, they were all aware that the media business and vested interests will have the final word on the way the protests are covered. “The media role in covering the protests can be similar to a call for mobilisation. It is capable of calling for intervention and mobilisation when it suits the media interests, but the media can also be very apathetic when the protests are not in line with the interests of media owners.”⁷⁷ Usage of social media, on the other hand, was seen as a potential way to escape the bias that might exist in massmedia in general, without any preference for particular media outlets (see section on social media).

The media role according to media content analysis

The specific cases under analysis were no exception from the overall impressions of interviewees on the role of media during protests. Most of the interviewees recognised the importance of the media coverage of the protests in all three cases, while also expressing skepticism about its quality, the depth of the reporting, and in some cases also of the nuances that the media reports carried. They attributed this skepticism to the nature of the media scene in the country, which remains clearly divided in terms of political affiliation, with a media lacking independence, and totally captured by political and economic interests that threaten or support media survival:

⁷⁶ Interview with Rezar Balla.

⁷⁷ Interview with Sazan Guri.

“Our traditional media is an institution upon which many doubts are cast, on the way it functions, on its deontology, on its consideration and determination of the public interest. However, it remains the main means of receiving attention for the protests. If you look at the media that followed our protests, the main private television, which is closer to the government, came only once to follow the protests and then lost interest. However, there are other media, which, although close to the government, have been the most active followers of the protests, covering them thoroughly. This might also be related to the fact that the protest was also against the involvement of the city hall of Tirana in building the flats, and currently the municipality is run by the opposition.”⁷⁸

Judging from the analysis of media content, the media made no particular effort either to justify or to denounce the protests and aimed to remain neutral for the most part. In a way, the coverage of the chemical weapons protests was supposed to tip the balance in favour of the protesters, since officials were totally absent from the communication except for some brief communication halfway through the protests to admit there was such a deal being discussed and at the end, when the Prime Minister read a statement rejecting the deal. “The protesters’ voices have prevailed at all times, because other actors, especially officials, have not reacted, even though the protesters have insisted on having such a reaction.”⁷⁹ Another protester, from the university students, also confirmed the dominance of students used as sources of information in the media, saying that “the media amplified the voice of the students.”⁸⁰

Even though officials were mostly lacking from the coverage, the media made attempts to create an appearance of neutral coverage, trying to contact security or chemical weapons experts. This introduced different opinions from those of protesters into the debate, claiming that Albania should accept the offer either because of its international commitments or because it was a safe process that would benefit the country. However, in most cases, the TV stations tried to invite both environmentalists or protesters and experts who advocated

⁷⁸ Interview with Ervin Goci.

⁷⁹ Interview with Blendi Salaj.

⁸⁰ Interview with Rakip Belishaku.

for the deal. This is consistent with the formats employed in Albanian media, where balance is usually observed, but the reporting formats favour the debate and discussion between different positions and persons, rather than in-depth journalism, investigative reporting, or documentary-like journalism. In fact, talk shows on current affairs, focusing on discussion, rather than in-depth reporting, are a widespread genre on Albanian television.

A minority of respondents were satisfied with the media coverage of the protests. According to the office of the People's Advocate, the ombudsman, which has followed all protests, "the protests were covered extensively in print media and audiovisual media, and they were generally balanced".⁸¹ Some protesters also share this opinion. "Media coverage of the protest was good, thorough and our demands have been explained well,"⁸² said one of the students participating in the protest. However, the main source of dissatisfaction of protesters was the lack of follow-up reports or more in-depth coverage, problems identified by most respondents. For example, "the media coverage in television [of the flat building by Tirana lake] consisted mainly of comments from protesters and footage of the event, but there was no further in-depth report, and no reports dealing with the overall phenomenon that our protest points at, which has become a plague for this city and for Albanian society in general."⁸³

Journalists seem to be divided in this respect. Some of them said that the media was crucial in lending a voice to the protests and did its best. "I do not think we could have done much more in these cases, or a better job. If we did not show the protests on TV, the protests would not have existed at all for the public, nobody would know, and we did give this contribution."⁸⁴ Some of them admitted that the coverage could have been more thorough.

⁸¹ Interview with Elona Demollari, People's Advocate press advisor, 28 May 2015.

⁸² Interview with Rakip Belishaku.

⁸³ Interview with Ervin Goci.

⁸⁴ Interview with Rezar Balla.

“Our job often finishes when the protesters go away, and we run to cover the next story, lacking the time, effort, and sometimes the will or possibility to dig further into the story.”⁸⁵ One journalist interviewed was radical in his criticism of the media coverage. “Media are part of the disinformation policy of public institutions. They are not active in communicating the protests, it is like ordinary people do not exist for the media and news tend to focus on beautiful and powerful people, while the ugly, old, weak people seem not to exist.”⁸⁶

In some cases the interviewees, mainly protesters, also made a distinction according to the accessibility of media. For example, student and environmentalist protesters have pointed out in public (and reiterated in the interviews) that online media outlets that are considered independent and professional, such as Reporter.al, the Albanian version of BIRN,⁸⁷ have shown continuous attention to the protesters’ demands and have covered the events throughout.⁸⁸

Based on the monitoring of media content, having in mind the actors that specify the problem and the solution, the actors can be divided into three main groups: protesters, politicians, and reporters.

⁸⁵ Interview with Klevis Saliaj.

⁸⁶ Interview with Gjergj Erebara.

⁸⁷ BIRN, the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, is »a network of editors and trainers that enables journalists in the region to produce in-depth analytical and investigative journalism on complex political, economic and social themes« according to their own website: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/static-page/about-birn> The Albanian online publication of BIRN is: <http://www.reporter.al/>

⁸⁸ Interview with protesters.

Actors specifying the diagnosis	N	Subgroups	N	Actors specifying the prognosis	N	Subgroups	N
Protesters	69	Ordinary people	22	Protesters	64	Ordinary people	24
		Civil society representatives, environmentalists	47			Civil society representatives, environmentalists	40
Politicians	52	Prime Minister	32	Politicians	53	Prime Minister	33
		Minister of Foreign Affairs	5			Minister of Foreign Affairs	5
		Speaker of Parliament	5			Speaker of Parliament	6
		Opposition MPs	6			Opposition MPs	5
			4				4
Experts	9	Environmentalists	4	Experts	6	Environmentalists	1
		Security	5			Security	5
Journalists	40	Journalists	40	Journalists	22	Journalists	22
Total	170		170	Total	145		145

Table 10: Actors specifying the diagnosis and the prognosis

As the table 10 shows, the majority of actors that act as sources of information and specify the problem of the protests comes from among the protesters, which is the case in 69 out of 170 cases. Within this group though, it must be noted that the majority of quoted persons or persons that define the problem comes from the so-called elite of civil society, while protesters that are not known to the media occupy only a small part: 22 of 69 cases. The same applies

to actors specifying the prognosis: protesters formulate the prognosis in 64 out of 145 cases, but 40 of the 64 protesters are civil society representatives. In a way, this also fits with the dynamics of the protests, as the environmentalist groups were the first to announce their opposition against the possible dismantling of chemical weapons in the country and they were among the most vocal groups, as well as among the main organisers of the protest. In addition, this is also in line with the tendency of the media to go back to the usual sources of information, since many representatives of the group that initially started the protests also have significant media experience as part of civil society or as experts.

This trend has also been highlighted by some interviewees, mainly protesters. “The media tend to avoid protesters in general, and prefer to go to opinion leaders, while other protesters are more of an illustration in footage, not the main voice heard.”⁸⁹ Another journalist and protester also points out the limitation posed to protesters by the widespread phenomenon of talk shows on current affairs: “The standard television formats were sometimes an obstacle, as out of six participants only one was a protester, whereas the five others were the usual television analysts.”⁹⁰ While some journalists admitted that part of the explanation for this lies in the shortcuts that media tend to take when it comes to sources of information, some also explained this with the reluctance of protesters to expose themselves in the media (as noted earlier).

The tendency to treat politicians as the essential sources of information that can never be missing in a report is another feature of media coverage identified by the respondents. “In general the media runs after politicians and considers the citizens’ word vulgar, and not as relevant as to be addressed in the media.”⁹¹ The media content on the protests

⁸⁹ Interview with Ervin Goci.

⁹⁰ Interview with Blendi Salaj.

⁹¹ Interview with Erion Kristo.

against chemical weapons would perhaps not be the ideal case to illustrate this tendency, as the communication of politicians and their statements were minimal and they were silent almost throughout. In fact, part of the reason to protest was related to the stubborn silence of officials on the whole affair. The same tendency of greater importance placed on officials' quotes and interventions as compared to protesters, is also evident in the student movement, in the rare statements from officials. Even though the students had been protesting for months, the moment the Prime Minister went to speak to them was covered by all media and his reaction became the focus of the news. Such a trend is not visible in the third case, since official reactions have been missing altogether. However, the fact that the analysis and the interviews did not suggest politicians as a dominant presence does not necessarily point to a more professional media, but rather to the media reflecting the context and dynamics of the protests, as the officials stayed away from a space that is primarily believed to be reserved for them. In a way this was a dynamic forced on the media by the way the protests progressed and the involvement (or lack thereof) of specific actors, rather than by the media's own design and editorial policy.

Nonetheless, politicians are the most quoted source in the media after the protesters, with 52 out of 170 problems identified, but they are in different roles and wings, going beyond the official directly responsible for matters related to the specific protest. Out of the politicians, the most quoted is Prime Minister Edi Rama; he is followed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, opposition leaders, other MPs and the Speaker of Parliament, who are all quoted about the same number of times. This significant presence of the politicians quoted and specifying the problem is also related to the main phases of the protest and its peak. Since the Prime Minister and some other figures were part of these moments and were a determining factor in the outcome of the protests, it appears natural that this presence should be visible also in the media monitoring.

Media	Protester	Journalist	Politician	Expert
Lajmifundit	6	7	10	
Albeu	6	3	5	
Balkanweb	12	4	9	1
TV Klan	22	8	8	1
Vizion plus	7	8	7	3
Top Channel	10	4	7	3
Ora News	11	4	4	1
TVSH	10	1	9	
Total	84	39	59	9

Table 11: Actors specifying the problem, divided by media

As the table 11 shows, the main actors that specify the problems are the protesters in each outlet, ranging from 6 to 22 identified cases across the media. The only exception in this case is that of lajmifundit.al website, where politicians were specifying the problem ten times, as compared to six times when protesters were quoted and seven times when journalists were specifying the problem. However, even this case should be viewed with different factors in mind. For example, in almost all media outlets, even when journalists specify the problem they usually describe the dynamics of the protest events and repeat protesters' demands or politicians' statements. In this case, the problems specified by the journalist might also be an extension of the problems specified by the protesters or politicians, depending on who the journalist is quoting or talking about. In the cases of other media, the occurrences when protesters specify the problem is almost the same as that of politicians, as in the case of Albeu.com, Vizion +, and TVSH. What is noticeable here is also that the television stations in general have a higher number of sources than online media, with the exception of Balkanweb. The main explanation here lies in the difference of packaging the news in online media compared to television. Usually the news in online media are very brief, ranging from one to

two or three paragraphs and focusing on a particular statement or event. The main TV news editions, on the other hand, usually quoted more than one source, usually several protesters, which leads to this apparent difference in number of sources. However, the range and position of sources is not significantly different across media.

		Lajmifundit	Albeu.com	Balkanweb	TV Klan	Vizion +	Top Channel TV	Ora News	TVSH	Total
Problem	Safety of the process	4	5	7	9	6	5	8	4	48
Solution	Government should refuse	5	5	6	9	5	4	5	4	43
Problem	Institutional accountability	3	2	4	7	2	4	3	5	30
Solution	Government should be accountable and transparent	2		3	3		2	3	3	16
Problem	Following best public interest	2	3	5	1	3	2	4	5	25
Solution	Government should act responsibly	1	3	3		3	2	3	6	21
Problem	Intensification of protests	3	1	7	3	4	3	3	1	25
Solution	Government should refuse	2	1	6	1	3	3	2	1	19

		Lajmifundit	Albeu.com	Balkanweb	TV Klan	Vizion +	Top Channel TV	Ora News	TVSH	Total
Problem	Politicisation and manipulation of protests	4	1		1	1	1			8
Solution	Ban politicians from protest		1			1	1			3
Problem	Lack of public trust in government	2	1			1	2	2	3	11
Solution	Government refused the deal	1	1	1			2	2	3	10
Problem	International obligation				2	3	1	1		7
Solution	Moral duty to respect alliances		2	2	1	1				6
Problems	Albania is a safe option				1					1
Solution	Albania can accept the weapons		1							1

Table 12: Problems and solutions divided by media outlets

As with other variables, the identification of problems and solutions in each media outlet does not point to any major distinction in media coverage. As the table 12 shows, the problem that has dominated in the overall coverage and in each media outlet has been that of the safety of the process, while the common solution was that the government should

refuse the deal. The problem has been identified in each media between four and nine times. The second major problem focuses on the accountability and transparency of institutions. This is also found in a consistent manner across all media outlets, identified between two and seven times in each media. In this case, there has been no solution identified in two of the media, although it is implied that the government should improve accountability and transparency. A third major problem identified is that of good governance or public interest, and the solution has been that government is *supposed* to act responsibly or that the government *is* acting responsibly, depending on whether the government or the protesters are speaking. This also appears consistently across the media, as in most cases the problem is specified by the government and Prime Minister, trying to reassure the public that he is acting in the best public interest.

Overall, judging from the frame analysis and the media content in general, it can be said that the media reproduces the dominant frames, rather than challenging them. This is in a way explained by the way the media works in Albania: apart from particular analysis or editorials on current affairs, the main news editions tend to focus on current events, individual statements, Facebook statements of politicians or other prominent figures, and generally a contextualisation and deeper analysis of the situation is lacking.⁹² Even in the case of protests, the media has tried to convey the relevant actors and also include opposing views in a few cases, but in so doing it has merely repeated what the main actors involved have said, serving as a conveyor belt from those actors to the public. The only exceptions in news editions analysis are perhaps a few stories at the end of the protests, serving as a retrospective look on the protest against chemical weapons, retracing the events and describing it as the most spontaneous and massive citizen protest in the last 20 years, thanks also to social media mobilisation. In addition to the analysis of media content, interviews with protesters also confirmed that the media in most cases lacks analytical, contextualising, and interpretative

⁹² R. Zguri, *Online Media in Albania – an Overview*.

power, and with a few exceptions, rarely is interested in, or can afford to explore, anything beyond the first layer of appearances.⁹³

5.4 Role of social media and other alternative platforms

Facebook has been the main form of communication between protesters, as well as the main tool to mobilise protesters in the cases under study. Due to its massive popularity in Albania and increased Internet penetration, communicating through Facebook has proved a quick and often effective way for protesters to organise themselves. The following is a description of the use of social media in each case.

Protests against chemical weapons

The protests against chemical weapons were quite intensive, but took place over a shorter time span than the other two protests, wrapping up in just two weeks. However, since there were several groups and individuals organising the protests and there was no clear and specific leadership, several pages and communities were created on Facebook for this purpose, although two can be considered main pages. The first was that of Aleanca kunder Importit te Plehrave (AKIP), the Alliance against the Import of Trash. The group is composed of several organisations and activists, mainly environmentalists, but also including human rights activists. It had been created a few years ago as a reaction against proposed legislation to allow the import of trash and several substances from other countries for processing in Albania. This is one of the main visible groups organising the protests and participating in media debates, also thanks to the high profile of its members as civil society activists. AKIP's Facebook page has 5,882 fans. Although the page existed before the protest and is still active for its environmentalist purpose, it was one of the main virtual tools used during the protest against chemical weapons.

The page combined notes posted by the organisers with information on the progress of events, photos and videos from the protests, and links to news in local and foreign media on the plans to destroy chemical weapons. It also posted many photos of protests organised in other cities, giving its users a wider perspective on the events. Coverage of news from massmedia on the protests was shared through the page, but its content went beyond this coverage: it also contained frequent and live updates on the protest events, from different cities, as well as information on the next protests, what was needed for their organisation, information on how to sign an online petition against chemical weapons destruction in Albania, and so on. However, the quality of the content on the page did not differ dramatically from massmedia coverage, as AKIP representatives were already public figures and enjoyed access to media, so a part of their online statements were also broadcast or published in massmedia.

Another page established specifically for the protest in this case was the page called “1 milion shqiptare kunder shkaterrimit te armeve kimike ne Shqiperi” [One million Albanians against destruction of chemical weapons in Albania]. This page was administered by three friends, students at the time, and was soon identified as the main page for raising awareness and mobilising the public on the protests. One of the creators of the page recalled: “The aim of establishing the page was for this page to serve as a medium without a particular editorial line and to have as full a coverage of information and events as possible.”⁹⁴ This page was also the most popular compared to others, having more than 130,000 followers.⁹⁵ The administrators of the page used the page mainly for providing information they found on the events of the protests, and especially on the mobilisation of citizens to join the protests, which was successful as these were the biggest public protests seen since the early 1990s. The administrators of the page see its main contribution in the organisation of the first protest event, the continuous mobilisation of protesters, and the encouragement of pupils

⁹⁴ Gazeta Telegraf.

⁹⁵ V. Karaj, Mapo magazine, November 2013.

and students to leave their schools and join the protests, all thanks to the large number of followers.⁹⁶ The page also cooperated with another alliance that had launched a page specifically for this protest, the “Aleanca Kunder Importitte Lendeve Helmuese” [Alliance Against Import of Poisonous Materials] (AKILH). The page started by sharing news and information related to chemical weapons, and then also with calls on people to participate in the protests.⁹⁷ The page is still active and currently has 6,938 followers.

Student protests

The student movement has its own Facebook page, called “Per Universitetin” [For the University]. The page has almost 12,000 followers and is cited as the official page of the movement of the same name. It clearly serves as an internal platform for the movement; its posts provide information on future events and coverage of past actions. It often publishes speeches or notes by professors involved in the movement or notes with the position of the movement’s leaders on education reform and ongoing discussions on the law on education. The page also includes photos and posters that call for new protests, as well as invitations to sign petitions, serving as an important mobilisation tool for the students.

Environmental protests

The third protest, against the construction of new flats in the city’s largest park, also has its Facebook page, called “Qytetaret per parkun” [Citizens for the park]. The page has 5,068 followers and has a wider focus on environmental issues, rather than narrowly focusing on the particular construction issue. It has served to disseminate information on the protest, but also on other environment-related issues current in the country. In some cases it has also shared

⁹⁶ Gazeta Telegraf.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

information on student protests, which makes this page somewhat more fluid and active in several areas.

Social networks as a tool for internal organisation and mobilisation of protesters

While all respondents considered the traditional media coverage as an essential tool to communicate the protests to the public, social networks and alternative platforms were seen as a core resource for mobilising and organising protesters. One of them said: “Social networks, especially Facebook, are very important in communication during protests. Often special events are created and communicated online in relation to protests and there is plenty of communication among protesters.”⁹⁸ This was especially highlighted by student activists who declared that communication through social media “to us remains the main form of communication, both in terms of organisation and of public awareness of what we do.”⁹⁹ Similarly, other representatives of the students also considered social networks as the main way of communication and organisation between the protesters: “To us online communication during protests has been extremely important, as the notifications on the organisation of protests and the ways it would take place were distributed online.”¹⁰⁰

Mobilisation through Facebook was especially important for the protests against chemical weapons, also because these protests managed to mobilise the widest variety of people, from the professional, social, and geographical point of view. Furthermore, the protests did not have apparent leaders or one specific organisation, which made it essential to have a platform for communication and dissemination of information among protesters. One of the protesters recalls: “There was no plan at all, no specific actions, it was all spontaneous. I

⁹⁸ Interview with Erion Kristo.

⁹⁹ Interview with Arlind Qorri.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Rakip Belishaku.

knew some of the protesters, but I did not know many more. All communication took place on the wall of the Facebook page, people suggesting the time of the meeting, what we would do, what slogans we would bring. It was like a huge online meeting.”¹⁰¹

The other two cases of protests are somewhat different, as there were specific leaders and organisations behind them, who often worked or studied together, making organisation easier. However, even in these cases, Facebook remains the main source of internal communication and mobilisation. One of the protesters against the Tirana lake construction recalls: “Facebook has been used intensively for organising the protests. The information on the protests has been shown and discussed on Facebook, and press releases, photos, and other materials, have been disseminated through Facebook. We also made an attempt to engage Twitter and increase the base of followers, but Twitter is not that popular here and we aborted it.”¹⁰² The students also used Facebook as the main platform of communication. “Every information on organisation or on our positions went through Facebook.”¹⁰³

The protesters interviewed have no doubts about the opportunity that Facebook offers for internal organisation, and also of communicating with the public. The Facebook pages have been used to communicate among protesters, organise events, and raise awareness on their demands and on the situation at hand, using mainly photos, graphic views, key messages, videos, and calls for actions, among others. As one of the protesters recalls from the chemical weapons case: “Online communication was fundamental in the protest and Facebook was the main instrument used. Networks served to express the dissatisfaction of protesters and to build a platform of mobilisation for protesters. All communication and organisation, although spontaneous, was done through social networks. Information on

¹⁰¹ Interview with Blendi Salaj.

¹⁰² Interview with Ervin Goci.

¹⁰³ Interview with Rakip Belishaku.

chemical weapons was put on the page and then shared by hundreds of people, multiplying the effect and awareness.”¹⁰⁴

However, all interviewees, while praising the merits of social networks, also recognise the limitations of such communication. Said one about the case of the anti-construction protest: “We have had rather interactive communication on this platform, but the communication was limited to 40-50 persons that were very interested. We did not manage to have a massive interaction online and mobilise many more people.”¹⁰⁵ Another protester, involved in environmental issues and also very active during the chemical weapons protests, said: “Online communication has been very important, but the effect of television is much more powerful and you can also explain yourself and be heard better in television.”¹⁰⁶ As a journalist who followed the protests put it: “Online communication during protests is very important, but it does not establish a fact, it is not the reality. In Albania traditional media remains still the most powerful one; I would say that about 70% of the influence comes from TV, while print media almost does not exist [in terms of influence]. Social media is fine for commenting, but not to be part of the reality.”¹⁰⁷

Role of social networks as alternative means of information

All protesters interviewed unanimously agree on the importance of Facebook as the main source of information and mobilisation for protesters. While they disagree on the ability of Facebook to inform traditional media or other citizens, depending on the popularity of the pages, they also point out that Facebook represented them more “genuinely” than massmedia. “In the case of the university movement, there was information that was not published or was censored in

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Blendi Salaj.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Ervin Goci.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Sazan Guri.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Gjergj Erebara.

traditional media, and it was instead available for all to see on our Facebook page.¹⁰⁸ For example, several cases where students occupied university buildings for a few hours went unnoticed by the massmedia, but the videos, photos, and statements have been available on the movement's Facebook page.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, when the first university protests started, it took a while for them to be reported in the media, while the information, photos and videos of the protests have been available all along on Facebook.¹¹⁰ This is also pointed out by protesters against the building project in the capital's park: "Facebook has been decisive in mobilising protesters, although such a medium has its limitations in terms of reaching a mass audience, but we did not find any other means. On the other hand, it was a way to publish information we knew to be true and that was different from the 'tabloid' depiction of the traditional media. The media convey the problem in general terms, but with no further detailing of the specific building violations, the potential for destroying the lake, and so on. All of this was available on our page."¹¹¹ Another representative of the student movement also thought that the Facebook page was important for journalists, too, since it helped the journalists stay informed in real time,¹¹² while another leader of the movement said that media sometimes referred to their Facebook page, using it as a source of information.¹¹³ In fact, these observations are also in line with recent studies that indicate that massmedia is relying increasingly, and sometimes exclusively, on Facebook statements in its reporting.¹¹⁴

Last, but not least, in some cases social media was seen as an alternative channel of information when mainstream media were perceived by protesters as biased, uninterested,

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Interview with Rakip Belishaku.

¹¹¹ Interview with Ervin Goci.

¹¹² Interview with Rakip Belishaku.

¹¹³ Interview with Arlind Qorri.

¹¹⁴ AMI, *Social Media and Their Use by Albanian Media*.

or unprofessional. “From our experience, the reporting of traditional media does not meet professional criteria of accurate and relevant reporting of the protests that are independent from political and economic elites. Online platforms can be used by the protesters as forms of media communication that are independent.”¹¹⁵ However, the respondents were also aware that this might lead to a smaller reach compared to massmedia. “Traditional media covers the protests when there are political interests involved, as they are themselves an extension of politics. So, media has to be seen in the political context. With social media it is different and can be helpful, but on the other hand it lacks the ability to influence public opinion as traditional media does,”¹¹⁶ said a journalist who has followed the protests. Overall, social networks have had two functions in relation to the protests: as an internal organisation and information platform and more rarely, as a tool for mobilising other people and groups. This has been the case mainly for the protest against chemical weapons, where Facebook was used to give logistical information on the protest and also to call for and gather a greater number of people in the protest. In addition, Facebook has also been used as an indirect way of communicating with the media on the protest, since often the media refer to Facebook statements and comments in reporting.

5.5 The capacities and communication practices of citizens/ protesters

The three case studies represent different cases in terms of organisation of protests, whether they have a structure that deals with organisation and communication, and the media coverage that results. In order to have a better view of the different aspects related to capacities and communication practices of citizens and protesters, the research has addressed several facets, such as availability of protesters for media, level of organisation

¹¹⁵ Interview with Arlind Qorri.

¹¹⁶ Interview with Gjergj Erebara.

of protesters, access to media, communication through social networks, and the different forms of expression employed.

Availability of protesters for massmedia

In general, in all three cases, the interviews reveal that the protesters have been readily available to the media. None of the interviewees, pertaining to all three cases of protests, identified any refusal to communicate on the part of the protesters. In fact, many protesters admitted that often protesters have high expectations from the media and see it as the only way of getting their message through to the government or whoever they want to reach. As one of the protesters said: “I have never heard of any case when protesters deny access to media, quite the opposite. The problem is that not all protesters have access to media and it is natural that not everyone is heard.”¹¹⁷The experience of the anti-construction protests in Tirana also revealed the same tendency. The representative interviewed for this case, although skeptical about the quality of communication, stressed the protesters’ willingness to engage with media at all times: “Certainly the protesters are willing to communicate. All communication with journalists is done through willing citizens, namely the press releases, the interviews at the site of the protest, keeping in contact with journalists, even exchange of documents in some cases.”¹¹⁸However, a few respondents also noted the other side of the story: protesters want for the protests to appear in the media, but not all protesters like to be identified publicly. “Sometimes people are still afraid in Albania. They do not want to go out and join protests, and to be identified by name, surname, and state why they are protesting, and especially they do not want to do this in the media.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Interview with Sazan Guri.

¹¹⁸ Interview with Ervin Goci.

¹¹⁹ Interview with Gjergj Erebara.

Communication practices and the level of organisation of the protests

The research shows different views about the effectiveness with which protesters managed to convey their messages and about their organisational capabilities. A few interviewees were satisfied with the communication abilities and the manner of organisation of protesters. “Appearances of protesters in the media have been well coordinated and organised and not spontaneous at all. The messages have also been well articulated and there has been good media coverage.”¹²⁰ However, journalists tended to be more critical than protesters regarding the communication of protesters and their ability to articulate a clear message. Most journalists interviewed said that the communication of protesters is rarely well-organised, there are no organisational structures and the communication is spontaneous, lacking assignment of definite roles.¹²¹

The most organised protest in terms of communication seems to have been the student movement, also due to the fact that it is an internally organised movement and the protests and respective messages are planned ahead, while other protests have been more mixed in terms of protesters and messages. One of the student movement leaders said: “The activists of the Movement for the University have a special media department, which takes care of the virtual self-mediatisation of the movement, covering the events for the Facebook page and community, and also covers contacts with journalists.”¹²² Another protester also confirms this: “The interventions in the media were coordinated and there was articulation of the protest messages. However, in a few cases there were also sporadic appearances of participants, which were not exactly related to the protests and in a way tried to sabotage the protest, but we tried to filter and reduce such episodes with every protest that followed.”¹²³

¹²⁰ Interview with Sazan Guri.

¹²¹ Interviews with journalists.

¹²² Interview with Arlind Qorri.

¹²³ Interview with Rakip Belishaku.

While the student movement appears to be more organised, the protest against chemical weapons was a more spontaneous gathering of different groups and people, which was clearly more difficult to organise in terms of communication. As one of the environmentalists' representatives notes: "Communication with the media in protests is mostly spontaneous. Those organisations that have experience are able to engage in a more structured way of communication."¹²⁴

However, many interviewees also noted that there was a lack of organisation among protesters, which often led to contradictory messages.¹²⁵ "Protesters' communication practices are not always coordinated. There is a lot of spontaneity, apart from the cases when the protests have a political background. Often it happens that contradictory messages are articulated."¹²⁶ Another journalist and protester echoes the same sentiment: "In the case of chemical weapons, there were several groups of protesters that represented different social groups and chose different ways of communication. Some offered themselves as spokespersons in the media, but there was discord and they did not convey the same position."¹²⁷

Access to media and media practices

Both protesters and journalists admitted in the interviews that the message of protesters sometimes does not get through not only due to a lack of organisation among protesters, but also because of lack of media interest in the protest's cause. "The problem with the protests is that even when there are just ten people protesting, when these people are local celebrities, the media covers the protest. In the case of chemical weapons and in the case of the student movement, the media was forced to cover the protests, as they were genuine protests. The

¹²⁴ Interview with Lavdosh Ferruni, environmentalist, 20 May 2015.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Interview with Erion Kristo.

¹²⁷ Interview with Blendi Salaj.

novelty of these protests was that they were not an event staged for the media to cover them, but true events that the media in the end had no choice but to cover.”¹²⁸

The choice of persons representing protests in the media is also sometimes questionable, according to some interviews. Several interviewees observed that the media coverage tends to focus on the most public and newsworthy figures to convey the messages of the protest, even though they might not be the most relevant people to interview. One of the protesters noted that often the media may mislead with their coverage of the protests, as they do not choose the most appropriate persons to convey the messages of the protests.¹²⁹ Another protester also pointed to the media tendency to interview opinion leaders that are part of the protests and not necessarily persons that are less prominent but more engaged in the protest.¹³⁰

This tendency of the media to chase after celebrities in protests is also apparent in the media content analysis: out of 63 cases when the protesters are the actors that specify the problem, in 38 are the persons quoted the leaders of the movement, and in another 15 cases the umbrella organisation established by these leaders is quoted. Protesters who are ordinary persons specify the problem in only ten of the 63 cases. This might also be a good tactic for the protesters to get access to media coverage. As one of them mentions regarding what makes a protest successful: “It is also important to have links to key persons in the media, who can engage to cover the protest.”¹³¹ On the other hand, such a tactic, while successful, might also limit or to an extent distort the events and the representation of protesters.

The scale of the protests is also a factor identified as key in attracting media attention to the protests. This was the case for the protest against chemical weapons, where large numbers of

¹²⁸ Interview with Gjergj Erebara.

¹²⁹ Interview with Erion Kristo.

¹³⁰ Interview with Ervin Goci.

¹³¹ Interview with Lavdosh Ferruni.

people were consistently out on the street and made it difficult for the media to ignore. This is a 'must' also for most interviewees: "If the protest becomes massive, then the media comes on its own and there is no need for prior notification or communication."¹³²

On the other hand, protesters are constantly aware of the importance of attracting media attention for their protest to have some impact. Even though they consider the coverage mainly superficial and say that in-depth reporting and follow-up of protests is lacking, they still consider media coverage of protests a core tool for raising awareness. "Citizens view the media as their lifeboat. They always want to communicate with journalists and they never fail to do this. However, journalists not always come to the protests and are not always able to convey the message well."¹³³ The exception among the three cases appeared to be the student movement, which initially was distrustful of media coverage. However, even the students changed their tactic. According to a journalist who has been closely observing the protests, the students, have now started to understand its power and have tried to take new approaches to media coverage, attracting the media's attention.¹³⁴

Protesters communicating through social networks

In all three cases, the protests have been communicated through media coverage and through social networks, mainly Facebook pages. Since Facebook offers the opportunity for protesters to share and shape their own content, they used the platform to share photos, posters, slogans, videos, discussion forums, notes, and articles, among others. The ability to control their content is one of the main advantages of the platform, compared to other forms of communication, such as massmedia, according to the protesters (see above on the role of social networks). For example, as one of the protesters against chemical weapons recalls: "We posted

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Interview with Erion Kristo.

¹³⁴ Interview with Gjergj Erebara.

photos of people participating in the protests to give them a more human face: parents with their children, young people in the protests holding hands, so to have as much of a human face of the protesters as possible, to show that there was nothing wrong with the protests.”¹³⁵

A side effect of the coverage of protesters on Facebook is also that in some cases it has had a multiplying effect when the content posted by protesters appeared in massmedia. According to both protesters and journalists, Facebook content has also assisted the media in covering the protests¹³⁶, and in fact, journalists are also among the protest pages’ followers on Facebook.

Different forms and content of expression during protests

The main form of expression during protests have been marching in the main street and in front of the government, camping in front of the university, making speeches, chanting slogans, and so on. However, in some cases the protesters have tried to be creative in their expression of demands. This is especially the case with the student movement and to some extent also with the protests against chemical weapons. For example, protesters and journalists recall that in the latter case, the organisers called on every protester to be creative and bring his or her own poster, which led to a diversity of slogans.¹³⁷ In addition, other protesters have also tried to employ new and symbolic approaches. For example, apart from the classic way of communication through statements and press releases, the students have also tried to attract greater attention by throwing hygienic paper rolls at the government building, staging the dragging of a big box that symbolised a student loan, and writing their slogans in red ink on the street, among others¹³⁸.

¹³⁵ Interview with Blendi Salaj.

¹³⁶ Interviews with journalists and protesters.

¹³⁷ Interview with Gjergj Erebara.

¹³⁸ Interview with Arlind Qorri.

6. Concluding remarks

Protests in Albania face an institutional crisis, for several reasons. First, there is widespread suspicion against protests as tools used by the political establishment, which has led to disappointment of the population with such instruments in the long run. Second, the protests generally face a lack of results and accountability from officials and institutions, which discourages hope in using them as instruments to achieve specific goals. These factors, along with the general weakness and apathy of civil society, have led to a situation where respondents believe that protests are necessary, but, at the same time, trust in protests is scarce.

Media coverage of the protests has generally been considered neutral, but superficial. Media reports rarely employ in-depth formats, leaning more towards preserving political correctness, rather than reports that would provide a complete picture of the protests' dynamics and reasons, and address fundamental problems thrown up by the protests. Even though vested media interests usually affect or guide media coverage, the media content analysis in this case revealed a more or less tabloid depiction of the protests, with only slight differences of coverage across different media outlets.

The media routinely include in their reports the protesters' concerns about accountability and lack of transparency, but the media rarely initiate the quest for greater accountability of the government and rarely follow up on this issue. At the same time, the notion of accountability among officials vis-à-vis protesters and citizens is very weak. Communication practices in this regard indicate that officials usually totally ignore requests for accountability, or avoid engaging in direct dialogue with the protest representatives. Even in the rare cases where there are attempts at communication, the discussion assumes a populist angle, avoiding the pressing issue of the protest. Overall, the prospects for improvement of accountability of state officials seem rather gloomy, while protests seem not to have affected this state of affairs.

The research confirmed the essential role of massmedia in informing the public about the protests and in putting the protesters' demands on the public agenda. Even though media reporting might be biased and often superficial, the effect it has in raising awareness is still irreplaceable. Even though social networks are widely used and preferred in organising protests and mobilising protesters, when it comes to public sensibility, massmedia is considered the most effective form of information.

Nevertheless, protesters do not always receive the attention they would like from the media, due to a clash of the media's own interests with those of protesters, or simply because the scale of the protests might not be impressive enough to receive media coverage. The tendency to routinely provide space to so-called protest celebrities, rather than simple protesters, also does not always guarantee the best coverage of the protest events, demands, and dynamics. Similarly, the take-over of media coverage by political figures is a trend noticeable also in media coverage of protests, where the focus shifts to protesters when official reactions are missing.

Communication practices of protesters have seen the rise of Facebook as the main platform. This is especially true for the internal organisation of the protesters, and to a lesser degree also in potentially expanding the group of protesters. Finally, it has also become a way of communicating information to the media, and hence multiply the effect of protests through media coverage. In general, though, communication of protesters with the media, and in consequence with the public, has not always been organised, clear, or unified. The quality of communication greatly depends on the internal organisational structure of the protesters, as well as on their ability to establish links and contacts with the media.

7. Recommendations

To government officials

- Engage in direct communication with protesters, either on the street, or in the media.
- Increase transparency through routine communication events, such as meetings and discussions with the media, with interest groups, and with protesters, if necessary.
- Intensify efforts to improve implementation of the new access to information law as a way of being transparent and accountable to citizens, including protesters.

To the media

- Engage in in-depth reporting of the protests, going beyond the politically correct balancing of all sides involved.
- Follow up on accountability issues even after the protest events or protests in general are over, monitoring government/officials/institutions.
- Attempt to broaden the circle of persons interviewed and speaking on behalf of the protests.
- Encourage common debates involving officials and protesters.

To the protesters

- Create a communication strategy involving several targets, such as media, officials, civil society, and citizens, clearly formulating the message, demands, and means of communication.
- Find original and effective ways and strategies for expressing protest demands (e.g. hijacking of events, alternative forms of expression, strong visual symbols, etc.).
- Request that the media engage in routine communication and contacts in order to better follow and report on the protests.
- Use the opportunities offered by alternative media and social networks in sharing information and organizing the protest actions

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Appendix

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List of interviewees

Arlind Kote, Forca Rinia movement, 5 May 2015.

Arlind Qorri, professor, protester, 11 May 2015.

Klevis Saliaj, ATN TV, 16 May 2015.

Sazan Guri, environmentalist, 17 May 2015.

Lavdosh Ferruni, environmentalist, 20 May 2015.

Erion Kristo, activist, 21 May 2015.

Rakip Belishaku, student, protester, 27 May 2015.

Elona Demollari, People’s Advocate press advisor, 28 May 2015.

Ervin Goci, professor, protester, 3 June 2015.

Blendi Salaj, journalist, Club FM Radio & protester, 6 June 2015.

Rezar Balla, editor-in-chief of RTSH News Department, 10 June 2015.

Gjergj Erebara, BIRN reporter, 30 July 2015.



**“REVOLUTION AS THE ONLY SOLUTION”
COMMUNICATION PRACTICES DURING
THE PROTESTS IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**

Tijana Cvjetićanin

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I. Media environment in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Before the 1992-1995 war, the media scene in Bosnia and Herzegovina was quite developed in terms of number of outlets and infrastructure. Radio-Television Sarajevo, with two TV and two Radio programmes, was a part of the state-run RTV Yugoslavia network and covered almost all of Bosnia and Herzegovina. At the same time, there were more than 50 municipal radio stations,¹ with the first private radio stations opening in the 1990s. In the mid-1980s, 169 different periodicals were being published in BiH (Tucaković 2006, p. 165), including two daily newspapers, *Oslobođenje* and *Večernje novine*.

As in many other sectors, the war caused great damage to the media infrastructure, and many media acted as promoters of major centres of wartime political power. After the war ended in 1995, the increase in the number of media was generally welcomed, but reporting remained largely constrained by the dominant ethno-national divisions, including one-sided, ‘patriotic’ reporting loaded with discriminatory and hate speech against other ethnic groups.²

The first steps toward regulation and pacification³ of the media were taken under the

¹ E. Povlakić, “Lokalni mediji i radio lokalne zajednice u BiH”.

² For an in-depth analysis of hate speech in BiH in general, including media and case studies: T. Cvjetičanin, S. Sali-Terzić and S. Dekić, *Strategije isključivanja: Govor mržnje u BH javnosti*.

³ The regulation and pacification of media was undertaken with international assistance in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as Hozić explains it: “Media reform was also essentially perceived as the process of ethnic neutralization and de-politicization...By limiting their conceptualization of politics to ethnicity and institutions, media reformers created strict rules of language use and election coverage, banished some compromised journalists from public life, established principles of ethnic representation in public media outfits, funded numerous training programmes for local journalists and fostered development of associations and regulative agencies.” (A. Hozić, “Democratizing Media, Welcoming Big Brother: Media in Bosnia and Herzegovina”, p. 151). More about international assistance in: T. Jusić and N. Ahmetašević, *Media Reforms through Intervention: International Media Assistance in Bosnia and Herzegovina*.

guidance of the international community, including the drafting of major laws, regulations, and journalistic codes that were meant to assure both the freedom of media and their accountability. The Independent Media Commission (IMC) was established in 1998 and the Telecommunications Regulatory Agency in 2000; in 2001, the two institutions were merged into the Communications Regulatory Agency (CRA). The CRA is an independent state body responsible for the enactment of regulations concerning both telecommunications and broadcasting, with executive powers involving warnings, fines, and suspensions if broadcasters infringe the established norms.

On the other hand, print and online media are subject to self-regulation procedures, monitored by the self-regulatory Press Council of BiH (PC). The PC was established in 2001 and modelled after a self-regulatory body in the United Kingdom. The main mission of the Press Council is to supervise the implementation of journalistic norms adopted in the form of the BiH Press Code, in the mediation and resolution of disputes between readers and print or online media. However, unlike the CRA, the PC has no power to impose sanctions for breaches of journalistic norms and relies on the willingness of the media to accept its decisions. The institutional framework and (self-) regulatory norms contributed to the pacification of media content and have helped a great deal to limit discriminatory speech, but many issues remain inadequately addressed and poorly regulated.

In general, guarantees of freedom of speech aligned with international standards are included in the constitution and in laws and regulations that are supposed to protect the freedom of media against state interference.⁴ In addition, the *de jure* independence of both

⁴ For example, libel is regulated under civil law, and the freedom of information act adopted at state level and in both entities is advanced. A number of other laws and codes regulate to some extent matters regarding the media, such as: Law on Communications, Law on Public RTV service BiH, Law on RTV FBiH, Law on RTRS, Law on Public Broadcasting System. Rules and codes whose implementation is monitored by the CRA are available at: <http://rak.ba/eng/index.php?uid=1328108149> (accessed 6 July 2015).

the CRA and the public service broadcasters is assured through independent forms of financing, but the procedure of appointing managers in both PSB and CRA is considered to be highly politicised. In addition, local public radio and TV stations are directly financed by cantons and municipalities, which puts them in a position of conflicting dependence. The editorial independence of commercial media, meanwhile, is believed to be highly limited given that the few rare sources of revenue – with the state and related advertisers among the main ones – are the uncrowned kings of the market, a position that enables them to condition funding and influence editorial policies. Economic pressure exists on all administrative levels and is exerted by different, but highly interconnected, sources of funding. Media and journalists who manage to publish content critical of certain centres of power face other kinds of pressures. Court cases, police raids, and inspections are believed to be indicative of the instrumentalisation of public institutions by local power-holders seeking to pressure the media.⁵ Moreover, journalists are exposed to various kinds of threats, attacks, and infringements of their labour rights, which all pose threats to media freedom.⁶

⁵ Some recent cases that illustrate this kind of persecution include the case of a major news portal, klix.ba, that had its premises raided by police after it published an audio recording of the Prime Minister of Republika Srpska, Željka Cvijanović, speaking of buying off two MPs in order to reach a parliamentary majority. The police confiscated digital material, documents, and equipment in Klix's offices and interrogated their journalists. Another case was recorded in December 2014, when the Municipal Court in Travnik issued a decision for the temporary prohibition of publishing media content concerning a defamation lawsuit, even before the court issued the ruling in the case. See more about these and other cases in: S. Hodžić, "Reactions to the Attack on Charlie Hebdo in Bosnia and Herzegovina".

⁶ According to data from the Free Media Help Line, a service provided by the Bosnia and Herzegovina Journalists' Association, during 2014 there were 44 cases of violations of journalists' rights and the right to freedom of expression. 400 attacks on journalists have been reported to the helpline since 2006. See: A. Šušnjar, "(Ne)sigurnost novinara 'Ovo je nedemokratsko društvo, u kojem sloboda riječi nema pravo značenje'".

Today, the number of media of various types in BiH remains high, with nine daily newspapers, 105 magazines, and seven news agencies.⁷ The CRA has granted 135 licences for providers of audio-visual media services. There are currently 42 TV stations (12 public and 30 private), while radio services are provided by 64 public and 80 private providers. There are three public service broadcasters, each consisting of a radio and TV station, and 4 licences have been issued for non-profit radio.⁸ In addition, there are numerous online media. If we consider that BiH is a small media market,⁹ and since both advertising revenue and licence fees have seen a considerable decline in the past several years, media sustainability remains a constant concern. Thus, instead of indicating developed media pluralism in the country, the survival of a high number of media indicates that many of them operate with very limited resources that do not allow for quality reporting. In addition, a lack of transparency regarding capital and ownership¹⁰ contributes to the assumption of considerable political parallelism and lack of editorial independence.

The expansion of online news production brought new opportunities and challenges, especially in light of the lack of transparency of ownership and financing of the sector, since there are cases of websites which operate as media outlets, but are not registered as such and

⁷ Press Council of BiH, data available at: http://www.vzs.ba/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=5&Itemid=8 (accessed 5 July 2015).

⁸ CRA, *Godišnji izvještaj Regulatorne agencije za komunikacije za 2014. godinu*, pp. 5–7. Note: data from December 31, 2014.

⁹ Revenue estimates vary hugely, with advertising revenue estimated by different advertising agencies at between 25.2 and 33 million Euro in 2013. Overall revenue (including licence fees and other sources) in the television market only amounted to around 80 million Euro in 2012; since the estimated value of the advertising market in 2012 was significantly higher, at 45.45 million Euro, we should treat these numbers with care. For more on financing, see S. Hodžić, "Bosnia and Herzegovina", p. 119.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

information on their ownership is hard or impossible to find (often giving rise to speculation that these outlets are owned by political parties or figures).¹¹

The use of the Internet has seen constant growth in BiH. Data from the end of 2014 shows that 58% of the population is using the Internet (2,227,970 Internet users and 544,709 Internet subscribers). The number of Internet users is increasing (from 56.96% of the population in 2013 to 58% in 2014), but some point out that not all rural areas are provided with access opportunities. Almost all subscribers (99.58%) have broadband access.¹²

Nevertheless, television remains the most relevant source of information for the majority of the country's population.¹³ A few major TV stations make up the bulk of audience and

¹¹ When it comes to transparency of ownership and financing of the media, some major obstacles have been identified: a) Business entities, including media, are obliged to register with court registries. The data is held by 15 municipal/county courts across the country, i.e., they are scattered across the state and one has to pay court fees in order to get them. There is an online register of businesses in FBiH providing some of the data, but no similar registry exists in RS. b) There are no policies on ownership transparency that would foresee the tracking of both the origin of capital and hidden owners. c) There are no standards for publishing ownership data on the websites of media. In some cases this data is hard to obtain, especially concerning online media, because some of them operate as media outlets but are not officially registered as media businesses; financial connections between media and political/business actors, mainly donations and advertising contracts, are insufficiently transparent; the independence of local media is a challenge since cantonal (in FBiH) and municipal (in FBiH and RS) authorities provide funds for the media either by directly funding local public media, or by making donations. Such relations are even less transparent when it comes to private media. See S. Hodžić, "Bosnia and Herzegovina", pp. 127–152.

¹² CRA, *Godišnji izvještaj Regulatorne agencije za komunikacije za 2014. godinu*, pp. 38-39. See also ISP report for 2014. Available at: <http://rak.ba/bos/index.php?uid=1272548201> (accessed 6 October 2015).

¹³ TV is the most used mass media, with only a small number of people who do not view TV programmes. 40.13% of respondents said that they "occasionally" listen to radio and 42.15% "occasionally" read newspapers. Source: Univerzitet u Banja Luci, Fakultet političkih nauka, Institut za društvena istraživanja. *Medijska slika Republike Srpske: Izvještaj o istraživanjima javnog mnijenja u 2014. godini*.

revenue share, although this share remains relatively low for each broadcaster, due to the fragmentation of the country and the high number of available media. By contrast, most media are struggling to achieve sustainability, and the survival of a large number of media raises doubts about shady missions and financing models of at least some of them. The highest audience share for the period from January 1 to June 30, 2015, was held by the public service broadcaster Television of Federation of BiH (12.9%) and two private television stations: OBN (10%) and PINK BH (9.7%).¹⁴ Information concerning audience share of radios is limited to the diary method and is not available to the public, while circulation figures of print media have never been established. Radio is not considered a major source of information for citizens since its use is predominantly confined to entertainment,¹⁵ while circulation of print media is thought to be very low.¹⁶

Media reporting during the protests presumably posed special challenges “to the journalists and media outlets, given their proximity to local power-holders. One of the issues addressed

¹⁴ The audience measurement, based on People Meter method, is done by the company Audience Measurement. The source of data on measurement present here is Radio-television of Federation BiH RTVFBiH, at: http://www.rtvfbih.ba/loc/template.wbsp?wbf_id=94 (accessed 6 July 2015).

¹⁵ See T. Jusić and S. Hodžić, “Local Media and Local Communities: Towards Public Policies for Promotion of Local Media Content in Bosnia and Herzegovina”, p. 97.

¹⁶ Their audience reach in BiH has, traditionally, been low and it is safe to assume that it continues to decline with the growing presence of online media. Publishers are not willing to provide reliable data, but according to Freedom House, the total circulation of daily newspapers in BiH in 2010 was not higher than 90,000, “...which would mean that only 2.5 percent of the entire population regularly bought a newspaper. An analysis of different surveys in 2006 indicated that one-third of the population in BiH does not read newspapers at all, and there are strong indications that the remainder read newspapers only rarely, for there are many signs that newspaper circulation is extremely low. The same study also points out that the dailies are read mainly by middle-aged and elderly people, the only exception being *Dnevni avaz*, the most popular newspaper with a readership distributed equally among all age groups.” (A. Džihana, K. Čendić, and M. Tahmaz, *Mapping Digital Media: Bosnia and Herzegovina*, p. 20). See more, especially regarding the controversies concerning audience measurement, in: S. Hodžić, “Flash Report 5: Bosnia and Herzegovina”.

in this research report is how media reports frame recent cases of citizen protests and which structural and contextual conditions and communication processes determine such framing. In order to allow a better understanding of the context in which the communication practices take place, the following section will outline the short history of protests in the country.

2. Citizen protests and indicators of government accountability

For the past nine years, Bosnia and Herzegovina has been experiencing a perpetual crisis in all fields of governance.¹⁷ In the previous election term (2010-2014), a total of 11 political parties participated in ruling coalitions at the state and entity levels, with countless bilateral and multilateral party agreements on power-sharing (looking at the lower, cantonal level of government, the number is even higher). All of them have equally failed to implement their election platforms, through either the legislative or executive branch of government, showing no accountability to their voters.¹⁸ Bosnia

¹⁷ The process of constituting the Council of Ministers in the 2010-2014 term took no less than 14 months; while the Federation of BiH's Government had lost the support of the Parliament in less than two years, yet continued to act in a technical capacity until the 2014 elections. In the current term, both the FBiH and BiH executives were formed in the late evening hours of March 31, 2015, in a rush move to meet the final deadline for passing the entity budget. After the entity government was established, it fell apart in less than three months, due to discord between the coalition partners. In Republika Srpska, the constitution of the current parliamentary majority and the acting Government in November 2014 was marked by an unprecedented corruption scandal, as the entity's Prime Minister was recorded admitting bribing two MPs in the entity parliament in order to ensure a simple majority. The Parliament went on to confirm the Government, and the Prime Minister entered her second term in office without any legal consequences. These are just the most prominent of numerous examples demonstrating the utter lack of political and governmental accountability in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

¹⁸ The monitoring initiative "Istinomjer", which follows implementation of pre-election promises, found that, in the 2010-2014 term, the 11 ruling parties fulfilled just 3% of their election pledges; 29% were partially fulfilled, while 58% remained virtually untouched. A similar result has been recorded in the 2006-2010 term, showing that no progress has been made in making politics more accountable to the citizens. (*Zašto ne, Izvještaj o ispunjenosti predizbornih obećanja partija na vlasti u Bosni i Hercegovini u mandatu 2010-2014.*)

and Herzegovina's numerous parliaments¹⁹ are notorious for their inability to reach compromise and their inactivity in passing crucial laws. In the previous term, the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH passed only 14 new laws in four years, some of which were long overdue. For example, the Law on Census was, due to political disagreements, only adopted in 2012, making BiH the only European country that did not undertake a census in 2011. Another prominent case was the failure to pass amendments to the Law on ID numbers ordered by the Constitutional Court of BiH, which eventually led to the 2013 protests (discussed in detail further in the text as JMBG protests, a reference to the acronym for citizen ID number).

The executive branch is equally inefficient in implementing the laws that have been passed, for example those related to the protection of human rights, the fight against corruption, and establishing accountable governance. As an illustration, the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination was adopted in 2009, but has not been implemented yet,²⁰ and the same can be said about laws on the rights of the child, people with disabilities, witness protection, protection against domestic violence, and others.²¹

¹⁹ The dysfunctionality of BiH is often ascribed to its complex constitutional setup introduced after 1995. The state is divided into two entities (Republika Srpska [RS] and Federation of BiH [FBiH]) plus District Brčko. The entity 'borders' follow ethnic lines formed during the war. The FBiH is organised into 10 cantons, while RS does not have this intermediate level of governance. All these levels have their own legislative, executive, and judiciary institutions, which means, for example, that there are 14 parliaments and governments in BiH.

²⁰ Initiative for Monitoring of European Union Integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Alternative Progress Report 2015: Political Criteria*, Chapter 1.6 Institution of Human Rights Ombudsman of Bosnia and Herzegovina and 3.8 Fight against discrimination.

²¹ Ibid, Chapters 3.6 Children's rights and 3.7 People with disabilities; Initiative for Monitoring of European Union Integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina, *2014 Alternative Progress Report: Political Criteria*, Chapter 4 Transitional Justice.

Despite such a bad performance, and BiH being one of Europe's poorest countries, officials in Bosnia and Herzegovina are amongst the highest paid in the region.²²

The political culture is still far from democratic, as political life is dominated by obstructionism, self-centred party politics, and a lack of democratic practices within the parties, while democratic institutions are increasingly being stripped of any meaningful role and authority.²³

Other than the parliamentary elections, the country lacks efficient mechanisms to hold officials accountable. The implementation of anti-corruption strategies and plans, as well as

²² The monitoring conducted by the Center for Civic Initiatives, following BiH parliaments and governments' efficiency in fulfilling their own yearly agendas, shows that the legislative and executive bodies are getting less efficient and less productive with time. At both entity and state level, each new term is worse than the last in this respect. (More in separate reports for each institution: *Sažetak mandatnog izvještaja za Parlamentarnu skupštinu BiH 2010 – 2014*; *Sažetak mandatnog izvještaja za Vijeće ministara BiH 2010 – 2014*; *Izvještaj o radu Narodne Skupštine RS za period 2010 – 2014*; *Izvještaj o radu Vlade RS za period 2010 – 2014*; *Izvještaj o radu Parlamenta Federacije BiH za period 2010 – 2014* and *Izvještaj o radu Vlade Federacije BiH za period 2011 – 2014*).

²³ The most striking example being the exclusion of the state parliament from the process of constitutional reform negotiations, in a failed attempt to implement the ECHR decision in the 'Sejdic and Finci' case. The ECHR made a decision in 2009 that BiH needs to change its constitution to eliminate the provisions which discriminate against the 'Others' – citizens who do not belong to one of the three constituent ethnic groups (Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs). The Parliamentary Assembly's ad-hoc commission, established in 2011 with the aim to implement the decision, was *de facto* disbanded in 2012 without agreeing on the amendments proposal (Parlamentarna skupština Bosne i Hercegovine, *Izvještaj o radu Privremene zajedničke komisije oba doma za provođenje presude Evropskog suda za ljudska prava u Strazburu u predmetu Sejdić i Finci protiv Bosne i Hercegovine*). All further negotiations took place in closed meetings between the political parties' leaders, with both the citizens and the parliament completely excluded from the process (for details, see: Initiative for Monitoring of European Union Integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina, *2014 Alternative Progress Report: Political Criteria*, Chapter 1.1 Constitutions).

public reform strategies, remains close to zero,²⁴ while the prosecutor's offices fail to react to repeated proofs of non-transparent and illicit spending of public money.²⁵ At the same time, the dominant partitocracy, accompanied by pervasive corruption, has produced a high level of citizens' distrust in political actors²⁶ and the entire political system in the country.²⁷

As a result of this political setup, paired with the unparalleled complexity of public administration, the political class in Bosnia and Herzegovina is perceived by its citizens as the main generator of problems such as unemployment and lack of economic growth, vast public spending on huge administration which is both expensive and inefficient, and finally pervasive corruption.²⁸ The state of affairs in terms of the economic and social indicators is among the worst in Europe. In 2014, the year of the protests, the unemployment rate in BiH was 27.5% (ILO definition) and GDP per capita 3.64 Euro, far lower than the average in

²⁴ See: Initiative for Monitoring of European Union Integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2014 Alternative Progress Report: Political Criteria, Chapter 2.2 Fight against Corruption; and Initiative for Monitoring of European Union Integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Alternative Progress Report 2015: Political Criteria, Chapter 1.4 Public administration.

²⁵ As stated in Transparency International BiH's report: "The audit reports on public institutions have continuously indicated a large set of problems in the legality of budget spending. However, year after year the audit reports are repeated, but the law-implementation agencies and the judiciary haven't been establishing the individual accountability ... nor did the governments and the parliaments show any willingness to establish systemic solutions to contribute to more transparent and more accountable spending of public resources." (Transparency International BiH, Percepcija javne uprave: Bosna i Hercegovina 2014)

²⁶ Results of the research done by BH journalists show that out of several sectors, the citizens express the least trust in politicians – 26.8% of respondents (N=500), and the most trust in media – 80.6%. Source: BH novinari, *Mediji u BiH 2015: medijske slobode, profesionalizam i izazovi*.

²⁷ Gallup, *Global States of Mind Report 2014*.

²⁸ The perception of corruption in BiH is also on the rise, as shown by TI's Corruption Perception Index, where BiH has moved from 72 to 80 place on a list of 175 countries, becoming the second worst in the region (Transparency International BiH, "BiH nazadovala prema Indeksu percepcije korupcije").

Europe and Central Asia the same year.²⁹ The estimates from 2011 show that 17.9% of the population live below the national poverty line.³⁰ The average salary in 2014 was 429.5 Euro³¹ while the market basket for a family of four members amounted to more than 900 Euro.

This has generated numerous displays of popular dissatisfaction. While the February 2014 protests were the most intensive in terms of turnout in various cities, duration, and forcefulness of the protests, they were not the first. The country has, especially in the past nine years, been in a steady social, economic and political decline,³² which has generated numerous displays of dissatisfaction. Protest events all over the country, sparked by various socio-economic issues, have been an almost daily occurrence for years – be it those of workers, deprived of their social and economic rights in the privatisation process; mothers protesting against the lack of social care; or animal rights activists fighting against brutal laws on stray dogs. However, most of these protests have had a very limited reach, lacking the cohesive factors to be noticed and to engage participants across the country's administrative and political divides. The first protests that were more extensively covered by the media and involved thousands of participants, took place in 2008 in Sarajevo, the country's capital. The protests

²⁹ The Agency of statistics of BiH, data available at: <http://www.bhas.ba/>; the comparative insight is provided by the World Bank, where the national GDP per capita was 4.76 USD, while the GDP in Europe and Eurasia was 6.89. More at: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GNP.PCAP.CD/countries/BA-7E-XT?display=graph> (accessed 20 September 2015).

³⁰ World Bank data, available at: <http://data.worldbank.org/country/bosnia-and-herzegovina> (accessed 20 September 2015).

³¹ The Agency of statistics of BiH, data available at: <http://www.bhas.ba/> (accessed 20 September 2015).

³² Data obtained by the most relevant statistical reports show unfavourable numbers. According to EUROSTAT's research from June 2015, BiH has a level of GDP per capita around 70% below the EU-28 average and price level below 50% of the EU average (EUROSTAT, *GDP per capita, Consumption per capita and Price Level Indices*). According to the same agency, BiH has a very high unemployment rate with close 3 out of 10 persons without work. (EUROSTAT, *Enlargement Countries - Labour Market Statistics*).

started as a reaction to the murder of Denis Mrnjavac, a teenage boy who was stabbed to death on a tram in broad daylight. This was the third brutal murder in the course of only a few weeks, and citizens took to the streets to demand accountability for the deteriorating security situation in the city, the resignation of the city mayor and cantonal prime minister,³³ as well as a mechanism for dealing with juvenile delinquency.³⁴ No resignations were offered by the targeted officials, but the FBiH Government began to address lack of correctional facilities for juvenile offenders; one such facility was eventually built in the town of Orašje.³⁵ Mrnjavac's killers were sentenced to ten and 15 years in prison, respectively. In the years to follow, more and larger-scale protests began taking place in BiH. Protests in BiH, in a broader sense, have been a daily occurrence, but not often have they received mass support. The protests of February 2014 have been the largest to date, and they will be presented in the next sub-section, followed by an overview of two other cases included in the research.

2.1 Cases of protests analysed in this report

The selection of cases was based on three major criteria: a) highest number of participants, b) timing, with the most recent protests selected, c) the relevance and novelty of protest

³³ Months later, in October 2008, the prime minister resigned; the official reason given was the defeat of his party in the local elections. Any connection with his bad publicity in the course of the protests remains a matter of speculation.

³⁴ FENA, "Groz i Dosta: Spriječimo kolaps sigurnosne oblasti". In the following year, a similar, but smaller-scale, protest took place in Sarajevo after another murder. Amar Mistrić, a young waiter in a local pub, was shot by two of his customers after he asked them to leave the place at closing time. Distrustful of the legal system, the protesters blocked traffic in the main street, refusing to move until the perpetrators, who fled the scene, were brought to justice. Another example are the protests in reaction to unrest after a football game Croatia-Spain. More available at: A. M. "Ovo je Mostar! Stotine na trgu s čokoladama"; *Radiosarajevo.ba*. "Mostarski srednjoškolci: Dvije strane na jednoj".

³⁵ The juvenile centre was, however, completed only in 2014.

actions and the range of socio-political issues they involved, the focus being on protests involving motives beyond particular interest groups and two dominant forms of protests – street demonstrations and the plenum hearings.

The primary case under consideration here are the protests of February 2014; the communication practices during these protests was analysed in more detail, including insights from interviews and from the analysis of media reporting on the protests. The two secondary cases – the JMBG protests in Sarajevo and the Picin Park protests in Banja Luka – were addressed in this research through interviews only. The socio-political relevance and the ideas behind these protests will be outlined in greater detail below, but these protests overall attracted the attention of different actors (media, politicians, police, researchers), and involved common demands for a ‘better life’ and the common good, while also showing up the boundaries of ‘acceptable’ manifestation of discontent. While the protests are defined in the introductory chapter as collective actions aimed at achieving certain goals by influencing a certain target group, the terms ‘protest’ and ‘demonstration’ are sometimes used interchangeably, which illustrates how the February protests in particular predominantly took the form of street demonstrations. However, the February protests went beyond street demonstrations only and prompted the emergence of an institution that was novel for BiH, but not for the region – citizen plenums, as public forums whose goal it was to articulate and disseminate the citizens’ demands. The plenums arose shortly after the protests started, as an attempt to organise around the protest demands in a non-hierarchical way.

2.1.1. February protests: primary case

In February 2014, citizens in dozens of cities mostly in the Federation of BiH expressed discontent about the overall socio-economic situation and demanded accountability

from those in power. The protests in Republika Srpska were limited to Banja Luka, Bijeljina, Doboj, and Prijedor, but they were far smaller and quickly stopped.³⁶ The protests began in Tuzla, which, prior to the war, had been a prosperous industrial town. Its economy, however, was ruined in a poorly managed privatisation process. Many of its once successful factories were run into the ground by their new owners;³⁷ workers found themselves without jobs or working unregistered, their salaries and social contributions often unpaid for longer periods of time so that they lost their livelihoods and social and health insurance. For years, the workers of several manufacturing companies, including chemical companies Dita and Polihem, footwear manufacturer Aida, furniture factory Konjuh, and steel factory Livnica čelika, had been protesting without success to get the

³⁶ There is practically no difference in governance and standard of living between FBiH and RS, but the protests were far less prominent in the RS. The reasons are beyond the scope of this research and are related to complex issues of administrative setting, the political, social, and media landscapes of the entities, dominant attitudes towards the 1992-1995 war, and other factors. A likely contributing factor to the small scale of protests in RS was how the initial protests were framed by RS officials and the media – as a threat to the RS. This was accompanied by a series of intimidating statements, implying – or even explicitly stating – that dissent will not be tolerated and will be met with a tough response from the authorities. Several statements were made by officials about the police’s preparedness to prevent riots from spilling over into RS; the RS police minister explicitly stated that they were “watching the neuralgic points” at the entity borders, adding to the attempt to portray the protests as a national state of emergency (*Glas Srpske*, “Građani Republike Srpske bezbjedni – MUP prati dešavanja u FBiH”).

³⁷ Throughout ex-Yugoslavia, formerly state-owned companies were bought, usually under more than favourable terms, mostly by people close to the political establishment, who did not implement the terms of their privatisation contracts, but rather made a quick profit by draining the companies’ resources and driving them into bankruptcy. In Republika Srpska, for example, out of 700 privatised companies, 630 were no longer working by 2011. (Transparency International BiH, “Revizija privatizacije u RS bez rezultata”).

authorities to deal with these problems. Some investigations were put in motion, but ultimately nothing was resolved.³⁸

On February 5, yet another workers' protest took place, but this time they were joined by a wider range of citizens expressing their discontent. The cantonal government refused to meet and consult with the protesters,³⁹ after which some of the protesters attempted to enter the cantonal government building, defying a police cordon at its entrance, which sparked clashes between the police and the protesters. Several cases of police brutality were recorded,⁴⁰ while the protesters attacked the government buildings with rocks and tried to set it on fire. On February 6, it was reported that 102 police and 28 civilians had been admitted to Tuzla's ER for injuries sustained during the protests.⁴¹

³⁸ A lawsuit concerning the privatisation of Livnica čelika was launched in 2007 by the Cantonal Agency for Privatisation; as a result, one of the accused received a one-year sentence and the privatisation contract was annulled. The company was returned to state property, but the financial damages were never covered; the status of its workers, who went without salaries for months, was not resolved, and the conditions to resume production were not re-established (*Istinomjer*, "Nema vlade za radnike: LIVNICA ČELIKA"); The investigation on Dita was started by the cantonal prosecutor's office, but none of the seven persons investigated for alleged "abuse of power and authority and signing damaging contracts" has been sentenced to date (See: *Istinomjer*, "Nema vlade za radnike: DITA"). Other companies saw a similar fate: their workers bore the burden of failed privatisations, while those responsible for their demise were never held accountable.

³⁹ The official position was that workers should "seek their rights through the institutions of union organising, with whom the Government maintains a good cooperation". Source: *Tuzlanski.ba*. "Demonstrantima – predstavnicima radnika nekadašnjih giganata, obećan sastanak s premijerom TK". The request of protesters to meet the cantonal prime minister was denied.

⁴⁰ By the end of February, Human Rights Watch had collected evidence on 20 cases of police brutality during and after the protests. See more at: "Bosnia and Herzegovina: Investigate Police Violence Against Protesters: Victims Describe Excessive Force on Streets, in Detention."

⁴¹ E. F. "Tuzla: U hitnoj pomoći završila 102 policajca".

These events charged people in other cities. On February 6, a protest in support of the Tuzla protesters took place in Sarajevo and other cities soon followed. People in Zenica, Mostar, Bihać, Travnik, and Brčko – to name but a few – also took to the streets, demanding the resignation of their local, cantonal, or entity governments, efficient court cases against criminal privatisations, the abolition of vast privileges enjoyed by officials, and social and economic justice. The first two days of the protests saw attacks on various government buildings, several of which were set on fire or damaged with rocks. After the initial outburst, the protests continued in several cities, taking the form of protest walks, street gatherings, and traffic blockades, without clashes with the police or attacks against institutions. As a direct result, four cantonal prime ministers resigned (in Tuzla, Sarajevo, Bihać, and Zenica).

During the second week, the protesters in Tuzla, Sarajevo, Mostar, and other cities started forming citizens' plenums,⁴² nominally public forums launched as non-hierarchical self-organised platforms open to all citizens. The plenums were meant to use public discussions among citizens in order to articulate and advocate for their demands. The plenum of citizens of Tuzla, which was the first one to organise, described the plenum as follows: "A plenum is an assembly of all members of a certain group. It is a public space for discussion, without restrictions and the hierarchy of its participants, where decisions are made. A plenum possesses a certain work structure".⁴³ Similar, sometimes identical, descriptions were offered by plenums in other cities. For example, the one

⁴² According to the web page bhplenumi.info, the plenums which articulated and communicated protesters' demands were formed in the following cities: Brčko, Bugojno, Cazin, Donji Vakuf, Fojnica, Goražde, Gračаница, Konjic, Mostar, Orašje, Sarajevo, Tešanj, Travnik, Tuzla, and Zenica (source: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140723074440/http://bhplenum.info/>, accessed 5 August 2015). In Bihać, a centre of Una-Sana canton, the demands were articulated by a group "Bosansko proljeće" (Bosnian spring), which never called itself a 'plenum' but functioned in a similar way.

⁴³ Plenum građana i građanki Tuzle, Često postavljena pitanja (FAQ). The page is no longer online, but the content is available through an archived snapshot: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140305053045/http://www.plenumtk.org/FAQ>

in Mostar described itself as “an assembly of all the participants. It is a public and common space and all the decisions are made publicly. The plenum is open to all the citizens. Everyone has the right to vote, everyone has the right to participate.” The principles on which plenums are founded are also listed, including equality, solidarity, and nonviolence.⁴⁴ The idea behind the plenums was that all participants have equal opportunities to propose topics for discussion, present their views of the discussed problems and solutions, and that decisions are reached through a vote by all the participants. Most of the plenums’ efforts went into drafting and presenting protest demands to the public and the decision-makers, which was undertaken through working groups with specific tasks. The plenum of citizens of Sarajevo, for example, had ‘technical’ working groups (for legal matters, media matters, protests, logistics, and inter-plenum cooperation) and several ‘topical’ groups (for education, culture, economics, veterans’ affairs, and so on).⁴⁵

The plenums in different cities had various life spans, as did street demonstrations, but both forms of protests were generally active for around two months, with the last significant protest event happening on April 9 in front of the Government of FBiH, when protesters from various cities gathered to demand the resignation of the entity government.⁴⁶ In Republika Srpska, there were several smaller-scale protests, aiming to support the protesters in Tuzla and other cities, or simply ‘riding the wave’ and showing their own dissatisfaction with the system.

While the protests were still ongoing, during February and March, even after the initial violent clashes stopped, several cases of police brutality, intimidation, arrests, and

⁴⁴ Plenum građanki i građana Grada Mostara, O plenumu. The page is no longer online, but the content is available through an archived snapshot: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140525153832/http://www.plenummo.org/o-plenumu>

⁴⁵ Plenum građanki i građana Sarajeva, Radne grupe. The page is no longer online, but the content is available through an archived snapshot: <https://web.archive.org/web/20160205155118/http://plenumsa.org/radne-grupe/>

⁴⁶ *Radiosarajevo.ba*, “Završen protest učesnika plenuma, saobraćaj ponovo u funkciji”.

constraints on the freedom of movement of the protesters were recorded.⁴⁷ The police conduct was especially problematic in Mostar, where the protesters were stopped from moving through the western, predominantly Croat-populated part of the city, as part of a systematic attempt of political elites to portray the protests in the frame of ethno-national divides.⁴⁸

The police brutality and intimidation in Mostar went hand in hand with other forms of pressure, which was best seen in the treatment of Josip Milić, a leader of one of the rare unions that joined the protests. Milić was arrested in his apartment on the first evening after the protests,⁴⁹ but was also attacked twice by ‘unknown perpetrators’.⁵⁰ Both Milić and the union he leads were very explicit in their public statements on the reasons behind the attacks and the arrest, claiming that both were an act of the same political party (HDZ BiH).

Regarding the protest demands, Tuzla canton was the only one where a new government was formed following the protests, while three other cantonal governments that resigned at the peak of the protests in effect remained in office until the October elections, despite the formal resignations. However, the new government failed to meet even the basic

⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch recorded “nineteen cases of excessive use of force by police against protesters, bystanders, and journalists on the streets during demonstrations and against protesters in detention. (...) The accounts show clear evidence of excessive use of force against protesters both on streets and in detention. Victims include two women and three children.” Human Rights Watch, “Bosnia and Herzegovina: Investigate Police Violence Against Protesters: Victims Describe Excessive Force on Streets, in Detention”.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Initiative for Monitoring of European Union Integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Alternative Progress Report 2015: Political Criteria*, Chapter 3.2 Prevention of torture and ill-treatment.

⁴⁹ FENA, “Mostar: Uhapšen predsjednik Unije nezavisnih sindikata FBiH”.

⁵⁰ FENA, “Pretučen Josip Milić, predsjednik Unije nezavisnih sindikata FBiH”.

expectations of the protesters, leading to repeated lower-scale protests of workers from Tuzla canton later that year.⁵¹

Some of the cantons (specifically Sarajevo, Tuzla, and Una-Sana Canton)⁵² abolished the so-called 'white bread' privileges for officials,⁵³ and a few cantonal parliaments officially adopted demands by the plenums. For example, in Sarajevo and Goražde the salaries of cantonal MPs were lowered. But other than those initial reactions, no real efforts were taken to resolve the main issues behind protesters' demands, such as corruption, criminal privatisations, unemployment, and social injustice.⁵⁴ The Federal government refused to resign and has, instead, dedicated one of its sessions to consider the protesters' demands, accepting some and declining others. Nonetheless, other than adopting a few anti-corruption laws⁵⁵ of debatable significance, the FBiH Government did nothing to actually meet the demands.

⁵¹ The most striking was certainly the 'march to the border' by the workers of several ruined factories at the end of December 2014. The workers walked to the border with Croatia, at that point already an EU member, asking to cross the border and leave BiH. (*Klix.ba*. "Krenuli prema granici: Radnici Aide napuštaju BiH")

⁵² Centar za istraživačko novinarstvo. "Bijelog hljeba bez motike".

⁵³ A clause which allows officials, such as ministers and MPs, to continue receiving their monthly income up to a year after they leave, or get removed from, their positions in the executive or legislative branch.

⁵⁴ The record of parliaments adopting protest and plenum demands is available at <https://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com/2014/03/11/highlights-of-the-week-ending-sunday-9-march-2014/> (accessed 1 August 2015). An overview of the true results is available at: D. Sijah, "Godišnjica protesta: Vlasti nisu uradile gotovo ništa u vezi sa zahtjevima građana".

⁵⁵ "In the Federation of BiH, at the very end of the mandate of the previous federal Government, the Confiscation of Assets Law in the FBiH was adopted, and it should have come into force in March 2015, but its implementation was postponed, because the Agency for custody, management and disposition of forfeited assets acquired through criminal offences has not been formed, and it is responsible for the enforcement of the law." (Initiative for Monitoring of European Union Integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Alternative Progress Report 2015: Political Criteria*, Chapter 2.2: Fight against corruption)

2.1.2. Picin Park and ID number protests: secondary cases

The protests in Banja Luka in 2012 started as an attempt to save one of the very few green areas in the city, known as Picin Park.⁵⁶ The protest, held under the slogan ‘Park je naš’ (the park is ours), was organised through a Facebook group, “Save Picin Park! Don’t let us be fucked by every Mile in this town!” (“SPASIMO PICIN PARK!!! Ne dozvolimo da nas sjebe svaki Mile ovog grada!!!”)⁵⁷, which gained 15,000 members within only the first 24 hours.⁵⁸ The protests started on May 29, 2012 and lasted four months, the first of its kind in Banja Luka and RS since the war.⁵⁹ The protesters organised many peaceful walks through the city to draw attention to the issue, which gave them the nickname ‘Šetači’ (walkers).

The protest organisers were faced with police intimidation and fines,⁶⁰ as the local and entity government stood unequivocally behind ‘the investor’ – as the company that had

⁵⁶ The park was bought by “Grand Trade”, a company owned by Mile Radišić, a local tycoon and an associate of Republika Srpska’s president, Milorad Dodik. The regulation plan of the area was changed to allow the building of a business-residential complex in the former green space. When the company started clearing the terrain to start construction work, a group of citizens rebelled against the destruction of the park, sparking the larger protests.

⁵⁷ The group remained active after the protests declined and stopped and is still available at the address <https://www.facebook.com/groups/park.je.nas/> (accessed 10 August 2015).

⁵⁸ *Buka*, “Za 24 sata socijalna grupa Spasimo Picin Park okupila preko 15 000 članova!”

⁵⁹ A brief chronology of the protest and related events was published on the group’s page on its three-year anniversary: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/park.je.nas/permalink/1118736674809085/> (accessed 10 August 2015).

⁶⁰ One of the most prominent Picin park protesters, eco-activist Miodrag Dakić, was interrogated by the police at the beginning of the protests; police claimed that protest organisers needed to be identified as the gatherings had not been properly reported to the local authorities (*Nezavisne novine*, “Saslušani Miodrag Dakić: Policija traži vođu banjalučkih protesta”). Dakić, along with eight other protesters – all of them either journalists or NGO activists – was also charged with breaking the law on basic traffic security, specifically for “not following traffic lights and disturbing normal traffic routine”. The whole group was later sentenced by a court in Banja Luka and ordered to pay fines and court expenses (E. Katana, “Banjalučki ‘šetači’ najavljuju pravnu bitku”).

bought the park was officially referred to. Despite the unprecedented citizens' mobilisation, the park could not be saved and was eventually demolished and replaced with a large office building. A year later, with the permission of the local government and assistance from the police, Grand Trade seized the path that led to the property of Željko Vulić, whose house and small business premises border the former park.⁶¹ Another protest followed, when some of the previous 'walkers' gathered to support Vulić. In an attempt to prevent the further construction of business complex Grand Trade, Vulić and his son were taken into custody, while the judiciary until this day failed to process Vulić's complaints concerning the property and to take the case to court.⁶²

Another major case of protests are the 'JMBG' protests that started in Sarajevo in 2013, when citizens held the building of the Parliamentary Assembly and the Council of Ministers of BiH under siege for nearly two days. The protests were sparked by the news that Belmina Ibrišimović, a baby of three months, was unable to get travel documents to leave the country and receive the life-saving medical treatment she needed. Belmina was one of the children who could not get their ID number issued upon birth, as the Law on ID numbers had expired in February 2013 and political skirmished in the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH

⁶¹ *Radiosarajevo.ba*, "Banja Luka: Komšije i sugradani podržali Željka Vulića".

⁶² By end of October 2015. In the meantime, the road was taken over by Grand Trade. (*Mondo.ba*. "Željko Vulić: U Banja Luci kao na Divljem zapadu"). Mile Radišić was found guilty in a different court case, for misuse of official position and illegal manipulation of stocks prices, but avoided serving his three-year sentence by fleeing to Serbia.

prevented adoption of a new law.⁶³ On June 5, while the Council of Ministers was in session, a group of citizens parked their cars in front of the Parliament building, announcing that they would not unblock the exit until a valid law on ID numbers was passed and Belmina was able to leave the country for treatment. In response, the CoM issued a temporary decision which allowed for ID numbers to be issued to babies born after February 2013. The protests continued, and the number of protesters grew to a couple of hundreds. On the next day, when the Parliamentary Assembly was in session, the crowd grew by hundreds of citizens who surrounded the building, refusing to leave until the law was passed. The blockade lasted well into the night and was eventually dispersed by the police; the number of protesters decreased⁶⁴ and some of them were arrested and beaten during arrests.⁶⁵ As the law was not adopted, the protests continued until the end of the month, at times with more than 10,000 people.⁶⁶ Support came from many cities in BiH, which either held their own protest gatherings or joined the protests in Sarajevo, and from other countries in the

⁶³ MPs from Republika Srpska questioned the constitutionality of JMBG law's articles that referred to some municipalities by their pre-war names and objected to the use of old registration areas, arguing that they should reflect the new administrative structure of the country, involving the entity boundaries. The court ruled that "Identification Number must use the official names of the municipalities as adopted in the Law on Territorial Organisation of the Republika Srpska", but registration areas were not confirmed to be breaching constitutional provisions. Even though the Court's decision was explicitly only referring to changing the names of the municipalities, in March 2012 the Council of Ministers proposed a law which included the change of registration areas. The parties from FBiH refused changes of registration areas, while parties from RS demanded it. As a result, children born after February 2013 were non-existent in the administrative system (See more in: Initiative for Monitoring of European Union Integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina. *2014 Alternative Progress Report: Political Criteria*, Chapter 1.2 Parliaments and governments).

⁶⁴ See more in: *Al Jazeera Balkans*, "Okončani protesti ispred Parlamenta BiH".

⁶⁵ See more in: Beta, "Hapšenje demonstranata u Sarajevu".

⁶⁶ *TVI*, "Hiljade građana na koncertu bh. bendova ispred Parlamenta".

region.⁶⁷ The last major protest event took place on July 1, 2013, under the slogan 'Otkaz!' (resignation), and the new law on ID numbers was eventually adopted in November 2013.

⁶⁷ A significant number of people, both in the region and worldwide, also showed their support by sending or publishing their photographs with the 'JMBG' banner. The main online platform of JMBG protests, "JMBG za sve" ("JMBG for all": <https://www.facebook.com/Ja.BiH.JMBG>, accessed 10 September 2015), was flooded with hundreds of such photos, some of them from well-known public figures from BiH and the region.

3. Methodological framework

The analysis of communication practices related to citizens' protests is based on two primary sources: media content produced during and about the protests; and interviews conducted with protest participants, journalists, and officials.

A frame analysis of the media content sample was conducted, as well as a thematic analysis of the interviews. The aim of the frame analysis was to identify and analyse dominant frames which shaped the public discourse about the protests in BiH. The analysis involved different kinds of platforms and media with the aim to capture different patterns of framing the February protests. However, the authors do not claim to provide results that are generalisable to all communication during the protests, or to all content in a particular media outlet. The analysis offers a systematic overview of some of the relevant patterns of communication during the specific case of protests.

The interviews were aimed at providing insight into the perception of protests by representatives of media outlets, state and party officials, and protesters.

While the primary case analysis involved both methods, the analysis of secondary cases was limited to interviews only. In addition, although the February protests emerged in a number of cities, this research was primarily focused on, and involved interviews and media outlets primarily based in, three cities: Tuzla, Sarajevo, and Mostar.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ The selection of the cities is based on the specific and unparalleled administrative and political characteristics of each of them: Tuzla was the place where protests and plenums started first and where the privatisation issues and related violations of labour rights are especially prominent; Sarajevo is the capital where state and entity (as well as cantonal and municipal) institutions, criticised for their lack of accountability, are based; finally, Mostar was selected since the protests there involved a particular response from the authorities, which emphasised ethnic divisions by setting up police cordons and involved the arrest of one of the protest leaders.

The research also involved the analysis of secondary sources, mainly for the purpose of outlining the media and political context, as well as sources about media reporting during the protests.

3.1 Interviews: sampling and analysis

With the aim to provide insights into communication practices during the protests from multiple perspectives, three general groups of respondents were interviewed: media/journalists, government/party officials, and protesters/plenum participants. Overall, around 75 requests for interviews were made, and 35 interviews were subsequently conducted. Out of this number, 15 respondents were activists/protesters, 11 journalists (four of them identifying as protesters/activists at the same time),⁶⁹ and nine were state or party officials. The interviews lasted between 35 and 90 minutes; each was recorded and transcribed and a qualitative analysis of the content was conducted. The difficulties in reaching state and party officials were particularly pronounced, especially when they were contacted through official party and government channels. Some of them refused interviews citing a lack of time, other priorities, or a lack of information at their disposal; one, a former cantonal official, declined to participate since he did not see any personal benefit in it. However, more often officials and party headquarters simply failed to reply to e-mail requests for interviews and did not answer repeated phone calls, or delayed meetings beyond the duration of the research (the interviews were conducted in March-September 2015).⁷⁰ This lack of response should be mentioned as an indicator of what one of the respondents called the "politics of disregard" by officials towards the public.⁷¹ However, in the course of this research, after a multitude of attempts to reach officials through institutional and party channels and

⁶⁹ The researchers allowed the respondents to define their role during the protests themselves.

⁷⁰ Primary research was conducted between the end of April and the beginning of October 2015.

⁷¹ It seems relevant to notice that, despite all the efforts, only one official from Republika Srpska, a member of an opposition party, agreed to the interview. In the Federation and Brčko District, both the opposition and the parties in power were represented in the sample.

personal e-mails and phones, nine officials from several major political parties were finally interviewed. A dozen respondents, both protesters and journalists, required either complete or partial anonymity, which was fully guaranteed.

3.2 Media content: sampling and analysis

The media sample for the content analysis was selected on the basis of several criteria, including: media sector (including TV broadcasters and online media), type of media (public and private), audience reach (the most viewed/visited media selected), editorial stance (media considered close to the political elites, and those considered more critical), as well as territorial/ethnic disparity (including media based in different cities). Given that the protests were geographically dispersed and the communication unfolded on different administrative levels, the sample had to involve media of both state/entity and local significance. The sample focused on television news, given that television still remains the most trusted media and most prominent source of information in BiH.⁷² In addition, major online media were included in the sample due to both their specific role in rapid publication and dissemination of information (which was an important feature of communication during the protests) and their growing significance as a source of information in BiH.⁷³ Due to the limitations of this work, other media sectors with lower audience reach and declining use for information (radio and print) were not included in the sample. More specifically, the sample included:

⁷² See: A. Džihana, K. Ćendić, and M. Tahmaz, *Mapping Digital Media: Bosnia and Herzegovina*, pp. 19-20.

⁷³ “Although the public assumption is that young people turn to the internet increasingly as their basic source of news and information, no research in BiH has tested this. Nevertheless, a research study involving only 100 internet users confirmed precisely such a trend. In this admittedly small sample, only 5 percent of participants did not visit information portals at all, whereas 17 percent did so every day, while 47 percent visited news portals almost every day.” (Ibid. p. 20)

- **Five TV stations**, selected based on the combined criteria of audience reach, territorial/entity balance, and social relevance. Due to both the specific public service role, and the entity/ethnic balance, all three public service broadcasters (FTV, BHT and RTRS) had to be included in the analysis, while two commercial broadcasters were selected based on both criteria of audience reach and entity balance: Hayat TV, based in the Federation, and BN television, based in Republika Srpska.⁷⁴ The central news broadcasts of these stations during the ten continuous, most eventful days of protests – February 6-15 – were included in the sample. Thus, 50 news broadcasts were analysed, each of a duration of at least one hour. Since the unit of analysis was the specific report about the protests, and since each news broadcast involved one or more reports about protests, overall **72 TV news items** were analysed.
- **Online media outlets** were selected based on similar criteria: audience reach⁷⁵ and territorial/entity/ethnic balance. In addition to including media from both entities, media based in the three cities that were the focus of this analysis were also included: Tuzla, Mostar, and Sarajevo. For the period February 6-15, five online media were included in the analysis: Klix (klix.ba), Avaz (avaz.ba), Nezavisne novine (nezavisne.com),⁷⁶ Tuzlanski

⁷⁴ A different selection might have included RTV Pink and OBN, which also have a high audience reach, but are dominantly entertainment-oriented. Each station has only one news programme, aired 3 or 4 times a day with an overall duration of one hour; there are no other news-related programmes, except for two talk-shows (one on each station), that sometimes have current events as topics. The programme schemes of the two selected stations are more focused on information content: Hayat TV broadcasts news content of an average duration of 2.5 hours per day, while BN TV has an average of 3 hours per day of information content and two regular programmes dealing with current affairs. An analysis of the content of more local broadcasters would also be valuable, but was beyond the scope of this research.

⁷⁵ We used the Alexa traffic ranking as an indicator reach of the news portals in Bosnia and Herzegovina. (Available at: <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/BA>, accessed in December 2014)

⁷⁶ Out of the selected portals, two are online outlets of print newspapers (Avaz and Nezavisne novine) and one is an outlet of an international television station (Al Jazeera).

(tuzlanski.ba) from Tuzla and Bljesak (bljesak.info) from Mostar. Additional **articles** were included in the analysis; in order to provide some, although limited, insight into communication practices in subsequent days of the protests, a number of online articles published before the end of March 2014 was included in the analysis as well. The selection was stratified per dates of relevant events in each of the protest cities, with an average of three additional articles per five online media being analysed. Such events were primarily cantonal parliaments' responses to the demands of protests and plenums, the publication of plenum demands, the police blockade in Mostar as well as the arrests of protesters.⁷⁷ In addition, media with different ideological positions on the government and the protests⁷⁸ were included: Žurnal (zurnal.ba) and Al Jazeera Balkans (<http://balkans.aljazeera.net>) based in Sarajevo; AbrašMEDIA (abrasmedia.ba) based in Mostar; and Buka (buka.com) based in Banja Luka. Overall, **106 online articles/content** were included in the sample.

In sum, we analysed a stratified sample of 156 news programs/online articles, i.e., **178 news items**.

⁷⁷ In each part of the sampling based on dates, only one content item per media and per date was analysed. If more articles were published by the particular media on the same date, the researcher selected one for analysis based on the length of the article, the inclusion of different media (video and audio in addition to written text), and the number of sources and 'problems' identified in the text. 'Problem' is the variable of analysis that refers to the way that the protests and related issues were framed in the media text.

⁷⁸ For identification of such media, we relied on previous analyses published on the websites media.ba, istinomjer.ba, and analiziraj.ba.

4. Results of the primary research

4.1 The protests: media framing and perception

Protests seen as a tool for and manifestation of democracy

The most emphasised feature of the protests, singled out by a majority of interviewees, is their role as a tool for “learning democracy”, as some of the respondents have put it. The protests were described as “the first step towards a real democracy”⁷⁹, “true democracy at work”⁸⁰, “exercising democracy”⁸¹, “an upgrade of democracy”⁸², “a few days of freedom in 20 years of darkness”⁸³, and similar. One aspect of that role that was particularly underscored is citizens’ direct agency in the public sphere, as opposed to their usual position of helplessness against an antagonistic political class. This was described in terms such as “giving voice to the people, expression of solidarity, given the people political subjectivity”⁸⁴; and the people “departing from the role of the victim, finding new forms to express civil disobedience”⁸⁵.

The respondents, activists and journalists alike, have an overall positive view of citizen protests as an expression of *democracy*, but with two rather different meanings implied. Namely, Danijela Majstorović, protester and university professor from Banja Luka, considers

⁷⁹ Interview with protester from Mostar, May 2015.

⁸⁰ Interview with protester from Sarajevo, 30 March 2015.

⁸¹ Interview with Semir Mujkić, journalist with online magazine Žurnal.info, June 2015.

⁸² Interview with one of the officials, 22 July 2015.

⁸³ Interview with journalist from Sarajevo, April 2015.

⁸⁴ Interview with protester from Tuzla, May 2015.

⁸⁵ Interview with Damir Arsenijević, protester and scholar from Tuzla, May 2015.

the February protests to be “a clearly leftist story, since they were a demand for redistribution of common wealth, which was stolen by ethno-nationalistic politicians and then privatised”. She frames the protests in Picin Park in a similar fashion: “it’s not just a ‘green protest’, but also a demand for the public good, which cannot and must not be taken away.” The other view of *democratisation* was framed within the process of European integration, where the protests are seen as “the crucial democratic step, the greatest move of BiH towards Euro-Atlantic integration in the past 20 years”. In the first case, the respondent points to the participatory, left-leaning democratic processes as the protests’ important (and empowering) feature; in the second case, the move towards democracy is directly linked to the notion of the country’s accession to the European Union and NATO, which are implicitly seen as the parameter for democratic standards. These views demonstrate two different perspectives on democracy – one favouring participation, and the other favouring normative-institutional structures – and in both cases the protests are interpreted as a step towards the desired goal.

The interviewed officials in general also frame the protest as an expression of and a step towards democracy, but some of them put the emphasis on the violence that occurred during the February protests (also mentioned by some of the interviewed journalists). By doing so, they make a strong distinction between peaceful protests within the boundaries of behaviour permitted by the law on the one hand, and protests that include violence on the other hand, the latter being framed as “more similar to anarchy than democracy”, as one of the officials said.

In comparing the three cases of protests that are the focus of this research, the respondents, in particular activists and journalists, point to several common features. Firstly, all three protests are seen as an expression of certain common aspirations, described as a right to a ‘better life’ and the notion of ‘public good’. The interviewed activists in particular emphasised that citizens, deprived of these values, have a right – a duty, even – to pursue them. Special emphasis was put on the trans-ethnic nature of these aspirations, which allowed the protests to, more or less, surpass ethno-national divides and sentiments, leading to more unified

demands for the common interest. According to the interviewed activists and some of the journalists, the most revolutionary aspect of all three protests was the prioritisation of social and economic problems, as well as succeeding (to some extent) in introducing solidarity, the common good, and social justice as new subjects of public communication.

The interviewees also mentioned a few differences between the three protests relevant for the communication practices. In the JMBG protests (also called 'Bebolution' protests), the direct connection to a child whose life was at stake, involved strong emotional connotations, which several respondents pointed out as a powerful element for fast mobilisation. The demands of the JMBG protests were clear, focused on a specific law, and addressed to specific decision-makers, i.e., the state-level Parliament. In a word, their demands were easy to communicate. On a related issue, the protests' visual identity (a logo with a pacifier turning into a fist) was described as powerful and persuasive. Two of the respondents even stressed that the JMBG protests were, in a sense, non-ideological, but also more of an 'urban protest', in the sense that: "...they were, to some extent, 'sexy' for the artists and public figures, since it was not ideologically shaped" (plenum participants and protester). On the other hand, the February protests, as a few activists indicated, had a stronger ideological position, evolving around the class struggle and gathering participants from different underprivileged groups, including, for example, pensioners, the unemployed, and impoverished laid-off workers. In the view of the interviewed activists, the people who were protesting were in an adversarial position towards the political elites, who are seen as exploitative and corrupted structures ignorant of the public good. At the same time, virtually all interviewees pointed out that the February protests were not well articulated and that their demands were so numerous that they were difficult to capture and communicate.

Activist particularly point out what they frame as the subversive, revolutionary, and/or novel aspects of the protests. One is conceptual – that all three protests prioritised social and economic problems and departed from ethno-national reasoning. As one of the protesters said, the implicit message of the protests was: "I couldn't care less for nationalism, I want the factories to work, that

workers decide about them again...”⁸⁶. Another novelty of the protests was the ‘institution’ of plenums, which, as one activist pointed out, were a new form of what he sees as civil disobedience. One of the plenum participants stated that the demands of the protesters got a proper articulation only through the plenums, which were “a good public arena where, after so many years, you could hear the people beginning to speak”. Other plenum participants emphasised that this form of self-organisation gave the opportunity to “present attitudes of a public different from the dominant ones”⁸⁷ and to “impose some alternative topics”⁸⁸. But the plenums were also compared to “psychotherapy”, a “healing process” and “a valve to blow off steam”, on the premises that this was the first public arena opened for previously voiceless people. In the words of Semir Mujkić, a journalist from Sarajevo: “Whatever happened there, both good and bad, was overall a good process. It was the first time that people gathered in public to talk about their problems and try to do something about them.” Damir Dajanović, a plenum participant, thought that the plenums were a good corrective for official politics, in particular at the local levels of government: “A plenum which would, for example, influence the work of the Federal government is a bit harder to imagine, but at the local level it can make a substantial contribution to political accountability.” An allusion to the ancient Greek *agora* was also made by one of the participants: “One person – one voice, this is exactly the direct democracy of the ancient times.”

The focus of the activists’ framing of the plenums is clearly on the value of the plenums as a *process* – be it politically empowering or socially therapeutic. Three of the interviewed officials, however, focused on the negative effects they report that plenums had on the political processes in the country and/or on the protests’ success. An official from the SDP stated that the plenums “suffocated this positive drive of the protesters and every citizen who believed that something needs to change”. Another politician said that the plenums turned out to be

⁸⁶ Interview with Danijela Majstorović, scholar and protester from Banja Luka, 20 April 2015.

⁸⁷ Interview with Damir Arsenijević.

⁸⁸ Interview with Ines Tanović, plenum participant from Sarajevo, 23 March 2015.

disappointing because they were too poorly informed of the system they attempted to change to produce any real impact,⁸⁹ adding that the plenums made it easier for the politicians to avoid facing their own responsibility, by their decision “not to demand the presence of the politicians, but instead ban them from participating in the plenums”. An interviewed official from the Democratic Front party pointed out that the plenums’ inconsistent views of politics – trying to steer clear of it, while simultaneously considering setting up shadow ministries and committees – were misguided and provided officials with an opportunity to escape responsibility: “The message [of the protests] was: *We are hungry, let us eat* and there was no response to that [by the officials]. The moment when the government starts responding is when these fake leftists (...) decided to turn everything into ‘Occupy’⁹⁰ with this story of the plenums and direct democracy... We had a chance to get rid of the corrupt government, and it was hampered by a group of people who never even brushed against politics.”

The results of the content analysis do not correspond with the idea of the protests as an important phase in the ‘coming of age’ of Bosnian democracy that is dominant in the narrative of the interviewees. The frame of ‘democratic growth’ is hardly present in the media sample, with one exception of media content involving elaborate ideas on protests and the plenums expressed by a protest participant: “The alternative to this system of nationalism and capitalist robbery exists, but all of us, together, have to persist and work on it actively, in line with the principles of direct democracy...”⁹¹

Quite the contrary, officials quoted by the media presented the protests as undemocratic, demarcating “peaceful protests as a democratic right” from “violent protests as inadmissible

⁸⁹ Interview with Predrag Kojović, vicepresident of Naša stranka, 20 April 2015.

⁹⁰ A reference to the ‘Occupy’ movement, a protest movement which started with the ‘Occupy Wall Street’ protests in New York in 2011, subsequently spreading throughout the US and worldwide.

⁹¹ S. M., S. D. and K. KE. “Nudili nam zlatne kašike, a sada ne daju ni lopate za kontejnere”.

chaos”.⁹² In stark contrast to the views of the majority of interviewees, the views of the officials primarily rest on the premise of democracy as a system that should be exercised only within the institutional set-up, and the related *ethnic/national frame*. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Constitution is based on the ethno-national principle and both the functioning of institutions and national interests are placed on the different administrative levels (the state, the entities, the cantons), which were under criticism during the protests.⁹³ Thus, the attempts to critique these institutions, and even to transcend the borders of what was framed as ‘legitimate’ space to exercise democracy, were then easily treated as a direct attack on ethno-national interests. A press release of the HDZ BiH party is exemplary in this respect: “We call upon the citizens of Mostar, of Herzegovina-Neretva Canton, the Croats, not to fall for the lies and spin... trying to justify everything that happened today and portray it as dissent by disempowered citizens. The right to peaceful demonstrations is a democratic right which the Croat Democratic Community BiH (HDZ BiH) has always supported, but it cannot support vandalism and anarchy.”⁹⁴ The RS prime minister Željka Cvijanović used almost exactly the same wording to send a message of national cohesion (within entity boundaries): “I support, absolutely, every citizen’s right to express his attitude or join a protest walk, because Srpska is a democratic society (...) I do not, however, support any attempt to transfer a certain crisis from an absolutely chaotic situation such as the Federation of BiH, into an absolutely orderly environment like Republika Srpska. I expect the citizens not to fall for this trick.”⁹⁵

⁹² See also a reflection by a columnist of Al Jazeera Balkans, who, although generally critical of the political elites, also put the emphasis on the plenums as inherently antidemocratic: “Any kind of establishment of arbitrary and quasi-state structures in line with the logic and merits of the street, and the institutions outside of the citizens’ election will, would be a coup d’etat under the auspices of the fight for equality, justice, freedom, or any other proclaimed value of individuals or groups.” (O. Softić, “Sprječiti manipulaciju protestima u BiH”).

⁹³ See, for example: Sarajlić 2009, p. 16.

⁹⁴ *Avaz*, “HDZ-a BiH: Udar na institucije nastale iz dejtonskog ustroja BiH”.

⁹⁵ *RTRS*, “Dnevnik 2: Eskalirali neredi u Federaciji, zapaljena zgrada Predsjedništva BiH u Sarajevu...”

Political distortion and interference

The dominant frame in which the interviewees express negative views on the protests is that of **politicisation of the protests**, connecting them to political interests and influence of certain parties, or, in some cases, vaguely defined groups and individuals. This frame can be found especially in the narrative of the interviewed officials, which involved two significantly different patterns. The first view is that the protests started as an authentic expression of popular dissatisfaction, after which 'certain groups' attempted to corrupt and use them for particular interests. Some consider the attempted 'hijacking' of the protests to have been successful, with protesters having been 'led astray' by the usurpers. Such was the opinion of a member of the HDZ, who stated that "genuine citizens' associations and certain individuals, who tried, very honestly, to point to the difficulties in this society, were in a certain way manipulated or used by certain groups whose goals were entirely different". Officials from SDA, SDP and DF gave a different angle by also mentioning that there were 'some' political actors who tried to use them for political purposes through their public activities and attempts to align themselves with the protests. An official from DF was the only one who explicitly named the president of the SBB party, Fahrudin Radončić, as the one who tried to score political points by "shamelessly trying to ride on those protests, manipulate and use them for his own short-term promotion". A different viewpoint, according to which the protests had been "orchestrated" from the start, was expressed by another HDZ official, who said that the protesters seemed "well organised and well trained", adding: "The demands (in the entire Federation of BiH) were 90% identical... The protests didn't have only a social background, but rather aimed to destabilise the government, to change the ruling establishment. The goal was not to change the existing conditions for the better, but to establish a society without government and bring some kind of revolution."

In addition to the officials, only two respondents focused predominantly on the alleged political influence that corrupted the protests. A journalist from Mostar described the February protests as primarily politically instrumentalised, specifically as "some kind of pre-

election campaign of some political forces, a good idea that took a wrong turn.”⁹⁶ Drenko Koristović, a protester from Sarajevo, also considered the protests to have been usurped by politically motivated imposters, claiming that he witnessed them giving large sums of money to people: “...and they were shielded. Those were not the vulnerable people, demonstrators who are hungry (...) it was obvious they were brought there with a purpose, to make an incident and break these demonstrations. To give the police a reason to use force.”

As it will be demonstrated later in this chapter, political instrumentalisation was a much more frequent frame in the media reports than in the narratives of interviewees. The one conspiracy theory that was very prominent in the media content, but could not be found in any of the interviewees’ replies, was the view of the protests as directed against Republika Srpska. This is certainly due to the fact that no representatives of the ruling parties in Republika Srpska, nor representatives of the mainstream media from this entity, agreed to be interviewed.

Evolutionary road, dark alley, dead end: view of the future protests

According to many interviewees, these protests should be seen not as isolated occurrences, but as a series of interconnected events, in a way that each was built on the legacy and knowledge of preceding protests. Some of the respondents observed that people became more aware of their power. One of the protesters mentioned that these cases brought with them a new form of protest, stating that the ‘Bebolution’, when the Parliament was physically blocked by the protesters, brought “some action other than just holding banners”⁹⁷. Some respondents pointed

⁹⁶ It is worth noting that none of the other respondents, both journalists and protest participants, ever questioned the spontaneous nature of the protests. Moreover, some of them emphasised that some of the protests’ weaknesses came from that very spontaneity and lack of organisation, but activists also believe that conspiracy theories linking the protests to different political actors, primarily the SBB, overshadowed the protests as a whole.

⁹⁷ Interview with Damir Dajanović, protester from Tuzla, 1 April 2015.

out specific 'lessons' from previous protests. The protests in Picin Park were mentioned by some of the respondents as one of the first protests that demonstrated "that the public good cannot and should not be taken away". Along the same lines, another activist drew a more radical lesson, stating that the 'Bebolution' "taught us that peaceful protests are pointless".

Several respondents emphasised the gradual growth of citizens' consciousness and their readiness to get involved in political processes. The JMBG protests "were the first wave, February was the second wave. I think we'll get to see a third and fourth wave until something changes and I think the citizens' attempts to take a role in governance will intensify"⁹⁸. Or as another respondent said: "Without the JMBG protests, there would definitely be no February protest. Similarly, the next protest will ride on that energy and drive, brought about by these two very important events"⁹⁹.

However, when it comes to expectations in terms of future civic protests, opinions are divided. Some think that new, even fiercer protests are inevitable, because none of the past protests managed to bring significant change and all the reasons which sparked the protests are still present. On the other hand, these same reasons led one of the interviewed journalists to express skepticism regarding future mobilisation: "I think that this has further discouraged the citizens and any future citizen movement in the long term. It has, simply, been realised that any kind of constructive criticism of the system and attempts to propose solutions, which is what plenums did (...), will not get a response from the other side. I'm afraid that sends a completely wrong message to the people, that any peaceful protest, or anything at all constructive, is not possible in this society." The same interviewee went even further to predict that protest violence is likely to be seen as the only means to demand solutions: "And I'm frightened by the prospect of some future protests and what they will be like, if they happen again."

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Interview with protester and plenum organizer, 31 years old, 30 March 2015.

The interviewees expressed a strong sentiment that the protests failed to produce any substantial change to the social rights and political system, particularly in terms of political accountability, given that the political class has learned nothing from the experience.

Media framing of February protests: diagnosis

The media framing of the protests was, unsurprisingly, somewhat different from that of the participants in interviews. Based on the theoretical concepts outlined in the introductory chapter, the frame analysis was based on identification of the pair ‘problem’/‘solution’ in the analysed media content. The diagnosis part of the analysis is focused on ‘problems’ identified in the media content.

The findings point to the two general groups of frames, depending on whether the identified problems are those related to the socio-political causes of the protests and negative official responses to protests, or related to the protests themselves (see Table 1).

Category of frame	Frequency
Problems are related to protests themselves	144 (35.6%)
Problems are related to causes of/responses to the protests	237 (58.7%)
Other	23 (5.7%)
Total	404

Table 1: *The general frame categories (overall)*

There is also a small number of different other problems (n=23), including the constitutional set-up of the country, the behaviour of the international community, or the ‘weak state’ or state institutions (unpreparedness of the police, bad coordination of security forces, etc.).

When these results are broken down by individual media outlets, two of them – the RS public broadcaster RTRS and Nezavisne novine – stand out from the overall media sample for being the only ones framing the protests themselves as the main problem (see Table 2).

The problem	RTRS	Nezavisne novine	FTV	Bijesak	BNTV	BHT	Hayat	Klix	Avaz	Tuzlanski
The protests	34 (81%)	14 (60.9%)	16 (42.1%)	11 (34.4%)	13 (33.3%)	10 (30.3%)	12 (29.3%)	8 (20.5%)	6 (17.1%)	5 (16.6%)
Causes of / responses to the protests	8 (19%)	7 (30.4%)	20 (52.6%)	19 (59.4%)	24 (61.5%)	20 (60.6%)	23 (56.1%)	30 (76.9%)	28 (80%)	25 (83.3%)
Other	0	2 (8.7%)	2 (5.3%)	2 (6.3%)	2 (5.1%)	3 (9.1%)	6 (14.6%)	1 (2.6%)	1 (2.9%)	0

Table 2: *The structure of identified problems: main sample*

In about half of the media items that **considered the protests themselves to be problematic**, it was mostly due to the violence, damage to government property,¹⁰⁰ and endangering the lives of people (with emphasis on injured policemen and firemen who were putting out fires in the attacked buildings). This frame dominates in particular the media reports during the first 10 days of the protests, when most violence occurred, but it also persisted throughout the whole sample. After the violent clashes stopped, the violence and property damage were

¹⁰⁰ A particular problem within this topos is the destruction of documents in the BiH Archive, located in the building of the BiH Presidency. When the building was torched during the protests, the rooms where some of the archive materials were stored caught fire and some of the materials were burnt. The media reported on this in detail, sometimes even suggesting that the archival records were destroyed deliberately, as part of a political conspiracy.

still being mentioned, but in addition the ‘problem’ was framed in terms of traffic blockades, as disruptive to the normal order and functioning of the city.

The sub-sections below are organised based on the dominant frames found in the diagnosis part of the analysis.

Protests as a state of emergency

The identified frame of **state of emergency** induced by the protests occurs in the media sample 58 times. This general frame is comprised of three sub-frames.

Protests as organised or chaotic violence (clashes with the police, hooliganism, looting)	40
Destruction of public property as a strike against society w (cost of material damage, destruction of cultural and historical heritage)	8
Militarisation of the protests (reminiscence of war-time destruction, threats of escalation into ethnic conflicts, terrorism)	10

Table 3: *State of emergency: sub-frames*

The most frequent sub-frame in this category is that of **protests as organised or chaotic violence**, which was most frequent in the reporting on the first two days of protests. It was mainly focused on detailed descriptions of the clashes between the protesters and the police, listing the number of injured persons (police and protesters), reporting on the damage to buildings, etc. The protests are usually described as ‘riots’, ‘unrest’, ‘chaos’, etc. In some cases, the protests are described as generally violent, while in others the blame is put on a specific group of people (the hooligans among the protesters, an organised group present at the protests, etc.) A typical report of this kind, present in almost all sampled media, is as follows: “The protests are spreading in FBiH. The citizens have taken to the streets in Bihać, Sarajevo, Zenica...The protest gathering grew into unrest in which 50 persons were hurt,

while one policeman's life is in danger...Several minors clashed with the police, tear gas has been thrown, and three policemen are in the ER in Sarajevo."¹⁰¹

Militarisation of the protests (reminiscence of the war-time destruction, protests as terrorism, the threat of violence escalating into inter-ethnic conflicts) is the next most frequent sub-frame. Here the violence is not stressed as a threat in and of itself, but by implying the existence of motives beyond citizens' dissatisfaction, the media suggested more sinister dangers, including terrorism and attacks against the constitutional order: "The Federal police bureau (FUP) has filed a report... on the committed criminal act of terrorism, related to a criminal act of attack against the constitutional order. FUP states that, during the unannounced protests on February 7, a number of persons has performed a violent and organised entry into the building of the BiH Presidency and other BiH institutions in Sarajevo, and used flammable materials to inflict damage and start fires, and removed and set on fire the state flag as a symbol of the BiH state."¹⁰²

Destruction of public property as a strike against society is a somewhat less frequent frame, focusing on the effect that the protests will presumably have for citizens in terms of repairing the damage which will have to be financed from citizens' taxes, and the negative effect it would have on the economy: "Incredible damage has been done, which will cost millions [to repair]... Those additional budget costs will devastate the already struggling economy."¹⁰³ Other than material damage, this sub-frame also references the destruction of cultural and historical heritage, most notably related to a fire that destroyed some of the materials in the BiH Archive, located in the BiH Presidency building: "The damage done by the torching

¹⁰¹ *RTRS*, "Dnevnik 2: Eskalirali neredi u Federaciji, zapaljena zgrada Predsjedništva BiH u Sarajevu..."

¹⁰² *BHT*, "Dnevnik 2: FUP podnijela Tužilaštvu BiH krivičnu prijavu protiv NN lica ili više njih..."

¹⁰³ *Hayat TV*, "Vijesti u 7: Gost Vijesti u 7 član Predsjedništva BiH Bakir Izetbegović", 12 February 2014.

of the BiH Archive is immeasurable and its real dimensions are yet to be determined... A priceless part of archive materials, which survived two world wars, is gone forever.⁷⁷¹⁰⁴

Protests as political conspiracy

In around half of media items where protests themselves are framed as the problem, this was done within a frame of **political conspiracy**. The protests are portrayed as an endeavour to achieve particular political goals, which was mostly presented as detrimental to and directed against one of the three constituent ethnic groups. The reports which politicise the protests usually take the form of ‘revealing a conspiracy’ and uncovering the protests’ ‘real’ organisers, those who inspired them, and, in some cases, those who funded them (when it is implied or explicitly stated that the protests are carried out by ‘paid actors’).

These conspiracy theories in the media involved disregard for or distortion of¹⁰⁵ the protesters’ demands for social justice, workers’ rights, more opportunities for unemployed youth, cancellation of officials’ privileges, resignations of inefficient governments, etc.

Less frequent within the frame of politicisation of protests were references to the agendas of specific political parties, without explicit links to ethnic/national interests.

¹⁰⁴ RTRS, “Dnevnik 2: U požarima tokom nasilnih demonstracija u Sarajevu uništena arhivska građa sačuvana u dva svjetska rata”, 13 February 2014.

¹⁰⁵ A distortion of protest demands usually took the form of selection of banners, statements, and written demands shown and reported on, out of the whole of diverse messages. The most typical example are reports that focused only on those banners or persons who demanded the abolition of cantons and/or entities. Where found, these demands were portrayed in these types of reports as the protests’ main (if not only) demand, and used to interpret the protests as an organised effort to change the constitutional order of the country, at the expense of one or the other ethnic group.

The table below presents the frequency and the distribution of occurrences of this frame in the media sample, and shows that the content of RTRS and Nezavisne novine was especially saturated with this type of framing of the protests.

	The protests as ethnic/national agendas	The protests as party political agendas
RTRS	24	
Nezavisne novine	10	
Hayat	8	1
Bljesak	7	
TVBN	5	1
BHT	3	1
Avaz	3	1
FTV	2	4
Klix	1	
Buka	1	
Total	64	8

Table 4: *Politicisation frame by media outlet*

There are three specific versions of the sub-framing in this category, which are related to the three dominant ethno-national narratives – those of the protests being directed against the ‘national interests’ of Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs. As each of the three groups’ nationally oriented political parties have nested their ‘national interests’ within some part of BiH’s current constitutional framework – the state, the entities, and the cantons – they worked

to portray the protests as an attack against that level of government which provides the administrative frame to their ethnic group's identity.¹⁰⁶

The 'Serb' parties – particularly SNSD, which has been the core of Republika Srpska's ruling coalition for the past ten years – have long been portraying themselves as 'defenders' of the supposedly endangered entity, whose constitutional position, they claim, is under constant threat, with supposed attempts (by Bosniak political parties, the Office of the High Representative, and the 'international community', i.e., Western countries) to 'centralise' BiH by abolishing the entities or transferring their authority to the state. In this narrative, the BiH constitution, often metonymically referred to simply as 'Dayton', is a symbol of Republika Srpska's autonomy within Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The 'Croat' parties (particularly the HDZ) are focused on the cantons in the Federation of BiH, seen as the only administrative unit which provides protection of Croat 'national interests'. The cantons were set up after the war to draw administrative lines between newly established territories, effectively making them into state-like units.¹⁰⁷ The HDZ version of the 'threat to national interests' is the claim that Croats have not been provided with adequate political representation at entity and state level.

The symbolic repertoire of the 'Bosniak' parties, the SDA in particular, builds on the notion of nation-building, in the sense of establishing Bosnia and Herzegovina as an independent

¹⁰⁶ The administrative level that the political parties treat as a guarantor of their group's national interests, as a rule, corresponds to the administrative territories within which their group is a numerical majority.

¹⁰⁷ The cantons are (similarly to Republika Srpska) very centralised administrative units, with their own parliaments, governments, and very strong competencies in most fields of governance. The ten cantons are, however, not ethnically homogeneous: three cantons have a Croat majority, two are mixed, and five have a Bosniak majority.

state and defending its territorial integrity.¹⁰⁸ When the institutions of the state – all of them located in Sarajevo – were attacked by the protesters, SDA and SDP evoked the war-time destruction of the city under siege by Serb forces.¹⁰⁹

As the analysis below will demonstrate, these three political narratives have been activated in the ethno-national political elites' response to the protests. Moreover, they were mirrored in the media narratives on the protests, with the frequency of those frames very clearly related to the 'geopolitical' position of the media outlets.¹¹⁰

Attack on the entity structure (RS)	RTRS (21)	Nezavisne novine (9)	Buka (1)	Bljesak (1)
Attack on the state	BHT (1)	Hayat (4)	FTV (4)	
Attack on the cantonal structure (of FBiH)	Bljesak (5)	Avaz (1)	FTV (1)	

Table 5: *Politicisation: administrative levels*

¹⁰⁸ The SDA, but also other parties profiled as Bosniak, have thus often used slogans which emphasise the statehood of BiH as the highest value, such as "The strength of BiH" and "In unity lies strength" (SDA) or "The state before all" and "100% BiH" (slogans of the once significant but now marginalised SBiH party, which in its election platform for 2006 had the abolition of entities as its primary goal).

¹⁰⁹ The resistance to the siege, which lasted for almost four years, is one of the strongest and most salient symbols of the war and of state-building in these parties' political narratives.

¹¹⁰ The actors who specified these problems were most often representatives of political parties and/or governing bodies. A comparative overview of the nationalist narratives they instrumentalised in their public reactions to the protests is available at: *Istinomjer*, "The Success of the Protest: "It's 'Serb, Croat and Bosniak' after all" and P. Janusz, "Nacionalizmom protiv gladnog stomaka".

a) Protests as an attack against the entity structure (RS)

This frame was dominant in two of the media based in Republika Srpska, RTRS and Nezavisne novine, which together make up almost half of the political conspiracy frame and almost all occurrences of the attack against Republika Srpska sub-frame in the entire media (see Table 5).¹¹¹ However, at the very outset of the protests, on February 6, 2014, these media labelled the protests as “chaos in the Federation”, but the dominant focus was on the socio-economic causes of the demonstrations, with little or no claims of an ethno-political background.¹¹² An article headlined “Social unrest is shaking the Federation”, published in Nezavisne novine on the same day, speaks only of the hardships of the people. However, after the possibility of protests taking place in RS became more serious,¹¹³ the two main political figures in RS – President Milorad Dodik and Prime Minister Željka Cvijanović – engaged in an intense anti-protest campaign. The reporting of RTRS and Nezavisne changed, dropping almost any topic other than “uncovering threats” posed by the protests and repeating officials’

¹¹¹ The rare cases of such frames in reporting by other media referred to these threats mainly in describing the political discourse in RS, not treating these theses as a fact.

¹¹² The RTRS’s central news programme, Dnevnik 2, aired on February 6, 2014 reports on the violence, the protesters’ demands for resignations, the police brutality, the officials’ response, but makes no comment on the supposed ‘hidden political background’ of the protests.

¹¹³ The protest in Banja Luka was announced on February 7, 2014 as “a protest in support of workers in Tuzla and all of BiH”. An anti-government protest of war veterans also took place. A protest in Bijeljina on February 9 was explicitly anti-government.

statements that “disorderly unrest in RS will not be tolerated”.¹¹⁴ This stark contrast is evident, for example, in the way that Aldin Širanović, a protester from Tuzla, was portrayed in *Nezavisne novine* on the first day of the protests, with his moving testimony about his arrest. Just two days later, on February 8, an article headlined “The goal of protests – a return to the 1992 Constitution?” describes his organisation, Udara, as radical nationalists, set out to annul the Dayton constitution and re-establish the Constitution of the Republic of BiH adopted in 1993 by the wartime Presidency of BiH.¹¹⁵ In the view of this organisation as reported by these media outlets, the Dayton agreement is based on “aggression, genocide, force, blackmail, and betrayal and outside of regular constitutional procedure... According to a proclamation taken over from the organisation’s Facebook page, ‘For Bosnians and Herzegovinians, there is only a united, democratic, sovereign, and independent state of BiH, while the Dayton creation, so-called ‘Republika Srpska’, exists only as a part of an illegal, imposed constitution in Annex 4 of the Dayton agreement.’”¹¹⁶ Udara was also used as evidence of the protests’ malicious character by the entity television RTRS, whose report, titled “What could be their real background?” included statements such as this: “Political messages and symbols seen and heard at the protests leave less and less room for doubt that this is not a

¹¹⁴ This was also a very frequent frame in reports on both the JMBG and the Picin Park protests, with the protesters being accused of working for someone (political parties, foreign ‘patrons’) and pursuing a hidden agenda (plotting against the Serbs; trying to financially benefit from the protests). One of the main tools to back up claims that the JMBG protests had less to do with saving a baby’s life and more with ‘Bosniak parties’ political goals’, was the reference to the presence of ‘Anti-Dayton’, a group of people advocating the abolition of entities and reinstating the Constitution of the Republic of BiH. A picture showing group member Nihad Aličković and his supporters holding the RBiH flag was often used by RTRS in its reports on the protests, illustrating the ‘hidden agenda’ behind the protests in Sarajevo. Unlike RTRS and *Nezavisne novine*, the position of other media included in the sample was either not that clear, or shifted from one case to another.

¹¹⁵ The post quoted in this article, however, could not be found on any of Udara’s Facebook pages, while the “proclamation of the Bosniak Congress” mentioned further in the text wasn’t published by Udara, but by one of its page visitors (a type of content called “Posts of others to page”).

¹¹⁶ SRNA, “Cilj protesta vraćanje ustava iz 1992. godine?”.

spontaneous social unrest... They are organised according to a well-rehearsed scenario... The goal is to use the street to take down the government which has the electoral legitimacy of the people and to put in power those who would be favourable to foreign screenwriters and directors. What Otpor was in Belgrade in 2000, and later Pora in Ukraine, that is Udar now in the Federation” (Nenad Kecmanović, political analyst, member of the Senate of Republika Srpska and currently an advisor to Milorad Dodik).¹¹⁷

In the following few days, the notion that the protests in the Federation were a joint effort of all the ‘enemies of RS’ was already so widespread that it was simply presented as a fact. In an article headlined “The opposition hopes for protests” (Nezavisne), the entire repertoire of conspiracy theories is present, partly narrated by the journalist and partly presented through direct quotes from Dodik’s statements: “The president of Srpska pointed out that the international community has imposed economic and other reforms and that it has a concept of destabilising Srpska, which the current government will not allow. ‘Republika Srpska must have stability in order to maintain its constitutional position, as there are some foreigners who promote the concept of devastating and shutting down Srpska. *‘Our survival here depends on the strength of Srpska which mustn’t be lesser than the existing one’*, as noted in Radio-television of Republika Srpska. Protesters are presented as Bosniaks and individuals paid from the office of Nataša Kandić, the executive director of Humanitarian Law Center in Serbia.¹¹⁸ (...) Dodik concluded that Republika Srpska is stable and secure in every respect,

¹¹⁷ RTRS, “Dnevnik 2”, 10 February 2014.

¹¹⁸ For her work in the field of human rights (particularly related to war crimes perpetrated during the reign of Slobodan Milošević), Kandić’s name has become synonymous with ‘national treason’ and an alleged ‘western anti-Serb conspiracy’. Kandić has suffered various pressures and continuously been portrayed as a ‘traitor’, ‘foreign agent’, ‘Serb-hater’, and similar - not only by and during Milošević’s regime, but also by other political actors, right-wing groups and media outlets, tabloids close to the nationalist political parties, etc. (YUCOM, YUCOM’s HRD team Belgrade, Security of Human Rights Defenders in Serbia 2007 and 2008: YUCOMS Input to the Second Annual Report on Human Rights Defenders in the OSCE Region).

and that the protests in the Federation of BiH are politically charged, while in Srpska they were organised by Bosniak nongovernmental organisations and political parties.”¹¹⁹

b) Protests as an attack against the state

This frame was present in some of the Sarajevo-based media, mostly in quotes by political figures from the SDA, but also from the SDP. Here, the protests were portrayed as aiming to jeopardise the existence of Bosnia and Herzegovina by targeting only cities with a Bosniak majority, which would hand the parties in RS a justification to demand the secession of Republika Srpska from the ‘unstable’ Federation of BiH. As stated by the BiH Presidency member and SDA president, Bakir Izetbegović: “The justifiable anger of the people has been kidnapped and misdirected, to take down the government all the way to the municipalities [and create] a vacuum in governance on the territories where the Bosniaks live, which were defended by the Army of BiH. If that happens, than all those who wish for BiH to fall apart will have all the reasons to say *Well, you have a problem, we cannot live with you...*”¹²⁰

On February 10, 2014, Nermin Nikšić (SDP), then the FBiH prime minister, was a guest on FTV’s Dnevnik 2, where he stated that the “justified protests” had been hijacked. “Someone clearly orchestrated these protests, directed and ordered what is to be done,” he said. “It is up to the organs [the police] to discover, important results are made, the code names of those who gave orders by phone are known.”

These narratives were, in some cases, appropriated even by the media whose reporting had previously been very favourable to the protests, such as Hayat TV which, after having Izetbegović as a guest, made some conclusions very different from its earlier reports: “It is

¹¹⁹ SRNA, “Dodik: Opozicija priželjkuje proteste”.

¹²⁰ Hayat TV, “Vijesti u 7: Gost Vijesti u 7 član Predsjedništva BiH Bakir Izetbegović”.

speculated that football fans from several cities were competing who will start a bigger fire. It is speculated that football fans from East Sarajevo were the ones torching the institutions. It is speculated that one political party organised all this, or that the international factor is the organiser.”¹²¹ Even if the tone of this report might suggest that the media in question is simply reporting on observed speculations without drawing its own conclusions on the matter, the next report takes an explicit anti-protest stand and gives most definite confirmation of the existence of ‘organised elements’ within the protests, which had previously been presented as speculation: “This is the police, these are the protests, and these are the organised elements among the demonstrators, prepared for violence. That’s why they have masks, that’s why they have bags with tear gas and rocks, that’s why they are ready to set fires. Everyone who believes their own eyes knows this.”¹²²

c) Protests as an attack against the cantons

This frame was dominant in the media based in the cantons with a Croat majority. Here the focus was on attacks against the cantonal government buildings as an attempt to dismantle the constitutional setting of the Federation of BiH and abolish the cantons. Dragan Čović, the HDZ president, stated that this was a “scenario of shutting down cantons and transforming BiH in a different direction”, a part of the “long existing scenario to eliminate one of the constituent peoples from political and every other life in BiH”.¹²³ The attempt, however, failed because “the Croat people in Mostar and all over BiH recognised the possibility that someone wants to create problems in the places where Croats live”. The article, headlined “Čović: The protests were organised by political parties of Bosniak people”, had a superscript headline “Coup d’état” – an editor’s intervention entirely in support of Čović’s wildly

¹²¹ *Hayat TV*, “Vijesti u 7: Vlada dole, ostavke”.

¹²² *Hayat TV*, “Vijesti u 7: A gdje je komesar”.

¹²³ M. M. “Čović: Prosvjede organizirale političke stranke bošnjačkog naroda”.

speculative thesis, presented as facts. Another sub-frame present here was that of the protests being 'planted' in Mostar or, as the prime minister of HNK phrased it, "orchestrated and tendentiously transplanted from Bosnia to Herzegovina".¹²⁴

Bljesak also published a statement of the HDZ's board of veterans, describing the protests as terrorism and implying that the FBiH government (of which HDZ was not a part at the time) was behind it: "The expectations were not met of the organisers of the controlled chaos, who have been trying to provoke Croat veterans for a while, by continuously endangering their rights through the illegal revision¹²⁵ and criminalisation of HVO veterans."¹²⁶ However, the same portal also published a text which was openly critical of such narratives (from politicians from all three ethnic groups), calling them "stupid and clearly weak".¹²⁷

4.2 Accountability: media framing and perception

4.2.1. Government accountability/reactions to the protests

Perception of the interviewees

The failure of BiH politicians to demonstrate any accountability for their actions – not only in relation to the protests, but in the past 20 years in general – is a common observation by almost all the respondents who are activists or journalists. The all-pervasive "public

¹²⁴ Z. S. "Denis Lasić: Neredi su izrežirani i smišljeno prebačeni iz Bosne u Hercegovinu".

¹²⁵ A reference to the revision of veterans' privileges, which was taking place in the whole of the Federation but was portrayed by HDZ as being directed only at former members of Croat forces.

¹²⁶ M. M. "Odbor za branitelje: Novonastala situacija poprimila odlike klasičnog terorističkog čina".

¹²⁷ A. M. "Sindikati traže ostavke vladajućih!"

unaccountability”¹²⁸ of office-holders is described as a “politics of ignorance”, “politics of arrogance”, involving even the politicians’ “contempt for the people who elected them”. In the words of a plenum participant from Tuzla: “I had the opportunity to talk to a representative of the [US] State Department, who told me that the Presidency of BiH would gladly meet with a protester, provided it was somebody well educated and nonviolent. My response, of course, was: ‘If Barrack Obama said something like this, he would not stay in power for one more day’. That kind of contempt that the politicians expressed for the people, is still pervasive”¹²⁹.

This “grotesque lack of public accountability”, as one of the respondents put it, was particularly visible during the protests, appearing in the respondents’ narratives in two general manifestations. The first concerns politicians not taking accountability for the causes of the protests, instead seeking to shift the blame for the bad socio-economic situation. The respondents note that at no point during the protests did the politicians in power acknowledge their own responsibility for the numerous problems that prompted the protests. In the words of one of the respondents: “I might be wrong, but I know of no situation where the politicians admitted to be responsible for what’s happening and did the right thing. That never happened”¹³⁰.

The second manifestation of the lack of accountability concerns the failure of officials to take responsibility, together with their misguided and sometimes entirely false statements about the protests. A journalist from Sarajevo elaborates on the misplaced focus of politicians during the protests, commenting on current events instead of getting to the root of the problem: “I don’t need you to explain that the smoke is coming out of the Presidency building and talk about that. You should rather explain why it has come to this, why did you destroy this country, why did you sell out the factories, how did you get that rich that fast, building your villas up on some hill, and now you come and say that you understand how hard life is for us.”

¹²⁸ Interview with Danijela Majstorović.

¹²⁹ Interview with Damir Arsenjević.

¹³⁰ Interview with Ines Tanović.

The way some of the officials spoke of the protests was particularly problematic. Hana Obradović, a protester from Sarajevo, points out the reckless statements given by officials during the protests, such as those of the prime minister of Sarajevo Canton, Suad Zeljković, that “there are no hungry children in the Sarajevo streets, but criminals and hooligans”¹³¹ and those of Prime Minister Nermin Nikšić of FBiH and Presidency of BiH member Bakir Izetbegović, who on public television spoke about “12 kilos of speed found among the protesters” – a claim that was quickly proven to be false. She particularly stressed how different standards are being applied to ordinary people and to those in power, whose inflammatory statements are ignored by the judiciary: “To this day, no one has been held accountable for that, while, for example, individuals [who participated in the protests] are still being called to account and dragged through courts on charges of misdemeanour.”

Unlike the majority of other interviewees, the interviewed officials for the most part did not focus on the aforementioned issues related to their responses to the protests; they considered their communication practices during the protests to have been mostly correct and appropriate.

Results of the frame analysis indicating officials’ reactions to the protests

The results of the analysis of media content confirm the observations of the interviewees. If we look at the problems specified by the members of ruling parties and/or politicians in office (N=103), only six occurrences were found of them taking any responsibility for the situation

¹³¹ The statement was given after Zeljković resigned from his position, denying that he did so because he was scared by the protests. Commenting on his resignation, Zeljković went on a rant, accusing everyone from his own party members to the presumably orchestrated protests, for his failure as prime minister: “There are no hungry kids in the streets here, no people that we should be sorry for, but there are hooligans, bandits, criminals. These are very well organised groups, filled with the drug ‘speed’ and political instructions. They are offered money, Molotov cocktails and rocks are being handed to them from cars. It is an organised system and you wonder what are you doing in that system in your own town.” (Anadolija, “Suad Zeljković: Nisam otišao iz straha, samo ne želim biti otirač za noge!”)

that prompted the protests. However, even in these few examples, it was usually through acknowledging that ‘the politicians’, as a general category, had made certain mistakes – rather than examining their party’s or institutions’ specific accountability for specific problems, or announcing any substantial change or reform from within. The politicians from the two major FBiH parties at the time (SDP and SDA) in general did not deny that causes for the protests existed and that the socio-economic situation was bad, but they did not show any readiness to take responsibility. On the other hand, the politicians in RS spoke of the situation in their entity in a completely different manner, actively denying the existence of any reasons for protests (the statement of Željka Cvijanović, quoted in a previous section, on the “absolutely orderly environment in RS” is the most emblematic in this category).

Actors causing the problem	Protest participants (hooligans, vandals, protesters)	Competing political parties	Ethnic-specific political actors	Other ethnic-specific actors (citizens, organisations)	International factor	‘Centres of power’	Politicians in general	The police
Frequency	34	21	14	10	7	7	6	4
Diagnosis (problem identified in media reporting)	Property damage and clashes with the police	Problems causing the protests; or political instrumentalisation of protests, improper reaction to the protests	Attack on ethnic group’s interests	Attack on an ethnic group’s interests	Attack on a specific government level in BiH, i.e., on specific ethnic interests, or ruling political parties	Attack on an ethnic group’s interests	Socio-economic problems, bad government	Bad reactions to protest

Table 6: Actors responsible for the problems, specified by office-holders, ruling party members

Perhaps the most noticeable case of accusing a competing political party was a feud between the SDA and the SBB, specifically their leaders, Bakir Izetbegović and Fahrudin Radončić.¹³² Radončić, at the time minister of security of BiH, was accused by the SDA of mishandling the protests, which eventually prompted SDA members to successfully initiate his replacement as a minister. The SBB responded by singling out the SDA as the main culprit for the situation which led to the protests, and for the police brutality against the protesters: "The SDA should rather join the well-known anti-corruption efforts of the minister of security and the citizens, and try to find the solution there, not in the repression against hungry and robbed people." Another case of direct party rivalry being played out during the protests were the mutual accusations between the SDP and the SDA. Even though they were still at the time coalition partners in the FBiH government, each pointed a finger at the other as "the party in power responsible for the problems in the country".¹³³

As evident from the table above, there is a wide range of actors which officials specified as responsible for the threats to the interests of the ethnic group from which the official hailed, and which he supposedly represents and 'defends', and/or threats against the level of government in which the interests of that ethnic group are most vested. These actors, involving other ethnic groups or politicians, the international factor, and unnamed 'centres of power', thus fall into the wider category of enemy of the ethnic group, which is the most frequent in the whole sample (N=38), directly relating to the dominant narratives of protests

¹³² The conflict was given a particularly extensive coverage in *Dnevni Avaz*, owned by Radončić (4 of the 10 analysed articles), but appears throughout the sample as well.

¹³³ When the protests erupted, the coalition of parties which formed the Federation of BiH government (SDA, SDP, HSP and NSRzB) had long been broken; the government had received vote of no confidence by the Parliament a year before the protests, with all the parties staying in government nonetheless. This situation led to the paradox of the SDA and the SDP both describing the other party as being responsible for the causes of the protests even though both parties were, at the time, still in the same government together.

as attacks against the three dominant ethnic groups' 'national interests' (examples of such narratives are described in the sections above).

Perception of the role of media in how accountability was communicated during the protests

The issue of accountability and the media arises twofold in the narratives of the interviewees: there is a question of whether they called the officials to account, but also if they themselves were accountable to the public in terms of the trustworthiness of the information they disseminated. Special resentment is shown by activists who spoke about the demonisation of protesters through unchecked and entirely false information originating from government officials, such as that the protesters were distributing drugs, or that they had looted and demolished a shopping mall in Tuzla.

The overall impression of the respondents was that the political actors were given disproportionately space in the media compared to other social actors relevant for the issues raised by the protests. Additionally, one of the interviewed protesters remarked that officials were not confronted with controversial questions and instead were given space to tell their story.

In the view of interviewed activists and some of the journalists, the media failed to thoroughly explore the issue of accountability. In the words of a journalist who had been involved in the February protests: "I wouldn't say that the media sincerely called officials to take responsibility, in terms of editorial perspective. This happened very rarely. Maybe [newsweekly] Dani did it..."¹³⁴ At best, critical reporting seemed to have stopped at the call for generalised accountability. As journalist Ivana Crnogorac believes, although there was no finger-pointing at particular officials, every media report did indirectly raise the issue of accountability.

¹³⁴ Interview with Masha Durkalić, journalist and plenum participant, 20 March 2015.

A minority of respondents pointed to the practice of direct political influence on reporting and of editorial policies that did not allow for criticism of the government. One of the interviewed workers' organisers from Tuzla pointed out that her repeated calls for government accountability had in fact been systematically ignored by the media for years. One of the interviewed officials, from an opposition party, stated that the politicians worked "behind the scenes and managed, with only a few phone calls, to change the discourse on protests and to 'explain' to the press and television editors that the protests were against the state and that we would lose the state if they continued." The next sections will show to what extent the media content analysis confirms these conclusions of the interviewees.

Overall framing of accountability in the analysed media sample

What is particularly troubling is that the media, even those that were not openly supportive of official narratives, seemed rather reluctant to challenge them. For example, while officials sometimes gave live statements in television programmes, there is no record of journalists questioning them on the substance.

A rare example of an office-holder's statements being challenged occurred during a February 12 guest appearance of Bakir Izetbegović on Hayat. The journalist who interviewed him began the interview with reference to broken promises of a better life and social sensitivity given by Izetbegović's father Alija Izetbegović (the first chair of the Presidency of BiH and a founder of the SDA), pairing the quote with the question "Why hasn't your party listened to him?" Throughout the conversation, her guest's attempts to portray his party as not responsible for the grave state of affairs were met with similar questions ("How could you have allowed it to come to this?"). However, even in this example, the statements on the protests as an attack against Bosniaks (quoted previously in this report) were never questioned. This indicates that the ethno- national narratives, on which officials relied heavily, were treated by the media as the ultimate narrative, not to be further examined.

The framing of accountability in the media sample can also be observed through the structure of the solutions offered to the problems identified and the actors responsible for implementing them. The identified solutions are classified in a similar manner as the problems, into two general categories that make up the bulk of the sample: solutions that should be executed by citizens (50) and solutions that should be executed by the politicians in power and/or by the institutions (141).

In the first category, it is implied mostly that the protests are a legitimate action of citizens (31 cases), while the 'problems' within the diagnosis part of the frame analysis were found in the social problems prompting the protests or problems related to the reaction to the protests by officials, state institutions, or the police. Most of the solutions for problems identified in the media address the problem of bad government by calling for citizens to put an end to it; however, the solutions are rarely specific and in most cases take the form of protest slogans, or short statements taken from protesters in the streets.

Solutions to the problems that are causing the protests/solutions to the bad official responses to the protests

Continue the protests until changes happen (persecution of corrupt officials, government resignations)	Participate in plenums; create a movement	Show class solidarity as opposed to national divisions	Get involved in decision-making process, including forming new governments	Legal action (lawsuits against the police; legal aid for arrested citizens)
14	5	3	6	3

Solutions related to the problems within the protests themselves

Abstain from protests and unite around national interests	Vote in the elections	Protest peacefully
5	7	7

Table 7: Solutions that should be executed by the citizens

It was almost exclusively politicians in power who advocated voting as a legitimate form of participation instead of protests, and abstaining from protests, as solutions to the 'protests as a problem'. The solutions in the category of pacification of the protests were suggested by a variety of actors, including citizens appearing as media sources. These solutions refer to the variety of problems framed within the wide category of 'state of emergency' (protests as violence, damage to property and society, etc.) but also the ethno-politicisation frame (Serbs in RS should avoid protests altogether, Croats should rally in national unity, Bosniaks should remember the war-time destruction of government buildings, etc.).

The number of solutions that should be executed by politicians is almost three times higher, and the suggested solutions are far more diverse. Solutions to the socio-political problems that caused the protests are the most frequent in the sample (84), while solutions to the problems of police violence and/or inappropriate official reactions to the protests are far less present (28).

I Solutions to the causes of/responses to the protests (N=113)

I. Solutions for the causes of the protests (N=84)

Public administration and social care reform	Resignations of governments/officials	Fight against corruption	Form new/expert governments	Review of privatisation process	Revitalise the economy, create jobs, reopen the closed factories	Cut down government costs and abolish officials' privileges
16	15	13	11	10	10	9

2. Solutions for the wrongful official responses to the protests (13)

Stop the repression against the protesters/ release the arrested protesters	Prosecute those responsible for violence against the protesters	Engage in dialogue with the citizens/ plenums
6	4	3

Other solutions (16)

Change the constitutional set-up	Early or regular elections
7	9

II Solutions to the protests (28)

Maintain public order	Prosecute the protesters	Protect national interests	Maintain constitutional order	Determine who is responsible for the protests
12	6	5	3	2

Table 8: Solutions that should be executed by officials/institutions

It is worth noting that the solutions of problems in the category of ‘wrongful official responses to the protests’ are the least frequent, which coincides with the aforementioned opinions of citizens/protesters that public scrutiny of the conduct of officials was low. When it comes to the solutions related to bad governance and its consequences, most of them are defined through the demands of the plenums or the interviewed citizens and include solutions ranging from the very specific to the very general. For example, some were simply

saying to the politicians in general that they should "Go, leave the country and return what's been stolen", or "undergo a comprehensive reform of the state"; while others were more precise: "The citizens ask to set all public salaries at 600 KM, to enable welfare of 400 KM per month for those in need".¹³⁵ "We demand that the ministers' salaries be in the amount of 1,600 KM (...) and the prime minister's 100 KM higher and no car, no mobile phone, not a pen..."¹³⁶ In such cases, the solutions were demands towards specific institutions – parliaments, governments, agencies, prosecutors' offices, and so on. For example, the agency for privatisation and the prosecutor's office were asked in several cases to initiate a process of review of all the privatisations that resulted in factory closures. Some of the solutions that should be executed by the police, the courts, or the prosecutors' offices, relate to the problem of corruption (these institutions should investigate and bring to trial cases of criminal privatisation and corruption), the problem of police violence against the protesters (the police should change their conduct, the courts should try those responsible for excessive use of force). The solutions in this category that are related to protests as a problem are predominantly specified by officials and journalists, concerning investigation of those responsible for the damage and their instigators. The 'international community' also appears as an actor that should provide a solution for the general situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but only three times in the entire sample and without any specific suggestion as to how that should be done.

Perception of the communication practices of officials during the protests

In this research we also explored the perception of the communication practices of officials during the protests, as one indicator of their general accountability and especially of their accountability during the protests.

¹³⁵ J. H. "Završen drugi sastanak Plenuma građana Sarajeva, usvojena četiri hitna zahtjeva".

¹³⁶ A. M. "Sindikati traže ostavke vladajućih!"

In the opinion of most of the interviewed activists and journalists, the way the officials communicated with the public during the protests was particularly indicative of their lack of accountability. One-way communication through press releases by parties and institutions is seen as particularly problematic, as it allowed no opportunity for an actual conversation. Another preferred communication channel of the parties in power was the news conference, but they consisted mainly of long speeches by party officials, where the journalists were treated merely as note-takers. The content of these news conferences was seen as problematic as well, revolving around conspiracy theories and shifting the blame to rival parties without engaging in much interaction with the media. A statement made by SDP president, Zlatko Lagumdžija (at the time minister of foreign affairs), at a news conference was the most recognisable example, as he resorted to harsh nationalist rhetoric that was rather atypical for the SDP: “Attempts to depict parts [of the country] as dysfunctional concern exactly those parts where the Bosniaks are a majority, which is interesting, as the pensions in FBiH are 20% higher than in RS and so are the average salaries. I guess they want us to be ‘softer’ before the negotiations and get us to say ‘There, have a third [entity] and we will remain in the second, burnt-down entity.’ I believe this is just an episode and we’ll come out of it stronger to defend the entire state of BiH. Some want to make it look like the problems only exist here, while elsewhere it’s supposed to be all peaches, even though those peaches have been made on genocide.”¹³⁷

An interviewed journalist and activist reports that after the first shockwave, a “system of self-defence” was employed and different damage-control strategies put in motion by the politicians. Another interviewed journalist points to strategies of distraction, employed by officials in order to shift the attention from the protests, like organising parallel events for the media: “It was tragicomic. We didn’t pay attention to it, not even cynically. It didn’t even occur to us to attend, during the protests, some media conference on whatever bylaws on heaven-knows-what...”

¹³⁷ SDP BiH, “Opravdano nezadovoljstvo građana zloupotrijebili huligani”.

The fact that direct communication with the protesting citizens did not occur apart from a few isolated cases (such as an attempt by the mayor of Brčko to address the assembled citizens)¹³⁸ is seen as particularly troubling. Interviewed journalist Ivana Crnogorac, among others, emphasises the importance of direct communication and the possible consequences of a lack thereof: "Maybe none of this would have happened if any representative of any government in any canton where buildings were burning, had stood in the front of the people and said something meaningful." It has also been pointed out that messages by officials were mainly communicated through traditional media such as TV and newspapers; they were not present on social networks.

Some of the interviewed officials take a different view on the topic. A politician from the NS (an opposition party) who also saw the officials communication practices as a distraction strategy said: "They presented their interpretations of the protests very cleverly. The aim was to suppress the protests, which, basically, turned out to be a successful strategy." An official from the SDA, however, stated that the protests made "the officials improve their communication practices towards the media and the public. Some more, some less, but everyone's awareness of their accountability has been raised". However, in another statement, he confesses that those who were most responsible "hid from the media", and finds a justification for such behaviour: "It was unpleasant at that moment to take accountability, which, on the other hand, speaks of that state, the capacity and willingness of prominent people to bear with some problems". He sets himself apart from such practices, pointing out that he used social networks to communicate with citizens.

Another official uses examples of exactly the same communication practices which the activists and journalists described as negative, as a positive example of his party's (SDP) behaviour: "a news conference, we also sent press releases, we participated in all the TV

¹³⁸ *Klix.ba*. "Brčaci traže ostavku Ante Domića".

programmes we were invited to.” Two of the officials, from the SDP and the HDZ, said that they had communicated directly with citizens and plenums.

The conflicting views of officials and journalists and activists is probably best explained by considering the statement quoted above regarding the “hiding of those most responsible”. This comment suggest that some direct communication between citizens and officials did take place but that it was initiated by those from the lower ranks, not by the most prominent figures. The heads of parties, governments, parliaments, etc., did not engage in such communication and appeared in public only through the media – and even then in controlled environments of news conferences or one-on-one conversations with journalists, without ever being confronted by representatives of the protesters or opposition parties. This is what the journalists and activists recognised as unacceptable, one-sided communication by *all* the political actors. Even if it might not have been true for all of them, it was employed by arguably the crucial decision-makers, hence seen as the only relevant communication strategy of the politicians in power.

Perception on how protests influenced the notion of political accountability in BiH

Opinion about the protests’ effect on political accountability in the country is divided; overall, the respondents appeared not too hopeful, and even positive assessments were given with reservations. For example, one of the interviewed activists stated that political rhetoric did shift in the direction of showing more social sensitivity, but that political practice did not reflect the rhetorical shift. One of the officials (a member of an opposition party in the FBiH at the time of the protests) thinks that the protests made a significant impact by frightening the politicians “as never before”, but that the situation overall is still far from good: “They still steal, there is corruption, but to a much lesser extent, in my opinion... The situation is significantly better than before, but we are still far from the kind of accountability we need.” The notion that “frightening the politicians” is a success of the protests is evident in other

answers as well, albeit with less optimism. The predominant conclusion is that the effects of that fear did not last long, as politicians quickly resumed their usual patterns of behaviour.

However, some believe that the situation has actually got worse after the protests and that the politicians are now determined to curb any future attempts at large-scale protests.

In terms of immediate reactions to the protests, as demonstrated before, reaching for the nationalist narrative has been a common strategy of all the party leaders in power at the time. These types of reactions illustrate, very precisely, how deep the lack of political accountability in BiH goes. The striking difference between the protesters' demands and the officials' framing of the protests also point to the conclusion that nationalism is still used by the political elites as the most efficient tool to divide the citizens into antagonistic groups, keeping them in constant fear and suspicion of each other's 'real intents', thus preventing them from standing up against social injustices.

Indicators of accountability after the February protests

The events that followed the protests suggest that those interviewed protesters who feel that their impact on political accountability in the country has been limited are on point. The first confirmation to this can be found in the immediate reactions to the protests – specifically, the resignation of cantonal governments in Tuzla, Sarajevo, Bihać, and Zenica. After the protests ended, only one of the four governments – in Tuzla, where the protests had – was replaced by a new one, the other three remaining in a caretaker role until the elections of October 2014. However, the new government in Tuzla did nothing to resolve the problems of the workers who started the protests, nor did the government formed after the elections. The factory workers of Tuzla continued to protest for the exact same reasons as in February 2014, taking such desperate steps as marching, on foot, to the border with Croatia in December 2014, or going on weeks-long hunger strike almost a year later. Moreover, the current cantonal government responded to the ongoing workers' protests by passing a new law on public gatherings, restricting access to

government buildings – a move that was seen by the workers as a clear attempt to remove them out of sight instead of dealing with the problems they are protesting about.¹³⁹

Another serious manifestation of unaccountability was the lack of response by officials and institutions to horrific floods which struck the country in May 2014, when citizens were left to fend for themselves. Instead of the government, the first responders to the natural disaster were the citizens themselves, providing both the logistic and humanitarian aid.

When it comes to the protests' direct effects on the discourse of politicians in the country, in some cases the rhetoric of the political class took a somewhat paradoxical form (mainly in the Federation of BiH, as the RS parties stuck to the same positions), especially during the 2014 election campaign, which officially began on September 12.

While our research did not include an analysis of the political campaign, two narratives are identifiable based on a few illustrative examples of politicians' communication through the media: the candidates presented their party as the one that did the most to meet the protesters' demands, but, at the same time, continued to accuse their political opponents of 'staging' the February protests and/or to present the protests as an attack against the national interests of their ethnic group. One example is found in a TV debate featuring Lidija Korać, an SDP candidate, who stated that her party had "listened very carefully to the messages used by the citizens to express their justified dissatisfaction" and "had a very hands-on reaction to what's been said at the protests", citing the resignations of SDP cantonal prime ministers and the abolition of 'white bread' by SDP ministers as examples of fulfilling protesters' demands.¹⁴⁰ The contrast between this and the attitude expressed by the party's president in the first reaction to the protests is striking.

¹³⁹ M. Aljić, "Novi Zakon o javnim okupljanjima u TK-u: Demonstrantima ograničen pristup Vladi i Skupštini".

¹⁴⁰ D. Sijah, "Šta smo čuli od stranaka na vlasti u prvoj sedmici predizbornih debata".

Finally, the 2014 elections saw only one of the major ruling parties, the SDP, suffer a major loss of votes. The SDA, the other ruling party, won by a landslide in the Federation of BiH – the main location of the protests.¹⁴¹ In terms of party politics, another striking example of the lack of accountability is the eventual outcome of the feud between SDA and SBB that erupted when their politicians reacted to the protests. The two parties engaged in an all-out media war that escalated into pre-election accusations of murder and organised crime – only to form a coalition after the elections and celebrating the move as a step towards ‘Bosniak unity’.

Political processes in the institutional sense have not changed either, with some of them arguably regressing as most of the crucial laws passed by the new parliamentary majorities were adopted through urgent procedure (the most notorious example being the labour laws, adopted in both entities without consent from trade unions or any insight of the public into the process).

4.3 Role of media and communication practices of journalists

4.3.1. Biased reporting as manifestation of political parallelism and/or weaknesses of news production: perception and media reporting

Almost all interviewees showed dissatisfaction with the role of the media and with their reports during the protests, but not all for the same reasons. A majority of interviewees,

¹⁴¹ As the party itself certainly suffered no consequences in terms of its share of power, there are also no indications that any of its most prominent members were in any way held responsible for their inappropriate reactions to the protests, let alone for the problems that had provoked the protests in the first place. The example of the former cantonal prime minister Suad Zeljković is illustrative in this respect. Although his arrogant and offensive behaviour towards the protesters seemed to render him unfit to run for any position in the elections, he was, nonetheless, appointed personal adviser to Denis Zvizdić, the current Chairman of the BiH Council of Ministers (a position equivalent to state-level prime minister).

primarily the protesters and media representatives, believe that most of the mainstream media were biased against the protests and showed a degree of favouritism towards government sources and views. An interviewed official from the HDZ 1990 also indicated that the theme of inter-ethnic relations, key for the political agenda of leading political parties in the country, were reproduced by the media with the effect of discrediting the protests: “A few media... tried to portray those protests in some other light, as an attempt to cause interethnic conflict, which was far from the truth.” Some interviewees, on the other hand, also suggested that a part of the media showed an overt favouritism towards the protests. For example, Berislav Jurič, a journalist from Mostar, pointed out that the tendentious reporting went in both directions: “Some were absolutely on the side of the protesters, while others were on the side of the government, accusing the protesters of being under somebody’s control. There was no media which showed objectivity in its reporting.”

When pointing to the pro-government bias in the media reports on the protests, more than half of the interviewees stated that it is a result of the direct control over the media by particular political parties in power. Two officials concur, both from opposition parties at the time of the protests, with one of them pointing out that media reporting was “absolutely shameful” due to strong bias against the protests, as a result of the prevailing influence of the “SDA and SDP spin doctors”. The interviewed protesters/activists are especially critical of the role of the media, asserting that they acted as loudspeakers of political leaders and centres of political power. Danijela Majstorović said about the coverage of the February protests: “The media should be completely ashamed of themselves since their performance was catastrophic, very tendentious, very negative and malicious regarding the protests... There is no recognition of the public good, they are not watch-dogs... they play under a dictate.” Some of the interviewees singled out the public service broadcasters in this context.

The results of content analysis, however, suggest that the anti-protest bias in most of the analysed media was not as strong as experienced by protest. The main indicator pointing to this conclusion is the structure of the problems identified in the sampled media content, which shows that the negative responses to the protests (police violence, arrests), were identified as a problem almost twice as much as the protests themselves (see Table 2: The structure of identified problems).

As shown above, there are two media outlets, RTRS and *Nezavisne novine*, whose reporting matches the described strong bias against the protests (see Table 2: The structure of identified problems). Assessments of some of the representatives of the civic sector, but also of the political camps competing with the ruling parties, confirm such results. RTRS, the entity broadcaster based in Banja Luka, was particularly singled out for its political instrumentalisation and bias when reporting about the February protests. An official from PDP, an opposition party in Republika Srpska, pointed out that RTRS is "an entirely regime-owned television, under the ruling party's thumb". One of the activists also stated that this public service broadcaster acted as "Dodik's private media channel".¹⁴²

In the context of politicisation of protests in the mainstream media of Republika Srpska, the demands of the protesters were labelled as "political" or "both social and political", i.e., as demands that are jeopardising the constitutional order and RS. Although at the beginning of the protests the news coverage involved, to some extent, presentation of protesters' demands, in the later phases of the protests, when the narrative of the protests as a threat against Republika Srpska was well established, the presentation of the demands was almost entirely abandoned. RTRS referred to demands only five times in 17 news items broadcast over a nine-day period, and *Nezavisne novine* mentioned the protest demands three times in the entire sample of 11 articles.

¹⁴² Milorad Dodik is the leader of the SNSD, the ruling party in RS, and the President of RS.

The bias of the remaining two public service broadcasters – BHT and FTV – was also mentioned to some extent by the respondents, but the analysis of the problems identified in their news programmes suggests a more nuanced approach. FTV was more inclined to portray the protests in a negative light than BHT (42.1% compared to 30.3% of identified problems), but in neither outlet were the protests portrayed as more of a problem than the situation that had caused them. These two stations did tend to put the emphasis on violence committed during the protests in the first days, while it was still happening, and to provide officials with considerable air-time. However, unlike RTRS, they also gave considerable space to analysts, civil society members, and the protesters in the streets to present their views, which were often harshly critical of the political establishment. The discrepancy between the respondents' perception of the reporting and the results of the content analysis can be in part explained with the fact that most of the respondents' observations referred to the first days of the protests, when the media were predominantly focused on the torching of government buildings and clashes between the protesters and the police, which is when most of the negative reporting on the protests occurred (respondents mention examples such as comparing the protests to the war, portraying them within ethno-national frames, referring to the protesters as hooligans and vandals, etc.). A specific practice of media that was often mentioned by the interviewees as problematic was the uncritical transmission of spin concerning the protests. Some of the interviewees see widely transmitted spin as a key tool of demeaning the protesters and leading to the demise of the protests. The kind of spin most often referred to by the respondents evolved around the criminal actions of protesters – mostly drugs allegedly found among the protesters, or the alleged looting of private stores. Another type of spin concerned ethnic and entity divisions, such as those about threats to RS. The results of the analysis of media content confirmed that spin regularly originated with the political authorities, but disseminated through media outlets without additional information, clarification, or

critical evaluation, often in a sensationalist manner.¹⁴³ An article published by Anadolu news agency provides an example of that practice: the entire text is about the opinions of the SDA vice-president Sadik Ahmetović. “According to him, the Bosniaks are the biggest victims of the protests”, the article says. “He claims that the protests might have the goal to ‘Palestinicise’ the Bosniak people.”¹⁴⁴ The article also quotes Ahmetović’s conspiracy theories extensively: “I’m afraid that the enemies of BiH are using this cleverly,” he said. “I have some information that a group of football fans of FK Slavija from Istočno Sarajevo¹⁴⁵ has torched the Presidency and the BiH flag.”

The interviewed activists report that biased media coverage had to do with the fact that media mostly hosted party and government officials and that media space was not adequately distributed among all relevant actors. Ines Tanović, a plenum participant in Sarajevo, explains: “Officials had a lot of space on TV and in print media, and this is what people read and watch.” However, the results of the content analysis do not entirely confirm this. When it comes to the actors who define the problems and the prognosis/solutions, participants of the protests and plenums in fact appear more often than officials in the analysed sample of media (144 and 103 times, respectively), while the journalists themselves are the ones who most often take the role of specifying the problems within the news content (208 times) (see Table 9). It is also noticeable that the representatives of trade unions rarely appeared in the media as sources that define the problem, although still more often than representatives of veterans’ associations. The veterans were sometimes acting as supporters, at other times as critics of the protests.

¹⁴³ See: A. Arnautović, “Spin: laž koja pomjera brda”.

¹⁴⁴ Anadoluja, “Sadik Ahmetović: Bojim se da je cilj protesta podjela Federacije BiH”.

¹⁴⁵ Istočno Sarajevo is a former suburb of Sarajevo that after the war became part of Republika Srpska.

	Journalists	Citizens (protesters, nonprotesters, civil society in broadest sense)	Politicians/ parties in power, the government	Experts/in- tellectuals	Civil society	The unions
Protests as a problem	103	7	72	15	0	1
Causes/responses to the protests as a problem	93	136	23	20	27	24
Other	12	1	8	1	3	0
Total	208	144	103	36	30	25

Table 9: *The source/actor that specifies the problem*

A few of the interviewed respondents believe that political interference is quite direct – through intentional censorship and taking protesters’ statements out of context, or as a few respondents indicate, even picking voices that would render the reporting on protests less favourable (less eloquent people, people who could not be considered as representative of the protesters, etc.).

On the other hand, some of the respondents conceded that the protests, with their chaotic events, complicated topics, and sudden developments, posed new challenges for the media and journalists that they could not adequately deal with even in cases where political pressure was not as distinct. As pointed out by some of the interviewees, some of the challenges had to do with the numerous demands of the February protests, their complex nature, and a lack of good articulation by the participants. One journalist noted that the JMBG protests were more localised than the February protests, which made it easier to report from the field, while the February protests were more difficult to cover given that they were dispersed across different cities, with a multitude of events and demands, and many sources of information not already known to reporters.

The police	Other institutions (public servants that do not hold office)	Opposition parties/politicians	The international factor	Citizens (other than protesters)	Veterans	Other	Total
23	20	11	2	2	4	9	269
0	3	10	10	10	5	7	368
2	1	1	0	0	0	1	30
25	24	22	12	12	9	17	667

4.4 Lack of resources, lazy journalism, and lack of in-depth reporting

Referring to the problems of media production, interviewees also maintain that the media's bad performance was a result of "lazy journalism", in which journalists "were taking what they were given"; chose people they knew from before rather than protesters on the street; uncritically used unreliable sources or information, such as content from Facebook that was sometimes in complete contradiction with actual events, as a journalist pointed out; or relayed spin without the required critical evaluation. As indicated by some sources, in the worst cases journalists simply distributed propaganda they had received from political parties, which put the emphasis on the violence and described the protests as organised attacks performed by paramilitary groups.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ A personal record given to the author by a journalist, on condition of anonymity; the journalist had been given a set of pre-arranged materials on the protests by one of the ruling parties.

While some respondents believe this is also a result of lack of resources at most media organisations, others say that resources were not a decisive factor since some small outlets provided exemplary reporting on the protests: “If one small RTV Slon from Tuzla had the capacity to cover it well, then FTV, BHT, RTRS, Hayat and others must have had it – it is a matter of will.”¹⁴⁷ A few other media mentioned for their valuable reporting on the protests included Žurnal, AbrašMEDIA, tačno.net, Klix, Radio Slobodna Evropa (for professional reporting) and Media.ba (for analytical articles). Opinions were divided about the public service broadcaster BHT. Some mentioned that it strove to maintain professionalism and enthusiasm – in the sense that it made an effort to contact relevant people and broadcast their opinions – while others believed it did not perform well during the protests. Al Jazeera Balkans was also mostly mentioned for investigative reporting and good coverage, but respondents did not clarify what set it apart from the other media, except for the fact that they had a live broadcast on the first day of the protests and were present on location (which, however, was also true of several other media outlets).¹⁴⁸

The overall impression from the interviews is that there was a lack of in-depth information and analysis that would improve the public insight into the context, demands, and events of the protests. As one of the respondents said, information was missing about the demands: “...in a sense is this legally possible, is this realistic, is this already done or not.”¹⁴⁹ The respondents indicated that there were few or no investigative stories inspired by the protests concerning issues that sparked the protests, such as corruption, poverty, unemployment,

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Damir Dajanović.

¹⁴⁸ It seems that the respondents, quite in line with the results of research on the most popular media types, mostly focused on TV when giving their impressions on how the media covered the protests. In the particular case of Al Jazeera Balkans, this would explain the overall positive reviews it got from the activists, despite the content published on its website, which was often quite antagonistic towards the protests (see, for example: E. Ganić, “O podršci revolucionarima”)

¹⁴⁹ Interview with Berislav Jurič, journalist, Mostar, May 2015.

unlawful privatisations and the violation of workers' rights, or stories presenting the facts behind them.

The results of content analysis confirm that the issues behind the protests were most often covered superficially, by taking short statements from people in the street, or leaving the entire content up to the guests in live broadcasts.¹⁵⁰ In particular, the privileges of officials, such as high salaries, 'white bread', or additional reimbursements for their costs of living despite having the highest salaries in the region, are all topics that have been substantially covered in the BiH media but were somehow left out during the protests – even though they were among the most prominent grievances of the protesters. Commentary on the protesters' demands usually did not go beyond reporting officials' explanations on *why the demands cannot be met*; an opportunity was often missed to engage experts in the fields of the economy, law, social care, etc., to analyse and discuss the demands from a more substantial point of view. Media outlets on occasions uncritically transmitted arguments that sometimes took a rather absurd form, such as an argument of an economic analyst that lowering officials' salaries would endanger their retirement fund: "We know that the retirement fund is financed from the salaries, cutting them down will mean cutting down the payments to the retirement fund, which would have to be compensated from some other source. So, this is something that the public demands, *but the economists warn of the*

¹⁵⁰ Exceptions to this rule are very few, such as Radio Free Europe, which shortly after the protests started began publishing a series of in-depth analyses of the problematic privatisations in BiH, titled "Serijal: Privatizacijske pljačke" (Series: Privatization Thefts). Ironically, even though the protests started in Tuzla over the status of workers in the privatised factories, it was almost impossible to find any fact-based insight into the background of their problems published in that period of time (for example, none of the articles or TV broadcasts analyzed in the sample comes even close to that kind of analysis). As one of the interviewees put it, the burning buildings were covered far more than the underlying reasons that eventually led to them being set on fire.

damage this could cause in the retirement fund.”¹⁵¹ There were also reports that implied that the behaviour of protesters was inappropriate when set against protest demands and official responses: “An important fact [is] that Sead Čaušević resigned today, which was one of the protesters’ first demands, but it seems that meeting this demand wasn’t enough to stop the protesters’ rampage in the streets and in front of the institutions in Tuzla. In fact, it was after that that they... set the municipal building on fire.”¹⁵²

The overall impression of the interviewees was that during the February protests the media did not engage in an analysis of demands, missing an opportunity to serve as facilitators of an in-depth, quality public discussion.

With regard to the JMBG protests, the interviewees also pointed out the lack of in-depth reporting and media bias. Reliance on politicians for statements was seen as the main reason, with extensive coverage for example of the statements of political representatives from Republika Srpska, connecting the protests to ethno-national interests in an attempt to portray the protests as a plot of the ‘Bosniak’ parties. The reports also included, however, information on the support the protests received, especially from public figures in the region, as well as the plight of Belmina Ibrišević (the baby whose situation provoked the protests) and her parents. However, the legal and political situation that led to new-borns being unable to get their documents issued, was received short shrift: the dispute between the political parties and the insistence of SNSD and SDS to put political conditions on the implementation of a (binding and non-negotiable) decision by the Constitutional Court was covered superficially and infrequently, according to the interviewees.

¹⁵¹ *FTV*, “Dnevnik 2: I danas prosvjedi i plenumi diljem zemlje...; Hoće li tuzlanski primjer ukidanja bijelog kruha pratiti i drugi kantoni diljem FBiH”.

¹⁵² *BHT*, “Dnevnik 2”, 7 February 2014.

4.5 Different views about preferred role: objective or engaged media

The interviewees held two different basic normative views on the role of the media. Some of the respondents, primarily the journalists, implied that the expected role of the media is to provide 'objective' reporting, described mostly as not taking sides, in which multiple views are presented. In addition, some respondents mentioned: investigation beyond the superficial coverage of current events; reports from the field; efforts to contact all the sides involved in a story; presenting facts about events and their causes; and covering all related stories with a certain social and political significance, including those which are not favourable to the power-holders (such as the previously mentioned police barricades in Mostar). The perception of the interviewees of this balance, however, seems to depend on more than just the time given to pro-government and pro-protest sources, respectively. Even when our media analysis identified the elements of balance – for example, the variety of actors who participated in media framing of the protests – the dominant perception was that this was not the case, i.e., that pro-government sources were prevalent. This may indicate that the 'balance' in the media was seen as a false one, given that it went in line with unaccountability of the government. Nowhere is this better seen than in the general coverage of the causes that led to the protests. In the analysed media content, the government, the political parties, the corrupt power structures, and so on, have indeed been identified as the main actors responsible for the grave state of affairs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but most of the times this occurred through short statements of people in the streets, without deeper insight from the journalists. Their responsibility was usually generalised, not backed up by any investigative reports and thus for the most part devoided of political significance. The rare exceptions to this were the narratives of some of the featured experts (political and economic analysts, civil society actors, intellectuals, etc.), but the presence of such sources was not nearly as frequent as that of randomly chosen respondents interviewed in the street.

Actor causing the problem	Politicians in power, the government	Protest/ plenums participants	The police	Political opponents/ 'centres of power'	The international factor
Frequency	144	83	56	48	12
Actor causing the problem	Other institutions	Civil society	Veterans	Football fans	The unions
Frequency	8	3	3	1	1

Table 10: Actor responsible for the problem

As is the case with the structure of identified problems, the distribution of the actors responsible for the problems also varies from one media outlet to another. RTRS stands out from other media in this category as well, with the politicians in power being identified as responsible actors only two times (out of 40), while the citizens/protesters appear in this role 18 times, making it the only media outlet where the protesters are a majority of the actors responsible for the problem.¹⁵³ It is also noticeable that this broadcaster had the highest number of political opponents of the ruling parties, including those vaguely described as 'centres of power', appearing as being responsible for the problem (14 out of 40).¹⁵⁴ On the opposite end stands another TV station based in Republika Srpska, TV Bijeljina (BN TV),¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Nezavisne novine is the only other media mentioning protesters as the cause of the problem (6 times) more than the politicians in power (5 times).

¹⁵⁴ The 'centres of power' is an expression frequently used by the politicians in power, but also by journalists who quoted their statements. It usually refers to political representatives from the other entity (the Federation of BiH), or is used along with ethnically defined political actors ("Bosniak politicians", "Bosniak politics", and so on).

¹⁵⁵ TV Bijeljina is the one TV station in RS with a reputation of being pro-opposition and anti-government, and openly criticises the ruling parties. The SNSD has in the past boycotted TVBN on account that it was "conducting a campaign against the SNSD", refusing any contacts with its journalists.

whose news pieces put the blame predominantly on the politicians in power (see Table 11).¹⁵⁶ When it comes to the two other public broadcasters, BHT had a slightly higher frequency of the politicians in power being described as the cause of the problem (16 out of 36) compared to FTV (12 out of 14).

¹⁵⁶ This includes the protests in Bijeljina on February 9, 2014 that were met with counter-protests whose protagonists were among the quoted respondents in the news piece on the event. The counter-protests were explicitly pro-government and included slogans such as "No to the protests" and "You're a disgrace to the Serb people" shouted at the protesters. The narrative of the counter-protests' organisers entirely mirrored those of the politicians in power in RS: "We don't want demonstrations in RS, we want to maintain peace, dignity and unity of the RS. We don't want Bosnia and Herzegovina and the fire from the Federation to spread into Republika Srpska" (*BNTV*, "Dnevnik 2: Dvije suprotstavljene grupe demonstranata na protestu u Bijeljini").

Actor causing the problem	Politicians in power, the government	Protest/plenums participants	The police	Political opponents/ 'centres of power'	The international factor	Other institutions	Civil society	Veterans	Football fans	The unions	Total
RTRS	2	18	1	14	3		2				40
Klix	15	9	9			1					34
Avaz	16	5	2	6		1					30
Nezavisne novine	5	6	2	8	3		1				25
Tuzlanski	15	3	4			2				1	25
Bljesak	8	6	6	4	2						26
BN TV	21	7	4	3							35
FTV	12	7	6	7		1		1			34
Hayat	20	4	7	4	1						36
BHT	16	10	6			3			1		36
AbrašMedia	5	2	6								13
Al Jazeera	1	1	1	1	1						5
Žurnal	6	2	2					2			12
Buka	2	3		1	2						8
Total	144	83	56	48	12	8	3	3	1	1	359

Table 11: Actor responsible for the problem (by media outlet)

The police is the third most frequent actor framed as a cause of the problem in the entire sample. In some cases, the police was identified as responsible for the violence against the protesters, in others for the failure to stop protesters from attacking government buildings and for the poor coordination between law enforcement institutions. RTRS is an exception with only one reference to the police as the actor responsible for the problem; the police was usually mentioned in RTRS news as a part of the solution, in terms of stopping the spill-over of protests from FBiH to RS.

In general, the protests events, in particular the violence during the protests, were more represented than the protesters' actual demands. Throughout the whole sample of 178 media items, a total of 419 themes were identified to have appeared in the reporting, out of which the protest demands appear only 73 times, and even then usually in the form of listing what the protesters or plenums asked for, or taking statements from the participants. There were some exceptions, such as Klix, which reported regularly and in detail on plenum sessions, sometimes in the form of minute-by-minute updates with detailed descriptions of the discussions and demands. AbrašMEDIA and Tuzlanski were also thorough in their coverage of the plenums in Mostar and Tuzla and the demands which emerged from them. Overall, the demands that were mentioned the most were for the resignation of government bodies or officials and the abolition of their privileges (44 and 17 out of 73 times, respectively).

Several respondents, mostly among the protesters/activists, indicated however that the media should have focused more on accountability and provided engaged accounts of protests. Arguably, this would mean not only balanced reporting with multiple sources, but also analyses of the public interest, accompanied with extensive in-depth information and taking sides in accordance with that public interest. And while a majority of respondents feel that the media failed to perform their role (either the role of balanced or engaged reporting), one of the interviewed officials believes the opposite – that the majority of media in the course

of the February protests operated as “the fourth branch of power, acting accordingly to the citizens’ demands towards the political parties and the government”¹⁵⁷.

Some of the protesters think that the failures of media reporting about the February protests are especially worrying since they consider the protests as pivotal for the required socio-political changes and self-reflection from within society. In addition, some of the respondents, mainly the activists/protesters, believe mainstream media were the key factor in the demise of the protests. As Arsenijević vividly puts it: “The media killed us.”

When it comes to the protests in Banja Luka in 2012, the main issue with the media was not so much distorted reporting, but the marginalisation of the protests by the mainstream media. An interviewee said that the Picin Park protest “was ignored by the media and officials”¹⁵⁸, and another said: “The parties viewed it as some kind of private problem”¹⁵⁹. Activist Miodrag Dakić described in an interview with Radio Slobodna Evropa during the protests how the practice of the media in Republika Srpska differed: “There is a lot of media that report very objectively on the protests and the reasons behind this citizens’ rebellion, but a certain number of media don’t want to share information from the gatherings and the walks. Moreover, some of them are even maliciously misinforming the public, especially RTRS and Glas Srpske. It is particularly concerning that a public broadcaster, paid by all the Republika Srpska citizens, is being put at the service of one political party.”¹⁶⁰ This research did not include an analysis of media reports on the Picin Park protests, but an online search of media content serves as an indicator of how the protests were marginalised. For example, a search on the RS public broadcaster’s online archive only yields five articles mentioning the park protests, even though RTRS is based in

¹⁵⁷ Interview with the Official of HDZ 1990, August 2015.

¹⁵⁸ Interview with Danijela Majstorović.

¹⁵⁹ Interview with Berislav Jurič.

¹⁶⁰ *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, “Dakić: Vlast u RS se plaši šetača”.

the very city where they took place. *Nezavisne novine* (also based in Banja Luka, and also from the main sample) had a somewhat different strategy of reporting – most of the time, it simply published articles of FENA, a public news agency from the Federation, although the protests were happening in *Nezavisne*’s own neighbourhood. At the same time, a small independent outlet, *AbrašMEDIA* (based in Mostar), published daily accounts of the protests, including those of the charges brought against the protesters, the fines some of them had to pay, the charity activities they organised, and so on. The feeling of the protesters is that media marginalisation was part of a strategy of portraying the protests as insignificant: “Through portals and social networks, the young have raised their voice and called to protests... They didn’t mind that the state media are ignoring (or belittling) the protests of several thousand people in the capital of RS. They didn’t mind that the politicians in power have immediately accused the opposition of being behind the protests (life is a preelection campaign),” wrote one of the protesters at the time of protest.¹⁶¹

The protests on ID numbers (JMBG protests) in June 2013 were reported in an almost identical fashion to those of February 2014. The interviews indicate that conspiracy theories also to an extent dominated the media discourse in Republika Srpska, linking the protests to ‘secret plots’ of political parties from the Federation, foreign agents, ethnic animosities, etc., all of which were outlined by politicians from both the ruling and the opposition parties.¹⁶² The media based in the FBiH were, however, much less inclined to take a negative stand on these protests – as were the FBiH-based political actors. In the Federation of BiH, the JMBG protests were mostly

¹⁶¹ *Apsurd srpski*, “Obračun kod picinog koral”.

¹⁶² For example, the first statement which set the tone on the JMBG protests as a “kidnapping of the Serb MPs in Sarajevo” organised by the FBiH political parties under false pretence, came from Aleksandra Pandurević, member of the SDS, an opposition party from Republika Srpska. The ruling SNSD party’s narrative on the protests was in complete unison with that of the SDS, both describing the protests as a “hostage crisis”, demanding that the protesters be charged with terrorism, accusing them of being anti-Serb, implying they were instructed by parties from the Federation, etc.

seen as a display of citizens' solidarity which crossed not only local but state borders, as the JMBG protests received an outpouring of support from neighbouring countries and beyond.¹⁶³ This kind of publicity, along with the fact that the protests started as an attempt to save the life of a new-born baby, made it hard, in the view of the interviewees, for political actors in FBiH to antagonise the protesters in the way they would attempt in February 2014.

Comparing these three cases of protests, we conclude that the responses from the major media outlets were always under the significant influence of the political actors' narratives, albeit to different degrees.

¹⁶³ Several high-profile public figures and celebrities from Serbia and Croatia showed their support for the protests by taking photos holding a '#JMBG' banner; also, gatherings in support of the protests were organised in Belgrade and Zagreb on a few occasions.

5. Role of social media and other alternative platforms: from information through mobilisation to therapy¹⁶⁴

All those interviewed agreed that social networks were frequently used during the protests for sharing information, organising protests or plenums, and mobilising citizens.

Almost all respondents agree that the leading role for all these purposes was played by Facebook. As Hana Obradović reports: "Firstly, Facebook made possible the sharing of information, since there is no censorship... and one can post everything. And, secondly, Facebook was used for intensive communication among protesters." Other advantages of sharing content on Facebook mentioned by the respondents had to do with accessibility of information on the protests to citizens and (potential) participants. Ines Tanović, a plenum participant, reports that there was a Facebook group "50,000 people on the street", where one could easily find relevant information concerning the protests in Tuzla. Other respondents also mention that Facebook was a platform for using powerful images and messages from the protests – for example, photos of people who had been beaten, or photos showing contrasting images, such as buildings on fire on the one side and people drinking coffee on the other, which had the potential of boosting mobilisation. Some respondents mention that Facebook was also an important platform for people living abroad to access information concerning the protests.

In the course of the JMBG protests, the first group of people who, on June 5, 2013, used their cars to block the exit of the Parliament building or came on foot and stood in front of it, was organised within just a few hours through a secret Facebook group. After the protests

¹⁶⁴ The research on the role of alternative platforms is based on insights from the interviews, and an overview of the social platforms used, but the scope of this research did not allow for a comprehensive analysis of their content. Further research into the content of the multitude of social platforms that were used during the protests would be required to provide more insight and specific recommendations on the content of online platforms.

intensified, the group grew into a public platform, the official Facebook page of the protests named 'JMBG za sve' (JMBG for all), but a few 'working groups' were also created, where plans for protest gatherings were made on daily basis. The groups were secret in that they were only visible to their members, but they were open for people to join.

Masha Durkalić, a journalist and participant in the February plenums, mentioned the platform plenumsa.org and said that online platforms were much used: "We imagined them as a source of information for citizens. That was the real platform of citizen journalism aiming at mobilisation." Dajanović mentions a common platform on protests that aggregated reports, videos, photos, lists of demands from plenums, etc. from different cities, with activists from different cities as contributors.¹⁶⁵

Online platforms enabled dissemination of information faster than other channels, and had greater reach for younger citizens who are the main users of online platforms. The interactivity of online platforms was seen as important for several reasons. Semir Mujkić said that while it was important to read the news, it was also important to read comments that showed the direction of further developments. At the same time, online comments have been mentioned, just like the plenums themselves, for their therapeutic role, as an opportunity for people to 'let off steam'. Plenum meetings were livestreamed so that those who were not in a position to attend on the spot could still follow the debate.

The issue of ownership over the protest-related platforms is complicated. The platforms were typically administered by a group of people, and the rules of what gets published, what messages are communicated, what the communication with the page followers should

¹⁶⁵ According to information gathered in this research, the most prominent platform matching this description was the page "Information on protests in BiH without media spin": <https://www.facebook.com/Informacije-o-protestima-u-BiH-BEZ-MEDIJSKOG-SPINA-503627026421436/?fref=ts> (accessed 24 August 2015), with some 6,000 followers.

look like, what the visual identity should be, etc., were either decided within the group, or entrusted to persons assigned to handle specific tasks. The main difference between the primary and secondary cases in terms of their online presence was that both JMBG and Picin Park online platforms were rather centralised – much as the protests themselves¹⁶⁶ – while the organisation of the February protests was dispersed across several cities, without much coordination (contacts between activists in the cities were mostly established after the plenums were formed). This translated into a multitude of online platforms, and each plenum tended to have its own platform (usually a Facebook page or group). The first group that appeared was Udar in Tuzla¹⁶⁷.

After the plenums were started in Tuzla, Sarajevo, Mostar, and many other cities, Facebook groups of more or less all the organised plenums were made. These groups were used to disseminate information and inform the people on the plans for following events and gatherings.

5.1 Role of online platforms in comparison to mainstream media

Some interviewees mentioned that online platforms were used by protesters as a counterweight to the pervasive framing of the protests in the mainstream media, especially during the initial period when media focused mostly on the violence. As one journalist and activist commented: “If there were no online platforms, I think that most people would think that [the protests] had been an attempt of starting a new war or a coup, since that was the picture one could get via TV and print media.” The content produced through alternative platforms not only differed from that found in the mainstream media, but was often created as a reaction or

¹⁶⁶ There were some attempts to create several JMBG groups and pages on Facebook, but the one that was created by a core group of protesters was widely recognised as the protest’s ‘official’ page, together with the webpage <http://www.jmbg.org/>. This was the case with the Picin Park group as well.

¹⁶⁷ The group was led by Aldin Širanović. His name was the first protest-related name to appear in the media after his arrest, followed by demands from the Tuzla protesters that the police release him from custody.

response to it. The group “Information on protests without media spin”, started on February 10, 2014, was clearly created with the aim to counter the manipulative or misleading reports on the protests. As the group description declares:

“The media have been publishing false info about Bosnian protests for days, pitting us against each other and protecting the government which is finally afraid of its citizens, as well as the police which is arresting and beating those same citizens! Social networks have thus become the only place where people can get information on what has really been happening. This page should serve as a place where people themselves can upload truthful and verified information about the protests, and reveal the lies coming from politicians and their supporting media (...) This is the only way to get accurate information, as most of the media aren’t doing their job, but serving the government.

If you read the news you know is not true, LET US KNOW.

If you hear false rumours being spread about the protests, LET US KNOW.

If you experienced police brutality or intimidation, LET US KNOW,

If you are in the street and able to report on what’s happening, UPLOAD YOUR PHOTOS AND VIDEOS TO THIS PAGE.”

The same sentiment of distrust towards mainstream media reports about the protests was expressed on all of the plenums’ online platforms, for example in the Sarajevo plenum’s warning to page followers “not to trust anything they hear or read about the plenum unless it was confirmed on the official plenum page”.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁸ The page of the Sarajevo plenum (<http://plenumsa.org>) is no longer online, so the only source of the warning is a share made by another protest-related Facebook page (available on: https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=251082058406541&id=503627026421436 (accessed 7 July 2015)).

Comparing the content of mainstream media to that of alternative platforms reveals what the framing analysis could not – the events that were *missing* from the mainstream reports, which gives a better insight into the overall inclination of those reports. Alternative media such as AbrašMEDIA, or individual citizens who participated in the protests, made numerous recordings of police brutality which the mainstream media ignored, sometimes even after they were published on alternative platforms and made available to the general public. The Youtube channel of AbrašMEDIA was, for example, virtually the only place (on the Internet and in general) that regularly published footage of police conduct towards the protesters in Mostar.¹⁶⁹ Some of the media, such as Bljesak, occasionally republished their content, but none other of the media analysed in this research made the effort to document the barricades set by the cantonal police, or the arrest of Muharem Hindić-Mušica, one of the protest's most prominent figures. The situation concerning reporting on protests in smaller cities was even worse – the protest in Doboj was, for example, not covered at all,¹⁷⁰ while several cases of police intimidation (such as police visits to the homes of prominent protesters)¹⁷¹ against the protesters would not have been documented had it not been for the alternative platforms

¹⁶⁹ All the videos are still available at: <https://www.youtube.com/user/abramedia/videos> (accessed 7 July 2015).

¹⁷⁰ One of the protest-related Facebook groups published a photograph of a small protest in Doboj on February 8, 2014, along with the testimony of one of the protesters and his comments on how all the media failed to report that it had happened at all, even though some reporters were present at the scene (<https://www.facebook.com/503627026421436/photos/a.503762549741217.1073741827.503627026421436/505630909554381/?type=1&theater>, (accessed 9 July 2015).

¹⁷¹ The intimidation of the protesters in Herzegovina – including house arrests and attacks against protesters – was summed up in an article published by AbrašMEDIA during the protests: “In Mostar and throughout Herzegovina, mass arrests of innocent citizens, some of which ‘preventive’, were recorded (Mostar, Livno, Posušje...). The president of the Union of Independent Trade Unions, Josip Milić, a participant in the February 7 protests in Mostar, was brutally beaten with baseball bats. Feđa Fajić, a participant in the Mostar plenum, was a victim of robbery. His house was broken into, his car has also been stolen, only to be found two days later, but with all the plenum-related documents missing from it.” (*AbrašMEDIA*, “Pokušavaju li moćnici izazvati klasni sukob u kome se ne biraju sredstva?”)

and the citizens who provided testimonies. Additionally, Facebook groups were used to refute inaccurate information published in the media – which, in the view of some interviewed protesters, was required on more than one occasion.¹⁷² The failure of the mainstream media to report the police violence against the protesters was mentioned by the interviewed respondents as well. A journalist from Mostar said that the media had missed “huge stories” about the police and government conduct during the protests: “These attitudes [of the power structures] towards the protesters and that harassment would be a fascinating story for a journalist... Or the fact that the police has beaten up the alleged protests leaders. What was fascinating is that the police [in Mostar] has banned the crossing of the wartime ‘demarcation line’, but no one in the media found that intriguing.” A protester from Sarajevo said: “It was very inappropriate to wait a whole month to show the video of the riot police pushing the enraged crowd, young people, off the wall into the [river] Miljacka.”¹⁷³

5.2 The downsides of online platforms: corruption by political actors, possible surveillance, limited reach and public trust

Many respondents discussed weaknesses of social networks and online platforms, one of them being ‘infiltration’ by people affiliated with political parties who became more active and sought to subvert the initiatives built up on social networks. Džanović reports: “What

¹⁷² For example, Sarajevo citizens’ plenum had to refute false information on the time and place of the next plenum meeting no less than twice, first when unknown persons handed out leaflets with false information on the time and place of plenum’s meeting (<https://www.facebook.com/PlenumSa/photos/a.1451446498418197.1073741828.1451054241790756/1451957151700465/?type=3&theater>, accessed 10 July 2015), and the second time when the media published that the leadership of Sarajevo University had banned the plenum from meeting on its premises. (https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=251138281734252&id=503627026421436&stream-_ref=10, accessed 10 July 2015).

¹⁷³ Interview with Hana Obradović, protester from Sarajevo, 29 March 2015.

is problematic about social networks is that members of political parties always come and try to destroy everything. I noticed a few persons who constantly appear on all these pages or groups formed for certain initiatives.” One activist goes even further in reporting the presence of state surveillance on Facebook: “Informants are now heavily present on Facebook.”

As indicated by some protesters, the communication through alternative platforms had other aspects that they considered problematic, primarily a lack of means to establish the credibility of information. As one of the protesters indicated, it was hard to look for relevant and credible information among a multitude of voices where the loudest were the most dominant. Finally, due to their limited reach, lower credibility, and lower significance that the public attributes to these alternative platforms compared to the mainstream media, several respondents also suggested that these platforms could not have compensated for the lack of relevant information about the protests in the mainstream media.

The interviewees also pointed out that online platforms tend to give a false picture of activism, since many of the participants were merely engaged in so called ‘keyboard activism’. Majstorović for example, said: “There was a group in Banja Luka ‘We won’t give up Picin Park’ which had over 20,000 members, while the actual protests were attended by a much smaller group of people, especially in the end.” Another activist stated that “Facebook has become a compensation for taking genuine action in real life”. Thus, while online platforms were considered pivotal for organising protests, it was also argued that online communication was often providing a false sense of engagement, without actual participation in the key protest actions.

Almost all interviewed officials recognise the importance of online platforms in the context of protests. Several respondents acknowledge the value of online media and social networks in the sense of timely and efficient distribution of information on the protests, and in terms of providing more nuanced insight into people’s attitudes during the protests. One of the respondents stressed that online media and social networks, despite offering quick responses

to events, are still far from having the influence that mainstream media has in BiH society: "...press, radio and television are still very important media and means of communication, so they are still dominant, despite of the dynamics [of the new media] that I mentioned before." Some middle of the road attitudes were also expressed by three officials, who stated that they did follow new media and social networks, but did not view them as sufficiently reliable to be treated as the only source of information.

Another risk of online communication stems from exposure and vulnerability, with activists concerned about surveillance and subversion by political actors. The main concern of officials, meanwhile, is being personally targeted through such channels. One official said that he refused to follow protest-related events on social media, as they sometimes contained threats to both the "ministers and the people from the crowd" and were available to "those who don't mean well, to create a false picture".

In sum, during the protests included in this research, online platforms were indispensable in terms of dissemination of information and mobilisation. However, the interviewees value the stronger impact of mainstream media in the overall communication about the protests. The most telling illustration is the case of the JMBG protest. It was a Facebook secret group¹⁷⁴ that made it possible to gather the initial group of angry citizens and organise the protest in a matter of hours, but not before media outlet klix.ba initially informed the public about the problem of newborn Belmina Ibrišević, which motivated the protests in the first place.

Online platforms provided a fast, mostly free, and efficient way to exchange ideas and information within a group, to organise quickly in response to the events, to reach a significant number of people, and to counter the potentially harmful reporting from the mainstream media. However, the interviewees also express overall disappointment by the

¹⁷⁴ A group not visible to anyone but its members.

discrepancy between online and offline support (especially in the JMBG and Picin Park protests). All the weaknesses of the mainstream media, including the uncritical transmission of anti-protest spin, favouritism towards official sources, and lack of in-depth reporting, were believed to be detrimental to the February protests in particular, despite all the opportunities of online communication.

6. Communication practices of citizens/protesters

Core features of the February protests and plenums including their abruptness and the fact that they were made up of unorganised, heterogeneous groups, raised obvious difficulties mentioned by the interviewees. A lack of structure at the beginning of the protests, the absence of leaders or spokespersons, as well as the large number of demands were mentioned most often. Later on, when the plenums involved more elaborate organisation, the basic idea that it should be marked by a horizontal structure and the principle of ‘one person, one voice’ also meant that there were no elected representatives who could carry the plenums’ communication.

6.1 Communication with and representation in the media

The lack of a familiar communication structure and a multitude of demands were especially difficult for journalists. Masha Durkalić, a plenum participant, explains: “The media ask for somebody to speak on behalf of the plenum and you have to explain that the plenum has no leader and that everybody speaks on their own behalf. [The reporters’ confusion] is understandable, as the media ask for a spokesperson, somebody who will send the message on behalf of the group, and we couldn’t provide that.” Due to this tendency of the media, in practice the reporting focused on some people and in a way profiled them as representatives of protests and plenums (in particular in Mostar and Tuzla). While the respondents indicate that the communication in the first days of protests was evaluated as chaotic, the plenums provided a better articulation of demands, although they, too, showed weaknesses in organisation and communication. The weaknesses mentioned by the respondents included the following: there were no actual representatives of plenums and no spokesperson, communication was ad hoc, without a clearly defined strategy, coordination, and consistent messages. In effect, all the ingredients of good institutional communication were missing. Both officials and the media were not used to communication that operated outside of strategy-based patterns, which overall made communication more complex. A media group was organised

to facilitate the communication with media and its existence proved that communication with media was taken seriously. It gathered media professionals, mostly journalists who were also protest participants, but also people without experience with media. The media group communicated in different ways as reported by respondents: via declarations, attendance of TV and radio shows, articles for different media, including foreign media. There was also an initiative to publish a 'guerrilla newspaper' called "The voice of freedom", prepared by and shared among protesters, containing the most relevant information about the protests. There was the intention of publishing a journal "Bunt" ("Rebellion"), but lack of financial resources and internal organisation prevented this and only one issue was published online.¹⁷⁵

When it comes to openness of protesters towards the media, there were several limitations, according to the interviewees. Some interviewees mention that there was a selective approach of the protesters to the media, meaning that they were more open to some than to others. While Zlatan Begić, a protester and university professor, reports that such selective practices were a response to unfavourable reporting, journalist Berislav Jurič says that the protesters distanced themselves even from media that were neutral. Overall, the protesters are not regarded as having been open to public communication, which some explain with fear of consequences: "People were afraid to speak in front of cameras. People were intimidated, people were threatened... A girl I met in town said: It is forbidden for us, if somebody films us we will lose our jobs." Ivana Crnogorac, a journalist, reports that openness towards the media decreased the longer the protests lasted.

Most of the media reports in the analysed sample did feature protesters as sources, mostly in the widespread form of short statements recorded in the streets, mostly without disclosing full names but rather by referring to a first name or a description such as 'student', 'pensioner', 'citizen of Sarajevo' (the latter frequently associated with negative statements about the violence).

¹⁷⁵ The published issue is available on the website of the citizens' association Coda at: <http://otvoreni-magazin.net/01/01/2016/bunt-gradjanki-i-gradjana-bosne-i-hercegovine/> (Accessed 10 July 2015).

However, some of the interviewed activists think that the choice of sources was a reason for the bad articulation of the protest demands. As one of the activist puts it: “[The BiH media] have tendentiously chosen half-illiterate people to talk to,” contrasting the conduct of reporters from domestic media to that of foreign journalists, who, in his opinion, provided more extensive coverage: “They came to my house and we talked for an hour and a half... People were there, at the protests, recording. What our [journalists] were doing is a different story entirely.” The content analysis conducted in this research confirms that the citizens’ statements in the media sample were often not well articulated and focused primarily on expressions of frustration with what the corrupt and broken system did and how it damaged their lives. This added to the impression that the protests were not well organised and that they lacked a clear course of action. Some of the most frequent themes in the media quotations of protesters were the hardships of living in BiH and the hatred that people feel towards the political class. In some cases individual politicians were mentioned (most often Nikšić and Izetbegović) and sometimes they talked of them as a general category. Another common theme were the demands to free arrested protesters and drop any charges against them.¹⁷⁶ Furthermore the voices of protesters as transmitted through the media also referred to ethno-nationalism, most frequently in Mostar where the protests were often portrayed as ‘Bosniak’. Calls for unity and social solidarity against nationalist division could be heard, as well as protesters’ comments on how the politicians use nationalism and fear to paralyse the people and prevent or stop the protests.

The results of our content analysis show that the protesters’ demands were presented only superficially, which might be due to several reasons – the media not being able or interested in finding more adequate interlocutors, as previously pointed out, or the protesters being unwilling to communicate with the media. As a result, statements that were an expression of desperation or anger were given equal treatment to clear articulations of demands with more political potential.

¹⁷⁶ Some were charged with terrorism.

Visual representation

The respondents generally agree that the February protests did not really have a thought-out or harmonised visual concept, but that different creative tools were used, such as slogans, paroles, banners, graffiti, ribbons tied around protesters' arms, as well as a few logos adopted by some of the plenums, such as: two megaphones turned in opposite directions (in Sarajevo) or a miner waving a flag (in Tuzla).



Picture 1: *The logo of the Sarajevo plenum*¹⁷⁷

There was no one recognisable logo or symbol used widely in the protests across all cities. Zlatan Begić, underscores the consequences that the lack of a visual identity has had for the protests' general impact: "If we had had a logo, a flag, if all that had not been that spontaneous and instead if it involved some kind of organisation, we would probably be the government today." Journalist Ivana Crnogorac also states that the organisation was not sophisticated enough to enable the creation of a specific visual identity for the protests. One of the workers and strike organisers in Tuzla makes a similar point, albeit much more specific in terms of where the symbolism of the protests should have been: "We did have that miner of ours, in the plenums. A miner is... a symbol of workers, of dissent... in the former state [Socialist Yugoslavia], when they play one of those workers' songs that would lift you up.

¹⁷⁷ Source: The Facebook page of Sarajevo plenum (<https://www.facebook.com/PlenumSa>, accessed 15 July 2015).

We don't have that now and we should – some pioneer worker song, some patriotic song, something like that. Maybe a symbol of some sort, not necessarily a flag... but something.”

This lack of visual branding of the protests is particularly noticeable when compared to the much more distinct visual build-up of the JMBG protests. Unlike the February protests, the JMBG protests had a recognisable visual identity: a logo with a fist coming out of a pacifier,¹⁷⁸ as a visual representation of fighting for the rights of newborns; the hashtag #JMBG, used by hundreds if not thousands of people in the country and worldwide when they took and published photographs of themselves in a sign of support for the protests; a whole visual kit of different variations of the logo,¹⁷⁹ pre-designed Facebook cover photos, and so on.



Picture 2: *The JMBG protests logo projected on the Parliament building in Sarajevo*¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ The logo was created by a young designer who shared it on social networks and it was immediately accepted as the symbol of the protests (see: <http://adidzdarevic.com/work/babylution/>, accessed 28 July 2015).

¹⁷⁹ The fist-and-pacifier were, for example, stylised in colors of national flags, different football teams, etc.

¹⁸⁰ Source: Facebook page 'JMBG za sve' (<https://www.facebook.com/Ja.BiH.JMBG/photos/pb.117919935083973.-2207520000.1458747415./123129207896379/?type=3&theater>, accessed 28 July 2015).

The creative contributions to the protests' identity were coming from all around – designers, musicians, photographers. The protests in Picin Park were also more 'branded' than those in February, with a recognisable logo showing an upside-down triangle that framed the slogan 'Save Picin Park', with a tree, a bench, and a dog on top.



Picture 3: Save Picin Park¹⁸¹

When it comes to the visual representation of the protests in the media, the content analysis shows that the protesters were often shown protesting peacefully (N=44) or giving statements (N=29). However, when taking together the videos and images of protesters attacking the institutions (N=31) or the police (N=17) and images of the direct effects of this behaviour on public property (N=41), we conclude that the image of the protests and the protesters in the media was predominantly violent. This is rather telling given that the actual clashes with the police and attacks on government buildings only took place during the first two days, while the analysed sample covered a reporting period five times longer. The first two days of the protests were, admittedly, covered much more extensively than later days, with news broadcasts turned into 'protest specials', which contributed to the prevalence of such images in the sample. Nonetheless, the inflammatory images also stayed in use well after the clashes and their live coverage.

¹⁸¹ (Source: Twitter https://pbs.twimg.com/profile_images/458942176068501504/ivf1fKw0.jpeg, accessed 28 July 2015).

Visual image	RTRS	Klix	Avaz	Nezavisne	Tuzlanski	Bljesak	BNTV
Political actors	12	2	2	3	1	2	9
Gatherings in front of institutions, protest walks, other activities other than attacks or clashes	5	4			2	7	5
Consequences of the protest's clashes (fire burning, damage on property, aftermath of the protests)	9	3	1	1	1	3	3
Attacks on government buildings (stoning, throwing eggs, bursting into buildings, breakage, setting fires) and/or property (setting fire to cars, garbage bins, tearing out sidewalks, etc.)	7	2			1		1
Protesters giving statements	4					1	5
The messages of the protests (banners, signs, digital visuals, performances)	3	2		3	5	4	3

FTV	Hayat	BHT	AbrašMedia	Aljazeera	Žurnal	Buka	Total
8	5	2		2			50
6	6	3	4				44
5	4	6				2	41
6	8	6					31
7	6	6					29
2	3		3				27

Visual image	RTRS	Klix	Avaz	Nezavisne	Tuzlanski	Bljesak	BNTV
The police under attack (being shown as passive recipients of protesters' actions and/or hurt by the protesters)	3	2					2
Plenum meetings		6					
The protesters under attack (being shown as passive recipients of actions of the police and/or hurt by the police)	2	3					
Clashes of protesters and the police (both equally engaged) or stand-offs between them				2			
Police barricades (in Mostar)							
Traffic blockades							
Commentary (the media's own visuals such as caricatures and similar)							
Illustrations of social or economic problems							
Arrests of protesters							

FTV	Hayat	BHT	AbrašMedia	Aljazeera	Žurnal	Buka	Total
1	3	5					17
1		1		1			11
		2	2				10
1							6
			3				5
1	1	1					4
1	1	2					4
2	1						4
1							3

Visual image	RTRS	Klix	Avaz	Nezavisne	Tuzlanski	Bljesak	BNTV
Emergency services (firefighters, ER)							
Singled out protesters (focus on a person while they are not talking or giving statements)						2	
International actors							
Statements of other actors in the streets							

Table 12: *Visual representation of the protests*

It is also indicative that the police violence against the protesters was shown in the visuals considerably less frequently (N=10), while the arrests of protesters were barely seen at all (N=3). The case of Mostar, where the police kept the protesters from walking through the predominantly Croat-populated part of the city, was previously described by one of the interviewed journalists as a “huge story missed by the media”, as there were virtually no reports on it outside of the local media (most notably the AbrašMEDIA website). The visuals of the police barricades were only found once in a non-Mostar based media (Klix), out of the overall five times it appears in the entire sample. This is quite in line with the remarks of interviewed activists on how the protesters were presented as hooligans, while the police violence was largely ignored by the media.

Another aspect of the visual dimension of media reports that is in line with the interviewees’ comments – specifically, that of the media not attempting to report in-depth or explore the causes of the protests – is the very low frequency of any visuals that would illustrate the problems of socio-economic hardship, bad governance, and so on. Only eight such instances were found – four times, images of impoverished pensioners, holding their pension checks

FTV	Hayat	BHT	AbrašMedia	Aljazeera	Žurnal	Buka	Total
							3
							3
							3
							2

and showing how terribly small their monthly pensions are, and four times when talk about officials' privileges or high administration costs were illustrated with a visual presentation of numbers (their salaries, benefits, budget spending, etc).

The visuals in the media sample offer an insight into the messages of the protesters, written on the captions and banners used during the protests. The most frequently photographed of these was "Ostavke bando!" (Resign, mobsters!), seen at the Sarajevo protests. Several other versions of the same demand appear in visuals throughout all the cities where protests took place, calling for politicians or governments to resign, or for the arrest of officials. Another frequent caption was a list of the names of factories and companies ruined in the privatisation process. The protesters in Banja Luka listed Incel, Boska, Kosmos, Medicinska elektronika; in Sarajevo, one of the messages was "Arrest the vultures of Hidrogradnja"; in Tuzla, there was a banner implying it was carried by the "Cheated and robbed workers of DOO Tuzla Kvarc". The issue of criminal privatisation was also tackled in the context of all the institutions that should have reacted to it, but had not: "The core of the mafia: government, judiciary, the multimillion robberies get statute of limitations."

Many of the messages were responses to politicians' reactions to the protests or to criticism of the government. The claim of FBiH Prime Minister Nermin Nikšić about the alleged confiscation of speed among the protesters (mentioned above) was met with a banner saying "Nikšić, I'm selling speed and spin". The ubiquitous narrative of the RS politicians and the media of civil society, the protesters, and any critics of the ruling party as 'foreign mercenaries' provoked a banner saying "We are all foreign mercenaries, our state is being financed by the IMF". Messages to the citizens called on them to join the protests or accused them of being compliant with the status quo: "Your silence is of no use, it will only get worse"; "Citizens who hang their head in front of these bandits do not deserve to have a state".

Plenty of general left-leaning protest messages, not specifically related to BiH, could also be seen, such as "Revolution – the only solution", "One world, one struggle", and the famous slogan of the WWII antifascist struggle of the partisans: "Bolje grob nego rob" (Better the grave than [being] a slave). The politicians were sometimes explicitly portrayed as fascists, either generally ("Fascists, step down from power") or individually (a caricature of Nermin Nikšić paired with the infamous "Arbeit mach frei").

Overall, the media captured the multitude and diversity of the messages from the protesters. Despite their diversity, these messages generally revolved around calls to accountability, highlighting the problems faced by the citizens, and proclaiming dissent against the political class – all of which could be seen in the media coverage. Still, in the overall sample, images of violence were prevalent in the media representation of the protests.

7. Concluding remarks

Overall, the research suggests that during the recent three cases of protests in BiH, the media demonstrated simultaneously different stages of mediatisation of politics (Strömbäck 2008), ranging from a strong dependence on party politics through more independence to political actors adapting to media logic (for example by using spin techniques). It is doubtful, however, whether BiH has reached the fourth and final stage, where media logic and standards of newsworthiness have become a built-in part of the governing processes (Strömbäck 2008, p. 239). The differences in the administrative setting of BiH in part account for the different mediatisation phases. Public service broadcasters are managed by steering boards appointed by the state and entity parliaments, which differ significantly in the line-ups of their majorities,¹⁸² reflecting directly on the influence a single party may have on a public broadcaster.¹⁸³ In BiH and FBiH, parliamentary majorities encompass several political parties with very different – often conflicting – political positions, while the RS has been ruled by the same party (and its two coalition partners of the same ideological profile) for the past decade.

Looking into the three public broadcasters and their framing of the protests, there is a clear distinction between the Banja Luka-based RTRS and the Sarajevo-based BHT and FTV. The research demonstrates that RTRS is the only media outlet in the sample whose reporting fully fits all the negative descriptions of anti-protest and pro-government media bias given by the interviewees. This station's reports on the protests were in complete unison with the

¹⁸² The party heterogeneity of parliamentary majorities in BiH and FBiH is a result of an electoral system set up to ensure the representation of different administrative units (the entities in BiH and the cantons in FBiH) and ethnic groups (Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs). The RS, on the other hand, is a single administrative and electoral unit (the RS parliament has ethnic representation only through the Peoples' Council).

¹⁸³ For example, the political crisis in FBiH in 2012, when the parliament majority was disbanded, also involved the dismissal of the steering board of FTV. No such case was recorded in RS, where the ruling party's control over both the parliament and the public broadcaster has remained unchallenged for the past three terms.

narrative of representatives of the RS government and ruling party, while other views were rarely given space and any critical assessment of the dominant political interpretation was missing. These relations seem to fit the first stage of the mediatisation of politics, where the media are important in shaping the view of reality – but they do so by interpreting events according to the dictate of party politics. This relation could also be found in the privately-owned media closely tied with political parties, the most obvious example being *Dnevni avaz*. In this particular case, the coverage of the protests was favourable to the protest participants, but this was unanimously recognised by the interviewees as an attempt to exploit the protests for the newspaper owner’s personal political goals, not as an example of good media practice.

The two other public broadcasters provided various perspectives on the protests and not only the interpretations of political actors, demonstrating a position more independent of party politics. Their performance thus fits the second phase of mediatisation of politics, where “the media do not unconditionally mediate the messages... They now make their own judgments regarding what is thought to be the appropriate messages from the perspective of their own medium, its format, norms and values, and its audiences” (Strömbäck 2008, p. 237). Both were, however, still seen by the protest participants as pro-government and anti-protest, albeit FTV far more so than BHT (which is also in line with the nuances in their reporting, in terms of identified problems and/or actors causing them). While their reporting was quite professional in the later days of the protests, in the view of protesters, it seems to have remained ‘stained’ by the initial focus on the violence, which was particularly dominant in the visual representation of the protests. This speaks of a general conflict between the ‘protest logics’ where the ‘logic of damage’ is but one from an “available repertoire of action” (Cammaerts 2012, p. 123) and the overall inclination of the mainstream media to respond to such actions in a negative way. The fact that the property damage and clashes between protesters and the police received more thorough coverage than the causes of the protests –

emphasized in the interviewees' complaints about the lack of investigative stories and uneven representation of citizens and officials¹⁸⁴ – falls into the same category.

The way some of the commercial media in the sample, such as Klix, framed the protests fits the third phase of mediatisation, which is “governed more by media logic than any kind of political logic” (Strömbäck 2008, p. 238). This media outlet did provide space for political actors in covering the protests but showed no favouritism toward them, going after stories that involved various sources and perspectives. The sample also included a media outlet, AbrašMEDIA, that stood out from all other analysed media in its unambiguous position as *a voice of the protests*, providing, for example, unique records and materials on police repression in Mostar and in-depth coverage of the protests' internal dynamics. In this respect, AbrašMEDIA can be placed in the category outside of either the party-controlled or market-driven media – a “third type of media, relatively independent from market and state and embedded in civil society networks” (Cammaerts 2012, p. 125). AbrašMEDIA was, thus, the closest to the online platforms set up by the protest and plenum participants.

The role of online platforms was seen by the respondents as irreplaceable in terms of organising the protests and plenums, but opinion is divided about their success in informing the public and mobilising support for the protests. When it comes to mobilisation, the interviewees acknowledge the importance of social networks in distributing messages to a broader audience with no distortion and considerable speed. However, the same channels, such as Facebook groups and pages, were, reportedly, also open to (and used by) individuals

¹⁸⁴ An illustrative example of the mark left on the perception of reporting in the first days of the protests can be found in the conclusion of one of the interviewed journalists “...that the politicians were given about 20 minutes, the journalists reporting from the field – meaning, lying from the field – were given about 25 minutes, the religious figures were given about 12-13 minutes and the citizens were given about one out of those, I don't know, 47 minutes of news”. This record refers specifically to FTV's coverage of the protests in Sarajevo on February 7, 2014, but is extrapolated to the media in general.

and groups actively working to suppress the protests, raising the issue of online surveillance and safety, but also the reliability of information shared over these networks. The online media were thus used in both directions: by the protest participants to encourage citizens to join them, and by the presumed 'party agents' to discourage and/or intimidate them.

When it comes to communicating the protests' messages and informing the public about the protests, the role of online media and social networks is seen as indispensable in countering the media spin by the politicians and distributing the information missing from the mainstream media, particularly on police and government repression.

However, the mainstream media is seen as still being more influential than online media and uncontested as a dominant source of information for a majority of citizens. The mainstream media are described by the interviewees as having the power to 'kill' the protests by turning the public off through negative reporting, or even by simply not reporting at all. This is why respondents saw it as particularly harmful for the protests that the mainstream media: did not dig deeper into the background of the problems which led to the protests; let daily events overshadow the reasons and motives behind the protests; and failed to substantially and in-depth examine the accountability of the political class during the protests.

When it comes to the officials' response to the protests, the overall impression of the respondents was that the main tactic was to divert attention from the causes of the protests either to the damage inflicted by the protesters, or to fabricated ethno-national 'threats', and that they showed no recognition of the citizens as a democratic subject, engaging only in strictly controlled, one-way communication instead of a dialogue with citizens or the media. These views are largely confirmed by the content analysis, in particular in the quotes of political actors and the way that they, as mediated by the media, defined the protests, their causes, and the actors involved in the causes. The media did not manage to break this pattern with their reporting on the protests, and the members of the political elites were never

really called to accountability in a way that would make them adopt new communication practices and develop a more responsible attitude towards the public. This is particularly alarming in the context of media coverage of the officials' conspiracy theories on the protests, used by political actors as a long-established strategy to hijack and revert any discourse on accountability by raising ethnic tensions. In a post-war country, still divided along ethnic lines (primarily by its very administrative and institutional set-up), the uncontested dissemination of such narratives, even if it appears as neutral, can only have a polarising effect on society and a highly negative effect on the actor portrayed as an 'agent' of such a conspiracy – in this case, the citizens protesting against social and economic injustice.

The prevailing impression of the interviewed activists is that the protests failed to change significantly the officials' view of accountability, but did contribute to the development of political subjectivity of the citizens, especially through the plenums organised around the protests. However, in terms of communication, many weaknesses were detected in how participants of the protests and the plenums approached the mainstream media. These weaknesses can be summed up as *failure to adapt to the media logic* and use the mediatisation as a strategy to counter the competing narratives of the political elite. The lack of unique symbolic 'branding' of the protests; spontaneous, *ad hoc* communication with no coordination or clearly defined strategy; inconsistent messages; no representatives or spokespersons of the plenum – all these were mentioned as reflecting negatively on the public image of the protests and plenums.

While the protests covered by this research mostly involved unorganised groups that could not have adopted elaborate media strategies, the research results suggest that any future attempts will need better organisation of communication practices in order to counter the spin by political actors and to use the potentials of mainstream media for the protests' benefit.

8. Recommendations

To the media

Based on the inputs of the interviewed actors and the results of the content analysis, the general recommendation for **media professionals and organisations** is to aim to provide more detailed, more engaged, and more critical reporting on events of unquestionable significance for society, such as large-scale protests. Ideally, this would include:

- Engaging in investigative, impartial, and in-depth research of the issues that are important enough to prompt large-scale protests;
- paying due attention to various sources and opposing views that have important implications in the context of civic protests;
- assuming a more active role in particular when reporting about socially relevant issues and events such as those related to protests; this would mean exposing decision-makers to public scrutiny through investigative work and engaging them in a dialogue, instead of providing them with a safe space for distributing their messages;
- reporting based on good sources and a critical stance of journalists; especially in the context of protests, this would mean a careful re-examination of narratives of political actors, contesting unreliable statements and spin and questioning well-established theories of ethno-national conspiracies;
- actively re-examining the accountability of officials for contested issues.

These recommendations could only be fully applied to media that are both free of political influence and commercially successful enough to invest, without risking financial sustainability, in investigative reporting and quality content. Such preconditions are hardly ever found in one media outlet in the reality of the BiH media scene – with the exception of small, non-commercial media that are usually financed through grants and donations and typically have a very limited reach. However, as demonstrated in the research, not all media

are equally dependent on political patrons, which creates opportunities to improve their performance in terms of the public interest and restoring shaken public trust in the media. It goes without saying that accepting such recommendations is not to be expected from media that are tightly controlled by political parties, as long as the institutional set-up and the distribution of power allows for such a system to exist.

To officials

The recommendations for officials are to be taken with even bigger reservations, as all the indicators of public accountability – or lack thereof – point to the conclusion that the political class in BiH is highly detached from the notion of politics as a public good, deeply immersed in self-centred party politics, and primarily oriented towards personal and party interests maintained through corruption, clientelism, and perpetuating ethnic divisions. All these features of doing politics in BiH were displayed in officials' reactions to the protests; hence, the recommendations for true and substantial change would need to tackle the very core of the political system in the country and go well beyond the scope of communication practices, which are merely a manifestation of problems deeply rooted in the system. However, if the communications practices of the officials were, hypothetically, looked at separately from their causes, they would arguably improve through steps such as:

- Establishing direct contact with the public, particularly in situations such as citizen protests when immediate answers or actions are demanded of the government; the government should demonstrate its democratic credentials by communicating with protesters;
- engaging in a dialogue through the media, instead of communicating only through one-directional channels such as press releases, appearing in highly controlled environments such as one-on-one conversations with non-threatening journalists, or news conferences mostly consisting of statements, with no real interaction with the media;
- discontinuing the use of inflammatory rhetoric as a response to crisis, especially the kind that was demonstrated in response to the protests (evoking wartime traumas,

- fear-mongering, raising ethnic tensions, placing false information through the media directly or indirectly, etc.);
- focusing on the real issues of the protests without diverting public attention, i.e., assuming accountability for the problems and working on solutions through broad social dialogue.

To the protesters

The recommendations for **the protesters**, extrapolated from the research, mainly go in the direction of developing better organisation and communication skills in order to overcome the obstacles to better representation in the media, reaching the public, obtaining broader support, and putting stronger pressure on decision-makers. Specifically, this would include:

- Articulating demands better: focusing on a lower number of more specific and achievable goals to be communicated to the public. For this to be done properly, the demands should be reviewed and discussed with protesters who are experts in politics, communication, and related fields;
- planning protest actions more carefully, also with a view to strategic communication;
- adopting a proactive and pragmatic media strategy: making the message clear and recognisable; establishing recognisable ‘spokespersons’ as contact points for the media;
- ‘being the media’: making and distributing accessible, ongoing accounts of the events using available resources (online media, social networks, newspapers and bulletins, etc.);
- introducing a mechanism to verify information shared on social media, including actively pursuing confirmation from multiple sources;
- developing a clear identity of the protests: treating imagery, slogans, songs, the design of various materials and similar as a symbolic repertoire to help get the message out.

Clearly, these recommendations cannot be implemented in a vacuum either. The ultimate role of the protesters’ communication practices is to gather support for achieving the protesters’

goals, which usually depends on the response of the decision-makers. The media, on the other hand, can serve as facilitators or interrupters of even the most cleverly tuned and well thought-out messages, depending on various political, social, and economic factors. The reservations expressed regarding the recommendations for these two types of actors, therefore, also shape the success of the communication practices of activists, social movements, citizens' protests, and similar forms of organised dissent and active engagement in social and political processes.

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List of interviewees

Activists / protesters

- Ines Tanović, plenum participant from Sarajevo, 23 March 2015
- Hana Obradović, protester from Sarajevo, 29 March 2015
- Protester and plenum organizer, 31 years old, 30 March 2015
- Damir Dajanović, protester from Tuzla, 1 April 2015
- Danijela Majstorović, scholar and protester from Banja Luka, 20 April 2015
- Drenko Koristović, protester, 3 May 2015
- Activist from Tuzla, 11 May 2015
- Zoran Ivančić, protester, 14 May 2015
- B. S. protester from Mostar, May 2015
- Damir Arsenijević, scholar and protester from Tuzla, May 2015

Feda Fajić, plenum participant from Mostar, May 2015
E. H., protester from Tuzla, May 2015
Zlatan Begić, protester and university professor, May 2015
H. H., protester, June 2015
Worker from striking committee, June 2015

Journalists / activists

Masha Durkalić, journalist and plenum participant, 20 March 2015
Journalist from Sarajevo and plenum participant, April 2015
N. A., journalist and protester, 11 May 2015
Journalist of online portal and plenum participant, Mostar, May 2015

Media representatives

TV journalist who reported on protests, 28 years old, 6 April 2015
Ivana Crnogorac, BHT, 22 April 2015
Adnan Krdžalić, Tuzlanski.ba, May 2015
Berislav Jurić, May 2015
Journalist of online portal, Banja Luka, May 2015
Journalist of online portal, Mostar, May 2015
Semir Mujkić, Žurnal.info, June 2015

Public officials

Predrag Kojović, vicepresident of Our Party (Naša stranka), 20 April 2015
Zoran Blagojević, executive director of the Social Democratic Party BiH, 22 July 2015
Senad Šepić, member of the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH, 27 July 2015
Anto Domic, Mayor of Brčko District, August 2015
Borislav Borenović, Member of the National Assembly of the Republic of Srpska, August 2015
Emir Suljagić, member of the party Democratic Front (Demokratska fronta), August 2015

Pero Pavlović, Spokesperson of the Government of The Herzegovina-Neretva Canton, August 2015

Pero Nikić, Spokesperson of the Croatian Democratic Union 1990 (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica 1990), August 2015

Šlađan Ilić, president of the Tuzla Canton Assembly, 29 August 2015

Additionally edited by: Sanela Hodžić



**RALLYING FOR CHANGE:
RESTORING GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY
THROUGH CITIZEN PROTESTS
COMMUNICATION PRACTICES
DURING THE PROTESTS IN MACEDONIA**

Bojan Georgievski, Dejan Andonov and Zaneta Trajkoska

I. MEDIA ENVIRONMENT - Republic of Macedonia: A State of Division

The media in Macedonia is strongly divided in terms of political affiliation, with most outlets seen as pro-government and a small number as critical of the government. This has been recognised as a major obstacle for media development in numerous reports and analyses presented by Macedonian civil society organisations and international organisations.¹ The pro-government bias can be explained in part by dependence on state funding, primarily in the form of advertising by state institutions.² Political influence on editorial policies through government advertising and other financial incentives is a common practice.³ The state is one of the largest media advertisers in the country and was the single biggest advertiser in private media outlets in 2013.⁴ According to some estimates,⁵ the total value of the advertising market in Macedonia is between 35.1 and 47.4 million Euro, whereby television accounts for 80-85% of the market.

¹ According to the 2014 Transparency International (TI) *Baseline Assessment of Media*, the media in Macedonia is divided along political lines, with a majority “supporting the current establishment”. In its 2014 Human Rights Practices Report on Macedonia, the US State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor noted that “Individuals or organizations that appeared close to the current government owned most of the mainstream media” and emphasised the division of Macedonian media along ethnic and political lines. In addition, the report stated that there existed a limited number of independent media voices that actively expressed a variety of views without restriction. The 2015 Media Sustainability Index indicates that Macedonian media is divided into two camps: “critical” and “pro-government”. See Transparency International, *Baseline Assessment of Macedonian Media*; US State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, *Macedonia 2014 Human Rights Report*; and IREX, “Macedonia”, 2015.

² See for example remarks in the EU Progress Reports about indirect government control over media through advertising: European Commission, *The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Progress Report*, 2014, p. 12.

³ S. Tipevska and I. Mičevski, “Macedonia”.

⁴ Agency for Media Broadcasting, *Analysis of the Broadcasting Market for 2013*.

⁵ IREX, “Macedonia”, 2014.

The official data on government spending on advertising was unknown to the public for years.⁶ However, following strong demands from civil society and the international community, in 2014 the government released information on its spending on promotional advertisements and awareness-raising campaigns.⁷ The figures showed that in 2012, 2013, and the first six months of 2014, the government had spent approximately 18 million Euro on media campaigns.

As early as its 2009 Progress Report, the European Union expressed concerns about state advertising in Macedonia threatening to “undermine editorial independence”.⁸ The 2015 European Commission staff working document on Macedonia⁹ underlines that there is still no systematic or detailed reporting on government advertising, even though it has a major influence on the media market. Following repeated criticism from the European Union, the government decided, in 2015, to halt media campaigns such as ‘Smoking Kills’ and ‘Eat Healthy’. The step was made after the European Commission had provided the government with a list of “urgent reforms”¹⁰ that needed to be implemented, with a focus on the de-politicisation of public administration, freedom of expression, and electoral reform.¹¹

The dependence of the media on state funding has made them more vulnerable to influence of the ruling party over newsrooms and journalists. In such circumstances, in the small media

⁶ The uncertainties regarding the amounts of money from the state budget allocated to media outlets were addressed in several articles in the weekly magazines Fokus and Kapital, as well as other critical online media outlets (e.g. NovaTV.mk).

⁷ See Vlada na Republika Makedonija, “Podatoci za matrica za informiranje na građani”.

⁸ European Commission, *The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: 2009 Progress Report*.

⁹ European Commission, *The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: Report 2015*.

¹⁰ European Commission, *Urgent Reform Priorities for the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*.

¹¹ As part of the reforms, the European Commission asked the government to “establish stringent rules on government advertising”, “ensure full transparency on government advertising”, and “develop a mechanism for unpaid public service announcements of a true public interest character”.

market of Macedonia, it is difficult for media outlets to survive unless they align themselves with the interests of the governing parties and the large businesses connected to them. As the conclusions of the 2014 Media Integrity Matters study point out, it is not necessary for the state to own the media in Macedonia “since media owners are its direct clients”.¹² The result is a situation where the media and political institutions are in a relationship of clientelism, which weakens the role of the media as a watchdog and guardian of the public interest.

The citizens of Macedonia perceive the level of corruption in the media as quite high. According to the 2014 Transparency International report, 60% of citizens believe that, generally speaking, the media do not inform them ‘objectively’. One in four citizens believes that the media’s responsibility to provide news is for the most part not met objectively, primarily those related to political issues. More than 80% of citizens entirely agree with the statements that the media is an extended arm of political parties; that there is a connection between business, politics, and media ownership; and that the funds for public campaigns of the government are used to corrupt (buy the support of) the media. Finally, they believe that the funds intended for the promotion of parties’ policies are also used to corrupt the media.¹³

The circumstances allowing corrupt relations between media, politics, and business are the primary reason for the erosion of media freedoms and lack of media pluralism in the country despite the existence of a large number of media outlets. The poor economic situation of the media, low salaries for journalists,¹⁴ job insecurity, understaffing, and the failure of the public service broadcaster to fulfil its role, all compound the situation. In

¹² S. Trpevska and I. Mičevski, “Macedonia”.

¹³ Overall, TI’s Corruption Perceptions Index indicates that Macedonia belongs to ‘somewhat corrupt states’. In 2013 and 2014, Macedonia had a score of 44 and 45 respectively, on a scale from 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean).

¹⁴ I. Mičevski and S. Trpevska, “Flash Report 3: Macedonia”.

the 2014 World Press Freedom Index of Reporters without Borders, Macedonia dropped to 123rd place from 34th in 2009.¹⁵ Similarly, Freedom House has continuously decreased its scores for media and press freedom in Macedonia. The EU progress reports, too, have repeatedly signalled a decline in media freedoms in the country over the past several years. As stated in the 2014 Progress Report, the failure of mainstream media to provide the public with “accurate and objective information” leads to a “lack of informed public debate”.¹⁶

The division in the media sphere was especially evident during recent election campaigns. According to the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission (EOM) report, during the April 2014 presidential and parliamentary elections, the majority of Macedonian media were biased in favour of the ruling party, both in terms of quantity and tone of coverage.¹⁷

One of the most harmful aspects of the media polarisation in the country is the pro-government bias in the editorial policy of MRT, the Macedonian public service broadcaster. The 2015 European Commission report noted that MRT had failed to inform the public on issues of public interest in a balanced and non-selective manner.¹⁸ This is particularly significant in election periods. According to TI’s 2014 baseline assessment of the media, MRT “did not meet

¹⁵ Reporters without Borders, “World Press Freedom Index 2014”.

¹⁶ European Commission, *The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Progress Report*, 2014, p. 12.

¹⁷ The report notes that the private broadcasters TV Sitel, Kanal 5 TV, and Alfa TV devoted considerably more coverage to the ruling party’s campaign activities than to those of the opposition SDSM. Moreover, the tone of their coverage during the elections differed greatly depending on which political party was referred to. The report suggests that most of their coverage of VMRO-DPMNE’s activities was positive or neutral in tone. By contrast, the majority of their coverage of SDSM’s activities was mostly negative in tone. One of the conclusions of the OSCE/ODIHR EOM report is that TV Sitel, Kanal 5, and Alfa often broadcast items that were similar in content, referring to anonymous sources, and were biased against SDSM. See OSCE/ODIHR, *Poranešna Jugoslovenska Republika Makedonija: Presedatelski i predvremeni parlamentarni izbori 13 i 27 april 2014*.

¹⁸ European Commission, *The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: Report 2015*.

its obligation to provide impartial and objective coverage of the election campaign”.¹⁹ Although MRT1 allocated almost equal shares of its election-related coverage to the ruling party VMRO-DPMNE (36%) and the main opposition party SDSM (31%), the tone of the coverage clearly showed support for the ruling party. As much as 46% of its coverage of the ruling party’s activities was positive in tone, i.e., often emphasising its achievements and successes, while 54% was neutral in tone, i.e., not showing bias or favouritism towards any political party. For the sake of comparison, of its total coverage of SDSM’s activities, only 7% was positive in tone, while 19% was critical of its activities and the rest of the coverage was neutral.²⁰

However, there are several private broadcasters with fairer election coverage.²¹

1.1 Regulatory reforms

Pressuring the authorities to introduce an adequate legislative framework for the media was also an uphill struggle for media associations and journalists. The critics of the 2013 reforms of the

¹⁹ Transparency International, *Baseline Assessment of Macedonian Media*.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ The TI report notes that TV Telma pursued a neutral and objective editorial policy during the election campaign, according equal treatment to all presidential candidates and allowing them to communicate their messages to the voters. 24 Vesti devoted similar shares of its election-related coverage to VMRO-DPMNE (25%) and SDSM (24%). This was also confirmed in the OSCE/ODIHR EOM report, which noted that the coverage of these political parties by 24 Vesti was largely neutral in tone. Similarly, the TI and the OSCE/ODIHR reports said that Alsat-M had provided a balanced coverage of the elections and covered the campaigns of all parties in a “neutral manner”. While not specifically defining the meaning of the terms ‘neutral’ or ‘balanced’, Transparency International Macedonia claim that they assessed Macedonian media in accordance with “internationally recognized professional standards on the ethics of journalism”, which include ‘impartiality’ and ‘balance’.

media regulatory regime²² feared that the new laws would further undermine media freedom in the country. Of particular concern were the excessive obligations introduced for print and online media, and the institutional framework for the new Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, which enabled government control. Following pressure from the journalistic community in the country, the laws were amended, exempting online media from regulation, reducing the obligations of print media, and allowing the Journalists' Association of Macedonia to nominate one of the seven members of the new Agency.

However, the media-related laws continue to be misused for exerting pressure on journalists. Defamation was decriminalised in late 2012, but journalists still face high fines for this offence. Approximately 580 civil defamation claims had been lodged with courts by the end of 2014, a large number of them against journalists.²³ Many of these cases pose a threat to the financial sustainability of the media and journalists involved because of the potential excessive fines. In September 2014, the Appellate Court upheld a ruling ordering the weekly magazine Fokus to pay 9,000 Euro in damages for a 2013 article that had allegedly defamed the head of the Security and Counterintelligence Agency, Sašo Mijalkov.²⁴ This raises concerns about defamation actions being used by politicians as a means of exerting pressure on media and journalists through the judiciary. A recent policy paper by the Institute of Communication Studies reveals that judges protect the right to freedom of expression only in cases that do not involve senior government officials.²⁵ In cases that involve officials, judges act in favour of the government and do not

²² Two new laws governing media and audio-visual services were adopted: the Law on the Media and the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (the AVMS Act). The AVMS Act replaced the Broadcasting Council with the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, a new supervisory body for broadcast media that has basic administrative supervision powers over print media.

²³ European Commission, *The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Progress Report*, 2014, p. 46.

²⁴ IFEX, "Macedonian Investigative Magazine "Fokus" Fined Thousands of Euros in Defamation Case". See also V. Medarski, *Monitoring of Defamation Actions Litigations*.

²⁵ D. Ilic Dimoski and Z. Hadzi-Zafirov, *Courts of Law: Guardians of the Public Interest or of Individual Interests*.

comply with the European Convention on Human Rights. According to the 2015 Media Sustainability Index (MSI), the Law on Civil Liability for Defamation is used as an instrument of pressure that pushes the media towards self-censorship.²⁶ Faced with the threat of financial consequences, editors and reporters hesitate to engage in investigative journalism.

1.2 Government's communication gridlock

The effectiveness of the accountability framework of the Macedonian government has been in doubt for a longer period of time now, particularly its policies and practices related to open access to information of public character and to other instruments of preventing corruption.

The implementation of the law on open access to public information (FOI)²⁷ is still lacklustre and has been plagued by the same problems for several years. The public administration still waits for the legal deadline for responding to FOI requests to almost expire before responding.²⁸ Even when they do respond to requests, only general information that is of little use is provided. Moreover, they often refuse to respond to FOI requests referring to the provisions on classification of documents, thus preventing journalists from doing their job. In October 2013, researchers from Macedonia, for the purposes of a Media Observatory research project, submitted 34 requests to the government and other state institutions requesting data on the amount of money spent on public campaigns in the media from 2008 to 2013. Only half of those requests received a response, but even the received responses were incomplete and did not contain substantial information.²⁹ According to the 2015 MSI, the government gives information only to the media it perceives as 'suitable' to publish the

²⁶ See IREX, "Macedonia", 2015.

²⁷ Law on Free Access to Public Information, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia*, no. 13/2006.

²⁸ S. Dimovski, "Kako se izigrava Zakonot za sloboden pristap do informacii od javen karakter".

²⁹ S. Trpevska and I. Mičevski, "Macedonia".

information, while it disregards requests for information by critical media.³⁰ This was also confirmed in the 2015 Press Freedom report by Freedom House. The report notes that the law on open access to public information is “unevenly and selectively enforced, with officials delaying responses and shunning independent or critical media outlets”.³¹

This situation is reflected in the lack of transparency concerning major investments, such as the controversial project ‘Skopje 2014’, initiated by the current government in order to reshape the look of Skopje city centre by covering various buildings with baroque facades, constructing new buildings, and erecting monuments that represent Macedonian historical figures or particular segments of Macedonian history. The cost of the project has been unclear and is heavily disputed. In 2013, the Minister of Culture and the then Mayor of the Centre Municipality claimed that the total cost of the project was 207 million Euro, but a journalistic investigation revealed that these figures were far below the actual cost. A 2015 BIRN report revealed that the project cost more than double, closer to a staggering 560 million Euro.³²

A sad consequence of this lack of accountability and transparency on the part of the government is citizens’ distrust of democracy. According to a 2013 study,³³ the level of distrust of democracy is alarmingly high among young people in Macedonia. Only 6% of the youth covered by the survey are satisfied with the state of democracy in the country, the least trusted institutions being the political parties. This distrust is not solely directed at the ruling party, VMRO-DPMNE, but most political parties, particularly the larger ones (both Macedonian and ethnic Albanian).

³⁰ IREX, “Macedonia”, 2015.

³¹ Freedom House, *Freedom of the Press Report on Macedonia*, 2015.

³² M. Jordanovska, “True Cost of ‘Skopje 2014’ Revealed”. For more information about the BIRN investigation see *Skopje 2014 Uncovered*, available at <http://skopje2014.prizma.birn.eu.com/en> accessed 30 June 2015.

³³ M. Topuzovska Latković, M. Borota Popovska, E. Serafimovska and A. Cekić, *Youth Study Macedonia 2013*.

1.3 The media present on the market and their audience reach

Given the media's dependence on clientelist state funding, and in a situation where journalists are not given access to information of public importance, Macedonia's citizens are not provided with a pluralism of media sources and a diversity of views and opinions. This is true despite an oversaturation of the country's small media market. According to data from 2014, the structure of the Macedonian media market is as follows:

- **Print:** 8 dailies, 4 weeklies, 13 other periodicals;³⁴
- **Broadcast:** 1 public service broadcaster and 65 commercial broadcasters: 5 TV stations with national coverage (digital terrestrial multiplex); 5 TV stations with national satellite coverage; 26 TV stations with regional coverage; and 9 TV stations with local coverage;³⁵
- **Internet:** More than 30 online news sites (no official register).³⁶

Television is by far the most popular news media in Macedonia. According to an analysis conducted by the Broadcasting Agency in 2013, the Macedonian audience on average watched television for 4 hours and 27 minutes every day.³⁷ The 2013 figures on audience share in Macedonia revealed that the most watched were TV programmes aired by the channels perceived as pro-government. The most frequent choice of the Macedonian audience were programmes offered by TV Sitel (28.6%), followed by those of Kanal 5 TV (12.8%), and the public broadcaster MTV1 (9.0%). On the other

³⁴ Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, *Print Media Reports*.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ IREX, "Macedonia", 2015.

³⁷ Agency for Media Broadcasting, *Analysis of the Broadcasting Market for 2013*, p. 62; for the sake of comparison, the same year 79% of respondents said that their source of information on daily domestic and foreign events was television. These shares were significantly smaller for other types of media: 44% of respondents accessed news on a daily basis using the Internet, 20% by reading the print media, and only 8% by listening to the radio.

hand, TV Telma and Alsat-M TV, both private broadcasters with professional reporting, had an audience share of 3.0% and 5.3% respectively.

The numbers were similar in 2014, as indicated in the Analysis of the Audio and Audiovisual Media Services Market done by the Agency.³⁸ The analysis also puts TV Sitel (28.98%) and Kanal 5 TV (16.7%) at the top in terms of audience share. MTV1 experienced a dip in their ratings in 2014 (from 9.0% in 2013 down to 5.9% in 2014). Instead, Alsat-MTV was placed third with 5.97% in 2014.

The 2015 report³⁹ of the Agency for Audio and Audio-visual Media Services⁴⁰ shows that media close to the ruling party and the government attracted an overwhelming share of the TV audience in Macedonia.⁴¹ TV Sitel had the widest weekly audience reach in the third quarter of 2015 (53.3% of surveyed TV viewers indicated that they watched TV Sitel on a regular basis)⁴². Placed after TV Sitel was the second largest private broadcaster in the country, Kanal 5 TV (with a weekly audience reach of 45.5%), which, like TV Sitel, is known to pursue an editorial policy favouring VMRO-DPMNE, and the Public Broadcaster MTV 1, with a weekly audience reach of 19.5%. TV Telma, one of the few broadcasters that pursue a professional

³⁸ Agency for Media Broadcasting, *Analiza na pazarot na audio i audiovizuelni medijski uslugi za 2014 godina [Analysis of the Broadcasting Market for 2014]*.

³⁹ Data about the radio stations' reach and the share of satellite, regional, and local TV stations in the total viewership – 2015 Q3, available at: <http://avmu.org.mk/images/Q3.15 - Podatoci za dosegot na radiostanicite i udelot na sat. reg i lok. TV vo vkupnata gledanost.pdf> (accessed 6 November 2015).

⁴⁰ The data on the weekly audience reach was collected using the CATI method of phone interviews with computer assistance, using semi-structured questionnaires. The analysed sample included answers from 1,500 respondents.

⁴¹ Also indicated in reports by Transparency International Macedonia, OSCE/ODIHR EOM, and the IREX's MSI.

⁴² TV Sitel, the largest and most popular private broadcaster is known to pursue an editorial policy favourable towards the ruling party. According to the TI report, TV Sitel allocated to the ruling party 42% of its total political and election-related coverage, of which 77% was positive in tone.

and objective editorial policy, was placed fourth with a weekly audience reach of 17.8%. The media critical of the government reach a rather small section of the audience, and they are more common in the online media sphere. This situation offers limited opportunities for a proper public debate since matters of public interest are discussed and debated for the most part in these media. In such circumstances, citizens searching for a variety of opinions and views on matters of public interest turn to these media outlets, and especially the Internet.

1.4 Internet access and online journalism

Although TV still remains the primary source of information in Macedonia, the use of the Internet in Macedonian households is rapidly increasing. According to data published by the Macedonian State Office for Statistics in October 2015, 69.4% of households have Internet access at home, while 69.0% of households with Internet access have a broadband connection.⁴³ Furthermore, 70.4% of the total population aged 15-74 use the Internet, with a user share of 94.7% among pupils and students. The approximate number of inhabitants with Internet access is 1,057,000. Finally, there are over 1 million estimated Facebook profiles, although the actual number of individual users of the social network is probably around half a million.⁴⁴ There is no reliable data on the readership of online news media in Macedonia. The services (e.g. Alexa, Gemius) that measure the data on the average number of visitors on websites in the country cannot be considered as a completely reliable source and have therefore not been included in our analysis.

The online news media in Macedonia has seen a particular growth over the past few years. After the prices for Internet access dropped in 2005, the number of online outlets in Macedonia increased

⁴³ Usage of information and communication technologies by households and individuals, see: Državen zavod za statistika, “Koristenje na informatičko-komunikaciski tehnologii vo domakinstvata i kaj poedinci”.

⁴⁴ Albanian Media Institute, *Hate Speech in Online Media in South East Europe*.

significantly. Not only is Internet access increasing and the number of online media outlets growing, but the findings of a recent analysis also suggest that critical journalism in the country is for the most part to be found online.⁴⁵ This could in part be due to the online media sphere being the least regulated in the country. In addition, there are much fewer barriers (primarily financial and staff-related) to entry for online news compared to traditional media. However, online media, although offering more diversity and pluralism of news sources compared to the traditional media, still largely suffers from the same division along political lines.

In addition to the proliferation of critical online media outlets that adopt an investigative and analytical approach, numerous online news portals (such as Kurir.mk, Republika.mk) whose content exhibits clear favouritism towards the ruling party have also been launched in recent years.⁴⁶ The pro-government media are often accused of churning out content that originates from a single source and is redistributed across several online news portals with similar profiles.⁴⁷ In general, the quality of the content produced by online news portals does not seem to grow with the number of online news outlets. An analysis of the online media in Macedonia concluded that “investigative journalism or citizen journalism... are almost absent” from these media. The analysis further notes that when such content is produced by some online news portals, it is made possible through project-based grants from civil society organisations.⁴⁸

Although media ownership in the country is regulated in accordance with international standards and is for the most part transparent in the case of traditional media, the online media sector is the least transparent in terms of ownership structure. Findings of the 2014

⁴⁵ S. Trpevska and I. Mičevski, “Macedonia”.

⁴⁶ “Media, Money, and Secrets”, available at: http://www.mediapedia.mk/istrazuvanja/kurir-istrazuvanje_eng (accessed 6 November 2015).

⁴⁷ See IREX, “Macedonia”, 2015.

⁴⁸ Macedonian Institute for Media, *Macedonia in the Digital Age – Between the Rights and the Responsibilities of Communicating on Internet*.

Media Integrity Matters study show that most of the online media are owned by individual professional journalists, with the exception of *Telegraf.mk*, which is a separate digital publication of Media Print Macedonia (MPM), the publisher of three Macedonian daily newspapers (*Dnevnik*, *Utrinski vesnik*, and *Vest*). This type of ‘journalist ownership’ may imply that the owner is not motivated solely by profit considerations. At the same time, a cause for concern lies in the fact that for many online portals it is very difficult to identify the actual owners. In 2014, the investigative portal *MediaPedia* revealed that several pro-government online media outlets had been acquired by companies registered in tax havens, making it hard to identify the actual owners of these media. There are concerns that the hidden owners behind these online media might be high-ranking officials of the ruling party.⁴⁹

The marketing and advertising structures of the online media in Macedonia remain underdeveloped and underutilised. There is scarce information on the amount of money spent on advertising on online news portals (whether coming from state institutions or private companies), or on their primary sources of revenue.

⁴⁹ Research by *MediaPedia* showed that the publisher of *Kurir.mk* was the company EM MEDIA DOOEL. The company is formally owned by Aco Misajlovski, brother of Vlado Misajlovski, current Minister of Transport and Communications and member of VMRO-DPMNE. See more at <http://www.mediapedia.mk/sopstvenici/> (accessed 11 October 2015).

2. OVERVIEW OF MAJOR PROTESTS IN MACEDONIA IN THE LAST TWO DECADES

We will here give a short overview of previous protests in order to provide a context for the recent citizen protests that are the focus of our analysis. Since it gained independence, Macedonia has witnessed a number of cases of citizen mobilisation, predominantly based on ethnic origin, with civic protests becoming more frequent in recent years, culminating in the 2014 student protests. Other recent cases include the 2011 protests against police brutality, triggered by the murder of Martin Neskovski during the celebrations of VMRO-DPMNE's election victory held at Skopje Square. Also relevant are the 2012 protests against electricity and district heating price hikes. Recently, there have been a series of anti-government protests that started as a result of audio recordings leaked by the opposition. The protest groups gathered every day at 6 pm and marched in front of several state institutions to express their dissatisfaction with the manner in which government officials involved in the leaked recordings behaved. Some of the recordings were related to the investigation into the killing of Martin Neskovski, while others included instances of hate speech by public officials.

In the 1990s, one of the most prominent and massive citizen actions were the 1997 university and high-school student protests. They were staged against a government decision to introduce a law

that allowed studies in Albanian at Skopje's Faculty of Education.⁵⁰ The protests culminated in a rally staged in front of several key state institutions attended by several thousand university and high-school students. However, the government did not accept their demands and did not revoke the proposed law, instead largely ignoring their pleas and refusing a serious discussion on the matter. For this reason, the students staged a hunger strike that lasted around 15 days, again with no result. The proposed law was submitted for review to the Constitutional Court, which subsequently decided not to initiate proceedings in the matter, thus acknowledging the legality of the law.

The student protests in November 2014 were the first massive protests since 1997. They also provoked other groups of citizens to mobilise around various causes (e.g., journalists' plenum, professors' plenum, and citizens' plenum).⁵¹ Several months later, in February 2015, Macedonia was faced with a severe political crisis, involving the strongest anti-government sentiments and demands.⁵² Starting with the student protests and the turmoil that commenced

⁵⁰ The Law on the Usage of the Languages of Minorities at the Faculty of Education in Skopje (proposed by the SDSM, the ruling party at the time) provided for studies in Albanian at the Faculty of Education and allowed minorities to study in their mother tongue. The draft law provoked a massive student rally against the enforcement of the law, which the protesters claimed was contrary to the Constitution. The leaders of the movement noted that minorities were already guaranteed the right to study in their native language during elementary and high school education. The student movement, led by the president of the Students' Association, Mirjana Kitanovska, demanded that the law be revoked. Furthermore, they demanded the drafting of a new law on higher education and the resignation of the then Minister of Education, Sofija Todorova. For a more detailed socio-political background to the 1997 protests, see D. Nikolovski, *The Student Protests in Macedonia, Serbia, and Bulgaria in 1996/1997: the Interplay between Liberalism and Nationalism*.

⁵¹ Apart from the student plenum and the professors' plenum, the other initiatives were much less active and did not undertake regular activities.

⁵² According to 2014 polls by the Rating Agency in collaboration with Focus Magazine, 54% of surveyed citizens did not approve of the work done by the Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski in the period 2011-2014, while 41,2% of them approved of his work during that period. See more at <http://www.rating.mk/en/> (accessed 6 September 2015).

in February 2015, there has been mounting dissatisfaction with the government and numerous protests occurred in the months that followed. The crisis unfolded after Zoran Zaev, the SDSM leader, accused the government of running an illegal mass surveillance programme and monitoring the phone calls of more than 20,000 people over a four-year period. During the several months that followed, Zaev leaked numerous recordings of phone calls made by government officials and made allegations that the government and the secret service had conspired to undermine the judiciary and rig media coverage in order to retain power. Nikola Gruevski, the Macedonian Prime Minister, accused Zaev of orchestrating a coup with foreign intelligence agencies in order to overthrow the government, and pressed espionage charges against him.⁵³ As far as the authenticity of the leaked recordings is concerned, the Prime Minister stated for the media that “some of the leaked material is true, some is partly true, and the rest is false”. There are still no official reports by reliable experts about the authenticity of the phone calls.

On May 5, 2015, at least 1,000 people gathered in front of the government headquarters, demanding the resignation of the Prime Minister. The protest was held as a result of the release by Zaev of an audio file earlier on the same day, which accused the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Interior of attempting to cover up the death of the 22-year-old Martin Neskovski.⁵⁴ The protest turned violent during the night as demonstrators clashed with police forces in riot gear. The police used tear gas and water cannons to disperse the protestors and arrested dozens of people. During their efforts to track down protestors, the police forcefully entered the city library ‘Brakja Miladinovci’ and proceeded to attack and arrest students who were there at night studying for their exams.

⁵³ The case is still in its early stages.

⁵⁴ Neskovski was beaten to death by a police officer during a post-election celebration in 2011.

The political crisis culminated with a massive protest held on May 17 in front of the government building, when tens of thousands⁵⁵ of protesters demanded Gruevski's resignation. On May 18, the ruling party, VMRO-DPMNE, staged a large-scale pro-government rally, attended by thousands of people, during which the SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE set up their camps in front of the government building and the Macedonian Assembly, respectively. Finally, the leaders of the VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM reached an agreement to end the crisis after several weeks of negotiations mediated by the EU.⁵⁶ Following the Pržino⁵⁷ agreement, the frequency of anti-government protests dropped significantly. In the wake of the agreement, the public largely focused on the negotiations between the political parties regarding various measures that needed to be taken prior to the new elections (e.g., clean-up of electoral lists, ensuring the independent functioning of relevant state bodies, and greater media freedom).

At the time of finalisation of this report, mass protests were taking place in several cities in Macedonia, after the decision by President Gjorge Ivanov to pardon officials involved in the

⁵⁵ There are various estimates as to the number of protesters attending the May 17 protest, ranging from 20,000 to 60,000. See S. J. Marušić, "Macedonians Stage Mass Protest for PM's Resignation" and G. Johnzon, "40,000 People March in Skopje Demanding Immediate Resignation of Government". Russia Today (RT) published a drone video of the protests <http://www.rt.com/news/259421-macedonia-opposition-rally-gruevski/> (accessed 6 September 2015).

⁵⁶ The agreement included plans to hold parliamentary elections on April 24, 2016. The incumbent government was obliged to resign 100 days prior to the elections and elect a new prime minister. In January 2016, the new government was sworn in, along with the new PM, Emil Dimitrov, its programme limited to the organisation of the parliamentary elections. The agreement also envisaged the election of a Special Prosecutor, appointed with the consent of the parties. The prosecutor was vested with full autonomy to lead the investigations surrounding and arising from the intercepted phone calls and to take legal action if necessary. After several rounds of talks with the European mediators, the elections were postponed to 5 June. Meanwhile, in February 2016, the Special Prosecutor's Office accused a number of high-ranking officials and two former ministers of attempts to rig the 2013 local elections. The officials were accused of violating the election law, bribery, misuse of funds during election campaigns, and destroying electoral materials.

⁵⁷ Name of the Macedonian village where the agreement was reached.

wiretapping scandal. These protests voiced fresh demands towards the officials and included communication challenges on all sides.

2.1 CASES OF PROTESTS SELECTED FOR THE ANALYSIS

The cases of protests analysed in this research project have all taken place in Macedonia in the past few years. They have been selected based primarily on their socio-political relevance and their scale. In comparison with earlier protests that had an ethnic background (e.g. the 1997 protests), the movements subject to analysis in this chapter exhibit special features in part due the fact that they gathered people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, the student protests selected for the analysis had provoked the forming of other protest groups (e.g., professors' plenum, journalists' plenum) that staged protests of their own. In addition, protests took place with an increased frequency beginning from the second half of 2014, especially with the start of the political crisis in early 2015.

The primary case presented below was the focus of our research and was analysed more extensively, by means of content analysis, interviews, and review of secondary sources. The two secondary cases, on the other hand, were addressed through interviews and secondary sources only and for the purpose of comparison of communication practices. The anti-government protests staged in May 2015 have not been included in the analysis since they were staged when our research project was already in its advanced stages.

2.1.1. Primary case: Student protests against higher education reform

The primary case study, the student protests that started in November 2014, were the largest student protests in Macedonia since it gained independence. Thousands of students protested against proposed amendments to the Law on Higher Education, notably those that

introduced mandatory externally-supervised tests, i.e., ‘state exams’, for both Bachelor and Master’s students. Shortly after the amendments had been presented in public, the students launched a plenum, suggesting that the amendments were unconstitutional and violated university autonomy. More than 2,000 protestors marched outside several government buildings on November 17, 2014, ending their rally in front of the Ministry of Education. After being largely ignored at first, the students’ cause finally received more attention from the media and the government thanks to the unexpected high turnout. The movement continued to gather momentum predominantly through social media, as the student plenum attracted the support of more than 23,000 citizens on Facebook.⁵⁸

The government tried to stifle the protests by declaring that the envisaged exams would not be enforced before 2017 and would therefore not be applicable to the current generation of students. Moreover, using their influence over the media through which they most often delivered their positions, i.e., TV Sitel and Kanal 5, they continuously tried to discredit the protests as being party-political and funded by the Soros foundation. These accusations were never supported with substantial evidence, but were merely used to divert the public’s attention away from the cause of the protest and to prevent further mobilisation. As we will elaborate in the research findings, the students succeeded in defeating these particular accusations with various creative tactics (e.g., using red paper circles to parody the efforts of some media to label them as party-orchestrated). In any case, allegations of political orchestration of protests are a well-known tactic used by the ruling party to discredit protests that express dissatisfaction with its policies.⁵⁹ However, these efforts not only failed to

⁵⁸ Source: student plenum Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/%D0%A1%D1%82%D1%83%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%82%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8-%D0%9F%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%83%D0%BC-1553840998179517/?fref=ts> (accessed 8 October 2015).

⁵⁹ See for example *NovaTV*, “Ristovski: bevme svedoci na nov protest, no so seriozna...”, and *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, “Gruevski – Najaveniot studentski protest e partiski motiviran”, as well as *Fokus*, “VMRO-DPMNE: zaev ne kaža ništo za parite od SOROS”.

demotivate the students, but even fuelled their resolve to oppose the amendments. As a result, they scheduled another protest rally for December 10, 2014. The protests peaked on that day, with more than 12,000 students, members of academia, and other citizens attending the march in Skopje.⁶⁰ Professors from numerous universities and other higher education institutions in the country supportive of the student plenum and its demands formed their own protest group (professors' plenum) that consisted of more than 500 professors and academics. In response, professors who were in favour of the proposed education reform launched a 'Citizens' Initiative in Support of Knowledge in Higher Education'. This initiative caused some controversy when several professors who had supposedly signed the declaration launching the initiative claimed that their signatures had been forged.

The Parliament eventually adopted the amendments to the law, ignoring the outcry of the students and members of academia. As a result, on February 11, 2015, more than 1,000 students occupied the state university in Skopje, demanding the immediate suspension of the education reform. The students proclaimed the occupied departments as "autonomous students' territory" and throughout the occupation organised alternative lectures, concerts, and other events. After a meeting held on February 24, 2015 between the student plenum, the professors' plenum, the chancellor of the University of Skopje and the Ministers of Education and Finance, the government agreed to abandon the implementation of the external tests.⁶¹ The students ended their occupation of the university, but continued to organise various events on university premises, including alternative lectures.⁶² The student plenum is still

⁶⁰ S. J. Marušić, "Student Protest Blocks Macedonian Capital".

⁶¹ Furthermore, they agreed to delay the implementation of other provisions envisaged in the amendments, such as those pertaining to the number of articles professors are obliged to publish in international journals with a certain impact factor in order to be awarded academic titles or to retain their tenure.

⁶² During their occupation of the University, the student plenum regularly invited professors to hold lectures on various topics related to higher education (e.g., relevance of the ECTS system, student housing issues). Moreover, they organised concerts, theatre shows, and film screenings.

organising debates and lectures on topics related to higher education, inviting professors, members of academia, and public officials to take part in their events.

All of the parties involved agreed to prepare an entirely new Law on Higher Education, to be drafted by working groups consisting of representatives of the student plenum, the professors' plenum, the University, and the Ministry of Education. In May 2015, the student plenum announced that they were withdrawing from the negotiations because, according to them, the Ministry of Education and the government intentionally stalled the progress of the negotiations. In August 2015, the government postponed for the second time the entry into force of the new provisions of the Law on Higher Education, until 2017. Some see this postponement as a consequence of the current unstable political climate in the country and of the fact that early parliamentary elections are expected to take place in 2016. The new law has still not been drafted as of this writing, and the negotiations have slowed down largely due to the preparations for the elections, scheduled firstly for April 2016, later postponed to June 2016, and again postponed indefinitely in May 2016, being boycotted by the opposition parties.

The student plenum also supported and joined several other civic protests in the country, most notably the mass anti-government protests and the protests against the imprisonment of journalist Tomislav Kezarovski (the latter case is included in this analysis), both held in 2015. The student plenum staged a protest march on May 17, 2015, but later joined the anti-government protests held in front of the government headquarters, which involved demands for the resignation of the Prime Minister. Students were in particular rallying against the imprisonment of their student colleagues who had been arrested on May 5, when a protest included a demand for the resignation of the Minister of Interior at the time, Gordana Jankulovska. The protestors gathered after the opposition party SDSM released alleged wiretapped phone recordings that suggested a plot to cover up official responsibility for the killing of Martin Neskovski by a policeman on June 6, 2011. The May 5 protest turned violent in the evening when armoured police forces tried to disperse protesters with

water cannons and tear gas, after the protestors had thrown various objects at the government building. The police apprehended dozens of protestors (some of them students), and some of them were charged with partaking in a group riot and obstructing official police business.⁶³

2.2 Secondary cases: ‘I love GTC’ and protests against the imprisonment of Tomislav Kezarovski

An additional two cases were analysed based on secondary sources and interviews. Although these cases were smaller in scope than the student protests, their social relevance is considerable, since they managed to provoke a public debate and to engage the citizenry in various ways.

Several thousand citizens protested in June 2013 against the announced plan of the government to reshape the exterior of one of the largest and most visited shopping centres in the country, Skopje’s City Shopping Centre (GTC), built in 1973. According to the plans of the government, the open entrances to the GTC were to be covered in neoclassical, or ‘baroque’ style, Classical Antiquity-inspired pillars and domes, as part of the ongoing Skopje 2014 project for a makeover of the capital’s exterior. The June 2013 event represented the peak of the protests and was initiated by the Association of Macedonian Architects (AMA), but was also joined by many human rights activists as well as members of the arts community. During the protest, in a symbolic gesture, the protesters joined hands to form a human chain around the state-owned shopping centre, which marked the beginning of the ‘I Love GTC’ campaign. The protests contested the plans for reshaping the exterior of the centre because, as they argued, it was one of the last remaining symbols of original Macedonian architecture and part of the country’s cultural heritage. Moreover, they argued that the new plans would severely restrict the freedom of movement of citizens, since GTC, situated at the heart of

⁶³ Eight of the arrested persons were sentenced to one-year parole which, if violated, leads to a sentence of between three months and three years of imprisonment. One person was convicted to a ten-month prison sentence.

Skopje, is a transit point with several open entrances, which make it easy for pedestrians to traverse the city centre.

On December 28, 2014, more than 1,000 citizens gathered for a second time, staging a mass ‘hugging’ of the GTC, thus continuing the series of events started in 2013 with the aim to stall the makeover project. The protest succeeded in forcing a referendum on the issue that was held on April 26, but eventually failed due to low turnout in the Centre Municipality of Skopje (approximately 40%). Official data, however, show that more than 95% of the citizens who did vote supported the initiative for keeping the authentic GTC facade. So far, there has not been any official statement from the government about the pending renovation of GTC. Andrej Zernovski, the Mayor of the Centre Municipality, has stated that they will continue to fight to preserve the look of the GTC, regardless of the failed referendum.⁶⁴ The municipality has largely supported the efforts of the ‘I Love GTC’ protesters. It is relevant to mention that the Mayor is a leader of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), whose members often contest the politics of the ruling party, VMRO-DPMNE.

Another case selected for the secondary analysis are the October 2013 protests against the imprisonment of the investigative journalist of Nova Makedonija, Tomislav Kezarovski. Hundreds of journalists and citizens protested in Skopje after Kezarovski was sentenced to four and a half years in prison for revealing the identity of a protected witness. Wearing black shirts and carrying burning candles, the protesters wanted to symbolically mark the ‘funeral of democracy’, referring to the consequences that this case could have for media freedom and free speech. However, riot police prevented demonstrators from reaching their destination, the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle for Independence, in an otherwise peaceful protest.

Kezarovski was imprisoned for having revealed the identity of a supposed protected witness ('Breza') in a murder trial, in two articles he had written in 2008. In the articles, he quoted an internal police report that had been leaked to him.⁶⁵ Kezarovski claimed that he did not reveal the identity of the witness, but only provided the public with information about a "false" protected witness, in order to provoke a discussion about "shady police dealings".⁶⁶ At the time of his arrest, Kezarovski was also investigating the case of Nikola Mladenov, the publisher of the weekly Fokus who died in a car accident two months earlier. Even though some doubted that the car crash was an accident, there has been no evidence proving the existence of a plot.

Kezarovski was first arrested in May 2013. He spent 30 days in detention while the police investigated the charges, but his detention was prolonged three times. Each time it was done for an additional 30-day period under the pretence that he may "escape or influence other witnesses". Kezarovski went on a hunger strike in order to draw attention to the "absurdity"⁶⁷ of his situation. In October 2013, almost five months after his initial arrest, the Criminal Court found Kezarovski guilty and sentenced him to four and a half years in prison. Numerous international organisations condemned his imprisonment as a serious blow to democracy and free speech. Among them were the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, the European Federation of Journalists, Reporters without Borders. Journalists and media professionals from the country set up an Initiative Board for the Release of Tomislav Kezarovski. In November 2013, Kezarovski was placed under house arrest and awaited the final decision of the Court of Appeals, where his case was under review. On January 15, 2015, the Court upheld Kezarovski's guilty verdict but reduced the initial sentence to two

⁶⁵ Kezarovski refused to reveal the identity of the source that had leaked the police reports to him.

⁶⁶ It should be noted that the witness had not yet been given police protection at the time when the article was published.

⁶⁷ As referenced by Kezarovski's wife, Marina Kezarovska. See more S. J. Marušić, "Detained Macedonian Journalist Starts Hunger Strike".

years of imprisonment. He was imprisoned again, which incited protests that peaked on January 20, when approximately 3,000 people marched in Skopje demanding his immediate release. Surprisingly, the same day, the director of the prison took the decision to release Kezarovski on health grounds,⁶⁸ even though Kezarovski himself did not voice any health complaints. After being released, Kezarovski immediately joined the ongoing protests. On January 22, 2015, only two days after his release, Kezarovski was freed when the Criminal Court in Skopje approved the recommendation of the prison director, who sought parole for Kezarovski for the remainder of his sentence, which was three months and eight days.

Kezarovski's case is currently being pending before the Supreme Court, after his attorneys submitted a request for evaluation of the initial verdicts of the Primary and Appellate Courts that declared Kezarovski guilty and sentenced him to prison.

⁶⁸ However, Kezarovski was told to report back to prison a month later in order to finish serving his sentence.

3. SAMPLING AND METHODS

By applying frame analysis (for the case of student protests only) and in-depth interviews (for all the three cases), we identified the dominant frames used in media content and gained insights into the perception of the communication practices of journalists, activists, and public officials. We conducted a total of 17 in-depth semi-structured interviews with seven editors, journalists, and media experts; seven activists; and four representatives of state and public institutions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for the purposes of the analysis. The initial plan was to conduct seven interviews with public officials, but this was not possible since four officials/institutions refused the interview request.⁶⁹ The respondents were able to choose whether to disclose their name and the name of their organisation/institution. Two interviewees from the media requested complete anonymity, while two public officials requested their names not to be revealed but allowed for the institution from which they came to be identified.

The media content analysis sample (concerning student protests only) included five TV stations that are Macedonia's most watched⁷⁰ and three online media outlets, two of which are perceived as critical towards the government and one as pro-government. The selected TV stations were primarily those with the largest audience reach. Furthermore, we included

⁶⁹ The public officials we initially planned to interview refused on the grounds of lack of authorisation or due to other work engagements that required their full attention. Such responses came from the City of Skopje and the Basic Court Skopje 1, as well as the Ministry of Education. A representative of the Basic Court responded that the Court “cannot respond to any inquiries about the student, or other, protests because they’re not in any way related to the court and there was no need to communicate with the media about these protests, since other institutions are responsible in those cases”. The State Education Inspectorate also refused to participate in the interviews.

⁷⁰ Audience reach figures from the Analysis of the Market of Audio and Audiovisual Media Services in 2014 (*Analiza na pazarot na audio i audiovizuelni medijski uslugi za 2014 godina [Analysis of the Broadcasting Market for 2014]*).

media with different editorial policies: those perceived as favouring the government, as well as those that do not show bias or favouritism towards any political party and/or are often critical towards the government's policies.⁷¹ Some of the analysed media also have different types of ownership (some are owned by journalists, others by businessmen). The TV sample inevitably included the public service broadcaster MTV1 (5.85% audience reach in 2014), considered as pro-government, i.e., the central news in Macedonian, but also the private Alsat-M TV, the Albanian broadcaster (third in viewership ratings with 5.97%, according to the Agency's market research) that broadcasts its programme country-wide, both in Macedonian and Albanian.⁷² The analysis also includes Kanal 5 TV (16.71% audience reach in 2014) and the most popular TV Sitel (28.98% audience reach in 2014), both considered as pro-government. Another private TV broadcaster, TV Telma (5.30% audience reach), was included as one of the media with an editorial stance more critical towards the government. Of the online media outlets, our sample included Kurir.mk, an online news portal that shows extreme bias in favour of the ruling party. On the other hand, it also included PlusInfo.mk and NovaTV.mk, whose content does not show distinct bias towards any political party but is often critical towards VMRO-DPMNE. Both NovaTV.mk and Plusinfo.mk are owned by journalists, as opposed to most of the other analysed media, which are owned by businessmen or persons with links to politicians.

⁷¹ To identify these media outlets, we used the references from the OSCE/ODIHR EOM final report.

⁷² Due to the limited sample for analysis envisaged within the project, we were unable to analyse their programmes in Albanian.

Media	Number of analysed news items
TV media outlets	
TV Sitel	3
Kanal 5 TV	3
MTV I (public broadcaster)	3
TV Telma	12
Alsat-M TV	4
Online news media outlets	
Kurir.mk	12
NovaTV.mk	12
Plusinfo.mk	4
Total: 53	

Table of media content sample

The media sample we analysed encompassed the ‘peaks’ of the protests, i.e., the days on which the protests were the largest, most eventful, and covered most intensely by Macedonian media. Our sample included all articles and news related to the analysed cases of protests published and broadcast during the preceding day (December 9, 2014), the day the protest was held (December 10, 2014), as well as the following day (December 11, 2014).

Due to the limited scope of the project, we were not able to include in our sample the news programmes of the public service broadcaster in the languages of ethnic minorities, or the print media. Instead, the sample focused on the TV media with the largest audience reach and the most prominent online media. While the results cannot be generalised to all media content concerning student protests, they provide insights into different patterns of reporting on the protests. In addition, the results of the interviews provide insights into the current understanding of communication during protests, as seen by citizens/protesters, journalists, and officials.

4. RESULTS OF PRIMARY RESEARCH

The analysis of the media content provided insights into the dominant frames of media reporting on student protests. The dominant framing by the media perceived as favourable towards the government was that the student protests were orchestrated by a political party and not led by a legitimate protest initiative (see Table 1). These media were focused primarily on defending the proposed state exam, without providing any additional insights into how the exams would improve the quality of higher education in the country. They tried to delegitimise the protest on 28 occasions by claiming that it was led by the opposition party and the Soros foundation. Moreover, they made discrediting claims about a reportedly insignificant number of protest supporters and even tried to single out protest participants who were in any way related to the opposition, in order to support their claim that there were party-political interests involved in the protests.

Main frames	No	Subframes	No
Protests politically orchestrated	28	Student protests initiated by SDSM and Soros	15
		Fiasco and failure due to low turnout of students	6
		Protest against higher education reform and the Macedonian government	4
		Students manipulated for partisan purposes	3
Low quality of higher education	8	State exam will enhance the quality of higher education	4
		State exam will improve evaluation of knowledge	3
		State exam will solve the problem of 'bought' diplomas	1
Need for public debate	10	Public debate that will involve all stakeholders to define a state exam concept	7
		Extensive academic debate to upgrade the education system	3

Table 1: *Diagnosis frames on TV Sitel, Kanal 5 TV, MTV1 and Kurir.mk*

Note: While the number of overall news items included in this table is 21, the number of identified frames is larger (N=46) given that more than one frame is identified in most of the media items.

TV Telma, Alsat-M TV, Plusinfo, and NovaTV.mk in general provided more detailed accounts of the protests; presented the ideas, messages, and demands of the protesters; and covered all of the activities of the student plenum. They at times criticised the government for hastily introducing education reforms without considering the legal mechanisms already in place that would achieve the same goals, and also voiced concerns that the new reforms might jeopardise university autonomy (see Table 2).

Main frames	No	Subframes	No
Government's bad reforms	12	Hasty and inconsistent policy reforms in higher education	7
		State exam will decrease quality of higher education	5
Violating university autonomy	12	State exam proposed by the government violates the autonomy of universities	6
		Government ignoring opposing views	6
Pressure by the Government	13	Pressure on high school students not to support the student march	8
		Party labelling of students by the government	5
Unifying multiethnic protest	8	The biggest protest so far not based on religion or ethnicity	5
		Protest against democratic failures in the country	3

Table 2: *Diagnosis frames on TV Telma, Alsat-M TV, NovaTV.mk and Plusinfo*

Note: While the number of overall news items included in this table is 32, the number of identified frames is larger (N=45) given that more than one frame is identified in some of the media items.

In the following subchapters, the main frames concerning civic protests identified in the analysed media will be explored further.

4.1 The protests: media framing and perception

An overwhelming majority of the respondents (from all the three groups: journalists, activists, and government officials) view protests in general as one of the cornerstones of modern democracies. According to Todor Pendarov, the role of protests is “critical in the general democratic processes in a normal country”.⁷³ Some of the respondents consider protests as the expression of a certain attitude or dissatisfaction with government policies. As some of the interviewees stated, lack of an active citizenry, or lack of movements that freely voice their concerns, is tantamount to a “lack of democracy...”.⁷⁴ The respondent from the Centre Municipality believes that protests can “enliven the democratic capacity or the democratic climate in a particular country”.⁷⁵ Some of the respondents pointed out the role of protests as a means of putting pressure on the government: “One of the roles of protests is to show that a certain number of people stand behind the cause they’re fighting for and aim to change something, which is not something that suits the decision-makers.”⁷⁶

Several of the respondents agree that the primary case, i.e., the student protests, was the most significant event in Macedonia’s recent history. Some of them noted that the protests and initiatives launched in the last period had awakened something that had been missing in Macedonian society: the public’s awareness of problems in the society, their legal rights, and the right to freely voice their concerns about how they thought those rights were being violated. Tamara Causidis from the Independent Trade Union of Journalists and Media Workers, also a member of the Initiative Board for the Release of Tomislav Kezarovski, notes: “For the first time since this country gained independence,

⁷³ Interview with Todor Pendarov, PR advisor at the Macedonian Assembly, 9 April 2015.

⁷⁴ Interview with Konstantin Bitrakov, representative of the student plenum, 8 May 2015.

⁷⁵ Interview with Katerina Canevska, representative of the Centre Municipality, 14 March 2014.

⁷⁶ Interview with Nikola Pisarev, spokesperson of the ‘I love GTC’ initiative, 3 April 2015.

the citizen and public awareness is starting to come alive in Macedonia [and] able to articulate its interest.”⁷⁷

The media reporting on the protests, however, did not reflect this enthusiasm. Media outlets in Macedonia were largely divided into two camps in terms of how they framed the protests and protest groups. The frame of party-political orchestration of the protests was dominant in the first group of media (TV Sitel, MTV1, Kanal 5, Kurir), while the second group (Telma, Alsat, NovaTV.mk, Plusinfo) offered different accounts of the protests and the groups that led them, involving various sources (public officials, students, university professors). They later often critically approached the education reforms that had led to the student protests, and in general provided more information about the ideology, reasons, and demands of the protesters.

4.1.1. Anti-protest, pro-government framing

TV Sitel, Kanal 5, MTV1, and Kurir largely ignored the protesters and their demands in their reporting during the protest. They reported on protest events only rarely (in three reports), while demands and motives were ignored even more by these media (only one report) and the turnout figures diminished in some of the reports. The protests were generally framed as politically orchestrated and directed against the Macedonian government, while the concept of the state exam proposed by the government was largely framed in a positive light.

4.1.1.a. Politically orchestrated protests

Both the frame analysis and the inputs from a majority of the interviewees indicate that the media known to favour the ruling party predominantly framed the protests as politically

⁷⁷ Interview with Tamara Causidis, representative of the Initiative Board for the Release of Tomislav Kezarovski, 3 April 2015.

instrumentalised. In the analysed media sample, TV Sitel, Kanal 5, MTV1, and Kurir belong to this group. Of the 21 analysed online articles and TV news reports published by these four media outlets on December 9-11, 13 referred to political instrumentalisation. It was often specified that the Soros foundation was the primary funder of the protest groups. The protesters were named ‘Sorosoids’, implying they were both financially supported by the Soros foundation and promoting its political agenda. In addition, the protests were framed as being supported by high-ranking officials and supporters of the opposition SDSM. Typical examples were reporting by TV Sitel indicating that most of the citizen initiatives have a party-political background and are being abused for partisan goals by the opposition SDSM and their structures financed by Soros, or reporting by website Kurir.mk including claims that the student protests were used for partisan goals, that the student plenum was funded by the Soros foundation and that the march was directly initiated by the SDSM. Some of the illustrative titles of media reports include: *The Opposition Scored Political Points Off the Students’ Backs – Their Entire Logistics Were Placed at Their Disposal* (TV Sitel); *Student or Opposition Protests?, Soros Propagandists in the Front Rows of the Protests, Is the Student Plenum Using Soros Money to Pay for Advertisements in Opposition Media?* (Kurir).

Interviewees pointed out that government officials had repeatedly sought to discredit the student protests with their alleged party-political orchestration.⁷⁸ Maja Vaseva from Plusinfo believes the framing of the protests as party-political came from the highest echelons of the government: “Both the Minister of Education and the Prime Minister did that. They tried to qualify the protests as party-orchestrated. They attributed them to the opposition and some organisations that they associate with the opposition.”⁷⁹ According to a statement by Prime Minister Gruevski given in December 2014: “It becomes increasingly clear that the group that will come out to the next protest is deeply party-motivated. Most of them are from the

⁷⁸ Interview with Darko Malinovski, representative of the student plenum, 3 March 2015.

⁷⁹ Interview with Maja Vaseva, journalist of the online news portal Plusinfo.mk, 2 April 2015.

youth wings of the SDSM and other opposition parties or are in other ways motivated by the institutions that finance Vladimir Milčín and the Soros foundation in the Republic of Macedonia.”⁸⁰ The media framing of political instrumentalisation can be attributed partly to the practice of transmitting statements given by officials without any critical journalistic review. However, the findings show that reporters of the media considered affiliated with the government reproduced this framing themselves without referring to other sources. By contrast, the frame of political instrumentalisation of protests was not identified in the reporting of TV Telma, Alsat-M TV, NovaTV, and Plusinfo.

The other two cases of protests discussed in this chapter were not framed as political instrumentalisation. In the case of Kezarovski, the interviews suggest that it was solidarity with protesting journalists that ensured their positive representation in the media and prevented claims of political instrumentalisation. Regardless of their political affiliation, media outlets showed interest in covering the Kezarovski case, either actively supporting pleas for his release or informing about the protests without framing them in a negative manner. The media perceived as pro-government did not actively endorse the Board’s efforts to have Kezarovski released, but neither did they try to discredit them.⁸¹

Some of the interviewees who had been with the Initiative Board for his release noted that “thanks to the fact that he [Kezarovski] is a fellow journalist, we had a large number of interested media, irrespective of their political affiliations”⁸² and that “professional solidarity”⁸³ worked to their advantage. The second reason that the case was not framed as party-political

⁸⁰ R. F. “Gruevski – Najaveniot studentski protest e partiski motiviran”.

⁸¹ This was noted despite the claims by some respondents that the Kezarovski case was “used in someone else’s political battle”, a reference to opposition party members calling for his release or attending the protests. Interview with Marjan Nikolovski, news editor at TV Sitel, 15 April 2015.

⁸² Interview with Zoran Dimitrovski, editor of the weekly Fokus, 6 April 2015.

⁸³ Interview with Tamara Causidis.

was that it was not clearly anti-government in comparison with the student protests. Instead, some of the respondents argue that the government tried to distort the image of Kezarovski as an influential journalist and to diminish his role in critical journalism in the country. In the words of an interviewee: “The government wanted to say that it had no reason to quarrel with a journalist who had never criticised them and wasn’t literate, and that he wasn’t a well-known journalist in the first place.”⁸⁴ In the case of the ‘I love GTC’ protests, anti-government sentiments were present, but they were focused exclusively on the issue of the “baroquisation” of the GTC as part of the government-led project ‘Skopje 2014’, which attracted a lot of criticism because of the excessive spending of state funds on the construction of monuments, sculptures, facades, and new buildings. Some interviewees also note that these protests were the least susceptible to political delegitimation since they were the “most legitimate form of citizen activism”,⁸⁵ without elaborating on what determines such legitimacy.

As regards the student protests, two sub-frames supporting the general frame of political instrumentalisation can be identified in the analysed media reports: students were uninformed and/or unaware of being orchestrated by a political party, and turnout for the protests was low.

Students uninformed and/or unaware of being orchestrated by a political party

This sub-frame, under the general frame of political instrumentalisation, is strongly patronising towards the students. Media content indicating political manipulation and party-political influence on the student protests was often associated with claims that students were uninformed about the proposed state exam and its implications for the education system and/or unaware that they were being politically manipulated.

⁸⁴ Interview with Zoran Dimitrovski.

⁸⁵ Interview with Marjan Nikolovski.

Kanal 5, for example, reported that the students were not aware what they were protesting against, adding that the manipulation concerning changes in higher education should stop.⁸⁶ In a similar tone, MTV1 reported that the students were protesting against the state exam even though no specific model of state exam had been established yet.⁸⁷ Kurir.mk described the protests as unjustified and pointless and a result of political obstruction, suggesting that the students were ultimately protesting against the right and the obligation of the state to introduce evaluation of the quality of higher education. Along with claims about so-called civic initiatives that abuse independent thought in Macedonia for their party goals, Kurir writes: “Manipulation, distortion of the reforms and intimidation, along with a lot of funding and infrastructure provided by the SDSM, used by party soldiers sent to the protest to manipulate the students for their party’s goals”.⁸⁸ TV Sitel also indicated the unwillingness of students to examine in-depth the quality of the state exam proposal, thus framing the student protests as politically immature and uninformed.⁸⁹

Failure of the opposition to garner support for the protests

Under the frame of political instrumentalisation, another dominant sub-frame of TV Sitel, Kanal 5 TV, MTV1, and Kurir.mk⁹⁰ was that of the total failure of the protest due to the small turnout and poor support by the students, despite the maximum efforts of the opposition party to ensure massive attendance. The claims that the protests were not large

⁸⁶ *Kanal 5 TV*, “Vesti 18:00: Klimovski: konceptot na državen ispit e korekten”.

⁸⁷ *MTV1*, “Vesti 19:30”, 9 December 2014.

⁸⁸ *Kurir*, “PHOTO: All of SDSM and SOROS out to Protest with the Students”.

⁸⁹ *TV Sitel*, “Vesti 19:00: Bez incidenti završi protestot protiv državniot ispit”, 10 December 2014.

⁹⁰ The strongest distinguishing feature of Kurir.mk vis-à-vis the other two analysed online news portals (NovaTV.mk and Plusinfo.mk) is that it has a distinct editorial policy (showing bias towards VMRO-DPMNE) and is owned by a person close to a public official who is a member of the ruling party. On the other hand, NovaTV.mk and Plusinfo.mk are owned by journalists and their editorial policies do not show bias towards any political party.

and that only 2% of the total number of students in the country protested were part of the framing of the protest itself as illegitimate, i.e., as a sort of ‘problem’ in itself. These media claimed that the SDSM had to recruit and bus in pensioners as reinforcements for the protest. Moreover, they claimed that “opposition web portals”⁹¹ contradicted one another with inconsistent figures about protest attendance. TV Sitel also reported on the involvement of journalists in the organisation of the protests: “This morning all Soros journalists got the task from the SDSM to stand in front of all high schools and to pressure high school students into coming out and protesting so the opposition party does not live through another fiasco.”⁹²

This reporting typically involved pointing to the incongruity between the level of organisation of the protests and the low turnout: “The entire logistics of the SDSM and all of the money of Soros were not enough for the opposition party to gather even two percent of the total number of students in the country at today’s protest.”⁹³; claims about the recruitment of different profiles of participants: “To gain a higher turnout at the protest, besides party members, SDSM sent to the streets the people they regularly bring to all of their protests. ...In order not to be short of people, the protest included the so-called redundant workers of the SDSM from Kumanovo who regularly come to all protests in Skopje...” as well as analyses on how unsuccessful the mobilisation was: “In Macedonia, according to official data, there are 60,000 university students and 85,000 high school students. A protest is considered successful if at least half of this number is in attendance,

⁹¹ Libertas.mk, NovaTV.mk, Plusinfo.mk.

⁹² *TV Sitel*, “Vesti 19:00 : Opozicijata sobiraše politički poeni vrz grbot na studentite – celokupnata logistika ja stavi na raspolaganje”, 10 December 2014.

⁹³ *Ibid.* Similar was a quote from Kanal 5: “Even with maximum partisan efforts and pressures put on partisan professors and with financial assistance from the Soros Foundation, the largest opposition party SDSM has hardly managed to get two to three thousand people on the street at the protest march, which is two percent of the total number of students”.

i.e., 30,000 university students and 40,000 high school students, which would amount to 70,000 people in the streets.”⁹⁴

The practice of Kurir.mk did not deviate from these patterns. Quite to the contrary, the reports on Kurir.mk were in parts almost identical to the quotes from Kanal 5 and TV Sitel.⁹⁵

On the other hand, the media considered critical towards the government provided different information about the mobilisation. Most notably, a video of the protest shot from a drone belonging to a student protester⁹⁶, initially posted on social media and then rebroadcast by NovaTV, Plusinfo, and Libertas.mk,⁹⁷ showing a crowd of approximately 10,000 protesters marching on the main boulevards in the centre of Skopje, illustrated the high turnout.

Visuals supporting the political instrumentalisation frame

The most remarkable visual tool used under the overall frame of political instrumentalisation was the drawing of circles around some of the protesters labelled as opposition party affiliates

⁹⁴ *TV Sitel*, “Vesti 19:00: Opozicijata sobiraše politički poeni vrz grbot na studentite – celokupnata logistika ja stavi na raspolaganje”, 10 December 2014.

⁹⁵ For example, here is an excerpt from a report published on the day of the student protest: “The SDSM and all of their logistics, with maximum party efforts and pressure put on partisan professors and with a lot of financial assistance from Soros, have managed to get 2-3,000 people into the street, mostly party members and opposition activists. In Macedonia, according to official data, there are 60,000 university students and 85,000 high school students. A protest is considered successful if at least half this number is in attendance, i.e., 30,000 university students and around 40,000 high school students, which would amount to 70,000 people in the streets” (*TV Sitel*, “Vesti 19:00: Opozicijata sobiraše politički poeni vrz grbot na studentite – celokupnata logistika ja stavi na raspolaganje”, 10 December 2014).

⁹⁶ He was subsequently questioned by the police about the drone.

⁹⁷ The footage was also picked up and published by the Russia Today website.

or members. The web portal Kurir.mk and TV stations Sitel and Kanal 5 in this way also delegitimised the protests. Kurir.mk published photo galleries of a crowd of protesters – students, civil activists, professors, journalists, and opposition politicians – in which some of the protesters were marked with a red circle, identified with their first and last names, and said to be first and foremost party members and activists of the opposition and “Soros propagandists”.

While these photos did not show any insignia of a political party or organisation, one of the reports, which included claims that the protest had been instigated by the opposition, was accompanied by a photo taken from the Facebook profile of a protester in which she can be seen with an SDSM party flag. Her Facebook post is calling for support for the student protest. In another text, a photo of an older person supporting the protest with a student’s grade book raised high was also used as an illustration of alleged party orchestration, while stating that “(elderly persons), most likely following party directives, joined the march”.



Photo: member of the opposition party SDSM and her son circled as participants in one of the student protests.⁹⁸

The photographs from the web portal Kurir.mk were also shown on TV stations Kanal 5 and TV Sitel. The close-up shots used by these media did not allow the viewers to get an impression of the scale of the protests. The reports involved claims that MPs and SDSM activists as well as representatives of Soros were protesting, although on the video footage the protesters did not show any party symbols.

4.1.1.b. Low quality of higher education: state exam as part of the solution

Another media frame was presenting the ‘problems’ related to the generally low quality of education and to corruption, while suggesting that the proposed reforms were a step towards providing a solution. In defence of the proposal, TV Sitel, Kanal 5 TV, MTV1, and Kurir.mk framed the state exam as part of higher education reform in that it would end the practice of corruption and ‘buying’ diplomas, improve the evaluation of university diplomas, and overall improve the higher education system in the country (see Table 1). These frames were supported with statements by several University professors who appeared as expert speakers in the reports of some of these media outlets.

An MTV1 report included claims that the introduction of a state exam would end the practice of diplomas being awarded to students who do not have the necessary knowledge and thus improve the quality of higher education.⁹⁹ Kanal 5 similarly framed the state exam as a practice that would guarantee an appropriate level of knowledge and valuable diplomas for students and improve the quality of higher education, thus providing for a better future of the students.¹⁰⁰

The web portal Kurir.mk also reported about the low criteria and incorrect assessment of students’ knowledge, adding that students should support the state exam because it “will show how realistically the students are graded and it will supplement the quantity of knowledge”,

⁹⁹ MTV1, “Vesti 19:30”, 11 December 2014.

¹⁰⁰ Kanal 5 TV, “Vesti 18:00: Klimovski: konceptot na državen ispit e korekten”.

“it will promote the quality of the educational process and the teaching staff and it will intensify the attention that the students pay to the matter they are studying”.¹⁰¹

In cases where these media specified any solutions for the problem, they were mostly framed as the need for public debates that would involve all stakeholders in order to ensure good reform steps. The debates were also framed as a more democratic way of expressing citizens' views than street protests. However, these reports failed to mention that the plans for education reforms had been developed without consultation with the students, in a non-transparent procedure, which justified skepticism among protesters.

Solutions

Main frames	No	Subframes	No
The need for public debate	13	Public debate that will involve all stakeholders, to define a state exam concept	7
		Extensive academic debate to upgrade the education system	3
		Student support for reforms in education	3

Table 3: Prognosis frames by TV Sitel, Kanal 5, MTV 1 and Kurir

These solutions were identified in interviews and statements by some university professors (in most cases, the same statements were broadcast by all of the media) or communicated by the reporters or authors of the texts. Government representatives were not specifically identified either as responsible for the solutions, nor were they consulted in any significant way about the solutions. Other than these solutions, the prognoses identified in the reports of Kanal 5, TV Sitel, MTV1, and Kurir were mostly given in view of the expected implementation of the state exam and its benefits for the education system. Some quotes illustrate this: “According

¹⁰¹ *Kurir.mk*, “Mucunski: The Students Protest against Themselves”.

to the authorities, this reform should reveal which universities and departments give diplomas to students without them having any knowledge, and such practices should change”¹⁰²; “I see this exam as one of the possible reform measures that should contribute toward promoting the quality of higher education. In any case, it is a fact that implementing a state exam and analysing its results will show how realistically the students’ knowledge was graded by their professors”.¹⁰³ Another quote explicitly suggests that the solution should be student support for the proposed changes: “I believe that they [the students] should not oppose the assessment of how much knowledge they have acquired, instead they should do the opposite and support this reform.”¹⁰⁴

Both the pro-government media and those critical of the government conveyed the statement of the Minister of Education Abdulakim Ademi issued on the day after the protest, in which he minister indicated that the debate about the concept of the state exam should be the solution that would end the student protests (more in the chapter on accountability, below).

4.1.1.c. Perception of political instrumentalisation of protests

There is a general notion that protests are regularly either organised or hijacked by political parties, as noted by the interviewees, which is why protests can hardly escape political labelling. This is largely due to the severe party-political division in the country, which creates doubts as to whether authentic and autochthonous movements have ever really existed in post-independence Macedonia. Most of the interviewees agreed that the three cases of protest included in this research had not been orchestrated by political parties, but some did express general doubts about their authenticity. Marjan Nikolovski, a reporter for TV Sitel, noted that protests were

¹⁰² *MTV1, journalist*, “Vesti 19:30”, 10 December 2014.

¹⁰³ Bona Bajraktarova, university professor, *Kurir.mk*, 10 December 2014.

¹⁰⁴ *Kanal 5 TV*, Aleksandar Klimovski, university professor, “Vesti 18:00: Klimovski: konceptot na državni ispit e korekten”, 9 December 2014.

highly susceptible to party-political interests: “There have not been any citizen protests in Macedonia in the last twenty years, they’re all initiated for the sake of someone else’s political aspiration.”¹⁰⁵ A respondent from the Ministry of Interior similarly stated that throughout recent years there had been many cases where protests were supported or organised by the opposition, adding: “Many representatives of the opposition appeared as organisers, or supporters, of various protests, which makes one question the independence and autochthonous character of these protests.”¹⁰⁶ The respondents also indicated some differences between cases of protests in terms of their susceptibility to party-political interests. Thus, protests focused on specific issues, such as the release of Kezarovski or the issues addressed by the GTC protests, seemed to be perceived as more autochthonous and independent of political parties than those involving more far-reaching government criticism. Compared to these two cases, the student protests were much more critical towards the government, since the students’ dissatisfaction was fuelled not only by the latest reforms but also by the worsening state of higher education in the country in the past 7-8 years, the Law on Higher Education, which was undergoing frequent changes, and poor conditions for students (e.g., disastrous quality of student dormitories and increasing tuition fees).

Furthermore, the respondents also recognised that protests were regularly framed as politically orchestrated even when in fact they were not, and that media outlets played a key role in this regard. At this level of mediatisation of protests, the involvement of journalists in protests and solidarity among producers of media content was indicated as a factor that safeguarded the protests from being framed as politically instrumentalised (as was the case with the protests for the release of Kezarovski).

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Marjan Nikolovski.

¹⁰⁶ Name withheld on request; similarly, Todor Pendarov, PR advisor in the Macedonian Assembly, remarked that protest initiatives were often “... instrumentalised, and ours is a rare example of a country where there are counter-protests for an identical topic.”

4.1.2. Framing favourable towards the protests and critical towards government

Telma, Alsat, Nova TV and PlusInfo presented a different account of the protests from that of TV Sitel, MTV1, Kanal5 and Kurir, both in terms of the extent of their coverage and of the dominant frames. The prevalent topics discussed by these media had to do with the protest and the behaviour of the protesters, including information about gatherings, the organisation and messages of the protesters, as well as the pressure on students (in 14 out of 30 analysed texts).

These media reported more consistently on protest actions, with more information and more footage. Telma and Alsat-M broadcast videos of a large and noisy crowd of students marching in the streets and protesting in front of the government with banners and whistles. The protesters wore red paper circles on their heads and showed a large banner ‘Stop bad reforms’, while chanting ‘Autonomy!’ NovaTV.mk and PlusInfo also regularly published news about the protests, along with pictures and videos from the protests, sometimes taken from the protesters themselves. On the day of the protest, the web portal NovaTV.mk did a chronological overview of events. It also showed a photo gallery of a crowd of protesters carrying banners, and professional and amateur video showing protesters yelling slogans and blowing whistles. Among those was a video filmed by a drone that belonged to one of the students that showed the massive turnout.¹⁰⁷

These are some of the titles of the reports of NovaTV.mk: “Student March in front of ‘Mavrovka’ [a shopping centre in central Skopje], shouting ‘Autonomy, autonomy!’”; “River of Students Supported by Citizens Move Towards the Government”; “Citizens Take Hats Off to Students: ‘You Are the Future!’”; “Students Before Government: ‘We Are the Power’, ‘You Will Hear Us Now’”.

¹⁰⁷ The student was later detained by the police who ordered him to cease filming the protest. Source: F. Stojanovski, “The Macedonian Government Clamps Down on Filming Protests with Drones”.

TV stations Telma and Alsat-M Television presented the events in more detail and with critical insight. The editorial policy of Telma involved criticising the ruling party and the government as well as specific institutions, such as the Ministry of Education and Science, the Accreditation and Evaluation Board, the university leadership, and the students' ombudsman. Reports of Alsat TV provided several alternative perspectives based on the view that the revolt of the students was justified as a reaction to non-transparent decision-making by the government.

The web portal PlusInfo.mk used screenshots of messages from the Facebook and Twitter pages of the Students' plenum. The texts on the web portal linked to more comprehensive coverage in other media such as reports by local journalists for the international websites CNN iReport and Balkan Insight, pointing out that the news of the students' march was reported in almost all influential media in the region.

In terms of framing, these media put the protests in a rather positive light, as a response to a bad policy initiative and as the largest protests transcending party and ethno-national polarisation. In line with this, the proposed reforms were framed as a bad policy that would damage the education system and violate the autonomy of the university (15 reports). Some of the main problems identified in the analysed media reports had to do with the lack of justification for the state exam, their rejection by the university, and their incompatibility with the Law on Higher Education. Finally, these media also pointed to the government's labelling of the protests as politically instrumentalised and its pressure on high school students not to join the protest march (see Table 2). Eight media reports framed the government's labelling of the protests as merely a tool to discredit the protests, and nine reports presented the refusal of the government to discuss the state exam with the students as a problem.

4.1.2.a. Education reforms framed as violation of university's autonomy

If the media that favour the ruling party tried to frame the educational reforms as part of the government's efforts towards improving higher education in the country, the media that are critical towards the government predominantly framed the reforms as rash, unproductive, and in violation of university autonomy.

The dominant frames of TV stations Telma and Alsat-M and web portals novatv.mk and plusinfo.mk, were that the state exam is a part of substandard, rushed reforms and inconsistent governmental policy, which will jeopardise the university's autonomy and do damage to the quality of higher education, the students, and academic staff. These media criticised the government not only for failing to invest in education but also for violating the Constitution by threatening university autonomy and academic freedom.

TV Telma, Alsat-M, NovaTV.mk, and PlusInfo.mk claimed that the state exam lacked justification and was not in accordance with the Law on Higher Education, and reported that professors and higher education institutions rejected the concept. They also reported on the existing dysfunctional evaluation mechanisms and the lack of prior analysis of the effects of the state exam and lack of discussion with affected parties. What these sources most often commented on is that despite a multitude of problems afflicting the education system in the country, the proposed reforms threatened to deepen the problem instead of resolving them.

Student protesters were the main source that specified the problems in these reports, but also university professors and the reports' authors.¹⁰⁸ Some illustrative titles were "Students' March in Front of Mavrovka [a shopping centre in central Skopje], Shouting: 'Autonomy,

¹⁰⁸ Some pieces on the web portals NovaTV.mk and PlusInfo.mk had no byline.

autonomy!” “State Exam Proposal Known Since October” (NovaTV), “State Exam is an Impetuous Measure”, “Some Faculty Professors Against State Exam” (TV Telma).

TV Telma informed its viewers that the concept of state exam is unacceptable to the universities and most of the professors and that without a previous analysis of its likely effects, it might lead to a decrease in the quality of higher education. Telma, critical towards the government, pointed out that the Ministry of Education is trying to legitimise the state exam despite the student protests, and that the government is prepared to enforce the state exam even without the support of the universities. One report indicated: “Some of the professors and the students are on the same line” and agree that “the persistence of the Government to enforce the state exam at any cost is merely a vulgar form of violence”, and that in Macedonia there is “education that is consistent with a non-democratic regime”.¹⁰⁹ The same report quotes this criticism of government policy by Ljubica Kostovska, a university professor: “Someone is taking too many liberties and thinks they are most powerful and that they know everything in this country. To disrespect the university profession is to destroy the mental health of this nation.” It also included a comparison with the previous communist regime, put forward by Angel Georgiev, a retired university professor: “Despite it being called a non-democratic regime, this type of thing could not happen then. I have participated in several reforms of the university, but something like this has not happened so far.” In line with these complaints, the only solution specified in the content of TV Telma was that “the government should cooperate with professional organisations and students and stop to manipulate”.

NovaTV.mk reported that the proposed concept of a state exam is not constitutional, that it threatens the autonomy of the university, and that the authorities are trying to impose tighter control over higher education institutions. “The government does not present relevant analysis of the problems in higher education,” the web portal wrote, adding that “no real

¹⁰⁹ *TV Telma*, “Vesti 18:30: Državniot ispit e nepromislana merka”, 10 December 2014.

investments are being made to improve the quality of higher education”. It also wrote that the state exam would not raise the quality of higher education, and that “rushed reforms give birth to subpar students”.¹¹⁰ Alsat-M television similarly reported that the state exam was inadequate and inefficient and that the students’ plenum wanted genuine and legitimate reforms in higher education.

The opposite argument made by the government – that the state exam would not interfere with the autonomy of the university – focused on claims that the evaluators were to be chosen by the government and proposed by the universities and that a mutual and acceptable solution would be sought through a public debate with all stakeholders, including the students. But as noted below, the critics of the concept were unconvinced given the current modes of evaluation.¹¹¹

4.1.2.b. The largest, unifying, and multi-ethnic protests

The student protests were widely described as the most unifying ones in Macedonia’s post-independence history, both in some of the media content analysed and in the interviews conducted.

TV stations Telma and Alsat-M, NovaTV.mk, and Plusinfo.mk framed the student protest as the largest gathering to date that was above partisan and ethno-national interests and

¹¹⁰ NovaTV, “Studentskiot plenum isporaća baranja do Vladata”, 10 December 2014.

¹¹¹ The Board of Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher Education is the primary body authorised to evaluate higher education institutions in the country. The Board has numerous authorisations and they can evaluate, and in certain cases revoke, the accreditation if it determines that a particular programme is of insufficient quality and not in accordance with law. Some universities regularly hire external evaluators to assess the quality of their curricula and staff. Moreover, universities are obliged to conduct internal evaluations on a bi-annual basis, consisting of an evaluation of the study programmes, the quality of the teaching, and an evaluation of the teaching staff by the students. K. Blaževska, “Državniot ispit ja krena na noze akademskata zaednica”.

described it as a revolt against the overall challenging situation of democracy in the country and the way it is governed. Most of the coverage focused on the involvement of civil society in the protests and on the reasons behind the protesters' demands.

PlusInfo.mk mainly framed the student protest as the largest in Macedonia during its two decades of independence, supported by all ethnic, religious, national, and political communities. Citing the Balkan Insight portal, Plusinfo.mk published an article "Students blocked the centre", reporting that more than 12,000 students protested against the government's plans.¹¹² The other three media outlets provided similar accounts of the protests, emphasising the support from different profiles of citizens, including elderly citizens and high school students,¹¹³ parents and professors,¹¹⁴ as well as support from different cities¹¹⁵ and ethnic groups. Alsat-M TV, which broadcasts programmes primarily in the Albanian language, reported for example on the support from Albanian students. It also transmitted appeals made by the protesters for a peaceful protest without any national, religious, or party influence, in a bid to demonstrate that the protest is above partisan and national interests.

¹¹² "Hundreds of students, university professors and supporters said 'No' to the government's plan to introduce an examination under state supervision in the biggest protest that took place in Macedonia during its two decades of independence," was stated in the text. M. V., "I Si-en-en izevsti za direktorite koi gi sprečuvaa učenicite da izlezat na maršot".

¹¹³ NovaTV.mk reported that the student protest was supported by elderly citizens and high school students who joined the students in front of the university, in the street, and in front of the government. The titles of some of the videos broadcast by the web portal included: "River of Students Supported by Citizens Move towards the Government", "Citizens Take Hats Off to Students: 'You Are the Future!'", "Some celebrities supported the students' march".

¹¹⁴ Alsat-M reported on the support from parents and professors, for example.

¹¹⁵ TV Telma reported that over a thousand students and high school students in other cities also held mass protests, stating in one of the reports that the members of the student plenum are not only university students, but also a large number of high school students who would be affected by the reforms in the coming years.

This unifying quality of the protests was also stressed by several interviewees. They said that the student protests brought together people from all strands of society, who joined in their dissent from the high education policies of the government, which they deemed undemocratic and unjustified. Ivana Tufegčić suggested that this was an important notion in the student plenum: “The student plenum succeeds in eradicating discrimination, and stereotyping people even in our private lives, thus making us better persons. Nobody is discriminated against because of their different opinions and attitudes, ethnic or sexual orientation. Everyone is embraced.”¹¹⁶ Muhamed Zekiri, Editor in Chief of Alsat-M television, pointed out that the student plenum had done what very few initiatives and political parties failed to accomplish: uniting various ethnic groups around the same cause – a better education for all citizens. “There is no political party that will unite in one place Albanians, Macedonians, Turks, and members of the other communities,” he said.¹¹⁷

4.2 Government accountability: media framing and perception

The interviewed journalists and activists recognise the lack of accountability of public officials and institutions during these protests, and also in past citizen initiatives or protests. By contrast, the public officials interviewed believe that their institutions are among the most accountable ones in the country.

The analysed media barely addressed the issues of accountability and liability of the government in the course of the events linked to the student protests. In line with the division in how they framed the protests, there were also clear differences among the media as to who was identified as the **generator of the problems** at issue.

On one side are Telma, Alsat-M, NovaTV.mk, and PlusInfo.mk: out of 30 analysed reports they ran, 10 identified the government and the Ministry of Education That as responsible for

¹¹⁶ Interview with Ivana Tufegčić, representative of student plenum, 6 April 2015.

¹¹⁷ Interview with Muhamed Zekiri, Editor in Chief of Alsat-M TV, 11 April 2015.

the problems (such as lack of public debate about the concept of state exam or inconsistency of state exam with the autonomy of the university and with the Law on Higher Education). The government's lack of interest in a discussion with students was for example reported by NovaTV.mk, including a claim that minister Abdulakim Ademi "stubbornly" continued to push the concept of the state exam.¹¹⁸ Part of the problem, as framed by Alsar-MTV, was the postponement of a discussion on the state exam and the government's refusal to listen to students' demands.¹¹⁹

On the other side are Kanal 5 TV, MTV1, TV Sitel and Kurir.mk, whose reporting was within the general frame of political instrumentalisation and of better quality of education. They identified SDSM and Soros as responsible for the problems, as well as the students and to some extent the 'opposition' media. The students are portrayed as acting against reforms in higher education, while SDSM and Soros are accused of direct agitation for protest and abuse of students for political and partisan purposes. In support of these claims, TV Sitel, for example, reported that SDSM mobilised not only party members but also random people they regularly mobilise for all protests in order to boost their political goals.¹²⁰

When referring to the students as being responsible and not supporting education reforms, the media often engaged in paternalism of a sort, indicating that the students were unaware of the political manipulations behind the protests, or simply unclear about the cause of the protests or ignorant of the benefits of the proposed reforms.¹²¹ When the media framed the protests as party-orchestrated, this was stated as the only problem in the course of the

¹¹⁸ *NovaTV*, "Atanasov: Nema javna debata za eksterno, prašnjata se veke napraveni", 9 December 2014.

¹¹⁹ *TV Alsar-M*, "Vesti 10:30: Studentski plenum utre na mirni protesti", 9 December 2014.

¹²⁰ *TV Sitel*, "Vesti: Opozicijata sobiraše politički poeni vrz grbot na studentite – celokupnata logistika ja stavi na raspolaganje", 10 December 2014.

¹²¹ Kurir.mk reported that the students were being manipulated by SDSM and SOROS. See more: *Kurir.mk*, "Student plenum is extended hand of SDSM and SOROS". Kanal 5 TV reported in a similar manner. See more: *Kanal 5 TV*, "Državniot ispit – koncept protiv pojavata na kupeni diplomi".

protests, with SDSM and Soros identified as the culprits. On the other hand, the motives of the protests were neglected and the proposed educational reforms and the state exam received no further scrutiny.

However, across the media reports in the sample, there was a distinct lack of **critical discussion about the accountability** of the government, in view of the current state of higher education and the contested reforms. This was especially true for MTV1, TV Sitel, Kanal 5, and Kurir.mk, which did not point to government accountability at all, but even the media that are generally critical towards the ruling party and the reforms did not go further than identifying the Government and the ruling VMRO-DPMNE party as being responsible for finding solutions, failing to analyse in depth the mechanisms needed to address and resolve the problems related to education reform. Out of a total of 92 specified problems identified in the eight analysed media, potential solutions or prognoses were identified for only 19, and only eight of them directly point to the Government and the Ministry of Education as the actors that should provide solutions. Even then, the solutions for the problems in introducing the state exam were generally framed by the pro-government media as a reform toward better higher education and more objective evaluation of students, and in creating a broad platform for public debate that would include students and all stakeholders.

Media considered critical of the Government, however, also failed to offer solutions and prognoses. Only in one case did a media report explicitly call for a solution framed as cooperation between the Government and professional organisations and students in the reform of higher education, i.e., accepting the demands of the students and rejecting the state exam. This was in a TV Telma report on the rejection of the proposed exam by the Faculty of Law in Skopje. The report also included the opinion of professors about how the proposed exam might damage the education system: “The state exam might cause the gradual abandonment of the examination methods implemented at the faculties due to the pressure of the requirement for the students to pass the state exam implemented in parallel. Hence,

instead of increasing, this model might decrease the quality of higher education.”¹²² The same report indicated that the focus on the state exam for students was entirely flawed, and instead should be shifted to the problem of accreditation of faculties that fail to meet standards, as pointed out by the Skopje Law Faculty: “The fact that the [Evaluation and Accreditation] Board has accredited faculties that did not deserve to be accredited should be seen as grounds for the Board to immediately start evaluating the accreditation decrees that have already been given, and not as a basis for introducing state exams.”¹²³

4.2.1. Perception about false government transparency and accountability

A majority of interviewees, mainly journalists and protesters, pointed out that there is practically no government transparency in Macedonia – a precondition for broader accountability – and that this was demonstrated during the three cases of protests as well. Some interviewees also reported that the lack of government transparency was the key reason for the protest initiatives in the past couple of years. In the words of one interviewee: “Transparency, above everything else... is lacking in Macedonia, especially in the past decade, starting from the beginning of the ruling party’s tenure.”¹²⁴ Other respondents went further to say that the lack of transparency went far beyond the tenure of the current government, and had lasted for the “past 24 years”.¹²⁵ One respondent, however, indicated that this was particularly the case with the central government, and that the municipalities were “much, much more transparent” than central ministries.¹²⁶

¹²² *TV Telma*, “Vesti 18:30: Del od profesorite na fakultetite protiv državniot ispit”; 11 December 2014.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ Interview with Biljana Sekulovska, News Editor of online news portal NovaTV.mk, 6 April 2015.

¹²⁵ Interview with Ivana Tufegčić.

¹²⁶ Interview with Nikola Pisarev.

The majority of respondents agree that the current government keeps trying to build up its image of accountability and transparency, but without real indicators to back up this image. In reality, the government is portrayed as merely engaging in political rhetoric, failing to provide information, and delegitimising any criticism aimed at its policies. Sanja Vasic, an editor with TV Telma, noted: “They have invented a new kind of accountability. They’ll go out for a news conference, talk five minutes about how they finished building some street, sidewalk, building, factory or whatever, meanwhile refusing to answer any questions.”¹²⁷ While being active in presenting the current and future work plans to its constituents, the government is regarded as highly unresponsive to public inquiries, engaging in one-sided communication, and avoiding answers to questions of public interest. One interviewee said: “They often say ‘we accomplished what we promised’ and ‘we accomplished things we didn’t even promise’.”¹²⁸ Another interviewee: “They say that they’re accountable all the time, and when you ask the prime minister a question, he bombards you with at least fifty numbers and that’s what accountability is to them. They won’t give you an answer to a genuine question.”¹²⁹ As a result, the public is kept out of the loop when it comes for example to the money spent on public projects, and is not sufficiently consulted on public investments, a prime example of this being ‘Skopje 2014’.¹³⁰

During the student protests, a well-publicised event that stirred controversy was the sudden change of the location where the Ministry of Education held public meetings with university representatives about the education reforms. This was seen as one of the manifestations of non-transparency of the government. According to some respondents, even though the event was open to the public, the authorities changed the location as soon as they saw that

¹²⁷ Interview with Sanja Vasic, journalist with Telma TV, 4 March 2015.

¹²⁸ Interview with Zoran Dimitrovski.

¹²⁹ Interview with Tamara Causidis.

¹³⁰ See *Skopje 2014 Uncovered*, available at <http://skopje2014.prizma.birn.eu.com/en> accessed 30 June 2015 and M. Jordanovska, “True Cost of ‘Skopje 2014’ Revealed”.

the media and some of the students wanted to attend the talks.¹³¹ Biljana Sekulovska, a journalist from NovaTV.mk, noted: “They changed the location later, because they were afraid of the students or the media, or who knows of what. They absolutely operated in a covert manner, and still are.”¹³²

Some of the respondents believe that the Government exercises some accountability and transparency when it is pressured by having to deal with different problems and protests at the same time. An example of this would be the Government’s moves made under the combined pressure of the student protests, the controversy surrounding the imprisonment of Tomislav Kezarovski, and the ‘bombs’¹³³ of opposition leader Zoran Zaev, who leaked to the public numerous incriminating phone calls made by government officials. One interviewee said: “The government started to see that you cannot leave open too many fronts against you in society, because at the end of the road, if you open too many of them, your defeat may come more easily....”¹³⁴ The imminent release of Zaev’s ‘bombs’ pushed the government to start negotiating with the students, when before it largely ignored them. Moreover, around that time, Kezarovski was released under unusual and unexpected circumstances (on “health grounds” even though he did not complain of any major health issues), on the day the biggest protest for his release was staged.

In the view of respondents, the mainstream media rarely play a role in demanding government transparency, apart from the few critical media outlets with small audience reach (e.g. TV Telma, NovaTV.mk). As one respondent said, the majority of media in fact promote this false transparency by entering into an interest-driven relationship with the government:

¹³¹ The event was also well documented in online media. See more at *MKD*, “Ministerstvoto bega od Studentskiot plenum, plenumcite trčaat od zgrada vo zgrada za debata”.

¹³² Interview with Biljana Sekulovska.

¹³³ The term ‘bomb’ was used by the respondents and is now commonly used to refer to the leaked material.

¹³⁴ Interview with Zoran Dimitrovski.

“Transparency is acted... through the media, who are for the most part corrupted or are the government’s clients.”¹³⁵

4.2.2. Media reports critical of governments’ actions during the protests

Media critical towards the government, however, pointed to the lack of transparency and accountability of the government in the course of the protests. TV stations Telma and Alsat-M and the web portal NovaTV.mk, reported on the secrecy of the government, its refusal to meet the students and address their demands on the day of the protest march, and criticised the Government for not disclosing that the state exam had been discussed at Government meetings and that the proposal of the Ministry of Education and Science about the state exam was known two months before the protest. NovaTV.mk reported: “What is most interesting in the document [i.e. the proposal on education reform], except the details on the state exam, was the date of October 31, 2014. If the letter was written on that date and ready to send to the president of the Inter-University Conference, then students were clearly ignored by the institutions.”¹³⁶ On the day of the protest, NovaTV.mk reported that the Minister of Education rejected an invitation for a meeting by the student plenum, although he had on several occasions indicated that he was open for a discussion with the students. The day after the protest, NovaTV.mk critically reported on the statement of Minister Abdulakim Ademi that it was early for the students to be involved in a debate about the state exam, adding: “The students plenum will be invited for a discussion with the government once the final proposal for a state exam has been prepared.”

TV Telma critically reported about the state exam, pointing out not only that the Ministry of Education was unjustifiably pushing for the reforms, but also that the government had

¹³⁵ Interview with Xhabir Deralla, Head of CIVIL - Center for Freedom, 7 April 2015.

¹³⁶ *NovaTV*, “Predlogot za državniot ispit bil poznat od okotmvi”.

dismissed the students' arguments.¹³⁷ The report also noted the Ministry's determination to introduce the state exam despite the rejection of some university departments and the skepticism of a majority of professors. It reported the statement of Minister Ademi that the government will "not always have harmonised positions with universities", and reported the views of some professors that "disrespect of the academic community means the destruction of the nation's mental health". Alsat-M TV also pointed out the non-transparent decision-making by the government. It said: "The first element of installing a legal dictatorship is to cause confusion with the citizens, and this alerted some of the more aware citizens that they're being manipulated."¹³⁸ Alsat-M interpreted the postponement of the discussion about the state exam as a pretence by the Ministry of Education that they care about higher education.

4.2.3. From ignoring the protests to slight changes in the government's actions

The government was not only inactive in communicating with protestors, media, and the public during the protests, but this analysis also suggests that it missed the opportunity to convey and elaborate its position through the media and convince the public of the legitimacy of its decision. Several interviewees pointed out that this was an example of the lack of Government accountability. Officials did not engage in direct talks with the protesters, and made no public announcements addressing the problems pointed out by the students. The Government did not hold news conferences in response to the protests, nor did it issue press releases or have its representatives taking part in political talk shows, let alone take urgent measures as a result of the protesters' demands. Almost all respondents agreed that the Ministry of Education completely ignored the student plenum, even though the first protests

¹³⁷ TV Telma reported that the government did not hear out the students and their demands on the day of the protest and informed about the disappointment of the Students' Plenum that they did not have a meeting with the government and that the "indifference of the government will not waver them".

¹³⁸ *Alsat-M*, "Vesti 22:00: Ismaili: Studentite imaat pravo, ispitot nepotreben", 10 December 2014.

were attended by more than 3,000 people. A representative of the plenum illustrates the point: “We were ignored,” adding that in the rare instances when the government engaged in communication, this was not through direct talks but instead through the media.¹³⁹

Respondents also indicated that government representatives did not offer justification for their claim that the changes to the law would improve the quality of education in the country. According to Todor Pendarov, a PR Advisor in the Macedonian Assembly: “Their rhetoric boiled down to two elements, that the protests were party-political, orchestrated by a well-known political party, and that the law will bring quality to the education system, without explaining how.”¹⁴⁰ Both public appearances of Minister Ademi did not address students’ demands or offer meaningful information about the concept of state exam. In his first statement (December 9, 2014), he indicated that due to a long agenda for the government meeting, the education reform had not been discussed; in a statement given after the march (December 11, 2014), the Minister proclaimed the governments’ dedication to accountability regarding the issues raised by the protesters and offered a public debate on the state exam. He said, among other things: “We will present a specific proposal and will invite everyone to become involved in a debate and at that time provide their opinions, in order to find a mutually acceptable solution that will be implemented in the future. Until now I have not had any meetings concerning the state exam because we have not presented it publicly. When we present it, everyone will be involved in the debate, including the students.”

Both pro-government and critical media ran the minister’s statement and the solutions he outlined. It should be noted, however, that his proposal for public debate was met with disbelief by the students and professors, since the government had already developed the initial, fully fledged plan for state exams without the involvement of students and universities. Furthermore,

¹³⁹ Interview with Darko Malinovski.

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Todor Pendarov.

the critics were skeptical about the entire concept of state exam, having in mind that there already existed mechanisms for evaluation of universities in the Law on Higher Education.

In response to the launch of the professors' plenum,¹⁴¹ which supported the students plenum, a counter-initiative was formed, 'Citizen Initiative in Support of Knowledge in Higher Education', made up of some 200 professors and assistants who supported the government's concept of a state exam. At a meeting with the President of the Republic of Macedonia, organised on a request from this initiative, they discussed the need for reforms and improved quality of higher education. The meeting took place one day after representatives of the student plenum and the professors' plenum met the President and asked him to stop the amendments to the Law on Higher Education. The President did not use his veto.

A student plenum participant, however, reports on a change in the government's attitude when it became apparent that the new law had no chance of being implemented without stiff resistance from the students. "We were completely ignored and that lasted until they saw that ignoring us is counterproductive," said Ivana Tufegčić. Not only had the student plenum significantly grown in numbers, with other citizens joining the protest, but it also engaged in various activities (press releases, social media calls for mobilisation, appeals submitted to the Ministry etc.) and garnered support from the professors' plenum, the teachers' plenum, and the high school plenum, issued joint statements with them, and supported their actions. In February 2015, before the students occupied the university, the Prime Minister abruptly scheduled a meeting with representatives of the student plenum to discuss the new reforms.¹⁴² This was the first time the PM held direct talks with the students. The meeting resulted in

¹⁴¹ Inspired by the success and authenticity of the student protests, other groups in society also formed their initiatives (professors, high school students, journalists, etc.). A new term, 'plenumisation', gained wide currency to describe the trend.

¹⁴² *Radiomof*: "SP: studentski plenum vonredno povikan vo kabinetot na premierot".

the government postponing the implementation of the reforms. By the time the government started to recognise the student plenum as a legitimate organisation, the students had already staged several massive protests and garnered public support. Moreover, the somewhat less committed attitude of the government towards the proposed reforms might have been a result of pressure building from different sides simultaneously, including the wiretapping scandal that was about to be made public.¹⁴³

Interviewees said that ignoring the protests was the government's main reaction to the other two cases of protests included in this research. It is especially evident with regards to the efforts of the 'I Love GTC' protesters to initiate contact with the authorities. According to Nikola Pisarev, a spokesperson of the group: "They haven't given concrete answers to concrete questions. Neither to us, nor to the media." Maja Vaseva, a journalist from Plusinfo.mk, said: "The public was misinformed, citizens received incorrect information, and when the situation got out of control, they closed themselves, and gave incomplete data. In the end, the institutions prevented us from properly doing our jobs as journalists"¹⁴⁴

4.2.4. Which institutions are the most accountable?

Not all interviewees believe that the transparency and accountability of the ruling government coalition is insufficient. According to the respondent from the Ministry of Interior, "the situation has drastically changed in comparison with the previous [coalition, in power until 10 years ago], some of the parties, such as VMRO-DPMNE, promote accountability about their work, but also present their programme for future work activities".¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ The audio recordings were being released starting in February 2015, but Zaev and the opposition had announced months before that they had evidence of serious crimes committed by officials of the ruling party.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with Maja Vaseva.

¹⁴⁵ The interviewee requested anonymity.

It is noteworthy that the representatives of the public bodies claim that their institutions are among the most transparent and accountable in the current set-up.¹⁴⁶ The respondent from the Ministry of Interior said: “The Ministry is accountable and transparent, I don’t know about the other institutions”.¹⁴⁷ Todor Pendarov asserted that the Assembly of Republic of Macedonia is “...one of the most accountable institutions in the country”.¹⁴⁸

4.3 Role of media and communication practices of journalists

This analysis showed that the media prioritised daily events but also on occasion construed wider frames and meanings while representing or criticising the government’s and the protesters’ ideology and performance. The interviews showed that the media often drew information about the protest groups directly from their social media pages (announcements, news conferences, etc.). As indicated in the preceding sections, this research confirms that the political polarisation in Macedonia shaped to a considerable degree the way the student protests were framed in the media. In this chapter we will additionally analyse the perception about the overall role of the media in reporting the protests, as well as issues of depth of reporting, the sources the media used, and the attention given to the protests in their reports.

4.3.1. *Media as an educator vs. instigator*

In line with the audience data, the majority of respondents confirm that the mass media, TV in particular, are still the main source of news for most citizens in Macedonia, and that it played

¹⁴⁶ It should be noted that several of the state institutions declined our interview requests. The Primary Court in Skopje said that they had informed the media regarding the case of Kezarovski and were not in a position to provide in-depth responses on the other two cases.

¹⁴⁷ The interviewee requested anonymity.

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Todor Pendarov.

this role during the recent protests as well. Respondents mostly agree that the role of the media in a democracy is to inform the public and enable citizens to build an informed opinion about current issues. Some respondents noted that the media needs to play the role of an educator for the public, presenting various views and opinions of the involved actors without taking sides: “The media plays a significant role as presenters of all that is happening and as presenters of the messages from citizen initiatives, but they also present the views and opinions of all actors – the government, the broader public, and other stakeholders about those initiatives and their demands.”¹⁴⁹ Other respondents indicate that in some cases the media need to play a more engaged role. Marjan Nikolovski from TV Sitel said: “On the one hand, the media have the role of instigators, crisis creators, and creators of an element of radicalisation. I mean this in the sense of boosting the turn-out for a certain citizen protest aiming to achieve a political goal... On the other hand, they may unmask that idea [i.e. criticize the ideas behind the protests], also in function service of another political establishment.”¹⁵⁰

The respondents mostly confirm that the media failed to play a democratising role during the protests, and instead provided one-sided, or at best superficial, reports about the protests. While in general no one reported media that denied access to any of the relevant sides during the protests, media practices are believed to have largely reflected the current state of media polarisation in the country. “We have to note the serious polarisation of the media, the monopoly on the truth on one side, of one media, and the monopoly on the truth on the other side, the other media. The citizens are left with two monopolies on the truth, and they have to decide which monopoly to trust.”¹⁵¹ In line with the media frames presented above,

¹⁴⁹ Interview with Sanja Vasic.

¹⁵⁰ Interview with Marjan Nikolovski.

¹⁵¹ Interview with Ivana Tufegčić. This was confirmed by a respondent from the Ministry of Interior, who requested anonymity: “My personal opinion is that the coverage drastically varies from one media outlet to another... with regards to the mentioned protests.”

a majority of respondents listed TV Sitel, Kanal 5, and Alfa TV, along with Kurir.mk, as the media that presented the protests in a negative light (most notably through the frame of political orchestration by the opposition and Soros) and showed a favourable stance towards the government.¹⁵² The majority of interviewed activists and journalists mention TV Telma, 24Vesti, and Alsat-M TV, as providing more comprehensive, more professional, and unbiased reporting on protests. According to Ivana Tufegčić, who was constantly involved in the PR activities of the student plenum. “Telma, 24Vesti, and Alsat were communicating with us on a most regular basis”.¹⁵³ Polarisation is believed to be present across the media: “The TV, online and print media are similarly polarised,” said Sanja Vasic, an editor at TV Telma. “Among the pro-government media, I would mention Press24, Kurir.mk, Republika.” Respondents also indicate that the pro-government media are more numerous and powerful: “They [opposition media] are outnumbered, because the other media have the government behind them.”¹⁵⁴

4.3.2. Lack of investigative, in-depth journalism

It was evident throughout the analysed media, and substantiated by several of the interviewees, that the media mostly failed to provide in-depth investigative insights into the complexities of the problems plaguing higher education in Macedonia, and that it also failed to offer a comprehensive overview on the advantages and disadvantages of implementing the proposed reforms. Furthermore, the analysed media did not offer variety in representing the problems or solutions and identifying the actors responsible. Any particular media outlet tended to frame the protests in an identical manner over time, and throughout the coverage the same focus

¹⁵² For example, Konstantin Bitrakov, a representative of the student plenum who was involved in the negotiations with the government at the later stage of the protests, asserted that “one group of media... Kanal 5, TV Sitel, and the public broadcaster, MTV, to a large extent did not cover our activities, and even when they did, they covered them according to their preconception about what happened.”

¹⁵³ Interview with Ivana Tufegčić.

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Todor Pendarov.

prevailed: either they condemned the protests and their political instrumentalisation by the opposition, or they supported the protesters, criticising the government for the bad reforms and their way of governance, both without offering in-depth insights into the complexities of a major overhaul of the education system. Thus, daily reporting was to a large extent reactive and focused on protest events; it also showed a selective approach to sources, either those who support the protest or those who back the state exam. Some pieces in Kurir.mk, TV Sitel, and Kanal 5 in particular did not name any sources and the descriptions and interpretations of events were essentially opinion rather than reporting. Media reports also failed to include discussions with government representatives about their accountability. Interviewees indicated that a lack of communication by the government also contributed to this problem.

The failure of the media to offer quality investigative journalism during the protests was interpreted by the interviewees as a result of both political affiliations and insufficient resources, including staff. Marjan Nikolovski from TV Sitel pointed out that many media operate with “minimal, even less than minimal” resources.

4.3.3. Selection of sources as an indicator of media bias

It is telling that the frame of political instrumentalisation of protests that dominated the reporting of TV Sitel, Kanal 5, MTV1, and Kurir.mk was primarily determined by the reporters and news editors themselves (12 times in 21 reports, most notably in reports by Kurir.mk). Several university professors (in 4 reports) and the Minister of Education (in 4 reports) were the other sources that determined the problems in the news.

	Journalist	Minister of Education	Professors	Students
Kanal 5 TV	1	/	2	1
TV Sitel	2	1	/	/
MTVI	1	2	/	2
Kurir.mk	8	1	2	/
Total	12	4	4	3

Table 4: *Frequency of sources of information per media reports*

The protesting students were consulted least on the issues (three times). The professors who were selected as sources seem to have been tendentiously chosen. Both Kanal 5 and Kurir.mk consulted university professors who supported the introduction of the state exam as a means of improving the quality of higher education.

Online media Kurir.mk had the most questionable practices in this regard. While the authors of the reports were most frequently determining the problems without citing other sources, they also were not signed with their names or initials. This is, unsurprisingly, a customary practice of a media outlet that does not have any publishing details ('impressum') on its home page. The content analysis also showed that parts of texts on the web portal were almost identical to reports of the main news on Kanal 5 and TV Sitel. For example, the following passage from a report on Kurir.mk was also aired on both TV stations:

“The SDSM with all its logistics, maximum party efforts and pressure put on partisan professors and with a lot of financial assistance from SOROS, managed to get 2-3,000 people into the street, mostly party members and opposition activists. In Macedonia, according to data, there are 60,000 students and 85,000 high school students. A protest is considered

successful if at least half this number would be in attendance, i.e. 30,000 students and around 40,000 high school students, which would amount to 70,000 people in the streets.”¹⁵⁵

Unlike the pro-government media, the media that are critical of the government had representatives of the student plenum as the main source specifying the problem (in 17 reports), followed by university professors (6 reports).

	Students	Professors/ Experts	Journalist	Minister of Education	Politicians of SDSM
TV Telma	5	4	1	1	1
Alsat-M TV	3	1	/	2	/
NovaTV.mk	5	1	4	1	1
PlusInfo.mk	4	/	2	/	/
Total	17	6	6	4	2

Table 5: *Frequency of sources of information per media*

These media overall allowed for the presentation of different interests and opposing viewpoints. Alsat TV’s reports contained various viewpoints and alternative perspectives, including views from different student associations and university departments, in addition to the student plenum, and professors with opposing attitudes towards the concept of a state exam; the views of the Ministry of Education were also represented (see Table 5).

4.3.4. Marginalisation of protests as an indicator of media bias

There was notable marginalisation of the protests in some of the media. On the day of the student protests (December 10, 2014), the Public Broadcaster MTV1 covered the march with

¹⁵⁵ Kurir, “SDSM and SOROS and All Their Available Resources Barely Managed to Gather 3.000 People”.

only one item, reporting in the announcement of the story that the situation contradicted the denial of the student plenum of any kind of partisanship, and asserting that SDSM and Soros activists were present at the protests. In comparison to other pro-government media, MTV1 showed more diversity of actors that identified the problems (see Table 4), and presented the demands of the student plenum before and during the protest, as well as the statements (some of them paraphrased) of the Ministry of Education, but the events of the protest were not given priority and were presented in the middle or towards the end of the news bulletins. Other media from this category did not give sources from the other side an opportunity to express their views. Even though they had several actors identify the problems, the reports and sources of Kanal 5 had almost identical viewpoints, and were defending the education reforms.

Similarly, during the analysed period, Kanal 5 had three reports on the protest events aired during the middle of their newscast. Statements of representatives of the student plenum and of protesters aired only on the day of the protest, and this was after a commentary by the news editor-in-chief.

Finally, the three reports of TV Sitel had no diversity of opinion, with reporters themselves most often specifying the problems. The stories aired in the middle of their newscast, thus suggesting that the protest was not among the main events of the day.

Overall, these media did little to present the views of protesters, despite outcries from various sides requesting debate and a delay of the reforms. Some reports in these media, however, framed the issue under the general category of the need for wider debate on how the state exam should be conceptualised or how higher education should be reformed, but largely marginalised the students' demands and failed to call for government accountability.

On the other hand, media outlets with editorial policies critical towards the government – Telma, Alsat-M, Novatv.mk, and Plusinfo.mk – provided their audience with more

information about the events and the issues behind the protests (18 out of 32 TV and online reports). They headlined these events and devoted significant time to them on the web and during their prime time news. Some of these media also used social network profiles of protesters as a relevant source. Plusinfo.mk took information published on the official Twitter account of the student plenum, such as the following Tweet: “The pressure continues, but they will not stop us. This is just the beginning!”¹⁵⁶ PlusInfo.mk published in its entirety the letter of demands that the students submitted to the government and informed its readers that “not a single person is wearing party insignia at the protest”¹⁵⁷.

4.4 The communication practices of citizens/protesters

In general, the media had open access to the three protest groups that are the subject of this research. Most of the respondents from the media agree that all movements were very much open to the media and did not restrict access to journalists upon requests for information, but there were some cases where protest movements restricted media access to some of their gatherings.

However, there is a notable difference between the analysed protests mainly due to the fact that the initiative board for the release of the journalist Tomislav Kezarovski included distinguished journalists in the country, which made the media representation of the protests easier and enabled media in general to gain access to relevant information about the goals and purpose of the protests.

4.4.1. Denying access to media

The student plenum was generally open to media, giving them full access but also regularly providing updates through press releases, statements, and news conferences. However, at

¹⁵⁶ *PlusInfo*, “Privedeno momčeto koe go snimaše protestot so dron?”, 10 December 2014.

¹⁵⁷ M. B. “Marširaat so krenati indeksi: ‘Koja sila ke go sopre glasot na studentite!’”

times they did restrict access to certain media outlets. Interviewees mostly justify these actions with the inexperience of the protesters in relations with the media, as well as by the fear of bad coverage. On one occasion, access to the Autonomous University territory was denied to a journalist from the public broadcaster MTV after he attempted to get a statement from the plenum. The plenum representatives say that the access was denied on the grounds of MTV's "shady coverage" of the Kezarovski case, which they believed was unfairly covered by the "pro-government" media outlets. Some of the interviewees believe that this was "unnecessary" and "rash" and driven by emotions, an indicator of a lack of experience in communication. "I don't know if they had any kind of strategy in the beginning, they seemed disorganised and chaotic to me," said a news producer.¹⁵⁸

The respondents from television Kanal 5 mention that suspicions on the part of representatives of the student plenum was a considerable obstacle. When journalists of this TV tried to get a statement from the plenum, "they were reserved and suspicious towards us, even ignored us a little".¹⁵⁹ The outrage of students about the manner in which some of the media covered plenum actions prompted this reluctance to embrace communication with them: "They see that you are a journalist of Kanal 5, and they don't wish to communicate with you."

The reluctance of the protesters, however, seemed to have affected the communication with friendlier media as well. One journalist noted: "In the beginning, they forbade us to film them with our camera... The first time they even tried to push journalists out by force. We

¹⁵⁸ Interview with a news producer of a national TV, who requested anonymity, 7 April 2015.

¹⁵⁹ Interview with a news producer of a national TV, who requested anonymity, 7 April 2015.

didn't get that they are trying to organise and that they're afraid."¹⁶⁰ Thus there was an overall fear of media distortions that hindered more active communication with the media.

Besides these isolated cases, the student plenum also restricted access for media outlets to internal meetings, where they discussed important strategic issues and which were "not intended to be open to the public, with the purpose of internal coordination of the Plenum".¹⁶¹ Another plenum representative noted that the decision to deny media access to their internal meetings resulted from a previous abuse by a journalist: "Some journalist was present, and then gave away some information, so we decided to restrict media access to some of our internal meetings."¹⁶²

The 'I love GTC' initiative, by contrast, never held such closed meetings. "All meeting sessions, from the first to the last, were open to the public."¹⁶³ This initiative was different from the plenum in terms of its composition and organisation, given that it engaged experienced activists who are "very well organised, and are aware of the role of the media in the case of citizen action".¹⁶⁴ The initiative for the release of Kezarovski also had the advantage of being led by prominent journalists experienced in articulating their demands and able to assure the media coverage. As one interviewed editor said: "It was easier with the Kezarovski movement since we're talking about journalists who were part of the movement that organised the protests and the communication with them was correct and normal."¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁰ Interview with Sanja Vasic. Konstantin Bitrakov, representative of the student plenum, noted that "in certain situations it was necessary to conduct internal coordination without communicating with the media and the broader public."

¹⁶¹ Interview with Konstantin Bitrakov.

¹⁶² Interview with Darko Malinovski; no specific information on what kind of information was leaked by the journalist was received.

¹⁶³ Interview with Nikola Pisarev.

¹⁶⁴ Interview with Maja Vaseva.

¹⁶⁵ Interview with Muhamed Zekiri.

However, the student plenum, in the view of respondents, notably improved its communication in the course of the protests. Although the communication channels with the media and the public (aside from their Facebook page) were not clear, and demands were not always clearly articulated through the media, the communication patterns were developing as the plenum grew.¹⁶⁶ According to Maja Vaseva, a journalist from Plusinfo.mk: “Prior to the occupation it became apparent that they embraced the media as an important tool in the whole process.” Biljana Sekulovska noted that in time, the students acknowledged their potential. “They lacked courage and determination in the beginning. But as time passed, they became aware of their power, influence, they tried to establish contact, connect with the media, and they even tried to contact us, NovaTV.mk, on their own. They called us.”¹⁶⁷ The respondents from the student plenum also reported that it was a learning experience regarding communication: “As time passed, it became apparent to us that we had to have some communication with the media and be more open.”¹⁶⁸

From labelling to branding

In previous parts of this report, we mentioned the practice of the media to use visuals in order to single out and label some of the protesters as affiliates of the opposition party and to delegitimise the protests altogether. Such representation of protests inspired creative actions by the protesters. They wore red circles made of paper around their heads, stating for the media that they were doing this because they were fed up with the attempts of the government to politically discredit them. One of the students’ statements aired in the media was: “We appeal

¹⁶⁶ Some of the respondents even noted that the other movements’ quality of communication paled by comparison with the student plenum. “I think that they gave the professors’ and the teachers’ plenum a good lesson, as well as other organisations that have their PR departments.” Interview with Xhabir Deralla.

¹⁶⁷ Interview with Biljana Sekulovska.

¹⁶⁸ Interview with Darko Malinovski.

[to the protesters] that absolutely no party and national symbols be displayed, for this will cause controversy and the plenum will be seen in a negative context, just as we were labelled so far in numerous negative contexts. We definitely refrain from any party influences.”¹⁶⁹

Citizens who supported the cause of the students also marked themselves with red circles on their Facebook and Twitter profile pictures. The overall meaning of this was to point out that this labelling by the pro-government media as ‘Sorosoid’ or SDSM was used as a tool against anyone who expressed an independent opinion and disagreed with the government. Therefore, the circles that the citizens attached to their profile pictures were accompanied by the slogan “I think, therefore I’m marked”. Thus, the students pointed to the absurdity of the claims of the media, stripped them of their intended meaning, and used them for self-promotion and mobilisation (getting supporters to help them to defeat the tactics of the media).¹⁷⁰



Photo: Students wearing paper circles around their heads mocking media that accused them of being orchestrated by the opposition party.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ TV Telma, “Vesti 18:30: Studentite utre povtorno na mars”, 9 December 2014.

¹⁷⁰ Kurir.mk, as well as the pro-government TV outlets, eventually stopped marking students and members of the opposition.

¹⁷¹ Source: <http://slobodenpecat.mk/>; Author of the photo: Vanco Dzambaski.

4.5 Role of social media

Protest initiatives in all three cases relied to a high degree on communication through social media. Social media were used to inform the public and participants about the cause of the protests and their ideas, and to mobilise citizens through calls to attend protest events. As an activist notes: “If it weren’t for online communication, their cause would not have been that much visible in the public, and their growth would have been hampered.”¹⁷² But despite the crucial role of social media in information and mobilisation, the respondents point out that mainstream media are still necessary for the protest messages to reach a wider public. As Konstantin Bitrakov noted: “People still perceive more seriously news coming from the media, especially from a national television, than from a Facebook page.”¹⁷³

4.5.1. *Using social media for both mobilisation and information*

The student plenum strongly relied on social network platforms for information and mobilisation. Several of the interviewed protesters pointed to Facebook as the dominant platform through which the plenum reached its target groups. Darko Malinovski, involved in the plenum’s communication, said that social media were crucial in reaching both their peers and students as well as other supportive groups: “Facebook was one of the primary sources that made life simpler for us, in terms of communicating with our target groups, but also with the citizens that are not part of the student population.”¹⁷⁴ Facebook played the main role in mobilisation: “[it] was used for mobilisation, especially

¹⁷² Interview with Xhabir Deralla.

¹⁷³ A respondent from the Assembly also believes that “television is still the primary source”. Interview with Todor Pendarov.

¹⁷⁴ Interview with Darko Malinovski.

around the period when the protests were held, calling all citizens to support the student protests.”¹⁷⁵

Respondents point to the advantage of easy and fast communication through social networks, in comparison to the mainstream media, which is why “very often press releases were published first on the Facebook page of the student plenum and were then taken by the media, not the other way around”.¹⁷⁶ The interviewed journalists confirm that they often took press releases from the Facebook pages of the protest movements. According to Sanja Vasic: “The organisation of each protest, gathering, or another activity is conducted on social media. You check there first, and then you check your email.”¹⁷⁷ The student plenum also used its social media popularity for calls for food, clothing, and financial support.

One other advantage of social media noted by some of the respondents¹⁷⁸ was that social media platforms are not susceptible to political influence and corruption, in contrast with the divided traditional media sphere in the country. On a negative note, some of the respondents said that they were cautious in using social media, due to the fear of surveillance by the authorities. Ivana Tufegčić from the student plenum noted: “We were careful what we wrote on Facebook, especially around the organisation of the university occupation. The occupation documents were sent by e-mail, and as soon as that e-mail was accessed by the recipient, he or she would immediately delete it, because of the danger of interception of the communication.”¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁵ Interview with Konstantin Bitrakov. Todor Pendarov, PR Advisor to the Assembly, commented that “the larger role is for mobilisation, rather than informing” (interview conducted on 9 April 2015). The spokesperson of the ‘I love GTC’ initiative takes a different view: “Look, you have to inform in order to mobilise. These two things are related” (Interview with Nikola Pisarev).

¹⁷⁶ Interview with Konstantin Bitrakov.

¹⁷⁷ Interview with Sanja Vasic.

¹⁷⁸ Interview with Ivana Tufegčić.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

In the case of the 'I love GTC' initiative, too, Facebook was mainly used to inform the public about the movement's cause and the various events staged by the initiative. In the protests against Kezarovski's imprisonment, the respondents are divided about the relevance of social media. Some believe that the impact of social media was negligible: the initiative, launched and supported mainly by journalists, had good access to both online and TV outlets. As one of the respondents said: "I'm not certain if social media helped a lot for Kezarovski. Probably because the journalists themselves helped a lot by utilising the media with whom they were affiliated in one way or another."¹⁸⁰ Another representative of the Initiative board, however, still believes that communication through social networks was important for the initiative: "I think that Facebook reached the public the most, and that was a pretty successful communication strategy that started with a protest of around 50-60 journalists in front of the court, and ended with 4,000 people out on the streets, including Kezarovski himself."¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ Interview with Zoran Dimitrovski.

¹⁸¹ Interview with Tamara Causidis.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Media independence and freedom of expression have been severely undermined in Macedonia in the past decade. The media system is being gradually taken over by party-political networks of influence, with devastating consequences for the integrity of the media and journalism. Media clientelism is firmly entrenched as a means of generating financial gain for media owners and executives. Through political parallelism, political parties influence the media agenda, secure publicity, and disseminate political propaganda. These developments have created a culture of complete dependence of the media on the state, making media owners and journalists susceptible to the political will of high-level officials, destroying their financial and editorial independence, and compromising the ethical and professional principles of journalism in the country. On the other side are a few media that are independent from the government and find refuge in alternative sources of funding.

The deepening of the political division in the media sphere hampers the public's right to be informed about matters of public interest. Our research confirms that in the case of the student protests, coverage differed drastically from one group of media to the other. The protests, with their articulated causes, ideology, and demands were framed as politically instrumentalised by one group and as part of the solution for detrimental education reform by the other. The pro-government media delegitimised the protest movements by framing them as orchestrated by the opposition party, SDSM; by claiming that they were funded by the government's favourite villain, the Soros foundation; and by saying that the protests failed because of low turnout. By doing so, these media showed extreme pro-government bias. The frames were identical to the government's position and the main sources were officials, while the protesters' views were marginalised and the picture presented to the public was evidently partial.

The media that were critical towards the government covered a diversity of opposing insights and opinions from a variety of sources, be they political, from civil society, or academia.

Some media recognised the value of civic initiatives and allocated more time for them to express their attitudes and opinions. Overall, these media framed the protests in a completely different light – as a response to bad reforms and a violation of the autonomy of universities, or as the unifying force and response to democratic failures.

The interviewees are well aware of this polarisation in the media, which they say is pervasive among traditional media but also evident in online media. Some of the online media show a bias in favour of the ruling party (e.g. Kurir.mk, Netpress.mk, and Republika.mk). These media are often formally owned by individuals related to public officials or members of the ruling party (Kurir.mk), or their owners are unknown (Republika.mk).¹⁸² These media frequently quote each other in their reporting about persons or organisations that are critical of the ruling party.

On the other hand, when they are open towards citizens' initiatives, online media can be an excellent opportunity for communication with specific target groups. They can become a space for publicising issues that would otherwise go unnoticed. These online media (e.g. NovaTV.mk and Plusinfo.mk) have been giving various initiatives (e.g. the student plenum, the Board of Initiative, as well as 'I love GTC') an opportunity to voice their concerns and demands in public. The ownership of media matters, as demonstrated in these cases also: the online media that proved to be open for civic initiatives are mostly owned by professional journalists.

Overall, investigative and analytical journalism was completely missing from the reporting, and the public's understanding of issues related to education reform was hardly facilitated by the media. Reports were limited to information about the protest events, some focused

¹⁸² The founder of the company Prva Republika DOOEL is Iresine Ltd, registered in the 'tax haven of Belize, a popular offshore destination. See more at <http://www.mediapedia.mk/medium/republika>, accessed 9 September 2015.

on official views, while others presented the protest ideas more, but none engaged in in-depth analysis of the issues related to the protests. The problem is aggravated, and critical and investigative reporting discouraged, by intense smear campaigns, hate speech, and increased threats of defamation and libel lawsuits, to which journalists who publicly oppose the government have increasingly been exposed in the last years. In the course of the student protests, the media overall failed to provide independent and analytical reporting of complex issues related to higher education, and what the announced reform might mean for the students and academia.

The protest groups in all three cases selected for our research conducted their communication almost entirely through social media. According to the respondents, Facebook was crucial for their communication. The activists in all three cases used Facebook to inform citizens about their cause, ideas, and also to mobilise them through public calls to attend protests. The student plenum was particularly successful in using Facebook to its advantage, both by informing and mobilizing the public to attend its events. Moreover, Facebook was instrumental as a reliable two-way communication channel between activists and the media. The student plenum had more than 20,000 Facebook supporters. The media often used the updates on the student plenums' Facebook profile as a primary news source. Twitter was also used by the movements, but significantly less than Facebook.

The respondents involved in our research – activists, media representatives, and state officials – described the communication of the protest movements as articulate and transparent. Some exceptions, according to members of the media community, were evident at the beginning of the protests, when the student plenum was still an inexperienced initiative. In one case, the students even tried to force journalists out of their meeting area. As the protests progressed, the student plenum improved its communication practices and began to view the media as an important tool for presenting their cause to a broader audience. The Initiative board for the release of Kezarovski, made up of journalists, was well versed in communicating with

the media and the public, based on its members' professional experience of working in the media industry. In this case, the media mainly shied away from manipulating the public with incomplete information.

The influence of the protest groups analysed in this research varies across the different cases. The student plenum is still active; it continues to raise awareness for student rights and issues, organises various public events such as debates and lectures, and calls for support of causes initiated by other civic groups. It did not give in to pressure, and it faced each setback with resilience. The education reforms were postponed until 2017/18. Although the reforms have not been abandoned, the student plenum, along with the professors' plenum, will have a larger say in future efforts to create policy alternatives.

The Board of Initiative for the Release of Tomislav Kezarovski was disbanded after its goal had been achieved. Kezarovski was finally released, after strong pressure from the international community and domestic organisations, led by the Board of Initiative. The Board of Initiative directly contributed to his release, and the significance of its efforts is beyond disputed. It succeeded in gathering several thousand people on the streets of Skopje on the day of his release.

The referendum against the plans for reshaping of the GTC exterior failed due to the low turnout (even though more than 90% of people who voted, voted against the plans). Since then, the 'I Love GTC' initiative has been less active, even though the plans for remodelling the GTC, while not yet being carried out, have not been retracted.

The activists and a majority of the journalists interviewed hold the view that the current **government exercises no accountability** towards the public. "There is no public accountability," said one respondent bluntly.¹⁸³ Accountability is often only pretence, including

the utterly selective dissemination of information, only if and when it suits the government, and even then through one-way communication through pro-government media.

During the protests, the government did not communicate directly with the protest movements until some of them (e.g., the student plenum) gained more prominence and public support. It took the staging of a massive protest for the government to acknowledge the student plenum as an existing initiative and engage in talks about the reforms. The student protests basically became popular among citizens through social media, which led to increasing number of protesters attending each protest. They were also prominently covered by some TV and online media outlets (Telma, 24Vesti, Alsat, NovaTV.mk, and Plusinfo.mk).

The government failed to demonstrate accountability towards the public by not leaving sufficient time for evaluating and discussing the proposed reforms with stakeholders. In fact, the proposal was discussed by the government months before it was revealed to the public. That is why the protesters were skeptical when government representatives declared later, during the protests, that the details of the reform would be agreed through an inclusive dialogue.

The labelling of the protests as orchestrated by the opposition party and funded by the Soros foundation, practiced by the government and the pro-government media, is nothing new; in fact, it has been used by the government not only in the analysed cases, but whenever citizens expressed criticism in the past ten years.

There is evident pessimism among the respondents with regard to prospects for improved government accountability. “Whatever we do, we will get the same results... This government has gone to hell,” said one of the respondents,¹⁸⁴ while another pointed out that the lack of any public justification for policies is the basis of government strategy: “The largest political

¹⁸⁴ Interview with Xhabir Deralla.

party that is currently in power still thinks that it's better for them to sit back with zero accountability, without participating in debates, because they apparently lack arguments."¹⁸⁵

In sum, our analysis confirms the concerns raised by numerous international organisations that the media and journalism are in severe crisis in Macedonia. It depicts the influence of the political parties on the editorial agenda of most of the largest media in the country. The public broadcaster lacks independence and has to be thoroughly reformed since all data show its bias in favour of the ruling party. Finally, it depicts the political and economic pressures faced by the media in Macedonia, which prevent them from doing their job as watchdogs and guardians of the public interest. A very small but unrelenting group of media (Telma, Alsat, and 24Vesti) have successfully resisted the grip of the government, and over the past few years conveyed the demands and concerns of various protest groups. However, they still have a small viewership compared to the dominant media such as TV Sitel and Kanal 5 TV. And while the findings confirm the importance of ICT for the mobilisation of public support for a particular cause, TV is still the main source of information for Macedonians; more favourable treatment by mainstream media is recognised as indispensable for reaching a wider public and for the protests to achieve higher impact.

The Kezarovski case was a notable exception thanks to the very public solidarity shown by journalists and the media during the trial and the protests for his release. Media coverage was far more favourable than in the student protests, which demonstrates that journalistic solidarity is a strong force even under the difficult circumstances of current political parallelism in the media.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 For the media and media donors

It is of critical importance to transform the public broadcaster, MTV, from a party-political tool into a true public service and to ensure its independence, notably through new mechanisms for the continuous monitoring by civil society of MTV's depoliticisation. News editors of the public service broadcaster should be chosen in a transparent manner, in a process that will be enforced by law and monitored by academic and expert bodies to ensure its greater accountability to the public.

Since the results of the analysis confirmed the bias and lack of pluralism in the reporting about the protests, more should be done to ensure a critical approach and diverse views in covering protests that question the policies of the government. The media community should thus advocate for greater guarantees of editorial independence in general, including appointment of editors based on candidates' credentials, formal guarantees that owners and publishers are not to interfere in editorial decisions, consistent support by state institutions and journalists organisations for editors and reporters in case they are pressured by management or others, as well as the general promotion of journalistic norms and excellence through education and wider recognition of good journalistic work. Strengthening professional associations and self-regulatory bodies (Association of Journalists of Macedonia, Council of Ethics in Media, Independent Union of Media Workers and Journalists, etc.) is of utmost importance. These organisations directly support journalists and defend their rights and freedoms, but also establish mechanisms for self-regulation. Support should be provided for their operations and further development.

Media should engage in order to provide funding for quality news content and high-quality programmes, which should include considering possible alternative funding

(commercialisation of some of the content, crowd funding). Given the current dependence on donor support, the following recommendations are primarily aimed at donors and organisations providing short-term training for journalists:

- Ensure funding for investigative journalism that would support in-depth reporting, especially during periods of social unrest
- Organise training programmes for journalistic skills, specialisation in reporting, and professional conduct.

6.2 For protest groups

Protest groups should build a level of internal organisation so they can effectively communicate from the beginning of their protests. This means making contact information easily accessible and providing the media with clear and substantial information about protest activities and rationale. Other measures to consider include designating spokespersons, establishing regular communication with supporters and protest participants, motivating them for future involvement, and developing regular contacts with the media.

The protesters can be assisted in this process by established non-governmental organisations and by professional journalists who are open to them and respect professional standards. The NGOs should support protest movements by offering them advice and training in public communication, advocacy, and lobbying.

Protesters should use social media to disseminate content and react quickly to anti-protest spin. Our analysis proved that, during protests, social media can be a critical factor of influence and communication of key information and messages to the general public and to the media. Creative strategies should be used to turn attempts to discredit protests into a tool for self-promotion. However, more research is needed to explore the patterns of success

and failure in using social media and other online tools for communication during social uprisings.

Activists should ensure that their demands for government transparency and pressure for policy changes are consistent, clear, coordinated, and visible to the general public. The cumulative efforts of several protest movements in the past several years achieved this effect.

More efforts should be made by activists to communicate with the media and ensure the visibility of their key messages in traditional media. Despite a lack of interest of mainstream media in some stages of the protest, they should continue to communicate with them in an organised manner as protests develop.

Mass protests seem to be an effective tool for gaining public attention and provoking a response by the government. Therefore, activists should engage in staging such protests, and make maximum efforts to attract a large number of participants. This can be done by engaging on social media and implementing the internal coordination and communication methods mentioned above.

Another element of defeating spin tactics and public manipulation by the media during protests is to make citizens more aware and able to critically receive news on a daily basis. This is essential for empowering citizens to understand the way media messages are influenced and framed. Citizens should be informed about the strong political ties of certain media and how these ties work in practice.

6.3 For institutions and officials

The current communication practices towards citizens and protest groups by public administration and state officials require deep and systemic changes. Public institutions and

officials need to acknowledge the demand for greater public accountability and transparency, made by civil society and various civic initiatives, as a growing challenge to their political positions. The government must be ready to engage in open and deliberative talks with activists to discuss controversial policies.

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to da go povleče proektot za nadvorešno ocenuvanje, prodolžuva tvrdoglavo da go turka, velat od SDSM, pokažuvajki go predlogot na Vladata za proverka na znaenieto na studentite ispečaten na dve stranici. Nesoriozniot eksperiment stigma do fakultetite, no najteško za suetata na premierot, velat tie, e da se povleče od predlogot”, 9 December 2014.

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List of interviewees

Activists

Darko Malinovski, Student Plenum, 3 March 2015

Ivana Tufegčić, Student Plenum, 6 April 2015

Konstantin Bitrakov, Student Plenum, 8 June 2015

Nikola Pisarev, I Love GTC, 3 April 2015

Tamara Causidis, Initiative Board for the Release of Tomislav Kezarovski, 3 April 2015

Xhabir Deralla, CIVIL NGO, 7 April 2015

Zoran Dimitrovski, Initiative Board for the Release of Tomislav Kezarovski, 6 April 2015

Media representatives

Anonymous interviewee, National TV, 7 April 2015

Anonymous interviewee, National TV, 7 April 2015

Biljana Sekulovska, NovaTV.mk, 6 April 2015

Maja Vaseva, Plusinfo.mk, 2 April 2015

Marjan Nikolovski, Sitel TV, 15 April 2015

Muhamed Zekiri, Alsat M TV, 2 May 2015

Sanja Vasic, Telma TV, 4 March 2015

Public officials

Anonymous interviewee, Centre Municipality, 4 May 2015

Anonymous interviewee, Ministry of Interior, 4 May 2015

Todor Pendarov, Macedonian Assembly, 9 April 2015

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