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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### RISING AGAINST THE THIEVES Anti-Corruption Campaigns in South-Eastern Europe

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**ABSTRACT:** Since the 2010s, bottom-up anti-corruption mobilizations have broken out in different countries of south-eastern Europe. Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2014 and Macedonia in 2015 and 2016 were amongst the states in democratic and economic transition in which thousands of people took to the streets to express their discontent against a ruling class blamed for corruption. Although triggered by different events, these mobilizations present a number of similarities. Building on qualitative interviews and ethnographic observation of interactions on social media platforms, this article investigates the discursive strategies that movement organizers used to frame their claims and the protestors' identity in both countries. The article explores the ways in which protest leaders in the two countries appropriated the topic of corruption "from below" to delegitimize the ruling class using similar motivational, identity and diagnostic frames, notwithstanding the protests being spurred by diverse events. Furthermore, it elucidates the similarities and differences among the prognostic frames, that is, the proposed solutions to the problem of political corruption.

**KEYWORDS:** contentious politics, corruption, crisis of responsibility, governmental accountability, rule of law

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## 1. Introduction

The past decade has seen corruption, clientelism and political accountability become topics of public concern in several countries of south-eastern Europe. Conversely, the level of satisfaction with and trust of citizens in the key organizations of representative democracy such as parliaments and political parties has been reported to have declined over time (Transparency International 2017). The tension between increasing citizens' concern about transparency and accountability of institutions and decreasing satisfaction with the political establishment is more and more frequently expressed in the public space by means of contentious actions. Challenging the view of a weak, passive citizenry detached from political debates and civic arenas (Howard 2003, Tarrow and Petrova 2006), citizens of almost every country in the Balkan area have taken part in grassroots protests in which an anti-corruption discourse was used against the ruling elite. People poured into the streets, for example, in Sofia (2013-14), Sarajevo (2014), Skopje (2014-16) and Bucharest (2017) to voice their outrage towards a political elite perceived to be held unaccountable (see also Pleyers and Sava 2015). On the streets and social media platforms alike, demonstrators have denounced the apparent corruption of political officials, reclaimed responsive governments, and demanded that the ruling class respect the rule of law.

Corruption became thus both a prominent subject in the political discourse and a hot topic on the social mobilization agenda, in line with earlier research pointing to the centrality of corruption in public criticism in the region (Krastev 2002). Some scholars have attributed the increased salience of the topic to its appropriation by populist parties and leaders (Brentin and Pavasović Trošt 2016). Specifically, they have argued that populist leaders in the region increasingly tapped into widespread societal discontent by strategically combining the issue of corruption with the rise in social inequality and the economic decline in an attempt to increase their popularity. However, little has been said to date about the way corruption is perceived and articulated by citizens themselves. Leaving aside the issue of how corruption has been appropriated "from above", this article adopts a perspective "from below" in view of analysing comparatively the distinct ways in which movement organisers in the region have employed the topic of corruption as a discursive strategy to interpret and voice people's discontent towards the ruling class, and to signal the crisis of legitimacy concerning the political elite.

The article draws on a set of qualitative data gathered in the period 2014-2016, including qualitative interviews and ethnographic observation of interactions on social media platforms, to illustrate how the anti-corruption discourse has variably been em-

ployed by movement actors during the respective protests over corruption in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) (2014) and Macedonia<sup>1</sup> (2015-2016). The countries were selected for presenting numerous similarities in the institutional asset and socio-political context, allowing for what has been termed the most-similar research design, where cases are “as similar as possible in all respects except the outcome of interest, where they are expected to vary” (Gerring 2001, 210).

The contribution of this article is twofold. First, by offering new insights into how issues like corruption can be used to activate social discontent in countries usually deemed lacking a robust contentious political culture, it adds to the social movement scholarship analysing the evolution of movements vis-à-vis the crisis of neoliberalism. Second, this article sheds light on an under-researched geographical area of study, namely south-eastern Europe, which so far has shown up on the radar of academia almost exclusively for its ethnic conflicts and peace-building process (Belloni 2001, 2008, Belloni and Hemmer 2010, Kelleher and Ryan 2012), analysed with the lenses of post-socialist transition (Linz and Stepan 1996) or with the purpose of investigating the impact of the European integration on domestic politics (Kostovicova and Bojicic-Dzelilovic 2006, Fagan 2011, Elbasani 2013). Rather than considering protest events in the region as isolated instances of public discontent or as novel populist movements, the article takes them as discrete events presenting comparable characteristics to other movements that have emerged all over Europe following the introduction of austerity measures and the advent of the economic and democratic crisis. In so doing, this article contributes to the recent scholarship investigating the evolution of protest and social mobilization in the context of a crisis of neoliberalism at a time of austerity (della Porta and Mattoni 2014, della Porta 2015).

More specifically, the article argues that, seen from the perspective of social movement studies, these mass protests are, on the one hand, an integral part of the upsurge of resistance to neoliberal transformations emerging at the global level, and on the other, manifestations of prevailing disillusionment concerning a long-awaited shift of the post-Yugoslav area from socialism to the market economy and liberal democracy. Such an internationally endorsed transition has, in fact, failed to deliver, and, in the view of some scholars, “in the end proved to be overly optimistic and misleading” (Bieber and Kmezić 2017, 5). The transition process has instead brought about a per-

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<sup>1</sup> Owing to the dispute with Greece concerning the country’s name, the EU officially addresses the country with the appellation “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” (FYROM) instead of with the country’s constitutional name, the “Republic of Macedonia”. For the sake of brevity, throughout the article I will use the term “Macedonia”.

ceived pauperisation of the population, increasing social inequalities and diffused economic deprivation (see, for instance, Pugh 2005, Horvat and Štiks 2015).

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 introduces the theoretical background of the study, followed by an illustration of the methodology employed for data collection and data analysis. Section 3 provides details on the historical, social and political context of the countries in which the protests took place. Section 4 turns to analyse the case study of the anti-corruption mobilizations in Bosnia-Herzegovina, section 5 deals with similar protests in Macedonia, with section 6 providing a comparison of the two case studies. Section 7 concludes by summarizing the most important findings and reflecting upon the emergence of popular mobilization in countries often considered to have a weak tradition of street activism.

## 2. Theoretical and methodological background

This article tackles the way in which movement organizers appropriated the topic of corruption to signal the crisis of legitimacy regarding the political elite in south-eastern Europe. To that end, the analysis centers on the process of the attribution of meaning that groups and individuals give to symbols, events and discourses (Goffman 1986), known in social movement studies as “framing activity”. According to Tarrow, much movement effort is cognitive and evaluative, concerned with “identifying grievances and translating them into claims against significant others” (Tarrow 2011, 153). It follows that frames are “schemata of interpretation” (Goffman 1974, 21) that movements construct and use to make sense of the reality in a way that prompts people to take action, persuading bystanders of the importance and righteousness of the cause (Benford and Snow 2000). Following the classical categorization elaborated by Snow and Benford (1988), I center my attention on three dimensions of framing: diagnostic, prognostic and motivational, without disregarding the identity frame. While diagnostic frames identify a social problem the movement seeks to address and assign blame to the actors who are considered responsible for it, prognostic frames evoke and suggest appropriate tactics as potential solutions (Snow and Benford 1988). Differently, motivational frames provide the rationale that encourages potential supporters to side with challengers and to take action. Finally, identity frames “distinguish bystanders from opponents” (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 292), the “us” vs. “them”, a categorization used by movement organizers to “define their enemies by their real or imagined attributed and evils” (Tarrow 2011, 31). By exploring the different types of frames, this article identifies and compares the social problem the movement addressed and the individu-

als acknowledged as responsible for it (diagnostic framing); the potential solutions suggested (prognostic framing); the core values and motivation put forward to persuade individuals to get involved in the protests (motivational framing), and the way in which discursive strategies created a shared sense of belonging (identity frame).

Data for this article have been collected by means of qualitative methods such as document analysis and in-depth interviews with activists and key informants. The bulk of data collection occurred in two phases. In 2014, I conducted fieldwork in Bosnia-Herzegovina, while the interviews in Macedonia date to 2016. Specifically, I conducted a dozen semi-structured in-depth interviews with movement organizers of the 2014 Bosnian-Herzegovinian protests and five in-depth interviews with activists who took part in the 2015-16 mobilizations in Macedonia. I also closely examined websites and social media materials such as press releases, communiqués, flyers, slogans, movements' manifestos and documents, as well as media statements, published on the Bosnian-Herzegovinian Facebook pages of citizens' participatory assemblies (known as "plenums") that emerged in 2014 in the main cities of the country, i.e. the plenum of Sarajevo (@PlenumSa) and the plenum of Tuzla (@PlenumTK), and the articles published on the blog "Bosnia-Herzegovina Protest Files" (<https://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com>), which collected and translated into English the texts produced by the plenums during the February-May 2014 wave of protest. As regards the Macedonian case, I analyzed the same type of material published on the Macedonian "Protestiram" website (<http://protestiram.info/>) and Facebook page (@protestiramezaedno), as well as the Facebook page of the platform "Citizens of Macedonia" (@gragjanite.mk), and Colorful Revolution (@ColorfulMacedonia). Throughout the data collection phase, I devoted attention to photographs and memes, as both waves of mobilization presented widespread use of visual material. Documents and transcripts were examined by introducing elements of discourse analysis, adopted for its ability to uncover "how movement 'texts' (...) are composed and draw on existing discourses in order to communicate particular meanings" (Lindekilde 2014, 198).

### **3. Historical, social and political background**

Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia have been chosen for comparison as they present several similarities. Multi-ethnic cohabitation was at its highest in these countries before the breakup of Yugoslavia in 1992 (Hodson, Sekulic, and Massey 1994); both states experienced violent conflicts that featured ethnic elements (Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1992-95 and Macedonia in 2001) and had peacekeeping forces from the

United Nations (UN) and other international actors deployed in their territory right after the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s<sup>2</sup>. In both cases, internationally sponsored peace agreements (for Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Dayton Peace Accords<sup>3</sup> signed in 1995 and for Macedonia the Ohrid Agreement<sup>4</sup> of 2001) terminated the conflict, which was followed by a process of stabilisation and democratization. Nowadays, three different ethno-national groups coexist in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Serbs (of Orthodox faith), Croats (Catholic) and Bosniaks (of Muslim religion). Similarly, in Macedonia, the Macedonian-Orthodox segment of population is dominant, living side by side with the Albanian-Muslim community. While in BiH the three national groups share a language, in Macedonia the two communities speak different languages (Macedonian and Albanian). Although the peace agreements aimed at protecting the equal rights of the three constituents people living in Bosnia-Herzegovina and at providing more rights for the Albanian minority in Macedonia, both countries are still characterized by tensions of an ethno-national nature. The constitutional set-up of the two states grants proportional representation to the peoples living in their territory, which coexist under a political system operating on a consociational basis (Bieber 2005). According to the latest population census, in Macedonia Macedonians constitute almost 65% of the population (1,297,981 individuals), while 25% of citizens identify themselves as Albanian (509,083 people) (Republic of Macedonia, State statistical office 2005). The data of the census conducted in 2013 in Bosnia-Herzegovina (the latest after the 1992-95 conflict) reports that 50% of the population identify as belonging to the Bosniak group, about 30% as members of the Serbian community, and around 15% as part of the Croatian one. The remaining part did not answer or chose not to declare its ethno-national affiliation (Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2016).

Among other similarities, both countries have faced democratic turmoil in recent years (Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2014 and Macedonia in 2015 and 2016). On several occasions, citizens of both countries have expressed open dissent about corruption towards their political establishment by means of street protests. In Bosnia-

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<sup>2</sup> The UN Protection Force in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia (1992-95); UN Preventive Deployment Force in Macedonia (1995-99).

<sup>3</sup> The Dayton Peace Accords, named for the place in the US state of Ohio in which the agreement was signed, put the 1992-95 conflict to a halt, setting up BiH as a consociational democracy and a triple power-sharing system in which the three constituent nations (i.e. Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats) are granted proportional representation through a system of ethnic quotas.

<sup>4</sup> The 2001 Peace Accord, signed in the Macedonian city of Ohrid, ended a seven-month armed conflict between Albanian militants and the Macedonian security forces, which left more than 100 people dead. Amongst other provisions, the deal accommodated more rights to the Albanian ethnic minority.

Herzegovina and in Macedonia, demonstrators targeted government buildings and other symbols of power, at times violently, at other times making use of a creative repertoire. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, protestors vandalized and set fire to several governmental edifices in 2014; in Macedonia they occupied the public space in front of the Parliament building in 2015, and threw paint-filled balloons into the main government offices and monuments in 2016. In all these circumstances, demonstrators resorted to the use of a discourse tackling the corruption of policy makers in order to gain the broader support of various social groups, pointing to the whole political elite as the main culprit for the unfulfilled promises of freedom, equality, and citizens' participation in political processes. On the streets, citizens of both former Yugoslav states demanded accountability on the part of the ruling elite, a government responsive to people's needs and problems, that public authorities and officials abide by the law and respect democracy, as well as the adoption of anti-corruption provisions. Moreover, the slogans and banners carried on the streets by the citizens of both countries were written in a language that denounced political corruption. For instance, they referred to their politicians as "thieves and criminals" (MC2), pointing to an elite perceived as unaccountable, robbing from their constituencies (BH1), and "having increasing authoritarian tendencies" (MC2).

Although long present in the public discourse, the issue of corruption has increased in salience in both countries over the recent years, following a heightened sensitivity of public opinion towards the topic, as recently published reports show. In 2017, the Corruption Perception Index published by the anti-corruption organization Transparency International, which aims at measuring the perceived level of corruption in the public sector worldwide, reports high rates of perceived large-scale corruption in public institutions of south-eastern Europe. The report disclosed that the citizens of the two Yugoslav successor states experience corruption as a strong, continuous presence in their social environment. Asked to score how corrupt their country's public sectors are seen to be on a scale ranging from 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean), the citizens attributed a score that falls below the midpoint of the scale (Transparency International 2017). Furthermore, with respect to worldwide ranking, the two countries placed themselves among the lower-ranked countries in terms of perceived transparency of institutions.

The data for Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia unveil an increase over time in the perception of highly corrupt public institutions and low standards of the rule of law, with little improvement in citizens' trust in state institutions. The figures of the report clearly demonstrate citizens' deepened scepticism towards the institutions of representative democracy (e.g., Parliament and political parties) in contrast with a height-

ened trust in executive institutions and judicial bodies. A research conducted in 2015 by the Sarajevo-based think-tank *Analitika* shows the extent to which the level of citizens' trust in the institutions of representative democracy in Bosnia-Herzegovina is progressively declining. Conversely, trust in religious institutions is top-ranking (*Analitika* - Center for Social Research 2015). While almost 60% of Bosnian-Herzegovinian citizens declare that they have "high" or "some" trust in religious institutions, only 20% of the population expresses the same degree of belief in political parties. Amongst the institutions upon which citizens rely most are the Office of the High Representative<sup>5</sup> (OHR) (41%) and the European Commission (40%). Entity<sup>6</sup> and state parliaments, as well as governments at the local level, report the lowest scores in the rank.

The trust of Macedonian citizens in institutions of representative democracy documents a similar trend. According to a survey conducted by the Center for Insights in Survey Research, a significant proportion of Macedonian citizens expressed full trust in the Special Prosecutor's Office (SPO)<sup>7</sup> (39%), an extra-judicial institution in charge of investigating allegations of high-level crime since 2015, whereas only 15% declared that it relies on the state commission for preventing corruption. More than 50% of the surveyed population considers the work of the SPO important in ensuring the rule of law in Macedonia. A mere 16% of respondents claimed to believe in trustworthiness of political parties, while the highest trust was expressed towards the educational system (42%). The same survey discloses that almost 57% of the Macedonian population disagrees with the statement "the rule of law exists in Macedonia"<sup>8</sup> (Center for Insights in Survey Research 2017).

<sup>5</sup> The High Representative (HR) is an international civilian supervisor in charge of enforcing the civilian implementation of the Dayton agreement. He is the highest authority in the country, accountable to the Peace Implementation Council (PIC) international body. Among his tasks, the HR is entitled to remove elected or appointed officials from office if they violate the commitments envisaged in the Dayton Agreement.

<sup>6</sup> Entities in BiH are semi-autonomous territorial units that make up the country. There are two such units: Republika Srpska (RS) and the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (FBiH).

<sup>7</sup> The SPO in Macedonia was established as part of the European Union and United States-brokered Przhino Agreement.

<sup>8</sup> Rule of law was defined in the survey as "a state where all people and institutions are accountable to the law and the Constitution, and the Constitution and the law are equally applied to all".

#### **4. The protest over corruption in Bosnia-Herzegovina**

Historically, Bosnia-Herzegovina does not bear a solid tradition of mobilization and collective action transcending ethno-national cleavages (Milan 2016). Mass street protests were not a common occurrence before the 2010s, when the expression of opposition through confrontational means of action began to emerge in the country. In 2013, demonstrations were organized to protest the lack of a nationwide law on ID cards (Mujkić 2015). On that occasion, protest marches took place in the capital and in some urban centers of the country, generated by the inability of a critically ill infant to seek medical care abroad due to the lack of personal documents, which could not be issued owing to a political stalemate. The sit-ins in front of the National Parliament and the peaceful protests on the streets, organized by ordinary citizens to pressure policy makers to adopt a state law on identification numbers, terminated after a month. One year later, social discontent materialized in the northern part of the country.

The 2014 protests began in February in the city Tuzla, a former industrial hub located in the northeastern part of the country. The political turmoil, which from Tuzla spread to the main urban centers and towns of BiH within a couple of days, was dubbed the “Social Uprising,” as the mobilization took the form of a widespread and at times violent rebellion. The protest that triggered the discontent was initiated by disenfranchised workers of recently privatized factories of the Tuzla area in response to the closure of their plants (Murtagh 2016). The laid-off workers had staged several demonstrations in the past as a way to urge the reopening of the factories that once employed them, as well as to demand the payment of the wage arrears and unpaid benefits the workers were entitled to (Milan 2016). The closure of the factories stemmed from the privatization process that, from the 1990s onwards, had transferred the ownership of the state-owned assets to private entrepreneurs. The massive layoffs were thus the consequence of the mishandled privatization and mismanagement of the new owners, who in several cases took advantage of funds intended to withdraw the state from the economy, in cahoots with the local political elite (Pugh 2005).

On February 5th, the victims of these layoffs, the local trade unions and the unemployed, called for a protest rally. As had happened often in the past, the demonstrators gathered in front of the Tuzla canton’s court<sup>9</sup>, being the local government and judiciary the bodies in charge of following the lawsuits brought by the workers against the owners of their companies. Unlike previous times, on February 5<sup>th</sup>, police forces violently

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<sup>9</sup> Cantons are administrative and largely autonomous units that compose the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (FBiH), one of the two regional entities of the state. As local levels of government, each canton is responsible for issues such as civil administration, education, police, environment, and so on.

repelled the workers when they attempted to forcibly break into the premises of the canton government. The police reaction sparked a violent response, and the rally spiraled out of control. Two more days of unrest followed. The February 5th demonstration in Tuzla acted as a catalyst for mobilization, the repression of the protest setting into motion an unprecedented wave of solidarity across the country. In the city of Tuzla, students and other sectors of the population took to the streets in support of the workers. From the former industrial hub, the demonstrations diffused to several towns and urban centers of the country, joined by people of all ages. In an escalation of violence, on 7 February town halls, cantons' buildings and the headquarters of the nationalist parties were set ablaze and wrecked by demonstrators in the main cities of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The violent riots faded around 10 February.

The popular upheaval led to a sequence of high-level resignations of policy officials and was followed by a series of more conventional street marches that lasted until May 2014. Besides street demonstrations, joined by people from all walks of life and different national groups, citizens organized assemblies open to public participation, called "plenums". As an action form, the plenums functioned according to a direct democratic method of decision-making. Voicing their skepticism about the party system, the assembly participants sought alternative methods of political articulation based on a horizontal organizational structure (Milan 2017). Soon, the plenum model spread throughout the country, bringing together different strands of opposition movements and social groups. In the plenary sessions, retirees, workers, the unemployed, young activists and professionals articulated a broad array of concrete demands, which were collected and at a later stage re-elaborated in dedicated working groups, before being handed on to the authorities in charge of the specific issue (Arsenijević 2014, BH3).

Paralleling the increasing number of demonstrators and participants in citizen assemblies, the issues at stake and the demands broadened. The participants lamented the high level of unemployment in the country, lack of accountability and transparency of the authorities towards their constituencies and the culture of impunity prevailing among politicians, framing the issue in terms of good governance and social justice (BH1, BH2). In particular, the demonstrators blamed the political class for holding on to power by means of corrupt practices that relied upon the maintenance of clientelistic networks and the perpetuation of ethnic divisions. After months of protests and street marches, plenum activity came to a final halt around mid-May 2014.

## 5. The anti-corruption protests in Macedonia

Between 2014 and 2016, Macedonia witnessed an upsurge of social protest that represented the peak of a political crisis that began in 2012 and deepened in 2015. During the three years of unrest, the citizens of Macedonia used street demonstrations to denounce the lack of accountability of the ruling elite and to demand a radical shift in the political and social agenda (Vankovska 2015). The Macedonian season of civic discontent can be split into three phases. The first of these saw the emergence of a student movement in October 2014, which attracted a large number of people protesting the government's attempts to reform the educational system (Štiks 2015)<sup>10</sup>. The demonstrations resulted in the creation of the Student Plenum, an informal group whose participants occupied the faculties in protest, declaring them "free autonomous zones". There, they held alternative public lectures in collaboration with supportive professors who, meanwhile, had organized into the Professors' Plenum.

The second phase was marked by a major political crisis provoked by the disclosure of a massive wire-tapping operation by the incumbent government. In early 2015, Zoran Zaev, the leader of the Social-Democrat opposition party, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM)<sup>11</sup>, announced the release of what he called "the first of several political bombs" (Balkan Insight 2015). In practice, Zaev publicly unveiled that the incumbent Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, leader of the ruling conservative-nationalist party VMRO-DPMNE<sup>12</sup> and premier since 2006, had allowed the national security services to wiretap the telephone conversations of around 20,000 Macedonian citizens, among them officials, journalists and political adversaries (EPRS 2016). Besides unleashing the wiretapping scandal, Zaev provided incriminating evidence that the government had concealed the responsibilities of a police officer in a murder (Deutsche Welle 2017). As a consequence of this revelation, Gruevski's cabinet was accused of corruption, illegal influence on the judiciary, pressuring the media, and electoral violations, while Zaev was indicted for violence against state officials and charged with various crimes, including espionage (Petrovski 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Among other provisions, the reforms foresaw the substitution of the final university examination with a test to assess the students' knowledge by an external body, chosen by the Ministry of Education – an act likely to inhibit the autonomy of public universities (Pollozhani 2016).

<sup>11</sup> In Macedonian: Социјалдемократски сојуз на Македонија.

<sup>12</sup> Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity. In Macedonian: *Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство.*

The release of the “political bomb” gave rise to a surge of discontent among the local population towards the political class. Following popular mobilisation, the clashes in the northern town of Kumanovo in May 2015<sup>13</sup> and international diplomatic pressure, the ministers of the Interior and of Transport and Communications resigned, as did the chief of the Secret Services. For his part, Prime Minister Gruevski refused to step down. Ordinary citizens reacted to his refusal to resign by taking to the streets in the thousands, organized by means of social networks in the “Citizens for Macedonia”, a platform that gathered together “more than 70 non-governmental organizations, over 15 political parties (including the oppositional SDSM) and thousands of unaffiliated citizens” (Stefanovski 2016, 401). On the streets, demonstrators urged the premier to step down and to find a solution to the political impasse. Anti-government protests followed until mid-July 2015, with rallies taking place mostly in Skopje. Although generally unfolding in a peaceful fashion, protests turned violent on May 5, witnessing violent clashes between activists and the police, as well as the arrest of some protestors. The violent episode of May 5 marked a turning point, following which the protesters organized another group called “I Protest for Peace and Justice”. The group became widely known also as “I Protest” (#Протестирам #protestiram), as the hashtag used on social media networks for the demonstrations, which later turned into the reference for the events<sup>14</sup>. “I Protest” was a wide, informal movement, made up of individuals who intended to protest (MC2).

The broad citizens’ movement articulated several demands, which ranged from the immediate resignation of the incumbents to the release of the demonstrators detained since May 5, to the call for electing a new democratic government (MC2). The social protest reached its peak with a mass rally in Skopje on 17 May, after which the supporters of the SDSM opposition party, together with numerous social movement organizations and individuals, pitched tents in front of the Macedonian governmental building. The activists called the encampment “Freedom Camp” (Vankovska 2015). As a response, the following day VMRO-DPMNE supporters organized a counter-protest, mobilizing party activists and setting up a counter-encampment next to that of the opposition. The occupation lasted two months (Stefanovski 2016). The protests came to an end in July 2015, after almost two months of political turmoil, and the signature of

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<sup>13</sup> A controversial episode occurred in the town of Kumanovo on May 9 and 10, when a shooting among allegedly Albanian militants and the Macedonian police led to several deaths and 28 men arrested and charged with terrorism (the Guardian 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Both the movement and the hashtag recalled the protests against police brutality which occurred in Macedonia in 2011 (Al Jazeera 2011).

the internationally sponsored “Przhino<sup>15</sup> Agreement” in July 2015. The political accord, signed by the leaders of the country’s main political parties, was brokered by the European Union (through the EU Delegation to Macedonia) and the United States (through the US Ambassador to Macedonia) to bring an end to the political and institutional crisis paralyzing the country. The document envisaged several measures, amongst which the participation of the oppositional SDSM in the ministries, the demise of Premier Gruevski in January 2016, early parliamentary elections, and the establishment of a Special Prosecutor’s Office to investigate the crimes arising from the wiretapping scandal (European Commission 2015).

The end to the stalemate was temporary, however, and a third wave of social unrest began in April 2016. Gruevski had already stepped down as prime minister in January 2016, replaced *ad interim* by Emil Dimitriev (who belonged to the ruling party, namely, VMRO-DPMNE), and parliamentary elections were due in June 2016, when President Gjorge Ivanov announced his decision to halt judicial inquiries into officials at the time under investigation by the Special Public Prosecutor’s Office as allegedly involved in the wiretapping scandal. Despite the president’s claim that the mass pardon was implemented in the interests of the country, both the opposition and ordinary citizens interpreted the act as a clear intention to protect party officials from prosecution, exacerbating thus the perception of the impunity of political elites (MC2). The event constituted the spark for protests to resume in a third wave that became known as “The Colourful Revolution” (on the social networks with the hashtag #Шаренареволюција #šarenarevolucija) due to the repertoire of contention adopted by protesters. Choosing a novel means of expressing their dissent, the demonstrators hurled paint-filled balloons at various monuments and government buildings in the centre of the capital. Meanwhile, protests spread across the country, and demonstrations were held in towns and cities all over Macedonia. The demonstrators targeted, in particular, buildings and monuments that symbolized the urban renovation project launched by the government in 2010, known as “Skopje 2014”, said to have been a source of criminal capital and money laundering. The “Colorful Revolution” witnessed the participation of citizens from various social strata, waving Macedonian and Albanian flags together (Deutsche Welle 2016). Alongside insisting that the president revoke the pardons and the cabinet to resign, the demonstrators claimed that conditions for free and transparent elections were not yet in place, and called for the cancellation the parliamentary

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<sup>15</sup> Named after the neighbourhood of the capital where the negotiations took place.

elections planned for June 2016<sup>16</sup>. Unlike the previous wave of mobilization, in this last phase the opposition party SDSM was not officially part of the protesters' front, although its members participated in the demonstrations on an individual basis (MC1). Given that the May elections were eventually postponed, and the presidential pardon had been revoked to several officials implicated in the wiretapping scandal, the turmoil came to a halt in June 2016. In May 2017, President Ivanov granted a mandate to form a new government to the opposition leader Zoran Zaev.

## 6. Comparing anti-corruption frames in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia

The two waves of anti-corruption protests in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia present similar features, in particular with respect to the tactical repertoires employed by the demonstrators and their social basis as well as the way in which the issue at stake was framed. In spite of being triggered by different events, in both mobilization movement organizers put forward similar discursive strategies. In what follows, I analyze the rationales provided by protest leaders to motivate potential supporters to take action and to distinguish bystanders from opponents. Following that, I reconstruct the ways in which activists in both countries converged in the assessment of the problem and on tracing responsibility to the ruling class and their corrupt practices. Finally, I explore the diverse solutions put forward by protest leaders.

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Activists in the two countries blamed the establishment for badly functioning public institutions and lack of democracy, economic deprivation, as well as the widespread impoverishment of the population. In both cases, the grievances of protesters concerned issues of corruption. According to the interviewees in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the ruling elite was responsible for the mismanagement of the privatisation process of public enterprises and state-owned assets, which led to the bankruptcy of the industry in the country. Similarly, in Macedonia the protest leaders claimed that the revelation of corruption scandals in the country set into motion the cycles of protest, as it disclosed the lack of democracy in the country (MC1). In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the blame was assigned in particular to nationalist profiteers and former warlords, turned political officials in the aftermath of the 1992-95 conflict, accused of having enriched themselves through illegal activities and the privatization process of state assets, which re-

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<sup>16</sup> Infographics available at: <https://www.facebook.com/protestiramezaedno/photos/a.1649035648648791.1073741830.1648518838700472/1769400383278983/?type=3&theater> [accessed 14 May 2017].

sulted in bankrupted factories and mass layoffs (BH3). A banner held in the streets of Sarajevo read: “You have robbed for twenty years, and it is enough!” (*Pljačkali ste 20 godina, i dosta je*). Corruption was believed to mobilize different strands of demonstrators, belonging both to the former working class and to other segments of population, equally affected by corrupt practices that were said to determine the allocation of jobs in the public administration. An interviewee explained that the clientelistic networks, which often regulate the allocation of work places in the country, were at the same time hindering the opposition to the system from below. She said:

Sarajevo is the capital of the administrative center, about 20.000 people are involved in state service; there is a lot of corruption and nepotism. Sarajevo is the core of it all, and it is an illusion to expect people who got their jobs via nepotism and corruption to go on the streets and say: “We are against corruption”. (BH4)

Nonetheless, it emerged that the fight against corruption brought together individuals who belonged to different ethno-national groups. A protest leader referred to corruption as a mobilizing frame in the following way:

The protests were socio-economic; people wanted jobs, an end to corruption, nepotism, and they wanted that message to get through. If they'd asked for anything else, they knew that immediately the nationalists would appropriate it and just destroy the original message. (BH2)

In Macedonia, protest leaders pointed to the irresponsible behavior of the political elite as the main reason for their discontent. In particular, they accused Premier Gruevski of retaining his grip on power through electoral fraud and clientelistic practices and of betraying citizens by illegally wiretapping them (MC1), as well as working “to prolong the livelihood of the corrupt regime by signing a political deal with other party leaders” (MC3). Similarly, in an interview published on the website of “Solidarnost”, a leftist group that took part in the Macedonian protests, one of the protest leaders described the act of taking to the streets as a way to re-appropriate what the ruling elite had stolen from their constituencies. In her words, the mobilization represented a way of “reclaiming the streets, reclaiming what is ours. Reclaiming what has been plundered by the corrupt ruling elite” (Солидарност 2016). Another activist expressed the perceived sense of betrayal and blamed the elite, pointing to their unaccountability and depicting the act of taking to the streets as a necessary and natural consequence of citizens “that had enough [of the situation]” (MC1). While commenting on the offi-

cials indicted for illegal wiretapping and later pardoned by the president, he stressed the salience of corruption in mobilizing demonstrators:

One [politician] is charged for electoral fraud (...), another for torturing people. And in spite of being accused of it, all of a sudden the president set them free. This is a big issue! (...) Who wouldn't be against that? (MC1).

In both countries, movement organizers tried to convince bystanders to take to the streets by resorting to discursive strategies presenting collective action as a possible way to fight corruption, to make people's voice heard and to gain leverage over politicians. In so doing, activists adopted a dichotomizing discourse that strongly opposed the mass of dissatisfied citizens to the corrupt and unaccountable elites. By resorting to a language typical of populist style, both the establishment and the opponents were portrayed as belonging to all-inclusive, homogeneous categories. As opposed to the ruling elite, the demonstrators encompassed the inherently good population, untainted by ethnic or religious divides and betrayed by the elites in charge. To convey this message, activists strove to avoid attributing an ethno-national connotation to the demonstrators. In both the cases analyzed, ethno-national divisions were overcome in the narratives in the name of a "common enemy": the corrupt establishment, immune to accountability. The attempt to eschew ethnic connotation was equally embraced by protestors, who in Bosnia-Herzegovina raised banners on the streets that made a clear reference to the unity among three constituent peoples. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, from the very beginning the collective "we" was framed in terms of the "hungry people" (*gladan narod*) united in solidarity regardless of ethno-national belonging. Hence, the identity frame pointed to the emergence of a new cleavage that overcame the dominant ethno-national categorization by sidelining it. The unity of protestors was expressed in slogans such as "Our union is your destruction" (*Naše ujedinjenje je vaše uništenje*), which aimed at portraying ordinary citizens united regardless of ethno-national cleavages. Similarly, a banner raised on the streets of Sarajevo read: "We are hungry in three languages" (*Gladni smo na tri jezika*), with the intention to ridicule the institutionalization of ethno-national categories in the country, blamed for dividing across ethno-national lines people who, in their daily life, face similar problems, and are therefore portrayed as "united in deprivation" (BH1). Similarly, in Macedonia, banners, statements and calls to take to the streets were written in both Macedonian and Albanian languages, as were the hashtags used on the social media platforms and on the calls for action sprayed on the walls of the capital (Protestiram, meaning "I protest", was written both as #Протестирам, in Macedonia, and #protestoj, in Albanian).

In a similar fashion, the main slogan on 17 May 2015 demonstration read: “We are one” (ние сме едно), indicating the unity among the two peoples of Macedonia. In contrast to the protesters’ front, the elites were addressed with negatively connoted attributes, with reference made to their impunity after allegedly robbing, and thus betraying, their constituencies. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, interviewees expressed a similar sense of betrayal. Often, they referred to the demonstrators as “transition losers” (BH2), signaling the disillusionment of citizens towards the transition to market economy and liberal democracy, which was expected to bring about socio-economic rights, freedom and democracy. Both events that produced the mass protests in the two Yugoslav successor states were thus described as revelatory moments in which demonstrators realized that their expectations had not been met.

As a potential solution to the crisis, in both cases, movement organizers opted for a discourse that pressed for the resignation of the incumbents (i.e. local and federal governments in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the president in Macedonia) and the appointment of new officials. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the call for government accountability was accompanied by a demand to appoint technical governments composed of experts not affiliated with political parties and to introduce elements of direct democracy as a corrective to the representative system founded on electoral democracy. In Macedonia, during the Colorful Revolution, protesters sought the establishment of a transitional government and demanded a rescinding of the decision to hold parliamentary elections, scheduled for 5<sup>th</sup> June 2016<sup>17</sup>. In particular, during the later phase of the protests, movement organizers in Macedonia pointed to the Special Prosecutor’s Office as the institution in charge of upholding the rule of law. In their words, the Special Prosecutor, an institution set up by the EU in the framework of the Przhino Agreement, was depicted as the guardian of democracy and a demonstrators’ ally in the fight against corruption. By organizing rallies in support of the Special Prosecutor in September 2016, the “Colorful Revolution” movement conveyed a message portraying said institution as the bearer of popular will, playing a crucial role in resolving the crisis. A statement calling for a public rally in support of the SPO in September 2016 reported:

The government still ruled by the indicted Gruevski uses all opportunities to block the work of this institution (...) The SPO needs our help again. We must not let the regime

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<sup>17</sup> The Colorful Revolution statement “We determinedly continue with protests and demand:” <https://www.facebook.com/ColorfulMacedonia/photos/a.981719635238941.1073741828.981710395239865/981720035238901/?type=3&theater>

think that this institution, even for a moment, is left without the strong, joint, and decisive support by the citizens! As long as there's no justice, there will be no peace! <sup>18</sup>.

The distrust of the ruling elite was thus counterbalanced by a novel trust in an independent institution perceived as capable of upholding justice and of uprooting political corruption in the country. By contrast, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, movement organizers did not explicitly point to a supportive ally outside the political system. A part of the movement referred to actors outside the system of representative democracy, such as the EU and the OHR, as potential citizens' allies. Nevertheless, protest leaders opted not to identify the High Representative as an ally owing to his decreasing direct involvement in domestic affairs in the last decade (BH1). On the streets, some demonstrators called for the EU to hold their leaders accountable: for instance, a banner raised on the streets read, in English: "EU, we are the ones you should talk with". Other activists proposed to reject the representative system in favor of an alternative model of direct democracy (Marković 2015).

The anti-corruption frames put forward by movement organizers did not go uncontested in the political arena. In an attempt to demobilize and delegitimize the protests, incumbent governments relied heavily on identity counterframes revolving around the threat of an external enemy fuelling the protests in order to destabilize the country. In the case of Macedonia, on several occasions, Premier Gruevski blamed the American billionaire George Soros for fueling civic unrest, labeling opponents "Soros-oids"<sup>19</sup>. Along these lines, both media and public officials often referred to the young demonstrators vandalizing the cities during the February protest as "hooligans prepared to wreck the symbols of the state" (BH1), while the president of Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik congratulated the citizens of the Serb entity for not falling for provocations by the protests unfolding in the other entity, the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, in his view organized with the aim of destabilizing the country (Živković 2014).

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<sup>18</sup> "Macedonian 'Colorful Revolution' Rallies to Defend Special Prosecutor's Office", *Global Voices*, 26 September 2016, <https://globalvoices.org/2016/09/26/macedonian-colorful-revolution-rallies-to-defend-special-prosecutors-office/>

<sup>19</sup> "After Trump Win, Anti-Soros Forces Are Emboldened in Eastern Europe", *New York Times*, 1 March 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/01/world/europe/after-trump-win-anti-soros-forces-are-emboldened-in-eastern-europe.html>

## 7. Conclusions

The discourse of corruption has become increasingly prominent in recent years in south-eastern Europe. Already in the 2010s, popular dissatisfaction with perceived endemic political corruption began to be expressed by means of collective action. At this time, street marches and protests became a common feature of activism in the post-socialist context. Between 2014 and 2016, anti-corruption mobilizations took place in different countries of south-eastern Europe. In particular, citizens in the former Yugoslav states of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia participated in mass demonstrations to express their discontent concerning a ruling class accused of being corrupt and unresponsive to its constituencies. This article offered a comparative overview of the discursive strategies adopted by movement organizers during mobilizations over corruption in Bosnia-Herzegovina (2014) and Macedonia (2015-16). Specifically, it explored the ways in which activists appropriated “from below” the topic of corruption to delegitimize the ruling class and exploited similar motivational, identity and diagnostic frames, while their prognoses differed. By analysing these waves of protest in south-eastern Europe through the lens of social movement studies, this article foregrounded the idea of moving beyond an analysis of movements in post-socialist semi-peripheral Europe as typically associated with instances of populism. Instead, it stressed the utility of approaching them as movements developed in times of economic and democratic crisis.

The novel empirical findings contributed to our understanding of the different discursive techniques adopted during the anti-corruption campaigns in the region, as well as of the drivers for the popular participation in and wide-ranging support for the protests in contexts usually thought of as having a weak contentious political culture. The article disclosed that the narrative identifying in the corrupt political elite the main culprit for economic decline and social inequality, and the people-centrist discourse revolving around the betrayal of ordinary citizens, resonated across social and ethno-national groups in the population of both countries, succeeding in mobilizing a large number of citizens. Furthermore, the analysis revealed a coexistence of different solutions to political corruption. While in Bosnia-Herzegovina activists proposed the appointment of technical governments detached from political affiliation and the introduction of elements of direct democracy into the representative system, in Macedonia they acknowledged the Special Prosecutor’s Office as the guardian of democracy and rule of law, allied with the civil society in the fight against political corruption and for more transparent institutions.

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In conclusion, despite the diversity in the drivers of the mobilizations, the analysis disclosed a similar pattern of appropriation of the topic of corruption “from below” as a successful discursive strategy to voice society-wide discontent with the institution of representative democracy and towards the ruling class in south-eastern Europe, presenting a comparable diagnosis and different prognoses.

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### **Interviews**

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BH2, April 2014, #JMBG and human rights activist, plenum Sarajevo, Sarajevo  
BH3, April 2014, activist, plenum Tuzla, Tuzla  
BH4, April 2014, activist, plenum Sarajevo, Sarajevo  
MC1, July 2016, activist in the "Colorful revolution", Skopje  
MC2, July 2016, activist in the 2015 and 2016 wave of protests, Skopje  
MC3, July 2016, activist of "Solidarnost", Skopje

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