Practicing Solidarity: ‘Reconciliation’ and Bosnian Protest Movements

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ABSTRACT This paper asks whether, and in what sense, civic protests can contribute to some form of ‘reconciliation’. Focusing on the 2014 protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it analyses the actions and activities involved in the practice of protesting. In this context, reconciliation can be understood as civic solidarity: a forward-looking commitment to fighting for social justice and against the privileges of political elites. Solidarity is not only built horizontally across social or ethnic groups, but also vertically through opposition to the ruling ethnonationalist elite. Solidarity-building activities such as protests, however, are hindered by an institutional system that crystallises social divisions and dilutes citizens’ efforts.

Introduction

A few years ago, protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) caught the attention of international and regional observers for their rejection of ethnonationalist rhetoric and their ‘civic’ spirit. At the same time, it was not clear whether the demonstrations could have constituted a reconciliatory moment in a society that is often portrayed as deeply divided by instrumental uses of the past, and especially in the attribution of responsibility for wartime violence. Did these events amount to ‘reconciliation’, or contribute to it? And if so, in what sense? This paper addresses this question from the point of view of activities or practices that may be conducive to reconciliation, rather than the narratives or discourses surrounding it. The focus on activities allows us to bracket—at least momentarily—conceptual discussions about the meaning of reconciliation and its uses, which have questioned the usefulness of the very concept in post-conflict studies (see for instance Evans, 2018; Jansen, 2013). For the purpose of this paper, the focus on activities entails analysing the practical mechanisms that, while at play during protests, emphasise commonality and unity over fragmentation and difference in post-war societies.

The choice of protests as a site of reconciliation activity is informed by an awareness of the importance of informal activities for the sustainability of reconciliation (and more in general of post-conflict peace processes; see the following section). Protests are informal activities, which usually involve people in their capacity as ordinary citizens getting together in a public space, like a street or square, as opposed to organised events where individuals are invited to
take part, and meet in spaces that are not necessarily visible or accessible to the public. Despite their potential for drawing people together in fighting for a shared cause across social divisions, the potential for protests to contribute to reconciliation remains underexplored in the literature on informal activities in divided societies (Aiken, 2010; Fridman, 2015; Hromadžić, 2015; Smyth & McKnight, 2013; see following section).

The paper analyses the activities involved in the practice of protesting, and how they can—through different observable mechanisms—contribute to bridging social divisions in post-conflict societies. More specifically, the paper argues that socioeconomic protests in post-war countries can bring about civic solidarity as a positive outcome supporting processes of ‘reconciliation’ in divided societies. Rather than starting out from a fully-fledged definition of reconciliation, the paper sets some theoretical parameters and relies on the qualitative analysis of grassroots mobilisation to give meaning to the kind of reconciliatory dynamic that is produced through protesting. The analysis places emphasis on the mechanisms, that is, how protests can promote civic solidarity supporting reconciliation processes, rather than determining the extent of their contribution to reconciliation. In post-conflict contexts where social divisions are maintained along ethnic lines, socioeconomic protests are singled out for their potential in cutting across this divide and mobilising people around shared material and civic concerns. Two key mechanisms—subjectivation and prefiguration—are identified in the paper as contributing to civic solidarity, while the role of ruling elites and institutional systems in hindering reconciliation is also analysed. The argument can be well illustrated with reference to the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the socioeconomic protests that occurred in February 2014, which helped establish activist groups that continued meeting over a prolonged period of time (with some of them still active). The case of the 2014 protests is particularly significant for BiH, as this was the largest popular mobilisation in the country since 1992.

BiH has been at peace for almost 25 years, but the institutional system established by the Constitution included in the Dayton Peace Agreement crystallised and reinforced the ethnic divisions that had been manipulated to stir up violence during the war. The system effectively relies on the presence of (and neat distinction between) three ‘constituent peoples’: Bosnian Muslims or Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs. As several scholars have argued, the consociational multi-level system in BiH incentivises electoral competition on an ethnic basis (Bieber, 2006; Merdžanovic, 2015). The institutional system is heavily decentralised, with most competencies falling within the remit of two entities (the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, FBiH, and Republika Srpska, RS) and an autonomous district (Brčko), as well as ten cantons in the FBiH. As a result, Bosnia and Herzegovina is peaceful but still divided, territorially and socially, with political elites playing a major role in sustaining these divisions.

Moreover, the 2014 Bosnian protests can tell us something significant about reconciliation as activity beyond the Bosnian case itself. The Bosnian case can be seen as an unlikely case where spontaneous protests can cut across and challenge ethnic divisions. Therefore, analysing forms of contact and mechanisms in this difficult scenario can be illuminating for the study of divided societies more in general: if a certain activity works in the case of Bosnia, it may well work—once adapted to the local context—in post-war countries where social divisions are less institutionally maintained and reinforced. In other words, the focus on mechanisms broadens the contribution of the paper by indicating the path for similar research to be carried out in other divided societies. The data for this paper comes from interviews conducted with grassroots activists involved in the 2014 protests across Bosnia, fieldnotes from observation conducted at protests and gatherings in
Sarajevo, Tuzla, and Zenica, both carried out during fieldwork in 2014, 2015 and 2016.1 Together with the bulletin of Plenum Zenica, announcements from various Plena collected on the BH Protest Files website, and other documents, this body of data is used to identify the mechanisms facilitating, and the factors hindering, protests as a reconciliation activity.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section situates this work within the literature on informal activities and post-conflict reconciliation, identifying protests as an important yet underexplored dimension of this phenomenon. The following part discusses why and in what sense protests can be seen as a reconciliation activity. Drawing on the growing literature on protest movements, radical politics, and ‘activist citizenship’ (Isin, 2008) in South East Europe, it argues that protests can be seen as a site of remaking for the Bosnian polity, where divisions entrenched by the war can be overcome through civic ties. This section discusses the forms of contact and mechanisms at work in the activity of protesting, and the meaning of civic solidarity as a positive outcome of this activity. The third section traces how the forms of contact and mechanisms discussed above supported the creation of civic solidarity in the 2014 Bosnian protest, and what factors instead hindered this process. Lastly, the article concludes by highlighting the contribution of these findings: empirically, they demonstrate how socioeconomic protests can bridge divides even where inter-group divisions are maintained institutionally and politically; conceptually, they show the theoretical potential of ‘solidarity’ for re-thinking reconciliation.

Informal Perspectives on Post-Conflict Reconciliation

The key issue addressed by this paper—whether and how can socioeconomic protests contribute to reconciliation—is situated within the remit of informal activities that involve ordinary citizens. Loosely inspired by the idea that contact can improve intergroup relations (Allport, 1954; Hewstone et al., 2014), this paper focuses on forms of contact, which may be physical or symbolic, occurring unintentionally among ordinary citizens engaged in activities that are not purposefully aimed at reconciliation. There are good reasons to look at informal activities as opposed to formal initiatives. First, informality is characterised here as ‘unforced’ and spontaneous, which helps us counter some criticisms commonly associated with ‘reconciliation’ projects. In BiH, these projects are said to have often taken for granted, rather than problematised, ethnic divisions that were in fact more of a product of the conflict than its cause (Jansen, 2013, p. 231). Moreover, based on some version of the ‘contact hypothesis’, international donors have often pushed onto the local NGO sector priorities and modes of operation that did not account for the hostile political environment in which organisations often had to operate (Micsinski, 2016). According to Micsinski (2016, p. 102), this has contributed to the insulation of reconciliation activities to a small number of what he calls ‘NGO frequent flyers’, that is, individuals who were repeatedly recruited to attend workshops, who moved from programme to programme within and between organisations, monopolising opportunities in civil society’. Instead, informal opportunities for contact give us important insights into what happens when people gather spontaneously, as Albanians and Serbs in a Prishtina swimming pool in Fridman’s (2015) study: ‘no one paid them to come, they came just because they feel this is the right place to be on a Sunday summer morning’. 2

Second, informality can also be a way of coping with institutional incapacities and shortcomings in ways that transcend ethnic lines. This is particularly evident in the case of economic insecurities, such as the ones identified by Kostovicova, Martin, and Bojicic-
Dzelilovic (2012) in their study of ‘multidirectional security markers’ in Kosovo. Especially as they relate to economic issues, situations of insecurity seemed to touch on trans-ethnic issues, and are navigated using tools that go beyond relying on ethnic kinship. Institutions and state structures, however, can still play an important role in moderating the effects of contact among members of different groups, including forms of contact occurring at the informal level (see Hromadžić, 2015; Hughes, 2018).

Third, informality also offers opportunities to broaden the constituency of reconciliation processes. In particular, socioeconomic protests as reconciliation activities can overcome the limited reach of ‘community solidarity’ that is based on familial or neighbourhood links (Kostovicova et al., 2012) or informal encounters in swimming pools or workplaces (Fridman, 2015) that rely on personal acquaintance. By bringing together and forging connections between strangers, socioeconomic protests take into account society-wide, structural dynamics of inequality and injustice that may become entrenched in the aftermath of war. These dynamics of inequality should not be viewed, as Mamdani (1996) suggests, exclusively in individualistic terms of perpetrator-victim relationships. Rather, they should take into account the relationships between those who lost out from past injustice, and those who profited from it (Mamdani, 1996; he refers respectively to ‘victims’ and ‘beneficiaries’). This opens up reconciliation processes to broader social participation, as well indicating the need for distributive forms of reconciliation, to be pursued through measures aimed at reducing material inequalities, as a crucial part of the process of ‘social learning’ among former enemies.3

Lastly, looking at protests as activities that may bring about positive change in social relations also avoids some of the negative connotations of the term ‘reconciliation’. For instance, the translation of ‘reconciliation’ into the Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian pomirenje ‘evokes peaceful acceptance rather than mobilization or action’ (Jansen, 2013, p. 236), and is thus often met with scepticism by locals. Like transitional justice, reconciliation has also become a synonym for top-down elite-driven projects supporting political agendas and ‘national unity’, and marginalised alternative questions and issues, such as socioeconomic ones (Evans, 2018; Jansen, 2013). Once again, the focus on protests not only emphasises citizens’ agency, but also puts at the centre of the activity issues that might have been marginalised by other kinds of reconciliation projects.

We have several examples of how important interaction in informal settings is for contributing to the improvement of social relations in post-conflict settings. Studies from the Northern Irish context, where informal and community-based initiatives have taken precedence over formal transitional justice and reconciliation mechanisms, are particularly informative (see for instance Aiken, 2010; Smyth & McKnight, 2013). Focusing on Kosovo, Fridman (2015) has argued that ‘unstructured daily encounters’ occurring in workplaces, universities, or border crossing points can reveal much about shifts in power relations between ethnic groups. With respect to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Armakolas (2011) argued for the importance of grassroots engagement, alongside elite politics, in explaining the survival of interethnic bonds and community spirit in the city of Tuzla at a time when nationalist tensions were dangerously spreading throughout the country. It was the civil society that, when elites were tempted to abandon communal politics due to the growing strength of radical forces, pushed back and forced the city’s leaders to reject ethnonationalism. Another important contribution comes from Hromadžić’s (2015) work on flirting and dating, which shows how experiences of contact can both challenge and reinscribe ‘the ethnicization of everyday life’ in a post-war city like Mostar (BiH).
Transgressions among flirting youth, while not necessarily transformative, are still a form of ‘weak power’ that can temporarily suspend the ethnic boundaries that are routinely enforced in post-war Bosnia, while also underscoring their importance for the everyday life of young people.

The literature on informal activities and reconciliation reveals the importance of understanding the role of ordinary citizens in upholding or jeopardising the prospects for inter-ethnic reconciliation. Among various opportunities for contact in informal settings, however, protests or demonstrations have received little attention as activities that can potentially contribute to reconciliation in post-conflict societies. The scarce attention paid to protests as reconciliation activity may be due to the fact that demonstrations and popular unrest can be seen as jeopardising social peace in post-conflict countries, and even risking reigniting conflict. In countries where international actors intervene to support state- and peace-building, it is participation in the work of non-governmental organisations (NGOs)—not protesting—that is usually deemed the legitimate form of activism (Mac Ginty, 2012; Williams & Young, 2012).

And yet, protests—and socioeconomic protests in particular for this paper—can be an excellent way of studying reconciliation, insofar as they might involve people of different ethnicities (or people trying to build bridges across ethnic groups), who are fighting for a shared cause or against a system that is responsible for the existence and continuation of social divisions and injustice. By looking into socioeconomic protests, this paper thus focuses on instances where popular mobilisation occurs around issues that cut across social divides in post-conflict states. If seen through this lens, the activity of protesting can more easily be understood as bearing potential for the improvement of social relations in divided societies, through the formation of a new kind of ‘civic’ politics, although they probably do not constitute ‘reconciliation’ in and on themselves. Moreover, while protesting may be seen as risky for the stability of post-conflict states, this kind of activity is a commonly found form of political expression in any kind of society. As discussed in the following section, if we consider reconciliation as a form of politics, a certain degree of social contestation is to be expected as part of the process, and may even strengthen the emancipatory potential of reconciliation processes.

**Protests as a Reconciliation Activity**

This section discusses why and how protests can be seen as a reconciliation activity. The paper focuses specifically on socioeconomic protests as bearing potential for building civic solidarity in societies where divisions are maintained along ethnic lines. It does not question the fact that protests can be divisive in post-conflict contexts, especially when they occur along the same group divisions established by the war, and focus on exclusionary identity issues. However, having shared material grievances can help overcome divisions in post-conflict societies where such divisions are often maintained along identity lines (ethnic, religious, cultural), which are not the object of contention between groups in socioeconomic protests.

A key theoretical assumption informing this paper is that reconciliation is here understood as a form of politics, drawing on Schaap (2008). Among other things, reconciliation as politics acknowledges rather than problematise definitional ambiguity, as it sees contestation as inherently part of political processes. The ambiguity and openness of the concept can thus be ‘an enabling condition for politics among people in a divided
society’ (Schaap, 2008, p. 251). Moreover, far from entailing a ‘quietist attitude’ (Schaap, 2008, p. 257; see also Evans, 2018), reconciliation as politics entails a ‘willingness to reconcile’ that provides a ‘political context in which justice can be staged’, including through reparation and redistribution, thus also debunking the myth that reconciliation and justice are two incompatible aims. Protests can work as a reconciliation activity by creating the conditions where inter-ethnic relations can be negotiated, and bringing out the contestation element that is a key part of reconciliation politics.

Two caveats are necessary to the discussion of reconciliation in this paper. First, reconciliation as understood here does not postulate a once-harmonious community that must be ‘re-conciled’ after experiencing violence. Rather, and notwithstanding a past history that might have been either conflictual or peaceful, just or unjust, the ‘re’ in reconciliation can refer to an imagined, counterfactual community, one that responds to its members’ political imagination and social aspirations (Schaap, 2008, pp. 254–255). It can be argued legitimately, however, that a shared understanding of past violence (such as wartime violence perpetrated along ethnic lines in Bosnia) cannot be done without in reconciliation processes. The second caveat to be highlighted here is thus that comprehensive processes of reconciliation require more than protest politics as discussed in this paper. As protests are a contentious and forward-looking form of politics, their engagement with narratives of the past is limited, and this is why they can only ever constitute one aspect of a multi-dimensional project of bridging societal divisions.

Compared to other kinds of informal activities, then, protests are a form of contentious politics. There is a growing body of scholarship looking at social movements and radical politics in South East Europe, including in the Bosnian case addressed here (see for instance Horvat & Štiks, 2015; Milan, 2017; Mujanović, 2018; Štiks, 2015). Rather than being the mere expression of discontent, though, protests have a productive dimension, as they facilitate the emergence not only of new forms of activism, but also of new kinds of citizenship. Scholars analysing activism in South East Europe (see Fagan and Sircar 2017, for an overview) have thus drawn on Isin’s work (2008, 2009) on ‘activist citizenship’, which suggests that citizenship is in fact performative, insofar as citizens constitute themselves as such by committing ‘acts of citizenship’, including protests, occupations, or acts of civil disobedience, that disrupt, rather than uphold, the social and political order. Looking at protests as activity, in this paper, also entails paying attention to the productive dimension of protesting that goes beyond the articulation of grievances.

Ultimately, this body of literature on protests and radical politics in South East Europe (Horvat & Štiks, 2015), like the papers in the special issue on activist citizenship (see especially Baća, 2017; Dolenec, Doolan, & Tomašević, 2017; Toplišek & Thomassen, 2017), deports from a critique of the insistence on nationalism and ethnicity as the main concepts through which Balkan politics is to be analysed and understood. These authors look at civic protests as forms of activism, or activist citizenship, which go beyond ethnicity. They especially focus on social mobilisations that occurred in the region in the wake of the financial crisis, which temporally coincided or followed the Occupy movements around Europe, the United States and beyond (Pickerill & Krinsky, 2012), and shared their anti-establishment nature and the characterisation of social divisions between a large majority of the citizens and the elite. However, neither the literature on activism in South East Europe, nor the social movements literature on the variants of Occupy protests seek to analyse how civic protests can challenge ethnic divisions artificially maintained by political elites in post-conflict countries like BiH. This paper argues that looking into the potentially positive
outcomes of inter-ethnic contact that occurs in civic protests is crucially important, not only
to better assess the transformative potential of these protests, but also to understand whether
and through what mechanisms can protests contribute to post-conflict reconciliation, which
is what the following paragraphs attempt to do.

This paper conceptualises two mechanisms put in motion by inter-group contact that
occurs through the activity of protesting for socioeconomic causes, and identifies building
civic solidarity as the positive outcome—contributing to reconciliation—that these mech-
anisms can bring about. Civic solidarity can be defined as a forward-looking commitment
to fighting for social justice for all members of a society, thus overcoming (or aiming to
overcome) divisions that may become entrenched in the aftermath of war and mass vio-
ence. The focus of this paper is on trying to capture what characterises activities that
build civic solidarity within the context of protests, that is how protests emphasise civic
unity and commonality over fragmentation and difference.

The two mechanisms discussed here draw on the ones introduced at the beginning of this
special issue. In particular, protests involve: socialisation, as some physical and symbolic
mixing is present at demonstrations and protest gatherings; shared aspirations, as individ-
uals might possess common grievances and a shared willingness to achieve some form of
political change; and resistance, as civic protests bring together individuals in spite of (and
against) a divisive post-conflict system. Cooperation requires a higher degree of coordi-
nation and long-term commitment, and may be difficult to achieve in spontaneous social
mobilisation. Rather than taking these mechanisms as individual processes, this paper
argues that their analytical potential is increased when they are considered in combination.
Within the framework of economic protests, this paper focuses on two of these
combinations.

The first mechanism through which protests can build civic solidarity results from the
combination of (1) symbolic and physical mixing that occurs during demonstrations for
socioeconomic grievances, where people of different groups get together in the same
space, or adopt slogans and symbols that cut across social divisions, and (2) resistance
against the divisive identity frameworks that would normally keep these diverse groups
apart in divided post-conflict societies. The interaction of these elements gives rise to sub-
jectivation, that is a situation in which protesters constitute themselves as citizens through
protest activity, bridging identity-related divisions that characterise their post-conflict
society. In his study of citizen activism in Beranselo, Montenegro, Bojan Baća (2017)
argued: ‘one must distinguish subjectivation from identification, since the former is a
process through which social actors refuse to identify with the existing (politicised) identity
categories, but create themselves anew, in spite of their differences’ (Baća, 2017, p. 1435).
By shifting the focus on the making of new civic identities, this process counters the risk,
highlighted by Jansen (2013, p. 237), that particular ways of defining the ‘sides to be recon-
ciled’ may perpetuate relations of inequality, simply by legitimising exclusionary and divi-
sive forms of identity. Through subjectivation, people who come into contact for economic
reasons build bridges across other social divides by becoming citizen activists, thus promot-
ing civic solidarity.

The second mechanism working to facilitate civic solidarity is prefiguration, that is, the
process through which protests and their related activities come to embody a solidarity-
based (if not necessarily fully ‘reconciled’) society. This mechanism draws on Leach’s
(2013) and Milan’s (2017) uses of ‘prefigurative politics’ to describe how social movements
choose to embody the kind of change they want to produce, in order to advance their goals.
Within the context of economic protests, prefiguration works by combining shared aspirations, which include economic grievances but also more opportunities for political participation and influencing policy-making, with resistance against political elites and a system that has failed to address their concerns. In this case, people build civic solidarity by putting it into practice, and exercising forms of political participation that overcome conflict-related divisions. Both subjectivation and prefiguration seem to have a horizontal and vertical dimension: at the horizontal, grassroots level, socioeconomic protests build civic solidarity through socialisation and shared aspirations; in the vertical dimension, activists build solidarity because they are pitted against a ruling elite that refuses to address their economic concerns. Socioeconomic grievances, therefore, act as the basis or common denominator enabling ‘reconciliation politics’ to take place through protests.

This paper is also attentive to the conditions that hinder activities leading towards reconciliation. At the same time as civic solidarity is built horizontally and through opposition to ruling elites, those very elites try to prevent this opposition from being successful to protect themselves and maintain the status quo. As Hromadžić (2015) highlights in the case of flirting among youths in Mostar, intergroup contact is hindered by the institutional system that relies on ethnic divisions as its source of legitimacy. Analysing the 2008 Sarajevo protests, Touquet (2015) also argued that elites used various demobilising frames, including accusing protesters of hooliganism, and of being either politically manipulative (working for the new Naša Stranka party) or manipulated by foreign actors. Combined with an institutional system that encourages ethnicity-based electoral politics, elite discourses pose a great challenge to the process of building civic solidarity, and thus to reconciliation more broadly.

Protests can thus be seen as a site of post-conflict politics where identities and social relationships are remade in ways that may, or may not, facilitate reconciliation. The following section discusses the 2014 socioeconomic protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina, to illustrate how inter-group contact during protests could give rise to the mechanisms discussed above.

Against the Odds: Civic Solidarity and the 2014 Socioeconomic Protests in BiH

The Protests and their Aftermath

The socioeconomic protests of February 2014 were the biggest popular mobilisation since the beginning of the 1992–1995 Bosnian War. The largest demonstrations occurred between 4 February, when they started in the city of Tuzla, and 7 February 2014. By that day, thousands of protesters had taken to the streets across the country, with large gatherings occurring in Sarajevo, Zenica, Tuzla, Mostar and a number of other smaller cities in the Federation of BiH as well as in Republika Srpska. When they began in Tuzla, the protests were led by discontented workers from failed privatised companies, who were not receiving salaries and social contributions. The situation of structural injustice stemming from corrupted privatisations, high unemployment and lack of accountability compounded the problem, and led to more citizens joining the protests on the following day.

As the demonstrations spread to other cities, activist groups began asking for (and in some cases obtained) the resignation of governments at cantonal, entity and state level, and started organising into civic assemblies called ‘plenums’ (or ‘plena’, plural of plenum) to discuss and write further demands. In addition to their initial socioeconomic claims and government resignations, activists now demanded the abolishment of the privileges of political elites and their affiliates, proper scrutiny for privatisation processes,
tenders, and public companies, better social welfare, education reforms, greater transparency and an end to corruption, and the protection of protesters who had been targeted by the police. Mujkić (2015, p. 632) summarised the characteristics of the protests as: lack of leadership, horizontality, assemblies, distrust of institutional politics and political institutions, reclaiming public and political spaces, and a ‘desire for restoration of equality and elements of anti-predatory-capitalist sentiment’. He observed (Ibid., 627) that the protests allowed Bosnian people to start building a democratic counter-power, also thanks to the fact that during this time ‘the hegemony of the “ethno-cultural justice” narrative was temporarily suspended, thus opening the space for the emergence of “social justice”’. As for the protesters themselves, while we do not have precise data on their background, a few key features can be highlighted. First, people took part in the demonstrations as private citizens, even when they belonged to civil society organisations or political groups. As further discussed below, this contributed to the ‘civic’ character of the protests. Second, protesters included young people whose life chances were being adversely affected by the dismal state of Bosnia’s politics and economy, but also older workers whose jobs and basic labour rights were endangered through the war and transition. After all, unpaid workers in Tuzla were the ones who started the protests and remained one of the most active centres of mobilisation.

Another key feature of the 2014 mobilisation was that, despite their anti-nationalist and trans-ethnic character a majority of the protests occurred in the Federation of BiH rather than in Republika Srpska, and even within the Federation they involved Bosnian Muslim areas more than Croat-majority ones. Still, the accusation that these were ‘Bosniak’ protests does not necessarily hold. First, protests did occur in cities like Banja Luka and Prijedor in the RS. Activist groups were formed in these cities which survived the 2014 protests and subsequently took part in the Austrian Initiative (Ludwig Boltzmann Institute, 2016). When the RS premier, Željka Cvijanović, commented that Republika Srpska was evidently the more stable and functioning part of BiH, there was a backlash from activist groups, including war veterans, who called for more protests. While public support for the protests seemed to be spread across the country, it should also be noted that the Federation protests did involve people of different backgrounds, including Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs, as well as those who do not affiliate with the three ‘constituent peoples’, as the following paragraphs will also discuss. In fact, that this accusation—of the protests being mono-ethnic—emerged and got traction may be more indicative of the role of ethnonationalist elites in hindering solidarity-building across groups than of the failure of the protests to contribute to it. The different levels and nature of the mobilisation in RS (with more geographically concentrated protests in the larger cities), is salient for two key reasons: first, because it has important implications for the type of inter-group contact that occurred during the mobilisation, discussed below; second, as indicative of the growing attempts at social control and repression that increase the personal cost of taking part in demonstrations.

While Plenum meetings and smaller demonstrations continued to occur over February, March and April, when devastating floods hit BiH in May 2014 many activist groups turned to emergency relief efforts, trying to collect and distribute aid to isolated communities given the weak response of the authorities, while also keeping the anti-nationalist spirit of the protest movement. Nonetheless, activist groups did not completely disband, and became part of an initiative aimed at supporting grassroots activism in BiH. The so-called ‘Austrian Initiative’, financed by the Erste Foundation, but coordinated by the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute, involved eight groups from across Bosnia, including two
from Republika Srpska. Thanks to the initiative these informal groups, could access some funds to cover travel expenses for meetings, rent offices, buy computers and printers, and other basic supplies. The initiative allowed the survival of groups that would have otherwise struggled to continue their activities after 2014, and allowed activists to maintain useful contacts through regular meetings, although levels of mobilisation have remained quite low since 2014.

Types of Contact

The protesters identified social justice, not reconciliation, as the overarching aim of the protests. Therefore, the type of contact occurring during the demonstrations and related activities can be characterised as unintentional. Here, the term ‘unintentional’ refers to activities that do not have ‘reconciliation’ as their explicit aim. In other words, the contact among the groups did not occur by chance, but the purpose of it was linked to socioeconomic demonstrations rather than reconciliation activities. As argued by Allport (1954, p. 489), and resonating with the criticisms moved against NGOs programmes restricted to a small circle of participants (Micinski, 2016), avoiding the imposition of artificial reconciliatory goals can facilitate positive outcomes in inter-group contact. With respect to the distinction between physical and symbolic contact, the analysis carried out below shows that while symbolic contact dominated, some instances of physical contact did occur and contributed to reinforce the image of the movement as anti-nationalist and trans-ethnic.

Demonstrations provided the first opportunity for contact. On the one hand, these events established symbolic contact across ethnic groups by adopting explicitly anti-nationalist and inclusive slogans and symbols, as the following: ‘We are hungry in three languages’; ‘Death to nationalism’; ‘BiH is not Serb, nor Croat nor Muslim’; ‘Freedom is my nation’; ‘We are not nationalists, we are not hooligans’.

The symbols used by activists during the demonstrations, and later when plenum assemblies were established, were also clearly civic and tried to speak to citizens regardless of their group affiliation. Plenum groups often used two joined hands as a logo, or in other cases a fist or hand palm. Given the geographic spread of the mobilisation, and while it is difficult to ascertain the demographic composition of the protests, it is likely that a majority of participants in most cities might have identified as Bosniaks. However, interviews showed that in several cities, including Sarajevo, Mostar, Zenica, and Prijedor activists from different backgrounds took part in the mobilisation and the follow-up activities.

Plenum or activist meetings occurred in several Bosnian cities, including Banja Luka, Bihać, Brčko, Bugojno, Konjic, Mostar, Prijedor, Sarajevo, Tuzla, Travnik, Zenica, and Zavidovići, and constituted another opportunity for contact, both through physical presence at meetings and through the formulation of anti-nationalist and trans-ethnic demands. By definition, plenums were inclusive assemblies for discussion and mobilisation, open to all citizens regardless of background, and with no formal leaders (Arsenijević, 2014). These features encouraged citizens to see the plenums as a truly civic space where the ethnic divisions enforced by the institutional system were suspended. While assemblies could involve confrontation and disagreement, interviewees who recalled facing issues during plenum discussions did not relate them to inter-ethnic tensions. When discussions about controversial issues emerged at meetings in Zenica, such as the war crimes accusations against Naser Orić (a former commander of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Srebrenica region), these revealed disagreements among participants—both within and across ethnic
groups—that, while not being resolved or overcome, remained mostly amicable. While highlighting the limits of civic protests for shaping a shared understanding of wartime violence perpetrated along ethnic lines, these occasions also showed how highlighted how contestation and deliberation were part and parcel of the kind of contact occurred through protests and meetings and did not necessarily detract from the process of building civic solidarity.

It was also within the context of these meetings that other practical tasks involving symbolic and physical contact were carried out. Most importantly, this includes the drafting of Plenum demands that, as discussed below, transcended ethnic divisions, and focused on the needs of Bosnian citizens as a whole. Moreover, activists got together to write and distribute flyers, posters and other promotional material about the protests, and to create groups and pages on social media. In Zenica, plenum activists produced a monthly bulletin between 2015 and 2017. For some time, the three most prominent activists in Zenica were Meliha, a Bosniak woman, Goran, a Croat, and Ratko, a Serb. In September 2014 some of the activists involved in the 2014 protests took part in a meeting organised in Vienna by the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute, as the so-called ‘Austrian Initiative’ was about to begin. Meliha and Ratko attended the meeting in Vienna. Upon their return from Austria, the three activists got together at one of their meetings and produced a short video to discuss how the meeting went, as well as the other activities of the Plenum Zenica. In the clip we see Goran asking questions first to Meliha, and then to Ratko. Here contact is not just direct, brought about by the co-presence of the three activists in the scene and the background work they carried out in realising the video, but it is also clearly symbolic. Ratko and Meliha repeatedly refer to Bosnia and Bosnian citizens in inclusive terms, and their presence in the video, together with Goran, symbolises the possibility of a ‘reconciled’ Bosnian society fighting for social justice. While protests have been smaller and more isolated since 2014, meetings among activists from different parts of BiH continued until March 2018 as part of the Austrian Initiative, and represented an important opportunity for maintaining contact between groups in the FBiH and in the RS.

Mechanisms

This section outlines how the types of contact discussed above could bring about the positive outcome of civic solidarity in the 2014 Bosnian protests. This occurs through two key mechanisms: subjectivation and prefiguration, here analysed in turn. Subjectivation occurs when members of a divided society, coming into contact through socialisation, constitute themselves into a new subject—the citizen—by resisting the divisive frameworks entrenched by the legacy of wartime violence. In the 2014 protests, socialisation involved physical and symbolic mixing during demonstrations, plenum assemblies, and other activities that were carried out by activists. In addition to the presence of activists from diverse backgrounds at protests and meetings, the grievances that animated the mobilisation were the most explicit and powerful form of socialisation. Economic grievances were clearly framed in anti-nationalist terms, and in ways that could appeal to people in the Federation and in RS, and to anyone regardless of ethnic group affiliation. Moreover, the subject putting forward these grievances, and suffering injustice, was the citizen or citizen activist. As one interviewee remarked: ‘the plena demands had nothing to with ethnicity. It had all to do with the position of an ordinary citizen in this system. It was 99 against 1, 99 being the citizens’. Protesting as an activity makes people citizens activists, producing civic unity
through calls for activism that are explicitly framed in civic terms. In the first issue of the Bulletin of Plenum Zenica we see a one-page poster that reads: ‘It does not matter what you do; It does not matter how many commitments you have; You have to find time for society; Civic activism is your duty’.

This is followed by drawing of people in a variety of professions, from doctors to pensioners, to dancers and police, who are all identified as activists.\(^2^8\) In this sense, while working class issues (as brought to the fore by workers in Tuzla) were at the centre of the mobilisation, protesters were betting on civic unity as potentially appealing to people from various socioeconomic backgrounds, including younger generations.

By protesting under the banner of civic unity, citizens were also resisting the divisive ethnonationalist frameworks that are embedded in BiH institutions and supported by elites trying to secure electoral support. The adoption of slogans such as ‘we are hungry in three languages’ is a good example of how socialising entails representing people as a ‘unified front’,\(^2^9\) and also mocking (and opposing) some of the grotesque aspects of the consociational system in BiH, where the presence of three official languages means, for example, that cigarettes packets display the warning ‘smoking kills’ in three almost equal versions.\(^3^0\) The adoption of shared grievances, civic symbols and identities, combined with the resistance against ethnonationalism, strengthens civic solidarity, not by bringing together Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs, but through the creating of a new, shared identity, or a new subject—the citizen activist—whose belonging in BiH is not linked to their affiliation to the ‘constituent peoples’. Subjectivation thus contributed to civic solidarity through socialisation and resistance.

The second mechanism through which protests build civic solidarity is defined here as prefiguration, which results from the activists’ shared aspirations for social justice, and their resistance against privileged elites who have an interest in maintaining the status quo. First, activists and citizens protesting were brought together by socioeconomic demands. As highlighted above, the 2014 protests were started by workers in Tuzla, and their call for jobs, regular wages and social security remained at the core of the mobilisation.

To address these specific issues, the demands of the protesters had to be broadened to redressing socioeconomic injustice related to corruption, failed privatisation, and lack of accountability, as Plenum documents from all over Bosnia show.\(^3^1\) However, activists became soon aware that it would have been impossible to address socioeconomic issues without changing the political system itself: several activists pointed out that this required not only cutting emoluments and benefits for politicians, but also reforming the dysfunctional institutional system.\(^3^2\) Even in the aftermath of the protests, this focus on civic issues was keeping activist groups together, even as divisive issues emerged from time to time.\(^3^3\) The *shared aspirations* that put into contact Bosnians regardless of their background, therefore, included the establishment of a fairer social and political system, as the only route through which socioeconomic concerns could be truly addressed.

At the same time, the protests entailed resistance against the privileges of the elites and their attachment to the current system as the only guarantor of their permanence in power. The shared aspiration for a different kind of society, then, relied on exercising resistance against elite privileges and lack of accountability. This was done in two ways, the first of which was pressing demands aimed directly at challenging the politicians’ position of authority. One of the issues that became most representative of people’s resistance, in this sense, was the fight against the so-called *bijeli hleb* (white bread), that is the salaries that politicians or public officials continue to receive after their term in office has ended.\(^3^4\)
Even in 2015, when most plenum and protest groups were dissolving, the ‘white bread’ continued being a contentious issue: at the 2015 May Day march in Tuzla, the Solidarity Union brought white bread and even a lamb on a spit to the protest, placing them in the courtyard of the new Cantonal government offices (as their building was heavily damaged during the 2014 protests and had to be vacated). On a holiday where most people organise barbecues to celebrate workers’ day, their sarcastic message to the authorities was: you already have the bread, we have brought you the lamb. The protest against white bread was powerful because it marked the division between elites on the one hand, and unemployed and impoverished citizens, on the other, as the salient cleavage within Bosnian society, as opposed to ethnicity (see also Mujkić, 2015).

The second way through which protesters carried out resistance was by challenging the authorities’ roles and legitimacy more directly. One of the crucial features of the protests was, in fact, the creation of plenums as a site where a more meaningful kind of democracy could be practiced. In the eyes of protesters, plenums represented a more legitimate and representative body than those populated by elected officials. Similarly, when the country was hit by floods in May 2014, plenums and other activist groups coordinated relief efforts more quickly and efficiently than public authorities, thus somewhat substituting themselves to the BiH state in the first phase of the emergency, and once again, diverse groups of volunteers helped communities regardless of background. Through plenum assemblies and the activists’ engagement in flood relief efforts, people were effectively practicing the kind of society based on equality, solidarity and social justice that the protests were trying to bring about. By combining a shared aspiration for social and political justice with resistance against the current system, people were in fact prefigurating a fair, more ‘reconciled’ society of citizens. Through prefiguration, activists put into practice the civic solidarity that the protests were supposed to bring about and spread across Bosnia’s citizenship.

**Civic Solidarity in the 2014 Protests**

As the analysis above shows, unintentional contact through the 2014 socioeconomic protests put in motion two processes that could contribute to building civic solidarity. The latter is understood as a positive outcome of contact that may contribute to bridging post-conflict divisions, and is defined as a forward-looking commitment to fighting for social justice and against the privileges of political elites. Through prefiguration, the 2014 protests and follow-up activities allowed citizens to imagine and put into practice—at least momentarily—a different kind of society: one that is inspired and hold together by participatory democracy and solidarity, rather than ethnicity and national identity. Subjectivation, on the other hand, entailed the creation of a new form of citizenship and civic identity that is premised on the rejection of ethnonationalism.

Subjectivation and prefiguration are best understood as ongoing processes rather than occurrences limited to the 2014 mobilisation. Some elements of these processes can be traced back to earlier mobilisations, and continued to occur in the context of more recent protests. While the 2014 protests were the largest mobilisation since the 1992–1995 war, in fact, anti-nationalist (and anti-war) demonstrations took place in Sarajevo in early April 1992, which were the last public mass display of unity and solidarity before the conflict effectively started. Even after the war, and before 2014, civic protests had occurred in Sarajevo and other Bosnian cities, such as in Banja Luka in 2012, when people protested against the dismantling of a public park, and in Sarajevo in 2013, when masses gathered...
in front of the parliament to protest its inability to pass a law on the citizens’ ID numbers (an issue that was preventing ill babies from travelling abroad for treatment) (see Štiks, 2015). Citizens continued mobilising for smaller protests after 2014, for instance against the new Labour Laws passed in the FBiH and RS in 2015 and 2016 (Kurtović, 2015), but failed to produce transformative change and to involve large numbers of citizens. The inclusive and participatory character of some of these protests, and thus their contribution to civic solidarity, was somewhat weakened, and divisive symbols sometimes appeared even when the organisers took care in framing the event in civic and anti-nationalist ways.38

However, activists maintain that the protests did have a positive legacy, which can be characterised in terms of civic solidarity. One activist from Sarajevo, for instance, argued that thanks to the protests politicians know that in BiH there can be a ‘united front of people’ that can come after them,39 while another claimed that citizens ‘showed our government that we can actually organise and do it’, taking on the role of public authorities when they refuse to be accountable to the population.40 The protests and follow-up initiatives, even when falling short of the activists’ expectations, showed them that there are other groups working ‘on the same side’ as them, across BiH.41 Similarly, it also showed to ordinary citizens that they were not alone in suffering injustice, and that their grievances were in fact shared by many.42 Lastly, the network of activist groups that was formed during the protests survived, and those groups which remain active may well constitute the basis for the next wave of mobilisation.

Elements Weakening Civic Solidarity

The mechanisms building civic solidarity were weakened, or hindered, by elements inherent to Bosnia’s institutional system, and by the efforts of the ethnonationalist elites protecting that system. First, Bosnia’s institutional system effectively works to crystallise social divisions and to dilute citizens’ efforts. One of the key challenges faced by protesters was the formulation and delivery of demands to institutions at several levels, due to the decentralisation of Bosnia’s system. Depending on the nature of their claims, demands had to be delivered to the city authorities, to the cantonal governments (in the FBiH), the entity governments, or the state government. Plenum groups, as well as other activist groups in BiH had to grapple with the question of what is the authority responsible for addressing any specific issue.43 Moreover, even within the same entity, citizen groups in different cities would be directing their demands to different municipalities and cantons, thus fragmenting the movement. One activist commented that the lack of knowledge about ‘how the system works’ was a huge obstacle to presenting stronger demands and developing better political strategies.44

There is also some evidence that the international community might have contributed to this issue. In the aftermath of the protests and the floods, a British–German initiative was put in place to boost Bosnia’s EU integration process by, among other things, removing the reform of the Constitution to address the Sejdić-Finci ruling from the conditions to be fulfilled ahead of the implementation of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA). 45 This effectively allowed BiH to initiate the SAA in June 2015 without committing to rationalising its institutional system in ways that could facilitate unified citizens’ demands for social justice, while also placing a heavy burden on local authorities responsible for the implementation of economic and social reforms that became a key part of the
EU conditionality (Initiative for Monitoring of the European Integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2015, pp. 5–6).

Elites can also put in place strategies to demobilise citizens. In BiH, elites are able to counter resistance and defuse momentum behind shared grievances by accusing citizens of being ‘politicised’ (as argued by Touquet, 2015) or affiliated to the interests of an ethnic group. Political elites did, in fact, try to defuse the momentum behind the protests and divide citizens along ethnic lines, as this is the strategy regularly employed by political parties to secure electoral support, and incentivised by the institutional and electoral systems in BiH. In turn, each of the leading political parties made public accusations claiming the protests to be against ‘their own’ group. Activists also pointed out that bringing up nationalism to stir up divisions is a constant threat to social mobilisation in BiH. The protests’ focus on the forward-looking process of civic identity-building, rather than on developing shared understandings of wartime crimes and violence that are so often instrumentalised by elites, may have also weakened their ability to counter these narratives. Lastly, although Republika Srpska is usually singled out for its attempts to repress dissent, it should be noted that between 2014 and 2015 both entities made attempts to pass laws that would limit the rights and freedoms of civil society organisations (Initiative for the Monitoring of European Integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2015, p. 13). Thus, while the institutional system constitutes one element hindering civic solidarity among protesters and citizens in BiH, the instrumental use that elites make of the system further aggravates the situation.

Conclusion

Faced with the conceptual difficulty of defining reconciliation, and with local sensitivities around the use of the term, this paper has developed a new understanding of what ‘reconciliation’ could mean in the context of socioeconomic protests. While not amounting to reconciliation in themselves, the paper has argued that socioeconomic protests can bring about civic solidarity, which is defined as a commitment—shared across social groups in divided societies—to fight for social justice and a fairer system.

Socioeconomic protests are understood as an informal, and unintentional, reconciliation activity, as people get together due to shared grievances rather than with the objective to promote inter-group reconciliation. For this reason, the contribution of this paper is situated within a tradition of studies looking at interaction in informal settings, and following scholars, such as Mamdani (1996) or Jansen (2013), who have questioned the significance of reconciliation projects if they entail the marginalisation of structural inequalities in post-conflict and post-authoritarian societies.

The paper has thus looked at protests as a site of activity that can potentially involve a larger number of ordinary citizens that may be alienated by ‘formal’ or elite-led reconciliation efforts (Evans, 2018), and where social justice issues can be part of the agenda. Despite the wealth of literature on informal activities, in fact, not enough attention has been paid to protests as opportunities for contact and interaction across groups.

By analysing the 2014 socioeconomic protests in BiH, the paper has shown that this kind of activity can facilitate reconciliation by building civic solidarity among different groups of conflict affected communities. Civic solidarity in BiH was built through two key mechanisms: subjectivation, resulting from socialisation and resistance against ethnonationalism; and prefiguration, which combined shared aspirations for a fair society with resistance
against elite privileges and lack of accountability. While subjectivation refers to the creation of a new category of citizens who reject the imposition of totalising ethnic identities, prefiguration gave to these citizens the opportunity to demonstrate—to themselves and to the Bosnian authorities—that they could embody a society based on solidarity and fairness. In other words, they proved, at least for some time during the protests and the flood relief efforts, that they could be the change they wanted to see in the world.

At the same time as civic solidarity was built horizontally and through opposition to ethnonationalist elites, there were elements that prevented this opposition from being successful, and in doing so hindered the strengthening of civic solidarity. Just as Hromadžić (2015) highlights, a system relying on ethnic divisions as a source of legitimacy will inevitably seek to prevent unity (or ‘mixing’) among citizens. The analysis of the protests suggests, to borrow Hromadžić’s (2015, p. 883) expression, a ‘temporal and spatial convergence’ of the process of solidarity-building: while civic solidarity is formed, ethnonationalist elites and structural divisions work to unmake these gains that may threaten the status quo. While the outcome of the 2014 protests was mixed, and weakened by the institutional system and deliberate elite efforts, we have evidence that contact through protesting, meetings, and volunteering did help forge civic solidarity, and establish activist networks that remain in place.

The paper aimed to trace what mechanisms, within activities like protests, can facilitate (or hinder) reconciliation, and how this can occur. While these mechanisms have been analysed here with reference to the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the paper suggests that similar dynamics might be at play in social mobilisation in other divided societies. The case of BiH shows us that civic identities and solidarity can be promoted through protest even in countries that are deeply divided and institutionally complex. While protests are usually seen as disruptive and destabilising, the analysis presented here shows that—when they are inspired by shared socioeconomic grievances—they can in fact be a powerful tool to build civic solidarity among citizens.

Notes

1. I conducted 19 interviews with people directly involved in protests and plenum meetings in Sarajevo, Prijedor, Zenica, Tuzla, Mostar, and numerous other with people who participated in personal capacity. I observed a limited number of protests, such as the 1st May demonstration in Tuzla, and union-led protests against labour law reforms in June-July 2015 in Sarajevo. Between June-August 2015 I observed the meetings of Plenum Zenica, and conducted further visits in November 2015, April 2016, and April 2018.

2. This is a quote from an interviewee in Fridman (2015, p. 188).

3. Aiken (2010) defines social learning as the process through which identities are negotiated in post-conflict societies.

4. A case in point are the protests occurred in Vukovar, Croatia, where some ethnic Croat groups demonstrated against the use of Cyrillic signs to accommodate the needs of the Serb minority in the area. These protests reproduced, rather than overcame, the dynamics of the conflict that drove many Serbs out of Croatia. See Boris Pavelic, Croatia’s Vukovar Bans Cyrillic after Protests, Balkan Insight, 5 November 2013, https://balkaninsight.com/2013/11/05/vukovar-city-council-bans-cyrrilic/ [last accessed 22 February 2019].

5. Although not inexistent: the Bosnian protests suggest at least a shared understanding of economic crimes as being an important and unaddressed aspect of the war.

6. See also the rest of the special issue of Social Movement Studies, Vol. 11, Issue 3–4.

7. Naša Stranka is a cross-ethnic party founded in 2008, partly drawing its membership from the civil society sector. In BiH, political parties are widely seen as instrumental to the interests of a small group of insiders,
rather than as working for the public good. Accusations of being affiliated to a political party can be used strategically to delegitimise protesters.

8. See for instance: Announcement of the Citizens Plenum in Tuzla, 12 February 2014, BH Protest Files, available at https://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com/2014/02/12/announcement-of-the-citizens-plenum-in-tuzla/; and these reports by Bosnian journalists: February 2014, http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/bosnia-nervously-prepares-for-new-day; and by Dušica L. Ikić Cook and Elvira Jukić, New Protest Clashes Erupt in Bosnia’s Tuzla, Balkan Insight, 6 February 2014, http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/bosnians-head-for-another-day-of-protests, all accessed 17 April 2018.

9. ‘Visualizing the Plenum Demands’, BH Protest Files, 13 May 2014, available at https://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com/2014/05/13/visualizing-the-plenum-demands/, last accessed 19 April 2018.

10. See for instance: ‘We Will Call All Poor People to Come Out to the Streets’”, BH Protest Files, 19 February 2014, available at https://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.comhttps://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com/2014/02/19/banja-luka-new-protests-on-saturday-we-will-call-all-poor-people-to-come-out-to-the-streets/com/2014/02/19/banja-luka-new-protests-on-saturday-we-will-call-all-poor-people-to-come-out-to-the-streets/, last accessed 19 April 2018; ‘Prijedor Citizens’ Demands (Prijedor #1)’, BH Protest Files, 10 February 2014, https://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com/2014/02/10/prijedor-citizens-demands-prijedor-1/, last accessed 19 April 2018; ‘Answer by the Mayor of Prijedor to Citizens’ Demands (Prijedor #2)’, BH Protest Files, 17 February 2014, https://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com/2014/02/17/answer-by-the-mayor-of-prijedor-to-citizens-demands/, last accessed 19 April 2018. See also ‘Interview: Duško Vukotić, President of the Association of RS Veterans’, BH Protest Files, 14 February 2014, available at https://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com/2014/02/14/interview-duisko-vukotic-president-of-the-association-of-rs-veterans/, last accessed 19 April 2018.

11. See the following paragraphs on the Austrian Initiative. See also interviews with the Program Coordinator of the Austrian Initiative (Ludwig Boltzmann Institute), 9 November 2015 (Skype); Interview with activist from Prijedor, 24 April 2016, and from Banja Luka, 25 April 2016.

12. The RS Veterans Union declaration read ‘these statements will only stoke flares that have been lit by those in power, who are attempting by any means necessary to preserve a State that is based on crime, corruption, nepotism, and on a horrendous education system whose consequences are already being felt’. See ‘Declaration by RS Veterans Union (RS #1)’, BH Protest Files, 10 February 2014, available at https://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com/2014/02/10/declaration-by-rs-veterans-union-rs-1/, last accessed 19 April 2018.

13. See ‘Majority of Citizens Support Protests, while Violence Is Seen as Too Great a Price to Pay for Change’, BH Protest Files, 12 February 2014, available at https://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com/2014/02/14/majority-of-citizens-support-protests-while-violence-is-seen-as-too-great-a-price-to-pay-for-change/, last accessed 19 April 2018.

14. This does not necessarily mean that RS citizens are not able to mobilise en masse: in fact, police repression has sparked some of the largest protests of the past decade in Banja Luka following the death of David Dragičević, see Alfredo Sasso, Demonstrating for David in Banja Luka, Osservatorio Balcani e Caucauso, 10 May 2018, available at https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Bosnia-Herzegovina/Demonstrating-for-David-in-Banja-Luka-187713 [last accessed 5 July 2019].

15. See Ludwig Boltzmann Institute (2014, 2016). The eight groups were: the Banja Luka Social Centre (BASOC; Banja Luka, RS), Mreža 57 (Network 57; Bosnia-wide network), Neformalna Grupa Građana ‘Srebrenik je naš’ (Informal citizen group ‘Srebrenik is ours’; Srebrenik, FBiH), Neformalna Grupa Za Socijalnu Pravdu (Informal Group for Social Justice; Prijedor, RS), Plenum Zenica (Zenica, BiH), Plenum Bosanska Krupa (Bosanska Krupa, FBiH), Pokret Građana Gračanica (Civic movement Gračanica; Gračanica, FBiH), Sindikal Solidarnosti (Workers’ union Solidarity; Tuzla, BiH).

16. In Banja Luka, more substantial funds allowed BASOC to renovate an old Ottoman house and open a social centre. Interview with activist from BASOC, 25 April 2016; see also the Facebook page of BASOC at https://www.facebook.com/bassoc/, last accessed 22 April 2018.

17. The Austrian Initiative came to an end in March/April 2018. Interview with activist from Zenica, 17 April 2018.

18. Plenum Zenica Bilten broj 1 (Plenum Zenica Bulletin number 1), September 2015, on file with the author.

19. See Ludwig Boltzmann Institute (2016).

20. Interview with activist in Mostar, 24 June 2016; Interview activist from Prijedor in Sarajevo, 5 May 2015; Interview with activist in Prijedor, 21 July 2015; Interview with activist in Zenica, 7 May 2015.

21. Announcement: First meeting of the Brčko District Citizens’ Plenum, 11 February 2014, BH Protest Files, available at https://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com/2014/02/11/announcement-first-meeting-of-the-citizens-plenum-of-brcko-district/, Demands of the Citizens’ Plenum of Mostar, 13 February 2014, BH Protest
See Demands of the 13th Plenum of the Citizens of Sarajevo, 19 May 2014, https://bhprotest

See the website of the Center for Investigative Journalism (Centar za lstra

The Sindikat Solidarnosti (Solidarity Union) from Tuzla, for instance, framed their 1st May demonstration as a workers’ protest in their flyers and posters, but some of the participants brought to the demonstration Bosniak army flags, which constitute a divisive symbol. The poster reads: ‘Come so that, to which she replies that ‘of course, Bosnia and Herzegovina is one country’ (and Republika Srpska?” Goran then asks, to which Meliha replies affirmatively again, since it is part of BiH). In Ratko’s segment, he describes the protests emphasising their civic character, and then lists the groups present at the meeting in Vienna, pointing out they came from both of Bosnia’s entities.

Interview with activist from Sarajevo, 21 May 2015; see also Plenum Zenica Bilten broj 1: ‘the strength of citizens is in the numbers!’, on file with the author.

Plenum Zenica Bilten broj 1, on file with the author.

Interview with NGO activist, Sarajevo, 16 September 2015.

Pušenje ubija (for Bosniaks). Pušenje ubija (for Croats). Pušenje ubija (for Serbs).

Visualizing the Plenum Demands’, BH Protest Files, 13 May 2014.

Interview with activist from Sarajevo, 21 May 2015. See also Mostar citizens’ demands, 11 February 2014, BH Protest Files, https://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com/2014/02/10/mostar-citizens-demands-mostar-1/; Demands of the Citizens’ Plenum of Mostar, 13 February 2014, BH Protest Files, https://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com/2014/02/13/demands-of-the-citizens-plenum-of-mostar/; Bihac Citizens’ Demands, 10 February 2014, https://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com/2014/02/10/bihac-citizens-demand-s-bihac-1/; all accessed 19 April 2018.

Author fieldnotes, June 2015, Zenica. See the example on Naser Orić provided on p. 14.

See the website of the Center for Investigative Journalism (Centar za lstraživačko Novinarstvo), https:// www.cin.ba/bijeli_hljeb/, last accessed 19 April 2018. While some institutions removed these provisions after the 2014 protests, hundreds of politicians still have access to bijeli ljub in BiH.

Author fieldnotes, 1 May 2015, Tuzla. Interview with members of Sindikat Solidarnosti in Tuzla, 6 August 2018. See also Kurtović (2015).

See Demands of the 13th Plenum of the Citizens of Sarajevo, 19 May 2014, https://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com/2014/05/19/demands-of-the-13th-plenum-of-citizens-of-sarajevo; Bosnia Floods: This is Going to Stay with Us for the Next 20–30 Years, 24 May 2014, https://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com/2014/05/24/bosnia-floods-this-is-going-to-stay-with-us-for-the-next-20-30-years/, both accessed 19 April 2018.

The siege of Sarajevo effectively started then. See Bringa (2002), Touquet (2015). On anti-war activism in the former Yugoslavia see Bilić (2012).
of you who suffer injustice, join us in front of the SODASO building in Slatina, on 1st May at 9am. Sindicat Solidarnosti poster, on file with the author.

39. Interview with NGO Activist from Sarajevo, 16 September 2015.
40. Interview with activist from Sarajevo, 21 May 2015.
41. Interview with activist from Prijedor, 24 April 2016.
42. Interview with activist from Prijedor in Sarajevo, 5 May 2015.
43. See examples on BH Protest files; See also a flyer titled ‘For environmentally sustainable Zenica’ from the environmental NGO Eko forum, on file with the author. The flyer identifies the steel mill owner ArcelorMittal, the City of Zenica, the Federal Ministry for Tourism and Environment, and the Cantonal Ministry for Spatial Planning, Transport and Environment as responsible for pollution monitoring, supervision, and control over privatisation agreements at various levels.
44. See interview with activist from Sarajevo, 21 May 2015.
45. On the Sejdić-Finci ruling by the European Court of Human Rights see Hodžić and Stojanović (2011).
46. See Dalio Sijah, ‘Uspjeh protesta u BiH: Ipak je “i srpska i hrvatska i bošnjacka”’, Istinomjer, 10 February 2014, available at http://istinomjer.ba/uspjeh-protesta-u-bih-ipak-je-srpska-hrvatska-bosnjacka/; and the English translation on BH Protest Files, ‘The Success of the Protests is “Serb, Croat and Bosniak”’, 10 February 2014, available at https://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com/2014/02/11/the-success-of-the-protests-is-serb-croat-and-bosniak/, both accessed 19 April 2018.
47. One of them said: ‘if you go to workers’ protests in Banja Luka, and you mention the war to them, they will adopt a defensive attitude. They may not have food to eat on their table but they will tell you that they will die to defend their country’ (Interview with activist in Sarajevo, 3 May 2015).

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