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Lights and Shadows of Social Movements: Constructing a Collective Identity in Post-Socialist Macedonia

Summary

The article analyzes the construction of a post-ethnic collective identity in the 2014-2016 Macedonian social movements.

Instead of looking at the large-scale political changes as a yard stick for the success or failure of a social movement, it focuses on the cognitive process of collective identity and social action, in which heterogeneous individuals come together as a collective entity, learn to understand their grievances in collective terms and nurture a new sense of group-identity in relation to the external environment. It concludes that this process – based on shared memories of a collective struggle for the common interest against the common enemy – is to be understood as a fruitful outcome of a social movement that generates new movement biographies for a sustainable and permanent 'we-ness'.

In light of Bernd Simon's and Bert Klenderman's 'tripod approach' to collective identity, the contribution further argues that the success of a long-lasting social movement is based on creating a politically relevant collective identity that appeals to social bystanders in the general public. This inclusive and societal context beyond ethno-nationalist rhetoric was the driving force behind the success of the 2014-2016 social movements in Macedonia.

Lights and Shadows of Social Movements: Constructing a Collective Identity in Post-Socialist Macedonia

■ Introduction

After Talat Xhaferi, an ethnic Albanian politician, was appointed new speaker of the Macedonian Parliament in April 2017, around 200 supporters of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, VMRO-DPMNE, stormed the parliament and attacked journalists and several members of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia, SDSM, including the now Prime Minister of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev. An angry mob sang Macedonian national songs and waved Macedonian flags, while Zaev, blood pouring from his forehead, and 102 other injured Members of Parliament had to be evacuated by the police rescue squad. This shocking brawl came after months of timid coalition talks between Zaev and his Albanian partners, and after the President's, Gjorge Ivanov, refusal to hand Zaev the mandate.

The same time last year, the deep political division was still there – yet, the situation was different: In April 2016, the student protests that had begun two years earlier grew into a full-blown nation-wide movement against rampant clientelism and corruption under the then Prime Minister, Nikola Gruevski, and, for the first time in a decade, Gruevski's VMRO-DPMNE – despite a narrow election win – failed to form a new coalition and was eventually overthrown in December 2016. The ongoing scandal, however, evidences the persistent social and political instability in the country, and its still superficial democracy that continues to shape Macedonia's political scene. As one NGO worker said in an interview, 'some of the political elites in the country, including the former ruling party, are only deepening the gaps between the people, instead of working to bridge them together'.¹

Despite the two-year-long struggle against authoritarian populism, the chronic ills of Macedonia's post-socialist society have not been defeated yet. It is true that, as

1 *Aleksander Dimishkovski*, "Macedonia has new government, but rocky road ahead", New York Times, June 1, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/01/world/europe/macedonia-zoran-zaev-election.html> (accessed June 25, 2017).

some write,² the political schisms that had pervaded the Macedonian society for years nevertheless continue. What was the two-year-long struggle against authoritarian populism finally good for? The same problem is said to continuously jeopardize the country's democratic development: Were the 2014–2016 movements really all in vain?

This article addresses the 2014–2016 Macedonian social movements as a cognitive process, in which individuals with diverse backgrounds learned to understand themselves as a collective entity with shared grievances towards social and political injustice. Instead of looking at macro-level political outcomes as a yardstick for success or failure of a social movement, it focuses on the process of coming-together among heterogeneous members of society who construct self-awareness as an in-group in a power struggle with a political out-group. Understanding a social movement through the lens of collective identity is especially important in the Macedonian context, because the success of the 2014–2016 social movements – and I will elaborate the details further on – lied on the construction of inclusive group-ness as a unified social actor beyond the social and political divisions that had been the dominant feature of many short-lived earlier movements. What follows below is the story of a new sense of collective identity in post-socialist Macedonia beyond ethno-nationalist rhetoric, that of shared experience in a struggle against the decade-long reign of authoritarian populism, and that of new movement biographies that created a sustainable social movement for generations to come.

The Making of 'We' in Social Movements

In contrast to the more commonly reflected tradition of social movement scholarship, social psychology of protest is much more concerned with the social sense of the identity component, according to Bert Klandermans and Marga de Weerd: 'By taking group membership as a constituent of identity.'³ Conversely, the acquisition of a collective 'we' in the vein of the social movement literature – being able to act, believe, or identify collectively – is a learning process. An individual actively learns to associate with an in-group and its members which eventually leads to 'acting-together' and can be referred to as a social movement. This arises, as Taylor and Whittier write,⁴ from a set of in-group definitions that reflect the collective

2 *Dimitar Bechev*, "What is happening in Macedonia?", Al Jazeera, April 30, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/04/happening-macedonia-170430135004624.html> (accessed June 1, 2017); *Paul Reef*, "Macedonia's Colorful Revolution and the Election of 2016. A Change for Democracy, or All for Nothing?", *Südosteuropa* 65, no. 1 (2017).

3 *Bert Klandermans / Marga de Weerd*, "Group Identification and Political Protest", in: *Sheldon Stryker / Timothy J. Owens / Robert W. White* (eds.), *Self, Identity, and Social Movements*, 69–92, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, 68.

4 *Verata Taylor / Nancy E. Whittier*, "Collective Identity in Social Movement Communities: Lesbian Feminist Mobilization", in: *Aldon D. Moris / Carol M. Mueller* (eds.), *Frontiers of Social Movement*

interests, and is maintained by interactions between its members and their politicized-valorized consciousness – a consciousness that otherwise remains politically neutral.⁵

Construction of collectiveness in the context of social protest, therefore, is highly dependent on a shared experience, and, in specific, related to social injustice – be it corruption, housing problems, police brutality, or high unemployment, against which potential in-group members can raise shared awareness and respond to, and, therefore, are enabled to give politicized meanings to their group-identity and subsequent social movements. A shared experience is a significant factor, because it is this collective understanding of social injustice that allows people to stand up against their opponents and it is this reciprocity that makes their collective identity and action politically meaningful and significant. This can mostly be observed in movements whose members mobilize around issues dealing with shared experiences of an often-broader population, e.g. peace protests following terrorist attacks in London, Paris, and Manchester in 2016 and 2017.

On the other hand, the social psychological interest in collective identities and actions is focused on structural influences of in- and out-group boundaries followed by self-categorization and self-comparison.⁶ A social identity arises through a cognitive process, by taking on ideas of an in-group in opposition to an out-group based on contrasting evaluations, which, in result, works to enhance one's self-esteem. In other words, this is a process, where an individual becomes a part of a category, i.e. de-individualization, by accentuating the supposed similarities between self and a positively-weighted in-group and the differences with a negatively-weighted out-group.

Beyond the psychology of in- and out-group formation, the social identity theory's elucidation on identity management – status- and mobility-management of an inferior group and their members – sheds light on how people with a negatively-perceived social group strengthen their in-group identity to raise a collective voice to alter their status. Here, collective actions to better the inferior status as regards their out-group counterparts depend on, first, the stability of their in-group status, and, second, the permeability of the group-boundaries. Put differently, members of a negatively perceived in-group can strengthen their group-identity to act collectively

New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992; *Verata Taylor / Nancy E. Whittier*, "Analytical Approaches to Social Movement Culture: The Culture of Women's Movement", in: *Hank Johnston / Bert Klandermands* (eds.), *Social Movements and Culture*, 163-187, Minneapolis / London: University of Minnesota Press/UCL Press, 1995.

5 *Klandermands / de Weerd*, "Group Identification and Political Protest".

6 *Michael A. Hogg et al.*, "A Tale of Two Theories: A Critical Comparison of Identity Theory with Social Identity Theory", *Social Psychological Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (1995); *Jan E. Stets / Peter J. Burke*, "Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory", *Social Psychological Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2000); *Henri Tajfel et al.*, "The Social Dimension in European Social Psychology", in: *Henri Tajfel* (ed.), *The Social Dimension: European Developments in Social Psychology*, 1-5, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

to change their situation, if their status is seen illegitimate and, if their intra-group relations are stable enough to carry out such actions.

Cases, where protesters mobilize around their unjust situation that they share as a group, e.g. student protests across Austria and Germany against the 'Bologna Process' in 2009, exemplify the capability of and preference for collective actions taken by in-group members followed by group-identification. It should be noted here that a group-identification, which potential in-group members make, does not simply derive from their primordial qualifications, e.g. ethnicity, gender, race, or religion, but rather from a self-made and voluntary alignment, for which membership allows heterogeneous individuals to politicize their collective identity and actions.⁷

The construction of a collective identity in the light of social movement literature refers to the kind of process that a group collectively engages in, the outcome of which reflects the cultural production of collective consciousness, as opposed to the social psychological process of individual efforts that are made in the context of de-individualization and self-categorization based on membership.⁸ Taking the important notes on pursuit of collective identity and social movement into account, the remainder of the article sheds light on the social movements in Macedonia's escalating political crisis since 2014. The construction of a collective identity in the context of the Macedonian protests tells us a unique story of transformation of 'who-we-are' as a political strategy to appeal to the broader public, to reify the shared experience of social injustice as grounds for mobilization, and, most importantly, to unite people beyond social and political divisions, which were an underlying characteristic of the earlier social movements in post-socialist Macedonia.

Where It All Began ...

The story of post-socialist Macedonian social movements begins with the limited successes that Macedonia enjoyed following its transition into a liberal democracy. Unlike their counterparts in Central and Eastern Europe, whose economic liberalization and integration into the global market legitimized the 'hegemony of the new order',⁹ the political elites of post-socialist Macedonia had benefited from the lack of security amid both regional, e.g. in the 2001 insurgency, and international crises, e.g. in the 1995 naming dispute with Greece. In the aftermath of the 2001 Albanian insurgency and the legislative election in the following year, a new coalition government was formed between SDSM and the Democratic Union for Integration, DUI. This marked

7 *Klandermans / de Weerd*, "Group Identification and Political Protest".

8 This is the difference between the social construction of collective beliefs at a group-level and their appropriation at an individual-level.

9 *Ljupcho Petkovski / Ditmar Nikolovski*, "Populism and Progressive Social Movements in Macedonia", *Czech Journal of Political Science* 2, (2016).

a new era for Macedonian politics with increasing ethnic nationalism from the opposition and diminishing trust in neo-liberal politics among ethnic Macedonians.

The limited political and economic success that the country saw under the reign of SDSM and BDI paved the way for the rise of an authoritarian, nationalist and anti-elitist opposition leader, namely Nikola Gruevski, in 2006, whose anti-liberal and anti-pluralist politics strongly revolved around the making of the 'real people' – the victims of pro-Albanian and pro-European liberal elites. Authoritarian populism led by Gruevski and his VMRO-DPMNE had largely benefited from a deep popular dissatisfaction with the exclusive and non-transparent multiethnic coalition between SDSM and BDI, whose autocratic decision-making style had met with strong criticism from domestic to international NGOs, from local to central authorities, and from ethnic Macedonians to populist politicians, who had successfully politicized democratic deficits of post-socialist Macedonia into an ethnic problem. In the increasing ethnic tension in the post-Ohrid Framework Agreement ¹⁰ regime – fueled by a high unemployment rate; low wages; an ever-worsening domestic economy; corruption and crime – the self-proclaimed 'true defender of the nation' had finally won his battle against the 'betrayers' of Macedonian people in 2006 Parliamentary Election. ¹¹

The electoral success of Gruevski and VMRO-DPMNE in 2006 is not dissimilar from the rise of populism witnessed elsewhere in post-socialist Europe. In Macedonia, too, the construction of the new 'we' and 'others' strongly centered around populists' accusations on the liberal and social-democrat – or former communist – political elite, accompanied by a de-legitimization of democratic and liberal institutions in the name of the 'real people'. Much like other post-socialist countries, e.g. Fidesz's success in the 2002 Hungarian Parliamentary Election; or the 2005 electoral victory of PiS, Law and Justice, in Poland, the 'real people' of Macedonia – with the support of Gruevski and VMRO-DPMNE – responded to the failing 'liberal' government. The making of the 'real people' in the Macedonian context, however, had a strong ethnic flair.

Because the long-standing ethnic division between Albanians and Macedonians had been left unattended and mistreated under the previous government, a number of interethnic resolutions proposed by the SDSM and BDI coalition, e.g. the controversial 2004 Law on Territorial Organization, ¹² dismayed much of the ethnic Macedonian

10 In the aftermath of the 2001 Albanian Insurgency, both ethnic Albanian and Macedonian political parties agreed on the implementation of multiethnic policies across the nation. These included constitutional amendments for the veto rights for Albanian communities in some major policy areas, e.g. education, finance, language, and local politics among others.

11 *Jovan Ananiev*, "Factors for Strengthening of the Right-Oriented Parties in Macedonia", *Balkan Social Science Review*, no. 1, (2013); *Kamelia R. Dimitrova*, "Municipal Decisions on the Border of Collapse: Macedonian Decentralization and the Challenges of Post-Ohrid Democracy", *Southern European Politics* 5, no. 2-3, (2004).

12 The law proposed a re-organization of local municipalities that eventually gave ethnic Albanians greater autonomy in the areas with larger Albanian populations.

voters. Mass protests in July 2004 exemplified the birth of a new collective identity amid mounting discontents among Macedonians anchored in their shared experience with increasing social instability under the previous government; in a mono-ethnic solidarity fueled by the radical nationalist rhetoric of populist politicians; and in a successful politicization of their 'difference' with pro-Albanian and pro-European elite 'others'. Subsequent to the election victory of VMRO-DPMNE in 2006, anti-pluralist and anti-liberal politics prospered, the defamation of the political opposition intensified, and, consequently, the schism between the 'real people' and 'others' that its political legitimacy had depended on had widened.¹³

The Fragmented 'We' in Earlier Movements against Authoritarian Populism

The making of the 'real people' has consistently been a driving force behind the authoritarian politics of Gruevski and the VMRO-DPMNE, since 2006. It is no overstatement to say that the nationalist rhetoric of the 'we-and-others' binary in their decade-long reign was of utmost importance, as the political legitimacy of the Macedonian populism had always been deeply rooted in its 'struggle' against the so-called 'transitional elite'.¹⁴ Gruevski and the VMRO-DPMNE's obsession with construction and maintenance of the 'real people' is perhaps best-exemplified in their trademark project, *Skopje 2014*,¹⁵ as well as in the protests that had taken place following its proposal in 2009.

When the government first announced the initial proposal for an urban re-generation project in the city center of Skopje, a group of architecture students, *First Archi Brigade*, from Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje organized sporadic demonstrations – although these loosely organized protests merely met with minor success. Engineering a coherent collective-history-narrative for the 'real people' of Macedonia through a kitschy urban beautification project was opposed mainly by architects, students, and local authorities whose organization, however, remained peripheral and failed to attract the attention of the broader public.¹⁶

A collective voice that the First Archi Brigade and Co. sought to establish against *Skopje 2014* – concerning the largely authoritarian nature of Gruevski's policy-making – was fragile, e.g. a loose organization through the social media, and fragmented,

13 *Ljupcho Petkovski*, "Authoritarian Populism and Hegemony: Constructing 'the People' in Macedonia's illiberal discourse. *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 3, no. 2, (2015).

14 *Ibid.*

15 "*Skopje 2014*" is a highly controversial urban renewal project that was designed to give the city of Skopje a more neo-classical image. The Macedonian government was heavily criticized for spending up to 560 billion Euros on the construction of historic buildings, monuments, and sculptures – in spite of an unemployment rate of more than 30 % at the time. Between 2012 and 2014, around 20 administrative buildings, concert halls, and museums were constructed and over 40 monuments were erected across the city center.

16 *Ljupcho Petkovski / Dimitar Nikolovski*, "Populism and Progressive Social Movements in Macedonia".

e.g. exclusive criteria for in-group members, to expand the shared definition for an in-group to the wider population – hence, limited shared experience of and solidarity against social injustice. Despite their appeals to the 'citizens' to 'wake up, for once with their own heads, and become actors in the building (...) of their city's future instead of remaining merely passive observers',¹⁷ the lack of cognitive definitions of a shared experience of social injustice among ordinary Macedonians was evident in a number of ensuing counter-protests. This is crucial, because for potential in-group members with diverse qualifications to develop a collective entity, it is important to establish a sense of 'we-ness' 'within a language that is (...) specific to the group'¹⁸ in relation to the environment, and the social and political 'others'. The construction of a collective identity in a social movement, therefore, is a process in which a diverse bunch of social actors come together and perceive themselves as unified subjects. The relationship between collective identity and social movement is then a symbiotic one, because, as the movement progresses, the collective identity matures, and, in turn, as the collective identity strengthens, it defines the 'continuity and permanence of the movement over time'.¹⁹

The spirit of the 2009 student protests was short-lived, and its anti-populist narrative failed to appeal to the more conservative, religious, and still deeply divided ethnic communities of Macedonia. What initially began as protest against the autocratic decision-making process of populist politics again reaffirmed the deep schism between the 'real people' and the 'others', as the counter-protests and protests became a mere proxy war between the governing VMRO-DPMNE and the opposition parties.²⁰ A failure to re-negotiate the 'collective' in relation to concrete 'others' makes any further collective action impossible,²¹ and this was too strongly featured in other Macedonian social movements prior to 2014.

The beating of – and the eventual killing of – Martin Neskovski in June 2011 and the ensuing protests against police brutality is another example of the failed management of a sustainable collective identity in earlier Macedonian social movements. To the public uproar over the death of Neskovski, who was beaten to death by the Macedonian special police taskforce, *Tiger*, at the celebration of VMRO-DPMNE's 2011 election victory,²² the central authorities remained silent.²³ The story of

17 *Elena Ignatova*, "Macedonia: Student Protest Ends in Violence", *Global Voices*, March 31, 2009, <https://globalvoices.org/2009/03/31/macedonia-student-protest-ends-in-violence> (accessed May 18, 2017).

18 *Ibid.*, 44.

19 *Ibid.*, 49.

20 *Sinisa J. Marusic*, "Construction of Controversial Skopje Church Begins", *Balkan Insights*, June 7, 2012, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/construction-of-controversial-skopje-church-begins> (accessed May 20, 2017).

21 *Alberto Melucci*, "The Process of Collective Identity".

22 In June 2011, Gruevski and VMRO-DPMNE had won their 3rd consecutive victory in the parliamentary elections.

23 *Sinisa J. Marusic*, "Macedonia Protest over 'Fatal Police Beating'", *Balkan Insights*, May 12, 2011, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonians-protest-after-police-murders-youngster> (accessed June 3, 2017).

Neskovski quickly spread on the social media and the largest demonstration ever in post-socialist Macedonia took place.²⁴

Despite the relatively well-defined collective grievances against police brutality, the protests of summer 2011 remained insufficient to challenge the authorities, and the voice against the populist regime showed a lack of political context and relevance. The failure to turn their voice into a politically relevant one, in turn, made the protesters difficult to clearly define. First, the concrete 'we' and 'they' that correspond to the conflictual in-group-out-group dynamics, second, the causality between the 'others' and the injustice 'we' face, and, third, the lack of self-conscious engagement in a well-defined political struggle on behalf of their in-group and against their political out-group lacked significance.²⁵ Although the encounter with an authoritarian out-group who held responsible for social injustice paved the way for mass protests, the lack of politicized group-awareness failed to expand the boundary of its in-group for the broader public, and their vague political orientation in progress failed to challenge the schism between the 'real people' and 'others' instigated by the populist rhetoric.

In a constructivist approach,²⁶ the collective identity of a social movement is a cultural and social construct, and, therefore, it implies a coming-together of heterogenous individuals as an in-group in accordance with the trajectory of a movement itself. It is then a process, according to Alberto Melucci,²⁷ in which individuals who are loosely connected through the already politicized 'we-and-other' binary learn to see themselves as a better-organized and more institutionalized collective entity. Collective identity, therefore, is the 'ability of a collective actor to reorganize the effects of his actions and to attribute these effects to himself – and a lack of this particular ability was perhaps a decisive factor for the unsustainability of earlier social movements in Macedonia, as well as for the simultaneous failure of constructing a more inclusive politicized in-group beyond the populist rhetoric of the 'real people' of Macedonia.

Politicized Collective Identity beyond Ethnic Schism in the Macedonian 2014–2016 Movements

The relational dimension of collective identity highlights the interaction between movement actors, who actively produce shared meanings as the movement progresses,

24 *Ljupcho Petkovski / Dimitar Nikolovski*, "Populism and Progressive Social Movements in Macedonia".

25 *William A. Gamson*, "Taking Politics", Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992; *Bert Klandermans / Marga de Weerd*, "Group Identification and Political Protest"; *Bernd Simon / Bert Klandermans*, "Politicized Collective Identity: A Social Psychological Analysis", *American Psychologist* 56, no. 4, (2001).

26 *Cristina F. Fominaya*, "Collective Identity in Social Movements: Central Concepts and Debates", *Sociology Compass* 4, no. 6 (2010); *Klandermans / de Weerd*, "Group Identification and Political Protest"; *Alberto Melucci*, "The Process of Collective Identity"; *Francesca Polletta / James M. Jasper*, "Collective Identity and Social Movements", *Annual Review of Sociology* 37, (2001).

27 *Alberto Melucci*, "The Process of Collective Identity"; *Alberto Melucci*, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age*, Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1996.

whose ability to reflect their shared experience in collective terms appropriates the outcomes of their actions, and who learn to differentiate themselves from 'others' while continuing to be 'us'. From this constructivist perspective, collective identity is not a mere reaction of a naturally-given population to the environment, but a process, wherein the movement actors must learn to identify themselves as a collective entity in a clear dis-identification with the external environment.²⁸ Collective identity, therefore, is generated by a coming-together of diverse individuals as an in-group who builds 'shared memories'²⁹ through a shared history of protest-participation, of which the outcome – 'movement identity'³⁰ – is central to its sustainability and permanence. Sustainable collective identity requires, however, more than just an 'interactive and shared definition (...) concerned with the orientation of action and field of opportunities and constraints ...!'³¹

The failures in Macedonia of the 2009 and 2011 demonstrations against Gruevski's urban beautification project and police brutality did not derive from a lack of strong interaction between in-group members *per se*, but, rather, from a lack of political relevance in their collective voice that could mobilize actors in a self-conscious political struggle of the broader public. This inclusive context is an important one, because political struggles mostly involve 'third parties' aside from those who are immediately involved in a conflict. This more inclusive and societal context is what Simon and Klandermans ("Politicized Collective Identity: A Social Psychological Analysis", 2001) call a 'tripod approach' that sees the in- and out-group boundaries to be more fluid and flexible, because inclusion of the broader public itself acts as a strategy to claim the legitimacy of a social movement against the discredited authorities. For a sustainable collective identity in a long-standing social movement, the inclusive and societal context of a power struggle is of utmost importance for the in-group members to engage in a self-conscious action, where their collective voice speaks for the interest of the broader public.

Following the fourth election victory of Gruevski and VMRO-DPMNE, the general repertoire of anti-authoritarianism dominated the Macedonian protest scene of mid-2014. The opposition leaders, namely Zoran Zaev in SDSM accused Gruevski of election fraud, and, in return, the four-time Prime Minister condemned his political rivals for working behind the 'real people' who, as a senior member of VMRO-DPMNE said in an interview, 'did not allow to be taken in by the manipulative scenarios from the opposition'.³² The power game between VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, as well as the

28 This is what Alberto Melucci calls a processual approach to collective identity, in which in-group members learn to respond to the external social world by redefinition and reconstruction of their actions that correspond to new social and political orientations over the course of their phased development.

29 *Cristina F. Fominaya*, "Collective Identity in Social Movements: Central Concepts and Debates", 398.

30 *William A. Gamson*, Commitment and Agency in Social Movements, *Sociological Forum* 6, no. 1, 1991.

31 *Alberto Melucci*, Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age.

32 *Kole Casule*, "Macedonian opposition cries election foul, will not accept results", Reuters, April 27, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/amp/idUKBREA3POL820140427> (accessed June 1, 2017).

ensuing protests, didn't differ much from the long-standing turmoil that had pervaded Macedonia's political scene in the last decade, and its discourse seemed insufficient to diverge from the populist rhetoric of the 'real people' and the pro-Western and pro-EU 'transitional elites'.

After the government's decision to introduce a state-sponsored exam across universities in late 2014, however, social movements in Macedonia took a different turn. A series of authoritarian reforms in the education sector not only fueled mass demonstrations by the students and professors, but, this time, their grievances against the ruling party were able to reflect a deep dissatisfaction with the decade-long reign of Gruevski and VMRO-DPMNE shared by the wider public. This shared awareness of grievances is a particularly important one, because collectively-defined grievances against social and political injustice can transform 'my/your' predicament into 'ours', e.g. wide-spread political oppression, because 'our' unjust predicament as an in-group becomes a driving force behind a struggle against a 'common' enemy, e.g. authorities. Subsequently the actors in this confrontation with a well-defined political out-group can appeal to the public-at-large as a part of society, e.g. a nation-wide movement identity and an eventual overthrow of the ruling elites.

The more inclusive and societal context of the 2014-2016 student movements was strongly featured in their multiethnic outlook. In contrast to the vivid ethnic flair in the late 1990's and early 2000's student movements,³³ the cross-ethnic mobilization of post-2014 protests meant a successful deviation from the hitherto prevalent ethnic division between Macedonians and Albanians for more inclusive collective identity upon shared experiences of social and political injustice. The transition from the ethnic scope to a broader and more inclusive movement paved the way for a coming-together of the fragmented voices in deep social and political divisions of post-socialist Macedonia, and its inclusive and societal context redefined the struggle against authoritarianism in collective terms that concerned the common interest of Macedonian society-at-large. The new sense of 'post-ethnic' solidarity diverged from the schism between the 'we-and-others' binary in populist rhetoric, whereby the protesters and the public came to understand the movement as a cross-ethnic and cross-political struggle. This was an invitation for 'social bystanders', a third party,³⁴ to a new form of self-consciousness for a collective struggle, which nurtured the politicization of a collective movement identity – a prerequisite for a sustainable social movement.³⁵

33 *Lura Pollozhani*, "The Student Movement in Macedonia 2014-2016", *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen*, no. 5-6 (2016).

34 *Bernd Simon / Bert Klandermans*, "Politicized Collective Identity: A Sociological Analysis".

35 *Verata Tayler / Nancy E. Whittier*, "Analytical Approaches to Social Movement Culture: The Culture of the Women's Movement".

'Enough Silence!', *Dosta bese molk!*,³⁶ was no longer an outcry of just university students against the authoritarian education reforms, but that of shared grievances in civil society against the oppressive political regime that had impeded Macedonia's democratic development. Another important aspect to be credited for the success of cross-ethnic and cross-political mobilization of the 2014-2016 student movement came not only from the protesters, but their political opponents. Once mass demonstrations had begun after the proposal of state-sponsored university exams, Gruevski's cabinet not only failed to respond to the protesters' demands, but continued to pursue a number of other controversial policies, including higher *ex gratia* payment tax imposition and the faux-baroque beautification project in the capital city, Skopje 2014. This was a crucial factor for successful mobilization of a much wider in-group, wherein the actors across different movements, e.g. contract workers movement in 2015;³⁷ and 'I love GTC' movement against demolition of City Trade Center,³⁸ could come together as a collective body against the common enemy beyond issue-based organization.

The success the 2014-2016 student movement made epitomizes the significance of politicized collective identity for sustainability and permanence of a social movement. As their grievances were shared by the general public, their struggle became a struggle for the common interest of civil society. As their struggle became 'our' struggle against the oppressive authorities, it became a movement of society-at-large, whose members developed a mutual group-identity beyond the ethnic, gender or religious divisions that had hitherto dominated its political scene. Thus a sustainable collective identity was born, serving as a prelude to the subsequent development of 'I Protest', *Protestiram*, and 'Colorful Revolution', *Sarena Revolucija*, – nation-wide movements against Skopje 2014, which saw the eventual overthrow of the VMRO-DPMNE – DUI coalition in 2016 Parliamentary Election.³⁹

In Conclusion – What Was It All for?

After months of relentless coalition talks, as well as a series of 'tough talks' from the European Union and the NATO, Zoran Zaev's SDSM formed a new government with his Albanian coalition partners in May 2017. The story of the 2014-2016 student

36 Similar to earlier protests in the early 2010s, 'enough silence' was a popular protest slogan in the 2014 student movement that criticized both the oppressive – and unresponsive – Gruevski regime and the non-political stance taken in the previous movements.

37 *Sinisa J. Marusic*, "Macedonia Contract Workers Protest Tax Increase", *Balkan Insights*, December 22, 2014, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-contract-workers-protest-tax-increase> (accessed June 11, 2017).

38 *Goran Janev*, "Skopje 2014: Erasing Memories, Building History", in: *Maria Couroucli / Tchavdar Marinov* (eds.), *Balkan Heritages: Negotiating History and Culture*, 111-130, Farnham: Ashgate.

39 Despite the narrow election win, Gruevski's VMRO-DPMNE had failed to form a new coalition with his Albanian partners, and, for the first time in more than a decade, a new government led by the SDSM under Zaev was formed in May 2017.

movements that finally brought an end to the decade-long reign of Gruevski, however, is far from complete, as the 'guardian of the real people' – despite abuses of power, wide-spread corruption, rife nepotism and many others – still maintains a narrow parliamentary majority. It is true that the deep division between political parties nevertheless continues to pervade Macedonia. It is also true that the populist rhetoric of the 'real people' and the pro-Albanian and pro-EU 'transitional elite' is after all still rampant in its political scene. The storming of the parliament by angry VMRO-DPMNE supporters in April 2017 evidenced that the long-standing divisions in Macedonian politics still exist and that the defeat of authoritarian populism may not come as soon as anticipated by the protesters.

The real success of the 2014-2016 student movements, however, lies on the shared experience of a coming-together as a unified actor against social and political injustice, not much so on the macro-level outcomes that alter the politics-at-large. In contrast to their predecessors, the protesters of the 2014-2016 student movements learned to understand their grievances towards authoritarian populism in collective terms, came together as a unified entity for a collective struggle against the unjust authorities, and, more importantly, managed to work out a movement identity beyond the ethnicity-based group-membership that had dominated the previous movements.

The success of the 2014-2016 student movements – in fact, that of any other social movement against social and political injustice – shall not only be measured by the ostensible large-scale political changes, but by the new sense of collective identity that brought cultural impacts to civil society. It produced new movement biographies not only of direct participants but of the wider public, thus creating an example of a successful social movement for future generations.

Authoritarian populism pervades, not only in this small landlocked former Yugoslavian republic, but across Eastern and Southeast Europe. The causes behind this phenomenon differ from case to case, and so do their trajectories, as well as their social and political outcomes. The history of the Macedonian social movements, however, provides an important lens through which we can look at the varying degrees of success and failure of social movements in the region we had witnessed over the years. How does a social movement successfully generate collective identity? How can protesters maintain a sustainable movement that speaks for the common interest of 'social bystanders'? Why does the inclusive and societal context matter for the sustainability and permanence of a social movement?

Protests against authoritarian populism are not new in Eastern and Southeast Europe. As the 2016 protests against media oppression under PiS in Poland or more recent protests in Serbia over the alleged election fraud of Alexander Vučić exemplify, young protesters and 'liberal' politicians in the region do not remain silent in the face of social and political injustice. Their failures to generate a long-lasting social movement and appeal to society-at-large, however, make one thing clear: Without shared awareness of grievances against the common 'enemy', and without a collective

identity with political relevance that speaks for the 'silent majority',⁴⁰ a movement is left peripheral, its grievances fail to become 'our' predicament. At long last it remains insufficient to win its power struggle against the authoritarian populist authorities.

40 *Gabriel Mugny*, *The Power of Minorities*, London: Academic Press.