

# **Social media, protests and the dynamics of civil society in Bulgaria**

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## **Abstract**

This study focuses on the emerging practices of social mobilisation via social media in Bulgaria. Most studies on this topics have so far ignored the countries of the post-socialist block, which, similarly to elsewhere around the globe, saw a wave of protests between 2011-2014, spurred by disillusionment with the reality of the “Transition”. Social movement studies in general have hardly been applied to the dissident movements or their legacy in Eastern Europe, but instead activism in the region has been mainly studied from a “civil society” perspective, which has suffered from a too narrow definition and problematic normative theoretical assumptions that often “de-politicise” its aims. This thesis addresses some of these gaps and conceptual problems in order to try to broaden our understanding of the role social media (can) play for contentious politics, and by extension democracy, in new democracies like Bulgaria.

I take the view that in considering social media and its relations with contentious politics we are interested in social change (Fenton 2016). However, assuming that the latter is necessarily envisioned in radical democratic or progressive terms ignores cases where that is not the case, as well as the anti-democratic tendencies that can arise from the political use of social media. Drawing on radical democratic theory (Mouffe 1992 2009) and the notion of “uncivil society” Kopecky and Mudde (2003), my conceptualisation of civil society thus envisages theoretically, and assess empirically, a wider range and forms of civic association and mobilisation. By focusing on the social media practices in context of groups of civic actors from different ideological backgrounds, organisational structures and with different political agendas, I conceptualise social media as a contested public “space” where different manifestations of the (often polarised) Bulgarian civil society appear in a hegemonic struggle - one that is at the same time between actual citizen groups, and between idea(s) or discourse(s) about the meaning of “democratic citizenship”. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with activists and content and discourse analysis of social media communication pertaining to different protest mobilisations, I explore the complexities, the contested legitimacy and unclear political representation relating to different civil society actors and the role played by social media in their struggle for trust, visibility, recognition, and legitimacy. I also consider the wider democratic implications by interrogating sweeping claims about the democratic potential of social media and their affinity to participatory grassroots and/or populist politics.

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## 1. Introduction

Although diverse in scope, character and aims, what the global protest mobilisations that swept the world in the aftermath of the Financial Crash in 2008 had in common was the frustration, anger and distrust felt by citizens towards the established political and economic system, and a desire to find alternative routes to democracy (Dahlgren 2013, Kindle loc. 121). The Arab Spring in the Middle East, Los Indignados in Spain, Occupy in the US, Tahir Square in Turkey to name a few, raised important questions about the form and character of political participation, democratic representation, the emergence and reinforcement of political identities, and the social character of political activity (ibid). At the same time, these movements were also indicative of the emergence of new avenues and infrastructures for civic participation and mobilisation - namely those afforded by social media.

Much of earlier theorisation on these topics, however, has tended to portray digital and social media as either fundamentally ‘liberating’, ‘democratic’, ‘participatory’ and so forth (i.e. Shirky 2009; Rheingold 2012; Jenkins 2006; 2013; Benkler 2006; Diamond 2010), or the opposite – as enabling state and corporate surveillance, encouraging “slacktivism” and “clicktivism”, and/or supporting capitalist exploitation of personal data, “attention” and “immaterial labour” (Andrejevic 2007; 2004; Dean *et al.* 2006; Leistert 2015; Morozov 2009b; Terranova 2000; 2012; Scholz 2013; Fuchs 2012; 2014a; 2014b; 2007; Sunstein 2017; Zuboff 2018). This study takes the view, adopted by some scholars, that such techno-deterministic approaches are not very helpful for understanding social media’s *actual* uses in context, and their long-term implications for substantive political or social change (Couldry and van Dijck 2015; Cammaerts 2012; Gerbaudo 2012; Lim 2012; Juris 2012; Postill 2014a; Haunss 2015; Mercea and Iannelli 2016; Fenton 2016). As Dencik and Leistert note in respect to cyber-optimism for instance, “[a]lthough such a narrative appeals to modernist sensibilities and Enlightenment ideals of technology as the midwife of social and political advances (Curran 2010) it does little to illuminate the complexities and contradictions of contemporary forms of protest in an age of social media” (2015, Kindle loc.29 ). It has been thus suggested that the impact of social media should not be overestimated and that more consistent theorisations are needed of the relationship between online and offline *practices* of political contestation (Couldry 2004; Mattoni 2013b; Barassi 2015) and the broader media, cultural and political *contexts* in which they occur (Cammaerts 2012; 2013; Gerbaudo 2012; Lim 2012; Sreberney and Khiabany 2010).

In addition, what often seems to get ignored in most studies is the *actual politics* of the movements that utilise the new technologies (Fenton 2016)– i.e. their discourses, identities, framings and ideologies. This tendency echoes the general break away in the field of social movements research since the 1970s from studying the variation in the political and ideological orientation of movements and the almost exclusive focus on the *process* of mobilisation (Walder 2009; Caiani *et al.* 2012). Moreover, social media encompass a wide range of different platforms and affordances that can be used for different purposes, and that in some contexts it is important to distinguish between them (Dahlgren 2018). To quote Markham (2016, p. 949): “To be willfully prosaic about it, it varies from platform to platform and cause to cause. Our job is methodically to disaggregate and weigh up the implications of social media for the ways in which people think and act politically, whether as individuals or collectively”.

Finally, most contextual and practice-based studies on the role of social media for civic activism and contentious politics have so far ignored the countries of the post-socialist block, which were similarly engulfed in protests in the 2011-2014 period, spurred by disillusionment with the reality of the “Transition”, a growing feeling of exclusion from decision-making processes, and exasperation with the entrenched corruption of the political elites. Given the limited attention paid to new democracies like Bulgaria (Bakardjieva 2012a; Bakardjieva 2012b; Mercea 2018; 2014), much more research is needed in order to grasp the different forces and logics at play in all their complexities.

In order to take these critiques and knowledge gaps into account, and to advance understanding in the fields of contentious politics, democratic theory, and social media, this study is interested in the ways social media platforms like Facebook are adopted for and adapted to the local context and its challenges by different *kinds* of civil society actors, and the democratic implications therein. In addition, the study provides an empirical evaluation of the use of social media by civil society actors in *Bulgaria*, contributing much needed understanding to the role of social media in new democracies (Voltmer 2008; 2013). The main research question it addresses is:

**RQ): What democratic role do social media play in contentious politics in new democracies like Bulgaria?**

The rest of this Introduction will give a short overview of the Bulgarian democratic context and the protest cases the study focuses on, as well as the reasons why they need to be investigated. It will then introduce the detailed research sub-questions, and will offer a summary of the theoretical and methodological approaches taken to address them. The chapter will finish with an outline of the structure of the thesis in respect to its ten chapters.

## 1.1 Civil society and contentious politics in Bulgaria:

Bulgaria, a member of the European Union for more than a decade now, is currently experiencing what some observers (e.g. Dawson and Hanley 2016; Bánkuti *et al.* 2012; Müller 2014; Ganev 2013; Cianetti *et al.* 2018; Herman 2016) have described as a “backsliding of democracy” in Central-East Europe. To a large extent the region’s democratic problems have been blamed on the “hollowness” of its democratic institutions (Bohle and Greskovits 2012) due to the persistently low levels of social and political trust, as well as a lack of civic engagement and civic embeddedness in the polity, for example through involvement in formal civic or political organisations (Howard 2003; Sztompka 1996; Závecz 2017; Herman 2016). Civil society in the CEE region has been thus consistently described as “weak” and the organisations themselves variously as “elitist,” obscure, donor-driven and disconnected from the grassroots (e.g. Kopecký and Mudde 2003; Andreeva *et al.* 2005). This “weak” civil society (Howard 2003), some argue, has not only failed to provide an adequate oversight to the political institutions, but also to embed a meaningful identification with core liberal democratic values in society (Dawson and Hanley 2016). In Bulgaria, as elsewhere in CEE, together with the social inequalities created by the neoliberal reforms after 1989 and further exacerbated by austerity policies in the aftermath of the Financial Crash in 2008, these circumstances have contributed to the entrenchment of an oligarchic political class greatly alienated from ordinary people. This has raised concerns about the stability and viability of democracy in the country, and the region as a whole (i.e. Bohle and Greskovits 2012).

At the same time, the CEE region has seen the emergence of a new type of civic activity—informal civic movements- that have enjoyed higher approval and support in comparison to traditional civil society organisations. The Bulgarian protests of 2011-2013 are a case in point: as elsewhere around the globe, in that period Bulgaria experienced a wave of protests, which peaked with a number of Sofia-based environmental mobilisations in late 2012, and two major anti-governmental mass movements that followed in the Winter and Summer of 2013. Even if considered part of the same wave of global protests against growing inequalities and accompanying anti-democratic tendencies, the mobilisations in Bulgaria featured some significant differences from those happening in the global South and/or in the West, and to some extent were defined by specific local challenges and discourses.

For one, the social and political identity and homogeneity of the subject(s) that emerged from these movements have been ambiguous and contested. The actors claiming to

represent civil society were (and since then still are) various, distinct, and often engaged in hegemonic struggles over definitions of the public good (Stoyanova 2018; Ivancheva 2013b; Tsoneva 2017b; 2017a). In addition, the political and ideological idiosyncrasies of the post-socialist context, with its specific social divisions, histories and conflicts and the resultant different media structures, discourses, and ideological frames for social struggles, made the Bulgarian protests difficult to paint unequivocally with a progressive brush (the way their counterparts in the West or South often were). The Winter 2013 mobilisation, for instance, was difficult to define politically, as it featured a strong populist sentiment and both progressive (i.e. leftist groups, socially oriented demands, an anti-neoliberal framing etc.) and nationalist/far-right elements. It resembled more the recent Yellow Vests insurgency in France, which has since its beginning baffled analysts and commentators with its ambiguity, than say, the Occupy or the Indignados movements. The Summer 2013 and the environmentalist protests of 2012, on the other hand, although pro-liberal democratic in character, eventually came to be associated with the urban (Sofia) middle-class and a conspicuous elitist, right-wing/pro-market and anti-leftist framing – again, a significant difference with similar movements happening at the time in the West or South (Ivancheva 2013b; Tsoneva 2017b).

While global corporate social media platforms like Facebook have been central to the activities of the Bulgarian protest actors and have provided them with opportunities for personal expression, visibility, connection and collective identity- building, at the same time they have also mediated the arena for public displays of (ideological) confrontations and opposition. In addition, their profuse use by the Bulgarian activists has been simultaneously embedded in a local media ecology and public sphere characterised by a unique set of circumstances in that it can be described as highly mistrusted, polarised, rife with disinformation and propaganda and fragmented according to various hidden (and not so hidden) political and oligarchic interests (see for example Pfetsch and Voltmer 2012; Voltmer 2008) that are often hostile to civil society actors that try to challenge the status quo. The particularities of the Bulgarian media and political context thus posit some additional and specific local challenges that do not map easily onto other contexts, such as more developed (and better researched) Western democracies with more established media and democratic systems. Social media's democratic role in contexts like Bulgaria therefore cannot be taken for granted, but instead needs to be explored in respect to the actual practices, strategies, aims and discourses of different *kinds* of civil society actors engaged in contentious politics and activism, and the political, cultural and media environment in which they operate (cf. Voltmer and Sorensen 2019).



The study's main research question was developed to investigate these issues and is explored through interviews with activists, as well as content and discourse analysis of their and their followers' online communication. The study focuses on comparing and analysing the social media strategies and practices, as well as their democratic implications, of some of the protest actors that emerged and/or gained notoriety during the protests of 2011-2013. Many of these actors continue to be involved, one way or another, in contentious politics through the social media networks and Facebook pages and groups they established during the 2011-2013 protest wave. The focus of this research is therefore on more recent protests organised (or attempted) using social media by these activists in what (in some cases) could be considered to be "in-between" or "latent" phases of their movements (see for example Della Porta and Rucht 2002; Tarrow 1998; Melucci *et al.* 1989, pp.70-3). In aiming to distinguish any differences in strategies and practices and to consider their democratic implications, this study looks at four protest cases that involve different *kinds* of civil society protest actors – that is, at members of the "official" (liberal) civil society sector (i.e. employees or directors of environmental and liberal NGOs), as well as at independent grassroots activists or groups (with either (neo)liberal orientation or a more nationalist/populist outlook).

## **1.2 Research Questions, Aims and Objectives**

In order to explore the democratic role played by social media for contentious politics in Bulgaria, the main research question (**What democratic role do social media play in contentious politics in new democracies like Bulgaria?**) is broken down into two broad sub- questions, different aspects of which will be explored in six separate empirical chapters. The first sub-question (RQ1) focuses on the context and the challenges it presents to the different *kinds* of civil society actors in Bulgaria. It is addressed through two specific sub-questions that are explored in two dedicated empirical chapters:

**RQ1 What kinds of challenges face civil society actors that operate at the border delineating civil from political society in post-socialist contexts (i.e. by staging protests)?**

RQ1a) How do civil society actors involved in contentious politics in Bulgaria understand their role in, and aims in respect to, *political* conflict? (Chapter 5)

RQ1b) What kinds of challenges in the Bulgarian context do they perceive in regards to that role and those aims? (Chapter 6)

The second sub-question (RQ2) considers the activists' social media practices and strategies in respect to these challenges, and the democratic implications therein. It particularly focuses on challenges in respect to gaining visibility in the Bulgarian media ecology, as well as to winning the trust of potential supporters. Here I am especially interested in *the kind of publics or counter-publics* (Fraser 1990; Downing 2008; Downey and Fenton 2003; Benkler 2006; Warner 2002; Gerbaudo 2017a; Neumayer 2015) *they construct* in their efforts to gain visibility *and* visibility on their own terms (Dayan 2013), and in *the role of social media in respect to those endeavours* – that is, in the opportunities and challenges the activists perceive in relation to their use of social media for furthering their mobilisation and visibility aims. RQ2 also seeks to evaluate the *democratic* role of social media for contentious politics by considering the way different actors construct the conflict between Us and Them (Laclau and Mouffe 2001; Mouffe 2005a), as well as the extent to which they are successful in maintaining a cohesive collective identity and solidarity within their groups in the process of mobilisation (Melucci *et al.* 1989; Melucci 1996; Gamson 1992; 1991; Polletta and Jasper 2001), and the implications. RQ2 is explored through four specific sub-questions, with each discussed in a dedicated chapter:

**RQ2) How do different civil society actors try to address or respond to these challenges? What role do social media play and what are the implications for democracy?**

RQ2a) How do different civil society protest actors in Bulgaria (try to) gain visibility in the media ecology? (Chapter 7)

RQ2b) How do they (try to) gain the trust of potential supporters? (Chapter 8)

RQ2c): How do the civil society actors construct and represent the conflict on social media? (Chapter 9)

RQ2d): To what extent do they manage to develop and sustain a coherent collective identity and inter-group solidarity during mobilisation? (Chapter 10)

### 1.3 Analytical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding this project draws on several distinct schools of thought. First, this study is inspired by the **theory of radical democracy**, which proposes an understanding of public life in complex societies where numerous groups and actors make conflicting social and political demands that reflect their particular and often irreconcilable interests (Young 1990; Mouffe 1992). The thesis' focus on contentious politics stems exactly from my adoption of radical democracy as a normative base. According to participatory accounts of democracy, the democratic project must aim for expansion beyond the status quo – i.e. for “democratising” (Santos and Nunes 2004), or for “deepening democracy” (Fung and Wright 2001). From this point of view, democratic legitimacy stems from the active and continuing participation of the citizens (Pateman 1970; Barber 2003). Radical democratic theory builds on that and considers contentious politics as an expansion of the participatory dimension of civil society. It privileges conflict and contestation as the sites of “the political”, and thereby of the conditions for democratic expansion, or the “radicalisation” of democracy (Mouffe 1992). Not all conflict necessarily enables such a democratic expansion, however. In considering the democratic role of social media in contentious politics I therefore adopt Mouffe's framework that distinguishes between democratic agonism and (uncivil) antagonism, as well as Dahlberg's (2018) democratic visibility conditions in order to normatively evaluate participation through contention.

The second element of my theoretical framework is formed by **constructivist approaches to collective action** (Melucci *et al.* 1989; Melucci 1996; Gamson 1992; 1991; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Della Porta and Diani 2006), that have been developed in sociological studies of social movements. I acknowledge that the formation of collective identities remains a major prerequisite for participating in, as well as sustaining collective action. Moreover, social movements have been keen adopters and appropriators of the Internet and social media in the pursuit of civic and political causes (Bennett *et al.* 2012; Bennett 2013; Cammaerts 2012; Mercea and Loader 2012). I therefore adapt the concepts proposed in studies of social movements to capture the *mediated character* of the collective actors and protest activities that develop from social-media enabled and supported protest action.

## 1.4 Outline of the thesis

Chapter 2 offers a theoretical discussion of the relationship of civil society to democracy and contentious politics, with a particular focus on the new democracies of CEE. The chapter examines the fuzzy boundary that exists between civil and political society in practice, as well as the contested nature of the term as a normative ideal and its often contradictory appropriation as a legitimisation discourse (or a “battle cry”) by actors involved in both social and political activism. The chapter argues that a positive relationship between civil society, contentious politics (as a form of political participation) and democracy should not be presupposed, but instead the relationships between the various actors involved in protest mobilisations, including groups that are normally excluded from civil society on normative grounds, should be studied in context. It proposes that the democratic implications of such involvements and relationships can be evaluated using the notion of “uncivil society”, as well as radical democratic theory’s concept of “agonistic pluralism”. It further suggests that instead of looking at incivility and illiberalism, and conversely civility and liberalism, as intrinsic characteristics of groups or organisations, we should instead think of them as a continuum of communicative practices that *extend across* different kinds of civil society actors.

Chapter 3 discusses theories on the role of social and digital media in contentious politics, with a focus on visibility, gaining trust and collective identity building. The chapter argues that when considering the type of mobilisations social media are conducive to, we should not ignore their role in the construction and the maintenance of collective identities, without which it would be difficult for movements (or activist groups) to act purposefully, meaningfully and long-term as collective actors. The chapter further contends that the protest actors’ struggle to gain visibility and the trust of potential supporters in the networked media ecology takes the form of complicated processes of maintaining the “right” kind of visibility and sustaining an uninterrupted performance of “authenticity” in respect to fragmented publics, while also trying to counteract hostile mainstream (or oppositional) framing. The chapter develops the argument that we need to reassess and fine-tune sweeping generalisations about the inherent and self-sufficient democratising qualities and populist and grassroots affinity of social media, by looking at the context in which they are embedded, as well as at the politics and actual practices of the actors who employ them. The chapter proposes we adopt Dahlberg’s (2018) normative visibility conditions framework for evaluating the kinds of publics constructed by different actors in their quest for visibility.

Chapter 4 introduces the methodological approach to the study – a case study comparison approach (Flyvbjerg 2006, p. 63; Stake 1995; Yin 2003) - and its rationale. Next, it gives an overview of the Bulgarian context and the four different protest cases the study focuses on. The chapter then goes on to outline the mixed methods employed to analyse the different cases. It first explains the design and the underpinning theoretical framework of the textual content and discourse analysis of online communication related to the different cases. It then explains the design of the 27 semi-structured interviews used to investigate the self-perceptions, aims and social media strategies and practices of different protest actors. It ends with a reflection on the ethics and risks of digital and interview research, as well as on some of the limitations of the research design and methods.

The findings of the study are discussed in six empirical chapters (Chapters 5-10). Drawing on interview material, Chapter 5 discusses and analyses the findings about the self-perceptions and aims in respect to political conflict of the different civil society actors (RQ1a). The analysis identifies a tension that exists between the activists' self-perception of being an extra-Parliamentarian *political opposition* to power holders, on the one hand, and their anti-political moralistic outlook that idealises civil society, while at the same time posits partisanship as delegitimising or as a necessary "evil", on the other. In respect to that tension, the chapter further identifies three different orientations towards representative democracy, ideology and partisanship – a technocratic, populist and what I have called a liberal-moralist – and shows how they are reflected in the preferred tactics and larger aims of the actors.

Chapter 6 discusses and analyses the findings in respect to the key challenges of the Bulgarian political, cultural and media context that encroach on civil society's ability to pursue *political* aims and to keep power accountable (RQ1b). Drawing on interview material, the chapter shows that because of their oppositional stance and activities, civil society actors in Bulgaria share the perception that they operate in a highly hostile environment, where the political elites, the media and/or antagonistic business and party interests use various division and disinformation tactics in order to discredit, divide them, and to play different groups against each other.

Chapter 7 looks at the strategies and practices of the different civil society actors in respect to gaining visibility in the Bulgarian media ecology (RQ2a). Drawing on interview material, the chapter considers the kinds of alternative publics constructed by the different activists in their quest for visibility. It also discusses some of the challenges social media, with their affordances and logic, pose to the different activists' (visibility) aims, and reflects on some

of the issues those challenges raise for democracy and democratic participation in respect to the normative evaluative framework developed in Chapter 3. The chapter shows that although social media do offer non-elite actors opportunities for visibility in a hostile to them media environment, and that although they chime well with populist forms of communication (i.e. simplicity, emotionality etc.), we need to be more careful when lauding their potential for expanding democratic participation, particularly in light of their corporate ownership and market-driven logic of operation, and in respect to the context in which they are employed.

Chapter 8 considers the activists' strategies and practices for acquiring and maintaining visibility on their own terms, and relates those to the ways they try to gain trust and legitimacy in the mediated environment. Drawing on interview material, the chapter shows how in order to counteract opponent's delegitimisation claims and claim visibility on their own terms, the activists adopt an either technocratic or populist communication strategies and practices, which are oriented towards, or foreground, different interpersonal trust beliefs: *ability* (competence) or *integrity* (Mayer *et al.* 1995). The chapter also discusses some of the challenges social media (and particularly Facebook) with their affordances and logic, pose to the activists' aims in respect to gaining visibility *on their own* terms in the Bulgarian media ecology, and reflects on some of the issues those challenges raise for democracy and democratic participation of non-elite actors more generally.

Chapter 9 looks at what *actually* happens when the different civil society actors try to mobilise support for their protests on social media. In particular it focuses on the way the conflict gets constructed and represented on social media during mobilisation. Drawing on content and discourse analysis the chapter identifies and compares the dominant Us and Them representations in each protest case, and tries to gauge the extent of externally-directed polarisation. It also considers how the different understandings and discourses of civil society discussed in Chapter 5 translate into the different actors' framings of their protests. The chapter finishes with a consideration of some possible implications of the utilisation of different anti-pluralist and anti-political communication logics for democracy.

Chapter 10 considers the extent to which different civil society actors are successful in developing and sustaining a coherent collective identity and inter-group solidarity during mobilisation on social media. Drawing on content analysis, the chapter analyses, on the one hand, the protest groups' *overall internal cohesion and solidarity* as emerging during the discussions on the Facebook event pages set up for mobilising support for their protests, and on the other, the overall *consistency of the framing* of the protests on the page in respect to that proposed by the organisers. Based on this analysis, the chapter assesses the extent to which the organisers are successful in constructing and maintaining

a coherent collective identity in the process of mobilisation. The chapter finishes with some considerations of the implications of the use of social media (and especially Facebook) for contentious politics in Bulgaria, particularly in respect to issues of collective identity, inter- and outer-group trust and polarisation, and to participatory democracy more generally.

Chapter 11 summarises and brings together the entire study, and reflects on what the interviews and content and discourse analysis suggest in respect to the main research question. This concluding chapter also reflects on the choices that were made when designing the study and on what could have been done differently. It also considers some of the impacts of the research.





## **2. Civil society, contentious politics and the discursive construction of conflict**

### **2.1 Introduction**

In order to better understand the role of social media in contentious politics and the implications for new democracies like Bulgaria, we need to consider in more detail the debates around the relationship of civil society to politics, “the political” and democracy. A direct relationship between civil society, democratisation and the health of the newly established democracies has been assumed ever since the emergent grassroots movements pre-1989 were credited with the effective resistance to the state-socialist authoritarian regimes and celebrated for their role in the ensuing democratisation from below (Foley and Edwards 1996). The task of “democratisation” via the construction of a civil society was thus embraced as a major goal of the new collective actors that emerged from the collapse of the totalitarian one-party political system, with many approaches to, and theoretical debates around the concept of civil society and its usefulness burgeoning across the political and social fields – with the programme of the Polish Solidarność movement, Charter 77 of the Czech dissidents, as well as various treaties by the likes of Cohen and Arato, Gellner, Kumar, Alexander, and Keane being some notable examples. With civic activism seen as playing a decisive role in the gradual dismantlement of state socialism, certain dissident (male) intellectuals from East-Central Europe (such as Michnik, Konrad, Kis, Benda and Havel) rose to fame in the West, with their work keenly published on the other side of the Iron Curtain throughout the 1980s, even as it remained much less popular in their own countries (Gagyí and Ivancheva 2019, p.57; see also Falk 2003). In the emerging East-West intellectual exchanges (Keane 1988; Kaldor 1991; Cohen and Arato 1992; Tamás 1994) the (re)theoretisation of the notion of “civil society” (or ‘Eastern European civil society’, as the grassroots civic movements against the authoritarian regimes credited to the dissidents–intellectuals came to be known) gained new academic “currency” and increased the influence of intellectuals in the region (Mastnak 2005; Ivancheva 2013c).

Enthusiasm about the dissidents’ legacy in respect to grassroots participatory politics (e.g. Kennedy 1991), however, was soon replaced with disappointment with their failure to contribute to the post-socialist development of a civil society (Bohle and Greskovits 2012), since after 1989 associational life plummeted rather quickly once the dissidents were elected into government. Moreover, post-1989 Western donors poured funds into *particular types* of (ex)dissident projects, thereby directing the uncritical transposition of a

“portable model” of civil society into the region (Kalb 1998; Sampson 2003), that was “anti-political” and market oriented (Eyal 2000; Mastnak 2005). The expanding number of NGOs and think-tanks, however, did not lead to the assumed, by the US and EU donors, development of civil society and strengthening of democracy, as the disillusioned public mostly refused to join voluntary associations and instead turned to “uncivil” mobilisation (Kopecký and Mudde 2003; Howard 2003; Uhlin 2010).

Furthermore, despite the participation of large swaths of the populations of the CEE countries in the mass movements against the state socialist regimes, only a small intellectual elite managed to in effect take advantage of the framing of such activity as “civil society” activism (Piotrowski 2009) and to receive foreign funding, on which much of this groups’ visibility at the time dependent (Mastnak 2005, p.349). In the process of championing particular dissidents’ voices, the differences in their conceptualisations of civil society were often glossed over by Western observers and theorists. Thus, where Konrad’s “anti-politics”, Havel’s “life in truth”, Benda’s “parallel polis”, Michnik’s “new evolution” and so on reflected different orientations towards the state and the tactics deemed appropriate for challenging its power- such as non-engagement, lobbying or overthrowing of the regime altogether- in their theorisation Western scholars foregrounded different aspects of the *ideal* based on their various ideological positions (Gagyí and Ivancheva 2019, p.58; Mastnak 2005, pp. 336-342).

In what follows I will discuss in more detail some of the issues that have stemmed from these developments in the definition, understanding and application of the concept of civil society in respect to politics and democracy. I will particularly focus on the conceptual problems relevant to the Bulgarian post-socialist context, and draw out some implications for the methodological and analytical framework of this study.

## **2.2 Civil society, protest movements and democracy**

### **2.2.1 Civil society- a brief conceptual overview**

The idea of civil society has been a point of debate since Antiquity and continues to divide scholars today. In its classical form the concept was formulated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century during the time of an expanding market economy when an urban bourgeoisie was looking for ways to gain economic and political emancipation in respect to an absolutist state. At that time, the market represented an integral aspect of what was then considered civil society. As Cohen and Arato (1992) have noted, however, following Polanyi (1944), this thinking changed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and through most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when elites, now

representing the spirit of the modern state, “were successfully claiming to express the interests of a heterogeneous set of social groups and tendencies resisting and challenging the destructive trends of capitalist market society” (p. 29). Civil society thus came to be discussed variably as a corporate third sector regulating the relations between the state and the market (by Hegel); as a set of mediating institutions that act to reproduce the (bourgeois) state structures through manufactured consensus (by Marx and Gramsci); or as a parallel structure of civility emancipated from the state apparatus and more effective in preserving the social order (by Thomas Paine) (see Cohen and Arato 1992; Keane 1988).

Following from that, civil society, today often referred to as the “third” or “non-profit” sector, is generally understood to contain all private voluntary associations and networks that exist in-between the state, the family and the market (Edwards 2014; Kindle loc. 519). It is the arena where people come together to associate, discuss and seek to influence broader society (Finn Heinrich and Malena 2007, p.340) and to pursue their shared interests (Dahlgren 2009; p. 69). For Cohen and Arato it is also a *normative* model of a societal realm differentiated from the state and the economy (1992, ix-xx).

There have been two broad, and sometimes contradictory, ways of conceptualising the relationship between civil society and democracy (Foley and Edwards 1996; p.39). The first, which goes back to Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, emphasises “the value of voluntary associations in curbing the power of centralising institutions, protecting pluralism, and nurturing constructive social norms” (Edwards 2014, Kindle loc. 296). A dense and active civil society is considered to be central to the stability of democracy (ibid.; Kindle loc. 296), as it helps “train” individuals to become “citizens” by shaping their civic identities and skills and by fostering democratic values, as well as by building “social capital” in the form of networks and trust (Putnam 2000). This understanding is linked to the notion of participation historically associated with the republican democratic tradition (see for example Isin and Turner 2002; Edwards 2014), inasmuch as a well-functioning democracy is said to require the active participation of citizens in the polity (Pateman 1970; Putnam *et al.* 1993).

The second view, which looks to the literature on “redemocratisation” in Latin America, emphasises civil society as a sphere of action usually *in opposition* to the state. The rise of civil society in Central and East Europe has been similarly conceptualised from this anti-state perspective. Rooted in the socialist-era dissident opposition between society and the totalitarian state, the concept (re)emerged into the public and academic discourse after 1989 as a normative model that sought to describe political mass participation and

socioeconomic development (Gagyí and Ivancheva 2019; Mastnak 2005). Thus, in the context of the anti-communist upheavals in Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1970s and 1980s, which took place under the banner “citizens against the state” (Keane 1988), ‘civil society’ was embraced by activists, political commentators and scholars as either (or both) a “shining emblem” (Gellner 1994, p.1), or a ‘rallying cry’ (Kumar 2001). In other words, it became both an “end”- a new type of society based on liberal-democratic principles- and a “means”- a way for achieving it by building social movements capable of overthrowing the communist regimes (Edwards 2014, Kindle loc. 353).

### **2.2.1.1 Who is in and who is out?**

A major matter of theoretical contention has been the question of who belongs to civil society and who does not, and where do its boundaries lie in respect to the state and the market. On the one hand, the state and civil society have been always interdependent (ibid., Kindle loc. 593) and depending on the context, civil society can be embedded within state structures, it can collaborate with the state, it can demand or provide services that the state does not, or it can openly oppose the state (Pointer *et al.* 2016; pp. 4-5; see also Lewis 2001). On the other, the boundary between civil society and the market is even less clear, since, as some maintain (e.g. Gellner 1994), private economic activity is unavoidably a part, as well as an important pillar, of civil society, because it helps protect individual freedoms against state power (Edwards 2014, Kindle loc. 662).

A further point of contention revolves around the relationship of the “non-profit sector” to civil society. Neo-Tocquevillians view non-profit organisations or NGOs as crucial for strengthening the “connective tissue” of civil society (Edwards 2014, Kindle, loc. 697). Of particular concern, however, has been the trend of worldwide professionalisation of that sector and its gradual distancing from its grassroots base, which has resulted in the monopolisation of funding by large Northern NGOs, think-tanks and advocacy groups and their domination over emergent transnational networks (ibid., Kindle loc. 764). Rather than strengthening civil society, this has led to the concentration of power and the promotion of particular types of associations and notions of what civil society is and how it should operate (ibid., Kindle loc. 766).

When it comes to the CEE context, Gagyí and Ivancheva (2019) have argued that during the post-socialist “transition”, some problematic tendencies inherited from the intellectual East-West “dialogue” at the end of state socialism gained traction. Thus, on the one hand, notion of civil society that came to dominate the discourse in the post-socialist period essentially masked the relationship between it and the market and established equivalence between the latter and liberty (Ivancheva 2013c). In addition, its anti-statist

outlook took on a neoliberal logic that foregrounded elite donor-driven organising and activity. On the other hand, grassroots activist practices that existed under state socialism were (re)framed as the *evolution* of civil society from a state of Eastern “backwardness” towards the more “advanced” standards of Western democracies (Melegh 2006). In respect to that, various foreign-funded “democratic research centres” appeared with the task not only of measuring aspects of the operationalised ideal’s presence and development “on the ground”, but also of “engineering” it where it was deemed lacking (Dawson and Hanley 2016; Vetta 2012).

However, despite the institutionalisation of civil society in the face of NGOs and the donor-driven efforts to encourage, or create, grassroots and community participation (following the Toquevillian ideal), the ideal never materialised in practice. Furthermore, with the accession of most CEE countries to the EU in 2004, the US foundations, from which most funding used to come, withdrew from the region, with NGO financing starting to rely on EU funds being distributed through national governments (Ivancheva 2015). To survive financially, NGOs thus increasingly had to depend on the civil society activists’ pre-existing networks and links to the liberal elites, which extended into the state administration. Such an arrangement benefitted mostly the university-educated professionals who had the cultural and social capital and understanding of the world of policy-making and project development that was needed to get a share of the funding. This further led to some civil society organisations strengthening their relationship[ with the state and thus blurring of the lines between the two (Vetta 2012; Ivancheva 2015).

In respect to that, this thesis takes the view that in order to explore the dynamics of civil society in contexts like Bulgaria, we need to go beyond the standard structural, normative and numerical characteristics of civil society that tend to associate it with formal non-governmental organisations, and to envisage theoretically and assess empirically a wider range and forms of civic association and mobilisation,

### **2.2.1.2 Civil vs. uncivil**

Another problematic point has been the differentiation between “civil society” and “uncivil society”. In CEE, most of the foreign-funded NGOs that focused on issues such as “democratisation” failed to tackle some of the major problems that the transition to capitalism brought to the region, such as political alienation, polarisation, mass deprivation, insecurity and rising inequality (Dale 2011). Meanwhile, forms of political activity, such as contentious politics (i.e. Kalb and Halmai 2011) , that took place outside of the NGO-monopolised model of civil society, often as a reaction to these issues, were

dismissed as “uncivil” (Kopecký and Mudde 2003), and as not counting as instances of democratic participation.

In respect to academic scholarship, there has been generally a lack of a consensus in regards to what in fact differentiates “uncivil” from “civil” society. Most authors seem to draw the line at the use of violence (e.g. Payne 2000; Keane 1998). That, however, obscures some important dimensions and dynamics of contentious politics, such as the use of violence and other disruptive forms of action by protesters in a symbolic way or for attracting mass media attention (see DeLuca and Peeples 2002; Robins 2014). Moreover, violence from protest movements is often a direct response to state and police violence, either in its structural and systemic form, or its direct manifestation during protest events (Von Holdt and Kirsten 2011; DeLuca and Peeples 2002). In addition, civil society is not a homogenous terrain but one composed of groups with often incompatible interests, who can sometimes find themselves in direct confrontation with each other (e.g. Kostovicova 2006). Finally, violence does not occur in isolation, but is part of broader (sub)cultures, social norms and identities, and therefore its place in relation to civil society needs to be considered in context (Spasić 2003; p. 457).

Other scholars base their distinction mainly on the ideals of the organisations involved (e.g. Pedahzur and Weinberg 2001; Whitehead 1999; Shills 1992), viewing civil society as consisting of only those voluntary groups that work for the public good and embrace liberal democratic values and institutions (Kopecký and Mudde 2003, p.11). “Uncivil” society from this perspective is thus defined in terms of its illiberal, non-democratic or (right-wing) extremist agendas and/or organisational structures. As Kopecký and Mudde argue, however, these criteria are based on ambiguous (and often elitist) criteria and distinctions in regards to what constitutes civil or civilized behaviour and a satisfactorily democratic internal organisational structure, as well as in respect to what is a proper and realistic balance between the “rightful” and “exclusive” expressions of group interests and demands, and tolerance to the interests and demands of others (ibid.: pp. 11-12.). As the author points out, hardly any groups in the real world would completely meet the high moral, ideological and organisational criteria of “civil society”. Moreover, most liberal democracies are also based on exclusion and all political demands and ideologies, including liberalism, are founded on claims of ‘rightfulness’ and ‘exclusivity’. Thus, if the right of all groups to participate in the polity is said to be a main attribute of liberal democracy, then that should also include groups that oppose the dominant system (ibid.).

This thesis takes Kopecký and Mudde’s (2003) view that a definition of civil society that considers only organisations or groups that support and embrace liberal democratic values

and institutions is rather restrictive. Nevertheless, embracing an extreme relativism that cannot differentiate between, say, neo-Nazi groups and liberal NGOs on normative or empirical grounds, would be counterproductive for understanding the key challenges faced by civil society actors and the role these groups and organisations play in democratic politics. However, while we should be able to differentiate “civil” from “uncivil” and “illiberal” actors, behaviours and discourses, we should do so not simply in respect to what makes up civil society’s constitutive “Other”, but we need to also consider the active relations and interactions that different non-elite actors enter into on the political terrain, and the various implications for democracy ensuing from those.

### **2.2.1.3 Political vs. civil**

Finally, we have the grey area of “political society”, consisting of political organisations, parties and parliaments, whose place in relation to civil society has also been ambiguous. On the one hand, neo-Tocquevillians see politics as having a polluting influence on associations, which are supposed to be independent from partisan interests and to promote tolerance, trust and a sense of the public interest (Edwards 2014; Kindle loc. 625). This view in effect de-politicises civil society by designating to it “associationalism” of a cultural, as opposed to a political, nature (Kumar 2001).

Other scholars, however, treat “political society” as an important component of civil society, since the former usually has its roots in independent pre-political associations (Cohen and Arato 1992; Dahlgren 2009). Here political society is broadly defined as “the process by which the interests and values of civil society are articulated and aggregated for action by government” (Goertzel 2010, p.1248). Howard has further formulated a widely accepted current stance on these concepts and their relationships:

In other words, political society and economic society are primarily composed of elite actors and institutions that are involved with the pursuit of power or profit, whereas civil society is the realm of ordinary citizens, who join and participate in groups and associations on the basis of their everyday interests, needs, and desires. Unlike the organisations of political and economic society, civil society organisations – although they often seek political influence, and they constantly need financial support – have neither power nor profit as their objective or rationale (2010, p.187).

This conceptualisation thus sees political society as the route through which the interests and positions of civil society actors reach the sphere of formal political and legal institutions. The boundary between both can be rather fuzzy, however, and open to legitimacy concerns. For instance, the three “spheres” of economic, civil and political society can overlap forming sectors made up of hybrid organisations, such as political interest groups and formal non-governmental organisations (NGOs), focused explicitly on

influencing policy and changing power structures, while simultaneously “rely[ing] on participation and support from ordinary citizens for legitimation of their cause” (ibid., p. 187). Also, the movement of leaders between civil society and the state apparatus can be a common occurrence (Lewis 2008; Spasić 2003), particularly in countries in CEE that have (or used to have) a strong NGO presence with a “democratisation” agenda.

Conversely, scholars influenced by Gramsci conceptualise civil society chiefly in political terms, namely as a site of hegemonic struggles (Edwards 2014). In respect to that, some authors have tried to distinguish between *social* and *political* activism (e.g. Yang 2009) - a distinction difficult to make, since both frequently intersect, and the former may morph into the latter (see for example Gould and Moe 2015 for a discussion of the LGBT movement in Serbia). This problematic distinction reflects the post-Industrial trend that has seen political engagement and participation move out of the traditional political arenas, such as parliament and political parties. In respect to that, Melucci has argued that in complex societies collective phenomena cannot be treated simply as reactions to crises, effects of marginality or deviance, or arising from political exclusion, but also as symptoms of antagonist conflicts over control of social production and reproduction – that is, of social relationships, symbols, identities and individual needs (1996, p.99). Production no longer concerns the transformation of human and natural resources into goods alone, but has also come to incorporate the control of social relations, information systems and identities, where the “cultural” dimensions dominate over the “technical” and where the market has increasingly become a system for symbolic exchange (ibid., p.100). As a result new structural possibilities for conflict have emerged, for example social stratification based on gender or sexuality. These new emerging conflicts have been reflected in the emergence of the “new social movements” (such as the feminist and LGBT movements) of the post-industrial era, Habermas (1984) and Cohen (1985) saw in these new social movements an expansion of the sphere of civil society.

This points to one of the major sticking points, or “blindspots” (Mastnak 2005, p. 350), in regards to civil society discourse in post-socialist democracies – namely, its aversion towards politics. During the struggles against totalitarianism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in the 1970s and 1980s, the dissidents embraced the concept of civil society as a “shining emblem” (Gellner 1994) and construed it as “anti-politics”. In its confrontation with the authoritarian one-party state, the democratic opposition united strategically around the slogan “civil society against the state” (Arato, cited in Mastnak 2005). It however refused to be identified as a political party, which became synonymous with particularistic interests and the aim of seising and exercising self-serving, or even authoritarian, power (ibid: 251),



and instead saw itself as a non-partisan social movement based on a higher *moral* ground (“life in truth”) outside of the realm of politics. After 1989, civil society’s righteousness in CEE has continued to be construed in such a- or anti-political terms. In respect to that construction, Mastnak (2005) has identified two main problems. First, it tends to posit the democratic subject outside and/or in opposition to the state, and therefore it sidesteps democracy as primarily an *institutional* form of governance. Second, it construes civil society as *homogenous* and *uniform*, discounting its internal divisions, contestations and contradictions- that is, the hegemonic struggles, in a Gramscian sense, taking place between a wide range of organisations, groups and movements with different ideologies, political agendas, values and strategies that can both challenge or uphold the social order (Lewis 2001).

In the post-socialist and current democratisation discourses in some CEE countries, including Bulgaria, civil society continues to be largely conceptualised in such *moralistic* and *depoliticised* terms that presume unity and strictly differentiate it from the realm of institutionalised politics and partisanship (Mastnak 2005). This often translates into conflicting opinions in regards to the legitimacy and characteristics of different protest movements, based on the nature of their aims. During the 2013 anti-governmental protests in Bulgaria, for example, contradictory views were expressed in the public sphere in regards to what the different movements were about: some commentators painted the Summer 2013 protests in a moralistic, a-political brush, privileging their legitimacy to that of the Winter 2013 protest on account of them being about *universal* ideals of civil society, such as “justice”, “democracy” and “dignity”; in contrast, others foregrounded the legitimacy of the Winter 2013 ones, seeing them in more political terms as the result of social injustices and poverty and the terrain of class struggle (Stoyanova 2018; Tsoneva 2017a; see also Smilov and Vaysova 2013 for a compilation of the major debates on and accounts of the protests in the Bulgarian public sphere).

#### **2.2.1.4 Discussion**

To sum up, based on the preceding discussion I would argue that in order to understand contentious politics (and the democratic role of social media therein) in contexts like Bulgaria, it is important that we go beyond narrow definitions of civil society that, first, depoliticise it, and second, (falsely) equate it exclusively with the ideological outlook and political agendas of the original dissidents, or with the (liberal) NGO sector. In addition, a positive relationship between civil society, contentious politics (as a form of political participation) and democracy should not be presupposed: a group or groups of citizens that are joined voluntarily in collective action that aims at social change in the political field

does not necessarily equal a democratic (or progressive) force (Spasić 2003; p. 450), as the experience of some Eastern European countries demonstrates (see Kostovicova 2006). Rather, the relationships between the various actors involved in contentious politics, and their democratic implications, should be studied in context.

Given the fuzzy boundary that exists between civil and political society in practice, as well as the contested nature of the term as a normative ideal, and its often contradictory appropriation as a moralistic, a-political legitimation discourse by CEE actors involved in both social and political activism, the following questions thus arise: 1) **What kinds of challenges face different civil society actors that operate at the fuzzy border delineating civil from political society in post-socialist contexts (i.e. by staging protests)?**; and 2) **How can we (in order to avoid extreme relativism) effectively differentiate between such (civil or uncivil) actors, while also simultaneously considering the relations and interactions between them, and the democratic implications therein?**

In what follows I will go into more details about the relationship between (un)civil society and contentious politics, and will offer a normative perspective through which we could evaluate, from a democratic perspective, protest actors and their activities and discourses.

### **2.2.2 Civil society and participatory democracy**

The rise of contentious politics at the level of civil society over the last few decades has been linked to a decline of political trust (Norris 2011; Putnam 2000; 1995) that has been observed in Western “established democracies” and has led a number of scholars and politicians to express concerns about a “crisis of democracy” and/or a “crisis of representation” (see Zmerli and Meer 2017, pp. 6-7). Thus, less than a decade after the fall of the Iron Curtain, a growing dissatisfaction with political elites and their collusion with corporate interests has led citizens in Western industrialised countries to feel increasingly disappointed with the political system, a state some theorists have labelled “post-democracy” (Crouch 2004). Such widespread trends and sentiments have manifested themselves in two different developments. On the one hand, massive apathy and withdrawal from the institutionalised democratic process has been observed, for instance in respect to a decline in party membership (Mair and van Biezen 2001; Mair 2013). as well as a lower voter turnout, a rise of distrust in the government, and a decline in membership in labour unions and other traditional civic organizations such as bowling clubs (Putnam, 1995, 2000). This withdrawal from institutionalised politics has been, on

the other hand, paralleled with a rise in “extra-institutional” (Bennett 2008) or “extra-parliamentary” (Amna and Ekman 2014) activism.

In respect to that, Norris (2011) has argued that lack of trust exhibited by voters does not necessarily translate into detachment from political or social participation, but can have just the opposite effect – it can engender “critical citizens” who embrace activism and join movements and protests, and thus can strengthen democracy. Pierre Rosanvallon (2008) has described this rise of political activity in civil society and increasing involvement of actors associated with that societal sphere into the terrain of formal party and institutional politics as the expression of “counter-democracy”, whereas Dahlgren (2013) understands it as “alternative politics”, which take place outside of the formal institutions of governance, such as Parliament. In its “bypassing [of] electoral mechanisms to incorporate other actors who serve as watchdogs who speak and act on behalf of citizens”, this dynamic has been said to make democratic systems more open to non-elite actors (p.16).

Ultimately this has led to a debate about what constitutes “democratic participation” and “the political”. Carpentier (2009: p. 409) situates it in the middle of an ideological struggle between a minimalist and a maximalist view of democracy, where the first limits participation to the processes of electoral representation, while the second sees democracy as a balanced combination of representation and participation and the political as a dimension of the social (Mouffe 2005a; 2005b; 2009). Here Carpentier enlists the distinction Chantal Mouffe makes between politics and “the political”: for her, politics refers to “the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order” (Mouffe 2009: p. 101), while the political is a much broader dimension of the social that refers to conflictuality in all of its spheres and manifestations. Such a distinction requires that we avoid privileging institutionalised politics as the preferential site of the political, as every social process, including cultural participation, is invested with power and conflict and therefore has a political dimension (Jenkins and Carpentier 2013: p.269).

Following this line, some scholars have sought to understand democratic participation through its manifestations in people’s everyday activities. In that respect, the political significance of decisions and actions rooted in the private sphere have been linked to notions such as “issue networks” (Marres 2013; Marres and Rogers 2005), “dot-orgs” (Dean *et al.* 2006), ‘civic culture’ (Dahlgren 2009), ‘cultural citizenship’ (Hermes and Dahlgren 2006) and ‘public connection’ (Couldry 2006; Couldry *et al.* 2007) in what has marked a ‘cultural turn’ (Dahlgren 2006) in the study of democracy and political communication. Dahlgren (2009; 2013) has thus suggested broadening of the understanding of “the political” in line with Chantal Mouffe’s conceptualisation, which sees

it as “the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in all human society, an antagonism that can take many forms and can emerge in diverse social relations” (Mouffe 1999b, p. 754 cited in Dahlgren 2009, p.100). The political, according to Mouffe (2005a), is not a sphere of activity or a set of issues, but an ingrained feature of social organisation that engenders “friend–enemy” constellations (p. 12). In that “[i]t deals with the formation of a ‘we’ as opposed to a ‘they’ and is always concerned with collective forms of identification” (p. 11).

Claus Offe (1985) has similarly envisioned the politicisation of civil society, in the face of citizen initiatives and social movements, as a path towards the re-democratisation of societies and their emancipation from the intrusion of the state. For Offe it is thus necessary “to politicise the institutions of civil society in ways that are not constrained by the channels of representative-bureaucratic political institutions, and thereby reconstitute a civil society that is no longer dependent upon ever more regulation, control, and intervention (1985, p. 820, cited in Cohen and Arato 1992, p. 44). This should be done “through practices that belong to an intermediate sphere between “private” pursuits and concerns, on the one side, and institutional, state-sanctioned modes of politics, on the other” (ibid.).

Beck (1997) invokes the concept of ‘subpolitics’ in order to characterise this new way of operating in the arena of the political by non-elite actors, such as different professional groups and organisations, grassroots citizens’ initiatives and social movements, as well as individuals, which are not part of the official political and corporate systems (p. 103). Rather than this being a withdrawal of the citizens from politics, in effect it constitutes a withdrawal from formal political institutions and modes of action as individuals construct alternatives to the customary political causes, allegiances and commitments that are more relevant to their day-to-day life (see Van de Donk *et al.* 2004; Juris, 2008). Bakardjieva (2009) follows on that with the notion of “subactivism”, which “comprises small-scale, often individual and private decisions, discourses or actions that have either a political or ethical frame of reference and never appear on the stage of social design, but on the contrary, remain submerged in everyday life” (Bakardjieva 2012a: p.1359). From this perspective, the potential for political participation can be thus cultivated at the level of mundane everyday experience, which can often crystallise into heterogeneous and loosely structured “new social movements” (ibid.), which are less focused on advancing broad ideological agendas but rather on single issues or identities (Della Porta and Diani 2006; Melucci 1996).

### **2.2.3 Citizenship, political conflict and radical democratic theory**

As already noted, the view that sees contentious politics as a form of democratic participation is reflected in the theory of radical democracy (Laclau and Mouffe 2001; Mouffe 2005b; 2005a; 1992; 2009), which attempts to go beyond the narrow liberal conception of citizenship and to engage more critically with issues of difference, inequality, domination and hegemony. Essentially it dedicates itself to the pursuit of a form of citizenship that accounts for social justice in its struggle to reconcile the contradiction between equality and liberty found at the heart of the modern liberal democratic project. In doing that, it looks to civic republicanism for its richer conception of the political in its emphasis on the “common good” as having a moral primacy over the (selfish) individualism central to “classic” liberalism (i.e. John Stuart Mill 1961) which often does not recognise ideas such as “public-mindedness”, “civic activity” and “political participation” (Mouffe 1992, p. 227).

Thus, the “good life” in (classic) liberal political thought has been usually interpreted (at least historically) in *narrow economic terms*- as an inclination towards individual advancement or the pursuit of profit according to the rules of the market (see Macpherson 1977) - while citizenships has been defined in terms of a “bundle of rights” and a “negative liberty” (Berlin 1969), in respect to restrictions emanating from the state. This conception has been juxtaposed to the communitarian view, which considers the common good as having primacy over the individual’s private needs and desires, and citizenship as linked to partaking in a group identity, or a cultural and moral order of shared values and meanings. The republican conception of citizenship is situated somewhere in-between—emphasising citizens’ agency and promoting ‘civic virtue,’ whereby the (good) citizen makes a moral choice of prioritising the public good over her private interests by actively participating in the public life. The public good here is defined in rationalist and universalist terms, since the “[r]epublican theorists insisted on the unity of the civic public: insofar as he is a citizen every man leaves behind his particularity and difference, to adopt a universal standpoint identical for all citizens, the standpoint of the common good or the general will” (Young 1990).

Radical democracy, however, also engages critically with republicanism’s drawbacks, arguing that by embracing a universalist and elitist view of the public good, it fails to recognise the existence of inequality and diversity in modern capitalist societies. Thus, theorists adopting this approach have pointed out that not all citizens are able to acquire the civic competencies necessary to actively involve themselves in public affairs. For example, feminists have argued that the republican view’s emphasis on the “rational”

public domain as the cite of citizenship automatically excludes and ascribes a lower status to women, who have been traditionally associated with the more “emotional” and personal private sphere (Dietz 1987). In effect, they claim that civic republicanism homogenises the polity, excluding from citizenship all those who are defined as different and privileging pure rationality over any influences associate with the human body, desire or need (Young 1990 p. 117). Habermas’ theory of the “public sphere” and “discourse ethics” (Habermas 1989) that underlies the principles of deliberative democracy has been criticised on similar grounds by radical democratic proponents who have argued that the strife towards rational consensus underpinning discourse ethics puts liberal democracy at risk because it eliminates pluralism from the public sphere (Mouffe 2009; Mouffe 1992). From their perspective, pluralism is essential to a democratic project built around the principles of liberty and social justice.

Thus, radical democratic theory views modern societies as complex and as composed of different groups that have conflicting demands reflecting their individual and often irreconcilable interests and social positions (Young 1990; Mouffe 2005a; Laclau and Mouffe 2001). In that sense, the public good is often contested, and how people understand it is contingent on hegemonic (in a Gramscian sense) processes. A radicalised democracy therefore would not try to eliminate pluralism, but instead recognise different private and group rights and interests that may oppose and challenge the hegemonic understanding of the public good. Unlike the deliberative democratic approach (Rawls 1999; Habermas 1989), it does not believe in the possibility of a consensus that could satisfy both rationality and democratic legitimacy. As Mouffe (1999a, p.14) contends: “The democratic character of a society can only be based on the fact that no limited social actor can attribute to herself the representation of the totality and claim to have the ‘mastery’ of the foundation.” Rather, Mouffe recognises the fundamental dialectical tension that exists between the logic of democracy and the logic of liberalism, or what she terms “the democratic paradox”. She thus advocates the relinquishing of the idea of a democratic society built on perfect harmony and transparency and the acknowledgment of an inherent dimension of antagonism that underscores “the political”, an antagonism that is not simply a matter of difference, but of a radical undecidability (2009: p.99). A proper understanding of democracy then means going beyond “antagonism proper” and instead adopting “agonism”, which involves a relationship between ‘adversaries’ (rather than enemies), or between “people who are friends because they share a common symbolic space but also enemies because they want to organise this common symbolic space in a different way” (2009: p.13).

From this perspective, citizenship becomes an aspect of collective identities established through a process of articulation and positioning along an us/them, or friend/enemy axis. Envisaged from the point of view of “agonistic pluralism”, the aim of democratic politics then is to establish an us/them discrimination in a way that is compatible with pluralist democracy: that is, to construct the “them” in such a way that it is no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an “adversary”(ibid., p.15). The novelty of such democratic politics is not the overcoming of this opposition, which is impossible, but is found in the different way in which it is established. In that sense, the political project of radical democracy constitutes of transforming “antagonism” into “agonism” (ibid., p. 103).

#### **2.2.4 Contemporary mass movements and populism**

More recently, and in light of the mass popular mobilisations, such as the Occupy Movement, Los Indignados and so on, which emerged worldwide in the aftermath of the 2008 Financial Crisis, some scholars have started to (re)consider contentious politics, and therefore social and political conflict, through the prism of populism. Populism in general has become one of the most debated issues in contemporary politics, and in recent years has attracted much attention, both from academia and the media (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Judis 2016; Morris 2006; Laclau 2005; Müller 2017). The emergence of diverse populist phenomena like Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in America, the 5 Star Movement in Italy, Podemos in Spain, Marie Le Pen in France and Nigel Farage in the UK, has led many to argue that we are experiencing a ‘populist moment’ (Mouffe 2018) or ‘populist zeitgeist’ (Mudde 2004)– a historical time characterised by the rise of populist formations that challenge the neoliberal order.

Definitions of populism vary, but the one I find useful for my purposes<sup>1</sup> (i.e. the representation of social and political conflict) focuses on its discursive aspects, stating that:

populism “pits a virtuous and homogenous people against a set of elites and dangerous “others” who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice” (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008, p.3).

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<sup>1</sup> Here I adopt van Kessel’s (2014, p. 111) first level of abstraction that utilises a minimal definition of *populism* (or *populist*) and treats it as an expression of a discourse or a rhetorical strategy that can be adopted by any political actor, rather than being an essential characteristic of a party or a political leader. As he notes in his recommendation on using the term at this level, this application of populism is particularly suitable for cases in post-communist countries where populist discourse tends to be pervasive and used rather haphazardly.

The populist discursive model is thus based on the idea of a struggle over political sovereignty. In his key work on the notion Ernesto Laclau (2005) argued that populism is a *political logic* that involves an appeal to the whole of the political community, or “the people”, against a common enemy, and in particular against the corrupt political elites. The people are considered as the ultimate sovereign, while the elite is portrayed as betraying their interests and depriving them of their legitimate rights, values, identity and voice. Who the elites are thought to be, however, varies in accordance to the add-on ideology, with right-wing populism more likely to attack the liberal elites, supranational institutions, the mass media and the courts, while left-wing populism may instead focus on the immoral privilege of the economic and religious elites, such as the greedy bankers or rogue entrepreneurs (Engesser *et al.* 2017b, p.1283; Gerbaudo 2017b, pp. 96-97).

Regardless of who they are, the elites are usually portrayed as corrupted by the political and economic system, whereas the populist represents him/herself as untainted by power, and thus as a *non-elite actor*, as a challenger of the elites and as an advocate of the people, who ultimately aims at restoring sovereignty back to the people (Engesser *et al.* 2017a; Sorensen 2018). As Canovan has observed, the appeal of populism lies in its promise to “bring politics back to the people and the people back to politics” (2005; 2002), where “the people” can be constructed in any number of ways. The unifying appeal can thus take a variety of forms depending on the political orientation of a given party or movement, with the populist right tending to construct “the people” in highly exclusionary and xenophobic terms, usually in opposition to migrants and ethnic and religious minorities (Gerbaudo 2018, p.747).

Furthermore, according to Ostiguy’s (2009) model of the high-low, populist–anti-populist cleavage, populism is associated with a homogenous representation of the people who are posited in opposition to the elite, whereas anti-populism is associated with a heterogeneous representation of the people, where the role of the elite is to represent different constituencies, interest groups, and value systems. The cleavage is thus concerned with different modes of, and claims to, democratic representation, with populism generally seen as antagonistic to liberalism or liberal democracy (Laclau 2012; Urbinati 1998) while favouring more “direct” or “personalised” forms of representation (Ostiguy, 2009, pp 8-9). According to Mudde (2004, see also Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017) the central features of the populist discourse are instead monism and moralism, where “the people” and “the elite” are seen as sharing the same interests and values, while the main difference between them is based on morals (i.e. “pure” versus “corrupt”). Populists thus claim that they alone represent the *whole* people (Müller 2017),



while “the elite” represent *particularistic* interests. As a thin-ideology, populism also avoids deliberation on ideologically underpinned political or economic agendas or social projects.

Some have argued that in that it shares similarities with technocracy, and even represents the “other side of the same coin” of anti-politics (i.e. Caramani 2017, Bickerton and Accetti, 2017). For Urbinati (2014) technocracy is a kind of “unpolitical” democracy that delegitimises political conflict in favour of expertise, whereas populism radically polarises the public sphere where opinions are discussed into Us and Them, with Us being privileged on moral grounds (Mudde 2004; Müller 2014). Although at first glance technocracy seems in essence elitism, and populism is characterised by anti-elitist sentiments and mobilisation, as Caramani however notes, though seemingly opposites, technocracy and populism are essentially anti-political visions of collective decision-making, advancing a ‘unitary, general, common interest of a given society (or a country)’ (2017, p.60). Bickerton and Accetti, drawing on the works of Pierre Rosanvallon and Ernesto Laclau note similar parallels between elitist/technocratic and populist thinking:

[P]opulist and technocratic forms of discourse can be considered as two sides of the same coin, the coin being the critique of party democracy. [...] the idea of contemporary political life being restructured around a new cleavage between populism and technocracy actually masks a deeper dimension of political opposition –between party democracy and its critics –in terms of which both populism and technocracy find themselves on the same side (Bickerton and Accetti 2017, p.201 emphasis in original).

In both cases, the justification of democracy is ultimately an instrumental one: for technocracy it is an instrument in the quest for truth; for populism, democracy’s function is to enable the rule of a homogenous “will of the people”. Both, however, deviate from normative ideals of liberal democracy, such as acknowledgement of interest pluralism in their negative view of representation (i.e. through political parties) (Caramani 2017, p.54).

Where the above theorists tend to view populism (and conversely technocracy as the other side of the coin) as a threat to (liberal) democracy (as based in ideas of political representation and deliberation), others have taken a more positive view (Gerbaudo and Screti 2017; Gerbaudo 2017a; 2017b; Mouffe 2018). Mouffe (2018) for instance has recently revisited her and Laclau’s theory in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* from the 90s, acknowledging that with the disintegration of the welfare state and the rise of national, religious and ethnic identities the possibility of radicalising democracy has diminished, and arguing that we are witnessing a “populist moment” that signals the crisis of neoliberal hegemony. She thus contends that in the coming years the central axis of the political conflict will be between right- and left-wing populism, and argues for a left–populist strategy that establishes a frontier between “the people” and “the establishment” (or “the

oligarchy”) along progressive lines, which could bring together the multifarious struggles against subordination, oppression and discrimination (p. 61). By redrawing the political frontiers in such a way this “populist moment” would suggest a “return of the political” after years of neoliberal “post-politics” – a return that could either engender authoritarian solutions through politics that weaken liberal-democratic institution, or lead to a reiteration and expansion of democratic values.

The normative case that underpins Mouffe’s promulgation of left (pluralist) populism largely follows from her critique of the neoliberal hegemonic order under which liberal principles, such as the rule of law and individual freedom, gained dominance over democratic ones, such as equality and popular sovereignty (Longo, 2018, p.1). According to her, the absence of meaningful political contestation undermines *popular sovereignty*, while the ‘expansion of the financial sector at the expense of the productive economy’ leads to oligarchisation that subverts *equality*—the other pillar on which democracy stands (Mouffe, 2019; pp. 17-18). In this way the neoliberal hegemonic order manages to undermine the normative basis of democracy. This argument is in line with her theory of agonism, which, as we saw in the preceding section, views society as “divided and discursively constructed through hegemonic practices” (ibid. p10) and a healthy democracy as one where competing worldviews find expression, though in “agonistic”, rather than “antagonistic”, ways (p. 91). In this sense, her left-populism is not opposed to democracy and institutions, but instead corresponds to demands of the transformation of these institutions in a radicalising and pluralising sense.

How to draw a diverse range of people or groups under a unified left populist “we” though? According to Mouffe, the articulation of different struggles in their plurality under a “we” requires—as she and Laclau have argued before — the construction of a “chain of equivalences” that constitute new forms of subjectivities. This “populist subject”, which emerges out of such a combination of otherwise divergent demands into a single “chain of equivalence” gets opposed to a shared enemy (i.e. the people vs the elite) (Laclau 2005). While the “us vs. them” opposition stabilises the chain of demands, it does not eliminate completely their internal differences. Instead, a “master demand”, which Laclau calls an “empty signifier”, emerges to represent the rest and to stand for the “popular subject”.

For Mouffe such a populist strategy in delineating the conflict should foreground democratic discourse as playing a key role in the political imaginary of our times, by constructing a collective will that mobilises common *affects* in defence of equality and social justice, in order to combat the xenophobia of right-wing populism. As Longo (2018)

notes, by focusing on affect, Mouffe thus moves away from the ideological debates of left politics and towards practice— that is, she foregrounds *the how* rather than *the what*. However, affective appeals work differently in different contexts, so context-specific unifying and mobilisation platforms would (or could) work for different polities. In respect to that the post-socialist context of the CEE new democracies can be rather different to the Western ones Mouffe's discussions focus on. To what extent contentious politics in Bulgaria (can) result into the mobilisation of the kind of left (pluralist) populist "we" envisioned by her is an important question. With that in mind, I turn to briefly discuss some of the idiosyncrasies of the CEE, and Bulgarian, contexts, particularly in respect to civil society activism in the region.

### **2.3 Trust, contentious politics and grassroots populism in CEE**

When it comes to the decline of political and institutional trust in CEE countries, we have seen similar trends as in Western democracies, though the primary narrative in analyses of such trends in these contexts has concerned the transition from state socialism to liberal democracy after 1989 (Mishler and Rose 2001; Závecz 2017). In that respect, CEE countries have consistently found themselves at the bottom when it comes to political and institutional trust rates- a tendency that has been seen as a major obstacle on the road to democratisation. As Sztompka (1996, p.47) has observed, widespread distrust at all levels and all social spheres has been a common characteristic of post-socialist new democracies. While political trust in these countries was close to the levels of established democracies at the beginning of "transition" it declined slowly during the 1990s and 2000s – a tendency known as the "post-honeymoon effect" (Catterberg and Moreno 2005) - and has since bottomed (Van der Meer and Hakhverdian 2017; Závecz 2017). This endemic lack of trust has been linked to discontent with the prolonged and painful "transition" and its disappointing results, in the face of the dissatisfying political, economic and institutional performances of the new CEE democracies (Sztompka 1996; Mishler and Rose 2001). It has translated into trends like: general lack of agency and disinclination to participate in public and political life; readiness to emigrate; distrust of public institutions and services and preference for private ones; scepticism towards reforms; disinclination from forward planning and future investments; withdrawal into the realm of the private sphere and personal networks; as well as high suspicion of institutionalised political actors and the

media, but also increased trust in “alternative politics” and embrace of contentious politics and protests (Sztompka 1996, pp. 47-49; Hristova-Kujidlovski 2011)<sup>2</sup>.

In respect to the last trend, what we need to consider is that in post-socialist democracies, due to historical “baggage” left-wing politics and discourses are often marginalised, and popular mobilisations (or so called “alternative politics”) rarely adopt a progressive or left-populist framing (as they often do in the West), but tend towards nationalist and/or right-wing (even if sometimes liberal) discourses (Gagyi 2015). While left-wing radical activism has re-emerged in the region, such networks tend to be integrated within transnational, rather than local, contexts of contention, much like the liberal dissidents of the 80s and 90s were (Gagyi 2013). Locally, however, the picture looks rather differently. Thus, the failure of civil society to grow beyond a small group of professionalised and rather elitist NGOs did not result in a reconceptualisation of what meaningful civic engagement and participation could or should entail in the post-socialist reality, but instead the non-active segments of the population were denounced and the “failing” was attributed to a persistent (post)socialist “heritage”, “laziness” or “backwardness” (Gagyi 2015, p.17; 2013). When the 2008 financial crisis eventually led to a global wave of mass protests, including in CEE, the NGO-linked liberal elite also took part (at times even in leading roles), though mostly refused to see the local social discontent as a response to the effects of the crisis of global capitalism, but rather framed it as an effect of the “backwardness” of the East and its inability to develop “proper” capitalism (and consequently “proper” democracy) due to the persistence of “communist,” or “nomenklatura,” networks of oligarchic dependencies at the

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<sup>2</sup> In respect to the Bulgarian context in particular, according to a cross-national representative survey commissioned by the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development in 2016, only 23% of the Bulgarians declared that most people can be trusted (see BTI 2018 Country Report). This level of interpersonal trust is the third lowest in Southeast Europe, trailed only by Albania and Romania. Bulgaria also has one of the lowest shares of voluntary (formal) organisation membership in East-Central and Southeast Europe. Thus, according to a 2015 poll by OSI-Sofia, 80% of the population does not participate in any form of social or political organisation; less than 8% of all citizens are members of political parties, and only 7% are members of NGOs (cited in BTI 2018). As the BTI 2018 country report notes, this has limited considerably both the social basis and the area of operation of formal civil society actors, as they are mostly concentrated in Sofia and several other bigger cities. A report by the Open Society Institute in Sofia in 2011 identified the main reasons for such low participatory rates as: the civic organisations’ lack of capacity to empower the communities they represent; the organisations’ perceived lack of legitimacy; the lack of sustainable social links between individuals and their “encapsulation” into their family circles; and a serious problem of a lack of trust in formal institutions and between the citizens themselves (Hristova-Kujidlovski 2011, pp. 30-32). At the same time it pointed to the emergence of informal civic movements and their enjoyment of much higher approval and support in comparison to traditional civil society organisations.

highest levels of power (Gagyi and Ivancheva 2019; Gagyi 2015; Mikuš 2016; Tsoneva 2017b).

Meanwhile, cases of popular grassroots mobilisations with a more social, environmental or anti-globalist/neoliberal orientation, which often mix social-economic demands and a nationalist framing, have been consistently overlooked by the liberal NGO activists or dismissed as “uncivil”, not least because of their social-economistic focus, as well as the appropriation of sometimes violent tactics (Ost 2005; Kalb and Halmai 2011). This has led to further polarisation between groups of alienated citizens who have tried to address economic grievances, though increasingly through an ethno-nationalist/populist framing, and civil society activists from the liberal NGO sector – often distrusted and accused of being “national traitors”, “sell-outs-outs” and/or an “NGO mafia” by the former (Mikuš 2016; 2015; Sampson 2002). As Gagyi and Ivancheva (2019) argue, however, the success of right-wing populist leaders like Hungary’s Viktor Orban in promoting anti-liberal and anti-NGO policies, as a way to ‘defend the nation’ against the meddling of Western interests and elites, has been to a large extent due to “the legacy of decades of elitist NGO discourse which has sought Western-type democratisation, and which has downplayed negative local experiences in the post-1989 period” (p. 61).

The Bulgarian protests of 2011-2013 are a case in point: as mentioned in the Introduction, in that period Bulgaria experienced a wave of protests, which peaked with a number of Sofia-based environmental mobilisations in late 2012, and two major anti-governmental mass movements that followed in the Winter and Summer of 2013. The environmental ones were largely NGO-driven and targeted specific legislation(s), while the consequent mass movements were more spontaneous. Although also spurred by concrete issues – i.e. the rise in electricity and gas prices in the Winter 2013 case, and the appointment of a controversial oligarch and media mogul as the Chief of the Agency for National Security, in the Summer 2013 one- both later turned broadly anti-governmental.

There were, however, some significant differences between these protest movements. The events of the Winter 2013 protests, for instance, were marked by the self-immolations of destitute Bulgarians, spontaneous demonstrations, violent clashes with the police and a strong populist sentiment against all political parties and elites, while those of the Summer 2013 by an emphasis on peaceful, creative and aesthetic provocations. The first protest movement was linked to EU-wide negative trends such as austerity and the threat posed by financial neoliberalism to democracy. It was seen as the expression of the desperation of the less affluent Bulgarians, and thus as being dominated by socially oriented demands, associated with the traditional left (Dareva 2013; Ivancheva 2013b;

2013a). At the same time, the participation of some “uncivil”, far-right, nationalist, and anti-EU/anti-NATO groups was also noted (Klisarov 2014). The second was described as largely representative of the older dissident movement and the liberal NGO sector, as well as the young urban middle-class, who leaned to the center-right or right of the political spectrum, and who framed it in a conspicuous “anti-communist,” “anti-leftist” and even “pro-capitalist” (i.e. for more privatisation and less state) rhetoric (Ivancheva 2013b). Some commentators have thus argued that this wave of protests eventually made visible a new kind of hegemonic struggle *within civil society* that reflects changed socio-political divisions 25 years after the fall of the socialist regime (Stoyanova 2018). These socio-political divisions, which do not easily map on the Western left-right framework (see Raichev and Stojchev 2008; Popivanov 2015) and the resultant hegemonic struggle in the extra-institutional field, no longer pit a homogenised civil society against an authoritative state (as inscribed in the popular slogan of the 1990s, “civil society against the state”), but rather seek to re-constitute class-based (*and also* cultural) political articulations within civil society (Stoyanova 2018, p.8).

## **2.4 Studying conflict construction in contentious politics in the Bulgarian context**

Based on the above discussion, I would suggest that a populist/anti-populist framework would be better fitted for understanding contentious politics and *civil society* dynamics in Bulgaria, than, say, a classical political-ideological one (i.e. left-wing vs. right-wing). Despite recent substantive expansion of research on (the rise of) populism and its consequences for democracy, it has mainly focused on outsider *politicians* attempting to enter the institutional political arena (Engesser *et al.* 2017a; 2017b; Sorensen 2018; Van Kessel and Castelein 2016; Groshek and Engelbert 2012), ignoring grassroots populism, originated by anonymous civil society activists (who do not always seek to enter the institutional political arena), and supported through protests and social movements mobilised on social media (with some exceptions, see for instance (Aslanidis 2016; Gerbaudo 2017b; Gerbaudo and Screti 2017). In addition, more research needs to be done on the relationship of political-institutional *or* grassroots populism- including their mediated discourses and communication practices- to other kinds of (popular) mobilisations, such as anti-populist/liberal or NGO-driven ones (Postill 2018), particularly in the context of CEE, where research on populism has mainly focused on new populist *parties* (Učeň 2007; Pop-Eleches 2010; Sikk 2009; Stanley 2019). One of the aims of this thesis is to address these gaps, by focusing on different kinds of civil society actors

involved in contentious politics in Bulgaria and the relationships between them—i.e. formal organisations and grassroots activists and groups, in addition to actors with a more (neo)liberal/pro-Western orientation and ones with a more populist/nationalist one.

Given the high level of social and political polarisation in Bulgaria in regards to issues such as orientation towards the communist past and geopolitics, and the observed gradual dissolution, fragmentation and contestation of the (neo)liberal/pro-Western discourse and politics that had hegemonic dominance during the first ten years of the “transition” (i.e. Stoyanova 2018), I would also suggest radical democracy would be a more appropriate normative ideal for Bulgarian civil society to orient towards, than say, Habermas’ deliberative model that privileges “discourse ethics”, i.e. the establishment of consensus via rational argumentation. In respect to that I take Mouffe’s (2009; 1992) view that the strife towards rational consensus underpinning discourse ethics puts liberal democracy at risk because it eliminates pluralism from the public sphere.

In order to understand and evaluate the democratic role of social media in contentious politics, particularly in a context characterised by high polarisation between various “sides”, and where the widespread aversion to politics and leftist discourses might make the kind of progressive-populist “we” envisioned by Mouffe (2018) difficult to achieve, we thus need to look in more detail into **how political conflict is constructed by different civil society actors in the process of mobilisation on social media**. Here the distinction between antagonism and democratic agonism as proposed by radical democratic theory, and Kopecky and Mudde’s (2003) discussion of “uncivil” society, can offer a normative framework for understanding and evaluating these constructions in the (mobilisation) discourses of different protest actors, and their democratic implications.

What normative principles would underpin such an analytical framework? The Habermasian discourse ethics, which for Cohen and Arato (1992, p. 418) is a defining principle of civil society and the source of its own democratic nature and its democratising function, would suppose that communicative rationality, even if not always achievable in practice, would define the kind of communication civil society actors aim at, in a normative sense. Even if we take on board criticisms in respect to the overrationalisation that the Habermasian public communication model has been said to entail (i.e. Negt *et al.* 1988; Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira 2012; Papacharissi 2015; Dahlberg 2005), as well as allow for agonistic pluralism (i.e. the acknowledgment of the existence of irreconcilable differences and the construction of opponents as “adversaries” rather than as “enemies”) (Mouffe 1999a), a certain level of “civility” in the discourse of the protest actors would still be necessary for the discussions and communication taking place during protest mobilisation to pass for (relatively) conducive to the expansion, or “radicalisation”, of

democracy, or to “agonistic pluralism”<sup>3</sup>. In respect to antagonistic, or “uncivil” discourses, on the other hand, and following the criteria proposed by Kopecky and Mudde, communicative rationality, as well as the minimum condition of agonism in relating to the adversary, will be unlikely. Uncivil, or antagonistic discourse could be instead defined as disregard for and subversion of rational arguments, exclusivity or exclusion (i.e. high polarisation towards Them), lack of recognition and respect for the rights of adversaries, as well as for basic liberal democratic values, as well as symbolic violence (i.e. the use of threats or abusive language) (cf. Vladislavjevic and Voltmer 2017).

In respect to that, however, I would also suggest that we do not treat civility and incivility (or agonism and antagonism) as strictly pre-defined modes of social and political behaviour that are specific for certain groups or located strictly at the opposite poles of the socio-political and/or ideological spectrum. Rather, this thesis considers “incivility” (or antagonistic discourse) as *relative*, and as a continuum of evolving communicative practices that extend across different *kinds* of civil society actors that exist in relationship to each other.

## 2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has offered a theoretical discussion on the relationship of civil society to democracy and contentious politics, with a particular focus on the emerging democracies of CEE. The chapter examined the fuzzy boundary that exists between civil and political society, as well as the contested nature of the term as a normative ideal. It also considered its often contradictory appropriation as a legitimisation discourse by actors involved in both social and political activism. In respect to that, it raised the question: **What kinds of challenges face different civil society actors that operate at the fuzzy border delineating civil from political society in post-socialist contexts (i.e. by staging protests)?**

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<sup>3</sup> Here, even if we take a radical democratic normative framework (as opposed to Habermas’ discourse ethics) for evaluating the discourses of the different actors, I would argue that a minimum requirement of subscription to, or respect for, rational argumentation would be still desirable. For instance discussions based predominately on personal insults, even when not “uncivil” in strictly liberal democratic sense (i.e. respect for liberal democratic values such as tolerance of difference and pluralism, see Papacharissi, 2004 for a distinction between “civility” and “politeness”) could hardly be seen as conducive to the expansion of democracy.



The chapter further argued that in order to better understand civil society's dynamics in contexts like Bulgaria, and the role of social media therein, it is important to go beyond narrow conceptions that depoliticise civil society or (falsely) identify it with the ideological outlook and political agendas of the original dissident movements, or with the (liberal) NGO sector. This view is closer to the perspective adopted by activists and thinkers influenced by the re-emergence of Gramscian theory, which sees civil society in *political* terms, that is, as a terrain of hegemonic struggles between a wide range of organisations, groups and movements with different ideologies, political agendas, values and strategies that can both challenge or uphold the social order (Lewis 2001). The chapter also proposed that a populist/anti-populist framework is better fitted for understanding contentious politics and *civil society* dynamics in Bulgaria, than, say, a classical political-ideological one (i.e. left-wing vs. right wing), due to the general aversion towards "politics", as well as the marginalisation of left-wing/progressive discourses and activism in the CEE region,

Finally, the chapter argued that a positive relationship between civil society, contentious politics and democracy should not be presupposed, but, as Kopecký and Mudde (2003) contend, rather than *assume* it, empirical research should *study* the relationship between different civil society actors and democracy in its particular context and local circumstances and with different perspectives in mind. In relation to that the chapter proposed the distinction between antagonism and democratic agonism offered by radical democratic theory as an analytical framework for understanding and evaluating *mediated* civil society dynamics in social media during protest mobilisation, particularly in regards to **how the conflict is constructed**. This would involve looking at the continuous mediated performative identifications (see for instance Sorensen 2018) on the part of different kinds of civil society actors vis-à-vis the state and its institutions, vis-à-vis political society- i.e. political parties and movements vying for power- and vis-à-vis other civil society groups. In respect to that the chapter suggested that we treat agonism and antagonism (or civility and incivility) as relational aspects of communication practices of different *kinds* of actors, rather than static characteristics of particular groups.



### **3. Social media and contentious politics: issues of collective identity and visibility**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

Research in Internet studies and digital and social media – i.e. the infrastructures of web 2.0- has engaged extensively with the social implications of digital technologies, including social media platforms. With the Internet steadily becoming an integral part of everyday activities, much has been written on its implications for activists, social-movement organisations and grassroots citizen groups seeking various forms of social and political change. In that respect, scholars have focused on topics such as the changes to means of participation, the development of a sense of collective identity, the creation of community, and the framing of political discourse (Farrell 2012; Garrett 2006). More recently, academic interest in the cross point between media, civic engagement and political participation (see for instance Mercea and Loader 2012) has centred on the role played by social media in mass protest events (e.g. Spain's *Indignados*, the Occupy movement) (Gerbaudo 2012; Postill 2014b; Castells 2012; Juris 2012) and resistance to authoritarian regimes or “revolutions” (e.g. the Arab Spring, the Iranian elections) (Tufekci and Wilson 2012; Diamond, 2012; Lim 2012; Sreberney and Khiabany 2010), particularly in respect to the ways civil society actors adopted networked technologies to mobilise collective and “connective” action (Bennett *et al.* 2012; Mercea 2012; Cammaerts *et al.* 2013) and to challenge and resist political, media and corporate power (Juris 2012; Gerbaudo 2012; Castells 2012; Postill 2014a).

There have been, however, some significant differences in the ways scholars have seen social and digital media's *potential* for democratic and political transformation. On the one hand, cyber-optimists (e.g. Shirky 2009; Rheingold 2012; Jenkins 2006; Benkler 2006) have tended to attribute to the new technologies an inherently “liberating” and “participatory” qualities, because of their ability to enhance access to information, create networks of horizontal communication, facilitate faster mobilisation, reduce the costs to participation, offer innovative means for cultural production and strengthen sociality. Employing a more theoretical perspective, other scholars have gone beyond simple claims of enhanced communication possibilities to link the new technologies to a shift in the very nature and practice of politics (Fenton, 2016: p.2). In particular, the key technological characteristics of the Internet- namely speed and space; connectivity and participation; and diversity and horizontality- have been claimed to facilitate a particular networking logic

that corresponds to the development of a more internationalist, leaderless, and participatory form of radical politics (ibid., see also Castells 2009; Castells 2012; Juris 2008), as well as to a new type of organisational logic - that of “connective action,” - which has changed the very dynamics of collective action itself (Bennett *et al.* 2012; 2013).

The last years, however, have also seen a growth in the literature that approaches digital technologies more critically than these previous more enthusiastic takes. Some have looked for instance at the problematic applications of big data science (Pasquale 2015) or data-driven social services (Eubanks 2018). More recent *political* developments— i.e. the election of Donald Trump, Brexit, the Cambridge Analytica scandal, as well as the growing appeal of authoritarian, populist and neo-fascist politics across Europe and beyond, to name a few— together with cumulative research on the topic, have further shifted media and academic discussions away from the “liberating” and “democratic” characteristics of social media (Dahlgren 2018) and towards considerations of the “threats” they pose to liberal democracy, for instance due to their affinity, as some have suggested, to (right-wing) populist politics (i.e. Engesser *et al.* 2017b; Bartlett 2014; Groshek and Koc-Michalska 2017; Schroeder 2018; Krämer 2017) and their contribution to social and political polarisation, for example through the creation of “filter bubbles” (Pariser 2012). Social media are also increasingly being criticised for their role in public opinion manipulation through mass disinformation and non-transparent targeted propaganda campaigns during elections (i.e. Spohr 2017; Faris *et al.* 2017; Farkas and Neumayer 2018).

In respect to implications for activism and social movements, doubts have been raised as to whether Internet technologies can transform politics, create alternatives and facilitate substantive and long-term social changes (Fenton 2016; Haunss 2015). Thus on the one hand, political economy observers have pointed to the corporate ownership of social media platforms (Fuchs 2012; Van Dijck and Nieborg 2009; Van Dijck 2009; Leistert 2015), state and corporate surveillance (Andrejevic 2004; 2007; Fuchs 2014b; Morozov 2009a; Redden 2015) and the capitalist exploitation of “immaterial labour” online (Terranova 2000; Fuchs 2014a; Scholz 2013) to claim that the Internet, and especially web 2.0, technologies, are supporting a new type of capitalist domination (Dean 2005; Dean *et al.* 2006; Fuchs 2011; Zuboff 2018). On the other, concern has been raised about the seeming replacement of real-life participation, associated with traditional offline activism, with ‘clicktivism’ or “slacktivism” (Christensen 2011; Morozov 2009a; Morozov 2009b), leading to doubts whether political causes could succeed or be sustained through mediated activism alone (Curran *et al.* 2012; Gladwell 2010; Milan 2015a).

Much of this theorisation, however, has happened at an abstract level, prompting some scholars to call for moving away from techno-deterministic debates that fail to provide thick accounts of the *context* in which the technologies operate (Couldry and van Dijck 2015), as well as to demonstrate empirically and in more nuanced way their *actual* and long-term impact on political or social change (Mercea and Loader 2012; Loader and Mercea 2011; Cammaerts 2012; 2013; Fenton 2016). Adopting the view that it is important to look at the actual *practices* of political contestation, collective-identity building and mobilisation (Couldry 2004; Mattoni 2013a; Barassi 2015) and the broader media, cultural and political *contexts* in which they occur (Cammaerts 2012; Gerbaudo 2012; Lim 2012; Juris 2012), this chapter considers in more detail two major, and interconnected, lines of inquiry in respect to the relationship between social media and protest mobilisations – the attaining and maintenance of visibility, or attention, within the media ecology (Treré and Mattoni 2016; Mercea *et al.* 2016), and the construction and sustaining of a collective identity and inter-group solidarity in the process of (online) mobilisation.

The first part of the chapter discusses research and theorisation around the relationship between protest and the media, both in terms of the strategies and practices civil society actors employ to gain visibility and sympathy in the public sphere, and to mobilise and sustain support through the construction of resonant collective identities and gaining trust. It also outlines the normative framework employed to evaluate the kinds of publics constructed by the different civil society actors in the process. The second part considers debates around the relationship between social media *logic*, political communication and democratic participation more generally, and argues for the importance of doing contextual research. The last part discusses some of the characteristics of the media environment in the new democracies of CEE (Voltmer 2008; 2013), and particularly Bulgaria, and the challenges it presents to civil society actors involved in contentious politics.

### **3.2 Social media, collective identity and connective action**

In Western scholarship, contentious politics and protests have been mainly the realm of Social Movements Studies, with “civil society” as a framework mostly applied to studies of “democratisation” in CEE and the Global South, though as we saw from Chapter 2, their subjects- i.e. extra-parliamentary politics and participatory democracy- often overlap. The ‘cultural turn’ in social movement theory, which is interested in the ways collective actors construct and communicate their (internal and external) realities (see Della Porta and Diani, 2006, Chapter 3), is of particular relevance to the framework of this research. From this perspective, collective action is understood not as mainly arising out of determining

structural factors or availability of resources (as proponents of the resource mobilisation or political opportunities structure theories have argued (i.e. Eisinger 1973; Tilly 1978; McAdam 1999; McAdam *et al.* 1996), but rather, it is also the result of particular structures of meaning produced in the process of interaction among participating actors, which articulate the reasons, the goals and the motivation for action with other symbolic constructs (Melucci *et al.* 1989; Melucci 1996; Benford and Snow 2000).

Melucci for instance saw social movements as heterogeneous and unstable “social constructions”, where collective action is “built” by social actors through communication, negotiation, meaning production and decisions making (Melucci *et al.* 1989). Through these processes actors construct “a ‘collective identity’ - a moveable definition of themselves and their social world, a more or less shared and dynamic understanding of the goals of their action as well as the social field of possibilities and limits within which their action takes place” (*ibid.* p. 4). In other words, collective identity is the (implicitly) shared definition of membership, boundaries, and activities for the group (Johnston 1994, p.15). Thus, collective action does not merely emerge as a reaction to some perceived grievance or injustice, or out of cost-benefit analysis of external opportunities, but also comes from the ability of social actors, through interaction, to mutually define their world and recognise a problem as problematic in that world (Melucci *et al.* 1989, p.193). In that sense collective identity implies a “self-reflexive ability of social actors” (Melucci 1996) and is crucial for understanding the mechanisms underpinning actor’s decisions to get involved in collective action.

Consequently, collective identity as a concept has been widely invoked by social movement theorists dealing with questions of movements’ agency, mobilisation, sustainability and cohesion. An understanding of how social actors come to form a collectivity, how they maintain it over time and how they make sense of their acting together, requires that we go beyond a dualistic approach that looks at either “objective” conditions or “subjective” motives, or in other words, that keeps “structure” and “agency” separate (Melucci 1996). In an attempt to bridge that gap, scholars have looked at the relationship of collective identity to notions and processes of “creation of connectedness” (Diani 2004, p.284); “relationships of trust” (Della Porta and Diani 2006, p.94), solidarity (Hirsch 1986), commitment (Gamson 1991), and emotions (Goodwin *et al.* 2001). For collective action to occur it requires the formulation of a “we” characterised by traits in common and mutual solidarity (Della Porta and Diani 2006, p.94) where a positive definition of the “in-group” is juxtaposed to a negative definition of those who are being actively opposed (Touraine 1981; Melucci 1996; Tilly 2008). In that sense, movement

identities are formed in reference to “protagonists, antagonists and audiences” (Snow *et al.* 2004, cited in Della Porta and Diani, 2006: 94). However, these identities are not a fixed characteristic that pre-exists action, but are being constantly constructed, constituted and redefined through collective action itself and the interaction of actors involved (Melucci 1996). Thus, collective identity cannot be separated from *the processes of production of meaning* in collective action.

The production of such meanings is a dynamic and contested process involving different actors, means of communication and audiences. The shared definitions so produced are then objectified in rituals, practices, cultural artefacts, stories, characters and names (Johnston and Klandermans 1995). The process of meaning-production thus draws upon existing symbolic resources and unfolds within a historically specific context of political, cultural and discursive opportunities.

### **3.2.1 Social media and the move to “connective action”**

The post-industrial social reality, and in particular the expansion of the media system and the digital revolution, has resulted in identity no longer being constituted solely in reference to locality and the close proximity of actors, but can extend to whole national and supranational communities (Giddens 1990). Actors can feel solidarity towards people they have no direct links to, on the basis of a realisation that their direct experiences are part of a much more complex, vast and interconnected reality, as well as through a sense of having shared values and goals. In that sense “collective identity connects and assigns some common meaning to experiences of collective action dislocated over time and space” (Della Porta and Diani 2006, p.95). In other words it links disparate events (in both time and space) to show the continuity of a particulate struggle, thus sustaining movements throughout “latent” phases (Melucci 1996), during which a small group of actors engage in the reproduction of certain representations and models of solidarity that can later lead to the revival of collective action (Della Porta and Diani 2006).

In light of the more recent global wave of protest mobilisations fuelled by digital and mobile technologies, however, scholars have started questioning the potential of social media platforms to constitute and sustain collectives, with opinions remaining divided on the subject. Some, like (Fenton and Barassi 2011), have maintained that propriety platforms are incapable of creating and sustaining collective solidarity due to being built with individual networking in mind. Juris (2012) has similarly pointed to the way these platforms facilitate the aggregation of *individuals* around shared causes, rather than the fostering of thick ties and collective identities, which usually requires face-to-face communication.

Others have taken a critical view from a political-economic perspective, pointing out that social media platforms operate on the basis of corporate surveillance aimed at extracting profit from the data and content generated by individual users (Fuchs 2014a). Couldry (2015) for instance has questioned what he sees to be a new myth for the age of digital networks – “the myth of ‘us’” - which according to him encourages us to believe that our use of social media platforms constitutes a natural form of collectivity, a belief that is pushed by and essentially underpins these platforms' creation of economic value. Finally, some (Porto and Brant 2015) have stressed the importance of context showing how in a milieu where people tend to particularly distrust organised social movements and political parties, apolitical, vague and populist demands lend themselves to an easier endorsement on social media, which can result in the dilution of the political and ideological agenda of the protesters and in a drive towards an individualised and fragmented politics (Kindle loc. 3793).

On the other hand, scholars like Bennett et.al (2013, 2012) have demonstrated more enthusiasm towards social media's potential for empowering political and social activism, proposing that such platforms are generating a *different form* of protest action that they call 'connective action'. The authors thus juxtapose a *logic of collective action* that they relate with established formal organisations and the notion of collective identity to a *logic of connective action* that involves the use of personalised and inclusive “action frames”, like the “we are the 99 percent” slogan of the Occupy Movement (p. 744). Such “personalised action frames” are distributed through social media technologies and are able to align individuals with different backgrounds and motives under a common cause, because they are not so much based on established social groups, organisational memberships, and essential ideologies, but rather on ‘flexible political identifications’ (ibid). Thus in connective action participants engage with issues largely on individual terms (Bennett *et al.* 2014, p.233).

Bennett et al. (2012) identify two organisational patterns that they associate with the logic of connective action –an ideal and a hybrid type. The ideal type involves “self-organised” protest movements or events (such as the Indignados and Occupy) where the technology platforms take on the role of political organisations altogether, with political demands and grievances acquiring very personalised forms and being quickly shared through various networking technologies and trusted social networks (ibid., p. 742). Those protests are thus said to lack central or ‘lead’ organisational actors, and instead are characterised by loose coordination, with organisations, where present, remaining at the periphery (p. 755). The scholars further distinguish a “hybrid”, “organisationally enabled” type of connective action (such as the Put People First campaign in the UK) characterised by behind the



scenes networks of established issue advocacy organisations, which however refrain from associating in an obvious manner particular organisations or orthodox collective action frames with the protest movement (ibid., pp. 755-7). Instead, they use interactive digital technologies to engage supporters and encourage them to spread the message via personalised action frames through their own social networks. This middle type can involve more informal organisational actors that employ some conventional organisational tactics in terms of resource mobilisation and coalition building, though without imposing strong brands and collective identities (ibid., pp.757-9). Those two types of *connective logics* are juxtaposed to the *ideal collective* action type that depends on brokering identifiable membership organisations to organise and lead the action under common banners and collective identity frames, to mobilise support and to bridge differences (ibid., p.755). Such protest (for example the G20 London Summit protests) are thus characterised by the promotion of “more exclusive collective action frames that require frame bridging if they are to grow”, as well as the use of digital and social media technologies mainly for organisation and coordination purposes, rather than for “personalised interpretations of problems and self-organisation of action” (ibid.).

### **3.2.2 Bringing back “collective action”**

More recently, some scholars have pointed to the neglect of the issue of collective identity and its related forms of expressive (rather than instrumental) communication, with recent literature focusing mainly on the strategic consequences of social media use for protest purposes (Gerbaudo and Treré 2015, p.865). As Gerbaudo and Treré thus note in the introduction to a special issue on social media and protest identities in the journal *Information, Communication and Society*, collective identity has been marginalised in research not least because of the dominance the notion of networks has had in empirical studies of digital societies, particularly in respect to the way it has been applied to the study of social movements via concepts such as “connective action” (ibid., p. 865). Although the authors acknowledge the important intellectual contribution of debates around the changing nature and practices of protest in the digital age –especially in regards to the decline of formal organisations and the rise of individualised forms of engagement (Mercea and Loader 2012; Bennett *et al.* 2014) - they at the same time contend that far from having disappeared from contemporary activism, collective identity still constitutes an important issue for both activists and scholars. In particular, it is still crucial to the “understand[ing of] the emergence, persistence, and decline of protest movements”, and to the “discern[ment of] their meaning and worldview”(ibid., p.866).

In her contribution to the special issue Kavada (2015) points out that the notion of “connective action” often does not make a clear distinction between the periphery of a movement and its core (p. 874). She thus argues that it is important to focus not just on how the use of social media *might not* foster the development of a collective, but to also consider the role of social media in communication processes that (attempt to) render an aggregation of individuals into one, which, despite being loose and decentralised, can still be said to constitute itself as a *distinct* collective actor that is aware of itself, distinguishes itself from its environment (i.e. from other civil society actors and *their* aims) and *has agency* (ibid.). As Della Porta has pointed out elsewhere, collective action is not really possible if there is no “we” characterised by common traits and solidarity, as well as no shared understanding of who the “Other” – i.e. the one designated as responsible for the conditions against which people are mobilising – is (Della Porta 2006, p. 94). Kavada (2015) thus interrogates the way “collectives constitute themselves as actors” through social media by looking at the Occupy Movement, and argues that Facebook and Twitter played a role in the “identisation” of the movement. Thus on the one hand, the way these platforms blurred the boundary between the inside and the outside of the movement chimed with its values of inclusivity and direct participation. On the other, however, the way they structured the communication on them often led to conflicts arising around issues of leadership, representation and the movement’s “collective voice”.

Similarly, Coretti and Pica (2015) have looked at the effect of social media on the construction of collective identity in the anti-Berlusconi Popolo Viola (Purple People) movement in Italy, arguing that changing human interactions and social media’s evolving infrastructure engender new forms of collective identity. In respect to that they stress the imbrication of technological affordances and power dynamics in the processes of collective identity construction. Thus their research revealed that Facebook pages became a terrain of both construction and conflict over collective identity, with the initial success eventually falling prey to the incompatibility between the commercial logic underpinning Facebook’s affordances, and the egalitarian ideology of the movement.

On the other hand, Stefania Milan (2015a; Milan 2015b) has introduced “cloud protesting” as a theoretical and empirical tool to revisit the notion of collective identity by also building on Bennett and Segerberg’s theory of the changing organisational patterns of contemporary protest movements. She illustrates how the latter engage in a “politics of visibility” that changes the old notion of collective identity and argues that social media “subvert the terms of the identity-building process” by fostering engagement and impeding sustainability (Milan 2015b, p.6). Thus, on the one hand, social media intensify the

“interactive and shared” aspect of collective identity by encouraging recurrent interaction on platforms that engender “always-on” practices. On the other, they offer to individuals the accessibility and customisation of available meanings into personalised assemblages, or “personalised identities” (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, p. 144), that are always evolving and contributing to the *process* of emergence of a collective representation of a “We” (Milan, 2015b, p.6). This collective identity, however, is built on “malleable minimum common denominators rather than ideological strongholds impermeable to individual interpretations” that can be tailored to fit anyone through juxtaposition and selection (ibid.)

The difference between this “politics of visibility” and collective identity lies in the role played by the group, with the individual no longer dissolving into the group, but the group remaining an intermediary stage of mutual recognition, and the means, rather than the end, of collective action. Thus, as Milan argues, “visibility creates individuals-in-the-group rather than groups” (2015a, p.12) with the resulting identity staying strong as long as it continues to be nurtured by social media, but unlikely to last in the long term. The organising principle of the cloud thus promotes effervescent bonds, where the groupings it fosters offer “a convenient flexible sense of belonging which stands for collective identity”, but “do not impose the degree of responsibility toward fellow activists that real-life groups do” (ibid. p.10).

In a similar vein, Gerbaudo (2015b) analyses the use of protest avatars across the 2011 wave of popular protest, such as the Egyptian revolution, the Spanish Indignados and Occupy Wall Street, and argues that the practices of rapid adoption and viral diffusion of “memetic signifier” contravenes the dominant notion of social media as individualistic, as it demonstrate that these platforms can be used as sites where collective identification takes place. He, however, also acknowledges the instability of such forms of collective identity that he terms “online crowds”.

### **3.2.3 Discussion**

To sum up, when considering the role social media platforms play in contentious politics we should not only focus on their role for the mobilisation and organisation of disparate individuals, but we should also interrogate their amenability to the construction and maintenance of collective identities, without which it would be difficult for movements (or protest groups) to act as collective actors with agency and achieve their political aims (Haunss 2015, Kindle loc. 361). The following question thus seems to requires further consideration: **To what extent do different civil society actors manage to develop and**

### **sustain a coherent collective identity and inter-group solidarity during mobilisation on social media?**

When engaging with this question I would argue that it is important to pay particular attention to the *kinds* of actors (in terms of organisational structure, political/ideological orientation and values) that employ social media for mobilisation, the ways they chose to do that (i.e. which social media platforms and which affordances they chose to use and how), and consider their (relative) success or failure in that respect. We should also take into account the political, media and cultural context in which social media are employed for the purpose of mobilisation. For instance we should pay attention to any particular or additional challenges contexts like Bulgaria, characterised by extremely low levels of social, political and institutional trust, wide-spread of disinformation, and high levels of social and political polarisation, might pose to the ability of different *kinds* of civil society actors engaged in mobilisation activities to aggregate disparate individuals into collectives or sustain collective (or connective) action via social media.

In addition, as Bennett et al. have argued, although collective and connective action are distinct *logics of action*, they may co-occur in various formations within the same realm of action (2012, pp. 758-9). That is, they suggest that in the much messier real world, we often find co-existence, layering, and movement across the three types of *logics* (ibid). Thus, the hybrid form of organisationally- enabled connective action according to them sits somewhere on a continuum between the two ideal types of established organisationally-brokered collective action and the more self-organised networked connective action (p. 754). It is also where the tension between the other two logics is usually revealed, not least because of the *organisational hybridity* (Chadwick 2007) that characterises such contexts. As Chadwick has argued, organisational hybridity has made it difficult to box organisations into neat categories, as depending on the circumstances, they can shift from being issue advocacy NGOs, to SMOs leading campaigns or protests, to networking points for connective action (Bennett et al. 2012, p.758). Thus, as Bennett et.al note, the organisations involved in the hybrid model refrain to openly brand or take ownership of the protests' agendas; however, they do not give up on their missions, but learn how to be different things to different audiences- i.e. how "to shift among different organisational repertoires, morphing from hierarchical, mission- driven NGOs in some settings to being facilitators in loosely linked public engagement networks in others" (ibid). Here I would agree with the authors that one of the advantages of the application of their typology to protest action and its development, is that it allows one "to move away from fixed categorisation schemes, and observe actually occurring combinations of different types of

action within complex protest ecologies, and shifts in dominant types in response to events and opportunities over time” (ibid). I would thus argue that it is important we look more closely at what happens at the points of hybridity and explore the tensions that might occur between the logic of *connective* and *collective* action in the course of protest mobilisation.

### **3.3 Protest groups as “visibility entrepreneurs”: the quest for visibility and for visibility on your own terms**

Social movements everywhere seek visibility (Dayan 2013), or attention (Tufekci 2013), with the aim of mobilising political support, gaining validation of their demands, and widening the scope of conflict beyond likeminded publics (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993). As Cammaerts (2012, p.121) notes, “[m]ass demonstrations are modes of social performance that, while not being their prime goal, produce a spectacle of numbers – the ‘public space [is] where dissent becomes visible’ (Mitchell and Staeheli 2005, p.798). In other words, protestors want to have their voices heard, which also involves shaping the way their actions are understood and represented (Downey and Fenton 2003; Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993; Castells 2007; Calhoun 1993). Attention, or visibility, is thus a key *resource* (Tufekci 2013) of protest movements, as it offers them a way through which they can present and fight for their preferred framing of problems, convert wider publics to their causes, recruit new members, try to counteract oppositional framing or delegitimising attacks, gain solidarity, and mobilise supporters (p.849). Gaining visibility, or public attention, however, does not guarantee the achievement of desired results, and can also generate other threats to the movement’s aim. On the other hand, *not* having visibility, or public attention, can suffocate a movement (ibid.; also Dayan, 2013, p.142). Much of protest movements’ strategic resources are therefore devoted to “gaining, denying, sustaining, and manipulating public attention” (Tufekci 2013, p.849). In respect to that, protest actors can be said to be (“visibility-deprived”) “visibility seekers” who demand: “1) the right to be seen, 2) the right to being seen on their own terms, and 3) the right of conferring visibility on others” (Dayan 2013, p.139). A big part of social movement research has thus concerned the discourses of protest groups and social movements, particularly in relation to how they represent themselves and how they are represented and framed by others (Johnston 2002, p.68).

Media (including digital and social media) are especially important in this respect as they offer the necessary visibility to activists and their demands and ideologies, which can take the form of stories, symbols, and slogans or catch words (Goodwin and Jasper 2003, p.53). The mainstream media, in particular, have traditionally played a central role in selecting

and bestowing visibility through processes variously described as “framing” (Entman 1993; Goffman 1974), “gatekeeping” (Lewin 1947), and “agenda setting” (McCombs and Shaw 1972). In the past, not getting mainstream media coverage meant not getting public attention. With the advent of the new media ecology, the routes between protest movements and public attention have changed and multiplied. Activists can now, *on their own*, and often taking on the role of citizen journalists, broadcast to large publics, mobilise supporters, frame their struggles in their preferred way, as well as directly engage journalists, public figures, celebrities, politicians and government officials in a bid to get more attention.

In respect to that, scholars have observed that the internet has contributed to new *forms of visibility*, such as the anti-globalist “counterpublics” (Dahlberg 2007 (Dahlberg 2007; Fraser 1990; Downing 2008; Warner 2002) or instances of *mundane citizenship* (Bakardjieva 2009). More recently, scholars have pointed to the “disruptive capacity” of the new media technologies, which has enabled citizens to discuss and share political information, and to “critically monitor the actions of governments and corporate interests” (Mercea and Loader 2012, p.5). In relation to mass protest movements, in particular, researchers have identified some novel attention pathways, such as “networked microcelebrity activism” (Tufekci 2013).

When it comes to conceptualising and studying the relationship between protest movements and the media, Cammaerts (2012) has offered the term “mediation opportunity structure” that for him comprises of the media opportunity structure, the discursive opportunity structure and the networked opportunity structure, which operate in a circular relationship, with each one impacting the others in various ways. According to him, the “mediation opportunity structure” allows us to differentiate between *different* media actors with different forms of organisations who adopt different ideological frames and to include the activists’ own communication strategies and acts of “self-mediation” (2012, p. 120).

Here Cammaraets draws on Silverstone’s (2002, p.762) conceptualisation of mediation as a dialectical process that, albeit being asymmetrical and uneven, “does attribute a degree of agency to those resisting, to those watching or using” (2012, p. 118). For Cammaraets the “double articulation” of mediation (Silverstone 1994) means that “[p]rocesses of mediation apply as much to media as a material object with reference to technology and the everyday as it does to the symbolic, the discursive, with reference to Gramsci’s ideological war of position (Livingstone 2007)” (2012, p.118). The concept of “double articulation” thus enables us “to consider media and the production of content in conjunction with technology as well as the communication strategies and media practices

of citizens and activists” and thus to “challenge and complicate the analytical distinctions public/private and producer/user by introducing processes of self-mediation and co-production”(ibid). Thus, considering the different ways in which media and communication enable and constrain activists in the ultra-saturated media and communication environment in which they currently operate (and thereby social media’s role for contentious politics) involves assessing the opportunities and constraints for social movements as well as the logics they attribute to their protest actions (ibid.)

With that in mind, in what follows I will look in more detail at how different aspects of the mediation opportunity structure – i.e. the mainstream media and networked social media technologies- and their logics have been discussed in the literature in respect to non-elite actors’ struggle for visibility in the media ecology.

### **3.3.1 Contentious politics and their mass-mediation**

Visibility can be conceptualised in terms of the critical form of “publicity” that has been understood by Habermas to be the chief activity constitutive of the public sphere (Shapiro 1970, viii). It involves the opening up of norms and political power to scrutiny by all affected citizens, as well as the granting of freedom to persons to form and make visible (i.e. express publicly) their opinions through participation in rational public debate (Dahlberg 2018, p.1). As Dahlberg notes (and as argued by both critical and poststructuralist political theorists, such as Habermas, Mouffe, and Rancière), a key point in the formation of any public sphere, and for democracy itself, is the visibility of a dissensus; that is, of the existence of divisions and disagreements within a community as to the common good, as well as in respect to the legitimate procedures for dealing with such divisions (ibid. p.3). The visibility of dissensus is thus considered by these theorists to be a *normative* condition for any public sphere and for democracy itself – it differentiates democratic societies from non-democratic regimes (i.e. authoritarian, fascist, etc.), by not only acknowledging the existence of differences and disagreements, but also by encouraging their expression, thus enabling arenas of *politics* (ibid.).

From both deliberative (Habermas 2006) and radical democratic (Mouffe 2006) perspectives, communication media are central to the enablement of such *political* spaces. In contemporary democracies, most social and political conflicts are mediated (Rucht 2004, p.211; Koopmans 2004). For Habermas (2006) the media facilitate the expression of opposing positions, while for Mouffe (2006) the media’s role “should precisely be to contribute to the creation of agonistic public spaces in which there is the possibility for dissensus to be expressed or different alternatives to be put forward” (p. 974, cited in Dahlberg 2018, p.3). Although the new media ecology offers contemporary activists new

opportunities to communicate outside of the mainstream channels (Bennett 2003; Dahlberg and Siapera 2007; Van de Donk *et al.* 2004) mainstream media still remain central for the wider communication of activists' contentious politics and the pursuit of their goals (Cottle 2008, p.854).

The three major purposes protest movements need the media for are mobilisation, validation, and scope enlargement (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993, p.116). To mobilise constituents and draw in third parties into the conflict as mediators or partisans, and thus shift the balance of power, activists need to reach them through some form of public discourse. The media thus serve as conduits of collective action frames, offering the necessary visibility to activists and their demands and framings. The media spotlight also validates the movement as an important player on the political scene.

In that respect, staging protests and rallies has been a common way for receiving mainstream media coverage that can then bridge the sometimes disconnected publics with policy-makers through public opinion formation (Cottle 2008, p.853). In order to attract the media's attention *and* at the same time receive favourable coverage activists, however, need to carefully understand and appeal to the needs and rules of mass media (Rucht 2004, p. 32). Essentially, protest organisers aim to achieve a balance between fitting the media's "news values" agenda in order to receive coverage, or standing, and generating a discourse that grants them preferred framing and sympathy (Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993, p.121). Negotiation over meaning then becomes an important aspect of the transaction between protest movement actors and the media, and ultimately takes the form of a struggle over "framing" (Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993: pp. 118-119).

The type of framing is mostly determined by the journalists themselves, though there are also structural factors that reflect power differences between actors and the rules of access. Moreover, the framing transaction is itself affected by the particular media norms, values, and practices, as well as the broader political and journalistic culture in which they operate. The "mediatisation" of politics (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999) in particular, with its focus on conflict, drama and personalisation, has a major influence on how news media cover civil mobilisations (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993, p.119). Therefore, as many scholars have noted, gaining visibility through the mass media has involved significant, and sometimes detrimental, trade-offs to protest movements, such as losing control of the framing of events and the issues, as well as having to rely on tactics (such as violence or celebrity endorsements) that, although successful at drawing media attention and coverage, might at the same time hurt the preferred message or image of the protests (Gitlin 1980; Meyer 1995). As Benford and Snow (2000) recap, research has consistently



found that “social movement activists rarely exercise much control over the ‘stories’ media organisations choose to cover” (p. 626).

Established media have also long been criticised “for being overly managed and, worse, for producing stylised versions of disagreement that obscure some voices while normalising dominant discourses and power relations” (Dahlberg 2018, p. 4). As part of the mainstream culture, the news media are thus not neutral spectators, but often find themselves in a conflict with protest movements that they consider to be disruptive of “the legitimate order” (Gitlin 2003, p.271). Since the media operate under dominant hegemonic frames, this means that “certain actors [are] given standing more readily than others, but certain ideas and language are given a more generous welcome” (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993, p.119). On the other hand, social movements usually challenge the status quo and their standing and framing is normally not readily accepted. Thus, based on cumulative research, scholars have argued that the media coverage and its set of framing strategies constitute a “protest paradigm” (e.g. Brasted 2005; McLeod and Detenber 1999) that has a status quo bias (McLeod and Hertog 1992; Gitlin 1980; Entman 1993). The protest paradigm treats protest groups as politically deviant and irrational by focusing on the protesters and their activities, inter-organisational squabbles and confrontations with the police, rather than on the issues behind their mobilisation.

Finally, activists often find themselves in a dependent position in respect to the mass media - they need the media much more than the media need them. The relationship between the two is thus said to be one of asymmetric power dependency (Rucht 2004) or “competitive symbiosis” (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993; Wolfsfeld 1991), where both parties compete in the making of meaning and have something to “trade” – either information or publicity – though one side (the protest movement) has much more to lose than the other (the media). That is, being ignored or being framed in an unsympathetic way normally has much greater cost to the movement, than the anger from movement actors directed at the media costs the later, in economic or other terms. Therefore, gaining attention (for instance, through politics of spectacle) *and* having the issue and/or protest framed in the desired way, often do not mix and match so well (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993, p.122). Or if we are to use Dayan’s (2013) terms, we can say that “gaining visibility” *and* “gaining visibility on their own terms” has always been problematic for protest movements when it comes to the mainstream media coverage.

### **3.3.2 The new media ecology: protest actors as “visibility entrepreneurs”**

More recent scholarship has found that the manifestation of protest paradigm mechanisms is less straightforward than previously argued. The media may have the upper hand when it comes to the representation of protest movements, but their control is not absolute (McCurdy 2012). Cottle (2008) for example contends that current protests involve an increasingly complex range of identities and issues that operate in an ever-expanding media ecology, that can be said to consist of publics and counterpublics (Warner 2002). This has led to a much more complex scope of media responses, where different factors might variably affect the tone of reporting (Boykoff and Laschever 2011).

Furthermore, according to scholars (Dayan 2013; Tufekci 2013) the technological changes that have brought with them new affordances, practices and norms have led to a new orientation to visibility and new ways of managing it (Thompson 1995). As Brants and Voltmer (2011) have argued, the relationship between citizens and political and communication elites – i.e. politicians and journalists – has become characterised by a process of de-centralisation, with citizens venturing into arenas of communication that are outside of the control of political elites, and thus being “disruptive” in respect to traditional political practises and institutions (Mercea and Loader 2012). In other words, with the advent of social media, the flows of production, distribution and interpretation (as well as re-mediation) have become more difficult to control. New actors have entered the mediasphere previously accessible mainly to institutional actors or celebrities. These “visibility entrepreneurs” are driven by a desire to gain visibility and bestow it on others, and also vie for visibility “on their own terms” (Dayan 2013).

Tufekci (2013) has further proposed that the emergent new media ecology has introduced new dynamics to the relationship between protest movements and public visibility, with recent technological developments having brought “new more participatory and distributed means of production of attention” (p. 852). According to her, the new networked participatory media have given more power to social movements to frame their protests and campaigns, as well as to distribute their preferred framing to large audiences, something that was not possible before (ibid). Activists have also become able to challenge journalistic coverage directly, as well as to create the kind of visibility - i.e. “buzz” – that is hard to discount (ibid., p. 853). Movements, as has often been the case in the past as well (Torres 2003), have therefore started to adapt to the new media ecology by developing “repertoires of protest” that strategically and tactically adopt successful practices (McAdam, 1983 (McAdam 1983; Mattoni 2013b) for gaining the desired visibility

(i.e. “visibility on their own terms”).

In what follows I will look in more details at some ways the “alternative” visibility (or publicity) of protest actors, facilitated by the new media technologies, has been conceptualised, as well as discuss some issues in respect to gaining “visibility on your own terms” on social media.

### **3.3.2.1 Publics, counter-publics and cyber-populism**

Social and digital media, due to their relatively unregulated status, offer various opportunities for non-elite actors to negotiate meaning as many use different platforms to engage a wide range of heterogeneous networked individuals (Svensson *et al.* 2015). Through the use of social and digital media thus different political positions and forms of communication can become articulated simultaneously, forming different “counterpublics” as alternatives to the mainstream (Benkler 2006 ; Downing 2008; Downey and Fenton 2003; Fraser 1990; Warner 2002). “Counterpublics” are generally conceptualised as challenging unequal power relations in mass culture by making marginalised and critical voices heard (Warner 2002). A public is thus perceived as a counterpublic if it offers resistance to some form of domination: it is “counter” in that its participants articulate counter-hegemonic discourses, that is, discourses posited against the boundaries of the public sphere, from which the counterpublic participants are excluded (Dahlberg 2018, p.5). “Counterpublics” are thus the result of the underlying antagonism inherent in any social formation based on inclusion/exclusion relations and as such they are “critical-reflexive spaces” where alternative identities and counter-discourses are developed and the dominant hegemony is challenged (Dahlberg 2011, p. 861). Here the active subject’s motivations are more affective than rational (cf. Habermas 1984), based in a perception of systemic injustice and exclusion, as well as more group- oriented than individualistic, underpinned by a sense of solidarity with others.

In effect, counterpublics exist in a relational public sphere where each discourse affects the other. Since the oppositional and marginalised nature of counterpublics is relational, it is also conditioned by the media ecology in which social media operate- that is, by the relationships between various independent, commercial, and public media (Neumayer 2015, p. 297). Therefore, the relationship to mass media is also relevant for the marginalised and oppositional self-representation and identity negotiation in social media of oppositional groups. The counterpublics that are developed as unities against a common enemy are in this sense constructed as alternatives to the mainstream and are constituted through antagonism and exclusion by articulation through different media (Neumayer 2013). As Dahlberg notes, what this ultimately amounts to is “a never-ending

struggle for visibility in the sense of recognition” (2018, p.5).

More recently, Gerbaudo (2017a) has identified two main waves of digital activism (and thereby forms of “alternative publicity”), corresponding to the web 1.0 and web 2.0 phases of technological development of the Internet, and linked to the anti-globalisation movement of the 90s and early 2000s, and “the movement of the squares” that began in 2011, respectively. According to him, each movement has its own dominant ideology, and that since the 2008 financial crisis, “digital activism has moved from the margins to the centre, from a countercultural posture to a counterhegemonic ambition” (ibid. p.477). In other words, he maintains that it has gone through a transition “from cyber-autonomism to cyber-populism”, where the first saw the Internet as an autonomous space for the construction of countercultural politics and publics *outside* the mainstream, whereas the second sees the Internet as a “popular space” that is to be appropriated by *ordinary citizens* for the purpose of *popular* mobilisation against the neoliberal elites (ibid.).

For Dahlberg a “counterpublic”, unlike a “consensual enclave”, is a “public”, as long as it reflects the *internal contestationary conditions* of the public sphere (i.e. the visibility of dissensus), as well as a number of other visibility conditions, which relate to the relationships of visibility between individuals and groups affected by a dissensus, on the one hand, and between publics and the “systems” of state administration, economic organisation and other strategically-driven institutions and elites, on the other (2018 p.3). The key normative visibility conditions outlined by him include: 1) the way visible disagreement is dealt with, that is, whether that is done “via reasoned argumentation in which the reasoning and supporting information behind different positions is made visible to all affected” rather than through “resorting to secret and strategic deal making or retreat into enclaves” or “to antagonism, violence, or authoritarian rule” (ibid. p.3); 2) participatory equality, where all individuals affected by a dispute “should have equal possibility to see and be seen, hear and be heard, which entails equality of control over seeing and being seen, or hearing and being heard, or visibility” (ibid. p.4); 3) the exposure of the practices and processes of power-elites—including corporations, NGOs and individuals—to critical public scrutiny for the purpose of either making them “accountable” (from a liberal perspective), or for encouraging their ongoing interrogation, contestation and revision (from a radical-democratic one) (ibid. 5); 4) and the autonomy of the discourses that constitute the public sphere (through both rhetoric and practices) from the coercive and instrumental influences of economic and administrative power (cf. Habermas 2006) (ibid.5).

In respect to the first point, the reasoned argumentation can take different forms depending on the participants, and can include “formal deliberation, informal storytelling, affective expression and agonistic contestation” (see Habermas, Mouffe and Young), ideally leading not only to greater visibility of other points of views, but also to self-recognition – that is, to the participants’ enhanced clarity of their own positions, and thus to potential revision of their own arguments, values and identities (ibid., p.3). The second point implies mutual recognition– that is, treating the other as an equally worthy interlocutor or adversary to engage with, who has the same rights to see/hear and be seen/ heard (ibid., p.4), rather than as an illegitimate opponent or enemy to shun, silence or expulse. It can thus be said to relate to the principle of agonistic contestation underpinning radical democratic theory.

As we saw in Chapter 2, when Laclau and Mouffe talk about radical democracy, they imagine a radical pluralism that overcomes relations of subordination as forms of oppression (2001, p. 153) and is based on a struggle for the autonomisation of different subject positions (p. 167). Democratic pluralism, however, does not include only progressive or left-wing perspectives, as “the discursive compass of the democratic revolution opens the way for political logics as diverse as right-wing populism and totalitarianism...”(p. 168). Hegemonic struggles, therefore, do not always necessarily have a progressive or emancipatory character, as “oppression” and “subordination” can be articulated in different discourses, such as neoliberal, right-wing-conservative, nationalist-populist, but also anti-democratic ones (p. 174; see also Cammaerts 2009). There is a multiplicity of discursive forms of constructing an antagonism on the basis of different modes of subordination and the forms of articulation of an antagonism (in a counterpublic) are not predetermined, but are the result of a hegemonic struggle (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, pp. 168-9). This issue is of particular interest to this thesis, as the post-socialist context in Bulgaria, as noted in Chapter 2, means that social struggles are rarely articulated in explicitly progressive terms, as is usually the case in Western liberal democracies, but often embrace an elitist/(neo)liberal or alternatively, nationalist-populist framing. As Alvares and Dahlgren note, “publics can espouse anti-democratic values while nevertheless remaining ‘publics. Such publics constitute a risk for democracy due to the possibility of mobilisation and ‘self-education’ through violent actions” (2016, p.54).

The following question thus arises: **How do different civil society actors in Bulgaria try to gain visibility in the media ecology?** And in particular, **what kinds of publics or counter-publics do they construct in the process?** Here I am interested in whether the latter are aimed at the countercultural margins, or rather seek to establish a popular, or

populist, mass public, as well as the extent to which they can be said to be counterhegemonic and democratic (cf. Gerbaudo 2017, Dahlberg 2018; Alvares and Dahlgren 2016).

### **3.3.2.2 “Visibility on your own terms”: negotiating trust in the networked media environment**

When it comes to the main goals of social movements identified by Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993)- *mobilisation, validation, and scope enlargement* - winning the “trust” of potential supporter can be said to be particularly important for activists. At the level of the polity, trust, as a form of “social capital”, is said to be vital for a healthy democracy as it fosters citizens’ participation (Putnam 2000). As Almond and Verba have noted: “Belief in the benignity of one’s fellow citizens is directly related to one’s propensity to join with others in political activity” (1963, p.225 cited in Sztompka 1996, p.43). Distrust, on the other hand, has been said to hinder collective action (Putnam *et al.* 1993), to lead to alienation (Easton 1975) as well as to engender “anxiety, angst or dread” that breed passivity and stagnation (Giddens 1990 cited in Sztompka, 1996, p.45). Trust is therefore an essential element of activism, as without it members of social movements are unlikely to sustain participation in collective action (Diani 2000; Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010). As Della Porta and Diani (2006) note, the construction of collective identity is related to “the emergence of new networks of relationships of trust among movement actors, operating within complex social environments” (p. 94). As Gurak (2014, p.9) points out, “cultures of trust” are established between like-minded individuals who share personal connections, while an increase in fragmentation, polarisation and atomisation leads to a decrease in social trust (Dahlgren 2009, p.70). Trust is thus a function of communicative interaction among citizens, much of which, however, has become increasingly mediated (Dahlgren 2009, p.69; see also Agre 2002; De Laat 2005).

But what exactly is “trust” and how is it attained in social interaction? As a social and communication concept, trust refers to a specific connection between two or more actors. Numerous definitions can be found in the literature, from the perspective of sociology (eg. Coleman and Coleman 1994; Giddens 1990), social psychology (Deutsch 1958), political science (Miller 1974), economics (Williamson 1993), communications studies (Kohring and Matthes 2007) and others. As Quandt notes, despite the many contradictory definitions and views in existence, the consensus on the basic meaning of trust is that:

...it is needed and occurs if actors (trustors) cannot or do not want to control the actions of other actors, but expect a certain action from these alteri (trustees). These expectations are primarily based on past experience – may it be personal, may it be more general expectations with similar actors and situations. Furthermore, trust usually means that the

actions of the alteri do not have a negative impact on the trustor; on the contrary, the effects are supposed to be beneficial (2012, p.8).

Quandt goes on to give a broad differentiation of the types of trust discussed in the literature by types of trustees. Thus, on the one hand there is trust in people one knows very well, or personal trust (also “thick” trust, see Putnam 2000), which is “easier” and relatively risk free, as it is based on a lot of available information that makes predictions about the future actions of the alteri (the “trustee”) more predictable. On the other hand, there is what Putnam (2000) has termed “thin trust,” which is a generalised trust in alteri (persons or institutions) that are not very well known to us (Quandt 2012, p.9). Information flows therefore have a significant impact on the levels of social and political trust, since, as Putnam has observed, trust relies on reliable information about “the past behaviours and present interests of potential partners” (1993, p.74).

Mayer *et al.* (1995) identify three main kinds of beliefs that relate to interpersonal trust—competence, integrity, and benevolence. Thus, ability (competence) is the group of skills competencies, and characteristics that enable a party to have influence with some specific domain, for instance performing a task well or giving good advice (*ibid.*, p. 717). Integrity on the other hand, is the trustor's perception that the trustee adheres to a set of principles that the trustor finds acceptable, for instance a person may demonstrate reliability by keeping commitments and telling the truth (*ibid.*, p. 719). And finally, benevolence is the extent to which the trustee is believed to want to do good to the trustor, aside from an egocentric motive (*ibid.*, p. 718). Gaining the trust of potential supporters, as a civil society actor operating in a mediated environment, can be thus said to come down to *appearing*, in a convincing sort of way, to have competence, integrity, and benevolence, in addition to offering a framing of the issue that resonates with followers (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow *et al.* 1986).

In the networked media ecology, success in that respect often rests on one's ability to convincingly perform “authenticity” to a wider yet fragmented public (see for instance Enli 2015a; 2015b; Sorensen 2018). Alexander (2006) links authenticity to the intention of the actor - an authentic actor is one who *appears* convincing and sincere, that is, as if acting on the basis of honest intentions without ulterior motives of manipulation and deceit (p.55). *Perceived* authenticity has been thus said to build trust between politicians and the public (Coleman 2005). In Goffman's terms (1978) authenticity also indicates the point when frontstage behaviour is perceived as consistent with backstage behaviour. As already noted, the advent of social and digital media has impacted the way visibility is gained and bestowed. Even if new technologies have provided protest activists with alternative to the

mainstream media means to spread their mobilising messages to supporters and potential supporters, at lower costs and with wider reach (Karpf 2012), the issue of “gaining visibility on their own terms” – i.e. in a way that engenders trust by making them appear “authentic”- has not been solved, but has become more complicated. This is not least because, as Milan (2015b) notes in respect to social media, by “enabling a sort of permanent ‘hanging out in public’ (Fenton and Barassi, 2011)”, they function as a performative “front stage” for the self- only here the front stages can be multiple in respect to how many platforms or screen names one chooses to use (p.7). This can be problematic for sustaining a consistent performance in respect to front- and backstage, and therefore makes the appearance of “authenticity” in the mediated environment difficult and vulnerable to ‘disruption’ (Sorensen 2018).

As noted in Section 3.3.1, when it comes to the mainstream media, protest movements often have to trade their desired framing and representation for the opportunity to expand their visibility towards a broader audience of non-members. On platforms like Facebook, on the other hand, movements can directly deliver their messages to a wide public, yet a clash of audiences can also occur (Tufekci 2013, p.854). Thus, where with mainstream media we often have “mainstreaming” of the protest messages, with social media we can have the opposite effect, with targeted messages ending up enclosed within fragmented audiences, or “filter bubbles,” and becoming less appealing to the mainstream (ibid.). Tufekci further argues that the dynamics of “networked microcelebrity activism” is more complicated compared to the mass-media driven celebrity activist status (Gitlin 1980), due to the embeddedness of (grassroots) activists within networks of internal political publics that have alternative arrangements of accountability and representation (Tufekci 2013, p. 859). As she has noted elsewhere (Tufekci 2008), networked social media, such as Facebook, can be identity- *constraining* by way of their surveillance affordances-peer and non-peer. In a similar way, networked activism can *constrain* the actions of activists, and particularly of those who have higher visibility and reach (Tufekci 2013, p. 859).

Furthermore when it comes to the *validation* (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993) of the movement as a legitimate actor among wider publics, even if visibility can be gained independently, the mass media framing and representation still has significant effect (Tufekci 2013, p. 854). When such framing and representation is hostile, it becomes a matter of being able to acquire enough of the “right” kind of attention and of sustaining internal (i.e. within the movement) legitimacy, in order to counteract the negative mainstream coverage. On the other hand, the non-hierarchical structure and wide reach and speed of the Internet create various possibilities for deception and quick and easy



spread of misinformation in regards to activists and their aims. Thus, as Daniels (2014) has illustrated in relation to cloaked anti-abortion websites, struggles not just over framing, but also facts and truth, and thereby trust, have become fundamental to political activism in the digital era (p. 149).

To sum up, the struggle to gain the trust of potential supporters (as well as of the wider public) in the networked media ecology often takes the form of complicated processes of maintaining the “right” kind of visibility (Dayan 2013) and sustaining an undisrupted performance of “authenticity” (Alexander 2006) in respect to having competence, integrity, and/or benevolence, to fragmented publics, while also trying to counteract hostile mainstream (or oppositional) framing. While designing their framing and choosing their communication strategies, different civil society actors simultaneously make choices about which kind of trust beliefs to orient themselves towards or foreground in relation to their audiences (or publics). This brings up the question: **How do different civil society actors in Bulgaria try to gain the trust of potential supporters?** Here I am in particular interested in the role of social media, and the extent to which they are amenable to the needs of the Bulgarian civil society actors that operate at the border with political society, which, as we saw in Chapter 2, can posit additional challenges to their legitimacy.

### **3.4 Interrogating the social media democratic, participatory and populist narratives in context**

Although social media technologies were initially extolled for their promising potential in regards to engendering some or all of the visibility conditions outlined by Dahlberg (2018) (for example for providing means for the disintermediation of disputation), more recently enthusiasm in that respect has declined, due to research indicating the widespread and growing occurrence on social media of information cascades, the spread of misinformation and fake news, the enclosure of communication within “echo chambers” or “filter bubbles”, as well as various forms of online harassment (Del Vicario *et al.* 2016a; Kasra 2017; Schmidt *et al.* 2017; Pariser 2012; Bastos and Mercea 2019).

Claims by techno-enthusiasts like Shirky (2011) that social media provide users with control over their visibility, resulting in increased equality of visibility in respect to marginalised actors, has been also disputed by political economy of communications research (i.e. Fuchs 2014b) and software/platform studies (e.g. Bücher 2012b; Caplan and Boyd 2016), which have demonstrated that, in fact, social media in many cases contribute to inequalities in (control over) visibility. For instance, Gillespie (2018) has demonstrated that the way content gets moderated on digital platforms reveals an “irreconcilable

contradiction” (p. 21) where platform owners present themselves as just offering a neutral and conducive environment, meanwhile actively deciding what content appears or not on there.

Much of those issues have been attributed to social media’s business model, which “is based on reinforcing fragmentation through filtering communication so as to show users what they like to see rather than what might challenge their worldview” (Dahlberg 2018, p. 40), as well as to its “logic” (Van Dijck and Poell 2013; Klinger and Svensson 2015a).

### **3.4.1 Visibility, social media logic, and social media uses**

As Thompson (2005) has argued, visibility is necessarily mediated and medium-specific. According to him, communication media have produced a new form of visibility that is shaped by their “distinctive properties”, by “a range of social and technical considerations”, and by “the new types of interaction that these media make possible” (ibid., pp. 35-6). On the Internet visibility is thus not just considered a matter of visual or linguistic representations online, but also of software, which underpins the medium-specific “architectural organisation of visibility” (Bucher, 2012, p.1166) of Web 2. Referring to Marshal McLuhan’s (1965) famous statement, “the medium is the message,” Bucher (2012) further notes “it is the medium that makes the message visible in the first place, governing visibility in a certain direction” (p. 1166). In relation to this, scholars from the field of software studies (Berry 2016; Kitchin and Dodge 2011; Fuller 2008; Beer 2009) have looked at how software operates as a sociotechnical actor on its own terms, and at how it is able to influence users’ practices and experiences online, for instance when algorithms sort and filter what the user sees online.

Where the constructivist literature has traditionally focused on agency as much as on the media themselves, with the advent of social media the focus has thus moved back to the technology. In respect to that scholars have identified a “networked media logic” (Klinger and Svensson 2015a) or “social media logic” (Van Dijck and Poell 2013) that underpins the way mediation works on social media, and have differentiated it from the logic of traditional media. Van Dijck and Poell have thus argued that:

[t]he *logic* of social media, as was previously the case with mass media logic, is gradually dissipating into all areas of public life; the cultural and commercial dynamics determining social media blend with existing commercial and advertising practices, while also changing them. Far from being neutral platforms, social media are affecting the conditions and rules of social interaction (2013, p. 3, my emphasis added).

For Klinger and Svensson (2015) what differentiates “networked media logic” from traditional “media logic” (Altheide and Snow 1979) is that it involves not just content production, but also the distribution and uses of information. “Networked media logic” can be thus characterised by: 1) inexpensive content production by (non-professional) users in accordance with their preferences and for attention maximising; 2) distribution of content through networks of like-minded individuals; and 3) media usage within interest-bound and like-minded peer-networks that engender highly selective exposure and involve practices of constant updating (pp. 1246-1250). These characteristics drive political communication that is geared towards virality and “attention maximisation”, which correlates with emotional and personalised content (ibid., p. 1253). Visibility, according to the “network media logic” also requires “being connected to many others“- i.e. the maintenance of personal networks (ibid.: p. 1252).

In respect to that, there has been much concern that these media push users into enclosed echo chambers, or “filter bubbles”, that hide dissenting views (Sunstein 2017; Pariser 2012). In other words, social media, due to their algorithms that target users with posts similar to the ones they have previously “liked”, have been said to encourage the formation of *consensual communities*. Dissensus and disagreement within such enclaves become invisible, producing spaces that reinforce particular worldviews and “increase the intractability of (obscured) social divisions (e.g. Schmidt et al. 2017)” (Dahlberg 2018, p.3). On the other hand, where different points of views meet, the discourse is often characterised by a distinct lack of civility (Dahlgren and Alvares 2013, p.56 ). Thus, in many cases, rather than encourage the expansion, or “radicalisation” (Mouffe), of democracy, social media have been shown to enable extremist politics and promote polarisation and fragmentation (Alvares and Dahlgren 2016; Cammaerts 2009; Caiani *et al.* 2012; Peters 2015).

Furthermore, a new and growing body of research has looked at how social media’s affordances as well as uses linked to the “networked media logic” engender and intensify populist communication (Engesser *et al.* 2017b; Gerbaudo 2015a; Groshek and Engelbert 2012; Van Kessel and Castelein 2016). Engesser *et al.* (2017b), for instance, drawing on the ideas of *political opportunity structures* (Kriesi 1995; McAdam 1999) and *discursive opportunities* (Esser *et al.* 2017; Koopmans and Olzak 2004), have introduced the concept of *online opportunity structure* to refer to factors inherent to the online, media system. The factors that according to them encourage populist communication include: direct online connections and communication; the democratising potential of the Internet, particularly in respect to access to content production and circulation; the opportunities it gives to “non-

elite” actors to engage in political communication; its fostering of *homophily* (i.e. “filter bubbles” and “echo chambers”); the opportunity it provides for the recruitment of non-institutionalised supporters; and the tendency towards the use of forms of online communication, such as brief micro-blogging formats, that maximise attention in line with the idea of the “attention economy” (Engesser *et al.* 2017b, pp. 1281-1286; also Klinger and Svensson 2015a; 2015b).

The scholars argue that the *populist communication logic* goes hand in hand with these online opportunity structures, by, for instance, pointing out how populism, as a political ideology that revolves around the notion of popular sovereignty, is particularly well suited to be communicated through the Internet, due to the latter’s democratising potential. Moreover, the possibility social media offer to directly address “the people” is amenable to populism’s people-centrism, and as a media environment that favours non-elite actors the Internet is also a good fit with its anti-elitism. In respect to that some have attributed populist communication’s success when it comes to new technologies to the “unmediated” nature of communication on social media (Engesser *et al.* 2017a; Groshek and Engelbert 2012). Furthermore, the homophile filter bubbles and echo chambers of social media have been said to be conducive to the idea and practice of excluding ‘others’. Finally, the Internet’s “attention economy” is said to fit well with some features of the populist style, such as simplification, emotionalisation, and negativity (Engesser *et al.* 2017b, pp. 1281-1286; Klinger and Svensson 2015a; 2015b). These studies thus stress the significance of the *material properties* of social media technologies, i.e. their affordances and associated use practices (see Lievrouw 2014), in mediating and giving form to the populist communication.

Others have suggested that not only the participatory, networked and interactive nature of social media’s materiality, but also their “*ideology*” – i.e. associated *ideas* of interactivity, openness, and directness - engender a particular ‘fit’ with populist communication, politics and messages (e.g. Gerbaudo 2015a, p. 68; Groshek and Engelbert 2012). Gerbaudo, for instance, has argued that social media’s imaginaries, such as the techno-utopian myths of these technologies’ horizontal and participatory features (i.e Shirky 2009; Mason 2012; O’Reilly 2007) and their supposed automatic conduciveness to the flourishing of democracy (Gerbaudo 2015a, p. 79), underpin much of populists’ (both politicians’ and movements’) online communication practices and discourses (i.e Engesser *et al.* 2017a). As Gerbaudo notes, “crucial to the political deployment of such a participatory imaginary of web 2.0 is an emphasis on the emancipatory character of disintermediation and directness” (2015a, p.81), a narrative that chimes well with the typical populist discourse

that criticises all intermediating institutions and posits “direct” participation as the “genuine” democracy.

Gerbaudo (2018) thus sees the existence of an “elective affinity” of sorts between social media and populist contentious politics, that can be understood in terms of “the rebellious narrative” that has come to associate social media with the recent global mobilisations against the neoliberal order. As he further argues, the aggregation logic embedded in social media’s algorithms and the way it can concentrate the attention of an otherwise disparate people, has particularly benefitted the rise of populist movements. In respect to that he suggests looking at social media as key sites for both current populist discourse (“the people’s voice’) and collective action (“the people’s rally’), that is, as serving on the one hand as a means for alienated individuals to express themselves and, on the other, as spaces in which disaffected users could congregate and form “partisan online crowds” (ibid; Abstract).

### **3.4.2 Social media logic and the importance of contextual research**

A few problems have been identified in respect to claims of the existence of an affinity between social media and its *logic and ideology*, and populism (whether party-political or movement) and participatory politics. Dencik for instance has argued that the *ideological* constructions of social media as fitting conduits of populist (or popular) expression and politics and the emphasis on the latter’s role in protest movements has become a way of granting them legitimacy and credibility by attaching to them a narrative of “authenticity” (2015, Kindle. loc. 4116). This narrative rests on assumptions of “natural” or “spontaneous” protest emergence that is not marred by vested interests and hidden agendas, and can play into the hands of groups that may wish to obscure their political economy, internal organisation, or agenda (ibid.).

Others have pointed out that studies that try to empirically look at social media and its *logic* tend to do so in isolation from the rest of the hybrid media system (Chadwick 2017), which has produced a one-medium bias, a limited understanding and a lack of recognition of the complexity of the media ecology (Bode and Vraga 2018). As Postill has pointed out, social media are not insulated from the ‘hybrid media system”, but instead “social and mainstream media feed off one another in recursive loops of ‘viral reality’ (Postill 2014a)” (Postill 2018, p.756). He further notes that populists do not operate in a vacuum, or a filter bubble, but that they share “hybridly mediated spaces and arenas with other populists and with non-populists” and that “over time, these varied political actors co-evolve media strategies and tactics in full awareness of one another’s existence” (p.763). He has thus called for more contextual and cross-cultural studies of how different political actors, anti-

establishment and establishment alike, use different social media platforms for their purposes.

Van Dijck and Poell (2013) have similarly stressed the importance of considering the agency and actual practices of the users, rather than assume they are entirely dictated by the technology's logic (as some sort of "invisible hand"), arguing that even if the flow of content on digital platforms has taken an 'algorithmic turn,' with a central agency having considerable control over it, users still participate in steering it (ibid., p. 6). They thus contend that "platform owners are not the only power brokers in the social media universe", but "users themselves also have the ability to shape these algorithmic mechanisms" by manipulating coded interaction- for instance, they can push a topic to become trending, and therefore more visible, by re-tweeting or liking it *en masse* (ibid.). Thus, users are not just passive pawns fed into an algorithm, mindlessly being stirred one way or another by the "invisible hand" of its logic, but to an extent they have agency in choosing *which* social media's affordances to adopt, and *how* to adopt them, in accordance with their larger objectives. As Enli and Simonsen (2018) for instance, have demonstrated, the way journalists and politicians use social media is closely linked to their professional norms, and that the 'social media logic' is still related to the 'media logic' of mainstream and broadcast media.

What becomes clear from the discussion in this section is that claims about the democratic, participatory or liberating nature of social media and the publics they engender need to be considered in context (political, economic, cultural, media and technological) and in relation to what the actors involved actually do (or do not do) with these technologies. As Dahlgren argues, the point here is not to arrive "at some ultimate judgment, but rather to continue to explore and analyse the ongoing changes in society and politics in tandem with the continuing transformations of the media landscape" (2018, p.1). Social media's relationship to contentious politics should be thus interrogated by looking at the ways *different kinds* of actors (populist or otherwise) appropriate and adapt to their affordances and logic, and the extent to which the latter are conducive to their broader aims and are supportive of their values and identities.

The *democratic and/or counter-hegemonic character* of the publics constructed on social media by actors involved in contentious politics should also not be taken as a given, but their democratic quality and potential should be interrogated and evaluated in respect to contextual factors, such as local political and cultural imaginaries and discourses, as well as the actors' practices and aims. Any evaluative (or normative) account of the (cyber)publics and/or counter-publics constructed by different actors involved in

contentious politics in Bulgaria would thus require the application of some normative criteria. For the purposes of this study, I have chosen to subscribe to the postulates of radical democracy and the visibility conditions outlined by Dahlberg (2018) and discussed in Section 3.3.2.1.

### **3.5 The role of (social) media in post-socialist democracies**

When it comes to CEE, the media in particular have been shown to play a significant role in the consolidation of trust (or conversely, establishing cultures of distrust) in emerging democratic institutions and in encouraging (or not) citizen participation, particularly during periods when the other institutions that normally channel the flow of information – such as political parties – are weak (Schmitt-Beck and Voltmer, 2007). The transformation of the media systems in CEE post 1989, by way of liberalisation of the media market and the pluralisation of available information, as well as the advent of new journalistic practices, such as sensationalist reporting, can thus also be considered an important factor for the development of political and social trust during “transition”. As Voltmer (2008) has noted, however, it is not easy to apply Western models of media systems to new democracies, where new hybrid forms of political communication have emerged that combine liberal ideals of freedom of the press with local values, past experiences and the realities and constraints of the transition.

Although seemingly universal developments, the nature of the mediatisation of politics (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999) and the instrumentalisation of the media by political actors has been significantly affected by the historical legacy of the relationship between media and politics during communism (Pfetsch and Voltmer 2012). Generally speaking, many of the problems public communication suffers from in CEE today are largely the result of the transformation of the political institutions and the economy during transition (Linz and Stepan 1996). The media’s role and operation during the communist regimes was shaped by two main factors – nationalisation of the economy and ideological legitimisation (Voltmer 2008, p.29). Their main function was to serve as the mouthpiece of the ruling elite and as a mechanism for propaganda and political mobilisation of the masses. Therefore, objectivity was not considered the key paradigm behind the journalistic practice and as long as the media followed the party line, they were subsidised by the state and therefore spared the need to compete for funding on the market and respond to audiences’ tastes (Ognianova 1993, discussed in Price 2015).

Although post-communist market reforms and privatisation helped some media outlets gain independence from political patrons, the commercialisation of the media and the sudden withdrawal of state subsidies caught many unprepared and led them to bankruptcy (Bakardjieva 1995). At the same time, government interference has remained a problem, particularly in former state broadcasters now turned public service organisations, as politicians continue to rely mainly on the media for political mobilisation, rather than on effective organisation and alliance-building at grassroots level (Price 2015, p.30). A common way of the government (but also of other powerful political and economic players) to exert pressure on the media is by selectively distributing resources and favors, such as licenses, advertising contracts, EU subsidies, or access to information, in exchange for positive coverage (Hallin and Papathanassopoulos 2002; Pfetsch and Voltmer 2012). Moreover, a balanced representation of voices in the public sphere is severely lacking because of the high levels of partisanship and politicisation that characterise the post-communist press, where newspapers usually take unequivocally the side of particular parties or candidates, or blatantly promote the interests of particular economic and political elites, for example by aggressively attacking or discrediting their opponents (e.g. via the use of *kompromat*- a fabricated news coverage that aims to destroy a political or economic competitor). Lack of resources and know-how has also resulted in the prevalence of journalism based on speculation and opinion rather than on effective reporting founded on research and informed critique (Pfetsch and Voltmer 2012, p. 391).

The Bulgarian media environment shares much of these characteristics. Despite 12 years of EU membership, freedom of opinion and expression in the country has actually deteriorated in recent years, and the country now ranks way below the EU average in the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index<sup>4</sup> reflecting frequent attacks on journalists and the heavy dependence of the media on political and economic circles, often with links to former members of the nomenklatura (Letki 2002; Ibroscheva 2012; Price 2015; Bakardjieva 1995). Like elsewhere in CEE, although the current media sector is highly commercialised, it is also highly politicised, with a number of media outlets being openly biased (Spasov *et al.* 2017). On the one hand there is the public service broadcasters (the Bulgarian National Television and the Bulgarian National Radio) which are almost entirely funded by state subsidies and EU funds allocated by the government, and therefore are highly vulnerable to government interference. On the other, commercial

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<sup>4</sup> In 2018 it was at 111<sup>th</sup> place, while in 2007 when the country joined the EU it was at 51<sup>st</sup> place (Reporters Without Borders 2019).



media ownership in Bulgaria is heavily concentrated in the hands of powerful local media moguls, who use their control over the media outlets' editorial policy to promote their personal economic and political interests by, for example, pressuring politicians and rivals with smear campaigns and blackmail.

As Hallin and Papathanassopoulos (2002) have pointed out under such media-political clientelist arrangements, public opinion becomes a resource politicians, governors, and oligarchs use to consolidate and retain their influence. Moreover, because of the rather close networks of relationships between journalists and politicians corruption is common, threatening journalistic independence even more. A widespread practice, for example, is paid news coverage (positive for the politician or negative for the opponent) that involves politicians offering bribes and journalists expecting favours for their services (Pfetsch and Voltmer 2012). As prominent journalists are thus co-opted by competing political and economic circles and required to engage in advocacy rather than in neutral reporting, media outlets start servicing intra-elite communication needs (as exemplified in the famous "information wars" in Russia in the 1990s and early 2000s) rather than the public interest (Roudakova 2008, p.43). However, Roudakova has pointed out that the relationships in this system are not stable and predictable, as assumed by some scholars, but the media can be described as opportunist and disloyal – their loyalties would shift depending on economic incentives as well as power shifts within the system (i.e. after elections). This is a common occurrence in Bulgaria, where some media outlets are known to frequently switch allegiances overnight.

Disregard of basic professional and ethical standards in the journalistic profession also remains common, as the principles of accuracy and fairness are often flouted (Spasov 2014; Georgiev and Antonova 2013). The fact that between 2000 and 2011 a third of all newspapers ceased publication and their total annual circulation decreased significantly, has led most of those surviving on the market to publish more sensational content, shrink news rooms, and hire young inexperienced reporters willing to work for less money (Antonova and Georgiev 2013, p. 6). The result has been an insufficient in-depth coverage of international news and economic topics, shortage of quality investigating journalism, and a prevalence of emotional and opinion-based coverage of important social issues instead of a focus on analysis of their causes. Self-censorship continues to be a common practice among journalists, encouraged through forms of external pressure (Spasov 2014).

In this environment it is not surprising that the role of the Internet in public opinion formation has grown, since, as the 2018 Country Report of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism indicates (see Newman *et al.* 2018), online blogs, independent news sites and

Facebook have become increasingly important as sources of information and alternative views. It is important to note, however, that although growing, the broadband internet penetration still encompasses just a little more than half of households<sup>5</sup> and is heavily concentrated in densely populated areas, particularly big cities. In fact, despite Bulgaria having one of the fastest Internet connections in the World, a significantly large percentage of Bulgarians (40.6%) have never used the internet (Spasov 2014, p.9). The dominant content consumed by people on the web is news, though most of it comes from online outlets that rewrite content from traditional media and press agencies (Antonova and Georgiev 2013, p.7). In that respect, although their print circulation has significantly decreased, newspapers continue to be an important factor for public opinion formation, while television remains the most powerful news platform. Furthermore, because new online content providers need to be able to spend heavily on marketing in order to survive, only big companies with established business interests have managed to build a substantial online presence in a short time (for example the main television stations and Inews.bg). Therefore, the Internet has not yet brought a significant diversity in the news and political content offered (ibid).

On the other hand, with Russia's annexation of Crimea, the Ukrainian crisis, and the "information war" between Russia and the EU, a number of websites with anonymous ownership and financing have appeared, together with active trolling on social media, forums and comments sections. Such websites frequently circulate biased, false or outrightly fabricated information under the banner of "news", offering each other as "sources". This has resulted in a spread of disinformation in the online mediasphere, as well as in an increase in public cynicism and distrust in the information offered by all media (ibid).

These characteristics of the media environment in CEE countries, and Bulgaria in particular, can be argued to have had (and to continue to have) a significant effect on the low levels of social, political and institutional trust, as well as on the high levels of social polarisation and the pervasiveness of a culture of "generalised distrust" (Sztompka 1996, p.47). I would suggest that this polarisation and culture of "generalised distrust", coupled with the dependency and politicisation of the mainstream media posit major obstacles to civil society actors in CEE engaged in contentious politics vis a vis the status quo in respect

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<sup>5</sup> According to the statistics cited by the 2014 Balkan Media Barometer report, 53.6% of all households in Bulgaria had broadband connection to the internet in 2013 (as compared to 39.8% in 2011 and 50.8% in 2012). Of these, the share of households with broadband internet access was 65.9% in densely-populated areas, 54.4% in intermediate areas, and 40.0% in thinly-populated areas (Spasov, 2014: p. 9).

to gaining (the right kind of) visibility and gaining and sustaining trust and solidarity within their movements. **What exactly those challenges are in the Bulgaria context** is a question that needs further attention. Moreover, as social media, and particularly Facebook, have become increasingly important for organising and mobilising people in Bulgaria (Antonova and Georgiev 2013) it becomes also important to consider **the role they play in surmounting (or exacerbating) these challenges**, and **the democratic implications therein**.

### 3.6 Conclusion

To recap, a number of authors discussed above have challenged sweeping generalisations about inherent and self-sufficient democratising qualities or populist and grassroots affinity of social media and have pointed instead to the importance of looking at the context in which they are embedded, as well as at the politics of the actors who employ them. These perspectives see technologies not just as tools for resistance (or oppression), but also as complex social spaces and ecologies of mediations whose role in emancipatory and democratic (or also anti-democratic) pursuits is ambiguous at best. In fact, an abundance of participatory media can hinder democratic processes, instead of easing them. As Treré (2015, Kindle loc. 3565) observes, “social media resistance is constrained and controlled by political forces and has to “compete” in a digital environment where traditional politics unleashes all its repertoire of dirty digital tricks”. From a mediation perspective (Cammaerts 2012, p. 122) an ultra-saturated media and communication environment provides plenty of opportunities for activists to resist, to exercise their agency, to self-represent themselves and to defy the structural constraints. Simultaneously, activists need to face and adapt to structural constraints inherent to mediation, such as the mainstream media’s negative bias, a highly unpredictable public opinion and the limits enforced by the technologies themselves (ibid). The interrelated nature of these logics can produce different effects in different contexts.

As we have further seen in this and the previous chapter, the media and political environment in the new democracies of CEE might posit additional or bigger challenges to civil society actors trying to gain visibility and trust, mobilise support for their causes and sustain collective action. **What those challenges are**, and **how actors try to address them through social media and to what effect**, are all questions worth exploring further. Engaging with the contradictory nature of social media employed for contentious politics by *different* actors in a *contextual* way will thus enable us to reassess in a more nuanced way dominant public discourses of how social media not only expand visibility for non-elite

and/or marginalised actors, enable protest, but also foster a new type of political activism that is more spontaneous, participatory, democratic, horizontal and autonomous (Castells 2012; Juris 2008; Shirky 2009, Bennett *et al.* 2012) and/or is particularly conducive to what Gerbaudo (2015) has termed, in a positive sense, Populism 2.0.

In relation to this, two questions were identified in Section 3.3: 1) **How do different civil society actors try to gain visibility in the media ecology?** and 2) **How do they try to gain the trust of potential supporters?** In respect to the first question, I am particularly interested in the kinds of publics and counter-publics that the actors construct through their social media strategies and practices. That would involve considering the relationship between those publics and/or counter-publics to the mainstream, for instance whether they are particularistic, populist or elitist, and/or the extent to which they are counterhegemonic. Here I am also interested in the way the strategies and practices of different actors relate to the mediation opportunity structure - i.e. to the media opportunity structure, the networked opportunity structure, and also the discursive opportunity structure, where the latter includes the idealised discourse of “civil society” in relation to “the political” discussed in Chapter 2. In respect to that, Chapter 2 posed the following question: 3) **How do the civil society actors construct and represent the conflict on social media?** A further question was posed in *this* chapter (section 3.2.3) in regards to the ability of different civil society actors to maintain solidarity and coherent collective identities in the process of mobilisation on social media : 4) **To what extent are social media amenable to the building of coherent collective identities and the sustaining of solidarity during protest action?**

Thus, when it comes to assessing the role of social media for contentious politics, as well as the democratic implications, I am interested in two interrelate issues: 1) in whether the visibility and mobilisation opportunities provided by social media are in line with the different civil society actors' *overall aims* in terms of gaining visibility, gaining visibility on their own terms, as well as sustaining internal solidarity and a coherent collective identity during mobilisation, particularly in comparison to those of other, elite or non-elite, actors in the Bulgarian context; and 2) in whether the (cyber)publics or counter-publics constructed through social media by the different civil society actors in their visibility pursuits engender the normative democratic visibility conditions outlined by Dahlberg (2018) and discussed in Section 3.3..2.1.

## 4. Research Design and Methods

### 4.1 Introduction

The research design for this study is geared towards deepening our understanding of the role played by social media in contentious politics, particularly in a post-socialist democratic context characterised by peculiar socio-political divisions and conflicts, of which Bulgaria is an example. In respect to that, I am especially interested in the communication and mobilisation strategies and practices of *different kinds* of civil society actors involved in protest mobilisations— that is, of both grassroots groups and established organisations (and activists working within them), as well as of actors found on either the liberal or the more nationalist/populist ends of the (civil society) axis (see Chapter 1) – and the way they are affected by the affordances and logic of social media, on the one hand, and larger socio-political processes and discourses, on the other. I seek to interrogate claims around the amenability of social media to particular *kinds* of communication and mobilisations, by looking at and comparing the ways different actors *use* them in the Bulgarian context, and to what effect - both in terms of their aims as civil society activists, and in respect to larger socio-political processes taking shape in the country and beyond. The overarching research question framing the study, as stated in the Introduction, is the following;

**RQ): What democratic role do social media play in contentious politics in new democracies like Bulgaria?**

Additional research sub-questions, which explore different though interconnected aspects of that main interrogation, and which will be addressed separately in the empirical chapters that follow, were drawn out in Chapters 2 and 3. Those are:

**RQ1 What kinds of challenges face civil society actors that operate at the border delineating civil from political society in post-socialist contexts (i.e. by staging protests)?**

RQ1a) How do civil society actors involved in contentious politics in Bulgaria understand their role in, and aims in respect to, *political* conflict? (Chapter 5)

RQ1b) What kinds of challenges in the Bulgarian context do they perceive in regards to that role and those aims? (Chapter 6)

**RQ2) How do different civil society actors try to address or respond to these challenges? What role does social media play and what are the implications for democracy?**

RQ2a) How do different civil society protest actors in Bulgaria (try to) gain visibility in the media ecology? (Chapter 7)

RQ2b) How do they (try to) gain the trust of potential supporters? (Chapter 8)

RQ2c): How do the civil society actors construct and represent the conflict on social media? (Chapter 9)

RQ2d): To what extent do they manage to develop and sustain a coherent collective identity and inter-group solidarity during mobilisation? (Chapter 10)

The research design therefore considers the actors' online mobilisation and communication *practices* (*i.e.* what they do on social media, and in particular on Facebook, in respect to protest mobilisation and visibility aims), as well as the way they *perceive* and *understand* those practices in strategic terms.

The chapter will first offer a brief overview of the methods design of this study, and the theoretical concepts that underpin it. It will then provide a detailed description of the different elements of the design, including the selection and boundaries of the cases and protest events considered for analysis, the process of selecting and approaching participants for interviewing, as well as the process of selecting and analysing the online data. The chapter will end with some reflections on the ethical considerations and limitations of the research design, as well as on the value it brings to the study.

## **4.2 Research Design: A comparative multiple-case study approach**

The methodology underpinning this research project is the comparative case study (Flyvbjerg 2006, p.63; Stake 1995; Yin 2009). Creswell defines a case study as: "an exploration of a "bounded system' or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context" (Creswell 1998, p.61). It is thus known for its capacity to produce an in-depth understanding of current and historical processes and individual motivations that goes beyond descriptive

statistical measures (Della Porta and Keating 2008, p.202). This research project thus focuses on three qualitative case studies (Creswell, 1998) encompassing different civil society actors in Bulgaria that have recently used social media for mobilisation around a particular issue (or set of issues). A multi-case study design has the advantage of being considered more robust because it provides more compelling evidence and has also allowed me to balance feasibility and time limits with sufficient diversification of the cases for a significant comparison.

I take a holistic approach to the civil society actors under investigation by focusing on their mobilisation efforts around a particular issue. I thus examine :1) the genesis of their mobilisation efforts; 2) the dynamics and forms of online communication between key movement actors (protest organisers or activists) and constituents (actual or potential participants in the protest) and their embeddedness in the specific social, political and media context; 3) the repertoires of usage of social and digital media (particularly Facebook) by the different civic actors in respect to their strategic aims; 4) the relationship between online and offline action and participation, and 5) the conditions and strategies responsible for the success (or failure) of the initiatives (defined by how successful activists are in mobilising supporters, gaining visibility and achieving their aims).

The comparative analysis will focus on the similarities and differences between the cases and will make my study uniquely placed to identify recurring patterns of practices and strategies of civil society actors' conflict construction, collective identity building and attention and trust pursuit in contentious politics involving social media. The variations observed across cases, on the other hand, provide me with the opportunity to differentiate different ideal types of such practices and relate them to the affordances of the social media platforms and to the characteristics of the respective civil society actors that employ them. In line with the principles of the extended case study method proposed by Burawoy (1998) I make an attempt to interpret the concrete cases against the backdrop of larger processes unfolding in Bulgarian society in particular, and in the post-socialist context of Eastern Europe more generally.

#### **4.2.1 Cases and their boundaries**

The cases are selected strategically to encompass civil society organisations, groups or activists that were involved in the three broad *types* of popular mobilisations – the environmental protests of 2012, and the Winter and Summer protests of 2013- which, as already noted in the Introduction, were part of a broader protest wave that swept over the

country and peaked in the 2012-2013 period. Rather than focusing on these concrete events, however, I have chosen instead to look at how these movements (or parts of them) have developed their strategies and practices since then, by considering more recent mobilisations (or attempts at mobilisations) by organisations, groups or activists that were at the centre of the 2012-2013 protests.

Here I should note that the divisions between the three broad movements (and especially between the environmental and Summer 2013 protests on the one hand, and the Winter 2013 protests on the other) are as much discursive, as they are based in existing socio-economic and political-ideological divides, and the boundaries are not as clear-cut as is sometimes postulated. In reality, many people participated in all three, and some still see all of them as part of the same wave of popular discontent against the status quo and the way the country is being governed (Ivancheva 2013a). Nevertheless, the discourses around the differences and divisions between the mobilisations and their participants have not gone away from the public sphere (if anything, they have become more established in the public discourse), and often get applied- by politicians, commentators, and the civil society actors themselves- to more recent instances of protests organised by activists linked to these broad movements<sup>6</sup>.

In addition, although the support – bases of the three movements might have overlapped to some extent, they certainly did not do so entirely. For instance, many of the environmental protesters did not join or back *en mass* the Winter 2013 protests, even if they were also protesting during the same winter months against plans to build the Belene nuclear power plant, as well as against new legislation that tried to go around the Forestry Act. Instead, they tried to keep their distance, stressing that their focus was on “civic” or

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<sup>6</sup> As commentators have noted, the (liberal) media and political commentators played a crucial role in positing a division and an incompatibility between the two anti-governmental movements (i.e. “February is not June”, as one commentator said on television), playing down the fact that many of the participants in the Winter 2013 protests also took part in the Summer ones. For instance, intellectuals and political analysts who supported the Summer 2013 protests posited a split between “those who read and those who don’t”, between “those who share European civilizational values, and those who don’t”, between “the ‘poor’ and the ‘morally indignant’”, between “those who can afford to pay their bills and taxes, and those who can’t and so live on welfare” (Ivancheva 2013a; Dareva 2013; see also Smilov and Vajsova 2013 for a compilation of a variety of opinions, analyses, positions and commentary on the protests from the media). That drew criticism and indignation from some on the left, who counterpoised a narrative that described the Summer 2013 protests as “a revolt of the well-fed” (i.e. Dareva, 2013). This constructed division has remained as a predominant discourse, and if anything, has become even more established as a frame, and is still applied to different kinds of protests that have taken place after the protest wave of 2011- 2013.



“values” (i.e. democratic or European “values”) rather than on “social” (i.e. welfare, living standards, and labour rights) issues (Ivancheva, 2013a). On the other hand, many of them joined and openly supported the Summer 2013 protests, which shared a similar discourse, as well as embraced a pro-market rhetoric of green capitalism, low taxes, and “transparent” privatisation and concessioning (ibid). In both the role of citizens from the urban middle-class, who work in or have connections to the (liberal) NGO sector, was significant (Ivancheva, 2013a; Interviews). The environmental NGOs also mobilised in part their volunteer groups and members, as well as nature lovers and outdoor sports enthusiasts, who were not necessarily politicised enough to join other, non-nature-related types of (political) campaigns. They were also more likely (at least were in 2012 before the discursive division lines that pitted the liberal urban middle-class and the NGO sector against the “common people” gained particular traction) to attract participants from nationalist/populist groups who often see the protection of Bulgarian nature as a patriotic cause (ibid.; Interviews). We can say, however, that to a large extent both the environmental protests of Summers 2012 and 2013 were fueled by the urban middle class’ moral panic prompted by the illiberal turn of the country by way of the “oligarchy” gaining more control over the state. The protests of Winter 2013, on the other hand, were largely underpinned by the social and economic suffering of large swaths of the Bulgarian lower classes.

Moreover, where the environmental protests were (and still are) to a large extent an NGOs-driven affair (though also supported by citizens involved in various independent grassroots campaigns), the Summer 2013 protests happened in a more spontaneous and grassroots manner - they started from a Facebook Event set up by a few independent activists and/or bloggers, and eventually led to the formation of the informal right-wing/liberal citizen group **Protest Network** which posited itself as the “voice” of the protest. Ultimately, a couple of parties sprung from it (i.e. “14 June” and DEOS, which no longer exist, and “Da, Bulgaria”<sup>7</sup>), as well as a now formalised NGO (which started as an informal pressure group) campaigning for judiciary reform and against corruption, called **Initiative “Justice for All”**. On the other hand, some activists who had a central role in Protest Network split from it, due to internal clashes and scandals, but have continued to get involved in, or at times initiate, protests and campaigns as independent grassroots activists.

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<sup>7</sup> “Yes, Bulgaria”

Similarly, the Winter 2013 movement also began as countrywide spontaneous demonstrations against the rise of electricity and gas prices, many of which organised via (often anonymous) Facebook groups and pages. The informal civil society group **SILA**, linked to preceding protests against high fuel prices, emerged as a leading protest actor (to an extent due to the media attention some of its activists received). In the beginning of this project it still had a functioning website, though at the time of writing that website has been taken down, and the group no longer operates as such, as it split due to a number of internal divisions and scandals. Some of its main (ex)activists, however, continue to be involved in a variety of social and/or populist (i.e. against fuel price hikes), as well as nationalist/illiberal protests and campaigns (i.e. against refugees, “Gypsy crime”, the Pride Parade, “gender ideology” etc.) in collaboration with other (in)formal (and often far-right) groups, such as biker clubs, nationalist movements, and football fan clubs.

Based on the above considerations, for analytical purposes I treat these three broad protest movements and the groups or organisations central to them as three separate cases, even if, as noted, there are overlaps and the boundaries can be fuzzy. My choice of which particular organisations or groups to focus on as illustrative of the three cases described above, is underpinned by the following criteria: 1) central role in respect to one of the three broad protest movements of 2012-2013; 2) attempt to mobilise people around a cause (or set of causes) in the years following the 2012-2013 events, particularly in the 2015-2018 period), by organising a protest, march, or civil disobedience; 3) the employment of social media for the purpose of mobilisation, by creating a Facebook event page; 3) a sizeable social media presence (at least 1000 “likes” of their Facebook page or public Facebook profile). The specific groups or organisations selected based on these criteria are the following<sup>8</sup>: 1) **Coalition “For the Nature”**; 2) **(ex-)Protest Network**, particularly activists who were central to its establishment (some of whom went on to form the political parties DEOS and Da, Bulgaria, while others currently continue to support or

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<sup>8</sup> There are many other actors that were part of the 2012-2013 protest wave and the struggles over their framing, including leftist groups in the Winter 2013 protests, and university student groups during the Student Occupation in September 2013, considered to be an “Act 2” of sorts of the Summer 2013 protests( for instance see Dinev 2014). There are also other groups that make up the civil society playing field in Bulgaria in general, on both the (hard and/or anti-fascist) left and the (far)right. They are, however, currently rather marginal and get involved in an organising capacity in a limited number of protests. Thus, for reason of time and scope limitations I have decided to focus on the main and most visible actors in the broad 2012-2013 movements, and their extended networks. My choice was also underpinned to an extent by considerations about recent activities as well –that is, by whether the actors have continued their protest activities in one way or another after the 2012-2013-protest wave, and at the time I undertook this study.

initiate various protests as independent activists); and 3) **(ex-)SILA**, including one of the biggest (with more than 200 000 followers) and most central anonymous Facebook Pages indirectly linked to it- **National Protest Against All Outrages**<sup>9</sup>.

Although these particular organisations or groups are the main focus, the case studies also encompass other actors related to them (and to the three protest movements of the 2012-2013 wave more generally), in order to provide a more in-depth understanding of the context and the strategies and practices of these three broad *types* of Bulgarian protest movements, including in respect to differences in the organisational structures of actors *within* them. Thus, in respect to the first case, I also consider activists from grassroots groups set up independently by people that do not work for organisations that are part of the Coalition, but who collaborate with it on many causes- for instance **Save Pirin** and **Save Kara Dere**- so as to provide an insight into the *grassroots* side of the environmental protests. In respect to Protest Network, I also consider the informal-pressure-group-turned-NGO **Initiative “Justice for All”** that sprung from the later in the aftermath of the Summer 2013 protests, this time in order to provide a comparison with a *formal organisation* (NGO) involved in protests that share the discourses and aims of the Summer 2013 movement. Finally, in respect to the third case, I also consider some (nationalist/populist) activists that are part of **SILA’s** online and offline networks (i.e. with whom some of its ex-members collaborate and/or co-organise more recent protest actions), such as members of **Moto Club “Great Bulgaria”**, members of **football fan clubs**, as well as members of other **informal nationalist movements** that took part in the Winter 2013 protests. Groups linked to the organisation of the Winter 2013 protest movement tend to be generally grassroots/informal, with participants often sharing an antipathy towards the (liberal) NGO sector and formal organisation more generally, and therefore in respect to that case study I limit myself to informal groups and/or activists.

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<sup>9</sup> The Facebook page was created around 2011 during the protests against high fuel prices, but became particularly popular during the Winter 2013 protests against high electricity bills. One of the interviewees in this study who claimed to be one of the creators and current admins of the page also asserted to have been one of the organisers of these protests. When I began the study, the page had amassed a community of about 240 000 followers – one of the biggest found on the Bulgarian Facebook – and had been an initiator or a co-organiser of a number of protests (though not particularly successful ones) in the years that followed the mass mobilisations of 2012-2013, including against increases of the road tax, against Roma people and refugees, and in defense of a referendum, initiated in 2017 by a popular TV show host, Slavi Trifonoff.

#### 4.2.1.1 Specific protest cases

I also focus on four specific protest mobilisations/campaigns as exemplary of the three broad cases. The protests are chosen to reflect different *types* of civil society actors organising them in respect to the following distinctions: organisationally driven vs. grassroots protests and (neo)liberal/pro-Western vs. populist ones. They include two one-off protests – the first, against the arrival of the “Putin’s Night Wolves” in Bulgaria organised by ex-members of Protest Network; the second – in support of a national referendum on changes in the electoral law and party financing<sup>10</sup> and against the government of Boyko Borissov, organised by the people behind the anonymous Facebook Page National Protest Against All Outrages (from now on, NPAAO). In addition, I consider two longer protest campaigns – one over the summer of 2017 for judiciary reform organised by Initiative “Justice For All” (which developed out of parts of Protest Network) that involved three separate protest events a month apart; and the second from December until April 2018, organised by Coalition “For the Nature”, against the opening up of Pirin National Park for construction. Since the latter involved weekly protests over almost four months, I limited my analysis to only one protest event - the main and biggest one that took place on January 11th, to coincide with the day of the official start of the Bulgarian EU Presidency<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> The three-question referendum was held on the 6<sup>th</sup> of November 2016 alongside the presidential election. Voters were asked whether they supported limiting public funding of political parties, the introduction of compulsory voting in elections and referendums, and changing the electoral system from a proportional to a two-round representational one. Although all three proposals were supported by a majority of voters, the turnout was slightly lower than the legally binding quorum. Parliament thus refused to legislate in respect to any of the three questions. Meanwhile, the initiators, Slavi’s Show, started a legal case for manipulation of the vote, but the Supreme Court ruled out the referendum invalid.

<sup>11</sup> I have chosen two protests or protest campaigns in connection to Protest Network – one organised by known (ex-)activists and (ex-)“faces” of Protest Network, though in an independent capacity, and the other by the connected NGO Initiative “Justice for All”- in order to cover instances of both organisation- and grassroots-driven protest mobilisations as part of this broad movement case study. The environmental protest I consider here was organised by Coalition “For the Nature”, though in collaboration with independent grassroots groups and other organisations, some of which organised their parallel events. Therefore I treat it as a combination case of a campaign that is both grassroots- and organisation-driven (with some of the issues and tensions this creates). When it comes to activists or groups from the third broad case (i.e. those mostly linked to the Winter 2013 protests), as already noted, their protests or campaigns tend to be generally grassroots-driven. For the purposes of this study, as noted, I have chosen an attempt by the anonymous page National Protest Against All Outrages (which used to be associated with SILA and the Winter 2013 protests), to mobilise an anti-governmental protest, as an exemplary case of the type of (usually unsuccessful) protests attempted in the aftermath of the 2013 events by these kinds of actors through their networks of Facebook pages.

At the time the events studied took place, those who had joined the Facebook pages were usually visible to others by default, and the Facebook event pages created for the four protests were all public and could be accessed by anyone. Since data on social media is “ephemeral,” however, two of the event pages no longer exist on the platform – the Anti-Night Wolves one, and the one by the NPAAO Facebook page (itself taken down in December 2018).

### **Save Pirin Case**

The Save Pirin protests were called by Coalition ‘For the Nature’ in response to changes pushed by the Ministry of the Environment to the management plans of Pirin National Park, which, as campaigners claimed, opened almost half of its territory to the possibility of construction. The mobilisation lasted over four months, with almost weekly protests happening in the centre of Sofia, as well as occasionally in other cities in the country and abroad. The main protest event analysed in this study, which drew the biggest amount of people (estimated by the organisers at about 8-9000 people) and support from various other organisations, happened on the 11<sup>th</sup> of January 2018, to coincide with the opening of the Bulgarian EU Presidency (in an attempt to draw the attention of the EU’s representatives). As the year went on, and as enthusiasm declined and splits within the movement occurred, the protests dwindled more and more, with the last ones taking place in mid-April. The protest-organisers demanded the annulment of what they saw as illegal changes to the management plans and the resignation of the Minister of the Environment, Neno Dimov. Although that has still not happened as of the time of writing, the Coalition nevertheless won a court case that officially ruled that those changes broke the law. The Minister of Environment, however, has vowed to pass new legislation to make the expansion of the concession legal.

### **National Protest Against All Outrages (NPAAO) protest case**

This protest took place on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2017 in Sofia, and was organised online via an event page set up by the Facebook page “National Protest Against All Outrages in Bulgaria” under the slogan “There is such a people.” It was initially called in defence of Slavi Trifonoff’s referendum (see footnote 9), demanding the implementation of the will of “the 3 500 000 million people who voted”, but later on, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of August, a long post titled “СЦЕНАРИЙ ЗА ПРЕОДОЛЯВАНЕ НА ПЕРМАНЕНТНАТА ПОЛИТИЧЕСКА, СОЦИАЛНА И ЦЕННОСТНА КРИЗА В РЕПУБЛИКА БЪЛГАРИЯ” (“A blueprint for the overcoming of the permanent political, social and values crisis in the Republic of Bulgaria”) was pinned at the top of the event page, promoting broader aims. It listed a number of seemingly contradictory measures, ranging from populist ones, such as the suspension of

the Constitution, to pro-EU liberal ones such as “the conversion of Bulgaria in a proper member of the EU and the implementation of all recommendations for reforms that have been stalled in the last years”. Days before the protest was scheduled for another post by the organisers (the anonymous page National Protest Against Everything Outrageous) informed that a “shadow cabinet” had been nominated by “many citizens and citizen organisations” and had taken the lead of the protest. The actual names of those in the “shadow cabinet” were circulated by the organisers the day before the event itself. Where the Facebook event page had about 4000 people click “interested” and about 1500 “going”, before the date of the protest there were rumours circulated online, and subsequently via the mainstream media, that a big anti-governmental protest was expected. In reality, the protest drew no more than 250 people.

### **Justice for All protest case**

The analysis of this case draws on a dataset composed of online (Facebook) communication in the course of the organisation and enactment of three protests demanding an end to corruption and the oligarchic dependencies in the country, as well as a reform of the Judiciary system that aims to lessen the power of the Chief Prosecutor. The protests happened over the summer of 2017 (in May, June and July), and were part of the larger campaign for judicial reform led by the informal pressure-group-turned-NGO Initiative “Justice for All”, that was established by certain activists linked to Protest Network. The first protest (on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May) was co-organised by Coalition “For the Nature” under the slogans “citizen march for European justice” and “a country for the citizens, not the mafia”, and took place in four cities across the country, drawing about 1000 participants. The second (on the 14<sup>th</sup> June) was also co-organised by “For the Nature” nationwide as a commemoration of the beginning of the Summer 2013 protests, and had about 1500 participants. The third was called in a hurry on the 26<sup>th</sup> of July under the slogan “Justice not sausages!”, as a response to changes in the legislation, seen as an attack on citizens’ rights and in the interest of the oligarchy, which the government was planning to rush through Parliament before its summer break. The protest was also sparked by the perceived simulation of activity by the Chief Prosecutor, who had been quick to react in regards to a corruption and extortion case against an MP involving sausages, while cases of much bigger national interest, such as the bankruptcy of Corporate Commercial Bank, were being swept under the carpet. It however failed to attract many participants.

### **Anti- Night Wolves protest case**

The ANW protest was called by certain ex-members of Protest Network in response to the arrival in Bulgaria on the 30th of June 2016 of “The Night Wolves” - a motorcycle club known for its close ties to Russia’s President Vladimir Putin, as well as its involvement in the breaking away of Crimea (Shuster 2014). In summer 2016 the Russian moto club undertook a “Slavic World 2016” bike tour, which passed through a number of Balkan countries, including Bulgaria. The tour aimed to strengthen “the dialogue between Slavic peoples”, as well as “Russia’s regional and international connections” (Cheresheva 2016). News about their planned arrival in Bulgaria on June 30<sup>th</sup> were met with mixed reactions by different parts of Bulgarian civil society. On the one hand, the club’s Bulgarian branch, as well as pro-Russian and nationalist groups (including Moto Club “Great Bulgaria”), organised a welcoming for the touring motorists, while liberal/pro-Western groups criticised their coming to Bulgaria on social networks and in the media as “a Kremlin provocation”. (Ex-)members of “Protest Network” organised on Facebook two protest events against the arrival of the “Night Wolves”, demanding that the government ban their presence in the country— one scheduled for the day of the Wolves’ arrival on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June in the coastal city of Burgas, and the second scheduled for their planned visit to the biggest Orthodox cathedral in Bulgaria, the “St. Alexander Nevski” in Sofia, the following day. The publicity of the Facebook event did not manage to attract many would be participants (of 3175 invited, only 299 indicated to have Went, and 463 to be Interested). The protests themselves attracted much less than a hundred people. Both events, however, were marked by violent clashes between the protesters and members of two pro-Russian nationalist groups - Militant Movement “Vasil Levski” and Bulgarian National Movement “Shipka”, with members of both parties being arrested by the police. A video of the fight and its aftermath was consequently widely circulated and commented upon in online social networks and by digital and mainstream media, with debates ensuing around pro and anti-Russian stances, Bulgaria’s geopolitical orientation, cultural values and identity etc.

Please see Table 4.1 below for a summary of the three broad case studies, the organisations and groups covered and the specific exemplary protest mobilisation cases.

Table 4.1 Summary of case studies

Broad case / movement	Organisations and groups considered (i.e. activists were interviewed)	Specific protest cases	Outcome of protest case
<p><b>Environmental protests of 2011-2013</b></p> <p>Various protests in response to illegal construction, development and logging in protected areas part of the NATURA 2000 EU ecological networks;</p> <p>peaked in Summer 2012</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Coalition “For the Nature”</b> (incl. NGOs like Greenpeace Bulgaria, WWF, For the Earth, Association of the Parks in Bulgaria, Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation and others)</li> <li>• <b>Informal citizen groups</b> fighting for preservation of certain endangered natural sites (Save Kara Dere Beach, Save Koral Beach, Save Pirin and others).</li> </ul> <p>Tend to have liberal/centre-right and pro-EU/West orientation</p>	<p><b><u>Save Pirin case</u></b></p> <p>organisationally-driven &amp; environmentalist/liberal</p> <p><b>Date/Period:</b> Dec 2017-April 2018</p> <p>Organised by Coalition “For the Nature” in response to a decision by the Ministry of Environment to further open up Pirin National Park for construction</p>	<p>Biggest protest on 11th January drew between 8-9000 people in Sofia and across the country</p> <p>Final ruling of the High Administrative Court is still to come, but so far rulings have been in the protesters’ favour. The Minister of Environment has vowed to pass new legislation to make the expansion of the concession legal. Coalition “For the Nature” continues to demand his resignation.</p>
<p><b>Winter 2013 protests</b> against high electricity and gas prices</p> <p>The protest turned anti-governmental and more broadly populist/anti-neoliberal (i.e. against the political system and global capitalism more generally) and eventually led to the resignation of the center-right government of Boyko Borissov.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>SILA</b></li> <li>• <b>Moto Club “Great Bulgaria”</b></li> <li>• <b>People’s Social Movement</b></li> <li>• <b>Various</b> (i.e. active individuals involved in the online networks)</li> </ul> <p>Tend to have a socially-oriented though also populist/nationalist (some also pro-Russian) orientation</p>	<p><b><u>NPAAO case</u></b></p> <p>grassroots &amp; populist</p> <p><b>Date/Period:</b> 11<sup>th</sup> Sept 2016</p> <p>Anti-governmental grassroots protest, and for the implementation of “Slavi’s referendum”, organised by Facebook Page National Protest Against All Outrages (that used to be linked to SILA)</p>	<p>Only about 250 people turned up, despite the event receiving a lot of commenting on social media</p> <p>It was deemed a failure by the organiser</p>



<p><b>Summer 2013 protests</b> against the appointment of the oligarch and media mogul Delyan Peevski for Chief of the Agency for National Security</p> <p>Anti-corruption/anti-oligarchy focus</p> <p>The protests turned anti-governmental and led to the resignation, some months later, of the newly elected centre-left government of Plamen Oresharski</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Protest Network</b></li> <li>• <b>Initiative “Justice for All” (JFA)</b></li> <li>• <b>Party- movements “Da, Bulgaria”, DEOS</b></li> <li>• <b>Social Club “Chitalishteto”</b></li> </ul> <p>Tend to have a (neo)/liberal/centre-right and pro-EU/NATO orientation</p>	<p><b><u>Anti-Night Wolves (ANW) case</u></b></p> <p>grassroots &amp; (neo)liberal/pro-EU</p> <p><b>Date/Period:</b> 29-30 June 2016</p> <p>Protest against the arrival of “Putin’s Night Wolves” in Bulgaria, organised by ex-members of Protest Network</p>	<p>Did not draw more than 100-150 people</p> <p>A fight between the protesters and pro-Russian groups drew media attention and debate</p>
		<p><b><u>JFA case</u></b></p> <p>organisationally-driven &amp; (neo)liberal/pro-EU</p> <p><b>Date/Period:</b> May-July 2017</p> <p>3 protests over the course of Summer 2017, demanding judiciary reform and against dependencies and corruption in the justice system</p> <p>Organised by Initiative Justice for All, sometimes (in collaboration with Coalition “For the Nature” for 2 out of 3 protests)</p>	<p>The first two protests drew between 1000-1500 people.</p> <p>The third one drew much less, partly because of loss of enthusiasm and inter-group conflicts.</p> <p>A number of similar protests have been organised by the same actors since 2017, as the same problems with the judiciary remain.</p>

### 4.3 Studying social media mobilisation and visibility strategies and practices in context

The main question pondered when designing the study was how to engage with both the different actors' practices and strategies in respect to their uses of social media for protest mobilisation, and to relate that to how they see their role and aims in the socio-political context in which they operate. In particular, I wanted to capture any differences in the way the various civil society actors construct and (re)present the conflict between "Us" and "Them" in the process of mobilisation and the implications of such representations and discourses for the Bulgarian democratic context (and beyond). I was also interested in any differences (and their implications) in the ways they appropriate social media's (and particularly Facebook's) affordances to gain visibility, *on their own terms*, in the Bulgarian (new) media environment<sup>12</sup>, and to mobilise and sustain support for their causes.

The chosen methodological approach in this respect is two- fold. On the one hand, it involves the analysis of communication on social media in the course of protest mobilisation, and specifically on the Facebook protest event pages set up for that purpose, as the communication on there is geared exclusively towards conflict framing, and collective identity and solidarity building and sustaining. On the other hand, it includes semi-structured interviews with civil society activists involved in such forms of activism in Bulgaria. This dual methodological approach allows me to consider both the different representations of social and political conflict and the cohesion of the thus constructed collective identities on social media, as well as to interrogate the considerations underpinning the social media activities of different activists in respect to gaining visibility and trust and mobilising support, and the democratic implications thereof.

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<sup>12</sup> The decision to focus on Facebook alone was based on the fact that this is the most used platform in Bulgaria, as well as the platform of choice to civil society and political actors in Bulgaria – both as an alternative public sphere of sorts, and as a site for mobilisation and (online) activism. Twitter, Viber, YouTube, WhatsApp and the rest of the popular social media platforms, although used by different actors to different degrees, are nowhere near as popular in Bulgaria, and have a much narrower reach, which is partly the reason why activists tend to rely almost exclusively on Facebook for mobilisation. For instance, the 2018 Country Report of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Newman et al., 2018) indicates that 84% of respondents use Facebook for any purpose, and 73% for news, whereas Twitter is used by only 14% and 6%, respectively.

### **4.3.1 Content and discourse analysis of conflict framing and collective identity construction on social media**

Digitally mediated discourses in the context of protest mobilisation can be studied as the mediation and construction of collective identities and political conflict, as well as from the point of view of the reproduction of political ideology through mediated discussion framed by the particular political and ideological beliefs of a group. In analysing the online self-representation and oppositional identity construction of the collective actors, I employ a radical democratic perspective, as well as an analytical theoretical framework that understands identity negotiation in terms of the discursive *construction of us/them frontiers* and *collective action frames* (Svensson *et al.* 2015).

#### **4.3.1.1 Us vs. Them: Radical democracy, ideology and the discursive construction of hegemonic struggles**

As we saw in Section 2.2.3 in Chapter, 2 the framework of radical democracy situates different political positions in the social and discursive field of the “political”, where hegemonic power struggle takes place. Conflicts (or antagonisms in Chantal Mouffe’s terms) occur at points where the boundaries of discourse meet, and emerge where totalities, such as concepts of “objectivity” or “society,” are constituted and contested (Jones 2014, p. 14). Radical democratic theory sees conflicts as interrelated with social practices and processes of identification (Dahlgren 2009; Mouffe 2005a). From this perspective, the creation of an identity, whether individual or collective, is always an act of power, and this power-laden formative process always requires the creation of an adversarial relationship to “the Other”- an us/them distinction- since the identification of a “common enemy” (Mouffe 2006) unites different political positions in contestation.

The concept of ideology (Van Dijk 2006; Van Dijk 1998; Thompson 1990) is useful here as a starting point in respect to the way it gets constructed and reconstructed in discourse. Thompson broadly defines ideology as “meaning in the service of power” (1990, p. 7) and stresses the importance of examining the way meaning is constructed and conveyed by symbolic forms, such as text, images, and utterances, and how these symbolic forms are mobilised by elites to establish, sustain and justify relationships of domination. According to his theory, mass communication plays a central role in the production and diffusion of ideology. Where Thompson’s view on ideology is largely structural, Gramsci sees ideology as being produced and operating at the level of civil society as well (that is, at the level of contestation), and although for him it is also rooted in hegemony and domination, it is not necessarily based in class structure. In a Gramscian sense, ideology reflects a hegemonic

struggle over conceptions of the public good, which grants a hegemonic social group the legitimacy to hold state power. It is only when a certain way of thinking and seeing the world has acquired a hegemonic character in civil society that a political project built on it can become hegemonic. The success of a social group in acquiring and maintaining stable control over the modern state therefore depends on its influence on civil society. From a Gramscian perspective, civil society can be thus defined as a site of struggle between different groups striving for state power and ideology as the articulation of the different discourses of those groups contending for hegemony (Gramsci *et al.* 1971; Thomas 2013).

Ideology, as well as its reproduction and renegotiation in conflict, therefore represents an important aspect of such power struggles. According to Fairclough (1992), ideologies are important in establishing, maintaining, enacting and transforming power. For him, relations of power and struggle over power shape discursive practices in ideological ways and this opacity of the relationship between discourse and society is itself a factor in hegemonic domination (*ibid.*, p.67). Since they are “the basis of the social representations shared by members of a group”, ideologies often underpin arguments for, or explanations of, specific social arrangements, or influence particular understandings of the world (van Dijk 1998, p. 8). These ideologies, however, become more evident in confrontation than in everyday interaction (*ibid.*, p. 98). For Foucault (2003), discourse in contentious politics is essentially a struggle over such different understandings of the world, or “truths”, as counter discourses contest the legitimacy of dominant ones. The construction of these different perspectives on truth is based on the political belief systems of groups that act in contentious politics to challenge power. The establishment of friend-enemy constellation by the discursive construction of the Other and representation of certain aspects of the world in texts is central to such contestations and conflicts (Van Dijk 1998). The (re)construction of ideology in discourse can thus be analysed by looking at the polarisation between oppositional groups along “us” and “them” (or in-group and out-group) constellations in their discursive practices (cf. Neumayer 2013; see also; Van Dijk 1998; Reisigl 2017; Reisigl and Wodak 2009).

#### **4.3.1.2 Collective identity and collective action frames**

In addition to discursive approaches that foreground ideology, the signifying work performed by social movement actors has been also studied through the concept of collective action frames (Goodwin and Jasper 2003; Snow and Benford 1988; Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993; Wolfsfeld and Gadi 1997; McAdam *et al.* 2001), which are “defined as action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaign of a social movement organization (SMO)” (Benford and Snow 2000, p.

611). This perspective employs Goffman's concept of the frame to address this process of symbolic construction. For Goffman frames were "schemata of interpretation" that help audiences "locate, perceive, identify, and label" information about occurrences around them (1974, p.21). Typically, frames "define problems", "diagnose causes", "make moral judgments", and "suggest remedies" (Entman 1993, p.52 following Gamson, 1992). In order for the leaders of an organisation or movement to make their discourses appealing to potential supporters, they need to achieve resonance, which is determined by the interaction of two sets of factors: credibility and salience of their frames (Benford and Snow 2000). Furthermore, when individual frames become linked in congruency and complementariness, "frame alignment" is said to occur (Snow *et al.* 1986, p.464). In other words, collective action frames aim at triggering a cognitive process that turns discontent into (collective) action.

This process further involves the construction of a resonant collective identity for movement participants (Polletta and Jasper 2001). As we saw in Chapter 3 the construction of collective identity is a process that involves the "collapsing" of individuals into a group that perceives itself as a "we" and exhibits collective agency (Snow 2001). According to Melucci, this identity work involves 'an interactive and shared definition produced by a number of individuals (or groups at a more complex level) concerning the orientations of their action and the field of opportunities and constraints in which such action is to take place' (1996, p. 70). It is a process in which "elements are constructed and negotiated through a recurrent process of activation of the relations that bind actors together" (*ibid.*), and which happens at the frontier between the private sphere of the individual and the collective sphere of action. Referring to Melucci's theory, Matoni and Treré further note that "identities in social movements are said to require a continuous act of recognising and being recognised that implies a conspicuous passage of information between social movement actors and the environment in which they act" (2014, p.253). In other words, participants in collective action constantly reflect on the membership and boundaries of the group, as well as on its goals, resources, and social and political role and place within the larger context (Laraña *et al.* 1994).

#### **4.3.2 Content and discourse analysis of conflict framing and collective identity construction on social media**

According to (Hunt and Benford 1994), framing processes thus link individuals and groups ideologically and constitute a central mechanism in identity negotiation between activists and supporters (Benford and Snow 2000, p.632). In respect to that, Steinberg's(1998)

discursive take on frame alignment seeks to combine the discursive and framing approaches, by viewing the dynamic process of frame formation as a dialogic negotiation of meaning, permeated with explicit power relations within a “terrain of conflict.” He argues that in order to understand the framing process, we need to look at the discursive fields within which it takes place. This discursive approach further sees framing as a collective process, which involves paying attention to the “complex multi-level processes by which meanings are both circulated and transformed between the level of the small group and the mass media” (ibid.:, p. 862) – and, I will add, now increasingly social media. From that perspective, social movements are engaged in innovative forms of discursive practices that challenge *or reproduce* the existing order of discourse, or ideology, in a given social sphere (Lindekilde 2014, p.205).

The textual analysis in this study employs such a discursive approach to analysing framing processes. Its aim is to 1) identify, classify and compare the diverse interpretative frames that the different civil society actors employ, as well as the various contexts and meanings associated with them; 2) identify the communication strategies that different actors adopt in the depiction or construction of political and social conflict on social media; 3) reflect on the styles adopted by participants in the discussions on Facebook (i.e. on the democratic quality of the discourse, see Chapter 3) in process of mobilisation and the rules and norms, if any, that organise discourse production; and 4) trace the discursive processes of framing (Benford and Snow 2000), as well as the interplay between the different frames in the construction of collective identities and friend/enemy discourses.

In respect to that, I have chosen to conduct content analysis of posts and comments collected from the protest mobilisation pages of different protest groups, which allows me to generate an overview of the predominant framings in the discourses of these groups, as well as to compare them. It also allows me to compare the overall *quality* of the discourse across the different cases. Content analysis in general is essential to finding patterns, based on which researchers can methodically evaluate texts and their use of framing, and allows for comparison between them (Reul *et al.* 2016, p.6).

In addition, the active reproduction, construction and reconstruction of ideologies and power relations in the online identification practices of different civil society groups can be addressed in a more in-depth manner through the conceptual framework of Discourse Theory (Carpentier and De Cleen 2007; Phelan and Dahlberg 2011; Laclau and Mouffe 2001), which is concerned with how different political positions form the “political”, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough 2003; Reisigl and Wodak 2009; Van Dijk 1998), which examines how power relations are reproduced in discourse. Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory allows for the examination of political identities in terms of the

formation of frontiers against a common enemy and the formation of unities based in the development of collective identity through articulation. Language, however, is not an isolated element of social life but is interrelated with other elements (Fairclough 1992, 2003). Critical discourse analysis therefore focuses on how discourse is articulated by social practices with other non-discoursal social elements by taking account of the order of discourse, power and the social structures of language (Fairclough 2003, p. 25).

Both discourse and frame analysis are concerned with examining the relationship between movement “texts” and their broader contexts. Thus their combined interest “is the discursive battles over meaning and definition of reality, which play out within and among social movements, and among their friends and foes, often in the public sphere” (Lindekilde 2014, p. 196). Though they differ in the way they analyse these questions, the scope of analysis, and in the degree of strategic rationality attributed to actors, discourse and frame analysis may be combined so as to add depth to the study (ibid.). In my project I combine them in order to examine and compare how different discourses of “democratic citizenship” and “friend/enemy” conflicts are upheld or challenged by frames and counterframes across various types of civil society actors in the field, and the role of social media in these processes.

Basing my framework on literature that deals with the role of media in conflicts (Vladisavljevic and Voltmer 2017; Wolfsfeld and Gadi 1997; Voltmer and Kraetzschmar 2015; Vladisavljević 2015) I have isolated the following two “elements” to focus on, which I believe offer a meaningful conceptualisation of the main “ingredients” of a conflict or contention and collective identity framing that can be found in collective action on social media – namely, what is the protest about, and who is involved:

- **Problem/s definition** – what is the conflict/contention about? What are the identified causes of the problem/s? That includes any **solutions** identified as well.
- **Actors** – who is involved in the conflict/contention? Who are “we” (Us) and who are “they” (Them)? How are the two sides designated? What are the particular objectives of the actors involved? That includes their **actions** (what are the means used or undertaken by these actors?) and any **moral judgments** made by them in respect to themselves or the “Others” (i.e. the legitimacy, justification, and morality of actions and actors).

#### **4.3.2.1 Data collection for content and discourse analysis**

The content and discourse analysis are based on a selection of between 490-700 posts and comments per case (including the About sections, treated as a separate post), collected from the Facebook event pages set up for the purpose of protest mobilisation (see Section 4.2.2.1.): a total of 674 for Save Pirin, 543 for ANW, 496 for JFA and 591 for NPAAO. The selection criteria consisted of all the posts and tails of comments made on the day the protest event page was set up, and then those made on the day before, during and after the protest took place. Only in the case of the NPAAO protest, where the protest event page was created 6 months before the actual event, and then updated a few weeks before via a pinned post that contained more developed protest aims –i.e. a description of the problems, demands, and solutions- I have included that day as well. Furthermore, in respect to the Save Pirin protests, where the posting and commenting over the selected days was of at a much higher rate than in the other cases (more than double the amount of posts and comments), for the sake of balance and equal weight, I further limited the selection of posts and comments from each of the designated days. I did this by cutting out posts proportionately from the beginning and end of each day, with some adjustments made aimed at keeping the whole tail of comments under each post that fell under the selection criteria.

The posts and comments were collected manually, by copying and pasting into an Excel document, together with the date (of each post, but not the comments in the tail), any links (to videos, images, other posts etc.) contained in the posts or comments, the number of likes (or other interactions) and the number of shares. The data was then coded in SPSS via an especially designed coding scheme, and analysed manually in Excel.

#### **4.3.2.2 Content analysis of conflict framing and collective identity cohesion**

Collective action frame analysis focuses on the process of the attribution of meaning that underlies any conflict by looking at the strategic ways different civil society actors act upon particular issues and attempt to mobilise potential sympathisers (Caiani *et al.* 2012, p.12). Conflicts are usually constructed with the use of frames, which “define problems”, “diagnose causes”, “make moral judgements”, and “suggest remedies” (Entman 1993: p.52; following Gamson 1992). Collective action frames are further “defined as action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaign of a social movement organisation (SMO)” and aim at mobilising potential supporters and demobilising antagonists (Benford and Snow 2000, p. 611). In this respect, grievances are not automatic and self-sustained motives of protest, but are rather the



product of ongoing interaction among social actors, including via social media (see Chapter 3).

Furthermore, as already discussed in Chapter 2, processes of identity building in contentious politics always involve the construction of an “us” and a “them”—that is, the identification of an *Other* against which a coherent *Us* can be defined (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, p.136). This frontier between *us* and *them* is where *the political* in radical democracy is found. For my analytical purposes in respect to this identity construction, I have loosely adopted Abdelal et al.’s (2006) analytical framework for Identity as Variable, which defines a collective identity as a social category that varies along two dimensions—content and contestation. The authors define *content* as the meaning of a collective identity that according to them may take the form of four non-mutually-exclusive types: 1) *Constitutive norms* or the formal and informal rules that define group membership; 2) *Social purposes* or the overall goals shared by members of the group; 3) *Relational comparisons* or the definition of an identity group by counterpoising it to what it is not, or to other identity groups; and 4) *Cognitive models*, or the worldviews or perceptions of the way a particular identity shapes political and material conditions and interests (p. 696). *Contestation*, on the other hand, refers to the degree of agreement within a group over the content of the shared identity (ibid.). The authors therefore do not understand collective identities as fixed or constant, but as varying in the agreement or disagreement about their meanings, with the concept of contestation expressing “the fluidity and contextual nature of identities” (p. 697).

I adapt Abdelal et al.’s (2006) analytical framework as follow. First, in terms of *content*, I treat 1) *constitutive norms* and 4) *cognitive models* as related to the way “we” or “Us” is represented (i.e. who “we” are, what “we” want, what “we” do or have done, what “we” believe in, value, fight for, etc.). I furthermore relate 2) *social purposes* to how the problems and solutions are defined, and 3) *relational comparisons* to how the “Them” is represented (i.e. who “they” are, what “they” want, what “they” do or have done, what “they” believe in, value (or do not value) etc.<sup>13</sup> Finally, when it comes to *contestations*, I relate that to the level of *internal polarisation* on the Facebook mobilisation event pages, that is, any arguments or contestation present in respect to the framing of the protests, their organisation and tactics, the perceived legitimacy of the organisers/leaders and so on.

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<sup>13</sup> This adaptation and analysis is loosely based on Vicari’s (2010) linguistic approach to frame analysis and coding that combines Benford and Snow’s (1998, 2000) and Gamson’s (1992) conceptual frameworks with a generalised “frame semantic grammar” model.

With those considerations in mind, the content analysis<sup>14</sup> of the conflict framing during protest mobilisation has been designed to, first, evaluate the posts and comments on the Facebook event pages set up for that purpose in terms of *what* they identify as a *problem* (or *cause of problems*) (coded as different kinds of causes of problems, i.e. “political institutions”, “political culture”, “judiciary” etc., see Codebook in Appendix D<sup>15</sup>, “PROBLEM” variables), *whom* they designate as an *opponent* or *enemy/adversary* (coded as “Them”) <sup>16</sup>, and *how they construct and represent the Us* (coded as “Us”) (see Codebook, Section D2).

Coding for *contestation* (coded as “You” and “internal problems”, see Codebook, Section D.3), in the posts and comments, on the other hand, allows me to also measure and compare the overall levels of *internal polarisation* on the different protest mobilisation pages (and therefore, the coherence of the collective identities and the relative strength of intergroup- solidarity on them)– that is, to determine how much of the discussions are internal arguments, in respect to what, and how polarised are those arguments.

In addition, from a radical democratic perspective I am also interested in *how polarising these designations are*, in terms of the level of antagonism expressed towards the designated enemies or adversaries- both external Them, as well as internal You (cf. Mouffe). The content analysis thus tries to measure whether the conflict is constructed in a relatively antagonistic or agonistic (i.e. radical democratic) way (see Codebook, Section D.4). It also considers the *kind* of antagonistic speech (if any), prevalent in the discourses of the different protest groups in respect to the external Them or the internal You. The quality of the speech is measured in terms of levels of incivility and impoliteness (or confrontational speech) (cf. Papacharissi 2004). Thus, the presence of high levels of uncivil speech is taken to indicate low levels of subscription to liberal democratic values, such as tolerance and pluralism. High levels of impolite speech would, on the other hand,

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<sup>14</sup> Please refer to the Codebook in Appendix D for a detailed explanation of how the different aspects are coded.

<sup>15</sup> Some of the variables in the Codebook were adopted from the MeCoDEM Media Content Analysis Codebook (2014) (cf. Voltmer and Kraetzschmar, 2015; Vladislavljevic and Voltmer 2017). The MeCoDEM project was led by Katrin Voltmer, University of Leeds (UK) and funded by the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration. <http://mecodem.eu/> (accessed 10 September 2019)

indicate general disregard or subversion of rational argumentation (cf. Habermas, see also Chapter 2).

#### **4.3.2.3 Conflict construction in discourse and counter-publicity**

I have chosen to base my in-depth analysis of the selected posts and tails of comments on the Discourse–Historical Approach (DHA) to critical discourse analysis (Reisigl and Wodak 2009), as it focuses specifically on representation of Self-Other identities. Although it is usually applied in respect to constructions of national identity and prejudice towards “out” groups (Wodak 2001; Wodak 1999), here I have adapted it to look at the construction of collective identities in the course of collective action mobilisation (“us” vs. “them”). The main analytical categories in DHA are: 1) referential/nomination strategies; 2) predication strategies (action attributions), which associate the “named” categories to negative consequences in the case of the out-group (the “them”) and to positive ones in the case of the in- group (the “us”); and 3) argumentation strategies (also Fairclough 2003, p. 81), through which the positive and negative attributions are justified (e.g. for or against certain social actors), along with the legitimisation of the collective action (mobilisation against “Them”) (KhosraviNik 2010, pp. 57-66). The first two “consider the linguistic construction of social actors, objects, events, processes and their qualification in terms of what actions, qualities, attributions etc. are associated with the actors of Self and Other (KhosraviNik and Zia 2014, p.765) (see Appendix E for an example of how the analysis of Us and Them representations was conducted). The third is also linked to the qualities of the discourse.

The analysis (here integrated with the content analysis of the framing and *quality* of the discourse discussed in the previous section) is also mindful of how discourse is articulated by social practices with other non-discoursal social elements (Fairclough 2003, p. 25). The thematic questions of What (is/is not in the text) and How (the textual characteristics are/are not deployed) are answered by investigating the representations of Us and Them. The Why (is it like this) question is engaged with via contextualisation, that is, by linking the text to relevant socio-political explications, particularly in respect to historical processes of democratisation and the development of (the idea of) civil society and democratic citizenship in Bulgaria in the post-socialist period (cf. KhosraviNik and Zia, 2014).

#### **4.3.3 Semi-structured interviews**

In order to better understand and compare how visibility is pursued, and trust and legitimacy negotiated on social media, as well as to examine the practices, perceptions, motivations and intentions of the activists, I also conducted 27 semi-structured interviews with civil society actors linked to the three broad case studies and the particular protest

cases outlined in Section 4.2 (see Table 4.1) between January and May 2017. 25 of the interviews were conducted in person, and 2 over Skype. The interviews lasted between 1-1.5 hours.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as a method since they are more flexible and are conducted with a fairly open framework that allows to have focused two-way communication. Moreover, semi-structured interviews can help shed light on issues that are difficult to discover with other methods and can provide insights into perceptions and underlying motives of decision-making (Yin 2003; Flick 2009). On the other hand, interviews' limitations lie in the fact that they are only verbal reports and therefore subject to bias, poor recall, and poor or inaccurate articulation. Answers can be also affected by poorly articulated questions, reflexivity (interviewee gives what the interviewer wants to hear) or by how the interviewee perceives the interviewer (Yin 2009, pp.106-107).

For each case, recruitment was done following a "snowballing approach," by first approaching key players in respect to the three case studies outlined in Section 4.2.1 and the specific protest cases described in Section 4.2.1.1, and then following up with recommendations, suggestions and contacts provided by those participants. In terms of identifying the interviewees connected to the specific protest cases, I approached the people or organisations that had set-up the events and acted as main administrators of the Facebook pages. In respect to the broader protest movements that make-up the three case studies- the environmental, Winter and Summer 2013 protests – I approached key figures in Coalition "For the Nature", Protest Network, Initiative "Justice for All", and SILA, as well as the only person who at the time was publicly associated himself with the anonymous Facebook Page National Protest Against All Outrages. Participants were recruited through the private Facebook messaging service or email, with the same explanatory message/email outlining the nature and purpose of the research sent to all (attached in Appendix B).

For the purpose of this study 27 interviews between one and two hours long were conducted. I aimed to have an equal weight of participants from each designated case study<sup>17</sup>. The fieldwork was concluded once a point of saturation was believed to have been reached – i.e. when participants were not adding anything particularly novel to the discussions. Those included the following participants (see also Table 4.1 above for case

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<sup>17</sup> Though, as already noted, the boundaries between the cases are not clear cut, so some of the interviewees have been involved, including in organisational capacity, in protests pertaining to more than one of the designated broad cases.

summaries; also Appendix F for an anonymised list of respondents according to case) :

- 1) 10 people who are or have been involved in the last ten or so years in environmental-activism – that is, they have been involved in the organisation of campaigns and protests aimed at the preservation of Bulgarian nature threatened by development projects, legal or illegal logging, etc. These are all people who were involved in the organisation of the campaign and protests against the prospect of further ski development in Pirin National Park. 7 of them work in different environmental NGOs that are part of Coalition “For the Nature”. One person is the initiator of various civil society groups and protests against illegal development and construction around the Black Sea coast, and was the creator of a separate Facebook group (and later registered organisation) called Save Pirin, which collaborated with the Coalition during the campaign, but was not officially part of it. And the final one has been involved in various environmental protests and grassroots groups, but also in the more populist protests as well.
- 2) 9 people who became prominent as activists, protesters, bloggers and/or opinion leaders during the Summer 2013 protests, and who are or have been members of civil society groups and/or political organisations and parties that have their beginnings around that time, and to a large extent developed from these protests. These are people who largely identify as centre or right-wing (either conservative or liberal), with anti-communist, pro-Western/EU/NATO and anti-Russian/anti-Putin views, and have various ties to Western-funded liberal NGOs. All of them were part, in one way or another, of Protest Network. Most are also involved with, or support, Initiative “Justice for All”. The majority also support and/or have been involved in the organisation of the environmental protests, including in Summer 2012 and the one for the preservation of Pirin mountain.
- 3) 8 people who became active or publicly prominent during the big anti-governmental protests of Winter 2013, and who are, or have been, members of civil society groups or networks and/or political organisations that have their beginnings around that time, and to a large extent came out of these protests (such as SILA, National Movement “Vuzrajidane,” National Social Movement, National Movement “Han Kubrat”). These people belong to a broad network of largely nationalist, conservative, anti-liberal and/or populist groups, some of them self-identifying as “leftist” (i.e. those with an anti- neoliberal outlook and ties to, or more sympathetic

views of, the conservative Bulgarian Socialist Party and/or Russia and Putin's government), while others with views that are closer to far-right ideologies<sup>18</sup>. From the interviewees, 4 were directly linked to, or part of (ex) SILA, including the person who currently claims to be one of the admins behind the page National Protest Against All Outrages<sup>19</sup>. The other interviewees were from groups which were also involved in the winter 2013 protests and have since collaborated with SILA and other nationalist, far-right and/or populist groups on the organisation of various protests in recent years (e.g. against the Roma, against the refugees, against the Bulgarian Gay Pride, against high petrol and electricity prices, and more recently against the "Istanbul" Convention for the protection of women from gender-based and domestic violence and against the teaching of "gender ideology" in schools). Those include Moto Club Great Bulgaria<sup>20</sup> (1 interviewee). The rest of the interviewees for this case study are admins or moderators in pages and groups similar to NAPAAO and linked to the Winter 2013 movement, with a particular focus on people who were at the time of the fieldwork active in the organisation of protests against the Istanbul Convention and the (supposed) spread of "gender ideology" in Bulgarian schools.

The questions have been designed to reflect the theoretical basis of the research (discussed in Chapters 2 and 3) and to shed further light on how social and political conflict is understood and constructed by the different civil society actors, how visibility (of the right kind) is pursued, and how trust and legitimacy are established in the cross-media environment and the role of social media (with their affordances and logic) therein. The interview questions were designed on the one hand to interrogate the differences in the actors' self-perceptions, political ideologies and broader aims, and on the other, the

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<sup>18</sup> Though to different extents, since, as already mentioned, some of those were involved in the other protest movements of 2012-2013 as well, and do not differentiate between them. Although this study does not consider groups and organisations that clearly espouse Nazi or fascist ideologies, some of the people interviewed admitted to collaborating on occasions with some of these groups around different protest activities.

<sup>19</sup> The participant in question was asked if he could provide contacts with some of the other admins behind the page, but he said they had refused, because of security and other considerations, such as pressure and/or harassment by government officials and other power-holders.

<sup>20</sup> They also organised the welcoming of Putin's Night Wolves in the summer of 2016 and were the other side in the conflict with the protesters that took place then (see ANW protest case description in Section 4.2.1.1).

structure and organisation of the group/s they are involved in– that is, whether it is a formal expertise- oriented NGO, or a more informal non-expert grassroots civil society group or activist network. The questions were divided into three sections focusing on: 1) the organisation, group or activists and their protest activities (i.e. what is the structure of the group/organisation, its aims, how are decisions taken, what kinds of protests/activism they are involved in etc.) (background context and RQ1); 2) the visibility, trust building and mobilisation strategies and practices of the actors in respect to social and mainstream media and the challenges they experience in the Bulgarian political and media context (RQ1b and RQ2); and 3) the activists' self-definitions and representations in respect to their role as civil society actors operating at the border with political society (RQ1a) (see Appendix A for the detailed Interview Schedule).

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and formed the data for qualitative textual analysis conducted using NVIVO that aimed to identify common themes and narratives across the data sets. Thematic analysis was used in respect to the main focuses of the research questions: self-perceptions, aims and goals of activists in respect to the conflict; the type of organisations/groups and their activities; the challenges experienced by them in the Bulgarian media and political context; and their social media strategies and practices in respect to visibility, trust building and mobilisation and the challenges experienced in respect to those.

## **4.4 Ethics and Risks**

The involvement of human participants in the research requires prior ethical approval that I applied for in accordance with the guidelines of University of Leeds;.

### **4.4.1 Ethics in relation to digital data**

My study is based on the analysis of social media content produced by two groups of user: 1) public individuals or groups comprised of the civil society actors organizing the protests; and 2) private individuals comprised of protest supporters/Facebook group participants. The ethical issues relevant to my research thus relate to the privacy and anonymity of social media data.

For the content analysis I collected posts and comments by private individuals in public Facebook pages and groups. As Markham and Buchanan (2012) note in the Association of Internet Researchers ethics report, the ethical factors for collecting information in online public spaces are ambiguous and contested. For example, despite operating in a public space some people may still have expectations of privacy, or of how their communication

is used by third parties and out of the context in which it was produced. In such ambiguous contexts, they recommend adhering to Nissenbaum's (2010) concept of contextual integrity by considering what Zimmer (2010, p.323) calls the "contextual nature of privacy". In terms of the context of my study, I am therefore considering the following: the private individuals' content that will be included is produced in the context of public discussions on open public groups or pages. Users therefore intentionally engage in a public discussion, often with strangers, similarly to the way people comment in the comment sections under news articles.

In all cases, names associated with the comments have been anonymised so as to make participants less likely to be identified. Although some authors (e.g. Zimmer, 2010) argue that data gleaned from social media, even when anonymised, could be easily pieced together to identify the users, the only online data of private individuals that my study contains is in the form of comments on public Facebook pages and groups, and not on their personal Facebook accounts. Therefore, none of their profile information – birth date, gender, location, or other personally identifiable information was included in the study or data set. The analysis of data involves the comments or posts rather than the identity of the profile owners. As Markham and Buchanan (2012, p.7) note, in the case where the connection between the object of the research and the person who produced it is indistinct, there may be a tendency to define the research as not involving human participants. However, they also contend that in the context of Internet research, the concept of 'human subject' may not be as relevant as other terms such as harm, vulnerability and personally identifiable information. For example, users may be identified by quotes entered in a search engine and these are the sort of ethical consideration one needs to keep in mind. In my discourse analysis, I therefore refrain from using, where possible, long quotes from private social media users as illustrations. I also use them translated from Bulgarian into English.

#### **4.4.1.1 Risks and Harms**

My study only uses publicly available content from contexts where no registration or group membership is required to view it. I deliberately make sure to not include comments done by participants that are obviously minors, as they are considered a vulnerable group. Although the data is political in nature and involves mobilisation against authorities, it is nevertheless posted in open public spaces and accessible to all, including authorities. I therefore do not foresee a need to seek the consent of users to use it. However, as discussed above, I have taken measures to anonymise any direct quotes used in my analysis, or minimise the use of such quotes where they make the identification of the



person likely, or when their nature is such that they might put the person at high risk of being targeted by authorities.

#### **4.4.2 Ethics in relation to interviews**

All participants were provided with an information sheet and a consent form (included in Appendices B and C). The consent form asked participants to sign if they were willing to take part in the research, for the sessions to be recorded and for their responses to be published. All interviewees were given the right to withdraw their consent up to a month after the interview and were provided with my contact details in case they had any questions or concerns. I kept their information confidential and anonymised all transcripts in order to minimize the risk of them being identified. Data was stored on the servers provided by University of Leeds. Most participants were happy to not be anonymised, as they are recognisable public figures/activists, and their views and activities are well known and openly present in the public sphere. Only three participants were reluctant to participate at first (particularly from the populist case study, i.e. the Winter 2013 protests) due to security reasons, and requested anonymity. Nevertheless, I have taken measures to anonymise all participants, and am providing only information about the groups/organisations they are linked to (see Appendix F for a list).

#### **4.5 Final reflections on the methodology and research design and their limitations**

For reasons of time and resource limitations, certain additional foci of enquiry were dropped from the research design. For instance, I was planning to conduct content and discourse analysis of mainstream media coverage of the protests and actors in question, in order to relate the conflict framing of the different groups and their visibility and legitimisation activities to those of the media in respect to them. However, as it would have required a much bigger scope of analysis than the limitations of this project allowed for, the media coverage was not conducted at the end. Similar considerations underpinned the decision to drop plans to conduct multimodal discourse analysis of the online communication - for instance, in respect to likes/reactions to comments and posts, as well as memes, images, videos and articles posted during the mobilisation efforts on the Facebook event pages. Although such an analysis would have provided another, and richer, level of understanding of the processes of conflict representation and construction on social media, it would have also required additional set of skills and understanding of the materials, as well as a much longer timeframe than the duration of the PhD allowed

for. This was part of the consideration to limit the analysis to Facebook event pages, and not expand it to other mobilisation sites, such as Facebook groups, pages and profiles, and even other social media platforms. Another consideration in this respect was the increasingly important questions of privacy, especially in respect to Facebook groups – whose “publicness” is a particularly grey area.

Finally, as already noted in previous sections, the groups and actors that are the focus of this study cannot be considered as exhaustive of the three protest movement cases in question, as there were other actors and groups involved as well, of different political outlooks and aims. The case studies chosen here are also not representatives of the whole of civil society in Bulgaria and its conflicts. However, I have chosen to focus on those particular ones, on the one hand due to limitations of time and resources, but also because I believe that they are illustrative of some of the key struggles going on *within* civil society in Bulgaria at the moment, and that understanding this dynamic contributes to better understanding of the dynamics of democratic politics and contestation in the Bulgarian context (but also beyond) overall.

## **5. Between civil and political society**

### **5.1 Introduction**

My principal concern in this chapter is RQ1a: **how do different civil society actors involved in contentious politics in Bulgaria understand their role in, and aims in respect to, political conflict?** The discussion that follows is based on interviews with activists from different civil society groups and/or networks. To answer the research question I interrogated the activists' self – understanding as civil society actors, including the way(s) they see their relationship to “the political” and the system of democratic representation more generally (see interview questions 1-4 and 17-20 in Appendix A). I found that the self-perceptions of different civil society actors as single-issue pressure groups or political opposition are both *anti-political* in their *rejection of partisanship* and take on an either technocratic or populist orientation to “the political” (Bickerton and Accetti 2017; Laclau 2005; Rosanvallon 2011). Here I treat “civil society” not as a social field populated by NGOs or interest voluntary groups and clubs, but as a Discourse open to polemical interpretation and appropriation by actors locked in a struggle with the political and economic elites, on the one hand, and at times with each other, on the other. In other words, I treat it as a discourse mobilised by the various protest actors in the rhetorical establishment of their identity and objectives as broader movements or civil society groups, which allows me to then better understand and evaluate their practices and strategies in respect to those objectives.

### **5.2 Civil society as an anti-political opposition: antagonism towards politics and its implications**

As noted in Chapter 2, Bulgarian society, similarly to the rest of the post-socialist block, has been characterised with very low levels of trust in the country's political system and democratic institutions (Mishler & Rose, 2001; Van der Meer, 2017). At the same time, civil society, as a polemical concept, has retained a veneer of purity and idealism. As we saw in Chapter 2, during the struggles against totalitarianism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in the 1970s and 1980s, the dissidents embraced the concept of civil society as a “shining emblem” (Gellner 1994, p. 1) and construed it as “anti-politics”. In other words, they posited the opposition to the authoritarian state as a *non-partisan* social movement based in a higher *morality* and existing outside of, or even in opposition to, the realm of politics (see Chapter 2). In what follows, I will interrogate the extent to which such discourses of civil society shape the different Bulgarian protest actors' understanding of

their current democratic and political role, as well as the conceptualisation and designation of their broader aims in that respect.

### **5.2.1 Civil society, politics and political parties in Bulgaria**

The respondents' attitudes towards the political elites, parties and civil society in Bulgaria are in line with the observed general societal trends in CEE noted above. Thus, all respondents expressed highly negative views of the governing elites, including of both the current ruling right-wing party GERB and its far-right coalition partner the Patriotic Front, as well as the Parliamentary opposition, i.e. BSP (the Bulgarian Socialist Party), DPS (Movement for Rights and Freedoms, also known as the "Turkish ethnic minority party"), and more recent populist parties like Volya ("Will"). The interviewees thus do not tend to see much of a difference between the mainstream political parties (or the Parliamentary-represented ones) and consider them to a large extent to be interchangeable—i.e. as representing the interests of the status quo and/or "mafia" structures and oligarchic circles in the country, with leaders who are criminal, immoral, corrupt, incompetent and/or working only for their own narrow self- or party interests and the interests of their oligarchic backers. This distrust in political parties is also perceived to be widespread in society, so any connection to a party, or any (visible) participation of a party in a civil society protest, is considered to be delegitimising, and is therefore avoided or discouraged, with obvious party identification signs often banned or missing from the protests:

The parties are a normal part of civil society, but in Bulgaria [...] the view has gained dominance that they are not. That the parties are in a sense criminal organisations, which need to be restricted by any means (Respondent 14, (neo)liberal/pro-Western case/organisation).

The mainstream parties are also often seen as taking advantage of and manipulating civil society protests for their own political ends, and thus as "untrustworthy" partners, even when, from the position of Parliamentary opposition, they may take the side of the protesters against the government. Although members and leaders of parties are not necessarily expected not to join protests, their support in official capacity (rather than as "independent citizens") is considered to be damaging:

[...] if one party declares itself, it will repel people who are not its supporters. And overall, there are no such declarations [...] the politicians, who support the protests, do it as citizens (Respondent 2, environmental case/organisation).

Because of their negative attitudes towards and distrust in all major parties in Parliament, activists in Bulgaria often construct (“their” side of) civil society as the *actual*, though extra-Parliamentary, *opposition*, which has the watchdog job of monitoring and criticising the government’s actions, exerting pressure on it when it breaks the laws, and demanding that it change course when it fails to defend the national interest. Activists from Protest Network, for instance, describe their role as being a “corrective” to *any* government:

And in reality, these are our ambitions– to be corrective to every power, regardless...you know, if ‘Da Bulgaria’ together with DCB<sup>21</sup> go into power and start doing stupid things, of course that we will go after them too (Respondent 16, (neo)liberal/pro-Western case).

Those working in established NGOs see their role, and the conflicts in which they engage, in more technocratic terms, as between “civil society experts” against “the state”. As “experts” they mainly engage with single issues of specialised interest to them, when they deem intervention is necessary in order to stop (incompetent or corrupt) representatives of the state to push through inept legislation or breach existing regulations and laws:

We normally argue with the state, right, we argue...with no one else than the state, whether the state is right or not (Respondent 1, environmental case/organisation).

Nevertheless, the organisationally linked civil society actors are open to working *with* the government and other institutions and organisations when necessary, and when possible. This openness is also shared by grassroots groups or activists focused on single issues, such as saving particular natural areas from development:

We also are leading some negotiations with this government through all kinds of channels. We are not in some kind of an isolation here – “We are total revolutionaries, and we won’t negotiate with you at all”. No, we want to reach our goals, and we think there needs to be a dialogue (Respondent 8, environmental case/grassroots).

At the same time, the narrow, single-issue and expertise-oriented focus of some NGOs and their employees can clash with their activism and *political* aims, since it predisposes them to ignore the “bigger picture” and the reality of the *political* field on which they operate when involved in campaigning. Thus, some expertise-oriented protesters’ (i.e. those that work on particular biodiversity-related scientifically-oriented topics) lack of knowledge of the larger political processes in the country, and their inability to make connections and

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<sup>21</sup> ‘Da, Bulgaria’ (“Yes, Bulgaria”) and DCB (“Democrats for a Stronger Bulgaria”) are two centre-right, extra-Parliamentary parties headed by people that used to be part of Protest Network or are close to its members.

bridge to other issues, was cited as one of Coalition “For the Nature”’s major weaknesses as a *political* actor by one of its leading activists:

The citizen activists, according to me, need to be well informed about the overall political situation in the country, in order to know where their problem is coming from [...] This is the weakness of the citizen movements, in my opinion. The people, focused in their problems, miss the bigger picture and therefore make the wrong decisions (Respondent 2, environmental case/grassroots).

Members of groups such as SILA and Moto Club “Great Bulgaria”, who are active participants in and/or organisers of single-issue protests of far-right/nationalist/populist (such as against migrants or the Roma), but also sometimes socio-economic character (i.e. against high electricity prices, see Chapter 4 on context and cases) also tend to see their role as an extra-Parliamentary opposition or a “citizen corrective”, which “means that you have to be an opposition to every single unacceptable decision taken in respect to the people” (Respondent 21, populist case/grassroots). This “citizen corrective” is imagined as always “outside” of Parliament, because “you can’t expect the Parliamentary parties to act as real opposition” as “they are all the same”:

They can be opposition only in respect to business projects that concern some of them. But in no way can they be an opposition in respect to the decisions concerning the citizens. That is why the state needs a corrective (Respondent 21, populist case/grassroots).

The way they define “unacceptable”, however, is in more nationalist-conservative terms, for instance as threatening to “the national interest”, or to the “traditional Bulgarian values and culture”, the “traditional family”, the ‘purity of the Republic’ and/or the well-being of “the normal (ethnic) Bulgarians”:

As I said- the defence of the Bulgarian border, the protection of the most vulnerable, the protection of the national interest, especial now in such disturbed times [...] (Respondent 23, populist case/grassroots).

We have more of a national patriotic conservative orientation. We don’t want a “gender” society, we are not keen of the gay parade. Everyone is free to be what they want, but for us it is not proper [...] we just don’t like this kind of public showing off (Respondent 21, populist case/grassroots).

These activists in particular also tend to see themselves in a Robin Hoodian light as “patriotic people, who love their country” and who also help “the most vulnerable” (Respondent 23, populist case/grassroots). For instance a number of the respondents stressed the fact that due to their rise to prominence during the protest wave of 2012-2013, they have become recognisable to the general public, and as a result people often stop

them on the street or contact them online with problems and pleads for help. They then decide whether to help – for example by using their online networks to organise fundraising campaigns or to spread information and support a cause-on a case by case basis. For instance, at the time of the interview some ex-SILA activists were approached with a plea to support a campaign against prosecuting an ethnic Bulgarian doctor for shooting, with an illegal firearm, a Roma man who broke into his garage:

We support, yes, if it is a human thing and the people insist, right, whether it is right or not, these are personal...we can't decide. We from a human point of view are obliged, if there is tension, and the people really say it is like that..." (Respondent 23 populist case/grassroots).

Even if a strong distrust of partisan politics and of mainstream political parties is expressed by most activists, a significant number of the respondents, however, admit to have been candidates of, or to have been involved in, the development of smaller political parties or movements, which have tried, at one point or another, to enter the National Assembly (though so far unsuccessfully), in order to act as an *official* Parliamentary opposition and influence policy this way. This crossing of the boundary between civil and political society is often described as a reluctant, yet necessary - if real change is to be sought in the unresponsive to civil society political environment- move of last resort:

[...] for example some good idea, it has started from civil society. In one moment, in order to reach Parliament or the local council, if it is for local aims, if then... however, there are people who do not listen to civil society, then what do we do? [...] We start a political party. Although you don't want to bother with political parties (Respondent 16, (neo)liberal/pro-Western case/organisation).

For instance, a number of the high profile activists who work in the NGO-members of Coalition "For the Nature" (including two of the interviewees) are also members and/or have been candidates of the Green Party, which has close links (both professional and personal) to the Coalition and to the environmental NGO sector more generally. Furthermore, at least five of the respondents linked to Protest Network have been candidates, or at the time of writing were members of the managing boards of the parties that came out of the 2013 summer protests – "Da, Bulgaria" and "DEOS"<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> DEOS broke apart at the end of 2018, though some of its main figures went on to become candidates of "Da, Bulgaria".

Finally, a number of the interviewees from the populist case study admitted their previous short-lived involvement in the populist political project of the TV journalist Nikolaj Barekov that appeared during the Winter 2013 protests, as well as in the establishment of the National Movement “Vuzrazjdane”- a far-right nationalist-populist party, which has tried (so far unsuccessfully) to enter the domestic and European Parliaments. Others said they had tried to start their own political projects, which disintegrated prematurely due to interpersonal conflicts. The main reasons given by the interviewees for leaving such initiatives were lack of trust and the realisation that they were not “genuine” and not “the real deal” – i.e. that there were hidden political and/or economic interests involved “behind the scenes” (Respondent 20, populist case/grassroots).

### **5.2.2 Protest as a tool of extra-Parliamentary politics in Bulgaria**

In terms of the extra-Parliamentary political “tools” that different civil society activists in Bulgaria use to try to further their aims, the large majority of the respondents see protesting as a last, though often necessary in the current political environment, resort. Other tools for political pressure and awareness-raising that the activists employ include lobbying, petitioning, resorting to the courts, organising of local or national campaigns and other forms of attention-grabbing media stunts (such as visual performances):

We have organised specialised events with key participants [...] We have done round tables and discussions. Thus any form of pressure in terms of realising the aims that we've had...so that a real justice reform can happen [...] (Respondent 17, (neo)liberal/pro-Western case/organisation).

Protests are normally resorted to when other means fail, or when the activists think there is an immediate danger of something unacceptable and/or illegal being passed or undertaken by the government that could have irreparable damaging consequences (such as opening National Park Pirin for further development, revising the “right” kind of national history taught in schools, or the ratification of the Istanbul Convention):

And now they have taken “Turkish slavery” out of the textbooks, and are trying to tell us that there was no such thing. So all these, Ivan Vazov, Zahari Stoyanow, all the Bulgarian classics, have been lying [...] These are the kind of things that do not let you sleep calmly (Respondent 23, populist case/grassroots).

What kinds of protests different groups and activists see as effective tools in this respect, however, depends on how they conceptualise their overall aims as civil society actors and also has to do with the kind of organisations they are involved with or represent. Since the



popular anti-governmental protests of Winter and Summer 2013, most of the activists who were involved at the time (in either one or in both) seem to have become disillusioned with the potential of such wide mass movements to lead to long-term change, especially if there is no *viable political* (that is, a party) alternative led by *their people* that can replace the main party players in the Bulgarian Parliament:

So, this is a topic of many bitter arguments even in our community – which protest has succeeded, which hasn't succeeded [...] It is obvious that we are not the ones governing the country, neither we as persons, neither the parties in which we participate (Respondent 12, (neo)liberal/pro-Western case/organisation).

However, for some what is important is the short-term potential of these kinds of broad anti-governmental protests – since they led, in one way or another, to the resignation of the respective governments in 2013-2014 - to scare the governing elites into listening to the citizens, by ultimately threatening the stability of the rule itself. As scholars have established previously, political violence has two interrelated components - its actual use and the threat of its use – and its aim is often to make the threat of violence credible, thereby pushing elites to implement change (Nieburg 1962, p.865; Della Porta and Diani 2006, pp. 178-185). In line with this, most of the activists linked to the Winter 2013 protests, but also a few connected to Protest Network and similar grassroots groups, expressed the view that more radical, disruptive, and even violent protests and the fear (of instability, violence, etc.) they can engender (rather than public support of the protests) is the only thing that can motivate the ruling elites to listen to the citizens and to change course. Short-lived successes are also seen as building up the citizens' belief in their own agency as political actors and keeping them motivated:

When this government falls because of such precedent, the next one will be more careful and more likely won't allow the same mistake. But the positive thing with every successful step of the citizens is that they, according to me, gain more and more belief in their own power (Respondent 10, (neo)liberal/pro-Western case/organisation).

As already noted, the activists involved with the formal NGOs (i.e. those part of the Coalition or Initiative "Justice for All") or those involved in single-issue grassroots campaigns (such as "Save Koral Beach" or "Save Kara Dere") overall tend to see protests as a tool to pressure an unresponsive government on *concrete issues*. Although they are not against it in principle, they thus do not think bringing down the government should be the main focus of a citizen protest's demands. Instead, they are more open to a *dialogue* with the government, rather than necessarily taking on a full-on oppositional stance, with

demands for a resignation left for until all else fails. Part of the reason is that they are the ones least likely to see themselves as a *political* opposition, but instead as experts in a particular area or as single-issue pressure groups :

Moreover the Coalition is not a structure [...] which tomorrow will change, roughly speaking, the government and take the power. First, because it is not a party, second because it doesn't have such an aim, and third, even if we all want to take down this government, it is not the Coalition the one that will point to the next one (Respondent 2, environmental case/organisation).

The employees of the NGOs, as well as the members and current candidates or leaders of political parties (i.e. ex-members of "Protest Network" who are currently in the managing board or are candidates of "Da, Bulgaria"), and especially the younger (and usually female) activists, also tend to be generally against "illegal" (i.e. not coordinated with the authorities), violent and/or radical and disruptive protests. The latter are considered counterproductive and damaging by these activists, especially in respect to the image and legitimacy of the protest and its public support. In that they orient towards what Keane (2004, p.34) calls 'the modern bourgeois conviction that violence against things is somehow equivalent to violence against people'. In that they privilege the mobilisation of broader allies as a strategic choice, than visibility and pressure through disruption and the threat (or enactment) of violence (Della Porta and Diani 2006: pp. 178-185):

Well, I overall am not a fan of the radical protests. I don't think they bring any change. I rather think that they create negative opinion (Respondent 5, environmental case/organisation).

These activists instead tend to be more inclined towards "positive," "non-violent" and "creative" stunts (of the "flash mob type") that draw the media's attention, but not in a negative way, and concentrate the energy "in the right direction" (Respondent 5, environmental case/organisation). This preference also reflects a concern about the reputational damages an "illegal" or violent protest might inflict on the non-governmental organisations they represent, or a worry that it might delegitimise the protest in the eyes of the public or turn away some of its usual supporters , such as "people with kids who won't bring their child when they know that someone will fight with the police":

But we often can't commit as a Coalition, which is after all created with organisations that are registered, we need after all to do things in a legal way and to protect our image to an extent [...] After all these are organisations, which are for public benefit which have their aims, budgets, right, serious things (Respondent 4, environmental case/organisation).

Most respondents agree, however, that the political context (with its structure and opportunities) in which the protests happen is also important when it comes to how

successful they will turn out to be, or what form they will take. For instance the main Save Pirin protest was planned to coincide with the opening ceremony of the Bulgarian EU Presidency, because of an expectation that the presence of top EU official in the country would make the Bulgarian government more accommodating to the protesters' demands (in an attempt to look more "democratic" or to avoid disruption and damage to its image). In reality, the opposite seemed to take place – the EU officials did not want to "rock the boat" and damage the Union's image by criticising the Presidency host, and therefore closed their eyes to the issues of corruption etc. raised by protesters on the streets of Sofia, thus emboldening the government to further ignore and/or dismiss the protests.

### **5.2.3 Protest framing: single issue campaigns vs. broad anti-governmental revolts**

Previous studies on social movements have shown that protest actors often face the dilemma of how broad or narrow their framing should be (see Benford and Snow, 2000). Gerhards and Rucht (1992) hypothesised that the "larger the range of problems covered by a frame, the larger the range of social groups that can be addressed with the frame and the greater the mobilisation capacity of the frame" (p. 580 cited in Benford and Snow 2000, p. 618). They further proposed that this would hold true only insofar as the various problems incorporated in a frame could be "plausibly connected to one another" (ibid). Although the scope of the collective action frames associated with most movements is usually limited to the interests of a particular group or to a set of related problems (ibid. p. 619), the scope of some collective action frames can be quite broad and have them function as "master frames" (Snow and Benford 1992). Research (i.e Noonan 1995) has shown that master frames may vary in respect to how inclusive and flexible they are, as well as in their interpretive scope, which has an impact on which groups are mobilised and which not. Swart (1995) has further suggested that in order for frames to function as master frames they need to be not only inclusive and flexible, but also "culturally resonant to their historical milieu" (p, 446, cited in Snow and Benford 1992, p.619). The analysis of the interviews with the different Bulgarian activists suggests that similar framing dilemmas and struggles to find a "master frame" that is resonant with as many civil society groups as possible hold true in the Bulgarian context as well.

Thus, the decisions about how much to scale-up (or expand) the demands of the protest in order to attract a broader range of supporters, as well as which groups to openly collaborate with, usually reflect what the protest organisers see as a strategically useful framing. On the one hand, the organisationally-linked activists or the members of single issue pressure groups (such as Save Koral Beach) tend to prefer a focus on few clear and

concrete demands- for instance the withdrawal of the ministerial decision from December 2017 that opened Pirin to further development and the resignation of the Minister of the Environment, in the case of the Save Pirin protests<sup>23</sup>. They maintained those should be always stated on the protest event pages and not modified too much “so that everyone, who reports, that is, everyone who reads and the journalists, can report the message” (Respondent 9, (neo)liberal/pro-Western case/grassroots).

The expansion of the aims of the protests too much to include many different, broader and/or vague demands or issues (i.e. the resignation of the whole government, lustration, break-up of the whole model of oligarchic dependencies, fight with corruption etc.) in an attempt to attract a larger support-base is seen as risking diluting the focus or becoming too abstract and not achieving anything at the end – i.e. such a framing risks losing *salience* (Snow and Benford 2000, p. 621). Thus, for them a protest that is framed as being “for everything” is difficult to communicate to the wider public, or as one respondent with a PR background put it: “Always when you expand the focus too much there is the danger to lose the small picture” (Respondent 3, environmental case/organisation).

That is why these activists prefer aiming for a concrete, issue-focused framing, even if it is potentially bridgeable or extendable (Benford and Snow 2000, p.624; Gerhards and Rucht, 1992) to related or broader problems, such as “corruption” or “rule of law”. Rather than aiming to overhaul the whole corrupt system or regime all at once, they see a win on one issue as a good precedent for future action. In other words, for them achieving one success demonstrates that civil society pressure works, that “we have convinced them in some way” (Respondent 4, environmental case/organisation), and can thus encourage other parts of civil society to follow in their steps and make demands in other social spheres. That would, in their view, eventually make the whole system of governance more accountable and open to participation by civil society actors. They thus take a step-by-step “democratisation” (see Della Porta and Diani 2006, pp.245-8; see also Whittier 2004) approach to contentious politics and social change:

I agree that all the other problems exist, but there could be a much grander plan and step by step to pursue it (Respondent 4, environmental case/organisation).

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<sup>23</sup> Given that I conducted my fieldwork while the Save Pirin protests were underway, I had a better chance (than in respect to the other broad case studies) to observe the processes of negotiation and conflicts over framing in “real –time” and “on the ground” (i.e. as the campaign unfolded), and discuss those in more detail with the respondents.

The activists linked to the environmental NGOs, in particular, see having separate protests for different issues with their own particular demands more strategically beneficial and efficient than congregating all of them together under one large umbrella movement with many different slogans or more abstract aims. The worry, as noted, is that “if we protest for everything, we protest for nothing”:

But at the protest, someone to come in and say “let’s expand it with the problem with the private debt collectors” [...] Ok, the problem with the private debt collectors is a big problem, but you will need a lot of time to go in and explain it to the rest, in order to- first, those who are on the streets, to accept that it is part of the big picture and it contributes, and second to your own people - why are you going there (Respondent 2, environmental case/organisation).

Thus, although the environmental activists were open to other groups joining the Save Pirin protest –since they needed to increase the numbers of their supporters on the street in order to look more convincing to power-holders - decisions in respect to whom to openly collaborate with and allow to speak at their events was difficult to make and was taken strategically, on a case by case basis, within the Coalition, and through negotiations. However, rather than trying to build a *collective* actor with a broader and inclusive identity, agency and aims, these activists instead prioritised a “top-down” approach where they allowed groups or individual activists with different aims to *offer support* as separate entities and bridge their concerns, but not to contribute equally or to have a say in the organisation of the action and the framing of the protest. In that respect, they maintained a top-down model of protest mobilisation more typical for organisationally-driven “collective action” (Bennett *et al.* 2012). The collective actor thus constructed, however, was not unified, but was fragmented into individual, self-contained causes or issues:

That is why the [protests about the] the farming lands law, the organisers themselves, who are our supporters and members, they do it...they do it separately, but we popularise it as part of the common, how to say it, the common protests (Respondent 3, environmental case/organisation).

Members of Initiative “Justice for All” similarly prefer to focus on clear concrete demands (in their case a *particular kind* of judicial reform), rather than to scale up to broader and more radical demands, such as the resignation of the whole government. Unlike members of Coalition “For the Nature”, however, they are more open to collaborating with, and to welcoming, *all kinds* of different groups under the banner of their protests (including, according to one respondent, left, right and centrist, as well as child protection, gender equality and pro-lustration groups, “the Greens”, Coalition “For the Nature” etc.) as they see their framing– i.e. lack of an adequate judiciary system, corruption, and bad governance - as a universal one under which almost any problem in Bulgaria can easily fit

– that is, they see it as a “master frame” (Benford and Snow 1992.) As one respondent noted:

[...] the problems of the judiciary system are in every single sphere, because the corruption, which is not punished, the corruption models, which work, they are found in every single sphere. If the judiciary doesn't work, it messes up the functioning of all other spheres” (Respondent 18, (neo)liberal/pro-Western case/organisation).

They thus favour a more connective approach to pursuing their aims, where different groups with their issues come together and find a common denominator- a “master frame”- around which to unite their struggles, rather than keep them separated.

Conversely, the respondents linked to the grassroots groups – i.e. to both the Summer and Winter 2013 cases studies- on the other hand, have differing views in respect to what constitutes good strategic framing of their protests. Those to a large extent depend on whether they see themselves in the role of extra-Parliamentary *opposition*, or a single-issue pressure group, as well as on their experiences of previous protests they have been involved in, and the extent to which they consider them a success or failure. Thus, for those who have broader and/or specifically *political* aims (i.e. ex-members of Protest Network who are now members of the movement-parties that sprung from it), keeping the focus on a few concrete issues, rather than on the bigger picture, is not enough, as it does not challenge what they see as a whole interdependent structure of “bad governance”, “corruption”, “oligarchic dependencies” and a “failure of lustration” that is behind all problems in the country, including the environmental ones. For them, to be successful, any protest should eventually scale up to a bigger popular movement encompassing different groups and embracing more radical demands, such as the resignation of the whole government, as a way of scaring whoever comes next into power into being warier of and more receptive to civil society's requests for reforms. In that sense, as also noted previously, they see themselves not as single-issue pressure groups, but in broader terms - as an extra-Parliamentarian civil society *opposition* to an immoral governing elite:

But it needs to get to the resignation of the government, because the government is dependent on these criminal economic interests, let's call it like this, and the change of one pawn with another won't change things substantially (Respondent 10, (neo)liberal/pro-Western case/organisation).

For the activists linked to the Winter 2013 protests an emphasis on “justice” as well as the “national interest” is the most resonant framing. The activists from this case study however tend to have ambivalent opinions in regards to how useful a broad oppositional “anti-government” framing is, particularly since the big anti-governmental protests of 2013 when

the eventual co-optation of parts of their movement by various political and business interests left them disillusioned with institutional politics. They thus currently see focusing on concrete issues and demands as strategically more useful when it comes to gaining the trust of potential supporters, who, according to them, have become more suspicious of broad anti-governmental protest movements (as they see them as “orchestrated” from behind the scenes by partisan interests). Most therefore agree that any protest, even if it is generally “against the government” and in defence of “the national interest”, should focus on some concrete reasons why the governments’ policies are incompetent and/or against the “national interest” and why it is therefore necessary for it to resign:

If you are fighting against corruption , let it be focused, to want change in concrete laws, to want a guarantee that this will happen, that the laws will apply to those and those (Respondent 19, populist case/grassroots).

At the same time, and unlike respondents from the formal NGO sector of “experts”, the activists see themselves in a more *reactive*, or “*corrective*” role, as “watchdogs of power” or an “outside opposition”, rather than as citizens or groups with expertise who want or have a right to participate in the design of policy or solutions. As one respondent explained:

We are not elected, we are not those who govern. We shouldn’t have to go and provide solutions, we say “we have a problem and it needs to be solved]...] We just say that we want something to happen, and we think this is not right, and we want more transparency (Responden 19, populist case/grassroots).

#### **5.2.4 Civil society and political ideology in Bulgaria**

An important common feature of all activists I interviewed is that they tend to consider their general aims as “above-ideological” and/or “non-political,” in the sense of going beyond the traditional left-right divide of the political arena, and instead as being concerned with the *common* (or neutral) “national” or “citizen” interests. Those interests, while construed as being universally shared by all Bulgarians, however, are conceived rather differently by the activists from the different groups, along the lines of an either technocratic or populist (as well as what I will call a liberal-moralist) conceptualisation of democratic politics (i.e. Caramani 2017, Bickerton and Accetti, 2017). As Bickerton and Accetti point out, the central commonality between technocracy and populism consists in the negation of interest pluralism and mediation through political parties. Caramani similarly describes how populists and technocrats go against pluralism and mediation:

Both [populism and technocracy] are examples of “unmediated politics” dispensing with intermediate structures such as parties and representative institutions between a supposedly unitary and common interest of society on the one hand and elites on the other

[...] populism stressing the centrality of a putative will of the people in guiding political action and technocracy stressing the centrality of rational speculation in identifying both the goals of a society and the means to implement them (2017, p.54)

We can identify similar outlooks when it comes to the different Bulgarian civil society actors' orientation to politics. Thus, the environmentalists consider the protection of the Bulgarian nature as a common national interest and cause that is ideologically and politically neutral, and thus regard bringing political ideologies (or deliberation) into the framing of environmental protests as irrelevant, and even harmful:

Our aim, and of these protests, is for Pirin not to be gone. We don't have time to deal with whether capitalism is bad, good and how much time, and how much capitalism or how much socialism exactly will save nature (Respondent 2, environmental case/organisation).

According to the members of the professionalised environmental NGOs this common national cause - the protection of Bulgarian nature- should be instead pursued through expert-driven regulations. Or in other words, for them technocratic and legalistic resolutions (of environmental disputes) underpinned by the expertise of the *appropriate* kinds of stakeholders (i.e. the EU) should take precedence over policy decided via genuine political deliberation (in a Habermasian, 2015, sense):

[But] the ecological laws are like this, and they are the framework [...] if you want to change it in accordance to the left - right, change it, but [...] with the understanding that, however, from the other side, the European framework is like this. That is, you can't go in a direct confrontation (Respondent 2, environmental case/organisation).

Those involved in the (now) formalised legalistically-oriented NGO "Initiative Justice for All" similarly see their aims as politically and ideologically neutral- since "justice has no colours" and "is for everyone"- and expert-driven. Here they also adopt a technocratic orientation to politics, but one that is also underpinned by a strong liberal outlook:

Justice cannot be a political ideology, neither the political program of a particular party. Like healthcare, like education, it is therefore for everyone. But while in healthcare and in education there are certain approaches –left, right, and so on- justice can't have left and right approaches. There are universal standards for justice (Respondent 17, (neo)liberal/pro-Western case/organisation)

However, although members of these organisations represent their aims as universal and "non-political" (or "non-partisan"), in a rather contradictory way they simultaneously acknowledge their aims to be of a *political* nature. In other words, in order to seem legitimate (in the Bulgarian context where parties and political interests are highly



distrusted), they stress that they are *citizen* organisations, though with *political demands* – in other words, they orient towards the kind of unitary common interest “unmediated politics” described by Caramani (2017);

[...] if our activity was political, we would have people from one, two or three parties gravitating around us, not have on the inside right-wing, centre and left-wing followers of all sorts [...] And that is why we are absolutely a citizen organisation, which without taking on political- we are not in parliament, right, we are not candidates in elections- in practice has political demands (Respondent 18 (neo)liberal/pro-Western case/organisation)

Similarly, most respondents linked to the Winter 2013 protests (such as members of SILA) also conceive of the “national interest” (which they claim to be defending) in universalising and essentialist terms, though of a different kind: either as the establishment of a “strong social state” which works for “the Bulgarian people” (often however imagined in homogenised yet ethnically exclusivist way, i.e. by discounting the rights of the Roma and Muslim minorities and migrants), and/or in nationalist/socially-conservative terms, as defending “national sovereignty” or “the motherland” against the interests of foreign powers, as well as protecting the “traditional values” and “Bulgarian culture” from foreign (liberal) ideologies. They thus fight for a “patriarchal conservative society” where there “is a hierarchy and you know who is who” (Respondent 21, populist case/grassroots) :

This excessive liberalisation of absolutely everything, as you see, results in nihilism, in negation, in lack of understanding. A person cannot protect his motherland, if he does not love her in some way. And to love her, this comes from the family, from the school, back in the day from the military service, which now does not exist. And exactly here is the problem (Respondent 23, populist case/grassroots)

Here the de-politicisation is underpinned by moral rather than technocratic considerations. These activists thus see parties and the discourses around political ideologies as an elite strategy to divide “the Bulgarian people” and/or think policy choice should depend on and be dictated by the common “national interest” alone, rather than by partisan or group divisions or ideologies:

Many and all kinds of lines of divisions started. Whether you are a Russophile, or Russophobe, whether you are a democrat in your beliefs, or have more social views, whether you are poor or rich, or educated or not [...] These divisions harm all of society. They are imposed (Respondent, 19, populist case/grassroots).

The activists from these groups/networks therefore tend to conceptualise democratic politics and political conflict in rather *populist terms*. As we saw in Chapter 2, populism is often defined as a thin ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two

homogenous and antagonistic groups: “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite,” and argues that politics should be an expression of the *general will* of the people (Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). For Mudde (2004) the central features of the populist ideology are thus monism and moralism, where “the people” and “the elite” are seen as sharing the same interests and values, while the main difference between them is based on morals (i.e. “pure” versus “corrupt”):

I am convinced that most people want to live better in a more democratic state [...] Here we are talking about morals, after all. Deep inside everyone knows that this [what is going on] is not right (Respondent, 19, populist case/grassroots).

Finally, for the majority of the activists linked to the Summer 2013 protests and Protest Network, instead of ideological, the central and most important social and political contention in Bulgarian society under whose umbrella all civil society struggles can (and should try to) fit, is the fight against “corruption” and “the mafia-oligarchy,” and for functioning liberal democratic institutions, the rule of law and an Euro-Atlantic identity and geo-political orientation of the country. Only after these issues have been resolved there could be any meaningful disputes over ideology, policy, distribution of resources, etc.:

[...] for me the real contradictions in Bulgaria are two. One is, let's call it with cultural names, “Europeans against Eurasians”, and the other is “citizens against the mafia”. From there on, all the rest divisions into left and right, libertarians and conservatives, greens, reds come second (Respondent 14, (neo)liberal case/organisation).

The environmentalist causes are also often framed as part of that main, bigger civil society struggle against “corruption” and the “mafia-oligarchy”, both by some of the environmental protest organisers themselves, as well as by other participating activists and supporting groups linked to Protest Network and the Summer 2013 mobilisation:

What we do is, we say: “Pirin is a symbol of all of this”, of the fight with the oligarchy, of the missing judiciary reform, of the dependent media, and so on (Respondent 3, environmental case, organisation)

This anti-political sentiment is also often underpinned by strong moralism, which sees attempts at introducing *actual politics* to the framing of social and political conflicts as a move by (illegitimate) opponents that aims to distract from the *real* problems and substitute the “real” contradictions with “false” ones. In other words, similarly to the activists with a more populist outlook, the activists from Protest Network tend to see political divisions as secondary, and even detrimental to the pursuit of the main (supposedly) “common”

interests of Bulgarian society – a pro-European orientation of the country and the defeat of “the mafia” in power:

[...] in the Bulgaria society at the moment there are being imposed artificial divisions, and unfortunately many decent people also defend the other side [...] And the people who are trying to impose other kinds of divisions, they rather work for, let's call it for the Eurasian or the mafia side of this big argument (Respondent 14, (neo)liberal case/organisation).

What is also notable here is that the thesis that ideological and political divisions are detrimental and artificially created by power elites in order to divide Bulgarian civil society is shared by many of the activists who otherwise self-identify as defenders of liberal democracy and “Euro-Atlantic values” - a contradiction that is also present in the Mission Statement found on Protest Network's website:

We are convinced that *only together*, standing up for our *civil positions*, we could turn Bulgaria into a lawful European state with working institutions and a political class which defends society at large. This process needs constant civil control and *a unification of the ideology-torn and socially-struggling Bulgarian nation* [...] (Protest Network website, About section/Mission Statement, my emphasis).

The activities and aims of activists from this broad civil society network are therefore presented as politically and ideologically neutral, as simply reactive to (obvious) injustices and wrongdoings perpetuated by the elites. On its website Protest Network thus further describes itself as an instrument for self - organisation of active citizens with their own position, protesting against any injustice, regardless of gender, race and political affiliation. PM is designed to be a corrective to any government” (Protest Network website, Mission Statement). The activists linked to the Network insist on a similar above - or anti-ideological orientation and stress a focus on “concrete” issues, which are understood to be a-political in nature:

It is always a matter of certain concrete, for example, actions or...they are not some abstract ones, let's say, ideological [...] This is not there, it is rather through our reaction towards certain concrete activities, our evaluation of them (Respondent 15, (neo)liberal/pro-Western case/organisation).

At the same time, what is considered an injustice is framed in a particularistic way that postulates a rather narrow (neo)liberal view of democracy and social struggle (i.e. in its focus on anti-corruption and the “rule of law,” see for example Bukovansky, 2006) and a Euro-Atlantic orientation as ideologically neutral and undisputable conceptions of the public good. We thus often end up with a contradictory attempt by the activists from Protest Network to simultaneously play down the existence of hegemonic struggles within civil

society, while pushing a rather particularistic liberal-right and pro-Western ideological outlook as a *universal* moral principle and a (supposedly) neutral, undisputable conception of “the good”- a particular discourse that I would argue takes a hybrid form of *liberal-moralism*, which is close to populism in its anti-pluralist approach to politics and the way it *delegitimises* oppositional views on moralistic grounds – for instance, it does not accept a pro-Russian orientation as a legitimate position, but necessarily sees it as driven by corruption or immorality. In other words, they posit themselves as the “pure *citizens*” and their right-wing, pro-Western orientation as the only *legitimate democratic* position, that is, they equate that position with liberal democracy itself. It is however different from populism in its privileging of the institutional arrangements of liberal democracy and its foregrounding of citizenship in its classic (and minimalist, i.e. John Stuart Mill 1961) liberal sense (see Chapter 2, Section 2. 2.3).

### **5.3 Conclusion: Civil society in Bulgaria - between technocracy and populism**

To sum up, across the cases we have instances of technocratic, populist and what I call a liberal-moralist orientation to political ideology, citizenship and partisanship with all civil society actors essentialising and depoliticising the social and political struggles they are engaged in, though those involved in NGOs etc. do that by foregrounding the (supposedly) a-political, neutral and expertise-driven legalistic solutions to problems of interest to the public, whereas the more grassroots actors subsuming social and political differences and interests under a moralistic, universalised, and construed in anti-pluralist (either nationalist-conservative or (neo)liberal) terms conception of the national, or popular, interest (cf. Caramani 2017; Bickerton and Acetti 2017),

What further emerges from the analysis is a tension between, on the one hand, a self-perception of being an extra-Parliamentarian *political opposition* to power holders due to a lack of a real one, yet on the other, an anti-political moralistic outlook that privileges civil society (either in its supposed expert-driven ideological and political neutrality, or in its identification with the noble people, or moral righteous citizens, against the corrupt politicians and parties), while at the same time sees partisanship as delegitimising or as a necessary “evil”. We thus have two slightly different, yet critical positions towards representative democracy, which are to some extent reflected in the preferred tactics and larger aims of the actors - engagement /dialogue with the state, or “outside” opposition to it.

This downplaying of the existence or importance of pluralism in politics, and therefore of a meaningful political conflict (in agonistic sense) in political struggle, and the assumption of there being an uncontroversial “national interest” or “public good” common to all citizens, tends to be a shared essentialist outlook of all three broad civil society cases, and could be problematic from a radical democratic perspective (see Chapter 2). In the last two chapters (9 and 10) I will look in more detail at how that affects the actors’ ability to forge and sustain a coherent collective identity and solidarity, and to mobilise supporters, as well as what it means for participatory democratic politics in Bulgaria more generally. Before I turn to these discussions, I will first consider some of the external (political, cultural and media-related) challenges civil society actors face in the Bulgarian context when they attempt to cross the line (both in practice and at the level of the social imaginary) delineating civil from political society (Chapter 6), and how they (try to) respond to them via social media (Chapters 7 and 8).



## 6. Challenges faced by civil society actors in the Bulgarian context

### 6.1 Introduction

In Chapter 5 I looked at the different ways the actors under investigation understand the relationship between politics and civil society and the role of contentious politics in respect to that. I argued that despite the differences among the different groups, the discourses they employ— by appealing either to morality or expertise — seek to avoid the political as agonistic pluralism, while simultaneously positing themselves in the role of a (moral) *opposition* to the power holders. When it comes to the *strategies* of protest activists, it has been suggested that no specific strategic element can be evaluated separately without considering the conditions social movements have to operate in (Burstein *et al.* 1995; Della Porta and Diani 2006, p.227). In this chapter I therefore go on to consider RQ1B: **What kinds of challenges face civil society actors that operate at the border delineating civil from political society (i.e. by staging protests)?**

The discussion that follows is based on interviews with activists from different groups and/or networks, with questions focused on the various political, cultural and media obstacles they perceive as standing in their way to achieving their *political* aims. First, the chapter shows that because of their oppositional stance and activities, most of the respondents share the perception that they operate in a highly hostile environment, where the political elites, the media and/or antagonistic business and party interests use various division and disinformation tactics in order to discredit, divide them, and to play different groups against each other. Here social media become an important tool for gaining visibility and trust, counteracting delegitimising attacks and mobilisation. Second, the chapter demonstrates that in contexts characterised by the prevalence of an idealised discourse of civil society as a homogenous non- or anti- political moral entity that is set *in opposition* to institutional politics and the state (seen as immoral), on the one hand, and by high (ideological) polarisation, and on the other, scaled up collective action can be hard to sustain. In other words, the Bulgarian idiosyncratic political context (typical for CEE) makes it difficult for a chain of equivalences to be established between otherwise relatable (in other contexts) issues. This makes the scaling up of protests into larger movements hard to maintain for long, and often leads to further polarisation, fragmentation and rise in distrust between different civil society “sides”.

## 6.2 Challenges of the environment

### 6.2.1 A hostile political environment

From the respondents' perspective, the political elites see actors like them who attempt to venture into the political field and challenge the status quo (by for instance staging protests) as a threat and therefore use various delegitimising and division strategies against them. Common tactics identified by the interviewees include the organisation of contra-protests by entrenched political and business interests, as well as the use of infiltrators and provocateurs to divide or discredit their own protests (see also for instance (Dollbaum 2017; Rone 2019)).

The contra protests, they are financed, one person gives money, people participate and then go home. The status quo works in this way (Respondent 17, (neo)liberal case/organisation).

Such tactics are seen as having a negative effect on the activists' ability to win the trust of potential supporters, as well as the cohesion of their groups. In addition, the majority of the respondents identified attempts by their opponents to control, or utilise, Facebook and its affordances "with the aim of influencing public opinion in one un-objective way, manipulative and propagandistic" (Respondent 10, (neo)liberal case/grassroots). For instance, the use of Internet trolls (or fake profiles) to smear the activists and their protests, to sow division within their Facebook groups, pages or events, or to limit their access to the networked public sphere, is a commonly used tactic by the political elites according to the respondents (see Rone 2019 for a discussion of similar tactics in respect to the Indignados movement). One activist linked to Protest Network and a few grassroots environmental protest groups thus explained how she had her Facebook profile hacked on a number of occasions and used to make posts or to create fake "contra-protest" events on her behalf, according to her "so that there is a reason for reporting the other point of view" (Respondent 9, (neo)liberal & environmental cases/grassroots).

Furthermore, having a post or profile reported *en masse* by what the respondents suspect to be organised groups of "trolls", in order to get them blocked or temporarily taken down by Facebook, is an experience many of them, and especially the "high profile" ones (the "micro-celebrity networked activists" to use Tufekci's 2013 term), share. Although not all of the interviewees acknowledged to have been victims of such troll attacks, most knew of a friend or fellow activists who have had such an experience at least once. Some activists linked to the Summer and/or Winter 2013 protests, in particular, insisted that they "knew



for sure” that different political and business interests maintain paid “troll armies” on standby, ready to be sent out when needed to target inconvenient groups or profiles:

What I know for sure is that the parties in Bulgaria- at least the two biggest ones for sure (GERB and BSP) – have underground, let’s call it like that, formations who do this. They do propaganda in the social networks, they are also involved in attempts to change and lead the public opinion in one way or another. We are talking about organised structures of people, who are doing this (Respondent 10, (neo)liberal case/organisation).

The activists linked to the more populist oriented groups (i.e. SILA) were also more likely to mention direct experiences of having their (online *and* offline) groups broken up by infiltration by trolls or having members get co-opted through offers of backroom “secret” deals and/or money. A number of them blamed the eventual disintegration of their groups and networks in the aftermath of the Winter 2013 protests, as well as the drop of trust in society in regards to these kinds of mass movements, on such tactics and practices of the political and economic elites. They thus appeared the most wary towards other civil society actors with whom they otherwise share similar worldviews and aims, and were particularly careful to differentiate themselves from ex-collaborators who have fallen from grace in the public’s eyes (i.e. by being found to have collaborated with shady businesses, politicians or parties), accusing them of “selling out”, “betraying the cause”, acting out of “self-interest” and not having “noble” and “pure” intentions as they themselves have, and therefore of not being “real” citizens or members of civil society:

[...] many of the people that were involved in things that I am involved in, sold themselves for a lot of money. They offered me too, but for me money is not, money doesn’t attract me so much so that I take it for something that is against my principles [...] And I am proud of this, because few like us are left who are “sound”, unfortunately. And actually that is why the word “protest” devalued itself, and it no longer has the same force as it had five years ago [...] (Respondent 19, populist case/grassroots).

Other respondents, particularly those connected to the environmental groups and formal NGO networks, on the other hand, do not see the “trolling” of their Facebook mobilisation pages and groups to have much of a polarising effect beyond the “virtual” realm and the sphere of online discourse, due to the lack of an “offline” continuation of these practices. That is, they see “trolling,” or divisive arguments on their pages more generally, as a form of “slacktivism” (Gladwell, 2011) that tends to remain at the level of the “virtual”.

Well, they succeed I think online, but not offline. Because for example they find followers for sure, but these are such inactive people...they prefer to be active on Facebook (Respondent 5, environmental case/organisation)

Thus, perhaps because they are established organisations with clear structures and membership, and are also required to uphold a certain level of transparency (i.e. it is publicly known who they are and what their activities and funding are) that their organisationally-led protests are more difficult to become targets of *actual* infiltration and/or co-optation by their political opponents. On the other hand, the more grassroots protest movements linked to the populist groups, and to a lesser extent to the (neo)liberal/pro-Western ones, seem to be more vulnerable to such oppositional tactics of the elites, due to the more lateral and structureless nature of their protest movements, in which “membership” often comes down to joining a Facebook group or liking a Page (Kavada 2015).

### **6.2.2 A hostile media environment and uncivil public sphere**

According to Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993), protest movements are dependent on mainstream media for three interrelated purposes: to mobilise political support, to increase the visibility, legitimacy and validation of their demands and to widen the scope of conflict beyond likeminded publics. Generally speaking, the coverage of a given protest or activist issue by the mainstream media has been found to be dependent on concurrent configurations of political and economic interests and power (Cammaerts 2012, Cottle 2008), as well as on aspects of media logic (Altheide & Snow 1979; Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999). Cammaerts describes “the extent to which movements are able to achieve this and get their message across in the mainstream media or not, their degree of cultural influence in the public sphere, which invokes issues of access to the media” as “the media opportunity structure” (Cammaerts 2012, p. 119).

In Bulgaria, as with the governing elites and mainstream parties, the respondents from all cases tend to be highly distrustful towards the mainstream media due to concerns with their operational logic and ownership, their lack of independence and their adoption of a highly uncivil discourse. Generally speaking, the mainstream media are deemed by the respondents to be sensationalist, unprofessional, manipulative and/or dependent on and under the control of different political and business interests, hostile to challengers of the status quo. There are, however, some differences among the interviewees from the different cases in respect to their attitudes when it comes to the different *kinds* of mainstream media.

The major print media and their online portals are overall the most distrusted and negatively viewed media outlets by the respondents, although most interviewees are sceptical of the press’ relevance and importance, with the newspapers’ reach and readership largely perceived to be diminishing. The print media’s (and their associated

online versions) ownership by government-friendly oligarchs, such as Delyan Peevski, is the major reason given for the high levels of distrust towards them. The activists linked to Protest Network and the environmental NGOs in particular point to the utilisation of these media by their opponents to spread “fake news” and propaganda against them in a bid to delegitimise or discredit them. In that they liken the mainstream press to “media bats” used for concerted “black PR” attacks on them and their activities:

It is not a coincidence Bulgaria is at a very low position in regards to freedom of speech and freedom of the media, this is not without a reason. The reason is that we are non-stop bombarded with a monstrous propaganda of fake news [...] I personally read monstrous things about me and my friends (Respondent 14, (neo)liberal/pro-Western/organisation).

In other words, they stress their experiences of having been (or knowing someone who has been) the objects of concerted smear campaigns from the major newspapers and their associated online sites, particularly those they identify as “Peevski’s”<sup>24</sup>. Such smear campaigns sometimes even include free “booklet” supplements to the major newspapers, dedicated to “revealing the truth” about the more well-known activists and their alleged activities:

In Bulgaria the information environment is poisonous all the way. Toma Belev<sup>25</sup>, for example, is a particular case of personalised Satanisation of these things. [According to the press] Toma is guilty for two thirds of all the idiotic things in this country, including for example, for some woodworm (Respondent 2, environmental case/organisation).

The techniques identified in respect to that involve mixing facts with fiction and hearsay (i.e. using vague phrases like “it is known”), which according to the activists is especially difficult to counteract or defend against, especially if parts of the biographical data presented are correct. In addition, pictures from people’s Facebook profiles that are “not the most optimal” are also often looked for and used to present the activists in negative light or to discredit them (Respondent 13, (neo)liberal case/organisation). The respondents see these delegitimation strategies as especially problematic and harmful to their causes, as they successfully breed mistrust towards them in society, and delegitimise them in the eyes of potential supporters, and sometimes even in those of friends and family members:

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<sup>24</sup> The pro-government oligarch, media mogul and MP Delyan Peevski.

<sup>25</sup> A leading activist of Coalition “For the Nature”, director of a local NGO, and candidate of the Green Party (“the Greens”).

The effect is destructive. My own parents think, that I have taken money from Soros, in order to organise protests [...] (Respondent 14, (neo)liberal/organisation).

This kind of uncivil public sphere is seen as damaging to civic participation and activism. For instance, the possibility of becoming a target (by association) of smear campaigns by the media often discourages smaller local organisations from participating and supporting protests, at least publicly, because of fear of the damage this could cause to their national reputation, and therefore finances from voluntary donations and so forth:

Now we somehow live with this personally, but it interferes with the citizen activism as a whole. Because of it part of the NGOs, who are quieter or have less resources to fight, they don't come to such [protests], right, because they think that they also will become part of the "baddies", and consequently that would interfere with their work (Respondent 2, environmental case/organisation).

Respondents connected to the Winter 2013 protests are similarly distrustful of the major newspapers and their online portals and see them as biased against them and their activities, because of these media's economic links to the governing elites. However, they often subscribe to similar theses that the environmental or (neo)liberal protesters accuse the press of promulgating against them (for example questioning their authenticity as civil society actors and experts and/or accusing them of being national traitors, or of being financially motivated). For instance, the majority of the respondents linked to SILA insisted they knew the environmental protests were "paid", and that there were financial rather than ecological motivations behind them:

The way now there are no protests, you can see the money has been stopped, they are not protesting [...] (Respondent 21, populist case/grassroots).

On the other hand, some respondents from these groups consider themselves to be the objects of smear campaigns by online media associated with the (neo)liberal/pro-Western groups, such as the investigative site Bivol<sup>26</sup>:

I remember they were spawning "snakes and lizards". Overall they were trying to connect me with someone who himself came out and said he has nothing do with Aleksej<sup>27</sup>, nor has he given us money (Respondent 21, populist case/organisation).

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<sup>26</sup> An independent online site that does investigative journalism.

<sup>27</sup> Aleksej Petrov – a shady businessman, with whom members of SILA were accused of having behind the scenes connections during the Winter 2013 protests.

Most cable TV channels and/or internet TVs are also viewed with distrust and scepticism, as most are known to be owned or controlled by the main parties (either the ones in government or in opposition) or business people close to them<sup>28</sup>. According to most respondents, these media's agenda is in fact to "distort" the truth so it serves the political aims of their owners, by for instance manufacturing a "negative image, a negative halo" for the protesters (Respondent 12, (neo)liberal case/grassroots). Local media, on the other hand, are generally more positively viewed by the respondents, and are deemed to be more supportive, independent and able to comment more freely on the issues at stake. Members of the environmental groups in particular stressed these media's generally positive reporting of their causes and protests. However, it is also acknowledged that positive coverage is not always a given with these media either, and depends on the context and on what pressures the journalists working for them happen to be under:

It [the coverage] depends, and to be honest when you consider that the same media can at one time publish a positive unpopular news and at the same time can come up with some total stupidity from the black PR (Respondent 9, (neo)liberal/grassroots).

Finally, when it comes to the mainstream electronic media - that is, the national TVs (the public broadcaster BNT and the two national private TV stations, BTV and NOVA TV) and radios (including the public Bulgarian National Radio), which to some extent are regulated and required by law to maintain some levels of objectivity and pluralism- the interviewees share similar negative opinions<sup>29</sup>. The grassroots actors linked to the 2013 protest

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<sup>28</sup> For instance, TV Europa is headed by the close to the ruling party GERB Georgi Harizanov, who is also the founder of the think –thank "Institute for right-wing politics", also linked to GERB; Kanal 3 is similarly controlled by GERB, while TV stations SKAT and ALFA are owned by members of the government far-right coalition partner, the Patriotic Front.

<sup>29</sup> Here I should note that although usually considered to be one of the more (comparatively) objective media, trust in the Bulgarian National Television (BNT) plummeted significantly around the beginning of the SavePirin protests in December 2017, when Emil Koshlukov, known for his friendly ties to the government and oligarchic circles close to it, was appointed as its new Head of Programming. The large majority of the respondents from Protest Network and the environmentalist groups thus felt that this move had a palpable negative effect on the way BNT reported on the protests, with the coverage deemed significantly biased in favour of the government and the business interests seeking to further develop Pirin Mountain as a ski resort. On a few occasions the Save Pirin protests ended up in front of the building of BNT, demanding Koshlukov's removal and a more objective reporting by the public broadcaster. A couple of smaller, side protests against Koshlukov and BNT's reporting were also organised in front of the broadcasters' building in central Sofia by independent civil society activists (including some ex-members of Protest Network), running parallel to the larger Save Pirin protests.

movements in particular find the coverage by the mainstream media as manipulative and generally negative – according to them they are engaged in “mass disorientation” as one respondent from SILA called it (Respondent 21, populist case grassroots). To a large extent they thus blame the mainstream media (and their logic of operation that looks for a scandal) for driving divisions within their protest movements, by for example “designating leaders” or promulgating gossip about internal splits, intrigues, co-optation etc.:

We of course as people who participated in the processes helped, willingly or not, for this to happen. We weren't prepared about how to react, and how to act. But the manipulations and the divisions in society started from the mainstream media, and I can claim without any doubt the national ones (Respondent 19, populist case/grassroots).

Although highly distrustful of the mainstream TV channels, however, and frequently disappointed by their coverage- “Horrible. They just cover us in ridiculous ways (Respondent 6, environmental case/organisation)- most civil society actors nevertheless tend to acknowledge their importance (due to their wide reach) for influencing public opinion, raising awareness, and attracting support for their causes. Only a few respondents linked to the populist groups considered the main broadcasters' influence as limited and/or diminishing. That perception, however, was based on anecdotal evidence of the kind “I don't watch TV anymore and I don't know anyone who does” (Respondent 23, populist case/grassroots) and goes against most polls, according to which, and as noted in Chapter 3, TV is still the most popular media in Bulgaria.

### **6.2.2.1 Strategies towards the mainstream media**

Generally speaking, when seeking publicity and visibility (beyond organising a protest and hoping it will be widely covered) the decision of the different civil society actors of whether and how to approach or engage with a particular media outlet, and the success in doing so, depend on factors such as the latter's ownership, the current political situation, the kind and hierarchical level of economic and political interests that are being challenged by the protesters, the availability of sympathetic journalists working in the outlet at the time, as well as the kind of organisation or group the activists are part of and its overall aims and tactics.

Overall, the majority of the activists tend to prioritise *political pragmatism* when it comes to the key media players in Bulgaria. Political pragmatism necessitates that non-elite actors adapt to the logic of professional journalism through developing news strategies, as

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well as engage with news media that are normally uninterested or even hostile to their causes (Waisbord 2011). In other words, despite the proliferation of communication opportunities in today's hybrid media ecology (Cammaerts 2007; Cammaerts *et al.* 2013; Chadwick 2011; 2017), the dominant "journalistic logic" (Waisbord, 2011) remains the main gatekeeper of the mediated public sphere for the Bulgarian civil society.

In that respect, establishing news-making coalitions with "friendly" (oppositional) elites and their online media, or maintaining relations with "well-disposed" journalists in different mainstream outlets, as well as using standard practices for attracting media attention, such as writing and sending press releases, are common strategies adopted by activists across all cases. The majority of the respondents are also well aware of how the media logic operates (Altheide and Snow 1979) - for instance in respect to the need to produce "interesting", "news-worthy" events in order to "attract the photographers and the media, so that these events are covered" (Respondent 4, environmental case/organisation). At the same time, the different *kinds of* activists have different preferences in respect to what *sort of* attention they seek - with those from the formal NGOs preferring "peaceful", "positive" and "creative" acts (such as "flash mobs") more likely to engender positive coverage and public support, whereas the grassroots actors, and especially those from the more populist groups, tending towards violent and confrontational tactics which they see as more effective in respect to their broader oppositional and contentious aims (see Chapter 5).

There are also certain differences in respect to how the activists from the different civil society groups or organisations approach the mainstream media outside of protesting. Drawing on the interview data, I have identified three broad orientations in that respect - *visibility-oriented*, *selective* and/or *passive-avoidant* that I will briefly discuss here. Thus, on the one hand the informal grassroots activists' objectives (particularly those engaged in environmental activism) tend to focus predominately on *gaining visibility*, that is, on attracting the attention of the media and the government to their cause- "which is your first step"- since for them "it is harder to break in the national TVs" (Respondent 9, environmental case/grassroots). The expertise-oriented established NGOs, on the other hand, take a more strategically *selective approach* in respect to choosing *which media* to engage with and *under what conditions* (see Fenton 2010; Cottle and Nolan 2007). They would thus normally take up invitations to debates on national TV with other citizen groups or professionals/experts, but would decline invitations to discussions with non-experts or irrelevant to the issue, according to them, obnoxious "opponents". They see the latter settings as ploys by the TV channels "to create... some kind of a scandal" that often ends

up revolving around accusations based on “incorrect facts”, which “throw the conversation into an impossibility”(Respondent 4, environmental case/organisation). In other words, they do not embrace *every* chance of “gaining visibility” through the national electronic media, but consider certain *kinds* of *visibility* to be even potentially detrimental to their image, interests and long-term goals, as they could end up discrediting them in the eyes of other professionals, or legitimising points of view they otherwise insist are illegitimate – i.e. arguments that are not underpinned by “expertise” but by particularistic economic interests (see Chapter 5).

When it come to the respondents linked to the Winter 2013 populist protests, during the latter they initially sought to engage with the media, for instance by writing press releases, building relationships with “friendly” journalists, taking up invitations to participate in talk shows and in some cases even accepting to lead morning TV shows (due to their rise to public fame at the time). However, since then they have become highly skeptical of the media, because, as already noted, they blame them to a large extent for driving divisions and suspicion within their groups and for discrediting them and their protests. Those with the more extreme far-right views and causes are especially distrustful of the way the mainstream electronic media tend to report their protests and to represent them - i.e. as “violent thugs”, “lumpens”, “drunks” or “football hooligans” who “don’t know why they are there” (Respondents 23 and 24, populist case/grassroots). These activists are therefore particularly careful when it comes to non-live interviews or reportages from their protest events, but, unlike the expert NGO representatives, prefer live studio discussions, where they can say things without them being edited out post factum. Their current approach to the media, and particularly to the big national TVs, therefore can be described as more *wary* and *passive-avoidant*, in that they no longer tend to seek coverage purposefully.

### **6.2.3 Summary**

To sum up, in seeking visibility in the public sphere, the Bulgarian civil society actors involved in contentious politics have to operate in a political and media environment perceived as incredibly hostile and uncivil towards them, as well as fragmented in respect to various (non-transparent) political and oligarchic interests, and therefore as highly unpredictable and unreliable. The mainstream public sphere is seen as a major obstacle to civil society’s success in pursuing its aims and fulfilling its role of “watchdog of power” and/or extra-Parliamentary *opposition*. In such a context social media become crucial tools for the activists for gaining visibility, bestowing visibility on their opponents, and mobilising support for their causes and protests. At the same time, they can also become tools in the hands of the activists’ *opponents* in their attempts to



divide and discredit their groups and movements. In the following chapters (7, 8, 9 and 10) I will look at the social media strategies and practices of different protest actors in respect to gaining visibility and mobilising support in such an environment, as well as at the amenability of these platforms and their affordances, and especially of Facebook (as the most used platform in Bulgaria), to their visibility and mobilisation needs and aims.

### 6.3 The idealisation of civil society and its challenges

As we saw in Chapter 5, despite their anti-political and anti-partisan orientation, many of the respondents in reality are (or have been) connected to smaller, extra-Parliamentary parties (i.e. “the Greens”, “Da, Bulgaria”, “Vuzrajdane”), and since their causes often overlap with the agendas and programmes of these parties, the latter’s leaders and high profile members are usually present at the events (even if unofficially). This ambiguous position between civil and political society, however, is not without problems for the actors’ legitimacy in terms of their self-representations as *a-political* or *politically neutral*, and *independent*. Thus, the majority of the respondents admitted that the involvement of political parties or the often blurred lines between political candidates or party leaders, and civil society activists, hurts their legitimacy, opens them to discrediting attacks and makes potential supporters doubt their real motivations and aims when organising a protest about an issue:

Another question is how they will be covered in the media. Because tomorrow they will say here these ones from “Protest Network” or from “The Greens’ are “riding” the protest, and this is not true. But people will hear it (Respondent 16, (neo)liberal/ organisation).

In some cases entering “official” politics even limits their scope of public activity and media visibility, due to the heavy stigmatisation and association with bias partisanship carries in the Bulgarian social and political imaginary, and the media’s desire to appear politically neutral. One activist from Protest Network, for instance, noted that the moment he got involved with the party “Da, Bulgaria”, his invitations to participate in TV shows and debates dropped significantly:

They [the media] do this, right, from the point of view of not looking biased and connected to some political power, on the other hand they are protecting themselves from attacks by some people, right, and at the end the result for me is that I participate in less things (Respondent 14, (neo)liberal case/organisation).

In respect to this some respondents try to play down *political* involvements in their causes by maintaining (unconvincingly) that any members or leaders of parties that are present at their protests are there *only as independent citizens* – even when they make speeches at the events, as was the case, for example, with the leader of “Da, Bulgaria” during the Save Pirin protests:

[...] we all acknowledge that there is no point, it wouldn't be positive, it wouldn't be beneficial the flaunting of this or that party. Right – “But did you see Hristo Ivanov<sup>30</sup>?” Well, why shouldn't I see him? The guy is walking on the square, he does not agree with what is happening. But they saw him, well, they will see him, what can I do, of course (Respondent 2, environmental case/organisation).

Others, like one respondent who works for Greenpeace Bulgaria (and therefore come from a more NGO-centred perspective on civil society), see the lack of clear boundaries between civil society and political parties in Bulgaria, where the same people can be part of both spheres at the same time – i.e. by being employed or involved in the NGO sector and also candidates or leaders of “the Greens” party- as highly problematic for gaining legitimacy and trust of potential supporters, as it opens them and their causes to attacks from opponents. According to this respondent “a line should be drawn, right – ‘I do politics’ and ‘I do NGO’” (Respondent 6, environmental case/organisation).

Going even further, however, other respondents see formal and/or foreign funded civil society organisations or NGOs (such as for instance Greenpeace Bulgaria), as equally illegitimate. The large majority of the respondents from the populist groups for instance maintain that the environmentalists and *their* protests (or “the Greens” as they call them summarily) are not “real experts”, or “real environmentalists”, but are (foreign) sponsored NGOs that just appropriate funds without doing any “real work” and that defend only causes that benefit them financially (Respondent 21, populist case/grassroots)<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Ex-Protest Network member and currently the leader of “Da, Bulgaria”.

<sup>31</sup> That said, as already noted in Chapter 4, the designation between the three broad cases is for analytical purposes mainly, and therefore the borders between them can be sometimes quite fuzzy, with people from one civil society “side” being involved in the campaigns and protests organised by the other “side”. For instance, where most of the actors linked to the Winter 2013 protests interviewed generally do not support and/or get involved in the protests of the environmentalists or the judiciary reform activists (even in cases where they agree with the problems/demands put forward by the protest organisers), as they are distrusting of and hostile to the civil society *actors* organising them, a few said they do support them and participate in them, because they have clear aims, or because they are about “national” causes or tend to be anti-governmental. Similarly, some of the interviewees were involved in both the Winter and the Summer 2013 protests and do not see a big difference between them- they think the separation and perceived polarisation between those two protest movements was artificial and

Similarly, the groups and activists associated with Protest Network and the Summer 2013 protests are also seen by the more populist “side” of civil society as “political organisations”, who are sponsored by “foreign” (particularly American and EU and/or “globalist”) economic and political interests to work against “the Bulgarian interest”, and thus as “inauthentic” or “paid protests”:

We didn't participate in the Summer ones [the Summer 2013 protests], because we are this kind of enthusiasts who are not “paid”. The Summer ones, let's be honest, were in the interest of certain layers of society and in their majority were “paid!” (Respondent 25, populist case/grassroots).

Such general distrust towards (liberal) NGOs, which is also encouraged by the political elites, the media and so forth, can sometimes put the environmental activists in a position where the organisations they work for may be the *actual* organisers of the protest (as part of Coalition “For the Nature” for example), yet showcasing their involvement as *organisations*, rather than as *citizens*, would detract from the protest's legitimacy:

Here even to go dressed up as pandas<sup>32</sup>, it will also be taken to an extent badly, even if we are part of the Coalition [...] that we are advertising ourselves (Respondent 4, environmental case/organisation).

Since the large majority of the interviewees from groups linked to the Winter 2013 (populist) protests define the “national interest” in socially-oriented but also in nationalist, conservative and often illiberal terms (see Chapter 5), causes deemed to be “liberal” are generally viewed as going against the “national interests”, and therefore as being illegitimate. Conversely, activists linked to the Summer 2013 protests tend to be distrustful of the “side” associated with the Winter 2013 protests. The majority of the respondents from Protest Network, for instance, doubted *these* protesters' *authenticity*, accusing them of “being paid”, of having behind the scenes links to political parties such as the Bulgarian Socialist Party or to shady businessmen, and/or of being protests of citizens that are “not free”, due to their primary concern with social and material issues (seen as illegitimate civil society motivations), their “nostalgia” for the communist times, their position of dependence in respect to their employers, or their anti-liberal democratic or sometimes also leftist (anti-neoliberal) views (i.e. Respondent 13, (neo)liberal case/organisation).

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was purposefully driven by the ruling elite through the media in order to fragment and divide civil society). Others (from all three cases) view only one of the two big 2013 protests as legitimate, while the other as “orchestrated” by local elites or foreign forces.

<sup>32</sup> The WWF's symbol is a panda bear.

Finally, the majority of the environmentalists consider their *direct opponents* to be “inauthentic”- that is, they accuse them of either being “fake NGOs” created in an inorganic way by the power elites (in respect to “pro-development” NGOs); of not being “free citizens” or being “paid” and organised artificially and coercively by the government and their business allies (in respect to “contra-protesters”); and of not being “experts” and therefore having illegitimate claims in regards to the management of Bulgaria’s nature and environment (in respect to business lobbyist seeking expansion of development in protected areas).

What we have here, is a rather *idealised* (and vulnerable to attacks) conception of *being independent* as civil society- in both the political and economic sense- that the civil society actors find difficult to play up to in reality. It becomes a sort of a closed circle of anti-political (i.e. technocratic or populist/moralist) legitimating claims-making, where *one* side constructs itself as legitimate by claiming authenticity on account of the *other* side’s lack thereof. Thus “*we*” are legitimate because “*we*” are moral, have the “right” values and therefore are “authentic” representatives of civil society. “*They*” are *illegitimate*, because “*they*” have the “wrong” values and/or are “paid” and therefore are “inauthentic” representatives of civil society – i.e. are not “real environmentalists”. Then back again, “*we*” are legitimate, because “*we*” are *experts* and *professionals* and therefore *authentic*. “*They*” are *inauthentic* and lack legitimacy, because “*they*” are *not experts*.

In this context, according to the respondents, social media, and especially Facebook in Bulgaria, become crucial tools in counteracting the delegitimisation claims of their political opponents and the media, even as these platforms are susceptible to other kinds of manipulation, like group infiltration, co-optation and trolling (see also Rone, 2019). In Chapters 8 and 9 I will consider in more detail the strategies and practices employed by different activists in their struggle to win supporters’ trust amid deligitimising smear campaigns, insinuations, media manipulation and overall propaganda against them, and will also consider Facebook’s amenability to their aims in that respect, as well as some of the democratic implications.

## **6.4 Maintaining a collective identity and internal solidarity while expanding the support-base**

Maintaining a coherent collective identity while expanding their support-base presents a challenge to the Bulgarian protest activists not solely because of the divisive and discrediting tactics used against them by their opponents and the oligarchic media, but also due to their varied and sometimes conflicting aims – with some protesters preferring

to focus on single-issues and their resolution, whereas others aiming at larger systemic (or power) changes (see Chapter 5). In a context characterised by high levels of public and social distrust and polarisation, as well as general reluctance to participate in contentious and/or civic action, walking a tight line between maintaining the focus of the protests, and a “neutral” ideological framing in order not to push away potential supporters and causing divisions, can similarly prove difficult for civil society actors when they want to expand their support. Common struggles over the framing and the focus of their protests, as well as over decisions about which groups to collaborate with thus often reveal the tension that exists between the actors’ self-understanding as a-political civil society and their differing collective identities and ideological orientations, and challenge the (idealistic) notion of the existence of a unified, homogenous civil society locked in a (moral) struggle against a corrupt elite. For the activists the challenge thus often becomes how to keep people with various political-ideological orientations united “around the main cause” and who to collaborate with or not:

Well, it is a bit complicated, because again we will have to go back to the context of the fact that the Bulgarian society is not such that can unite easily and can support other causes (Respondent 2, environmental case/organisation).

Thus as we saw in Chapter 5, the protest actors are often faced with a dilemma: broadening their aims and linking them to people’s everyday concerns risks losing focus and encroaching on “the political” and therefore engendering loss of legitimacy as non-partisan members of *civil society*; keeping the focus too technical and issue-specific, on the other hand, risks losing the support of peripheral groups, as well as failing to expand the issue’s relevance beyond their core support-base. Furthermore, ideological divisions tend to be seen by the respondents as secondary, unimportant, disruptive or artificial. They thus consider associating their protests and themselves with political ideologies, ideas or parties to be detrimental and delegitimising to their causes, and therefore try to keep the protest framing away from such identifications:

The parties are not allowed to bring distinguishing marks at citizens’ protests, such as flags and other such identifying things.[...] So mutual tolerance [...] and the clear understanding that the protest is neither right, neither left, neither green, neither purple (Respondent 3, environmental case/organisation)

In their wish to maintain the image that their protests are about a *neutral national cause*, rather than in the service of partisan (or ideological) interests, and thus to avoid internal conflicts, the activists (particularly those from the formal NGOs), however, embrace a practice of policing the borders of discourse by keeping *particular* ideological slogans or

messages out of their protests or moderating posts in the Facebook groups and events *they* deem too politically divisive:

For me there is no possibility for unity around the theme “capitalism kills” or, for instance, “100% market will save the nature” (Respondent 2, environmental case/organisation).

The initial equation of civil society with the dissident movement against the communist regime, and the persistence of a strong aversion to leftist discourses and politics (see Chapter 2) play a particularly important role in the Bulgarian context in respect to such civil society framing and collaboration dynamics. For instance, what in other countries might be considered “appropriate” frame bridging for environmental causes is not always directly transferable to the Bulgarian case (or is actively avoided by the activists). Thus, anti-capitalist or explicitly leftist framings are frequently rejected by the Bulgarian environmental protest organisers, although they are often adopted, or even recommended to them, by their Western colleagues:

One citizen protest in England during which someone goes out and says “capitalism kills” is not a big issue [...] But in Bulgaria, right, we have a very big problem with what was before capitalism, and you have to consider this somehow (Respondent 6, environmental case/organisation).

Environmental activism in Bulgaria therefore does not usually bridge to social-economic concerns, but tends to stay within a liberal-technocratic discourse framework of “anti-corruption”, “rule of law” and “democratic values” (see Chapter 5). Some activists even insist on maintaining a separation between these *types* of issues –i.e. social-economic (such as high energy prices) and civil (such as illegal development in protected parks)- as they see them as incompatible:

[...] don't think that the electricity should be something super cheap, because this is a waste of energy, which is used, which should have some kind of value. And this way you can repel people, right... And for Pirin, the person has gone to protest for Pirin and wants Pirin to be saved. But yes, it is so, there must be boundaries between the two (Respondent 6, environmental case/organisation).

To an extent, the insistence of actors who are more firmly on the “civic”, rather than on the “political” side of society (i.e. those employed in expertise-oriented NGOs, who are not simultaneously party candidates) on keeping the focus on concrete (technocratic) demands and avoiding more general political framings is an expression of the a- and anti-political construction of civil society as an ideal in the CEE context (see Chapter 5). Thus, even when they make *political* (or policy) demands, they maintain that those

demands are ideologically neutral and non-partisan, in a technocratic sort of way:

[...] there need to be really some concrete demands, and everyone to agree on them. And when there is an argument to be clear, if your party or ideology is OK with these demands, let us be together. Then afterwards you can divide yourselves as you want (Respondent 6, environmental case/organisation).

This strategy, however, does not always work, particularly in the networked social media environment, where interpersonal and intergroup conflicts can quickly become public and travel across personal networks, involving more and more people. For instance, people with a banner “Capitalism Kills” were kicked out from a Save Pirin protest in the city of Plovdiv by the local organisers, after which long discussions and arguments ensued on the Save Pirin Facebook pages and groups, with a few of the main organisers from the Coalition threatening to ban such slogans from the protests as a whole:

There is of course a third group, which I personally will kick out any moment, because they are...they cause total division (Respondent 2, environmental case/organisation).

In turn, some leftist activists criticised on social media what they saw as a right-wing bias of the environmental protests, where anti-communist and pro-lustration slogans were, according to them, allowed without much indignation. They also pointed out that taking a pro-capitalist and pro-business position does not fit with the outlook of most green movements across the world<sup>33</sup> and risks alienating many left-leaning people who otherwise identify with the environmental cause (see for example Dodov 2018 for dVersia magazine and Burov 2018 for the left-wing online media Baricada). Some leftist groups consequently decided not to participate in the protests anymore. Thus, by trying to enforce a “neutral” ground that refrains from “politicising” the protest, so as not to create a conflict or alienate potential supporters from one or the other side, the organisers of the Pirin protests ended up achieving the opposite, as they, perhaps inadvertently, policed the boundaries of the discourse much more strictly in favour of one side- the right-wing and/or anti-communist one (which, as we saw in Chapter 2, in the Bulgarian post-socialist contexts is often seen as the default “neutral” position of the “authentic” civil society).

For the environmental protest organisers, who might be otherwise able to attract support from various “sides” of civil society, the problem therefore often becomes how to *maintain* that support, as the environmental cause is often contested at the level of political ideology (from the left, but also from the nationalist and center-right). As a matter of comparison,

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<sup>33</sup> See for instance Fenton 2008.

what helped the counter-globalisation movement of the 2000s, according to Della Porta (2005b), was “the identity shift from a single-movement identity to multiple, tolerant identities” that “are characterised by inclusiveness and positive emphasis upon diversity and cross fertilisation, with limited identification” (p. 186, cited in Kavada and Society 2009, p. 818). The Alter-Globalisation movement particularly emphasised its plurality, diversity and inclusiveness as defining of its identity (Della Porta 2005a, p.80) and engaged in a process of “frame-bridging” that produced a discourse that left “broad margins for autonomous development” while allowing for “development of a collective identity that is ‘open’ and ‘multi-faceted’” (2005b: p. 200, cited in Kavada 2009, p. 819). Or in other words, it, as other similar transnational protests at the time, purposefully relaxed “the ideological framing commitments for participation” (Bennett 2005, p.819). Unlike the well-researched NGO-enabled movements of the 2000s in the West, which featured a mix of organisations, grassroots groups and individual activists with a variety of ideological orientations and organisational forms (Della Porta 2005a), the locally-oriented organisationally - driven environmental protest movement in Bulgaria finds it difficult to deal with a heterogeneous support-base. On social media that difficulty becomes particularly apparent and harder to resolve, as, due to its networked character and the impersonal and speedy nature of the communication that takes place on it, divisions and conflicts can spread and escalate quickly.

Other organisationally-driven protests, such as those by Initiative Justice for All (also linked to the Summer 2013 movement), the scaling usually works the opposite way - the activists of that organisation are more open to scaling down and collaborating in their campaigns and protests with protest groups focusing on a variety of issues, inasmuch as they see a large number of problems in Bulgaria easily fitting within the frames of “corruption”, “bad governance”, “lack of rule of law” and “unaccountability and inefficiency of the judiciary system”<sup>34</sup>. Nevertheless, their ability to mobilise a larger support-base seems to be limited due to the professional focus of their campaigns and the specificity of their target audience. As one ex-member of the Initiative (she was an active member until it became a formal

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<sup>34</sup> It is important to note here that during the Summer 2013 protests, in which members of JFA participated as part of Protest Network, initially a range of groups with different political views took part, as the appointment of the oligarch Delayn Peevski for chief of the Agency for National Security was seen as an outrage across civil society. As Protest Network started being recognised as “the face” of the Summer 2013 protest by the media, however, and as it posited itself and its discourse as its “voice”, conflicts and divisions appeared. Some leftist groups and activists, as in the environmental protests, felt alienated by the neoliberal framing and anti-communist slogans popular at the protest, such as “red garbage,” and eventually stopped participating.



NGO) pointed out, even when the topics of anti-corruption and judiciary reform are given air-time on mainstream TV talk shows, the activists fail to frame them in ways that are relatable to the average viewer– for instance, by connecting the abstract idea of institutional reform to concrete everyday problems, such as housing scams or crime. As she notes, the target communication audience of the Initiative’s campaign is very narrow, consisting mainly of jurists and magistrates, which “requires a very different language and very different focus”. According to her, the organisation “itself does not dare fall to a different level [of communication], in order to keep up its image in the judiciary milieu”, with the result being, she claimed, that a large percentage of the Bulgarian people do not understand or care about the issue of judiciary reform” (Respondent 9, (neo)liberal & environmental cases/grassroots).

When it comes to activists from the groups linked to the Winter 2013 protests, they tend to subscribe to a mixed, and often incoherent, in a populist sense, political ideology. For instance some would claim they have left-wing views, and simultaneously express strong anti-communist and/or nationalist/conservative sentiments:

I would say [we are] centre-left, in some way [...] But we also support many right-wing ideas, which are connected with the main causes we defend [...] like not allowing, let’s say, the giving of Bulgarian citizenship to [foreign] persons, particularly with an Arabic background (Respondent 23, populist case/grassroots).

As already noted, these activists understand the “national interest” in nationalist and illiberal terms, i.e. as the protection of the “traditional Bulgarian (Christian) values” against the (“foreign”) liberal values associated with events like Sofia Pride or with struggles for the rights of minorities or migrants (see Chapter 5). They thus tend to collaborate with groups that share such illiberal framing and causes- for instance on protests organised by far-right groups and parties against the Roma or against refugees. On the other hand, they consider the environmental and liberal rights- oriented NGOs (like the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee), as well as activists and groups linked to Protest Network, as adversaries in a highly antagonistic senses – “usually with such like Protest Network we are at knife point, and we have even had physical confrontations” (Respondent 24, populist case/grassroots). They do not see them as legitimate civil society actors, but as “fake experts”, or organisations that are financially motivated or that “are sponsored by foreign interests”, such as America or Gorge Soros:

Well, it is like at war. There are people on our side, those who fight for some such “pure and sacred Republic”, some more idealistic aims [...] And on the other side are the people who have some purely selfish agendas, regardless of what kind– party, financial and so on (Respondent 24, populist case/grassroots).

They thus tend to refrain (with some exceptions) from associating themselves with protests organised by activists linked to this “side” of civil society, even on issues that they agree on, such as judiciary reform, anti-corruption or environmental protection. In other words, the activists from the populist groups would (openly) collaborate only with groups that share their nationalist/conservative framing or whom they do not consider “discrediting” to their reputation- i.e. those groups they deem “inauthentic” civil society actors. In respect to that they therefore prioritise the *actors* rather than the actual *causes* when making decisions about whether to support or take part in a protest organised by others. When it comes to collaborating with other like-minded groups, however, they often are internally as divided, due to ego-driven infighting, splits and high levels of generalised distrust (often resulting from past disappointments and “betrayals”). Open collaboration (offline as well as online) therefore is mainly based on the personal relationships they have with members of other groups, or are a matter of “personal reputation”, rather than on concerns with a particular kind of framing.

These dynamics are unlike the process of “connective action” described by Bennett *et al.* (2012). For instance, during the hybrid “organisationally-enabled” connective action identified by the authors the ideological framing is relaxed in order to allow a broader gamut of groups or people to join, and the organisations take a backside role (2012, p. 757-9). In the case of Save Pirin and to an extent the judiciary reform protests organised by JFA, we have something that resembles more the ideal *collective action type*, which depends on brokering identifiable organisations to organise and lead the action under common banners and collective identity frames, and to bridge differences (ibid. p.755). This type of action is characterised by “more exclusive collective action frames”, as well as the use of digital and social media technologies mainly for organisation and coordination purposes, rather than for “personalised interpretations of problems and self-organisation of action” (ibid.).

The protest movements of Winter and Summer 2013 (associated with the populist and Protest Network actors, respectively), on the other hand, resembled more the *connective type* of action described by Bennett *et al.* – i.e. they lacked formal organisations officially “leading” them and were coordinated and communicated almost entirely through Facebook profiles, pages and groups (see Chapter 4 for more detail on cases). However, the eventual prioritisation of inter-personal relationships and strong ties embedded in networks of trust by the actors involved has made their current protests (in the latent phase of their movements) difficult to expand beyond their own personal networks, and often highly antagonistic in respect to the discourses of “the other side”. In Chapter 10 I will look at how

successful in fact the different kinds of civil society actors are in sustaining a coherent collective identity and solidarity during some more recent protest mobilisations.

## 6.5 Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen that the activists from all three broad civil society cases share a perception of operating in a political and media environment that is hostile towards them and their activities, and where the distribution of power is highly unequal and skewed towards their major opponents – various political elites and oligarchs. Some of the main strategies identified by the respondents as used by political elites and other hostile parties to attack civil society groups and activists they find “inconvenient” involve either: sowing divisions from within by infiltrating their (Facebook) groups, co-opting members and using “troll armies” to spread misinformation and distrust; and/or organising “contra-protests” or utilising the dependent mainstream media for more generalised and far-reaching propaganda campaigns. In respect to the latter, the Bulgarian media context can be characterised by the prevalence of uncivil forms of communication practices - with the oligarchy-controlled media largely perceived by the activists as spreading propaganda and fake news in an attempt to discredit and demonise what the media owners and their political backers consider to be their “opponents”. In addition, the media, due to their dependencies, but also their logic of operation, are often seen as either legitimising, or even prioritising, the “other side” and its manipulative claims against the protesters, or as creating problematic hierarchies of leadership or divisions within the groups.

In this chapter I also suggested that scaled-up collective (or connective) action might be challenging to sustain in a context characterised by the prevalence of a discourse of civil society that constructs it idealistically as a unified non - or anti- *political* entity (political in an agonistic pluralist sense), on the one hand, and by high (ideological) polarisation, on the other. In other words, the local discursive opportunity structures (see Cammaraets 2012 ) makes a chain of equivalences between otherwise relatable (in other contexts) issues difficult to establish. On the other hand, issues that are (theoretically) more easily extendable to other groups and social spheres (i.e. judicial reform) are often framed in a too abstract liberal-technocratic way by the professionalised organisations driving the campaigns, making them difficult to relate to the things ordinary people care or are concerned about in their day-to-day lives. In other words, they are communicated in an elitist professionally-oriented manner that makes connective action via “personalised action frames”, and therefore the protest’s expansion into a wider *popular* movement that reaches beyond the concerns of the professional middle-class, difficult.

Furthermore, as we saw, the formal NGOs (liberal and environmental) tend to be looked at with distrust by the more populist “side” of civil society, because of their usually liberal orientation, elitism, as well as the often negative media coverage. This engenders a position of antagonism between different “sides” where the “other” is excluded from “legitimate” civil society on moralistic or ideological grounds, making it potentially difficult for the protest actors from all cases to scale up their protests to broad popular movements (a “we”) by building coalitions with other civil society groups, or to sustain them as such in the long run, particularly during “latent” phases of their movements.

In the following two chapters (7 and 8) I will look more closely at the different civil society actors’ (social) media strategies and practices that seek to address these challenges - namely those of gaining visibility and trust, and of expanding and mobilising support, in such a context. I will also consider some of the challenges the reliance on social media (with their logic of operation, affordances, etc.) presents to the actors and their goals in that respect, and to (participatory) democracy in Bulgaria more generally. In the last two empirical chapters (9 and 10) I will consider the extent to which the different actors are successful in practice in their more recent mobilisation efforts on social media, and discuss some further implications.

## Chapter 7 Contentious politics and the quest for visibility

### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter will focus on **RQ2a** developed in Chapter 3, Section 3.2: **How do different civil society protest actors in Bulgaria (try to) gain visibility in the media ecology?**

In relation to that, I will particularly look at the role social media play in this process and will consider some of the implications for democracy in Bulgaria and beyond. The Bulgarian protest activists' strategies and practices for gaining visibility, as elsewhere, can be said to revolve around two main objectives: getting (the proper kind of) mainstream media coverage (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993) and/or building and maintaining their own alternative online public spheres with social and digital media playing a crucial role in respect to both. The sub-question I will focus on in relation to that, as developed in Chapter 3, is: **What kind of alternative public spheres are those?** In other words, here I am interested in whether they are aimed at the countercultural margins, or rather seek to establish a popular, or populist, mass public, as well as the extent to which they can be said to be counter-hegemonic (i.e. inclusive of marginalised voices, political views etc.). I am also interested in the role of social media (and particularly Facebook) in the construction of these publics, and the extent to which their affordances<sup>35</sup> (Khazraee and Novak 2018; boyd 2010; Vitak and Ellison 2013; Treem and Leonardi 2013) – for instance Facebook Pages, Groups and Events- are amenable to the visibility aims and needs of the activists, as well as to the radicalisation, or expansion, of democracy, as per the visibility conditions outlined by Dahlberg (2018) (see Chapter 2). In this chapter I will thus draw on the interview material to interrogate and compare the different activists' strategies and practices in respect to gaining visibility. In particular, I will focus on how 1) their self-understanding and broader aims as civil society actors and 2) the way they perceive the media ecology (Treré and Mattoni 2016) in which they operate affect the ways they adopt and adapt to social media's affordances and logic (Van Djick and Poell 2013). In other words, here I am interested in the "mediation opportunity structure" (Cammaerts 2012) and its relationship to the activists' strategies and practices oriented towards gaining visibility.

In what follows, I will first look at the way the civil society actors claim their "right to be seen" and to "bestow visibility on others" (Dayan 2013) within the Bulgarian media ecology. I will then consider some of the challenges social media, with their affordances and logic,

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<sup>35</sup> I follow Gibson's (1979) ecological conceptualisation, which defines affordances as what the environment or the technological platform can provide to its users to achieve their goals.

pose to the different activists' (visibility) aims, and will reflect on some of the issues those challenges raise for democracy and democratic participation. I will argue that although social media do offer non-elite actors opportunities for visibility in a hostile, oligarchy-controlled and uncivil mainstream media environment, and that although they chime well with populist forms of communication (i.e. simplicity, emotionality etc.), we need to be more careful when lauding their potential for expanding *democratic* participation, particularly in light of their corporate ownership and market-driven logic of operation, and in respect to contexts characterised by high levels of polarisation along Us–Them divides, and low levels of social, political and media trust.

## **7.2 Social media and the quest for visibility: different protest publics and their logics**

In recent years the Bulgarian mainstream electronic media's growing sensitivity to negative public opinion (due to increasing competition for audiences), as well as their changing practices ushered in by the entry of social media into the field, seem to an extent to have played to the advantage of protest activists. For example, according to all interviewees the main TV channels currently would rather cover a protest that has received a lot of coverage in the social networks (through posts, comments, live videos etc.) than risk appearing disengaged from issues of public interest, especially in cases when their competitors have also chosen to cover it. Most of the respondents therefore admit to having started to predominately rely on social media for getting the attention of, and coverage by, the big national TVs. In other words, for them it is no longer necessary to reach out to "inform" directly the media that a protest is going to take place, as journalists are believed to be following different Facebook groups, pages and opinion leaders/activists and so to be able to find out this information on their own.

At the same time, given the perceived dependence, unreliability and untrustworthiness of the mainstream media, which often provide the "wrong" kind of visibility to the protesters (Silverstone 2007, see also Chapter 6), social and digital media are also considered to be crucial tools for providing *alternative* and critical publicity by all respondents:

I think that Facebook has, not a unique, but a very specific position in respect to the fact that the Facebook platform established itself as a sphere that compensated the lack of enough freedom and critical stance of the media (Respondent 10, (neo)liberal case/grassroots).

As Dayan has argued, not only do internet media "allow publics to acquire visibility, and to acquire visibility on their own terms, but they also allow them to define the visibility of

others, to become organisers of visibility”, or in other words, to become “visibility entrepreneur[s]” (2013, p. 143). In what follows, I will explore the way different civil society actors with different organisational structures, aims, and values, in their quest to attract media attention, as well as supporters to their causes and protests, use these tools to “acquire visibility”, as well as to “confer visibility” on others (i.e. on their opponents). I will argue that two broad logics characterise the *kind of publics* that they create as “visibility entrepreneurs” in that respect - a *top-down logic of centralised information aggregation and dissemination*, on the one hand, and a *de-centred bottom-up logic of group and page-centric audience attention aggregation and/or individual-centric networked visibility maintenance*, on the other (cf. Tufekci 2013).

### 7.2.1 Group and page-centric audience and attention aggregation

As we saw in Chapter 6, some of the activists linked to the populist groups do not tend to see the mainstream media as a viable public sphere for popularising their oppositional, anti-governmental causes and views. Instead of engaging strategically with the mainstream media, they thus prefer to direct most of their efforts towards the building and maintaining of an *alternative networked* public sphere on social media (*boyd 2010*). This *alternative public sphere* consists of a network of interconnected personal profiles and (often *anonymous*) sites, blogs, Facebook groups and pages (according to a couple of respondents, currently “more than 50”). Many of those are dedicated to a particular topic or issue, usually with a patriotic/conservative, anti-governmental or anti-systemic slant. A number of them - for instance the Facebook Page “National Protest Against All Outrages” (see Chapter 4 for case description)- first appeared during the 2011-2012 protests against fuel price hikes and the mass anti-governmental protests of Winter 2013, when they served as crucial information-sharing and mobilisation platforms<sup>36</sup>. These profiles’, blogs’, sites’, groups’ and pages’ activity has been largely focused on bestowing visibility on issues the activists consider important and to rile up supporters against the government (for instance

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<sup>36</sup> It is important to note, however, that at the beginning of this research project those pages and website were still in existence, but by the time of writing this chapter few of them remain – many of the pages and the website connected to SILA have disappeared from the Internet, whereas the Facebook Page “National Protest Against All Outrages” was permanently taken down by Facebook for unclear reasons in December 2018, around the time new mass mobilisations across the country were going on against increases in fuel taxes, inspired by the Yellow Vests movement happening at the time in France. The page “National Protest” was active as a mobilisation platform during those protests, which is why the explanation given by the person publicly identified with it (one of the interviewees in this study) was that it had been targeted by the government in cahoots with Facebook. However, the page takedown could be due to a variety of other reasons, including recent changes in the rules and tightening of controls on Facebook in regards to “hate speech”, “fake news” and/or “spamming” practices.

by circulating information that attacks, discredits or mocks the governing elites), to counteract what the activists see as “media manipulation” and “disinformation”, to “open people’s eyes”, to “wake them up” and to disseminate “the truth” (Respondent 22, populist case/grassroots). Thus one respondent from SILA described the network as “a freedom of speech kit, let’s call it like that, a coordinated attack [...] it can be coordinated derision, you can have all kinds of uses” (Respondent 22). Although most people that write for their sites and blogs are not professional journalists, others are, and according to one respondent, see it as an opportunity for “free expression” – something they do not have at the mainstream media organisations they work for. The network’s overall aim, according to these activists, is therefore to:

[..] be free, to tell the truth, to give the truth to the people, there is no other aim. Because most of the news surrounding us don’t provide the truth, they give minced and well moulded truth to the people (Respondent 21, populist case/grassroots).

Furthermore, the people that manage the pages and groups in these activists’ online network all tend to know each other, and frequently coordinate mass postings, or “spamming” campaigns, when they want to attract attention to particular issues (Respondent 21, populist case/grassroots). As this kind of activity currently can lead to a profile being blocked by the Facebook algorithm, some do it through “fake” profiles in order not to jeopardise their real ones (Respondent 20, populist case/grassroots). Occasionally, this network of groups, pages, sites, and blogs is employed in this way for the mobilisation (or attempts at mobilisation) of people for protests. Thus, it is first used as a sort of “opinion barometer”, to gauge public interest or affect in respect to an issue (and therefore to judge whether it is worth trying to organise a protest) by for instance posting polls on the pages or in the groups or circulating blog posts on a “topic” and seeing how many people engage with them. If there is enough response – judged by number of “likes” as well as by “visits per day”- then the pages etc. are used in a coordinated way to set up events and spread information:

Then the bigger [pages] make a poll, then the smaller “rocket propellers” take over. An image is created for the action, how the event will proceed, with easily digestible information, right, step by step what we will do (Respondent 21, populist case/grassroots).

As an *alternative* to the mainstream public sphere, and particularly the national electronic media, this network of sites, blogs, and Facebook groups and pages is, however, different from the oppositional (subaltern) *counterpublics* (Negt *et al.* 1988; Fraser 1990; Warner 2002) usually discussed in relation to the “new social movements” literature, or the specialised *issue publics* (i.e. Dayan 2005), more typical of professionalised NGOs. Thus, rather than constructing a niche public of a specific marginalised group (as in the case of



counterpublics), the public constructed by these activists is a *broad* one – that is, they see it as representative of “the general public,” or of “the ordinary Bulgarian people”. In other words, their strategies and practices focus on setting up and maintaining an alternative *mass public* (of the kind that the national electronic media target) that is at the same time also *networked* (boyd 2010) and *oppositional* to the governing status quo. However, this public is not necessarily the kind of *progressive* “online crowd” of ordinary citizens engaged in anti-hegemonic popular mobilisation against the neoliberal status quo, as described by Gerbaudo’s concept Populism 2.0 (Gerbaudo 2015a; 2018), but is often constructed in illiberal, conservative and/or nationalist terms:

[Our public consists of] more conservative people, meaning patriarchal, they want to have a normal family, for there to be a hierarchy, to be known who is who. Right, they don’t want everyone to be poor and everyone to be rich, they want there to be some sort of hierarchy (Respondent 20, populist case/grassroots).

Furthermore, the activists from this case study admit to often using<sup>37</sup> various tricks, such as algorithm hacks, to quickly assemble as large a audience or follower-base for their groups and pages as possible. The Facebook page National Protest Against All Outrages was one of the first and biggest Facebook pages set-up in a similar way by some activists from SILA, and before it was permanently taken down in December 2018 by Facebook (see Footnote 35), it had an audience of around 220 000 ‘followers’ - one of the biggest on the Bulgarian Facebook at the time:

[it is done] to get an audience right away. Meaning, if the page is new, it will have 10 likes, for example, by your friends. If you want to have 50 000 in ten days, there is no way this can happen. And so in two days you can get 50 000- one person sits down, hacks the whole system and starts (Respondent 21, populist case/grassroots).

In order to retain the public added in such ways, to attract more followers to their Facebook pages and groups, as well as to avoid Facebook censorship and/or government crackdown, some of the respondents involved in the set-up of such networks also admit to purposefully refraining from using too inflammatory, racist or confrontational language (such as “Death to Boiko Borisov<sup>38</sup>” or “Death to the Gypsies”) in the names of their groups or pages, but would instead opt for “democratically sounding” ones, like “Civil Society” or “Democracy”. Such names are meant to make (potential) members less suspicious about

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<sup>37</sup> Or used to use, before Facebook started cracking down on such practices around 2015.

<sup>38</sup> The current Prime Minister.

the more radical outlook of some these groups and pages. In other words, obfuscating the “real” aims of such groups and pages is part of these activists’ strategies for amassing and retaining larger publics on social media:

You can’t make it so drastic- “Death to the Gypsies”. Because not everyone is racist, right, not everyone would support, even if they are a racist, such behaviour. and to like such behaviour, right, to embarrass themselves in front of their own audience (Respondent 21, populist case/grassroots).

Furthermore, the activists’ refusal to put themselves forward as “leaders” by remaining semi-anonymous behind this network of sites and pages seems to be a strategy aimed at defusing suspicions about any personal *political* ambitions they might have, in a context where such breed much distrust. To an extent this tactic seems to stem from the activists’ negative experiences during the Winter 2013 mass protests, when the media’s designation of various “faces of the protests” drove divisions within their movement and groups. According to the interviewees, the attempt to create formal, hierarchical organisations and/or parties at the time “killed in reality everything...the whole citizen energy went to hell” (Respondent 22, populist case/grassroots). One respondent from SILA thus described their *current political* ambitions in terms that are close to populism in their antipathy to representative democracy and : i.e. as “a need to create a movement, without a leader, but with a board” consisting of people from all spheres and walks of life (Respondent 20, populist case/grassroots). In respect to that, the network of anonymous pages, sites and groups are imagined as representing this “leader-less” movement of “the people” and embodying the collective “public opinion”, rather than as the agenda of a particular group. In another words, the respondents construe their networks of sites, groups and pages as an expression of the popular will and affect. However, they simultaneously, and somewhat contradictorily, posit *themselves* in the role of the behind-the-scenes “driving force” of this “public opinion”:

In general I am very much against such party, citizen and so on organisations, some such organs [...] one council of people, even informal one, with voting can solve the problems, without being formalised legally. Social media and the sites that we publish in the network are enough to form some kind of public opinion in Bulgaria (Respondent 22, populist case/grassroots).

On the other hand, in order to attract and retain the attention of a public these actors deem to be largely disinterested in political issues, they maintain sites and/or blogs where they write attention-grabbing, sensationalist information and/or humorous political commentary, including “fake news”, which they circulate through their Facebook pages and groups. Spreading content in this way is often a collective, rather than an individual, effort: the

activists coordinate between themselves to simultaneously post in groups they moderate and/or administer (a practice that Facebook currently considers “spamming”). The main justification given was that this is done in order to maintain a level of interest and discontent amongst people who tend to be “politically apathetic” and to draw their attention to “the truth”, so that they can be mobilised against the government when an opportunity arises. Thus, according to one respondent, because yellow news draw much more attention than more serious ones, they need to “find ways to present” the information they deem important, so that it is read by more people:

If you present it as “Well, the health minister has a lover and needs to pay her support, and that is why he is raising your health contributions”, this will be read [...] Just a sensationalist headline makes people pay attention (Respondent 22, populist case/grassroots).

Some interviewees also admitted that these are common practices for getting funds through “clickbait” as well, which have been adopted by some in their networks. They thus often collaborate with owners or editors of “friendly” online media sites and put them as admins of their pages, so that the latter can cheaply and easily circulate their site contents to large audiences, without having to pay for advertisement.

To sum up, in their attempt to build a broad *mass* or *popular* public, as an alternative to the (corrupted) mainstream public sphere, these activists’ group and page-centric audience and attention aggregation strategies and practices are oriented towards taking advantage of, or “gaming”, the affordances, algorithms and attention monetisation model of Facebook, that is, of some aspects of its social media logic (Van Dijck and Poell 2013), as well as of the possibilities social media provide for shunning transparency of identity, operation and aims. To an extent these practices can be also said to be oriented towards overcoming the structural limitations to visibility on the Facebook platform (i.e. its networked, fragmented and individual-centric form of communication and interaction or the limits to the number of friends a profile can have).

### **7.2.2 Individual-centred networked visibility maintenance**

When it comes to the activists linked to Protest Network (PN) and related groups (liberal/pro-Western case, grassroots), we have a similar bottom-up approach to constructing an alternative public, yet one that is underpinned by a slightly different *logic* of seeking and maintaining visibility. Protest Network emerged as a horizontal network of independent activists, bloggers, citizen journalists, professionals and grassroots civil society groups during the 2013 Summer protests. The activists linked to it describe it as “an umbrella-organisation” for different groups and “social media influencers” (Respondent

13, (neo)liberal case/organisation). Initially it developed around the Facebook protest event page called “I don’t want Delyan Peevski for chief of DANS”<sup>39</sup> which was set up by a few activists and bloggers and via which the protest action was organised and coordinated throughout the summer. The original event page later changed its name to “DANSwithme”, and the hashtag #DANSwithme became emblematic for the movement (although Twitter never took a central communication or organisational role within it). A Facebook page and a website were created subsequently where a common manifesto was uploaded, and up-to-date information about relevant political and protest developments, news, alternative political analysis and commentary were frequently shared. In addition, other support or solidarity groups and pages were set up, including by Bulgarians abroad, where information was circulated and discussions took place. Protest Network can thus be said to be an Internet protest movement - one that developed almost exclusively on the web – and its protest activity can be seen as an example of what Bennett and Segerberg have called “connective action”. Like the populist groups discussed previously, Protest Network is very media-centric, as most of its activities revolve(d) around acts of mediation, i.e. acquiring and bestowing visibility online. It can thus be described as a highly mediatised, or *hyper-mediatised*, civil society actor (i.e. Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999):

And because this is the only protest group, which has such an approach [...] It became emblematic as approach and as media, and in reality we, when there is a reaction, a call for a protest, or just a public position commenting on the actions, or calling for such, all of that multiplies on the pages of Protest Network on Facebook (Respondent 15, (neo)liberal case/organisation).

Like in the case discussed in the previous section, PN’s network of sites, Facebook pages and groups similarly operates (or operated) as an *alternative, or oppositional, networked public sphere* with a generalised watchdog function of *conferring visibility* on the political and institutional elites. In this case, however, that function is geared mainly towards shining light on issues that fall under the liberal frame of “*corruption*”, “*(lack of) rule of law*”, “*zadkulisie*” and “*captured state*” (coined by these activists as “the model #KOI<sup>40</sup>”). In fact, *conferring visibility* and thus raising *the public sensitivity* towards these particular issues, as well as “*giving voice*” to the “*voiceless protest*” (as Respondent 15 put it) are considered

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<sup>39</sup> The Bulgarian National State Security Agency.

<sup>40</sup> “#Koi” (or “#Кой” in Cyrillic) translates as “#Who”. It initially stood in for the question “Who suggested Delayn Peevski for chief of DANS?” that the Summer 2013 protesters asked, and later came to symbolise all of “the zadkulisie”, literally meaning “the behind the scenes”, which these civil society actors see as the model of non-transparent and corrupt governance of Bulgaria.

as the primary *raison d'être* of Protest Network as a loose activist grouping, and as some of the measures by which the Summer 2013 protests are judged, to an extent, as a success. Maintaining its particular “protest discourse” is also the given reason for the continuation of the network as an (mediated) activist entity long after the end of the 2013 protests and the fall of the government at the time:

[...] these protests are a success, because they changed the public agenda, they changed the way it is spoken about the problems in society [...] (Respondent 14, (neo)liberal case/organisation).

As most respondents linked to Protest Network admit, however, since some of the core activists went on to formalise its activities, either through the setup of NGOs (“Initiative Justice for All”) or parties (ex-DEOS, and currently “Da, Bulgaria”), PN, as a pressure groups, has fragmented, and its visibility as an entity has almost disappeared. Its (ex-)activists, however, continue to maintain the visibility of *its discourse* through their personal blogs, Facebook profiles, Twitter accounts, YouTube channels and other social media platforms and news sites, like the media platform and Facebook page *Terminal 3* (which started as the online site NoResharki during the 2013 protests) that provides critical of the government political commentary and news and analysis from a liberal-right/pro-Western perspective.

For Protest Network (ex-)members, as for other civil society actors, Facebook is nevertheless the most important and widely used social media. The more publicly prominent activists thus use their personal Facebook profiles (often with up to 5000 Facebook friends and even more followers) and/or pages largely for political and publishing purposes: for instance, to circulate their blog posts and articles, to share news and information about current relevant protests, to offer commentary on various political and social problems and developments, and to invite others in their networks to discuss, debate or share them. They can thus be said to act as what Tufekci (2013) calls “networked micro-celebrity activists”, by which she means:

politically motivated non-institutional actors who use affordances of social media to engage in presentation of their political and personal selves to garner public attention to their cause, usually through a combination of testimony, advocacy, and citizen journalism (ibid.; p. 850).

According to Tufekci’s account, the ability to gain access to the “highly networked, dense, but also hierarchical information ecology” and to direct the flow of attention and visibility within it is what counts when it comes to the “newly emergent microcelebrity activists” visibility seeking practices (ibid., p.862; see also Bastos and Mercea 2016). In respect to that, the focus of the Protest Network activists’ Facebook activities is on counteracting media censorship (or “blockade” as some respondents call it) and/or propaganda directed

at them and *on maintaining their own personal visibility* in the (online) public sphere and within their networks. As one respondent noted: “Without sharing on Facebook nowadays, according to me, there is no reading” (Respondent 13, (neo)liberal case/organisation).

Networked microcelebrity activists, however, often vie for visibility not solely by way of direct social media communication with followers, but also through mass media attention. As Tufekci (2013, p. 858) notes, their microcelebrity status is boosted as well as strengthened through mass media appearances, which result in an enhancement of social media attention and in more followers. In this way networked microcelebrity activism can be particularly effective for *the aim of scope enlargement* (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993) of a movement (Tufekci 2013, p. 854). Similarly, much of the Protest Network activists’ visibility strategies are oriented towards getting the attention of journalists working in the mainstream media. Thus and *unlike* the activists from the populist groups (see Section 7.3.1), they *actively seek visibility conferred on them* by the mainstream media, by for instance, duplicating content and posting in on different social media platforms, “with the idea that it reaches [different journalists who use different channels]” (Respondent 13, (neo)liberal case/organisation).

Networked microcelebrities also often gain initial attention by way of their citizen journalism from highly charged protest events. They can thus be described as “activist citizen-journalists”, or “citizen-journalists activists”, since they *actively seek* newsworthy (protest) events (Tufekci 2013, p. 858). As such, their reporting simultaneously tries to bestow visibility on the cause, as well as advocate for it (ibid). When it comes to Protest Network’s (ex-)activists, their ability to confer visibility and attract attention to particular issues (including from the journalists and the political elites) while advocating for certain points of view is what their reputation as “opinion leaders” (or “visibility entrepreneurs”, in Dayan’s terms) in fact rests on. Thus as already noted, they operate under the perception that active people who are recognisable in the social networks are followed by the media and by the political elites. As one respondent stated: “Everyone, I am sure of this, every significant for these parties subject, is personally being watched carefully, is followed carefully [on social media]” (Respondent 10, (neo)liberal case/grassroots).

In that respect building up their personal reputations as “experts” or “opinion leaders” in the social networks is particularly important to them, since “it is obvious that you can’t ignore completely one very serious factor, which is the social media, Facebook, and which are these so-called influencers on social media” (Respondent 10, (neo)liberal case/grassroots). For these activists, and unlike for those linked to the populist case study, the rise to a “social media influencer” status is often considered to be due to particular

*professional skills* and *expertise*, for instance in the field of investigative journalism, public policy and administration, law etc. Thus a number of these actors try to merge their *professional skills* and “know how” with their online activist activities. Others try to turn their blogging and social media activism into a professional activity, i.e. to *professionalise* their activism:

[...] I use them like this, with the limited possibilities that one person has, to check, to investigate, to receive some information which to systematise, to process and present to my audience, or I partner with- it happens often- other journalists, with media (Respondent 10, (neo)liberal case/grassroots).

Furthermore, the Protest Network activists try to confer visibility not only on the political elites and the issues the latter are seen as trying to conceal from public scrutiny - such as the “model” of oligarchic dependencies and “captured state” - but also on what they see as the “captured” mainstream media. In other words, they see their social and digital media activities in terms of putting pressure on the latter to fulfil their democratic function, and themselves not just in the role of *watchdogs of power*, but also of *watchdogs of the watchdog*. During the Save Pirin protests, for instance, the National public broadcaster BNT was accused of a particularly biased coverage, at one point coming out with an article title referring to the protesters as “dozens”, while a similar Reuters report described them as “tens of thousands”. This led to the organisation of parallel protests in front of the BNT building in central Sofia, led by some ex-members of Protest Network. Social media become particularly useful “tools” for these activists in that respect:

I commented then on this coverage, on this difference. The people right away made screenshots, the BNT’s title, the Reuter’s title [...] (Respondent 15, (neo)liberal case/organisation).

What is important to note here is that the Protest Network (ex-)activists’ social and digital media strategies and practices are largely underpinned by, and reliant on Facebook’s algorithmic connectivity, or the logic of “networked individualism” (Wellman 2001). In other words, the kind of “visibility entrepreneurship” (Dayan 2013) or “politics of visibility” (Milan 2015b) they engage in is almost entirely dependent on their *personal* popularity and that of the content they share within their own networks of a few thousand friends and followers. As one respondent noted, their audience reach relies “on the mass sharing by individual people, with the idea that those who are bigger influencers in this way, they can attract more people” (Respondent 13, (neo)liberal case/organisation). However, where some take a more optimistic view of this method of gaining visibility – ““It happens, according to me, automatically [...] if you are not my friend on Facebook it doesn’t mean you won’t see my call. You will see it through a friend of yours, who has seen it through me and has shared

it” (Respondent 10, (neo)liberal case/grassroots)- others are more sceptical of its effectiveness and see its dependence on *others* liking, commenting and sharing as limiting:

[...] in Facebook for instance we write what we think, in Terminal 3 a regular topic of ours is „fake news”, we try to counteract some things, but outside of our own audience we in reality do not reach the people who need some kind of a real point of view [...] (Respondent 14, (neo)liberal case/organisation).

In respect to this, knowing how to attract “attention” as a “micro celebrity” in the social media “attention economy” (Klinger and Svensson 2015a) and to maintain it, is particularly important for these actors, and those with PR, digital marketing or other professional backgrounds stress the use or awareness of such relevant social media strategic skills in their communication practices. They thus foreground a *professionalised* approach to maintaining *personal visibility, or fame*, in the networked public sphere, rather than seeking to aggregate generalised audiences around anonymous groups or pages (as the populist actors discussed previously). One respondent for instance shared that he was advised by a professional to always, “regardless of whether as an admin of a page, or as owner of a personal profile”, make sure he responds in time to people who write under his posts, especially while still “fighting for attention” on social media and trying to become “famous” (Respondent 13, (neo)liberal case/organisation). As Tufekci notes, this form of *political-activist* networked microcelebrity is similar to the *non-activist* one conceptualised by Marwick and Boyd (2011) as a “mind-set and set of practices in which audience is viewed as a fan base; popularity is maintained through on-going fan management; and self-presentation is carefully constructed to be consumed by others” (p.14 cited in Tufekci 2013, p. 850). In the activist construction, the audience is however seen not as fans but as political supporters, allies, opponents, and mediators such as journalists, while attention is treated as a resource often sought explicitly for the cause, rather than for the individual-as-celebrity (ibid).

The followers whose attention the Protest Network activists do manage to attract and sustain, however, are more likely to hold similar views, due to the logic of “networked individualism” which “presupposes that people directly connect to other people with whom they are involved in specialised relationships of common interest” (van Dijck and Poell 2013, p. 8). As van Dijck and Poell note, [t]his type of sociality revolves around the person rather than the group or the locality”, and is driven by social platforms which “ostensibly offer users the opportunity to pick and choose others to connect with and communicate on



a personal basis”, and therefore “allow individuals to create their own customised social networks and communities (ibid.).

Facebook is more of an environment for communicating directly with some people, who are close to you, friends, acquaintances or who follow you because of what you say, share, do [...] (Respondent 10, (neo)liberal case/grassroots).

Thus, although their professed aims are to bestow visibility on the power elites and what they try to keep “hidden”, the Protest Network activists do not in fact imagine their public as the *general public*, but construct it in rather narrow terms, as a sort of *oppositional* counterpublic of people like *them* “who are not the voters of the mainstream parties”. Instead of consisting of marginalised, “voiceless” or subaltern groups, or of a generalised mass public of “the (ordinary) people” or “people who are not very interested in politics” (as in the case of the populist actors discussed in Section 7.3.1.1), this (counter)public comprises of “entrepreneurs”, “young urban professionals”, “people on the centre-right” who “live in the cities”, who “read foreign media”, “people with their own businesses”, “autonomous people and/or “freely thinking people” who practice “free professions” and espouse “democratic values”, and who are “active citizens,” with “political aims” on which they act (Respondent 14, (neo)liberal case/organisation). It is the public of “the brave citizens” who are “ready to take on risks,” in both their professional and private lives, and who have “a strong sense of justice” (Respondent 18, (neo)liberal case/organisation).

These activists’ public is therefore constructed in a rather elitist way, as one consisting of citizens who hold certain privileges and already have agency and a voice. This elitism becomes particularly evident when the respondents describe those who *they do not* see as part of their public, i.e. who they think fail to identify with them and their causes or who doubt their motives, and whom they construe as “anti-citizens” (Tsoneva 2017b). For them these “anti-citizens” (or the “Other”) are people who are “uneducated” and “uninformed” (Respondent 18, (neo)liberal case/organisation), who find themselves “on some other level, a very much lower level of the mass pyramid”, who are “from Hadji Dimiter, from Mladost,— do I know”<sup>41</sup>, and who are preoccupied with “these existential problems, economic and so on” and therefore (supposedly) incapable of acting politically without a financial incentive, or imagining someone else doing so (Respondent 13, (neo)liberal case/organisation).

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<sup>41</sup> Socialist- era neighbourhoods in Sofia associated with the working- class (as compared, for instance, to central Sofia, which is often associated in the Bulgarian liberal imaginary with the “right-liberal urban elite” or the old bourgeoisie.

As we saw in Chapters 5 and 6, however, despite their elitism, the civil society actors from this case study *perceive themselves as marginalised and oppositional* (and even as persecuted) within the Bulgarian political and media environment. In a *relational* sense they thus construct their public as a *counterpublic* (to the mainstream) (cf. Neumayer 2013). Furthermore, although they try to portray themselves as righteous and *professional* citizens whose purpose is to shine light on hidden *truths* (i.e. on how politics, with its behind the scenes dependencies, works in Bulgaria), some interviewees also admitted to at times having resorted to the use of “fake news” or “clickbait” tactics utilised by activists from the more populist “side” of civil society: for instance, during the 2013 protests they coordinated Facebook posts claiming (falsely) the Prime Minister had resigned in a bid to attract attention and further their aims as protesters by getting the government to resign for real:

Overall the idea was that the people start believing that he had resigned and in such a way to put him in an uncomfortable position, to create some kind of stirring in that respect (Respondent 14, (neo)liberal case/organisation).

Thus, in their bid to gain attention and “provoke a public reaction”, these activists’ strategies in respect to the social media environment in which they operate and its *logic geared towards the “attention economy”* are in fact not always *that* different from those of the “other”, populist groups, from whom they often try to differentiate themselves, and whom they tend to paint as illegitimate, not least because of their communication practices, such as spreading sensationalist information or “fake news” .

### **7.2.3 Centralised information aggregation and dissemination**

Finally, the visibility-oriented social and digital media strategies and practices of activists from the formal organisations or single-issue pressure groups, on the other hand, such as the environmental NGOs that make up the informal “Coalition For the Nature” (environmental case), or those involved in the pressure-group-turned- NGO “Initiative Justice for All” (liberal case), are largely oriented towards *narrow audiences*, or *issue publics* (Kim 2009; Dayan 2005; Henderson 2014) consisting of experts, supporters and/or members who are *already* interested or have stakes in the *particular issues* at hand (for instance, in protecting the national parks or in judiciary reform). Those publics are often aggregated from activities the organisations organise outside of their protest mobilisation efforts, such as volunteering events, professional conferences or campaigns:

We for example have a volunteer group connected to Friends of the Earth, where the people are active [...] So, some people, who have been active for example during an action for garbage [collection] in particular can express their citizen activism for Pirin too (Respondent 6, environmental case/organisation).

Thus, the respondents working for NGOs tend to use the social and digital media channels of their organisations (or of the Coalition as a collective of such organisations<sup>42</sup>) primarily to maintain visibility within an *existing* public of followers, volunteers, or supporters – or in other words, “people who know the nature in Bulgaria [...] they know about the organisations, the environmentalists; people who know these problems, they have heard of them” (Respondent 4, environmental case/organisation) - by providing up-to-date specialised information about developments around their work and the issues they focus on.

Coalition “For the Nature”, for instance, maintains a website and an official Facebook page (currently with about 34 500 likes and/or followers) where the communication officers share updates on campaigns’ developments, relevant information and environmental news. The website also serves as a kind of depository of detailed analyses of the issues and as an archive of public documentation related to the Coalition’s campaigns and those of its separate member organisations – i.e. “what kinds of signals we have sent, what educational activities we do, things around the project”- which the activists occasionally link to on the Facebook page. It thus provides “fuller information” that interested parties “can acquaint themselves with” (Respondent 7, environmental case/organisation). The site also aggregates links to blogs dealing with related topics, which are targeted particularly to people who do not have Facebook, but are interested in learning more about an issue and keeping up-to-date with developments. Similarly, Initiative “Justice for All” maintains an official website with a news portal/blog, where its demands for judiciary reforms are presented, and legalistic and relevant political news is posted. They also have a Facebook page with about 45 000 followers (at the time of writing), where expert information, news and political and legal commentary are circulated and then re-shared and/or discussed in the comments by followers and supporters.

In other words, the websites and Facebook pages of the formal organisations *represent* them strategically to other stakeholders and supporters, by *making visible* the track record of their activities, campaigns and positions. These platforms also act as online depositories

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<sup>42</sup> The separate member organisations and NGOs of Coalition “For the Nature”, such as Greenpeace Bulgaria, WWF, Friends of the Earth, the Bulgarian National Parks Association etc., have their own organisational websites and Facebook pages targeted to their specific activities and campaigns and with their own separate follower and support - bases. Here, however, I am focusing on the Coalition as an informal “grouping” of these organisations that acts as a collective activist entity, with relatable, yet separate, broader and more inclusive aims than the individual organisations that comprise it, and with its own separate strategies, which include the organisation of protests.

and disseminators of expertise, documentation and information targeted at a *specific audience*, which is *already* aware of the existence of the organisations and of their causes and activities. Finally, they act as specialised media channels that produce and disseminate news about particular areas of expertise – *bestowing visibility* on specialised issues that might remain outside of the scope or interest of the mainstream media. In fact, according to some respondents, journalists from the mainstream media often follow their sites and social media platforms for news around such specialised topics. Thus, in a way of a role reversal, rather than actively trying to gain the media's attention and enter the news agenda, the activists expect the media themselves, driven by their own logic, to regularly check the organisations' sites and pages for "newsworthy" material, as "they aim to be the first before the other media to share them" (Respondent 18, (neo)liberal case/organisation). In addition, "friendly" bloggers, or public figures and opinion leaders supportive of their campaigns, are also relied on to follow their sites and Facebook pages and to popularise the positions expressed on there:

So, some very active public figures, bloggers, who read, and by reading, they also popularise, sometimes they publicise our statements, our positions, and so they popularise them (Respondent 18, (neo)liberal case/organisation).

Thus, the publics these civil society actors (environmental and liberal organisations) construct through their day-to-day communication activities can be said to be closer to "consensual enclaves" where information is shared in a top-down, strategic manner, than to publics oriented towards internal contestation and participation. During times of protest mobilisation and active campaigning, the communication strategies and practices of the activists working for formal organisations however take on a more wide-reaching and networked approach to sharing information and expanding their support-base, or in other words, to *gaining visibility* in the (online) public sphere and exposing a dissensus (cf. Dahlberg 2018). In other words, we then have a shift from strategic, organisationally-driven form of communication to the constitution of a (counter)public that, as we saw in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 often overlaps with the (neo)liberal/pro-Western one in respect to its target audience and its "anti-corruption" and "anti-oligarchy" discourse.

At such times the organisations' Facebook pages take on leading communication and mobilisation roles, with the actors responsible for strategic communication moving their focus on mobilisation activities, such as setting-up and moderating Facebook protest event pages and sharing of information about the issues and the protests through wider social networks. In addition, some grassroots groups and events start to appear as well, and to link to the main protest. In this case social media start being used to spread "personalised

action frames” that are bridged to the main issue/s, in what Bennett *et.al* (2012, 2013) call “connective action”:

[...] the people, who protest outside of Sofia started to associate some answers to one previous question, to associate the common protest with the local problems, which are also ecological, and started putting them forward again during the protests in their own towns [...] (Respondent 2, environmental case/organisation)

In such instances, maintaining visibility in the network, or engaging in “politics of visibility” (Milan 2015a), becomes paramount for forging and sustaining solidarity with the protest participants, and expanding that from the core. Thus according to one of the respondents, people’s attitudes become more supportive when they see that people from many different cities (including abroad) come out in solidarity with the protest cause. As he noted: “The visibility of the widening of the geography of the processes is very positive” as it “creates the feeling of solidarity in places, where there are few people and [the feeling] that they are not alone” (Respondent 2, environmental case/organisation). Switching from a top-down strategic form of communication to more lateral, participatory and networked ones (or vice versa) however, does not come without problems on social media, as we will see in Section 7.4

### **7.3 Facebook affordances and visibility challenges for non-elite actors**

This sections argues that the way Facebook structures and organises the communication on its platform is not particularly well-suited for gaining wide-reaching visibility outside of a narrow network of friends and followers with similar interests, or in other words - for a scaled-up “connective action” (Bennett et al. 2012), especially in respect to non-elite actors with fewer resources, links and access to the mainstream media operating in highly hostile to civil society politics environment. In addition, Facebook’s Page affordance, widely utilised by activists and organisation in a bid to widen their visibility is not particularly amenable to participatory politics, as it tends to support and prioritise a top-down, one-directional form of “brand visibility” in the network.

#### **7.3.1 Reaching beyond support - base and personal network on Facebook**

Most respondents agree that a negative side of Facebook is that visibility on the platform is usually limited to within the networks of friends and followers one has already established. They therefore see the way the algorithm operates - i.e. the way “it brings

you together with likeminded people” (Respondent 3, environmental case/organisation)- as an obstacle to expanding one’s audience, as it tends to push one’s visibility in the network towards people one tends to communicate (or interact) most often with. This can often create an illusion of a wide-reach and popularity of a given issue, when that it fact might not be the case.

In other words, the “echo-chambers” (Del Vicario *et al.* 2016b; Pariser 2012) Facebook’s affordances (re)produce are seen by a number of activists as a limitation to their mobilisation and visibility aims, as they create “an imaginary idea about the surrounding world” that has little resembles to the world “outside” (Respondent 3, environmental case/organisation). This impedes the activists from reaching to “others”, outside of their bubble, “because when you don’t know these people, who think about the meat and the bread, roughly speaking, you don’t have how to reach them” (ibid). For them thus finding the “right” messages for attracting the attention of “these kinds of people” is problematic “because we ourselves, we don’t communication much with them, we communicate with those like us” (ibid). That is, according to some respondents, Facebook tends to create what some have termed “consensual enclaves” (cf. Dahlberg, 2018) of like-minded people with similar interests, experiences and concerns.

One way to reach beyond your immediate network of friends and followers on Facebook, and to increase the visibility of your posts, is to “sponsor” or “strengthen” them. For activists that do not have much resources (i.e. grassroots groups) even such relatively small payments can become a financial burden and thus can create an unequal playing field in respect to their elite opponents:

That is, each one [non-elite organisation] is concerned about finances. Everywhere the money is not enough, everywhere you need to make decisions about whether for instance to sponsor, to strengthen one Facebook post, or something else to do with the money, with view of the expected result (Respondent 13, (neo)liberal case/organisation).

Thus, rather than providing equal opportunities for lateral “networked connectivity” and expanded reach, as some on the techno-optimistic side tend to profess in regards to social media’s democratic potential (i.e. Shirky 2009, 2011), Facebook tends to (re)create hierarchies of visibility, where those who can afford to pay- benefit, leaving smaller grassroots groups and activists in inferior positions in relation to bigger and better resourced political players, such as mainstream parties and large organisations. In that respect, and in this case, Facebook’s affordances and logic, rather than favouring *in particular* the communication needs and practices of non-elite actors, as Esser *et al.* (2017) suggest, seems to in reality fit better with those of actors who *already* have good access to visibility.

Another way to gain visibility within a larger public on Facebook is through posting in different Facebook groups, perceived as related to the issues at hand in one way or another. For instance one respondent active in Coalition “For the Nature” said she tries to post not only “in environmentally-focused pages and groups” but “to write in mountaineering groups, where the people are not always very active, but in this way, they can quickly get excited” (Respondent 6, environmental case/organisation). Such interest-based Facebook groups can be “with up to 5000-6000 people” and some activists believe that sharing in them can substantially increase visibility: “by the method of internet progression it grows as a snow ball” (Respondent 18, (neo)liberal case/organisation). Others, however, see such a fragmentation of the online public (sphere) into groups with narrow interests, many of which have very small number of participants, as an obstacle for gaining wide-reaching visibility, particularly in an environment where the mainstream public sphere tends to be hostile to the activists and their activities:

And many people don't know at all, the information about the protests doesn't reach them at all [...] Because, perhaps because of the media [...] They are not in the Facebook groups, yes. And the Facebook groups are very limited – only a few thousand people (Respondent 9, (neo)liberal & environmental case/grassroots).

Moreover, as they are usually set up according to specific interests, these groups also tend to have gatekeepers who make sure the focus of discussions within them stays on topic. Thus, when it comes to issue causes, such as Save Pirin, it is often difficult to aggregate new followers from across different, unrelated groups, as many of the activists encounter problems getting their posts approved by the groups' moderators and administrators:

Most of the groups are very thematic and in fact they stick to their topics and let's say you don't have a right to publish such info or the admins don't tolerate [...] (Respondent 9, (neo)liberal & environmental case/grassroots).

Protest or campaign-related postings are also often considered to be political propaganda and looked at with suspicion within such groups, especially if coming from activists connected to (extra-Parliamentary) parties, such as “the Greens” and “Da, Bulgaria”. Posting in such groups is thus often considered “counterproductive” by activists with *political* agendas, not least because “in Bulgaria unfortunately it is [...] very difficult to explain to someone that the fact that you are a political party doesn't mean necessarily that you want to rob him [...]” (Respondent 13, (neo)liberal case/organisation). This generalised scepticism towards “politics” therefore makes discussions on social media around political issues difficult and attempts to post in non-political groups “pointless”, because:

the group is controlled, the moderator himself will directly delete us or directly won't allow us to post anything, so there is no real rational debate, and they run away from it anyways (Respondent 14, (neo)liberal case/organisation).

Thus the way Facebook fragments the (online) public sphere into spaces (or “consensual enclaves”) with a variety of gatekeeping rules and discourse ethics, is seen to not be amenable not only to political agitation, but also to rational deliberation, particularly in a context like the Bulgarian, where a highly polarised and dependent media sphere favours, and thus often normalises “uncivil” forms of communication. As one respondent noted, “[w]hen you know that you can be defeated by rational arguments, you don't participate in rational debate”, and this for him is as true in regards to the mainstream public sphere in Bulgaria, as it is in respect to Facebook and other social media:

In practice there is no public space where such a conversation can be had. The Facebook groups are not such a space [...] at the moment, even if someone wins an argument, that is, proves in a logical way that he is right, no one cares about the logic (Respondent 14, (neo)liberal case/organisation).

The generalised distrust pervading society (see Chapter 5) also means that being an “outsider” to the Facebook groups can be an additional deterrent, with “internal” people more likely to have success in passing by the gatekeepers and in deflecting suspicion of a hidden motive. This makes protest organisers dependent on finding people within their ranks or among their friends and families who are members of various interest groups and willing to distribute protest-related information in them. For instance, one respondent had a pregnant acquaintance suggest that she post information about a protest in the Facebook “mothers' groups” she was a member of, and their tactic specifically was “that it is her, right, not someone from us, because it needs to be an insider” (Respondent 4, environmental case/organisation). Activists from the environmental groups and those linked to Protest Network also often rely on “influencers” amid their ranks, or on individuals within their networks with many followers to share widely from their personal profiles during mobilisation and to thus reach a bigger audience and attract more people.

According to the organisationally-linked respondents, in particular, having to rely on the availability, goodwill and interest of individuals who are not necessarily involved in the cause makes their mobilisation efforts more difficult, haphazard, un-coordinated and thus less effective, than if they were able to plan and coordinate a systematic information distribution campaign. In other words, for them protest mobilisation on Facebook often ends up being an individual-centric and fragmented effort, rather than a collective, coordinated one:



The problem is [...] with the resource of people, because someone has to do it...and it needs to be done by volunteers, right, and we don't manage to always find them. That is, the spread of the information we could say could be better if there are people who tententiously share in all kinds of groups (Respondent 14, (neo)liberal case/organisation).

In cases where the activists do coordinate such "posting campaigns" (as the populist actors said they usually do in their own networks of pages and groups) they are often at the mercy of Facebook's algorithm, over which they have no control, and which frequently changes the terms of engagement. For instance, Facebook has recently started banning coordinated posting, or "spamming" as it calls it, which has resulted in many of these activists' pages and accounts being temporarily banned or deleted;

Because for one article [...] or one picture, or one meme, for it to spread quickly you need to post it in a few places at the same time. Which makes it seem that we are doing it purposefully, that we are some kind of trolls (Respondent 21, populist case/grassroots).

In addition, these activists' strategies for going beyond Facebook's individual-centric networked visibility and reach limits by maintaining networks of many groups and pages with as large as possible membership means the latter is usually not vetted. This makes their public groups and pages easier to infiltrate by political opponents, government "spies", and "trolls", who then post divisive, defamatory or inflammatory content in order to generate distrust, dissuade people from protesting or break the groups apart. In addition, due to the rather horizontal networked way these groups and pages are set up and operated, and the large numbers of participants, admins and moderators in them, they seem to be particularly vulnerable to breakups due to "usurpation" by political opponents or to co-optation by rivals or ex-collaborators. Thus a number of the respondents involved in the setup of such groups and pages said they had often found themselves mysteriously "kicked off" from the admin panel of a Facebook group or page they had started with others, with the name of the page or group and the nature of the information shared in it suddenly having changed.

Many of these activists' profiles tend to get blocked or their pages and groups to be taken down on a regular basis due to an increase, according to them, in mass reporting of posts and content, as well as algorithmic "censorship" (i.e. in respect to "hate speech" or distribution of "clickbait" content etc.) – "before it wasn't like this, that is, Facebook has now become a very un-free area for activity, there is a lot of censorship" (Respondent 22, populist case/grassroots). Sometimes "fake" copycat pages appear instead of the ones that were taken down. Because of this, a number of the activists said they have set up numerous profiles, so that when one gets blocked, they can post through another. They also constantly need to create new groups and pages with similar names and to start again

the process of attracting followers to them. A consequences of this was that most of the respondents from this case study appeared not to know for certain how many such groups or pages they were administering or moderating at any given time, and could not remember their names. Another issue for them is that when pages get taken over by opponents, or closed down due to reports, the audience that has been accumulated - sometimes in the hundreds of thousands- is suddenly lost. Then energy needs to be spent in trying to re-gain it, as well as in establishing the new page as the “real” page administered by the “authentic” civil society actors and winning (again) the trust of followers– not an easy task, especially when the page was anonymous to begin with.

### **7.3.2 Visibility on Facebook as one-way “brand” maintenance and the limits to participation of “outsiders”**

As shown in section 7.2.3, the visibility and communication strategies and practices of *formal organisations* are focused on aggregating information on their websites, such as legislative documents, specialised news and updates on project work and campaigns, and disseminating it via social media. This is, however, generally done in a centralised, top-down manner, with limited scope for participation and input by followers and supporters. The main aim appears to be to keep a base of existing stakeholders and supporters informed and engaged, and to sustain their interest and trust through maintaining visibility of the organisation’s competence and efficacy.

Websites and Facebook Pages are generally amenable to such a top-down communication practices. For instance, a quick look at the setups of the Coalition’s and Initiative Justice for All’s (JFA) websites shows that, much like regular media sites, they are dominated by a one-to-many communication model that offers limited participatory and interactive opportunities to visitors (through, for instance “Contact Us” or “Comment” options). In other words, the websites do not allow for direct content input from “outsiders”, but are managed and updated by employees of the organisations. Their primary roles thus seem to be *to represent* the organisations and their activities in front of their supporters, potential supporters, and other stakeholders, and to *inform*, rather than to invite broader participation and/or discussion around the issues of concern. Although some organisations do try to encourage contributions from supporters to *their* website blogs, that is still done in a top-down, directed manner, where people are “provoked” or “given opportunities” to participate within an already established framework and suggested parameters:

Yes, overall we provoke people, we give them opportunities, and to the volunteers, to write blogs as well and to publish them (Respondent 5, environmental case/organisation).

When it comes to JFA's and the Coalition's Facebook Pages, we similarly encounter limited participatory opportunities for the public, which reflect not only decisions about which Facebook Page affordances *to use*, but also the *nature* of the affordances *themselves*. Overall, a look at the pages shows that the communication on there is structured around and underpinned by the commercial and business-oriented affordances and purposes of Facebook Pages, rather than aimed at encouraging active civic participation and debate. JFA's Facebook Page, for instance, does not allow for posts by "visitors", but features, as does the Coalition's one, "Reviews" and "Recommendations"- an option that reflects the commercial nature and logic of Facebook Pages, whose main *raison d'être* (or operational logic) is the promotion of businesses and brands. This purpose is also evident in the way the About sections of the Coalition and JFA are set-up under Facebook Pages: for instance, information about both is found under the heading "Business Info", while the main campaigns of the Coalition are listed under a subheading "Products".

This setup also affects the hierarchy and organisation of communication within Facebook Pages. Although the Coalition's page does allow for "Visitor Posts" (as this affordance is currently called), on Facebook Pages those are separated from the main newsfeed and are relegated to a small window in the upper - right corner of the page, which requires several clicks to open<sup>43</sup>:

Generally speaking our page is such that...mainly we publish, right, Facebook made it in such a way that the other posts are left in some...the posts from others, they sometimes are seen, sometimes- not (Respondent 3, environmental case/organisation).

Although Facebook Pages do allow for some level of interactivity through liking, re-sharing, commenting, and rating, this interactivity seems to be structured around building the organisations' reputations and maintaining their online visibility (or "presence"), as well as sustaining the loyalty and interest of their supporters- for instance through invitations to demonstrate support via "Reviews" or by "liking"- rather than by encouraging any direct and consequential input by participants:

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<sup>43</sup> Where in 2010 Page walls were showing posts uploaded by both administrators and users, in 2011 Facebook launched the new Timeline layout, where the algorithm EdgeRank decides what content is to appear on top of a newsfeed. Moreover, in respect to page design, posts by users were now relegated to a small window with little prominence.

On Facebook we put “hot news”, if I can call them like that, because in order to maintain this thing, in order to have a stream of people every day, who follow some topics, we need to upload information (Respondent 7, environmental case/organisation).

The page setup, which concentrates communication on the main Newsfeed that features only the posts of the organisation-owner, thus often turns it into the “mouthpiece” of the organisation, which maintains a centralised “gatekeeping” control over the framing of the discussions and the communication that takes place on the page in general, even in cases where posting and commenting by visitors is technically permitted. What we have, however, is not full-on censorship or direction of the discussions, but the maintenance of some centralised control over the latter’s’ nature:

We even leave some critical posts towards us [...] Now, when someone starts saying that we are paid, that we stop tourism, and all kinds of things, of course we...don’t waste our time with such people [...] (Respondent 7, environmental case/organisation).

The way the Page affordances limit participation through hierarchising and centralising the flow of communication, on the other hand, engender visibility conditions that are therefore not in line with participatory equality, where all individuals affected by a dispute “should have equal possibility to see and be seen, hear and be heard, which entails equality of control over seeing and being seen, or hearing and being heard, or visibility” (Dahlberg 2018, p.4).

Moreover, Facebook’s operational logic, which require one to constantly post to the Newsfeed in order to “maintain visibility” within one’s network of friends and followers, do not seem to be a great fit with organisations (or in this case, a Coalition of organisations) whose *central* activity is *not really* news production and dissemination. As one respondent explained, at times when not much was going on (i.e. when there are no mobilisations, campaigns or projects under way) “we were wondering what to put on this page, and we were putting some pictures with animals, here we are saving this or that, there- this or that [...] we are really wondering from where what to drag” (Respondent 7, environmental case/organisation).

### **7.3.3 Dependence on social media and what it means for long-term strategy**

As van Dijck and Poell argue, citing Wendy Chun, “interactive real-time interfaces empower users and ‘buttress notions of personal action, freedom, and responsibility,’ while

at the same time they empower platforms to steer and exploit users' activities ([2011], p. 74)" (2013., p.10). Activists thus need to constantly adapt their practices to the datafication logic, or "the changing norms of a data-driven, global social economy"(ibid.). For instance, the practices and strategies adopted by the activists from the populist groups for audience and attention aggregation, which worked well during the 2012 and 2013 mass protests, are however no longer feasible, as Facebook's rules have been revised and loopholes tightened and "now they catch you right away" (Respondent 22, populist case/grassroots).

The activists in general are well aware of the constant changes to the platform's algorithms, rules and norms introduced by Facebook due to its shifting priorities as well as pressure from governments and regulators across the globe, and are forced to constantly adapt their strategies and find new "loopholes". However, they are not always very clear as to how *exactly* the changes translate to the way communication and connectivity works on the platforms, due to the lack of transparency:

I mean I don't know what effect will these last changes have, which they announced, that the Page feeds wouldn't be so visible, but let's see. I am sure that some cure will be found for this too. Some "hack" will be come up there (Respondent 13, (neo)liberal case/organisation).

Some in particular find the complete reliance and dependence on one corporation and its whims to be a potential threat to their ability to mobilise support and engage in activism, and civic activity more generally. Thus according to one activist from Greenpeace Bulgaria "Facebook is already becoming a bit more unfriendly towards pages" and "after the last change in Facebook's algorithm overall it will become more and more difficult to do such things, protests etc." (Respondent 5, environmental case/organisation). In general, the frequent changes in the way the Facebook algorithms functions –i.e. what content it prioritises and on what terms- have become particularly problematic for the activists' mobilisation and visibility strategies.

For a number of the respondents it has therefore become clear it is necessary to seek alternatives as "it is a bit stupid to be dependent on some algorithms of Facebook" (ibid). In other words, the logic of operation of Facebook and the fact that it has all the control and frequently changes its community rules, algorithms and affordances (due to, for instance, various recent scandals and raised concerns around data privacy, the spread of disinformation and fake news, and unregulated and opaque political targeting online), makes civil society groups that depend on it for gaining and maintaining visibility, counteracting propaganda and mobilising and building support (particularly in a hostile to

them local public sphere) very vulnerable. Here again we have a case of limited participatory equality (Dahlberg 2018), but this time in respect to the activists, and the Facebook platform itself: that is, the activists operate in an environment in which they in fact do not have control over their visibility:

[...] you lose too much energy in building some network and increasing the users, the people that support you, and at the end Facebook decides to change the algorithm for two years and the end, these people, if you don't have their emails, they don't have how to read the content from now on (Respondent 5, environmental case/organisation).

## 7.4 Conclusion

To sum up, the unpredictability, dependence and unreliability of the mainstream public sphere has pushed Bulgarian civil society actors engaged in contentious politics to rely heavily on social media platforms for their visibility and mobilisation efforts. In respect to that, some activists' practices and strategies are underpinned by an aspect of social media logic (van Dijck and Poell 2013, Klinger and Svensson 2015a, 2015b) that is oriented towards attention aggregation- often through "hacking" the system- around a network of anonymous sites, groups and pages, with the aim of amassing large undifferentiated networked publics, or "online crowds" (Gerbaudo 2018), and exploiting their attention and affect for political and sometimes also economic purposes. Here I would suggest that the lack of transparency and the heavy dependence on social media logic and the "attention economy" for the maintenance of visibility make the publics constructed by these activists problematic from a normative democratic perspective (cf. Dahlberg 2018, 2019, see also Chapter 3).

Others, on the other hand, use social media, and particularly Facebook, for the maintenance of *their personal* visibility as political and public figures and of *conferring visibility* (Dayan, 2014) on *the* practices of the oppositional political elites and media, whom they see as "captured", corrupt and undemocratic. In other words, they tend towards what Tufekci (2013) calls "networked microcelebrity activism". Their practices and strategies thus focus on aggregating a public (or attention) around *themselves* based on their notoriety as *individuals* with *certain credibility, expertise and professionalism*. Their tactics nevertheless are still oriented towards and dependent on exploiting social media's "attention economy", and therefore the publics they construct in this way are not really autonomous from the coercive and instrumental influences of Facebook's profit-driven business model and thus do not fulfil all of the normative visibility conditions proposed by Dahlberg (2018, p.5),

Moreover, the civil society actors from both the grassroots liberal and populist cases tend to construct themselves as counterpublics (Warner 2002, Fraser, 1990) inasmuch as they emphasise *oppositional* interpretation of identities, interests, and needs (see also Chapter 5). Their identity construction as marginalised and unrepresented (in respect to the mainstream public sphere) could be thus said to take place in a similar manner as for the more typical oppositional constellations of, for example, radical left (e.g. anti-fascist or anarchist) vs. radical right (neo-fascist, skinheads) movements (i.e. Neumayer 2013). Both of these publics, however, are not only exclusionary of “the other” (i.e. the voters of the mainstream parties, oppositional civil society groups, the poor, queer identities, etc.) in their embrace of either ethno-nationalist, heteronormative and anti-liberal discourses (in the populist case), or elitist ones (in the liberal/pro-Western one), but also *antagonistic* to the extent that they treat “the other” as an illegitimate, or a unworthy interlocutor (Dahlberg 2018, p.4). As they do not engender an *anti-hegemonic opposition* (Gerbaudo 2018), they do not necessarily contribute to the radicalisation of democracy, as they limit its expansion to more and more marginalised and excluded groups.

Finally, the social media strategies and practices of activists working for formal organisations focus on collecting and collating specialised information and producing news on developments in *their areas of expertise*, sharing expertise with other professionals and organisations, as well as maintaining the interest and loyalty of *an already interested and educated* audience of supporters. Their usual social media strategies and practices are thus underpinned by a *logic of centralised information aggregation and dissemination* whose main purpose is *strategic communication*, reputation and professional network-building, performance of professionalism and efficacy to specialised audiences, and trust and loyalty-maintenance, more typical for organisations (professional or political), than for grassroots networked social movements (Bennett et al. 2012, 2013). In other words, their visibility strategies are mainly targeted at “consensual enclaves”, rather than aimed at setting up contestatory publics (Dahlberg 2018). In the process of protest mobilisation, however, their tactics change, becoming more networked and connective, with the aim of making a dissensus visible to a wider public. This shift in communication logic and strategy, however, can have its challenges on social media, and particularly Facebook, as we will see in the next chapter.

In the chapter I also considered how amenable are Facebook’s affordances to the visibility aims of the different civil society actors and to participatory politics. I showed that the way Facebook structures and organises the communication on its platform is not particularly well-suited for gaining wide-reaching visibility outside of a narrow network of friends and

followers with similar interests and views, especially for non-elite actors with fewer resources, links, networking skills, and access to the mainstream media. Facebook's Pages affordance, widely used by the activists, also tends to prioritise "brand visibility" maintenance in the network to democratic participation and deliberation. Moreover, the actors' almost exclusive dependence on a foreign social media corporation, over which they have no control and which frequently and non-transparently changes the way visibility operates on its platform, translates into a vulnerability for civil society activism in the country in the long term.



## Chapter 8: Social media and the challenge of visibility on your own terms

### 8.1 Introduction

When it comes to the quest for visibility within the media ecology, we've seen that the wish "to be seen *on their own terms*" is particularly important for protesters, as it relates to their ability to gain the trust of potential supporters. In respect to that, this chapter will focus on **RQ2b**, developed in Chapter 3: **how do the different civil society actors try to gain the trust of potential supporters?** In what follows I will first consider the activists' strategies and practices for acquiring and maintaining visibility *on their own terms*, which I will relate to the ways they try to gain trust and legitimacy in the mediated environment. I will argue that in order to counteract opponent's delegitimisation claims, the activists adopt an either technocratic or populist communication strategies and practices, which are oriented towards different interpersonal trust beliefs (Mayer et al. 1995, pp. 717- 719) - *ability* (competence) and *integrity*. The analysis is based on interview data, and therefore focuses on the activists' *perceptions* and *intentions (or strategies)* – what actually happens during their mobilisation efforts on Facebook will be considered in chapters 10 and 11.

This chapter also discusses some of the challenges social media (and particularly Facebook), with their affordances and logic, pose to the activists' aims in respect to gaining visibility *on their own terms*, and will reflect on some of the issues those challenges raise for democracy and democratic participation of non-elite actors more generally. It will argue that Facebook's affordances are not always amenable to the protesters' wish to be *both visible and visible on their own terms*, especially when it comes to formal organisations trying to organise a "grassroots" citizen protest - that is, to shift from organisationally-framed and directed *collective action* to a more grassroots, lateral and networked *connective action*, or to grassroots activists who want to avoid the negative consequences of visibility in a hostile (to civil society) local environment. Furthermore, the use of social media can also often exacerbate group and movement fragmentation by making interpersonal conflicts more visible at a larger scale, particularly in the highly polarised Bulgarian context where social and political trust is very low, and where a big part of the public debate happens on Facebook, for a lack of a more reliable and independent public sphere.

## 8.2 (De)legitimisation strategies: Who is an (in)authentic civil society actor and what is a legitimate protest?

As we saw in Chapter 2, the post-socialist and democratisation discourse in the countries of CEE posits civil society as occupying an independent space between the realm of institutionalised electoral politics and the economic sphere. In Chapter 6 we further saw that the legitimacy of civil society actors as such thus derives from their seeming independence from political and economic interests. A common de-legitimisation and propaganda strategy used against them is therefore to attack and/or question their independence as civil society actors, and by extension the authenticity and legitimacy of their protests. In that respect the two most often used claims or accusations against protests and protesters in Bulgaria (by the media, the power elites *and* rival groups) mentioned by the respondents are that they are “being paid” to protest by local or foreign interests and/or that their protests are “political” rather than “civic” (that is, that they are organised by oppositional political parties with the intention of ultimately taking down the legitimately elected government). Legitimacy as a civil society actor is therefore based on a claim to economic independence, as well as purity and nobility of intent, and involves stressing the fact that *we* are “not being paid” and “have never taken money” but are instead driven by a noble desire to change society for the better:

I have been asked the question: “Has anyone tried to bribe you?” Well no, they haven’t, no one has tried to bribe me! Yes, they’ve tried from various ministries to buy me out [...] But I have refused momentarily [...] (Respondent 8, environmental case/grassroots).

By stressing their independence and “pure” (that is, not economically-underpinned) motivations, the activists thus make tacit claims to *their authenticity* as civil society actors, and juxtapose that to the *inauthenticity* of other, *oppositional* groups or interests, whom their political opponents or the media often tout as representatives of “the other side” of a conflict. Such oppositional groups, for instance “contra-protesters”, are often described by the activists as being *dependent* on economic interests and therefore as having “impure” (and thus *illegitimate*) incentives: “they “are organised by parties of the status quo in order to defend their interests” (Respondent 10, (neo)liberal case/grassroots). These protesters are also often portrayed as being deprived of their “free will” and therefore of their claim to being *authentic citizens* – (idealistically) imagined as free and independent from economic or other structural constraints. This is for instance how one respondent described the “contra-protests” for a second cabin lift in Pirin, which he did not see as authentic, and therefore legitimate:

These are people who are driven with buses from Bansko and the region - driven under threat of losing their jobs, that [they] will be fired. That is, the free will categorically is missing and for sure we have some economic stimulus behind all of this (Respondent 10, (neo)liberal case/grassroots).

The second delegitimising claim identified by the respondents that is often used against them is to accuse their protests of being *political* rather than *civic*, that is, that they have *political* aims and/or that certain (hidden) political interests behind them are trying to bring down the legitimately elected government. Thus a common question the environmentalists often hear in respect to their causes and protests is: “But it, the protest is ecological, why are you politicising it?” (Respondent 2, environmental case/organisation). In respect to such accusations the activists construct their legitimacy by making a distinction between a *political* and a *partisan* protest. Although all the activists see civil society protests as having necessarily *political* aims - “With the fact that they are political I absolutely agree, because the people are protesting against policies” (Respondent 2, environmental case/organisation) - they simultaneously maintain that a protest ceases to be a *civil society* protest, and therefore loses *legitimacy*, when organised by a formal political organisation or a party, as then it necessarily “is partisan” (Respondent 13, (neo)liberal case/organisation), that is, it serves the particularistic interests of that party rather than the common public good.

An authentic civil society protest is therefore considered not only one that is “not paid”, but also one that is not *centrally organised* by an illegitimate entity – such as a business/industry or a party. The authentic protest should be instead *spontaneous*, or organised by a *legitimate civil society actor*, which the environmental and (neo)liberal/pro-Western activists in particular often imagine as belonging to the educated middle class (perceived as “free”, i.e. economically independent) and/or as a carrier of some sort of expertise and morality (see also Chapter 6):

Usually, part of the protesters are specialists on the topic, for instance biologists, if we are talking about Pirin, or are let’s say jurists, when we are talking about the judiciary reform, or are just some normal people, middle class (Respondent 10, (neo)liberal case/grassroots).

The illegitimate and “inauthentic” protest, on the other hand, is perceived as a centrally-organised, usually one-off event, with people “being brought by buses” from different regions of the country, and often given not only money, but also pre-made campaign materials and identification paraphernalia, such as printed signs and banners, or “official” protest T-shirts:

Well, if they are that spontaneous these protests, why does this protest by people from Bansko, and that, doesn't happen every week, but happened only once? Well, because they brought them with their organised buses, because they made them T-shirts [...] (Respondent 8, environmental case/grassroots).

### **8.3 Gaining trust in virtual interaction: Between populist/moralist and technocratic - deliberative communication practices and strategies**

As we saw in Section 8.2, a common de-legitimising and propaganda strategy used against the activists is to attack and/or question their independence as civil society actors, and by extension the authenticity and legitimacy of their protests. In their attempt to win the trust of supporters in a media environment that they experience as highly polarised, distrustful, and rife with disinformation, civil society actors thus strive to portray themselves as the *only legitimate* and *moral* opposition to the *illegitimate and immoral* governing elites, by simultaneously *universalising* their struggle while *differentiating* themselves from other, counter-hegemonic groups. They therefore construct themselves as a *depoliticised* yet *political* opposition that conceptualises political conflict in moralistic and essentialist terms (see Chapter 5), as one either between a technocratic civil society of experts and the state, or between the moral righteous citizens (or “the people”) and the corrupt elites. Their legitimacy as civil society therefore stems from a claim to *authenticity* based on an idealised notions of political and economic independence, on the one hand, as well as from either technocratic or a populist (or liberal-moralist) conceptualisation of their identity and aims, on the other.

So how do civil society activists in Bulgaria try to win the trust of potential supporters in virtual interaction?<sup>44</sup> When it comes to the way they deal with *obvious* “trolls”, who purposefully infiltrate their groups or pages to write rude and inflammatory comments in order to polarise the discussions and create conflicts, the activists from the different cases have similar strategies— they normally either block them and delete their posts as “it is

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<sup>44</sup> Here I should mention that the large majority of the respondents agreed that in the hostile and polarised political and media context in which they operate it has become very difficult to gain the trust of supporters online, and that meetings “in person” are always preferable, as then people get to “see who you really are” (Respondent 18, populist case/grassroots). Even so, most admitted that their mobilisation activities are nevertheless concentrated online due to limited resources and time for organising offline meetings, campaigning around the country, etc. Therefore at present I will mainly focus on their online activities.

pointless arguing with them, they are paid to do this” (Respondent 19, populist case/grassroots) or ignore them and leave their supporters on the page to argue with the trolls themselves. There are however some important differences in the ways the different civil society actors try to win the trust of people more generally, given the propagandistic and hostile media environment they have to operate in. These differences relate to how the activists perceive the role and aims of civil society in respect to the political system.

Thus, the majority of the interviewees from the expertise-oriented NGOs (such as the environmental ones or Initiative “Justice for All”) tend to foreground “objectivity”, that is, the communication of factual information and rational arguments backed up with data and “facts” - for instance through the posting of links to serious analyses or legislation on their institutional web-sites - as a strategy of countering “fake” arguments and accusations and “proving” the legitimacy of their cause/protest, and of themselves as civil society actors. They thus stress that they “don’t post incantations, right- “A Third World War is coming” and so on [...]” to attract attention but “try to prove, to show, to argue things with documents, with official correspondence, or with more detailed explanations” (Respondent 1, environmental case/organisation). Then the doubting side can make up its own mind on whether to trust them or not:

[...] when you publish some kind of facts with concrete documents and so on, because the people just, when they see for example a scanned document and so on, explained, when you have some concrete numbers, concrete information, which has been demanded via the legal way, and when you constantly make use of such information [...] that way trust is build I think [...] (Respondent 5, environmental case/organisation)

In other words, the NGOs-linked activists subscribe to a Habermasian discourse ethics and expect that their audience – which they imagine as consisting of “people who read” (Respondent 1, environmental case/organisation) - possesses the critical and dispassionate faculties to be able to make the *right* judgment of whether to support them or not when given *enough* and the *right kind* of information and argumentation. Their online strategies and practices therefore reflect what I will call a technocratic- deliberative approach to dealing with disinformation in the networked public sphere – one prioritising the establishment of “facts” and “truths” over relying on (or building) what Quandt describes as “personal trust” or trust based on “thick experience” (2012, p.15). This approach foregrounds the actors’ *ability (competence)*, that is, the skills, competencies, and characteristics that enable an actor to have influence with some specific domain (Mayer et al. 1995, p. 717). In other words, the activists link the *legitimacy* and the *rightfulness* of their cause to a quest for “truth”, which is understood in *technocratic* terms (i.e. as “facts”, “data”, “legislation” and so on, rather than “politics,” in the sense of a

struggle between opposing interests or ideologies) and to demonstrations of *efficacy* (i.e. what they, as organisations, have done in their field of expertise):

[We win trust] with objectivity. This is what the Coalition has always insisted on. Because we are...and the colleagues particularly, they are experts, that is, we very carefully stick to the facts, to the truth, to the laws and this is easy to prove, and to be seen (Respondent 3, environmental case/organisation).

It can be therefore argued that they privilege a more generalised, or “thin”, institutional form of trust-building, that rests on a belief in the general functioning of the “system”- i.e. of the network of expert NGOs, its rules of expertise and its rational and neutral actors-experts (Quandt 2012, p.12). In respect to that, they make tacit claims to their *own authenticity* as civil society actors by stressing their *expertise* (or “know-how”) and opposing that to the *inauthenticity* (and therefore *lack of legitimacy*) of their opponents, who lack expertise:

[...] you need to show the people who organise [the protest] and are behind it, that they have some credibility, that they are experts. Because the experts, after all, although they have become very devalued as a word and general significance in Bulgaria, the experts are experts (Respondent 4, environmental case/organisation).

As we saw in Chapter 4, the grassroots activists and/or members of the more informal, non-expertise oriented civil society groups, on the other hand, do not see themselves as “experts”, but rather as “influencers” and/or “vigilant watchdogs” of power, as “truth tellers”, and as fighters for “just causes” and defenders of the “national interest” in the face of all those working against it. According to these actors, trust is won when you show you always defend the “right” or “just” causes, that you are consistent in your beliefs and actions and refuse to collaborate with the “wrong” kind of actors, to “take money” or “make deals” (Respondent 8, environmental case/grassroots). In a sense, that involves building credibility in respect to *like-minded* people by constantly reflecting their views back at them and by consistently adopting the “right” or “moral” position:

When I see that [a cause] is getting distorted, I just say, stop, let's not lie to the people. And if against me more people stand up and say, roughly, “No, we will lie to them”, I then say, “screw you, people know me now, my opinion is valued, and I will say what the truth is” (Respondent 20, populist case/grassroots).

For these activists, gaining trust on social media seems to be a matter of “thick ties”, or embeddedness in networks of interpersonal relationships that are *made visible*, or are mediated, online. It is therefore largely based on *already* having established a personal reputation “*offline*”. In other words, being trusted depends on being known “in real life”, on being vouched for in your social network- for instance “when someone writes ‘this profile

is not real, it's fake' and people join in underneath, "no, he is a real person" (Respondent 20, populist case/grassroots)- and/or on having (and making visible, through Facebook Friends) contacts in common.

At the moment it is very difficult for some new person, let's say, some youth, I don't know right now how he can gain trust very quickly. You need somehow to have proven yourself, like the way people knows us from TV (Respondent 20, populist case/grassroots).

Gaining trust is also contingent on being honest and transparent online about who you are and what you are about – "it is good to be open, to say who you are, to have an email, to have a phone number on you profile" (Respondent 16, (neo)liberal case/organisation). In that it chimes with Facebook's "ideology of authenticity" (Haimson and Hoffmann 2016), which is reinforced through the site's documentation, "real name", "authentic identity" and other policies, and in public statements by company representatives (i.e Facebook 2014). Gaining trust is also dependent on having "proved" that you "do what you say", that you "show up" offline (i.e. at the protest) when you say that you will. That is, it depends on demonstrating a consistency between your online and offline behaviour and professed values:

[You win trust] when you are clear and consistent and you say clearly what you do, what you are trying to do, and you do it consistently. [...] And you explain why you do it (Respondent 9, (neo)liberal & environmental cases/grassroots).

Similarly to the institutional actors, the grassroots activists also link the legitimacy and the rightfulness of their causes (and protests) to a concept of "truth", however in this case it is understood not so much in term of *competence* based on "know-how", i.e. knowledge of "facts," "data", "legislation", "best-practice" etc., but instead as deriving from their *personal integrity* and *appearance of authenticity* in respect to *personal* (rather than *institutional*) networks. In other words, trust is based on the knowledge, gained over time and through personal interaction, that the party making a claim has *integrity*: i.e. that these are not "the kind of people who can be stepped on, who can be corrupted" but "are people who nobody can touch, because they are honest, conscientious" (ibid). The truthfulness of information posted online is thus guaranteed "with our names and with [the names of] those we are together with" (ibid).

These activists' strategies and practices therefore reflect what I will call a *populist-moralist* approach to appearing authentic and legitimate as civil society actor in the networked public sphere – one underpinned by what Quandt describes as "personal trust" or trust based on "thick experience" (2012, p. 15), which foregrounds *integrity* (Mayer at al. 1995).

This approach, similarly to the institutional technocratic-deliberative one, is however also anti-political (with “political” understood in the sense of a conflict between opposing interests or worldviews, cf. Mouffe) as it puts a strong emphasis on moral rightfulness – of both the actor and the cause (“doing what is right”) - as well as on *the appearance* of integrity (vs. the appearance of competence in the case of the institutionally-linked actors) in the mediated environment. In other words, the activists stress their *right* (or pure) motivation (integrity) and their *right* value system (morality), as signifiers of authenticity, and contrast them to the immorality and impure motives of the *other*, *inauthentic* civil society actors and/or the political and economic elites. Here, and in line with the populist (or liberal-moralist) outlook discussed in Chapter 5, legitimacy is constructed as deriving from values rather than facts or politics, and from direct experience and personal forms of communication, rather than impersonal, institutionally brokered ones.

As already noted in Chapter 3, Alexander (2006, pp. 54-7) links authenticity to the intention of the actor –that is, it is about *appearing*, in a convincing sort of way, to have honest intentions without ulterior motives of manipulation and deceit. For Goffman (1978) authenticity is about consistency of social performance- i.e. it indicates the point when frontstage behaviour is perceived as consistent with backstage behaviour. In respect to the digitally mediated performances of protest actors, Milan (2015b) argues that protest activists engage in a “politics of visibility” on social media where the “enact[ing of] a story of which they are the protagonists” (p.7) takes a central stage. As she further notes, this digital performance “becomes the *conditio sine qua non* of social action, whereby *making protesting visible* on social media turns out to be constituent of the protest”(ibid).

Managing and recording their visibility in respect to their protest activities is thus vital for the maintenance of an authentic performance of integrity on social media, particularly for the grassroots activists who depend on their personal reputations. Thus, when their identity, aims and motivations are questioned or attacked, they foreground their “track record” of the causes they’ve been involved in, and the *consistency* between their *online* and *offline* activity in relation to those, as “proof” of having (the *right* kind of) convictions and integrity. The live-streaming Facebook function from the place of the “happening”, which some respondents enthusiastically embrace, is a reflection of this idealisation of the notion that you “were/are there” and therefore you “show/ed integrity”. In addition, when these activists live stream, or post images of themselves from their protests or activities, they are not only showing that “they have been there”, but are also performing their role of “truth- tellers” in the face of media and state “censorship”. For instance this is how this respondent described an altercation with the police he and his anti-migrant group had in



front of a mosque in central Sofia they went to “observe” (because of, according to him, “suspicious” behaviour going on inside of it):

And the whole thing I am live streaming, and this whole thing explodes on the whole internet, right away friends start sharing. I am streaming live, I don't stop streaming live, while the police attacks us as if we are the transgressors, and I live stream it (Respondent 20, populist case/grassroots)

The mediation of the activists' activities (in the mainstream media and in the social networks), the live video streams, as well as their online profile/s with their posts, reports, blog entries etc. here act as “proofs” or “track recorders” of the actors' integrity- i.e. of always being on the “good” side and opposing the “bad” side (Respondent 23, populist case/grassroots). What we have here are various “tiny acts” (cf. Margetts *et al.* 2015) of mediated individualised *performative antagonisms* (cf. Eyerman 2006) that aim to establish the actors' reputations and therefore win them trust and legitimacy in their networks. What tends to matter more in this case is quantity (number of video reports, posts, reported activist activities etc.) over quality (i.e. the *kind* of information). That is, the activists' *continuous* presence in the mediasphere - by “be[ing] active, show[ing] good activities that are reported” or by consistently producing their own reports - is crucial for building up their reputations:

Everything from there, when checked, turns out to be true. And when you do ten publications like these, or twenty, or thirty, or fifty, or a hundred, and people then start trusting you and know you as an author with whom lies, deception, don't exist (Respondent 8, environmental case/grassroots).

The difference between activists associated with Protest Network and similar (neo)liberal groups, and those linked to the more populist ones, however, is that the first tend to rely on their personal reputation in the mainstream public sphere and within an elitist networked (counter)public consisting largely of members of the urban *professional* middle class. Thus as saw in Chapter 7 they posit themselves as “citizen journalists”, “influencers”, “political bloggers” and “opinion leaders” who do extensive research and use their critical faculties and knowledge to look for, systematise and analyse available information in order to “speak truth to power”- that is, they stress and perform a “professional” (in terms of subscribing to the journalistic norms and ideals) approach to information curation. On the other hand, most of the members of the populist groups posit themselves as an *opposition* to the mainstream public sphere, which they see as restrictive of free expression, for instance in respect to “telling the truth” about “gender ideology”, “the migrants” etc. (Respondent 20, populist case/grassroots). They also tend to stress a *lack of professionalism* as a marker of authenticity, by insisting they, or their fellow activists, are not “real journalists” (or “bloggers”, whom they associate with the (neo)liberal and NGO-

linked activists and with *their* lack of authenticity, see Chapter 6), but just “normal people” who are not afraid to “speak the truth” in the face of censorship and to defend the “right” causes (Respondent 22, populist case/grassroots).

Differences in social media uses in respect to privacy- for instance whether you are on Facebook with your “real” face (or profile) or not- can be similarly used to underpin claims to authenticity (and inauthenticity, respectively). Thus those with “authentic”, *open* profiles, where one can see their posts, pictures and information, are considered trustworthy- “we go out with our faces, here, there we are, everyone can see our profiles, everyone can see who we are, can write to us a message” (Respondent 8, environmental case/grassroots)- whereas those who have chosen to keep that information private (regardless of whether they are intentionally aiming to deceive or do it out of privacy concerns), are not. Being “authentic” on Facebook therefore means that you are recognisable *on the ground* as well, or in other words, that you can no longer hide behind “showcase[ing] activity on Facebook rather than on the street”:

[...] because everyone is hidden behind Facebook, many people work with fake profiles, I mean, they go in with some [profiles] that have two pictures, if even this, and fifty friends, right, and then they are the big revolutionaries, the big things, the big deeds, the big ideas, the big whatever, and you don't even know this person has been at the protest (Respondent 8, environmental case/grassroots)

## **8.4 Facebook's affordances and visibility on your own terms**

Having looked at some of the activists' strategies and practices for gaining trust in online interaction, in what follows I will consider some of the challenges faced by them in respect to gaining visibility *on their own terms* in an environment of networked communication structured by a particular social media platform- Facebook- with its logic of operation and constantly changeable affordances and rules. I will argue that Facebook's affordances are not always amenable to the protesters' objective to be *both visible* and *visible on their own terms*, and they are often faced with a choice between one or the other.

### **8.4.1 Visibility vs. visibility on your own terms on Facebook: social media and the struggle to appear authentic**

As noted in Chapter 3, when considering authenticity in relation to the media and processes of mediation, the focus is on the *appearance* (Enli, 2015a, 2015b) of being authentic rather than with the moral ideal itself of “being faithful to yourself” (Taylor, 1992). As Margaretten and Gaber (2012, p.3 cited in Enli 2016, p.133) “without the perception of

authenticity, trust cannot be established” in politics. Thus in theory, politicians who *display* authenticity and *appear* sincere and consistent win support (Coleman 2006 ). Such a notion of authenticity as a performance of integrity in a mediated environment can be thought of as itself a strategy (Enli 2016, p.133). We can thus say that for the civil society actors being trusted involves appearing to have benevolence, competence and/or integrity (Mayer et al. 1995) by consistently showcasing, or performing, those both online and offline (cf. Alexander 2006, Goffman 1959).

A technique to construct authenticity on social media is to seemingly display an unrehearsed ‘backstage’ by performing spontaneity (Enli 2016; p. 127). Thus in their strife to seem authentic and legitimate as *protesters-citizens*, the civil society actors try to maintain an image of “independence” from formal organisations, the state, businesses and/or parties and thus of “spontaneity”, and to juxtapose that image to the *inauthenticity* (and therefore *illegitimacy*) of their opponents - for example of “contra-protesters” (see Chapter 6). The desire to *appear authentic*, i.e. spontaneous and unorganised, however, can sometime come into direct conflict with the communication practices that social media, and particularly Facebook, with their affordances and logic, force activists into adopting in order to *be* and *stay visible*. For instance, as already noted in Chapter 7, reaching people beyond one’s immediate network of Facebook Friends and Followers often requires “sponsoring” your post, page or event, or paying for the targeting of a specific audience according to given parameters. That is, Facebook, driven by its commercial interests and business-oriented logic (i.e. Fuchs 2014b, pp.153-178), requires payment, or “sponsoring” in order for any post, page or event to have a wider reach on its platform, regardless of whether its aim is commercial, political or civic/activist:

[...] at the end, you can use advertising in order to reach people you have no other way of reaching [...] You create a campaign, which you address specifically to people you have picked beforehand, who you want to see this post (Respondent 5, environmental case/organisation).

This is, however, not ideal for the mobilisation purposes of some protest actors as it detracts from the legitimacy of their protests, making them *appear* “paid for” and “unspontaneous” (i.e. “organised”) and therefore “inauthentic”. The respondents from the environmental NGOs for instance said they were reluctant to use Facebook’s “sponsoring” option for the Pirin protest events, even though they were well aware that not using it significantly limited their audience reach on the platform. Using it, however, would have made them even more vulnerable to attacks that they are “paid” protesters, with “foreign” financing. That is, for a protest to seem legitimate in the Bulgarian context, it requires the

maintenance of an *appearance* of being “spontaneous” and organised by “independent” citizens on their own volition. This makes using Facebook’s “sponsorship” affordance for *mobilisation* purposes– i.e. during the times when it is usually most needed – difficult, especially for civil society actors from the formal NGO sector:

You have to, right, to pay in order to reach more...bigger audience, and we don't want to pay, so that they don't say “Look at those paid ones here, they are posting their paid posts (Respondent 7, environmental case/organisation).

At the same time, the employees of the bigger international environmental NGOs like WWF or Greenpeace normally do not have a problem using the “sponsoring” or “targeting” options for campaigns that are exclusively the focus of the NGOs they work for. Thus, perhaps because the NGO sector in Bulgaria (as well as in CEE more generally) is *particularly* vulnerable to accusations of foreign funding and lack of independence from economic and political interests (see Chapter 2), the claims to legitimacy of the broader “citizen” campaigns and protests the civil society actors organised as members of the Coalition of environmental NGOs required a public maintenance (including on social media) of a separation between the protest aims from the specialist work the NGOs themselves are funded to do:

But we need to separate things, though, because WWF is supporting the protests, but advertising, for example, we pay only for things that are connected to our activity (Respondent 4, environmental case/organisation).

Such an ambiguity is difficult to maintain on Facebook, however. Facebook’s business-oriented and commercial logic treats all communication on its platform as commercially oriented, and therefore as a service provided to businesses to be charged for and profited from. This thwarts the formal organisations’ quest for visibility as *citizen protest organisers*, as it makes it difficult for them to gain *such visibility on their own term*- i.e. by maintaining a separation between their organisational and their “grassroots” activities and communication needs. Using Facebook’s “targeting” and “sponsoring” affordances thus works for businesses and certain organisation-driven campaigns that target *specific* groups, but not so much for organisation-led mobilisations (Bennett *et al.* 2012) that in the Bulgarian context try to appear “spontaneous” and “citizen driven” in order to seem legitimate. In respect to that, here the way the platform *actually* operates clashes with the ideological claims in regards to social media’s amenability to spontaneous mobilisation, i.e. with the techno-utopian myths of these technologies’ open, horizontal and participatory features (i.e. Shirky 2009, Mason 2012; O’Reilly 2007). Rather than making a protest

appear “natural” and “spontaneous” (see Dencik 2015), certain social media’s affordances for mobilisation and reach can in fact end up making it seem the opposite.

On the other hand, a number of the grassroots respondents who mentioned Facebook’s “sponsoring” option do not tend to consider it problematic to use, but rather see it as a legitimate means of counteracting their opponents (i.e. the governing elites or major political parties) who also use it to spread “contra-propaganda” against *them* or *their* causes. Both activists from Protest Network and the populist groups, who are or have been involved in new oppositional parties or anti-governmental protests see it as a necessary tool in the political game:

It [sponsoring posts] is obligatory, it is a mass practice...in order for a given event not to be seen only by your Friends, but in some way to go beyond to the other contacts of your own friends (Respondent 16, (neo)liberal case/organisation).

For the activists from the populist groups, in particular, the “sponsoring” option is the only available means to avoid “censorship” on Facebook (for instance via “trolls” that report “inconvenient” or “extremists’ posts or pages in order to get Facebook to take them down), as according to them “when you sponsor [a post or a page] no one can ban you” (Respondent 22, populist case/grassroots). Given that a number of these respondents admitted that their posts get often reported for containing “hate speech” or being “threatening” (though they see them as “being honest” or “telling the truth”), in *their* case using Facebook’s “sponsoring” option appears to be amenable to their strategy of *building up* their legitimacy by *maintaining visibility* as “truth-tellers” through a performance of “authenticity” (cf. Sorensen 2018a) within their networks.

Furthermore, not all visibility on social media is taken as *beneficial* or *desired* visibility, especially for activists for whom maintaining an *appearance* of having integrity in their networks is important in order to have legitimacy. For instance, being seen to support a protest organised by the “other side” might be detrimental to one’s reputation. Thus, a couple of interviewees from the environmentalist groups mentioned that they were aware of people from the nationalist/populist “side” supporting their protests “secretly”, so as not to discredit themselves in their own activist networks. In these cases, those actors try to *limit*, rather than *enhance*, their visibility on social media:

[...] there are people who out of fear of being pronounced enemies by “their side”, just don’t show off, but they are present, or support [us] in a different way. They are less, of course, there is no way to turn the whole community overnight, and that is why with such groups you need to work offline (Respondent 2, environmental case/organisation).

That is of course not always possible, as social media allow people to bestow visibility on *others*, without their consent or awareness. When in such cases the “backstage” (in this

case the “hidden” participation in a protest organised by “the other side”) spills onto the frontstage because of social media, there is rupture in the front the activists try to maintain in their own networks, and a potential loss of legitimacy. For instance one interviewee from a populist group admitted receiving accusations from within his activist network of being “paid” etc. because he was seen on social media supporting the environmental protests, and that he had to rely on his personal reputation to deflect such accusations:

They were like “Are you crazy, what are you doing there, your place is not there, do you know that they are paid?”. [I told them] “you know me, I won’t go if they try to buy me, I won’t go, I am not such a person” (Respondent 23, populist case/grassroots)

#### **8.4.2 Authenticity vs. security**

A further concern with a choice between *being visible* and *appearing authentic* comes up in respect to some of the activists’ considerations of whether to maintain one or more personal profiles or pages. For instance, for the activists that see themselves as “influencers”, “experts”, “opinion leaders” or “citizen journalists” the priority tends to be staying visible. What these civil society actors seem to fear, as Dayan has observed in respect to most Facebook users (who do not seem to mind being surveilled on the platform) is “the risk of losing visibility, of becoming less visible, of becoming invisible, of disappearing Bücher (2012a)” (2013, p.142). According to him, “being visible proves them worthy of regard (Honeth 2005). Being invisible plunges them back into insignificance” (ibid). Many of these activist thus tend to have more than one personal profiles or pages, even if that risks making them seem “inauthentic” (i.e. “fake”) – both in terms of Facebook’s policies’ on “authenticity” (see Facebook 2014; also Haimson et al. 2016) and in respect to others in their network of potential supporters- because if one gets reported by “trolls” or opponents and is temporarily taken down by Facebook, they could still continue to *be visible* via the other ones and provide what they see as crucial information to their followers and supporters. On the other hand, respondents for whom their personal reputations within their networks is *particularly* important for their claim to legitimacy tend to prefer having just one, “real”, profile that everyone knows them by. Being blocked or censored on Facebook can even serve as “proof” of their *integrity* – for instance, according to one respondent it demonstrates to others in his network that he is “doing the right thing” and is “telling the truth” (Respondent 20, populist case/grassroots). In other words, they prioritise the appearance of authenticity and integrity to visibility.

The way Facebook structures visibility on its platform can also sometimes come with risks for people from smaller communities where there is no much anonymity and where jobs

are scarce, and employers are few and usually linked to power elites. Thus, when setting up a Facebook Event - either via a personal profile or a page - the organiser of the event is visible on the page as such. When the protests are organised centrally by a formal organisation (or a Coalition of NGOs) through its official Facebook Page, the risks for those who set the events up are minimal. However, very often people from smaller cities or towns, who want to organise local protest events or additional grassroots initiatives in support of the main event, have to do it through their personal accounts. Many, however, are reluctant or afraid to have their names associated publicly with a protest for fear of being fired from work or repressed in some other way by local power structures.:

A few times I've asked: "Let's put someone else as an admin in the event" – right, so that they can admin it, administrate it, they don't want (Respondent 8, environmental case/organisation).

Mainly in the larger urban centres like Sofia, where people have more anonymity and employers and politicians have less direct influence over individuals or the community, people feel it is safer to officially set up a protest event through their personal profiles. Thus, in the Bulgarian context, Facebook in reality is sometimes less amenable to grassroots de-centred mobilisation (see Bennett *et al.* 2012), as local grassroots activists would prefer the "visible" organising activity (but then also the *actual* coordination) through social media to be handled by a formal organisation, while they offer support from the background, away from any internet public-ness:

Well you have to provide them with some kind of anonymity [...] Or you need to ask from them things that are not connected to publicity, right, for instance to photograph that there is no queue [at the lift station], or something like that, which won't make them look bad and create problems for them (Respondent 6, environmental case/organisation).

For the environmental, organisationally-driven protests this means that the usually Sofia-based NGO-linked organisers often end up taking the job of organising and coordinating online the local supportive protests as well (without actually being there). Facebook's top-down, one-way visibility management affordance of scheduling posts in advance comes in handy efficiency-wise in this respect, though at the expense of the "spontaneous", "bottom-up," "horizontal" and "citizen-driven" image that the environmental protest movement (in this case) is aiming for in its wish to seem legitimate and authentic:

Right, the possibility of Facebook to load news in advance...because I don't have much time to sit and ...I am the only organiser in this thing [...] (Respondent 7, environmental case/organisation).

Alternatively, security reasons, together with a desire to seem “spontaneous” and independent from party, economic and institutional interests (and thus not driven by “impure” motives) seems to underpin some of the grassroots populist actors’ decision to maintain mostly *anonymous* networks of pages and groups - i.e. to stay *invisible* behind such pages and to organise protests through them<sup>45</sup>. As we will also see in Chapter 10, however, such anonymity can prove problematic for sustained collective action and for gaining participants’ and followers’ trust.

### **8.4.3 Collective action vs. individualised and participatory visibility on Facebook**

This section will draw on interview data to look at the way the activists use Facebook’s affordances to structure their communication and will consider the extent to which they perceive the latter as amenable to their aims of mobilising and extending support for their protests and sustaining inter-group solidarity and trust. This will involve looking at how the different actors draw the boundaries of their collectives on Facebook as well as try to deal with framing struggles, fragmentation and polarisation during protest mobilisation, meanwhile retaining an image of legitimacy and “authenticity”.

Different civil society protest groups have different processes for recruitment-organisations for instance often maintain formal memberships with well-defined roles (for example they have databases of volunteers), while social movements are generally more flexible and fluid, with more porous boundaries (Gerlach and Hine 1970). The processes through which one can become a member of a grassroots movement are not clear and as Kavada (2015, p. 877) notes, they often simply involve the registration to an email list or the clicking of the ‘like’ or “follow” button on Facebook. Thus it is the people who have access to the different communication spaces of the movement who can be said to constitute, informally, its membership (ibid). In that respect, some of these online sites, such as email lists or social media pages, serve as *unofficial* membership databases of the movement’s supporters. On the other hand, the conversation sites of the movement can be characterised by *different levels of accessibility and visibility*, as well as by *different*

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<sup>45</sup> During the fieldwork I managed to get access to only one person publicly claiming to be one of the people “behind” the Facebook page National Protest Against All Outrages. The others declined the interview invites sent through him due to concerns about their safety and security, as according to him, they face constant harassment and persecution by the ruling elites on account of their activities.



*communication affordances*. This affects the process through which the movement distinguishes between core and periphery and defines its boundaries (ibid).

In respect to that, a common practice across all three broad Bulgarian civil society cases discussed here is the use of different “levels” of Facebook groups for coordination and mobilisation activities. Thus, all respondents use public Facebook pages and/or groups which people can search for, follow/like or join in order to communicate with their broader and more peripheral support-base. Usually these groups and pages are interlinked and serve as mobilisation platforms for different campaigns and protests. A common practice is that a Facebook protest event is created by the official organisation’s or civil society group’s Facebook page, or by a few grassroots activists, and then shared to other related groups. When there is a larger campaign or protest going on, solidarity Facebook groups are also often created by Bulgarian citizens in other cities, or abroad, through which smaller protests in support are organised. The main decisions in regards to the organisation, however, are usually taken within a circle of “insiders” (i.e. the “official” or “main” organisers):

Overall, right, the things that come out of the Coalition, are proposed and are voted by the Coalition, but at the same time there are many such, “free programmes” we call them, where the people just self-organise in the groups, and protest themselves (Respondent 5, environmental case/organisation).

The “official” decision-making and planning thus often takes place during face-to-face meetings or over group communication via email, Skype, or Messenger. Facebook’s affordance of closed, hidden groups (a type of Facebook group that you cannot join, search for, or see unless you are invited by its administrators) is also commonly used for organisational and strategic discussions and activities, to which only an “internal circle” and a periphery of “vouched for” people have access. These types of groups permit the core activists to vet who is allowed in on internal communication and to protect themselves from infiltration by trolls and political opponents<sup>46</sup>, as there “everyone knows each other personally” (Respondent 20, populist case/grassroots). They also make protest coordination and organisation easier due to the smaller number of people who participate in the discussions and decision-making processes, though it is not uncommon for smaller

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<sup>46</sup> Only a couple of the respondents in reality expressed a belief that their communication in the closed groups to be “safe” from government surveillance – the majority subscribe to the view that there are no such places on social media, though the closed hidden groups offer a better level of security than the open or closed (but not hidden) ones.

“groups within the group” to form and internal conflicts to appear (Respondent 16, (neo)liberal case/organisation).

Because of the often blurred boundary between public and private communication on social media, tensions and conflicts (in regards to framing, organisation, decision-making, identity, tactics etc.) can also often take place between members of the “core” and the “periphery” of the movements on the “outside-facing” sites (such as Facebook Pages, open groups and protest event pages). This is where the desire to maintain control over the organisation of a protest, particularly in the case of organisationally-driven campaigns, can come into a conflict with the desire to keep up its image of being a “grassroots”, “citizen-driven” and “spontaneous” initiative.

Thus, as we saw in Chapter 7, during times of protest the formal organisations’ Facebook pages take on leading *mobilisation* roles, with the actors responsible for the NGOs’ strategic communication moving their focus on other activities, such as setting-up and moderating Facebook protest events and sharing through their wider personal social media networks. In other words, the communication activities take on a more networked focus on sharing information and expanding visibility to a wider support-base and public. However, the lack of pre-existing and consistent social media communication practices and clear communication roles and structures oriented towards *protest mobilisation* within the organisations (and/or the Coalition as a whole), can engender problems, as the people responsible for strategic communication suddenly and haphazardly take on the additional responsibilities of sustaining visibility across increasing number of platforms, groups and pages. In that respect, keeping the desired framing while aiming to broaden their support-base and popularise their cause can prove challenging for the NGOs in the context of social media, and can sometimes lead to as much *demobilisation* as *mobilisation*.

To an extent this is due to their target audience changing– as one respondent noted, the target group of WWF for which she works is different from the target group of the Coalition (which WWF is part of), as the latter comprises of more politically active citizens:

The Coalition are much more active citizens and with us, there are many people whom we can make sign a petition, share, like, send a heart and so on, but not come to a protest (Respondent 4, environmental case/organisation).

Where a broad mix of different groups and citizens end up participating in a protest movement, as in the case of the organisationally-driven Save Pirin one, as the campaign proceeds and expands it becomes harder for the “official” organisers (in this case Coalition

“For the Nature”) to keep the focus on the desired framing and protect the “image” of the protest – i.e. as a “peaceful” event in the face of calls for escalation. As one NGO activist from the Coalition explained, “it is chaotic – there is no organisation, no strategy as a whole”, as there “are a lot of groups who do some things, right, ‘beyond’” (Respondent 5, environmental case/organisation).

The task of maintaining the organisations’ ownership of the protest while keeping the cohesion of an expanded and expanding group of supporters with more varied views and aims, who start to coalesce around the more participatory Facebook event pages that take on the role of online protest mobilisation forums, can thus prove overwhelming. On these Facebook Event pages, the top-down and more strategic approach to external communication typical of the formal organisations (see Chapter 7) is suddenly disrupted, with the protest activists having to adapt to a more bottom-up, dynamic and participatory nature of communication. Overall they try to focus their page and group moderation efforts on following the discussions on the pages and keeping the diagnostic, prognostic or motivational framing under control- i.e. on maintaining a *visible* consensus on what the best way to conduct the protest is and why it is important to keep going. In respect to that their strategy is to “isolate”, “ignore” or “block” people who are too disruptive – i.e. too negative, uncivil, or provocative, for instance by calling for “escalation” or “radicalisation” of the protest– so as not to “waste themselves in writing and emotionally” (Respondent 4, environmental case/organisation), while engaging with those “who propose sensible things” (Respondent 18, (neo)liberal case/organisation). As “official” organisers, the activists often feel they “have some sense of responsibility to communicate with the participants in the protest and with those who have a stronger opinion” (Respondent 4, environmental case/organisation).

Moderating and answering can however become a rather tasking and difficult process. This is not least due to the possibility of a continuous, “real-time” commenting and posting by participants on Facebook’s event pages and groups, which the organisers find hard to keep up with, as “the information is just overwhelming, right, as a quantity (ibid). Thus, in the fast-paced information environment of social media that never stays still “the risk [...] is that you miss some people, some opinions, some groups and wishes”. This can come into conflict with the civil society actors’ professed participatory and democratic values and can lead to loss of legitimacy in the eyes of some supporters:

And if you don’t notice this, and miss it – bad for the protests [...] it drives people away, yes, wastes energy [...] (Respondent 4, environmental case/organisation).

At the same time, according to most of the respondents, too much time and energy often gets dissipated into arguments, discussions and conflicts on Facebook around strategies and tactics, detracting from the necessary “real” resistance: “it leads mainly to fragmentation of the discussion” which is “not helpful, it is even counter-helpful, because such talk on Facebook actually decreases the power of resistance” (Respondent 2, environmental case/organisation). In other words, too much participation in discussions online is generally seen by the civil society actors as discouraging “actual” participation on the ground, while encouraging what some scholars have called “clicktivism” or “slacktivism” (i.e. Gladwell,) by creating an illusion of being active:

Well, for me the worst effect [...] is that some people, thinking that by participating in these internet discussions, expressing opinion, sharing, liking, they think that this is enough for their citizen activity[...] (Respondent 18, (neo)liberal case/organisation).

Such concerns sometimes lead to policy changes in how the mobilisation pages and groups are moderated more generally that can run contra to the professed (participatory democratic) values and/or image of the group or organisation. For instance, from initially allowing more open and free participation of “outsiders”, where everyone could post anything straightaway and only vulgar comments were censored post-factum, policy on the Save Pirin events was eventually changed to a more tighter controlled regime, where posts needed to be approved first by the admins, or where participants deemed too disruptive were banned right away.

At the same time, while attempting to maintain control, the activists from the formal organisations simultaneously also tried to decentralise *the protest movement* itself and to make it *appear* more organic, lateral and participatory, by for instance encouraging *other* groups or activists that wanted to do things differently to take initiative and organise their own separate events:

[...]when someone says, “we want it to escalate, we want to fight, we want this”, [it needs] to be said, “we are organising a peaceful protest from this hour to that hour. Before and after, do whatever you want, you are citizens, but if you want something like a different citizen activity, organise it. Don’t wait for us (Respondent 6, environmental case/organisation).

Trying to encourage others to be actively and organically involved in the protest, meanwhile foreclosing much actual “peripheral” participation in the decision-making processes in regards to the framing and enactment of the main event, however, produced some contradictions. On the one hand, this top-down attempt at decentralisation while

insisting on maintaining control of the official campaign seemed to be counterproductive to the development of a collective identity, as it stresses internal divisions between “us” and “you,” instead of foregrounding a shared understanding of a “we” that has a collective agency. On the other hand, having a visible, formal organisation (or a coalition of organisations) in the role of a central communicator and organiser, both offline and online, created expectations in the participants, discouraging them from being proactive and taking initiative on their own accord.

Slightly different tensions and issues appear when moving the opposite way - from a grassroots lateral network of activists and groups (such as Protest Network) into more formalised entities, such as NGOs and parties. Thus, as previously informal groups formalise into more formal organisations, the dynamics of communication within their Facebook groups changes, with the now “official” leaders taking more control and narrowing the scope of participation of more “peripheral” actors. For instance, an ex-member of JFA explained that she eventually became inactive when the initial grassroots pressure group formalised itself into an NGO with a very narrow expertise-oriented focus, because she no longer had “what to help with” as there was now “a managing council, which makes the decisions, and it actually governs the organisation” (Respondent 9, (neo)liberal & environmental cases/grassroots).

Such changes in the groups’ dynamics can lead to interpersonal and inter-group conflicts, which the nature of communication on Facebook (lateral and fast, yet also “encapsulated” within particular personal networks or filter bubbles) can enhance or escalate. For instance, individualised accusations and expressions of dissent, easily communicated and “made visible” on social media, are seen as sowing divisions within the protest groups or activist networks, and potentially leading to “the quitting of people, sometimes the breaking up of causes, breaking up of crews, who drive the causes” (Respondent 9, (neo)liberal & environmental cases/grassroots), or in other words, to demobilised support and fragmentation.

In that sense, social media, and particularly Facebook, are seen as engendering “encapsulation” of the communication within small cliques (Respondent 9, (neo)liberal & environmental cases/grassroots), as well as “atomisation” and “hyper-individualisation” that can be counter-productive to sustaining solidarity and long-term collective action (Respondent 13, (neo)liberal case/organisation). The self-centred communication on social media (i.e. “mass self - communication” in Castells’ terms), which enhances *individual* visibility and is especially embraced by activists whose objective is to be “opinion

leaders” or “influencers”, can thus prove problematic for keeping a protest movement united as a *collective*:

And I remember I saw somewhere last week some such “strutting” of opinion in the social networks, which is a problem because, first – it will lead to many other little “struts” of such less-visible people, it will lead to some kind of division and yes, to this atomisation, to this ultra-individualisation (Respondent 13, (neo)liberal case/organisation).

According to most of the respondents, the shift of much of the organisational and communication activities on social media can prove detrimental to the maintenance of a *collective* also because it cannot substitute “face-to-face” communication, during which stronger ties and interpersonal trust are formed and there is less risk of misunderstandings to occur:

Facebook synthesises in some way your speech regardless of the long posts, and at the end it is much shorter than the personal conversation [...] (Respondent 9, (neo)liberal & environmental cases/grassroots).

## 8.5 Conclusion

This chapter showed that the different strategies and practices employed by different activists for gaining trust are underpinned by different notions of the *authenticity* and *legitimacy* of civil society – one built around the idea of *competence* or expertise (“experts” vs. “non-experts”), the other on morality and integrity (“the righteous citizens/people” vs. “the *corrupt elites*” and other immoral and self-interested actors). Thus, in a bid to claim authenticity as representatives of civil society, and therefore legitimacy, the members of the formal organisations stress their “expertise” and subscribe to, or strive at, a Habermasian discourse ethics that foregrounds facts and rationality as underpinning “truth”. The members of the grassroots (neo)liberal and populist groups, on the other hand, posit themselves not so much as “experts” but as “vigilant watchdogs of power” and “truth-tellers” in society – in other words, as exposing the lies of the government, the major parties, the oligarchs, and the mainstream media, who are said to work against the “national interest”. They thus construe their legitimacy as deriving mainly from their morality and integrity. The first ones however tend to foreground *professionalism* in practices of information curation, while the second stress *lack of professionalism* as a marker of “truth-telling”. In respect to that, the actors from both cases can be said to adopt performative agonism or antagonism (in a Mouffian sense), where they stress their differentiation from the “Other” who they posit as *untrustworthy* – for instance “unfree contra-protesters” or “paid bloggers”.

The chapter also demonstrated that Facebook's affordances can sometimes interfere with the protesters' objective to be *both visible* and *visible on their own terms*. The blurring of the boundary between front - and backstage and public and private (i.e. Papacharissi and Gibson, 2011) on social media, as well as the way its logic operates, underpinned by commercial rather than democratic interests, often require actors to choose between *visibility* and *security/privacy*, *visibility* and *the appearance of authenticity*, and *visibility* and *maintaining solidarity*, particularly where the idealised notions of "independence", "participation" and "spontaneity" of civil society are concerned. These tensions become especially apparent when formal civil society organisations (i.e. NGOs) try to organise a "citizen" protest- in other words, when they try to shift from organisationally-driven *collective action* to a more grassroots *connective action*- or when grassroots activists from smaller cities or communities want to avoid the negative *consequences* of visibility in a hostile (to civil society) local environment.

In that respect, when it comes to security the politics of visibility on Facebook is more in line with the needs of formal organisations or established public figures, rather than grassroots activists, particularly those who operate in smaller towns and therefore bear more *personal* risks. Alternatively, grassroots actors who try to avoid this problem by staying *invisible* behind anonymous Facebook pages and groups often run into problems with trust. At the same time, the self-centred communication on social media (i.e. "mass self - communication" in Castells' terms), which enhances *individual* visibility and is especially embraced by activists whose objective is to be "opinion leaders" or "influencers", can prove problematic for keeping a protest movement united *as a collective*:

On the other hand, Facebook's politics of visibility can also *limit* the possibilities of more *institutionalised* actors like NGOs to claim legitimacy in the Bulgarian context by maintaining an image of independence, openness, and a dedication to the values of participatory democracy during *political* activities (such as protest mobilisation). Thus, Facebook's requirement for posts to be "sponsored" in order to enhance visibility interferes with the organisationally-driven protests' objective to appear "independent" and "authentic", i.e. "spontaneous". Also, protests that are initiated by formal organisations (or a Coalition of such) in Bulgaria, even when they want to appear "spontaneous" and "citizen-driven" in order to seem legitimate, are not just often centrally managed in practice, but are *also* centrally managed through certain Facebook affordances, whose chief purpose is the maintenance of a controlled "online presence" and "brand visibility" in the social network, rather than horizontal communication and bottom-up organisation and coordination of campaigns.

Finally, the chapter showed, in line with recent discussions on hybridity (Chadwick (Chadwick 2017; Chadwick 2007; Bennett *et al.* 2012) that different *kinds* of actors can shift from one logic to another, as the context, the group's organisational structure and/or their aims and activities change (see also Bennett *et al.* 2012, pp. 758-9). The chapter demonstrated that navigating such hybrid contexts – which, as Bennett *et al.* note, is where the tension between connective and collective action usual comes to the fore (ibid.)- necessitate that they are agile, flexible and have the skills and capacity to switch between different strategies and practices, or in other words – to be hyper-responsive - which on social media can often prove challenging.



## **Chapter 9: Us vs. Them: conflict representation on social media in the process of protest mobilisation**

### **9.1 Introduction**

In this and the next chapters I will look at how the various strategies the different civil society actors in Bulgaria adopt (or strive towards) in dealing with the challenges they face when traversing the border between civil and political society (discussed in the previous chapters) *actually* play out on social media when they try to mobilise support, and with what implications for democracy. This chapter in particular will focus on **RQ4c**, developed in Chapter 3: **How is the conflict constructed and represented on social media during protest mobilisation?** In other words, here I am interested in the ways the different protest organisers *and* participants end up framing the conflict between Us and Them on their mobilisation pages. In what follows I use content and discourse analysis to identify and compare the dominant Us and Them representations in each protest case, paying particular attention to the level and kind of antagonism expressed towards the Them in order to gauge the extent of externally-directed polarisation. I also consider how the different understandings and discourses of civil society discussed in Chapter 5 translate into the different actors' framings of their protests, and develop the argument that in their attempt to simultaneously universalise their struggle, and seem legitimate by differentiating themselves from other (often counter-hegemonic) groups, civil society actors in Bulgaria often end up adopting different kinds of anti- or a-political communication logics: a classic populist (i.e Engesser *et al.* 2017b) or an elitist liberal–moralist one, that act as reverse images of each other in that they both play down the existence of *political* conflicts *within* civil society. I further argue that the overall democratic quality of the discourse about the Them, understood in terms of agonism and antagonism (cf. Mouffe), reflects these different kinds of communication logics at play. I finish the chapter with consideration of some possible implications of civil society's utilisation of different anti-pluralist and anti-political communication logics in constructing and representing political conflict, particularly in the context of growing concerns regarding the role of social media in social polarisation and the rising distrust between different "sides".

## 9.2 Two communication logics: populist vs. liberal-moralist

This section looks at and compares the way the conflict between Us and Them is constructed and represented<sup>47</sup> during mobilisation on the protest event pages of the different protest groups. In what follows I draw on the content and discourse analysis to show that in their attempts to mobilise popular support, the different civil society actors try to gain legitimacy by universalising their struggle, while simultaneously distinguishing themselves from *other political* and *civic* actors, deemed to be opponents. They do that by using different kinds of communication logics – a classic populist or a liberal-moralist one. To do that I first consider how Them is constructed in the discourse of the different protesters and then go on to do the same in regards to Us.

### 9.2.1 Us vs. Them in Bulgarian protest mobilisation discourses

In this sub-section I refer to the content and discourse analyses<sup>48</sup> in order to determine and compare *who* the dominant Them actors are in the discussions taking place on the different protest mobilisation pages, and *how* they are represented. I designed the content analysis coding scheme to identify the first (or top) three criticised (Them) actors per post or comment and to categorise them. By adapting the Discourse–Historical Approach (DHA) to critical discourse analysis (Reisigl and Wodak 2009; Wodak 2001; KhosravNik and Zia, 2014), I then looked more closely at how those different categories of Them actors were represented, bearing in mind the specifics of the Bulgarian political and cultural context.

#### 9.2.1.1 Who are “Them”?

The content analysis of the posts and comments collected from the Facebook mobilisation pages of the four protest cases (see Chapter 4 for a description of each case) shows that the *national authorities and political and governing elites* (a summary variable that includes the government/coalition, Prime Minister and other ministers, the main political parties, Parliament and the MPs, the judiciary and police) are seen as major opponents by all four broad civil society groups<sup>49</sup>. This is the predominant summary group of Them actors in the

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<sup>48</sup> Please refer to Chapter 4 for an explanation of the coding and analysis method, and to the Codebook in Appendix D.

<sup>49</sup> Please refer to Table 9.1 and Table 9.2 for the breakdown and share of the different Them actors in the discourses of the four protest cases.

mobilisation discourses of *Justice for All* (from now on *JFA*), *National Protest Against All Outrages* (from now on *NPAAO*) and *Save Pirin* protest groups and the third most mentioned summary category of Them actors on the Facebook mobilisation page of the *Anti-Night Wolves* (from now on *ANW*) protests (see Table 9.1).

Table 9.1. Breakdown of the different Them actors in the discourses of the four protest cases

The table shows the share (%) of different Them categories out of all the references to a Them actor coded in the posts and comments for each case, with the *first three Them references* per comment/post recorded (variables THEM1S, THEM2S and THEM3S in codebook, see Appendix D). Findings of ≥ 10% are presented in bold.

	Save Pirin	Justice for All	Anti -Night Wolves	National Protest Against All Outrages
National political authorities and governing elites All	<b>42%</b> (n= 154)	<b>49%</b> (n= 84)	<b>19%</b> (n= 88)	<b>40%</b> (n= 89)
Civil society actors general (“the people”)	3% (n= 10)	1% (n=2)	0% (n= 0)	<b>14%</b> (n= 32)
Individual civil society actors named	0% (n= 0)	1% (n= 1)	3% (n= 13)	1% (n= 2)
Voters/supporters of government	11% (n= 40)	<b>12%</b> (n= 20)	0% (n= 0)	2% (n= 5)
Nationalist/far-right/conservative groups or organisations	0% (n= 0)	1% (n= 1)	2% (n= 10)	0% (n= 0)
Liberal/pro-European civil society groups or NGOs	0% (n= 0)	0% (n= 0)	0% (n= 0)	0% (n= 1)
Russophile citizens and groups	0% (n= 0)	1% (n= 2)	<b>30%</b> (n= 139)	0% (n= 0)
Ethnic or religious groups	0% (n= 0)	0% (n= 0)	0% (n= 0)	0% (n= 1)
The media	<b>17%</b> (n= 61)	5% (n= 9)	2% (n= 8)	4% (n= 8)
Bulgarian Orthodox Church	0% (n= 0)	0% (n= 0)	2% (n= 9)	0% (n= 0)
International actors- Russia/Russians All	0% (n= 0)	2% (n=3)	<b>36%</b> (n= 168)	3% (n= 6)
International actors - “the West” All (incl. EU, US, NATO, World Bank, IMF)	0% (n= 0)	0.5% (n= 1)	0% (n= 0)	<b>11%</b> (n= 24)
International actors- Other	0% (n= 0)	1% (n= 2)	0% (n= 0)	0% (n= 0)
“They”/”Them”	8% (n= 30)	<b>15%</b> (n= 26)	4% (n= 18)	6% (n= 14)
“the communists”, “the nomenklatura”	0% (n= 0)	2% (n= 4)	1% (n= 3)	6% (n= 13)
“the oligarchy” , “the mafia”, “the rich”	<b>17%</b> (n= 62)	9% (n= 16)	0% (n= 2)	5% (n= 10)
“big business”, “global corporations”	0% (n= 0)	0% (n= 0)	0% (n= 0)	4% (n= 8)
“foreigners”	0% (n= 0)	0% (n= 0)	0% (n= 1)	0% (n= 0)
Other	2% (n= 9)	0.5% (n= 1)	2% (n= 9)	4% (n= 9)
<b>ALL</b>	<b>100%</b> <b>(n= 366)</b>	<b>100%</b> <b>(n= 172)</b>	<b>100%</b> <b>(n= 468)</b>	<b>100%</b> <b>(n= 222)</b>

When it comes to the *national political authorities and governing elites (as a summary category)*, predictably, the Judiciary (and particularly the Chief Prosecutor) is the main focus of criticism for members and supporters of *JFA* (44%) with a generalised notion of the political elite (such as “the politicians”, “the power holders”, and “the status quo”) coming next (18%), while participants on the Facebook mobilisation page for the *NPAAO*’s protest tend to identify the current government and Prime Minister (47%), as well as the political elite more generally (29%), as the main opponents (see Table 9.2). Those protesting the arrival of the *Night Wolves* are mostly critical of the police (especially in regards to its biased handling of the protesters and their adversaries) (40%), as well as the political elites more generally (17%) and the government (11%). In regards to the *Save Pirin* protest, the most criticised political actors on the mobilisation page are similarly the general political elites (33%). In respect to the government, the focus of criticism however is not just the Prime Minister Boyko Borissov and/or the ruling coalition in general (24%), as in the other protest groups, but rather more specifically the Minister of Ecology Neno Dimov (26%), who was the main instigator of the changes in the management plans of Pirin National Park (see Table 9.2).

Table 9.2. National authorities and political elites : breakdown of summary category<sup>50</sup>

Table shows the breakdown of different kinds of Them actors under the *National authorities and political elites* summary category. Findings of ≥ 10% are presented in bold.

National authorities and political elites (summary category)	Initiative Justice for All		Anti-Night Wolves		National Protest Against All Outrages		Save Pirin	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
National authorities and political elites general (“the politicians”)	<b>18%</b>	15	<b>17%</b>	15	<b>29%</b>	26	<b>33%</b>	51
Prime Minister/government	<b>10%</b>	8	<b>11%</b>	10	<b>47%</b>	42	<b>24%</b>	37
Specialised ministers/ministries	3%	2	4%	4	0%	0	<b>26%</b>	40
Parliament/MPs	<b>13%</b>	11	0%	0	7%	6	8%	12
Judiciary (incl. Prosecution)	<b>44%</b>	37	7%	6	2%	2	1%	2
Police and intelligence services	6%	5	<b>40%</b>	35	2%	2	1%	1
Opposition parties	2%	2	5%	4	7%	6	4%	6
Extra-Parliamentary parties	0%	0	0%	0	2%	2	0%	0
Individual politicians	2%	2	14%	12	4%	3	1%	2
President	1%	1	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0
Local authorities	1%	1	2%	2	0%	0	2%	3
<b>TOTAL</b>	100%	84	100%	88	100%	89	100%	154

<sup>50</sup> Please refer to Appendix D for codebook and variables.

Where all four protest groups tend to designate the national political elites and authorities as major opponents and to blame them for various social ills, they mainly differ in their other major summary groups<sup>51</sup> of criticised Them actors. Although quite varied<sup>52</sup>, those other Them actors can be categorised broadly into two sub-groups: 1) internal or external “Others” perceived as “dangerous” and as direct opponents; and 2) other citizens or groups who are not supportive of, or are apathetic to the protests and their aims

Turning to the first sub-group of *dangerous Other* actors, the content analysis shows that commentators on the mobilisation pages of JFA and SavePirin (NGO-led protests) frequently (9% and 17% of all posts and comments that reference a Them actor, respectively) make critical references to an *internal Other* in the face of a *shady economic elite*, such as “the mafia” and “the oligarchy”, and of “*contra-protesters*” or *provocateurs* thought to be organised or sent by said “oligarchy” (or “mafia”) with the aim of delegitimising the protests (12% and 11% of all posts and comments referencing Them respectively, under the category *Voters/supporters of government*). Furthermore, in the case of SavePirin, much criticism (17% of comments that reference a Them actor) is also directed at the *mainstream media* (and particularly the Bulgarian National Television) and their coverage of the protests (and related issues)<sup>53</sup>. On the other hand, participants on the NPAAO event page (grassroots protest) express antagonism towards an *external Other*, predominantly in the face of various *Euro-Atlantic states, organisations and institutions* (i.e. the EU, NATO, IMF etc.)<sup>54</sup> (11% of all posts and comments referencing a Them actors). Similarly, in the mobilisation discourses of the protesters against the arrival of the Night Wolves (grassroots), *Russia* (including *Putin’s government and its supporters*, such as *the Night Wolves* themselves, and Russians in Bulgaria) emerges as a frequently

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<sup>51</sup> See Table 9.1 for a summary of all criticised Them actors for each case.

<sup>52</sup> Those differences reflect the protests’ motivations, aims and framings, as well as the contexts in which they developed and unfolded. For a detailed description of the four cases, see Chapter 3.

<sup>53</sup> The perception that the media coverage is biased led to the Save Pirin protests ending up in front of the Bulgarian National Television’s building on a number of occasions, and also to the organisation of smaller parallel protests against the public broadcaster’s political and oligarchic dependencies and bias.

<sup>54</sup> Despite the protest itself being framed as a pro-EU/pro-West by the organisers in the pinned description at the top of the Facebook event page, the content analysis of the selected range of posts and comments from the page shows more negative and critical references to the EU/NATO/“the West” than positive ones. It simultaneously reveals the presence of negative attitudes towards Russia as well, though to a lesser extent (see Table 9.1 above).

referenced *external Other* (in 36% of all posts and comments referencing a Them). By extension, and by association, *the Bulgarian Russophiles groups and/or Putin supporters* (those welcoming the arrival of the Night Wolves), and particularly *the Russophile nationalist paramilitary group “BNO Shipka”* (which got into a fight with some of the protester) are referenced extensively as *an internal dangerous Other* on the ANW’s protest mobilisation page (in 30% of posts and comments) (see Table 9.1 above). Finally, the NPAAO discourse also frequently references “the people” (or “the Bulgarian society”), here construed as Them (or an internal Other) by way of criticising their apathy, non-involvement etc. (14% of all references to Them).

### **9.2.1.2 Who are “Us”?**

Having looked at who Them are in the discourses on the different mobilisation pages, in this section I will now turn to consider *what* the dominant frames of reference that construct “Us” are. The content analysis of the discussions taking place on the different protest mobilisation pages shows that in addition to the (primary) self-identification as “*I/we the protesters*” (i.e. identification with the protest itself and/or with the other fellow protesters), the participants on all pages also share *Bulgaria/Bulgarians* (also the Bulgarian society/the Motherland etc.) as a major collective identity frame, though with some differences in importance. Thus, *Bulgarian/Bulgarians* is the second most common identity frame on the Save Pirin (10% of all references), Anti-Night Wolves (ANW) (15%) and National Protest Against All Outrages’ (NPAAO) (26%) mobilisation pages, and the fourth most common reference for Initiative “Justice for All” (JFA) (6%) (see Table 9.3 below for a comparison across all cases).



Table 9.3 “Us”: Cross-case comparison of the main Us identity frames

Table compares the prevalence of the different Us frames (identity frames and allies) across the four cases<sup>55</sup>. Here total n equals all identity frames and supportive actors coded per case, with the first three per post/comment recorded. Findings of ≥ 5% are presented in bold

Identity (“Us”) frames and allies	Save Pirin	Justice for All	Anti -Night Wolves	National Protest Against All Outrages
I/Us/We/the protesters/the protest	<b>63%</b> (252)	<b>55%</b> (140)	<b>42%</b> (43)	<b>44%</b> (108)
The citizens	4% (14)	<b>11%</b> (27)	<b>5%</b> (5)	0% (1)
The people	<b>8%</b> (32)	<b>5%</b> (12)	3% (3)	<b>18%</b> (45)
Bulgaria/the Bulgarians/the Motherland	<b>10%</b> (39)	<b>6%</b> (14)	<b>15%</b> (16)	<b>26%</b> (66)
Citizens of particular cities	2% (7)	0% (0)	1% (1)	0% (0)
The voters/the electorate	0% (0)	0% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)
Europe/Europeans/Western	1% (1)	2% (4)	<b>5%</b> (5)	3% (7)
Environmental organisations and groups/ nature lovers	2% (9)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)
(Neo)liberal civil society organisations and/or groups	0% (1)	<b>9%</b> (24)	1% (1)	0% (0)
Extra-Parliamentary parties	1% (2)	2% (5)	<b>5%</b> (5)	0% (0)
Opposition Parties				0% (1)
Government/MP/Coalition	0% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)	4% (9)
President	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (1)
Professional organisations and groups	0% (1)	1% (3)	0% (0)	0% (0)
Friendly media and journalists	2% (9)	0% (1)	0% (0)	1% (1)
Christians/Orthodox Christians	0% (0)	0% (0)	4% (4)	0% (0)
Other countries	0% (1)	1% (3)	4% (4)	0% (1)
Other countries- Russia	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (1)
Other countries - USA	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	1% (2)
Individual citizens or politicians	4% (17)	<b>5%</b> (14)	<b>6%</b> (6)	1% (2)
Slavic	0% (0)	0% (0)	2% (2)	0% (0)
Anti-Russian	0% (0)	0% (0)	2% (2)	0% (0)
Other	2% (8)	3% (7)	5% (5)	2% (5)
Other-owners of land	1% (4)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)
<b>TOTAL</b>	100% (398)	100% (255)	100% (102)	100% (251)

<sup>55</sup> Please refer to Appendix D for the Codebook and variables.

Where *“the citizens”* is the second most commonly used collective identity frame on the JFA’s mobilisation pages (11%) and the third (5%) and fourth (4%) on the ANW and Save Pirin ones, respectively, in the discourse of the NPAAO’s protesters it is almost missing. Instead, for the latter after *Bulgaria/Bulgarians* comes *“the people”/“the common people”* (18%) as a major identity frame. “The people” is also the third most common identity frame for the Save Pirin protesters (8%) – more than “the citizens”, which is the one used by the organizers themselves. Conversely, “the citizens” (11%), together with *“(neo)liberal organisations and groups”* (i.e. Initiative “Justice for All”, and others linked to Protest Network, see Chapter 4 for case description) (9%) are the most common “Us” references in the discourse of the participants on JFA’s mobilisation pages. We have a similar situation with the Anti-Night Wolves protesters, who likewise refer to themselves as *“the citizens”*, though also in ethno-nationalist and “Western” terms, as *“(the true) Bulgarians”* (15%), “Christians” (4%), “Slavic” (2%) and Europeans (5%). All cases feature European/Western as an identity frame, though that frame appears as a reference to a lesser extent than other ones, esp. for the Save Pirin and JFA cases (Table 9.3).

To sum up, when it comes to how the Us is constructed, the main difference lies in respect to a predominance of a discourse of “the people” or “the citizens”, and the extent of presence of nationalist (or “patriotic”) frames. Thus, participants on JFA’s, ANW’s and Save Pirin pages (protests representative of the (neo)liberal and NGO-linked “side” of civil society) use “the citizens” frame much more often than those on the NPAAO (nationalist/populist broader case study). The discourse on NPAAO’s page, on the other hand, is dominated by a patriotic/national frame of *Bulgaria/the Bulgarians*, followed by *“the people”* (or “the ordinary/common people”). This ethno-national “Bulgarian” frame (together with “Christian” and “Slavic”) is also prevalent on ANW’s page as well, even if we do not encounter many references to “the people”.

What is also notable here is that the Us-frames associated with the organisationally-driven protest cases (Save Pirin and JFA) also tend to extend to other formal extra-parliamentary organisations, citizen groups or parties, as members of the activists’ “universe of allies” – environmental ones in the case of Save Pirin, and centre-right, “anti-corruption” and “pro-judiciary reform” ones, in the case of JFA (see Table 9.3), implying that they belong to wider civil society networks of interconnected (liberal/pro-Western) NGOs and organisations. In ANW’s case we have such links to the extra-Parliamentary centre-right opposition (in the face of parties linked to Protest Network, like Democrats for Strong Bulgaria) (5% of all Us references). In the case of NPAAO, on the other hand, there is a percentage of posts and comments (4%) that actually frame the government (the main

party GERB, the PM or the coalition) as part of the “universe of allies” – that is, they are “friendly” towards the government—implying the presence of a variety of political or ideological orientations on the page, and thus a broad and/or incoherent collective identity (i.e. of “the people”).

Having looked at what the dominant Them actors and Us frames are in the discourses on the different protest pages, in the following subsections I will draw on the discourse analysis to consider in more detail how the conflict between Us and Them is constructed and represented during mobilisation on social media.

### **9.2.2 Populist vs. liberal-moralist construction of the conflict: two sides of the same coin?**

The more in-depth discourse analysis of the construction of Us vs. Them on the different protest pages identified a usual for the populist discourse conspiratorial framing, where a corrupt and treasonous political class is represented as being part of a secret, “behind the scenes” economic-political collusion with a dangerous (internal or external) Other (i.e. Engesser et al. 2017b; Mudde, 2004). There are, however, some important differences in the representation of the elites and their relationship with the dangerous Other/s across the cases.

On the one hand, in JFA’s, ANW’s and Save Pirin’s cases the collusion between the political elites and the dangerous Others is mostly represented in what I call elitist *liberal-moralist* terms, in the sense that it is construed as a danger to the institutions and values of liberal democracy. In respect to that framing we have frequent references to behind-the-scenes institutional links to shadowy economic-elites, particularly in relation to the government and politicians more generally in the case of Save Pirin, the police and security services in the case of ANW, and the Judiciary and Prosecution in that of JFA, with these institutional branches being frequently blamed for working in the service of the oligarchy and against the citizens’ interests and rights (i.e. “[the police] are the armed guardsmen of the oligarchy”; “our magistrates are in the service of the mafia state”<sup>56</sup>; “...Pirin and Vitoshka- presents of the government to the mafia in Bulgaria”). The elites’ and authorities’ autocratic and anti-democratic practices and their bypassing and undermining of liberal democratic institutions and norms are particularly stressed in the discourses of these

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<sup>56</sup> All quotes have been translated by the author.

protest cases (*“[they] want to institutionalise the mafia in the role of the State and to do this quickly, by making it completely dependent on a few oligarchs and the Judiciary”*). In the Save Pirin’s case much of these criticisms are directed at specific ministers (such as the Minister of the Environment) and/or specific changes in the legislation they are trying to push through (i.e. the changes in the management plans of Pirin National Park).

In the JFA and Save Pirin cases in particular, the main “dangerous Others” actors are *internal* and take the form of shady economic elites (*“the oligarchy”, “the mafia”, “the nomenklatura”*) who are said to be corrupting the liberal democratic system by keeping hold over the politicians, the media and also parts of civil society, by for instance organising fake “contra-protests” by coercing dependent workers into participating (*“the oligarchy and ex-Security Services, who now have directly taken over the county”; “Today we have the ugliest statement of the politicians standing behind the contra-protest and the oligarchy”*). In Save Pirin’s case *the mainstream media* (and related online sites) are also posited as dangerous to democracy. The most common criticisms in that respect point to their dependencies and links to power-holders and oligarchs (*“the paid media”; “#boykoTV<sup>57</sup>”*), their biased and propagandistic coverage of the protests and the issues of concern to the activists (*“the propaganda of our media is horrendous”*), and their opportunism and failure to serve the citizens’ democratic interests (*“they only count on scandal and vulgar scenarios [...]”*). In addition, the contra-protesters and provocateurs (i.e. supporters of the status quo) are also posited as opponents, by stressing *their lack of legitimacy as civil society actors* due to their links to the shadowy oligarchic elites and power-holders hostile to the protests (*“other people from the countryside were brought with paid for buses [...] to show how content they are with the scandalous decision of the Council of Ministers”*), as well as their conspicuous, rough and “out of place” appearance (*“[these] ‘wardrobes’, who seem to have been sent to scare us and to compromise the protest”*) and their provocative, aggressive and uncivil behaviour (*“[they] were trying to stare menacingly”*).

On the other hand, and particularly in the discourses of the NPAAO case (but also to an extent of ANW’s as well), the political elites are often described in highly antagonistic terms as “sell-outs” and/or “traitors” who are colluding with internal or *external* “dangerous Others” to deprive the Bulgarian people or citizens of their sovereignty, understood either in classical populist (*“sovereignty of the [Bulgarian] people”*), or in exclusivist-identarian (i.e. as an European/anti-Russian identity and orientation of the country) terms. In the

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<sup>57</sup> Boyko Borrisov, the current Prime Minister.

NPAAO's case the critical and antagonistic references to the political elites and national authorities are of a generalised nature, and are expressed in particularly strong anti-elitist language, with politicians frequently being described as "corrupt", "scammers", "murderers", "jackals" and "bloodsuckers" who "rob and destroy Bulgaria and the Bulgarian nation", causing the people "suffering" and who are even responsible for its "genocide" ("*This person [the PM] is a murderer of Bulgaria and of the whole Bulgarian people!*"). In this case the predominant "dangerous Others" are *external*, and take the form of other countries and/or supranational institutions ("*The World Gang, NATO, IMF and the rest*"), perceived as interfering in Bulgaria's national affairs, working against the Bulgarian national interest or pushing the country in the wrong geopolitical direction (for instance towards EU/NATO etc.) ("*The EU's prescriptions, which work against the Bulgarian state*"). The political elites here are blamed for their collusions with the external dangerous Other – for instance for "encouraging the foreign colonialists to liquidate the Bulgarian production"- and are often represented as "traitors".

In ANW's case the conspiratorial framing in respect to the political elites, as well as to various state institutions, such as the police, security services, and the judiciary (also the Bulgarian Orthodox Church) revolves mostly around their perceived association with, and opportunistic orientation towards, Russia and/or Putin's regime (i.e. "ruble-receivers"; "*The whole Mol<sup>58</sup> is under communist control and is not a Bulgarian state institutions*"). Thus, the police (as representatives of the national authorities) and other institutions are heavily criticised for their "friendly" orientation to the external "dangerous Others"- the Night Wolves and by extension Putin's regime - who are represented as unwelcomed foreign "aggressors" that aim to drive Bulgaria away from its rightful European identity by promoting anti-Western/anti-EU discourses ("Putin's hired strongmen"; [they] insult the European values"). This *external dangerous Other* is thus constructed as a threat to national sovereignty, understood as a European (and respectively anti-Eurasian) geopolitical and cultural orientation of Bulgaria. The "backwardness" of the Russian - Other in relation to the "civilized" Western culture is particularly underlined in that respect and betrays an elitist orientation to the Other, for instance through ridiculing of the Russian motorists' claim to a "rockers" identity ("*when in the civilized world they started playing rock, the murzilkas hadn't even changed their flap-ear hats yet!*"). By extension, references to the *internal* "dangerous Others" - here chiefly a particular Bulgarian Russophile paramilitary group, but also other Russophiles welcoming the Russian motorists- construct

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<sup>58</sup> The Ministry of Interior.

it as *dangerous* by stressing their *uncivil* character, representing them as violent and hostile, and similarly as a threat to the national security and the European orientation of the country (“*the weaponised guards of Russian capital and Russian business interests*”). This perceived pro-Russian or pro-Putin stance of the elites and authorities, on the one hand, and of Russophiles and pro-Russian citizen groups who welcome the motorists, on the other, is equated to a lack of (or to fake) patriotism and even treason (“*treasonous populists*”; “*fascist pseudo nationalists*”).

In addition to the liberal-friendly criticisms of the country’s political elites, some of the posts and comments on the Save Pirin protest page simultaneously reveal a more generalised and pervasive antagonistic attitude towards them, expressed in more classic anti-elitist populist terms. Thus, similarly to the NPAAO’s case and in line with the classic populist logic, Boyko Borissov and his government are often represented (and frequently via strong language) as *autocratic thugs and criminals who are robbing the people* (“*the gangster Borissov never has done anything and never will for the People*”). The governing elites are also accused of being greedy, arrogant, immoral, shameless and selfish (“*[...] the politicians are paid prostitutes*”) and of lying and manipulating public opinion (“*very soon these manipulations won’t be in his [Borrisov’s] interest*”). As in the NPAAO case, in addition to the elitist (pro-liberal democratic) one, here we also encounter an *anti-elitist* representation of the elites as *detached from the people and not caring about them* (“*The power holders [...] don’t hear nor see the thousands that have come under their windows*”), with the government, and specifically the Prime Minister, accused of being directly responsible for the misery of the most vulnerable (“*Whatever B. Borissov says happens, he stopped the drugs for ill people, reduced the benefits of the incapacitated together with Moscov<sup>59</sup> the health minister. Increased the prices of electricity, heating, water, food, stole money from the banks [...]*”). Some commentators on the page go beyond criticising just the current (or past) power-holders, and suggest that all parties, and representative government in general, are inherently illegitimate, corruptible and untrustworthy (“*If it’s not this government there will be another – what is needed is a change of the system of power*”). In the classic anti-liberal populist sense, they thus see representative democracy as a general obstacle to popular sovereignty (“*the citizens should empower themselves, so that they can remove the rotten politicians from the scene*”).

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<sup>59</sup> The ex-Minister of Healthcare under the previous coalition government headed by Boyko Borissov, known as cabinet Borrisov 2.

Finally, across all cases *the people* (or “*the common people*”) are at times also constructed as Them actors by way of criticising their support of the status quo and/or indifference to the protest and its demands. In this framing they are represented in elitist terms as *illegitimate Others* (and juxtaposed to the “real” and “noble” citizen-people – “Us”, the protest participants) by stressing their naivety, gullibility, “unfreedom”, and lack of intelligence, civility, morality and education (“*the simple people are easier to rule*) and their apathy, passivity and “slave mentality” (“*the problem is that most are already zombified and live online*”). In the ANW’s case, the *Russophile Bulgarians*, attending or organising welcoming events for the Russian motorcyclists (the Night Wolves’ “fans”) are also delegitimised in elitist terms by describing them as *foolish, gullible, and uncivilised* (“such a moronic people”, “a few million sheep”), because of their support of “Eurasian–totalitarian values”, or as meek and unpatriotic (i.e. “they have offered their wide-opened asses”). As with the Russophile paramilitary group, they are frequently accused of being “national traitors” (“[Russia’s] servants”; “treasonous garbage”).

### **9.2.3 Sovereignty of the citizens vs. sovereignty of the people**

What further emerged from the analysis are two different, and sometimes conflicting in respect to the protesters’ self-representations, notions of democratic sovereignty. On the one hand the communication on NPAAO’s mobilisation page and to some extent on Save Pirin’s posits “Us” as *the people*, who are represented as “noble”, “ordinary”, “hard–working” yet “poor”, “suffering”, living in servitude, and as marginalised, ill – treated, and betrayed by said corrupt, greedy and treasonous elite (“*and in what way are they [the politicians] better than the ordinary Bulgarians? The common Bulgarians work*”; “*Yes, but the common people eat bread, in order to live! And they are on the way to take even this from us*”; “*the poor*”, “*the Bulgarian slave*”, “*our suffered country*”). Here, the link between “Us” as “the people” is expressed through a (patriotic) alignment with the perceived common homogenous interests of the nation and the Motherland, which are threatened by the greed of the Other (“*I am going to the protest [...] to defend the interests of the Motherland and Nature, because they don’t have a voice with which to protect themselves and to say to the greedy MPs: “Don’t do this, you are taking everything away, you are taking and stealing from the Bulgarian people [...]”*”).

The “Us” in the JFA and to an extent Save Pirin’s case is, on the other hand, identified predominately with “*the citizens*” who, as *the people*, are presented as a homogenous entity while simultaneously qualified as “*free and honourable*”, “*caring*”, “*thinking*”, and “*honest*”, who are *actively engaged* in opposing the (corrupt) political and oligarchic elites. “The citizens” are those who “can’t stand the outrageousness and the lawlessness of the

oligarchy in the country” and who “want a radical judicial reform, a just and independent Court and an accountable and responsible Prosecution, Romanian style”. The collective self-representations of “Us”- “the citizens” therefore emphasise the latter’s agency, defiance and determination (“*we have a desire for change and for fighting back against the lawlessness*”), as well as their liberal democratic values, such as upholding principles like the “rule of law” and “justice” (“*let’s together protect democracy, freedom of speech and the rule of law*”) and their pro-European/Western orientation (“*we as part of Europe*”), but often also their alignment with the principles of “the market”, in a more neoliberal sense. This identity frame is furthermore presented in de-politicised universalising terms, as supposedly common to and shared by all (“true”) Bulgarian citizens. Or in the words of one commentator on the Save Pirin protest page:

“LET’S BE UNITED, SOLIDARY AND DETERMINED! Are we going to accept this?!? The protection of nature, of the rule of law, of the lawful state, of freedom of speech, of the rights and freedoms of the citizens, of fair market competition is the only meaningful action available for us the citizens for self-protection, for the protection of our life and health and the protection of democracy”.

Similarly, the Anti-Night Wolves protesters also identify with a notion of “*the citizens*”, though their main qualifying strategy in that respect is to emphasise their *civility* and *peacefulness* (“the peacefully protesting ones”), and juxtapose that to the Other’s aggression and *lack of civility* (“the beaten up by paramilitaries [protesters]”). Rather than a liberal-democratic frame per se, as with the JFA’s case, however, underlying this protest group’s self-representations is a broader *patriotic* (or even *nationalist*) theme - though one built around a liberal democratic, European, or “*civilized World*”, identity, i.e. “*we are supporters of the democratic Western European values*”- which features frequent positive self-identifications with “Bulgaria and the Bulgarian people” through references to “our patrimony”, “our soil,” “all that’s ours”, “our lands” or “the Motherland”, and counterpoises those to negative representations of dangerous outside Other – Russia.

Moreover, although liberal democratic in one sense, the construction of “the citizens” in the SavePirin, JFA and ANW protest groups can also be said to have an affinity to the populist construction of the “the people” (I will call this construction “liberal-moralist”), as it tries to downplay and even mask the political, ideological and class differences within society by homogenising the “citizens” and presenting them as a uniform group of noble and moral people united in their righteous anger against a “mafia-elite” (but also for a Europe-oriented future). Or as another comment from the Save Pirin protest page puts it:

These are the unifying demands on 11.01.2018 of all protesting citizens- democrats and simultaneously environmentalists, rights protectors, and Europeans fighting for a just and lawful state. In this citizen-political protest it doesn’t matter who self-identifies as green, left-



wing, right-wing, liberal or conservative [...] Everyone can go out and protest for their own cause, everyone can bring their own poster. The common thing is that we are all Bulgarian citizens, and WE DON'T WANT TO LIVE LIKE THIS ANYMORE! WE ARE FED UP WITH VULGARS, THIEVES AND FRAUDS IN POWER! We want a dignified life in a dignified European lawful state. CITIZENS FROM ALL CAUSES, UNITE!

The protesters thus present themselves as “ordinary citizens, with different views, but who want to live in a normal country.” However, despite claims to political neutrality or disinterest in political agendas (“*This is a protest of people, and not of the politicians. I don't want at all these right-wing leaders to lead me and to take advantage of my citizen anger*”), the above framings of the protesters' aims and representation of their identity betray a particularistic liberal discourse and identification, which is itself ideological and class-related (see Chapter 2 and 4 on the Bulgarian context).

*The people, in the sense of “the masses”,* are also described across all four cases as passive, apathetic, and easily manipulated (“*the people are asleep, there is no waking up*”; “[*they have*] *the thinking of frightened feudal peasants*”) and as victims of the exploitation, abuse and even genocide by the elites (“*the people were purposefully driven to this situation, common only to the animal kingdom*”), “their rights being crushed”, “their money, as Bulgarian taxpayers, and thus Bulgarian citizens” having been stolen by “all the politicians of the transition”. To achieve sovereignty they need to “be woken up” and motivated and their “righteous anger” directed against their oppressors in a revolt. They are thus in need of “educated” and “thinking” leaders with expertise to come forward and take the leadership of the revolt (“*We need to show the masses*”). The protests and the active participants here posit themselves in an elitist relationship in respect of “the (oppressed) people”, presenting themselves as the capable and competent challengers of the elites, and as fighters for the sovereignty of the people and the good of the country (“*there are people [among us] with ideas and competences! We will succeed!*”).

The notion of sovereignty, as already noted, however is constructed differently across the four cases. Thus, on the NPAAO's mobilisation page and in part on that of Save Pirin we have a classical populist anti-elitist discourse of a “corrupt and criminal political elite” that has captured the country and is oppressing the “common people”, robbing them of their sovereignty (see Engesser et al, 2017b; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). This populist (i.e. anti-elitist) framing of sovereignty can be seen clearly reflected in the organisers' stated aims in the “Blueprint for national salvation“ pinned at the beginning of the Facebook event page. In the “blueprint” the organisers call for suspension of the Constitution, for abolishing Parliament and all political parties, for convicting all politicians that have participated in the “genocide”, and for introducing “direct democratic rule by the

people” and ‘local self-governance’- or in other words, for restoring sovereignty back to the people. Sovereignty here is vaguely implied as freedom from the oppression of the elites and government by the people, which relate to conceptions of freedom and democracy different from liberalism (ibid.). In fact, in establishing democracy to mean “direct rule by the people” these protesters attribute corrupt and oppressive characteristics not only to the political elites, but also to the liberal democratic institutions themselves (i.e. Parliament and parties), equating the two. Instead of *embodying* it, here the institutions are perceived as *limiting* democracy,

The discourses on JFA’s and the ANW’s mobilisation pages, and again to an extent on Save Pirin’s one, is rather different in that it flips the notion of sovereignty by stressing the values of individual freedom and liberal democratic citizenship- that is, it construes freedom and citizenship in classic liberal terms. Thus, where the classic populist discourse (as in the NPAAO case) posits “the people” as an Us identity frame, in the JFA, ANW’s and Save Pirin cases the focus is rather on an elitist notion of “the citizens”. The cleavage so constructed is thus between the “corrupt, criminal and treasonous elites” (both political and “shadowy” economic ones) and the “noble citizens” (rather than the “noble people”), where the former are criticised for having captured the state and for working in collusion with “the oligarchy” or an aggressive authoritarian foreign power (Russia) to undermine the Western orientation of the country, its democratic institutions and the rule of law, while the latter are represented as actively fighting for European values and identity, liberal democracy, justice, freedom and a *citizen* control over state institutions. Here the self-representation of the protesters as champions of the constitution, the separation of powers and of parliamentary rules goes hand in hand with the separation of the immoral and undemocratic practices of the pseudo-elites from the liberal democratic institutions and the rule of law.

The relationship between “the citizens” (of which the civil society actors organising the protests see themselves as representative) and “the elites” is thus a reversed version of the classical populist one, with the latter frequently criticised in the comments for their anti-intellectualism and low-level thuggery (i.e. they are described as “*illiterate mob*”, “*stupid gangsters*”, “*gangsters turned politicians*”). By extension, the mass voter (i.e. the representative of “the common people”), who has elected the corrupt and unworthy politicians to power, or is supportive of the dangerous external Other, in the ANW case, is also represented as, and delegitimised on the basis of, being “*vulgar*”, “*stupid*” and/or “immoral” (see Section 9.2.2)- or in Tsoneva’s (2017b) term, as “anti-citizen”. In that sense, the actually governing elite, with the help of the uneducated, apathetic, stupid

masses, is seen as having usurped the place of the “proper” elite, who is supposed to be educated, honest, moral, competent, and to subscribe to liberal democratic values.

Thus, where classic populism is closely related to the idea of popular sovereignty and is often seen as critical of, or even a threat to, liberal democracy (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2012, p. 16), the elitist liberal-moralism discussed here is instead rather an expression of support for the latter as a form of “citizen sovereignty”. The civil society actors in this case want to restore sovereignty to an elitist notion of “the (moral) citizens,” rather than to “the common people”, and imagine that sovereignty in classic liberal, de-politicised terms (i.e. as “the rule of law”). Liberal democracy itself is thus seen here as having been usurped and corrupted by the governing and economic *pseudo-elites* and their vulgar and uneducated voters, rather than as a corrupt(ing) political system that has allowed the *elites* to usurp the sovereignty of the people. In that respect, the liberal-moralist discourse utilised by some civil society actors serves to indicate the failing of the political system to be a “true” (“Western”) liberal democracy. Thus, this kind of an elitist liberal-moralism regards itself as a corrective to the existing “illiberal” democracy in Bulgaria.

What often makes it as essentialising and anti-political as classic populism, rather than liberal in a radical-pluralist sort of way (cf. Mouffe), is its downplaying and masking of social and political conflict and hegemonic struggles at the level of the social, behind a homogenised notions of “the (righteous) citizens”, who are represented as an undifferentiated entity with supposedly shared interests and ideological orientation that have no relation to, for instance, class. In other words, it tries to present the interests of a particular class or section of society (which sees itself as the *proper* elite or as the *true* citizens) as the interests of the whole of society. As we will see in the next section, when pushed to the extreme, as in the ANW’s case, such righteous liberal-moralist construction of the conflict can come conspicuously close to its supposed opposite - the nationalist-populist framing- in its exclusionary, anti-pluralist, highly antagonistic and also uncivil dimensions.

### **9.3 Antagonism vs. Agonism: “Them” as enemies or as adversaries?**

Having looked at how the conflict between Us and Them is constructed and represented in the process of mobilisation, let us now consider the *democratic quality* of the discourse, that is, whether and to what extent the Them, taken together, tend to be represented by the participants on the different mobilisation pages as adversaries in a democratic conflict,

or as illegitimate enemies to be destroyed (cf. Mouffe). In order to be able to compare the overall *democratic quality* of the discourse across the different cases I conducted content analysis that aimed at determining whether the participants on the mobilisation pages construct Them in *relatively* agonistic or antagonistic terms, and the extent to which they use uncivil and impolite language in the process.

The content analysis of the posts and comments collected from all four cases shows some significant differences in this respect between Save Pirin and JFA, on the one hand, and NPAAO and ANW on the other. Thus, the general discourse on the Save Pirin mobilisation page appears to be the least antagonistic of all, with 33% (n= 99) from all posts and comments that refer to at least one Them actor using *moderate speech* when doing so (that is, using factual or neutral language to refer to an opponent or adversary), 41% (n= 120) being *somewhat antagonistic* (defined as containing some criticism, blame for the problem/s, negative attributions etc.), and 26% (n= 76) using *strongly antagonistic* language (defined as using strong language, insults, demonising or attacking the other, portraying the other as an enemy to be destroyed, annihilated or expelled, portraying divisions as unbridgeable, etc.) (see Table 9.4 below) (adopted from the MeCoDEM content analysis codebook 2014; cf. Vladisavljević and Voltmer 2017; Voltmer, K. and H. Kraetzschmar 2015)<sup>60</sup>. In the JFA case we have 27% (n= 36) of posts and comments refer to a Them actor in *strongly antagonistic* way, and 50% (n= 65) in *somewhat antagonistic*. About 23% (n= 30) use *moderate speech* to describe or refer to the “other” (see Table 9.4).

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<sup>60</sup> Please refer to Chapter 4 for the Methodology and Appendix D for the Codebook.

Table 9.4: Levels of antagonism towards Them – a cross-case comparison

In the table % refers to the share of posts or comments that refer to a Them actor in a moderate, somewhat antagonistic or strongly antagonistic way, out of the total of posts or comments referencing at least one Them actor. Findings of  $\geq 30\%$  are presented in bold.

Cases (Them external)	Moderate		Somewhat antagonistic		Strongly antagonistic		Uncodable/ Unclear		Total	
	%	N=	%	N=	%	N=	%	N=	%	N=
Save Pirin	<b>33 %</b>	99	<b>41%</b>	120	26 %	76	0%	1	100%	296
Justice for All	23 %	30	<b>50 %</b>	65	27 %	36	0%	0	100%	131
National Protest Against All Outrages	12 %	22	<b>55 %</b>	101	<b>32 %</b>	58	1%	1	100%	182
Anti-Night Wolves	19%	73	<b>35%</b>	136	<b>44%</b>	171	2%	3	100%	383

When we further analyse the ways Them are referred to on the Save Pirin and JFA mobilisation pages, we see that the posts and comments tend to be generally *civil*, with only 3% (n= 10) in the first case and 14% (n= 18) in the second being *uncivil* (defined as a verbalisation of a threat to democracy; the assignation of stereotypes or group labels, and/or threatening others' rights). Similarly, only about a third of comments and posts on those two pages (33%, n= 97 and 36%, n= 48, respectively) are also *impolite*, or confrontational (defined as resorting to name-calling, aspersions, synonyms for liar, hyperbole, pejorative speak, vulgarity, sarcasm, using all caps, using more than one exclamation marks, and others) (cf. Papacharissi 2004) (see Tables 9.5 and 9.6).

Table 9.5: Levels of civility towards Them – a cross-case comparison

In the table % refers to the number of posts or comments that use civil or uncivil language when referring to a Them actor, out of the total referencing at least one Them actor.<sup>61</sup>

Cases (Them external)	Them Uncivil	Them Not Uncivil	Uncodable	Them TOTAL
Save Pirin	3 % (n= 10)	96% (n= 284)	1% (n= 2)	100% (n= 296)
Justice for All	14 % (n= 18)	86% (n= 113)	0% (n= 0)	100% (n= 131)
National Protest Against All Outrages	24 % (n= 44)	76% (n =138)	0% (n= 0)	100% (n=182)
Anti-Night Wolves	31 % (n=117)	69% (n= 265)	0% (n= 1)	100% (n= 383)

Table 9.6: Levels of politeness towards Them – a cross-case comparison

In the table % refers to the number of posts or comments that use polite or impolite language when referring to a Them actor, out of the total referencing at least one Them actor.<sup>62</sup>

Cases (Them external)	Them Impolite	Them Not Impolite	Uncodable	Them TOTAL
Save Pirin	33% (n= 97)	67% (n= 198)	0% (n= 1)	100% (n= 296)
Justice for All	36% (n= 48)	64% (n= 83)	0% (n= 0)	100% (n= 131)
National Protest Against All Outrages	43% (n= 78)	57% (n= 104)	0% (n= 0)	100% (n=182)
Anti-Night Wolves	49% (n= 187)	50% (n= 192)	1% (n= 3)	100% (n= 383)

On the other hand, the analysis of the comments and posts on the mobilisation pages of NPAAO and ANW reveal a much more antagonistic and polarising discourse in regards to Them. In the first case only 12% (n= 22) of the posts and comments that refer to a Them actor are moderate, with 32% (n= 58) being strongly antagonistic and 55% (n= 101) being somewhat antagonistic (see Table 9.4). In the case of ANW we have similarly only 19% (n= 73) of posts and comments that refer to a Them being moderate, with close to a half

<sup>61</sup> Please refer to Chapter 4 for the Methodology and to Appendix D for the codebook.

<sup>62</sup> Please refer to Chapter 4 for the Methodology and to Appendix D for the codebook.

(44%, n= 171) being strongly antagonistic (see Table. 9.4). With regards to civility and politeness, we again have a similar picture, with 24% (n= 44) of all posts and comments on the mobilisation page of NPAAO being uncivil and 43% (n= 78) impolite, while on the ANW's protest page about 31% (n= 117) of all posts and comments that reference a Them actor are uncivil, and about half (49%, n= 187) are impolite (see Tables 9.5 and 9.6).

This suggests that in the case of Save Pirin and JFA we have a more agonistic construction of the conflict, whereas in the NPAAO and ANW, political contention is represented in rather antagonistic terms. In other words, the participants on the Save Pirin and JFA mobilisation pages (organisationally-led protests) tend to construct the Them as adversaries to disagree with, or to oppose through largely democratic means (i.e. by demanding institutional reforms of the Judiciary and Prosecution in the JFA's case, or by calling for the resignation of the Minister of the Environment and for the detraction of his changes of Pirin National Park's management plans), whereas the participants on NPAAO and ANW protest pages (grassroots protests) frequently adopt a highly antagonistic discourse that represents Them as an illegitimate and immoral enemy to be destroyed, annihilated or opposed by all means (i.e. get rid of all parties and the whole political system and substitute it with a new one, as in the NPAAO case) or expelled (i.e. do not let the Night Wolves pass through Bulgaria, as in the ANW case, or ban organisations supporting them). As we saw in the Section 9.2, the strong accusations of "treason" found in the discourses of these two protest groups suggest a Manichean view of Us and Them, which perhaps underpins the dominance of antagonistic and polarising speech on their mobilisation pages.

## 9.4 Conclusion and some implications

In this chapter I first showed that all four protest groups' online representations of conflict are based on a portrayal of the national authorities and political elites as self-serving, corrupt, criminal, incompetent and dishonest, often in cahoots with an outside or inside Other against the interests of "the citizens" or "the people", imagined as an a-politicised homogenous entity. I further considered the self-representations of the protesters as the "true and only" *opposition* to the corrupt elite and dangerous others, either in the role of "leaders" of the "apathetic" and "gullible" people or citizens in the struggle for sovereignty, as representatives of the "true Bulgarians" against the "national traitors," or as carriers of expertise and civic and legislative aptitude counterpoised to the thuggish-ness and ineptitude of the governing (pseudo) elites. I showed that in this way the discourses of the four cases employ different kinds of communication logics to construct the conflict, based on different notions of sovereignty and democratic citizenship, with some representing it

in classic anti-elitist populist terms- as one between the “*ordinary noble* people” and “the *corrupt undeserving* elite”- while others in elitist liberal-moralist terms (that are however similarly anti-pluralist), as “the (*liberal-democratic*) citizens” vs. “the *fake* or *pseudo*-elite” (i.e. “the mafia”, “the oligarchy”, the “ex-nomenclature” etc.).

I have also shown that these two kinds of civil society communication logics that emerge from the analysis - a classic populist or an elitist liberal-moralist one - act as reverse images of each other in that they both play down the existence of *political* conflicts *within* civil society. Where the first is based around the classical populist cleavage between “the pure common people” and “the elite,” the second flips that cleavage around and frames it in elitist terms, in a form of *anti-populist (or liberal) moralism*, presenting the conflict as one between the “pure (liberal) democratic citizens” (who are also equated with “pro-European”, and whose outlook is represented in an anti-pluralist way as the unquestionable “public good”) and “the fake (or pseudo-) elite” (also equated, in a Manichaeian sort of way, with “Eurasian”).

Interestingly, however, unlike the classic populist reliance on a charismatic leader to embody “the people” and their interests and to lead the revolt, the organisers of the NPAAO protest choose to preserve their anonymity behind the protest mobilisation event page (and the NPAAO Facebook page itself) throughout, seemingly in an attempt (as some of the comments posted by the NPAAO page itself suggest) to present themselves as being “part of the people”, as being uninterested in power, and as being honest in their aims and different from other oppositional figures, who have led previous protests with the sole intention of becoming a part of the status quo. The interview with one of the people “behind the page” further suggested that this practice of anonymity is also often adopted out of security reasons (see Chapter 8). As we shall see in the next chapter (Chapter 10), the populist construction of the conflict, however, fails to engender trust in the potential supporters the protest organisers are trying to mobilise, since the latter’s anonymity leaves “*the people*” as a *completely* empty signifier, with no visible leader or organisation to embody their “*rule*”. On the other hand, the moment such an attempt of embodiment was made - by putting forward, two days before the protest, a “shadow cabinet” supposedly agreed “democratically” by “the people behind the Page”, which was intended to take power once the protest achieved its aims of taking down not just the government, but the



whole corrupt political system - the problem of (lack of) representation came up, and trust on the mobilisation page deteriorated even further (see Chapter 10)<sup>63</sup>.

On the other hand, in respect to the liberal-moralist discourse adopted by the JFA, ANW, and to an extent the Save Pirin protesters, which constructs the Us in terms of the *free, democratic, pro-European, active, educated, and participating* “citizens”, we have a problem with elitism. Thus, this elitist construction of “the citizens” fails in its universalising purpose in the context of social media, as it attracts open scrutiny by participants outside of that rather narrowly defined identity. In other words, although this logic aims to frame the conflict in depoliticised and universalising terms (that is, as a struggle between “the good citizens” and “the bad elites”) at the same time it constructs “the citizens” in a very narrow sense (as educated, politically active, and with a pro-European/Western orientation), thus failing to achieve the unifying force the more inclusive notion of “the (common) people” carries (cf. Laclau 2005). Furthermore, by bypassing the official representative political institution of Parliament, yet positing themselves on social media as the *de facto* a-political *opposition* to those in power, these non- institutional civil society actors also raise the issue of representation and trust. By pitching themselves as representatives and advocates of an elitist, yet at the same time supposedly homogenous “citizenry” (claiming to represent some general and uniform interest of “all citizens”, yet excluding a big part of the Bulgarian population from that signifier, such as the voters of the Parliamentary represented parties, or people with pro-Russian views), these civil society actors thus also invite distrustful questions, such as “which citizens do they represent?”. As will be shown in Chapter 10, these issues can eventually lead to inter-group polarisation, fragmentation, and a struggle for legitimacy, as well as to general lack of trust in civil society initiatives, especially on social media where most of the communication of civil society’s contentious politics, identity construction and representative claims play out.

What is also interesting to note is that the presence of high levels of antagonism (as opposed to agonism) towards the Others is not necessarily correlated with whether the conflict is constructed in elitist or anti-elitist ways. For instance in ANW’s case, where on the one hand the activists and participants on the mobilisation pages adopt an elitist and

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<sup>63</sup> Just two days before the protest, the page NPAAO posted in the event a list of names it said have been designated by a committee as a “shadow cabinet” that will be ready to take control once the government is taken down by the protest. Much of the comments under that post expressed distrust as to who has made this list, and in whose name, pointing to the contradiction between claims that the aim is direct rule by the people, and the secrecy of the people who are behind the organisation of the protest.

liberal-moralist framing of the political elites, they at the same time adopt the *most* antagonistic and uncivil discourse towards the Other – suggesting, in fact, very low levels of tolerance towards difference or pluralism, even less so than in the classically populist case (NPAAO). This is due perhaps to the presence of strong identarian sentiments, which equate citizenship with the “right” kind of ideological orientation (i.e. pro-Western/European). Thus, despite the self-representations of the participants on ANW’s protest page in terms of “civility” (i.e. “peaceful protesters”) and support for “European democratic values” (discussed in Section 9.2.2), their strong antagonism and high level of polarisation in respect to Them betrays a rather nationalist-populist understanding of Us that makes claims to universality while at the same time being highly exclusivist when it comes to other groups’ and peoples’ interests, values and ideological orientations (i.e. pro-Russian ones). Both logics –the classic populist and the liberal-moralist- thus tend to claim legitimacy and authenticity through the antagonistic performance of moral superiority (rather than of agonistic opposition to a legitimate adversary on political grounds) on social media, and can be highly polarising, and therefore potentially problematic for democracy from a radical democratic perspective.

## **Chapter 10: Social media and the challenge of developing and sustaining collective identity and inter-group solidarity**

### **10.1 Introduction**

This chapter follows on the previous one and investigates **RQ4d**, developed in Chapter 3: **to what extent are the different civil society actors successful in developing and sustaining a coherent collective identity and inter-group solidarity during mobilisation on social media?** In other words, here I will again look at what *actually happens* when various civil society actors in Bulgaria use Facebook to try to mobilise and expand support for their demonstrations beyond a narrow activist core. As argued in Chapter 3, a strong protest movement that can act successfully as a political actor requires the creation of a collective identity by defining a common problem and establishing shared interpretative frames, as well as sustained interaction with opponents and the securing of allies (Melucci et al. 1989; Tarrow 1998; Della Porta and Diani 2006; McAdam et al., 1996). Thus for collective action to be possible and to be sustained, there needs to be a coherent “we” characterised by common traits, solidarity and purpose (Della Porta 2006: p. 94). What I am therefore interested in is whether the activists are in fact successful in mobilising a *collective actor* on Facebook (the platform of choice for Bulgarian civil society), and with what implications for participatory democracy.

As Mattoni and E. Treré note, citing Tilly, “social movements are said to “take place as conversations” in which activists interact with “multiple audiences” (Tilly, 2002 , p. 89) (p. 253). Kavada further observes that these conversations are about the collective reflecting on and revising its identity and self-perception, as well as deciding on who can express that and based on what legitimacy (2015, p. 881). In what follows I will look at four protest cases in order to establish how this construction of a collective actor plays out on Facebook during mobilisation. Thus following Kavada (2015), I will consider social media’s role in communication processes that (attempt to, to varying degrees of success) render an aggregation of individuals into a distinct collective actor with agency (even if often one that is rather loose and decentralised), or in other words, the processes through which the participants (organisers and supporters) on the protest event pages start (or fail) to see themselves as a “we” that is distinct from others and its environment, and which adopts shared understandings, goals and aims. For that purpose I will look at, on the one hand, the protest groups’ *overall internal cohesion and solidarity* as emerging during the discussions on the Facebook event pages set up for mobilising support for the protests

(Section 10.2), and on the other, the overall *consistency of the framing* of the protests, particularly in respect to that pushed by the organisers (Section 10.3). This will allow me to assess the extent to which participants on the pages adopt shared understandings, goals and aims, or in other words, whether the organisers are successful in constructing and maintaining a coherent collective identity in the social media environment in which they operate. At the end of the chapter I will also consider some implications of the use of social media (and especially Facebook) for contentious politics in Bulgaria, particularly in respect to issues of collective identity, inter- and outer-group trust and polarisation, and to participatory democracy more generally.

## **10.2 Intra-group polarisation and relative group cohesion**

The following section looks at and compares the overall levels of internal polarisation within the protest groups, and attempts to determine how challenging it is for the different organisers to maintain a cohesive collective identity and inter-group solidarity in the process of protest mobilisation. For my analytical purposes I have adopted Abdelal et al.'s (2006) analytical framework for Identity as Variable, which defines a collective identity as a social category that varies along two dimensions—content and contestation. As already discussed in Chapter 4, from this perspective collective identities are not fixed or constant, but vary in the agreement or disagreement about their meanings, with the concept of contestation expressing “the fluidity and contextual nature of identities” (ibid. p. 697). I will thus first look at the *overall levels of internal* antagonism (that is, antagonism expressed towards a protest organiser and/or other protest page participant) on the different mobilisation pages. I will then relate that to the overall levels of antagonism expressed against *external/Them* or Other actors, in order to gauge how strong or stable is the protest group's collective identity, i.e. the “us”, in respect to the “enemy”, or “them” (Mouffe and Laclau etc.). Next I will compare the *strength of internal antagonism* between the groups – that is, how polarised, uncivil and impolite the arguments between participants on the mobilisation pages of the four protest cases are. The section will also determine and compare the dominant points of internal contention on all mobilisation pages and reflect on any differences, particularly in respect to the different self-understandings and aims of the civil society actors (see Chapter 5). These analyses will allow me to make a general assessment of the level of internal solidarity and group cohesion that exists on the mobilisation pages, as well as to pinpoint the main issues that might impede the development and sustaining of a collective actor in the process of mobilisation on Facebook in Bulgaria.

### 10.2.1 Internal vs. external antagonism

The content analysis of the posts and comments collected from the Facebook mobilisation pages of the four protest cases shows that across all of them roughly a third of comments contain a reference to an *Internal Them* (or *You*) actor –that is, the comments address in an *oppositional way* (i.e. criticise, disagree, or engage in a discussion with) a protest organiser/s or one or more other participants on the mobilisation page (see Chapter 4 for a discussion of the methodology and coding). The main difference lies in respect to the ratio between oppositional posts and comments targeting *external Them* actors and those targeting *internal Them* or *You* actors, or in other words, in whether the *overall* antagonism on the page is directed towards *external Them* or towards *internal You*. Thus from Table 10.1 below we see that about half of the posts and comments on the Save Pirin event page (44%, n= 296) and the large majority in the Anti-Night Wolves' one (70%, n= 383) contain a reference (implicit or explicit) to an *external Them* actor, compared with 34% (n= 229) in the first case, and 11% (n= 57) in the second, that address an *internal You* actor in an antagonistic way. On the other hand, in the case of JFA only 26% (n= 131) reference at least one *external Them* actor in comparison to 34% (n= 172) targeting an *internal You* one, whereas in the case of NPAAO 31% (n= 182) of comments criticise *external Them* actors and 38% (n= 227) are antagonistic towards other participants on the protest event page. This shows that the overall discourses on JFA's and NPAAO's mobilisation pages are dominated by intra-group arguments, whereas in Save Pirin's and Anti-Night Wolves' cases the construction of adversarial frames in respect to outside opponents takes precedence.

Table 10.1 Internal vs. external antagonism

The table shows the share of comments for each case that contain at least one reference to a Them and/or to a You actor. Total N equals the total number of posts and comments coded per case. A post or comment can express antagonism (or opposition) to both an external Them and an internal You actor, to either, or to neither.

Cases	Save Pirin		Justice for All		National Protest		Anti-Night Wolves	
	%	N=	%	N=	%	N=	%	N=
Posts/Comments targeting at least one external Them actor	44%	296	26%	131	31%	182	70%	383
Posts/Comments not referring to an external Them actor	53%	356	73%	362	66%	392	29%	156
Uncodable	3%	22	1%	3	3%	17	1%	4
Total N	100%	674	100%	496	100%	591	100%	543
Posts/Comments targeting at least one Internal You actor	34%	229	34%	172	38%	227	11%	57
Posts/Comments not targeting an Internal You actor	66%	445	66%	324	62%	364	89%	486
Uncodable	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0
Total N	100%	674	100%	496	100%	591	100%	543

Let us now consider the overall kind and level of antagonism expressed towards *external* Them and *internal* You actors on all protest pages, which would give us an idea of how internally polarised the mobilisation discussions are. That involves looking at whether the internal arguments (or discussions) between the participants on the pages are *neutral/moderate* (i.e. participants are engaging in a moderate debate), *somewhat antagonistic* (contain some blame), or *strongly antagonistic* (are dismissive; portray differences as unbridgeable) (adopted from the MeCoDEM project codebook 2014; cf. Vladislavljević and Voltmer, 2017; see Chapter 4 for the Methodology and Appendix D for the codebook). As we see from Table 10.2 below, there are some significant differences in this respect across the four protest cases. Thus, the Save Pirin mobilisation page appears to be the least internally polarised, with 51% (n= 117) from all posts and

comments that are directed at an internal You actor using *moderate/neutral speech* when doing so, 42% (n= 95) being *somewhat antagonistic*, and only 7% (n= 17) using *strongly antagonistic* language (Table 10.2).

Table 10.2 Relative levels of internal and external antagonism- a cross-case comparison

The table shows the relative levels of antagonism of the posts and comments that reference external Them or address internal You actors for each case. Here % equals the share of posts or comments out of the total posts or comments referencing *at least one* Them (only the variable “THEM1S” in codebook) or a You actor (variable “YOU”), respectively. The coding measures the quality of the discourse in respect to those reference. Findings of ≥ 30% are presented in bold.

Cases	Moderate		Somewhat antagonist		Strongly antagonist		Uncodable		TOTAL	
	%	N=	%	N=	%	N=	%	N=	%	N=
<b>Save Pirin</b>										
Them external	<b>33 %</b>	99	<b>41 %</b>	120	26 %	76	0%	1	100%	296
You internal	<b>51 %</b>	117	<b>42 %</b>	95	7 %	17	0%	0	100%	229
<b>Justice for All</b>										
Them external	23 %	30	<b>50 %</b>	65	27 %	36	0%	0	100%	131
You internal	27 %	46	<b>50 %</b>	86	23 %	39	0%	1	100%	172
<b>National Protest Against All Outrages</b>										
Them external	12 %	22	<b>55 %</b>	101	<b>32 %</b>	58	1%	1	100%	182
You internal	17 %	38	<b>47 %</b>	106	<b>35 %</b>	81	1%	2	100%	227
<b>Anti-Night Wolves</b>										
Them external	19%	73	<b>35%</b>	136	<b>44%</b>	171	2%	3	100%	383
You internal	<b>49 %</b>	28	<b>30 %</b>	17	18 %	10	3%	2	100%	57



Second comes ANW's page, where, similarly, almost half (49%, n= 28) of posts and comments that target an internal You actor do so in a moderate way, 30% (n= 17) in a somewhat antagonistic, and 18% (n= 10) in a strongly antagonistic way (see Table 10.2). Here however, we should note again that only 11% (n= 57) of all posts and comments in ANW's case target an internal You actor, compare to 34% (n= 229) in Save Pirin's (see Table 10.1) - that is, overall the level of internal disagreement on ANW's page is lesser, though where present, disagreements are more on the antagonistic side than in Save Pirin's case. In JFA's case, on the other hand, we have 23% (n= 39) of posts and comments addressing an *internal You* actor in *strongly antagonistic* way, and 50% (n= 86) in *somewhat antagonistic*. Only about 27% (n= 46) use *moderate/neutral speech* to refer to or address another protest participant or the organizers (see Table 10.2)

When we further analyse the ways *internal You* participants are referred to or addressed on the Save Pirin and JFA mobilisation pages, we see that the posts and comments tend to be generally *civil*, with 0% in the first case and only 2% (n= 4) in the second being *uncivil*. However, about a third of comments and posts on Save Pirin's mobilisation page (28%, n= 63) and about a half on JFA's (45%, n= 76) are *impolite*, or confrontational (cf. Papacharissi 2004; see Chapter 4 for the Methodology) (see Tables 10.3 and 10.4).

Table 10.3 Relative levels of uncivil speech in respect to internal You and Them actors – a cross-case comparison

The table shows the percentage of posts or comments that use uncivil language when addressing or engaging in a discussion with an internal You actor or when referencing an external Them actor, out of the total of comments or posts that reference a You or at least one Them actor, respectively

Cases	Uncivil comments	Not uncivil comments	Uncodable	TOTAL
<b>Save Pirin</b>				
Them	3 % (n= 10)	96% (n= 284)	1% (n= 2)	100% (n= 296)
Internal You	0 % (n= 0)	100% (n= 228)	0% (n= 1)	100% (n= 229)
<b>Justice for All</b>				
Them	14 % (n= 18)	86% (n= 113)	0% (n= 0)	100% (n= 131)
Internal You	2 % (n= 4)	98% (n= 168)	0% (n= 0)	100% (n= 172)
<b>National Protest Against All Outrages</b>				
Them	24 % (n= 44)	76% (n =138)	0% (n= 0)	100% (n= 182)
Internal You	9% (n= 20)	91% (n= 207)	0% (n= 0)	100% (n= 227)
<b>Anti-Night Wolves</b>				
Them	31 % (n= 117)	69% (n= 265)	0% (n= 1)	100% (n= 383)
Internal You	11 % (n= 6)	88% (n= 50)	1% (n= 1)	100% (n= 57)

Table 10.4 Relative levels of impolite speech in respect to internal You and Them actors –a cross-case comparison

The table shows the percentage of posts or comments that use impolite language when addressing or engaging in a discussion with an internal You actor or when referencing an external Them actor, out of the total of comments or posts that reference a You or at least one Them actor, respectively.

Cases	Impolite comments	Not impolite comments	Uncodable	TOTAL
<b>Save Pirin</b>				
Them	33 % (n= 97)	67% (n= 198)	0% (n= 1)	100% (n= 296)
Internal You	28 % (n= 63)	72% (n= 165)	0% (n= 1)	100% (n= 229)
<b>Justice for All</b>				
Them	36 % (n= 47)	64% (n= 83)	0% (n= 0)	100% (n= 131)
Internal You	45 % (n= 76)	55% (n= 96)	0% (n= 0)	100% (n= 172)
<b>National Protest Against All Outrages</b>				
Them	43 % (n= 78)	57% (n= 104)	0% (n= 0)	100% (n= 182)
Internal You	59 % (n= 135)	40% (n= 89)	1% (n= 3)	100% (n= 227)
<b>Anti-Night Wolves</b>				
Them	49 % (n= 187)	50% (n= 192)	1% (n= 3)	100% (n= 383)
Internal You	19 % (n= 11)	77% (n= 44)	4% (n= 2)	100% (n= 57)

On the other hand, the analysis of the comments and posts on the mobilisation page of NPAAO reveals a much more internally antagonistic and polarising discourse. Thus only 17% (n= 38) of the posts and comments that refer to or address an *internal You* actor are moderate/neutral, with 35% (n= 81) being strongly antagonistic and 47% (n= 106) being somewhat antagonistic (Table 10.2).

With regards to civility and politeness, we again have a similar picture, with 9% (n= 20) of the posts and comments referring to or addressing an internal You actor on the mobilisation page of NPAAO being uncivil and 59% (n= 135) impolite. Similarly, in the ANW's case, 11% (n= 6) of the posts or comments referring to an internal You are uncivil, and 19% (n= 11) are impolite – suggesting, once again, that although the overall level of

internal polarisation on this mobilisation event page is lower than in the Save Pirin and JFA's cases, where present, it is much more confrontational and antagonistic (see Tables 10.3 and 10.4).

Thus from the analysis we can see that the posts and comments on Save Pirin's page are largely focused on constructing adversarial frames in relation to external Them actors (see Table 10.1), and with the majority of the disagreements between participants staying at the level of friendly debates and/or moderate civil and polite arguments, with few instances of harsh criticisms, dismissive comments and/or insults and personal attacks (Tables 10.2, 10.3 and 10.4).

In respect to JFA's case, we overall have a medium level of internal polarisation, with frequent, generally civil though sometimes heated arguments that seem to dominate the discourse on the mobilisation pages (see Table 10.2). The participants in these arguments, however, do not tend to be excessively dismissive of, or to attack the protest, its aims and/or the organisers and other participants (see Tables 10.1, 10.2, 10.3 and 10.4).

In the case of ANW, we similarly have a medium level of internal polarisation, with not very frequent internal arguments, though where present, they tend to be more uncivil than in the other two cases- that is, the participants tend to be more dismissive of, or to attack each other or the protest itself (Tables 10.1, 10.2, 10.3 and 10.4). This suggests that internal arguments/polarisation are likely the result of purposeful "trolling" from "outsiders" rather than of internal debates around the aims and organisation of the protest etc.

In the NPAAO case, on the other hand, very high levels of internal polarisation are evident, with arguments between participants dominating and often reaching highly antagonistic, dismissive, uncivil and/or rude levels with relatively few instances of moderate, neutral or polite tone, which suggests frequent instances of purposeful "trolling" that surpass moderate and civil debates, as well as a lack of cohesion of the collective actor on the page (Tables 10.1, 10.2, 10.3 and 10.4).

### **10.2.2 Intra-group/protest-related problems identified in the mobilisation discourses**

Having looked at and compared the level of intra-group polarisation across the four protest mobilisation cases, let us now consider the main topics (or the general categories of topics) of the internal arguments (or discussions) taking place on the protest pages (see Table

10.5 below)<sup>64</sup>. Content analysis of the protest-related or intra-group problems (total n) identified in the comments and posts collected from the mobilisation pages shows that in Save Pirin's case the large majority of protest-related criticisms (49%, n= 59) concern *the definition or framing of the protests' concerns, aims, strategies and or motivations*, followed by criticisms related to *the organisation of the protest itself* (i.e. logistics, type of protest, mobilisation strategies adopted by the organisers, the latter's competence as organisers etc.) (16%, n= 19), and *issues with representation and trust* (i.e. doubts expressed as to the organisers' legitimacy, authenticity, intentions and motivations etc.) (12%, n= 14). In the JFA case the main identified internal problems in the discourse similarly relate to the *definition of the protest aims, framing strategies etc.* (33%, n= 23) and *its organisation and logistics* (21%, n= 15), however the second most referenced issue here is *problematic interpersonal/intragroup communication* (i.e. references to lack of civility, or the use of inappropriate tone of voice, personal insults, etc.) (24%, n= 17). In NPAAO's case, on the other hand, the large majority of the identified internal problems in the posts and comments of participants relate to *issues of representation and trust* (49%, n= 77), followed by problems with the *definition of the protest aims and framing strategies* (27%, n=43), and with the organisation of the protest (12%, n= 18). Finally, in ANW's case we have very few posts or comments critical of the protest framing, strategies, organisation, inter-group relations etc. – 3 that relate to the framing, 1 to the organisation of the protest and 1 to the mode of communication on the page (see Table 10.5).

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<sup>64</sup> Please refer to the codebook in Appendix D.

Table 10.5 Main internal/protest-related problems identified in the posts and comments

The table shows the breakdown by type of all the internal/protest-related problems identified in the posts and comments (n total) in each case. Findings of ≥ 10% are presented in bold

<b>Internal/ Protest related problems</b>	Save Pirin	Justice for All	National Protest	Anti-Night Wolves
Intragroup communication (tone of voice, insults, etc.)	6% (n= 7)	<b>24%</b> (n= 17)	4% (n= 7)	<b>20%</b> (n= 1)
Lack of tolerance of different opinions	4% (n= 5)	6% (n= 4)	1% (n= 1)	0% (n= 0)
Organisation/tactics of protest (logistics, time, day, type etc.)	<b>16%</b> (n= 19)	<b>21%</b> (n= 15)	<b>12%</b> (n= 18)	<b>20%</b> (n= 1)
Representation and trust	<b>12%</b> (n= 14)	16% (n= 11)	<b>49%</b> (n= 77)	0% (n=0)
Definitions/framing of protest concerns/aims/strategies	<b>49%</b> (n= 59)	<b>33%</b> (n= 23)	<b>27%</b> (n= 43)	<b>60%</b> (n= 3)
Other	<b>13%</b> (n= 15)	0% (n= 0)	7% (n=11)	0% (n= 0)
Total internal/protest-related problems	100% (n=119)	100% (n=70)	100% (n=157)	100% (n=5)

### 10.2.3 Discussion

What the analysis shows is that in Save Pirin’s case there is a low level of internal polarisation and antagonism, with most intra-group arguments taking the form of moderate and civil debates mainly focused on disagreements over the framing of the protests’ concerns, aims and overall strategies (“*wasn’t the protest just about the lift?*”). There are also some concerns voiced in respect to the way the protests are organised and the (online) mobilisation managed (“*but why are you creating a new event every time so people need to sign up again - just change the date...*”), as well as doubts expressed in regards to the organisers’ or protesters’ *legitimacy, authenticity, and/or true motivations* (“*CLOWNS IT IS CLEAR TO ALL THAT YOU ARE PAID*”).

In JFA’s case the majority of the internal problems identified in the comments similarly relate to the *framing of the protests’ concerns, aims, strategies etc.* (“*And what is the connection between the freed by GERB MP and the judiciary reform, as I don’t get it?*”) and their *logistical organisation* (“*in 2 days during a week day, before lunch?! Do you seriously want to achieve something?*”). Here, however, we have a big chunk of comments also criticising the *nature of the interpersonal communication within the group*, for instance

the impolite or insulting tone of voice used by an organiser or another participant (*“And more insults. Haterism”*). This reflects to an extent the failure of the organisers, in their role of representatives of a formal expertise-oriented NGO, to live up to the “liberal-technocratic” ideal of dispassionate and neutral (Habermasian) discourse ethics in respect to their communication of the last protest’s aims on Facebook (framed using crude, humorous language as “Justice not sausages”, see Section 10.3.4 below), as well as in regards to the way they interacted with supporters on the page.

The situation looks a bit different in regards to the NPAAO’s case, however. Here almost half of the protest-related critical comments concern *the representativeness and trustworthiness of the protest and/or its organisers* (*“A few impostors have gathered and proclaimed themselves leaders. Also put themselves forward for ministers. Democratic...”*). As with the other cases, *the protest framing* is also frequently questioned (*“What a broad program- we dismantle the state and will create a new one, it is not clear how but we really want some kind of expert government and a presidential republic, but also we want democracy...There is no way for this to happen [...]”*), and to a lesser extent *the organisation of the protest and its logistics* (*“I waited, I waited, but nothing, neither a protest, neither a cabinet, neither kebabs, neither beer...there was just nothing, man”*).

To sum up, ANW appears to be the most closely-knit group, with low levels of internal polarisation and almost absent disagreements in regards to its identity and aims. In other words, it exhibits the strongest collective identity and inter-group solidarity and trust. The discourse on Save Pirin’s mobilisation page is the second least internally polarised, with arguments among participants mainly relating to issues with the protest framing, long-term strategies and logistics. In JFA’s case we similarly have struggles over framing and logistics, but also a large number of voiced concerns about the degeneration of the quality of the discourse on the page due to what seem to be interpersonal conflicts between participants and organisers. In NPAAO’s case, on the other hand, we have very high levels of distrust expressed in respect to the organisers’ legitimacy, authenticity, identity and motivations, most likely due to either “trolling”, or to the fact that the organiser of the protest - the Facebook page National Protest Against All Outrages - is anonymous, that is, it is not clear who are the people behind it (see Chapter 4 for an overview of the case, as well as Chapters 7 and 8 on these type of actors’ social media strategies). This protest group therefore exhibits the weakest collective identity and inter-group solidarity and trust.

## 10.3 Framing struggles on Facebook's mobilisation pages

In this section I will next look at and compare how framing works and is negotiated in the four protest cases under consideration, particularly in respect to how, or to what extent, the organisers' framing is bridged with other ones during the mobilisation discussions on the protest event pages around which the mobilisation efforts coalesce. As already noted in the beginning of the chapter, this will allow me to further assess the extent to which participants on the pages adopt shared understandings, goals and aims, or in other words, exhibit a coherent collective identity. I will also be able to gauge the main ideological and/or strategic points around which disagreements or polarisation occur. In addition, by correlating with the analysis of the previous sections, I will also be able to determine, overall, the extent to which the disagreements on the different mobilisation pages are a matter of agonism or antagonism.

In what follows I will first consider the overall (struggles over) framing of each case separately (see Chapter 4 for a description of the Methodology and Appendix D for the codebook). I will argue that in the process of mobilisation on the different protest event pages, the maintenance of the consistency of the framing posited by the organisers, as well as the scope and success of frame bridging other participants and groups attempt to do, varies depending on the group's identity, overall aims and organisational structure. I would also suggest that although the employment of social media (and particularly Facebook) can be successful in temporarily bringing together disparate people into an online crowd (cf. Gerbaudo 2017a), the personalised action frames that enable this work only to an extent, and unless there can be established a coherent chain of equivalences between different issues and their framing, demobilisation rather than mobilisation is likely to occur, particularly in highly polarised contexts like the Bulgarian one.

### 10.3.1 Save Pirin protest case<sup>65</sup>

The main event page created by Coalition "For the Nature" and administered by its activists for the Save Pirin protest, frames the issue as one relating to the political institutions. In particular, the About section posits the decision by the Ministry of the Environment to make what the activists see as unlawful corrections in Pirin National Park's management plans - which they say opens 48% of its territory to development - as the main problem and puts it as the focus of the protest, listing three main demands in that respect: 1) the annulment

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<sup>65</sup> Please refer to Chapter 4, Section 4.2.1.1 for a description of the case.



of the decision for Pirin National Park taken by the Council of Minister; 2) the revision and annulment of the concession contract for the Park because of its systematic violation by the concessioner; 3) the resignation of the Minister of the Environment, Neno Dimov.

Moving on to the content analysis<sup>66</sup>, we see that the summary variable *political institutions* – which includes the betrayal of the citizen or national interest by representatives of the government, the latter’s corruption and/or incompetence, as well as their authoritarian or non-transparent decision-making processes - is similarly the most referred to cause of problems in the discussions on the Save Pirin mobilisation page (34%, n= 139) (“*The power-holders have fallen into a schizophrenic crisis. It is showing symptoms of cognitive dissonance – it neither hears, nor sees the thousands that have come under its windows*”) (Table 10.6; see also Fig. 10.1 for a breakdown). Here the “Other” category includes various vague or unclear (for instance ironic) criticisms of institutions and/or power holders and their actions (i.e. “If to the list of demands can be added the resignation of the deputy PM Valeri Simeonov would be very good”; “these are either lies or deceptions- it seems the Patriots<sup>67</sup> can’t lift their heads off the ground”).

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<sup>66</sup> Please refer throughout to Table 10.6 for a cross- case comparison summary

<sup>67</sup> Reference to the Patriotic Front – the far-right coalition partner of the government.

Table 10.6. Prevalence of different problem framings identified in the comments/posts in the four protest groups

In the table % refers to the share of different *kinds* of causes of problems in respect to the total number of causes of problems identified in the posts or comments for each case. One post or comment can refer to more than one kind of cause of problems. Findings  $\geq 10\%$  are presented in bold.

<b>Problem causes identified in the posts/comments</b>	Save Pirin	Justice for All	NPAAO	Anti-Night Wolves
Political institutions and governing elites	<b>34%</b> (n= 139)	<b>27%</b> (n= 54)	<b>24%</b> (n= 53)	<b>18%</b> (n= 42)
Political culture	<b>25%</b> (n= 104)	<b>17%</b> (n= 34)	<b>41%</b> (n= 92)	<b>27%</b> (n= 62)
Judiciary/ Rule of law	3% (n= 13)	<b>43%</b> (n= 84)	4% (n= 9)	<b>13%</b> (n= 31)
Economic	<b>23%</b> (n= 93)	7% (n= 13)	<b>15%</b> (n= 33)	2% (n= 5)
International	0% (n= 0)	0% (n= 1)	5% (n= 11)	<b>24%</b> (n= 56)
Identities	0% (n= 0)	1% (n= 2)	8% (n= 17)	<b>14%</b> (n= 32)
Media	<b>15%</b> (n= 61)	5% (n= 9)	3% (n= 7)	2% (n=4)
<b>Total problem causes per case</b>	100% (n= 410)	100% (n= 197)	100% (n= 222)	100% (n= 232)

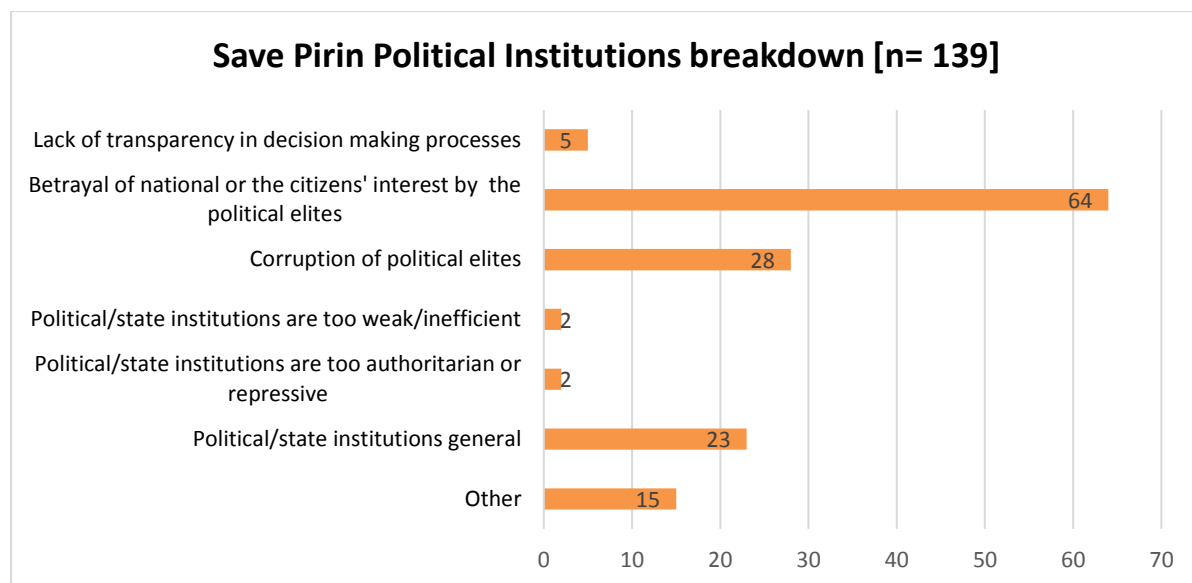


Fig.10.1 Save Pirin problem framing: Political institutions

Related to that framing we also have a number of posts or comments (15%, n= 61) that criticise the Bulgarian mainstream media for being the mouthpieces of the corrupt authorities and the oligarchy, rather than the watchdogs of those in power, and therefore stifling the possibility for democratic control and real public debate (*“The propaganda in our media is horrible”*) (Table 10.6). In addition, there are a significant number of references to *political culture* as a cause of problems (25%, n= 104) and in particular to *the general lack of democratic culture* in Bulgaria, that is, the anti- or non-democratic attitudes and behaviours of the citizens, the social acceptance of corruption, the weak or apathetic civil society, and the polarisation between social or political groups (Fig.10.2) (*“baj tseko<sup>68</sup> is pushing them to earn “honestly” their money before he finances their activity and events...it is like this with naskosirakova<sup>69</sup> and the rest of the material, that is selling itself”*). There are also a significant number of posts or comments that criticise the lack of support (in society more generally or in the protest group) for more direct forms of democratic governance, along the lines of the notion of “sovereignty of the people”, through referenda or popular assemblies, for instance, or through “self-governance” (*“I don’t understand why many people suggest that we need to demand mainly resignation*

<sup>68</sup> Tseko Minev – the majoritarian share-holder of First Bulgarian Investment Bank and suspected concessioner, hiding behind an offshore company, of Bansko ski resort.

<sup>69</sup> Nasko Sirakov, a well-known Bulgarian footballer, who together with other sport personalities came out in defence of the expansion of Bansko ski resort and the decision of the Ministry of the Environment.

and elections? Why there is no demand for something really ecological, like for instance people themselves to write the laws and to participate directly in the decision-making [...]?”) (Fig. 10.2). Finally, the “Other” category contains a variety of (vague) references to other aspects of political culture, such as lack of trust in the current system of government or in the institutions more generally (“I agree, but in the current government there needs to be some trust”), lack of deliberative and/or critical skills and the easy manipulation of citizens (“enough with these newspaper headlines; give us some facts, documents etc.”) or the widespread practice of “paying” protesters (“...at the protest against Oresharski they offered me money on the 17<sup>th</sup> day of the protest and how much this disgusted me, I stopped going or following the topic in general...”).

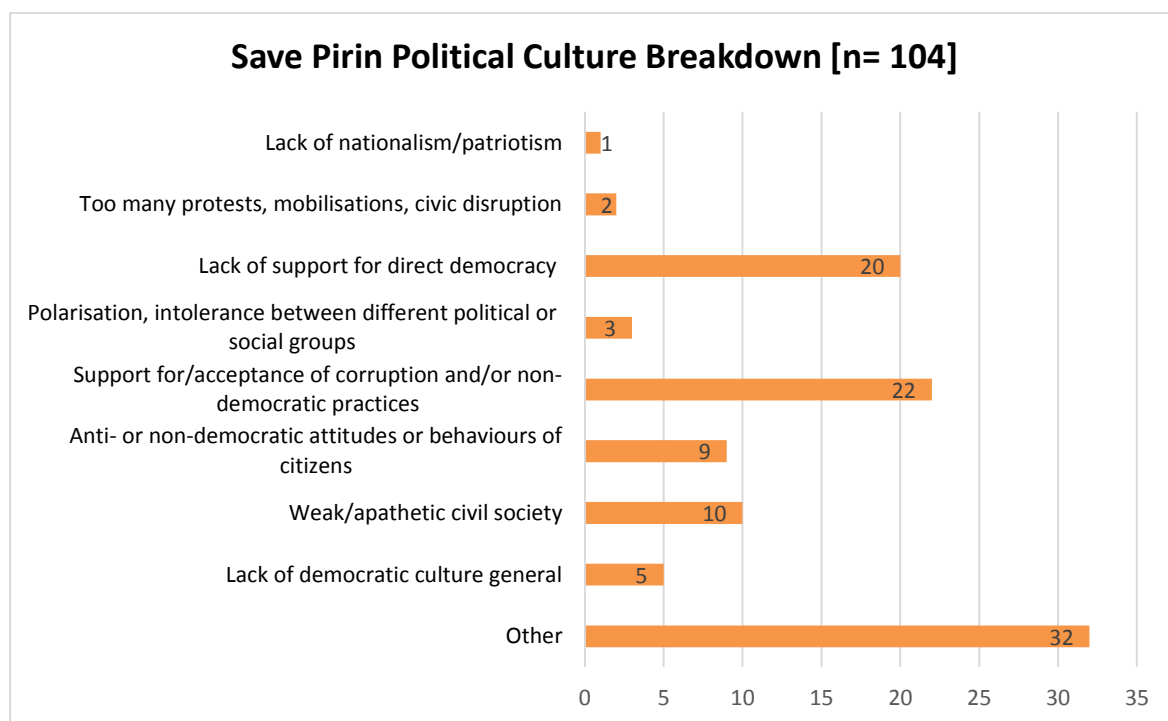


Fig.10.2 Save Pirin problem framing: Political culture

The third most referenced category of causes of problems identified in the comments and posts relates to the economy (23%, n= 93). When we look at those references more closely (Fig.10.3), we see that the large majority refer to the clientelism and oligarchic dependences that have taken over the Bulgarian economy (“*The resignation of one minister is not enough for solving the problem with the level of arrogance of the oligarchy and its ability to bend ministers with ease*”), while the rest vary and at times find themselves in opposition on the left-right axis. Thus, where the majority of the references take a more leftist perspective in their criticism of capitalism and the free market forces, as well as of

corruption, workers' exploitation, privatisation of the commons, clientelism, and the drive to overdevelopment of Bulgaria's nature that they fuel (*"Do you even know that except ecological, the problem is also social – I mean the salaries of the people working for the oligarch in question, owner of the concession, if they even get them, are insultingly small"*), a few take the perspective of the businesses, land-owners and developers, and/or are expressive of explicit negative views of leftist politics, such as socialism or communism, in general (*"BUT if you are owner of property there and you are not in a protected area, I just don't see a reason someone to complain, as much as I hate development of the Sunny Beach and Bansko sort"*) (Fig.10.3).

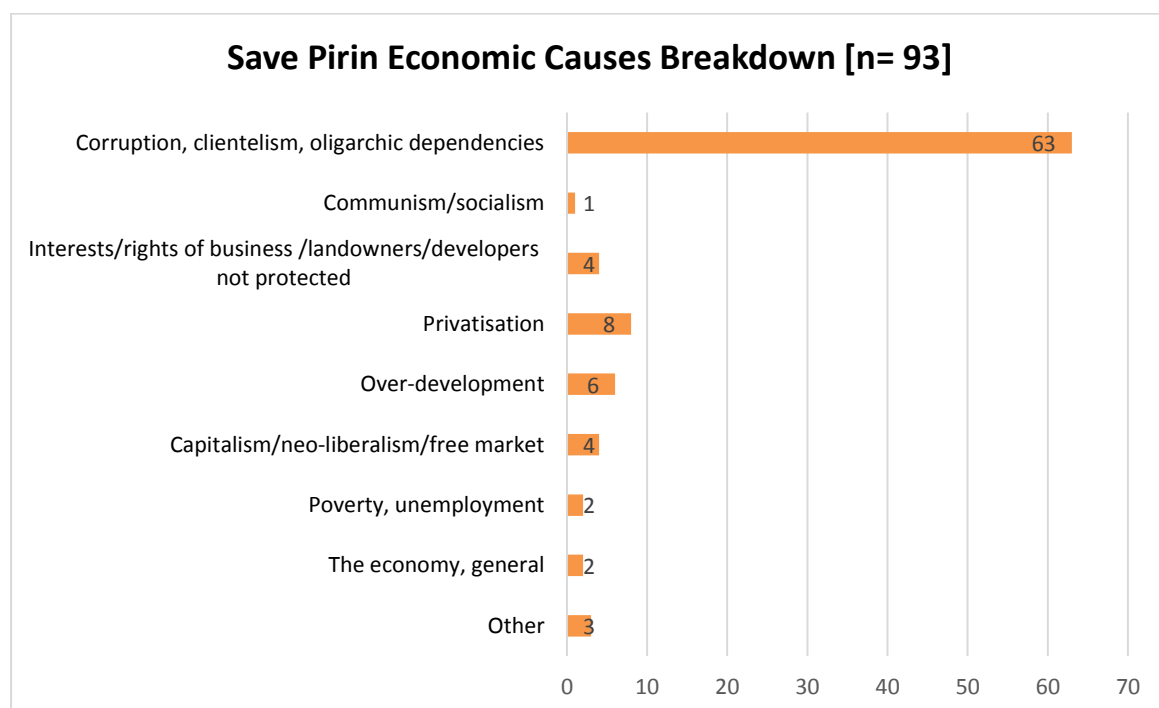


Fig.10.3 Save Pirin problem framing: Economic causes

### 10.3.2 Anti-Night Wolves protest case<sup>70</sup>

The About section of the Anti-Night Wolves protest event informs potential participants that the Night Wolves are planning to visit Sofia on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July (2016) and calls on supporters to show them that "they are not welcome here". The rest of the section describes the Night Wolves' links to the Russian government, KGB and security services, as well as states that they have been banned from Poland and other countries.

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<sup>70</sup> Please refer to Chapter 4, Section 4.2.1.1 for a description of the case.

Turning to the content analysis (please refer to Table 10.6), we see that of all the references in the posts and comments that try to define the causes of the perceived problems or injustices (n total = 232), the majority relate to *the political culture* of other Bulgarians (27%, n= 62), followed by *interference of an international actor* (24%, n= 56) (in this case almost exclusively Russia). Causes related to the *political institutions, judiciary/rule of law* and *(political) identities* also feature substantively (18%, n= 42, 13%, n= 31, and 14%, n= 32, respectively), whereas *economic causes* are the least mentioned (2%, n= 4).

In respect to *political culture*, lack of patriotism or “real” nationalism (for example references to “anti-Bulgarian” or “treasonous” behaviours of other citizens) is the most frequently discussed or mentioned problem (“*how many national traitors were there in Bulgaria, horrible and disgusting*”), followed by Russophile attitudes and anti-or non-democratic attitudes or behaviours of other Bulgarians (“*the Putinist nationalist whores in Bulgaria already started the violence*”). Similarly, the betrayal of national interests by the elites (i.e. “anti-Bulgarian” or “treasonous” behaviour of government officials etc.) is the most frequently mentioned cause of problems or injustices in respect to *political/state institutions* (“*It is full of whores in this judiciary system*”), followed by the inaction or incompetence of politicians and the weakness and inefficiency of state institutions (“*the state is sleeping*”) (Figs.10.4 and Fig.10.5).

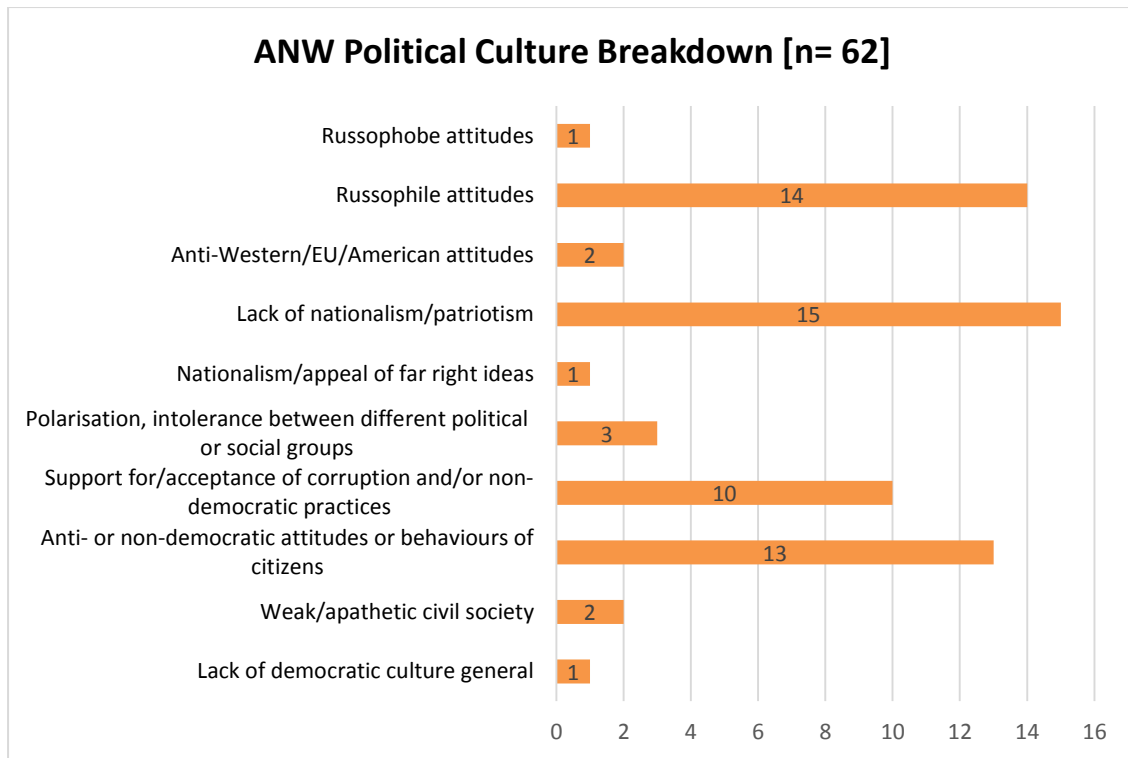


Fig.10.4 ANW problem framing: Political culture

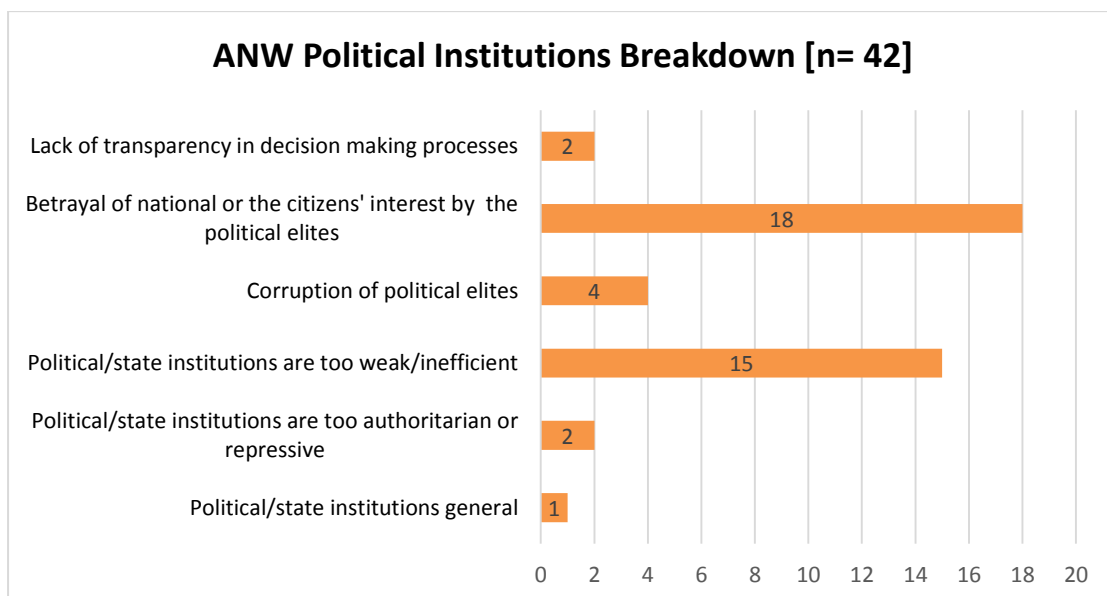


Fig.10.5 ANW problem framing: Political institutions

In respect to *the rule of law*, the *police*, and their corruption, impunity, inaction, partiality etc., is mentioned most often as a cause of injustices (“the inadequate reaction of law enforcement, the Prosecution”) (Fig.10.6). Finally, in terms of *identities*, political beliefs

and ideologies, and in particular the promotion of “communism”, are most frequently mentioned as problematic (*“pathetic communist gathering”*) (Fig. 10.7).

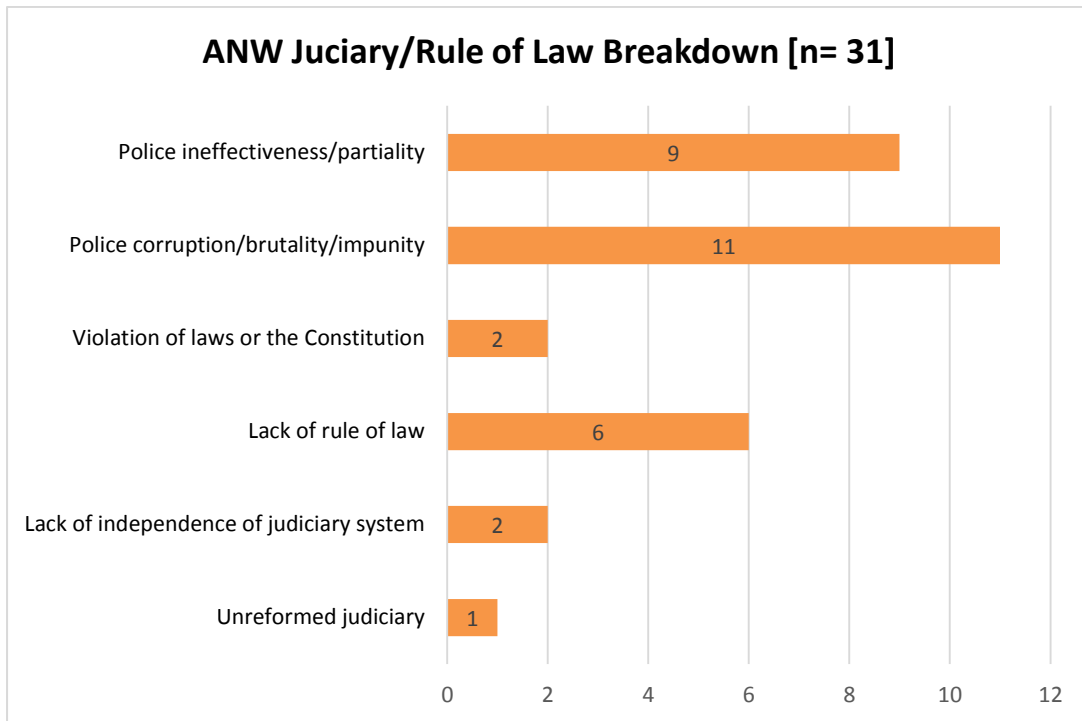


Fig.10.6 ANW problem framing: Judiciary/rule of law

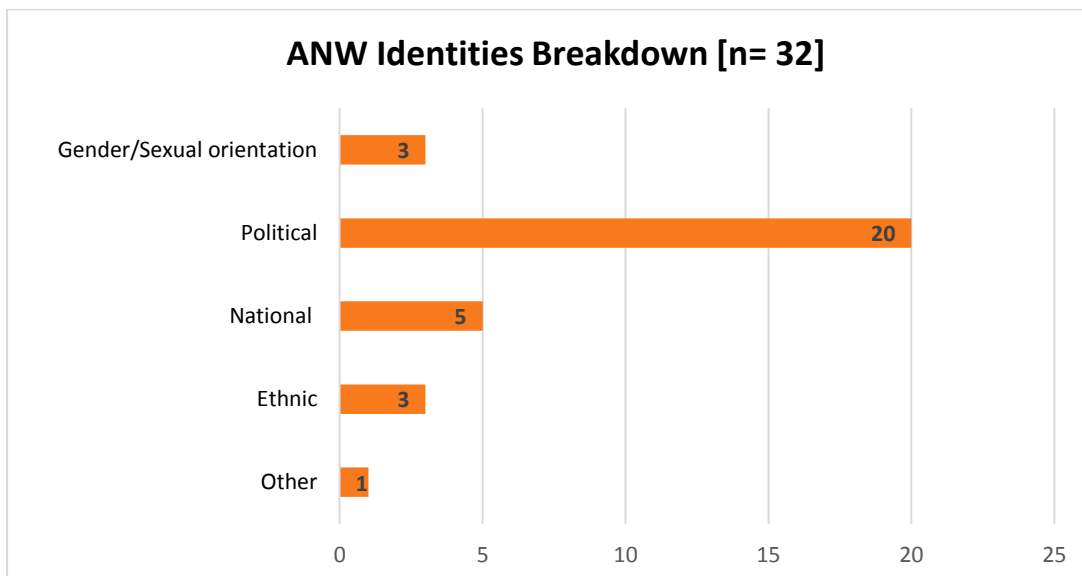


Fig.10.7 ANW problem framing: Identities



### 10.3.3 National Protest Against All Outrages (NPAAO) protest case<sup>71</sup>

This NPAAO protest that took place on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2017 in Sofia was organised online under the slogan “There is such a people” by the Facebook page “National Protest Against All Outrages in Bulgaria” (see Chapter 4 for a detailed overview of the case). The about section of the page simply says that “the page has been created in memory of all that have perished as a result of the negligence and outrages committed by all politicians in Bulgaria”<sup>72</sup>.

As already noted in Chapter 4, the protest under investigation here was initially organised in defence of Slavi Trifonoff’s<sup>73</sup> referendum, calling for the implementation of its results, or of the will of “the 3 500 000 million people who voted” in favour changing the electoral system and the parties’ financing. Later on, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of August, a long post titled “СЦЕНАРИЙ ЗА ПРЕОДОЛЯВАНЕ НА ПЕРМАНЕНТНАТА ПОЛИТИЧЕСКА, СОЦИАЛНА И ЦЕННОСТНА КРИЗА В РЕПУБЛИКА БЪЛГАРИЯ” (“A blueprint for the overcoming of the permanent political, social and values crisis in the Republic of Bulgaria”) was pinned at the top of the event page created for mobilisation for the protest. The post listed a number of measures, ranging from populist ones, such as the suspension of the Constitution, the abolition of Parliament and the introduction of “direct democratic rule by the people” and ‘local self-governance”, or the “starting of a program for national salvation that aims to overcome the negative influence and genocide of the population undertaken by the state administration of monopolies and cartels”, to pro-EU liberal ones such as “the conversion of Bulgaria in a proper member of the EU and the implementation of all recommendations for reforms that have been stalled in the last years” or “invitation of EU monitors as guarantors of the democratic processes for the period of transition, direct communication with EU institutions”, and neo-liberal ones such as “following the recommendations of the World Bank in the financial sector in order to ensure quick fiscal

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<sup>71</sup> Please refer to Chapter 4, Section 4.2.1.1 for a description of the case.

<sup>72</sup> As already mentioned in Chapter 4, it is not clear who operates the page (or operated it before it was taken down by Facebook in December 2017), as only one person at the time of writing had come out openly in the public sphere claiming to be one of its current administrators (and protest organisers via it), though he has said in a number of interviews that there are other “concerned citizens” involved as well. In his posts he often refers to those as the “collective behind the page National Protest”.

<sup>73</sup> A well-known Bulgarian TV late night comedy talk-show host.

stability”, “guaranteeing the freedoms of private businesses”, and “the absolute guarantees and protection of private property”. Days before the protest was scheduled for, a pinned post informed that a “shadow cabinet” has been nominated by “many citizens and citizen organisations” and has taken the lead of the protest. The actual names of those in the “shadow cabinet” were circulated by the organisers (the page National Protest Against Everything Outrageous) the day before the protest itself.

Turning to the content analysis of the posts and comments on the protest event page (see Table 10.6), we see that the overall framing is as broad and contradictory as the one outlined by the organisers in the pinned up post, though not necessarily in the same respect. Thus, of all the comments that try to define the cause of a problem or injustice (n= 222), interestingly the majority of criticisms are related to the *political culture* of Bulgarians (41%, n= 92). Problems related to the *political institutions* and *governing elites* (24%, n= 53 ) are the second most discussed, followed by problems with *economic roots* (15%, n= 33). Least mentioned causes of problems are those in relation to *the judiciary* (4%, n= 9), *geopolitics* (5%, n= 11) and the *media* (3%, n= 7).

In respect to *political culture*, the most often referred to issue (directly or indirectly) is the general apathy and weakness of Bulgarian society (or “the people”) (“*while the flock is asleep, our situation won’t improve*”), followed by a diverse set of cultural causes of problems in Bulgaria, ranging from more nationalist and conservative framings, such as the lack of patriotism and the erosion of traditional values (“*Let’s hope it is not Western-European ‘tolerant’, because that will completely destroy us!*”) to concerns about the anti- or non-democratic attitudes of the majority of the citizens and/or the social tolerance of corruption (“and you the young communists?”; “*There are such, who said to themselves that they can’t be bothered, of course, and these exactly are the people because of whom everyone in the state institution thinks that he can crush the one below him*”) (Fig.10.8).

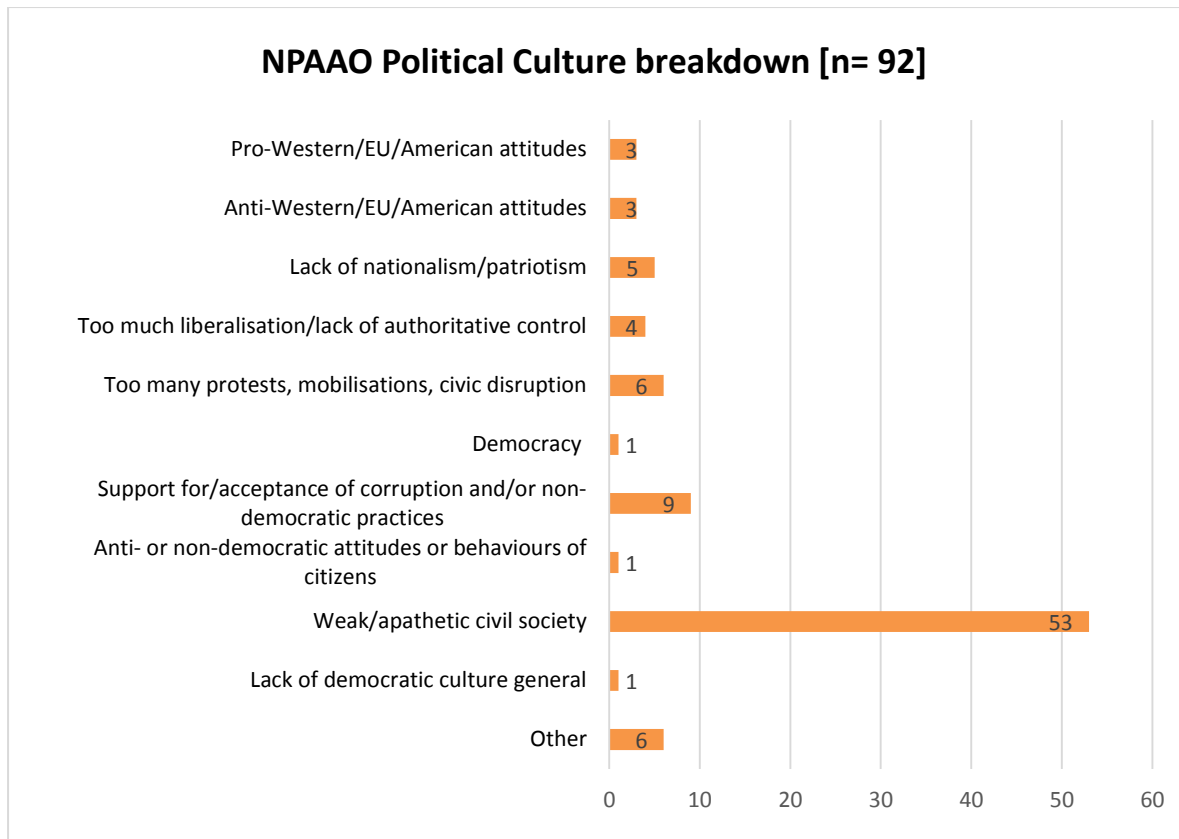


Fig.10.8 NPAAO problem framing: Political culture

The corruption, criminality, and the inaction and incompetence of governing elites are the problems most cited in respect to *political institutions* (“whether we vote or not, it is always the mafia ruling’) (Fig.10.9).

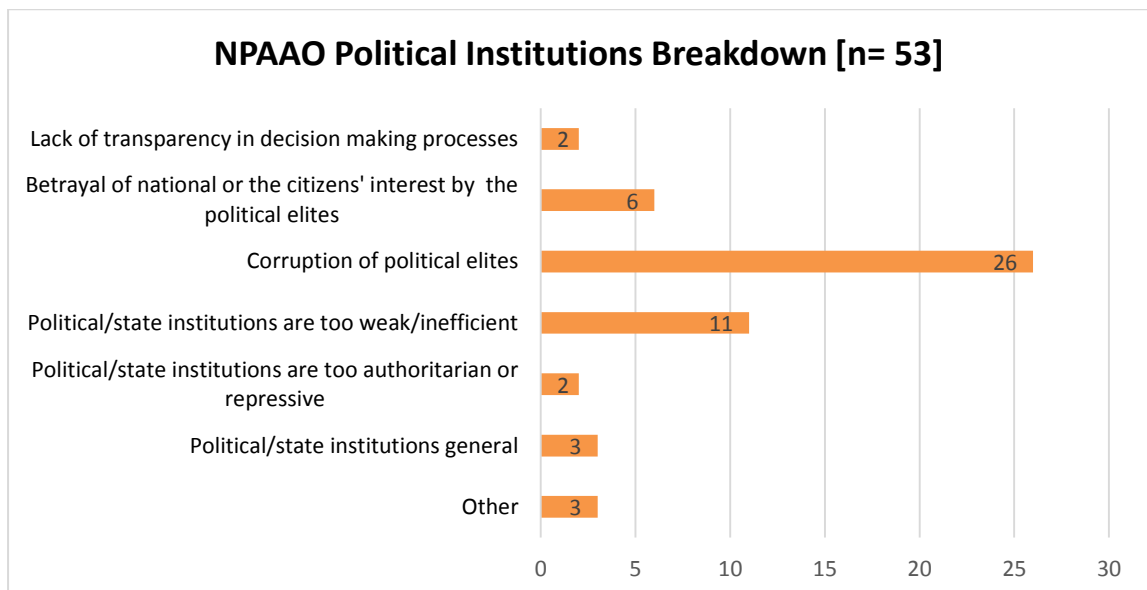


Fig.10.9 NPAAO problem framing: Political institutions

Finally, poverty, exploitation, capitalism, and the free market, on the one hand (*“THE SLAVEOWNERS (Metro, Kaufland, Lidl, Billa, T-Market) – IMPORT PRODUCTS from the EU, sell the products to the BULGARIAN SLAVES, and in the opposite direction, they EXPORT MONEY!”*), and clientelism and oligarchic dependencies, on the other (*“one of the main reasons you can’t do business here – the mafia-thugs and racketeers”*), are the most commonly identified *economy-related* causes of problems (see Fig.10.10).

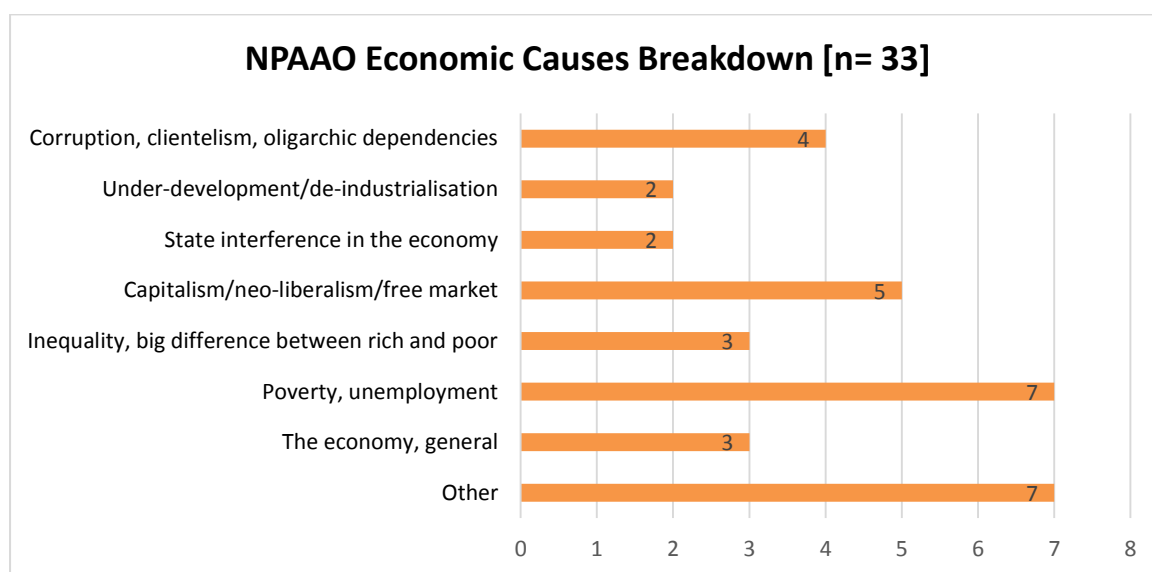


Fig.10.10 NPAAO problem framing: Economic causes

The analysis of the framings thus suggests that there is a high heterogeneity of identified problems and related causes on the protest mobilisation page, and that participants comes from different, often oppositional, ideological positions. For instance, Fig. 10.8 shows that there are conflicting opinions as to whether the pro-Western or anti-Western attitudes of Bulgarians are a problem, while Fig.10.11 below suggests a lack of consensus on the page about what the proper geo-political orientation of the country should be – pro-Russian/anti-Western or vice versa (a major dividing line in Bulgarian politics). Similarly, Fig.10.10 above suggests that on the protest mobilisation page there is no consensus on whether state interference in the economy and clientelist arrangements, or the free market and deregulation, are causing the major problems of the country.

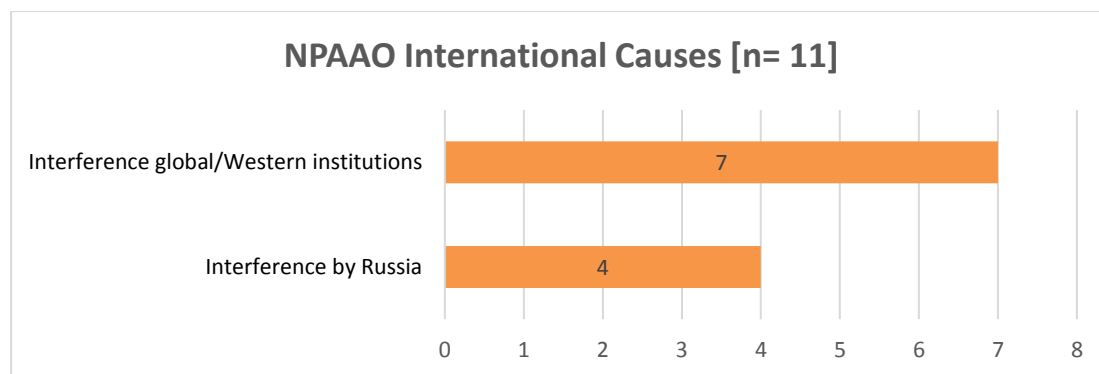


Fig.10.11 NPAAO problem framing: International causes

### 10.3.4 Initiative “Justice for All” protest case

The analysis of this case draws on a dataset composed of online (Facebook) communication in the course of the organisation and enactment of three consecutive protests demanding an end to corruption and the oligarchic dependencies in the country, as well as a reform of the Judiciary system that aims to lessen the power of the Chief Prosecutor<sup>74</sup>.

As noted in Chapter 4, the first protest under consideration here was co-organised by Coalition “For the Nature” and took place on the 23<sup>th</sup> of May under the slogans “citizen march for European justice” and “a country for the citizens, not the mafia”. It demanded that the government implement judiciary reform as recommended by the European Commission, as a way of safeguarding democracy, freedom of speech and the rule of law. Judicial reform was also advocated as crucial for the fight against corruption and against the capturing of the state by the “mafia” and the “oligarchy”, and as what Bulgaria’s “European future” and “European identity” depends on.

The second protest took place nationwide on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June –a symbolic day for the organisers and their civil society network, as on that day in 2013 Delyan Peevski, a notorious media mogul and oligarch, was elected as the new Chief of the National Security Services, sparking the Summer 2013 mass protests. It happened under the slogan “March for European Justice”, condemned the corruption in the system and the strengthening of “the mafia’s” hold over state institutions over the past 4 years despite the 2013 protests, and demanded judicial reform as a means to fight these dependencies.

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<sup>74</sup> Please refer to Chapter 4, Section 4.2.1.1 for a description of the case.

The third protest took place on the 26<sup>th</sup> of July under the slogan “Justice not sausages!” It was called as a response to changes in the legislation that the government was planning to rush through Parliament before its summer break. These legislative changes were seen as an attack on citizens’ rights and in the interest of the oligarchy. The protest was also sparked by the perceived simulation of activity by the Chief Prosecutor, who had been quick to react in regards to a corruption and extortion case against an MP involving sausages, while cases of much bigger national interest, such as the bankruptcy of Corporate Commercial Bank, were slowly being swept under the carpet.

The content analysis of the discussions happening on the three protest event pages during mobilisation (please refer to Table 10.6) shows that of all references to causes of problems or injustices on the page (n= 197) expectedly most are directed at the judiciary system and/or those managing or working within it (43%, n= 84). Problems related to the political institutions and governing elites (27%, n= 54), and to the political culture of Bulgarians (17%, n= 34) also feature substantively, whereas problems related to the economy and the media are the least mentioned (7% and 5% respectively). References to the identities or geopolitics are almost absent.

In respect to the judiciary, corruption, lack of independence from the governing elites, the lack of rule of law, and the lack of reform are the most commonly cited problems (*“the mafia inside the system is giving names exactly for the 6 places on the HJC<sup>75</sup>”*) (see Fig.10.12).

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<sup>75</sup> High Judiciary Council

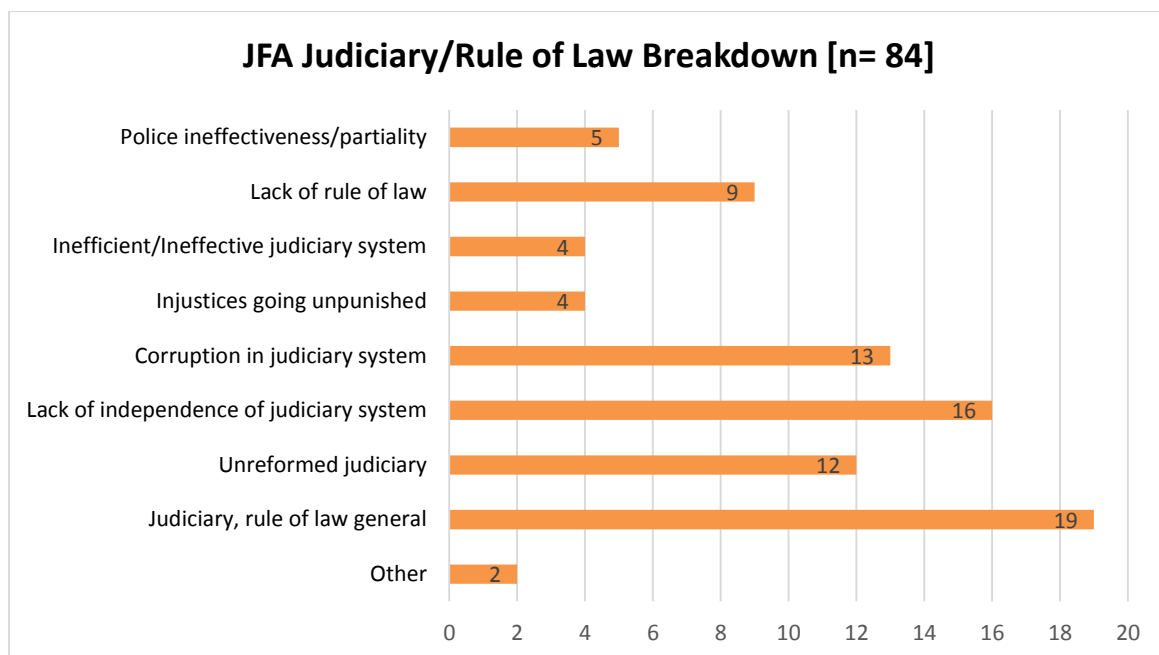


Fig.10.12 JFA problem framing: Judiciary/rule of law

Similarly, corruption and the betrayal of national or citizen interests by the elites is the most frequently mentioned problem or injustice in respect to political institutions, followed by the inaction or incompetence of politicians (*“[The MPs] are doing it clandestinely, they are creating news to distract attention and they are pushing through their dictatorship, by limiting the possibility of the citizens to fight for their rights”*) (see Fig.10.13).

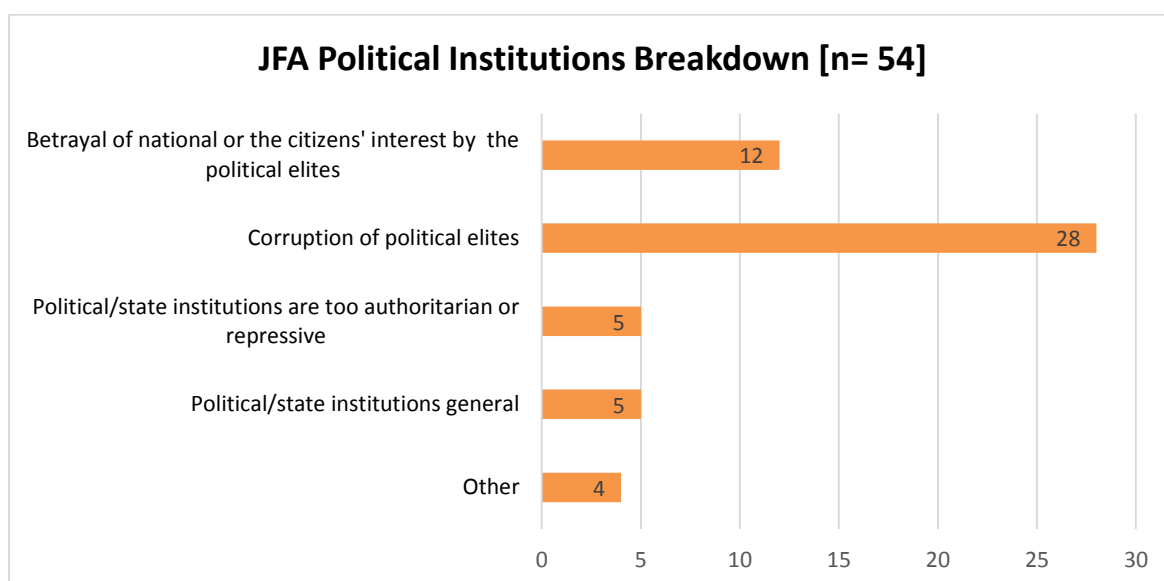


Fig.10.13 JFA problem framing: Political institutions

In respect to *political culture*, the most often referred to cause of problem (directly or indirectly) is the weak civil society or apathetic citizenry (“863 have declared interest. From experience I know that in reality 10% take part from those that have declared interests. We will be 86...”), followed by anti- or non-democratic attitudes and behaviours of some citizens, and tolerance or acceptance of autocratic or corrupt practices (“[...] of the 4% still left democrats in the country”) (see Fig.10.14).

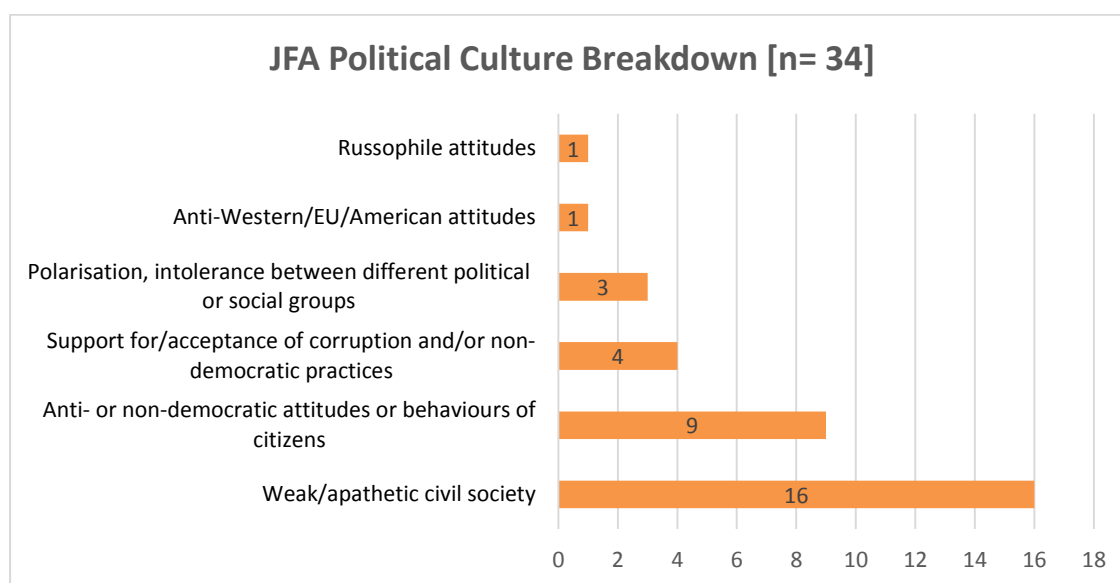


Fig.10.14 JFA problem framing: Political culture

### 10.3.5 Discussion

The analysis indicates that in the Anti-Night Wolves (ANW) case, the discursive construction of the protest framing happening on the Facebook mobilisation page does not deviate too much from the one suggested by the protest organisers in the About section- i.e. where it posits the Russophile and pro-Night Wolves (equated with pro-Putin) attitudes of the Bulgarians welcoming the motorists as a demonstration of the problem with the general lack of democratic culture and patriotism (or “real” nationalism) in the country, and the inactivity of the authorities as a sign of their corruption, dependencies, incompetence and betrayal of the national interest to a foreign (enemy) power- Russia. This is juxtaposed to countries like Poland that “defend their national interest by refusing entrance to the Wolves”. The Russophile, pro-Putin and alleged anti-democratic attitudes of many Bulgarians are further bridged to the still lingering influence of the communist past, in the face of the ex-Communist party (currently the reformed Bulgarian Socialist Party), the ex-nomenklatura with links to Russia, and the communist nostalgia among a large portion of the population. The almost non-existent references to problems related to the economy



further suggests that the framing of this protest is almost exclusively a cultural-identarian one – with references to the institutions and politicians mostly framed in terms of “treason” and “betrayal of the national interest”, that is, not so much as a dysfunction of the liberal democratic institutions, but as an attack on the Bulgarian “national (and European) identity”.

In the JFA case, the framing processes happening on the mobilisation pages for the three events are similarly overall consistent and follow the general frames advanced by the protest organisers, which put the judiciary and its lack of reform at the centre of the country’s problems (and as the focus of any potential solutions). The participants, as the organisers do in the protest description, mostly bridge the judiciary frame with the problems of corruption, oligarchic dependencies and the disfunctionality of the liberal democratic institutions in the country more generally. The very few references to economic causes of problems, such as poverty (only 7%) in this context points to the rather elitist, liberal–technocratic, and a-political orientation of these protests and of their participants, who seem to share the general framing posited by the organisers (see also Chapters 5, 6 and 9). The internal contestations occur primarily at the level of the framing’s focus and the language used in communicating it (rather than in regards to what causes of problems are posited). As we also saw in Section 10.2.2, a large number of voiced concerns regard the degeneration of the quality of the discourse on this case’s mobilisation pages (and particularly in respect to the third protest event) due to what seem to be interpersonal conflicts between participants and organisers.

The analysis of the discursive construction of the protest framing among the participants on the Save Pirin mobilisation page, on the other hand, shows that it follows the one posited by the official protest organisers (i.e. the political institutions, and by extension the dependent media, are blamed for the environmental and other issues in the country) only to an extent. It thus goes beyond that framing into criticisms of the “other Bulgarians” and their apathy and lack of democratic values and agency more generally (see also Chapter 9), on the one hand, and into a clash between leftist and rightist views on economic development and environmentalism, as well as between supporters of liberal democracy and those in favour of more direct forms, on the other. For instance, some participants try to bridge to an anti-capitalist, anti-privatisation and anti-developmental framing, while others embrace instead an anti-corruption discourse and maintain that the problem is not privatisation of the commons and the drive for development per se, but that they are done in a non-transparent, corrupt and non-competitive way. The fact that the organisers of the Save Pirin protests - Coalition “For the Nature”- are also co-organisers of the second

protest march of Initiative “Justice for All” (as well as that the latter were co-organisers of a few of the Save Pirin protest events, see Chapter 4 for case description) suggests that the NGOs behind the environmental protests chose to bridge their framing with the a-political liberal-technocratic discourse of “anti-corruption” and “rule of law” characteristic of the Protest Network-related protests (i.e. the JFA and to a lesser extent the ANW ones). Some of the participants in the protests, however, do not accept that a-political technocratic framing, and instead try to push a more ideological one – either leftist or rightist (see also Chapter 6 for a discussion of the challenges this presents). Other however, do not accept the liberal-democratic framing in general, and try to push for a more populist one, by criticising partisanship and Parliamentary democracy as a whole, and by pushing for a more direct form of “democracy by the people”.

Lastly, in the NPAAO case we have a conspicuous divergence from the framing(s) given by the organisers at the top of the event page, contradictory as they might be. Thus where the protest organisers try to frame the protest in a clearly pro-Western/pro-EU way (including in respect to associated global institutions, such as the World Bank), in the course of the mobilisation discussions taking place on the event page a range of contradictory opinions and positions are expressed, with some blaming “the West”, the EU, NATO, and/or institutions like the World Bank, the IMF etc. for Bulgaria’s problems. In addition, where the organisers try to frame the protest in a pro-market/pro-capitalist ways (i.e. fiscal stability, the primacy of private property, the protection of the interests of business), on the page a number of participants push a more leftist perspective – for example, blaming neoliberalism, the free market, and global corporations for the problems in the country, and foregrounding poverty and inequality as a major issue (see Fig.10.10). Finally, when it comes to the organisers’ bizarre mix of populist (i.e. *against* representative democracy and *for* “direct rule of the people”) and liberal-technocratic (i.e. *for* rule of law, EU oversight of Bulgarian institutions etc.) framing, discussions on the page follow suit with a mixture of contradictory criticisms directed at democracy itself, at the anti-democratic attitudes of the Bulgarian people, at the frequent civil society protests in the country in general, or the people’s general apathy –with the latter being the most referred to issue.

## 10.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, I would suggest that the framing in ANW’s case seems to keep its consistency during protest mobilisation not least because the effort remains encapsulated within one particular, and rather small, clique of like-minded grassroots activists, and does not try to expand to a wider potential support-base by bridging the framing to other issues

(except perhaps to the corruption and incompetence of the political elites and institutions). This small close-knit activist group mobilising around a culturally and politically polarising single-issue seems to be best placed at building and/or sustaining a strong collective identity, trust, and intergroup solidarity. I would further suggest that the high levels of antagonistic, uncivil and impolite speech on this group's mobilisation page in respect to 'Them' (see Chapter 9, Section 9.3) reflect this encapsulation of the discourse within a small group of like-minded citizens- a "consensual enclave" (see Dahlberg, 2018) of sorts - who take a strongly moralistic, Manichean and anti-pluralist view of democratic citizenship, framing it as a matter of identity (i.e. European orientation), rather than principles (i.e. pluralism), even as they otherwise try to stress their pro-democracy credentials. On the other hand, and perhaps exactly *because* of the anti-pluralist character of this protest, here we seem to have a case of the construction of a distinct and cohesive collective actor – one that clearly distinguishes itself from its environment (i.e. the "other" citizens) and has a sense of shared agency (see Kavada 2015).

In respect to JFA's case, we also seem to have a case of a distinct collective actor (a formal organisation and its supporters that have a strong sense of who "we" and "they" are and tend to agree on what the main problems and causes of problems are), but this collective actor is not *cohesive* due to interpersonal conflicts (rather than due to major differences in ideological orientations etc.) (see Section 10.2.1). Unlike the ANW case above, the framing here, although similarly a-political, is of a much more liberal-technocratic, rather than identarian character, which perhaps reflects the lower levels of antagonism and incivility expressed towards "Them" (see Chapter 9, Section 9.3). These protest case was, however, divided by internal ego-driven infighting and arguments around strategies, tactics and leadership. The visibility of such internal infighting on social media engendered fragmentation of the protest group around core-periphery axes (see also Chapter 8), which posed a challenge for the sustainability of the protests in the long term.

In the case of Save Pirin, we saw that a significant number of participants on the mobilisation page do not accept the a-political framing pushed by the organisers-NGOs. The struggles over the framing that ensue nevertheless tend to stay within a civil and agonistic speech parameters (see Section 10.2.1) perhaps because of the liberal-technocratic character of the organisers – NGOs and their moderating activities, which as we saw in previous chapters subscribe to the principles of "civility" and Habermasian discourse ethics (see Chapters 7 and 8). However, although the internal contestation is not polarising, the cohesion of the collective actor ("We") here seems to be weak due to discrepancies in the understanding of the problems, their causes and the solutions. In that

sense, this protest resembles more the organisationally-enabled “connective action” described by Bennett and Segerberg (2012) where “personal action frames” are distributed through social media technologies and are able to align people, at least temporarily, with different backgrounds and motives under a common cause, since they are not so much based on established social groups, organisational memberships, and essential ideologies, but rather on ‘flexible political identifications’ (p. 744). As we saw in Chapters 6 and 8, however, in the long-run this can prove challenging for sustaining the cohesion of the protest, especially as the organisations driving it attempt to maintain control over the framing that works for *them strategically* as expertise-oriented technocratic civil society organisations and try to exclude other, more *political* framings. Thus, although the environmental organisations are often able to attract support from various *sides*, it can be hard for them to sustain it, as the environmental cause is more contested politically, at an *ideological* level. As we saw in Chapter 6, in the idiosyncratic Bulgarian political context, the identification of the liberal NGO sector (including the environmental) with the political “right” (or with the “anti-communist” dissident movements of the past) often leads to tensions, and makes it difficult to expand the framing via a progressive (or left-populist) chain of equivalences, as proposed by Mouffe (2019).

Finally, the NPAAO’s grassroots protest case is closest to the ideal type of connective action (i.e. communicated mainly on Facebook, driven by personalised action frames, with no visible organisations involved), described by Bennett *et al.* (2012). As we saw in Chapter 9, its framing of the conflict between Us and Them is also classically populist and highly antagonistic. At the same time, it fails to engender much trust from participants and to mobilise a coherent collective actor (see Section 10.2), not least because of the amalgamation of a wide range of views, often incompatible with each other, as well as the *anonymity* of its organisers, aided by Facebook’s Page affordances. As we saw in Section 10.2, many of the participants on the protest event page express distrust towards the identity of the people „behind“ the protest or their real aims, meanwhile in the comments the organisers would often refer to themselves in vague terms, as the „collective behind the Page“. It is thus not surprising that this „National Protest“, as it was advertised, was highly polarised internally, and did not draw more than 150 -200 people. It is in these cases that the conflict between the claim that an anonymous Facebook Page with hundreds of thousands followers somehow represents “the people”, and the empty space left for an actual representative by that very anonymity, becomes apparent (see also Chapter 7).

In addition, it is interesting to note that although in NPAAO’s case we have the most uncivil, impolite and antagonistic discourse on a protest page in respects to *internal You* actors, very few posts or comments (4%, see Table 10.5 in Section 10.2.2) reference the

interpersonal and intra-group communication as a problem, unlike in JFA's case, for example, where it is the second most referenced internal issue. This could be due to the different expectations participants on the different protest event pages have in respect to the nature of communication in these protest groups, and to the nature of legitimate public discourse more generally. Thus, as we've seen from Chapters 7 and 9, the organisers and participants on JFA's mobilisation pages construe themselves in elitist-technocratic terms as professional, educated, civil and democratic "citizens" who oppose the vulgarity, incompetence, corruption, thuggishness and authoritarianism of the "pseudo-elites" and stress liberal democratic values and principles. The participants on the NPAAO's page, on the other hand, construe themselves in more classic anti-elitist populist terms – as the noble and patriotic, yet *ordinary* and much suffered people standing up to the corrupt arrogant elites.



## **11. Conclusion: the democratic role of social media in contentious politics**

The motivation underpinning this thesis was the view, adopted by some scholars, that techno-deterministic approaches, which see digital and social media as fundamentally ‘liberating’, “democratic”, “participatory” and so forth (i.e. Shirky 2009; Rheingold 2012; Jenkins 2006; Benkler 2006; Diamond 2010) or not (Andrejevic 2004, 2007; Dean et al. 2006; Fuchs 2012, 2014; Leistert 2015; Morozov 2011; Sunstein 2007; Terranova 2000, 2012), are not very helpful for understanding their *actual* uses in context, and their long-term implications for political or social change (Couldry and van Dijck 2015, Cammaerts 2012; Gerbaudo 2012; Lim 2012; Juris 2012; Postill 2014, Hauns 2015, Mercea 2014, 2018). Given the gap of contextual research on the topic in respect to the new democracies of CEE, and particularly in regards to contentious politics in the region, this thesis set out to explore how different Bulgarian civil society activists use social media in their attempts to adapt to and address specific *local* political and media challenges, and the democratic implications therein.

The thesis addressed the overarching research question: **RQ) What democratic role do social media play in contentious politics in new democracies like Bulgaria?** To answer this question, I combined interviews with protest activists with a content and discourse analysis of social media communication pertaining to a range of protest events. This methodological approach allowed me to provide insights into and compare the self-perceptions, cultures, practices and strategies of different *kinds* of civil society actors in Bulgaria and the ways these are expressed in the process of mobilisation on social media, as well as to reflect on the ways they relate to the mediation opportunity structure more generally (Cammaerts 2012).

Because of the focus on *context*, the thesis first explored questions aimed at interrogating the different Bulgarian activists’ self perceptions as *civil society* actors, as well as of their understanding of the political and media environment in which they operate, and their aims and goals in relation to it: **RQ1) What kinds of challenges face civil society actors that operate at the border delineating civil from political society in post-socialists contexts (i.e. by staging protests)?** More specifically, I looked into: **RQ1a) How do civil society actors involved in contentious politics in Bulgaria understand their role in, and aims in respect to, *political* conflict?** and **RQ1b) What kinds of challenges in the Bulgarian context do they perceive in regards to that role and those aims?** I then went on to consider how the actors try to achieve their aims and deal with the challenges

in the context of contentious politics. I was particularly interested in the role of social media and the democratic implications therein: **RQ2) How do different civil society actors try to address or respond to these challenges? What role does social media play and what are the implications for democracy?**

In respect to these challenges I explored the following questions: **RQ2a) How do different civil society protest actors in Bulgaria (try to) gain visibility in the media ecology?** and **RQ2b) How do they (try to) gain the trust of potential supporters?** I was particularly interested in *the kind of publics or counter-publics the actors construct* in their efforts to gain visibility *and* visibility on their own terms, and in *the role of social media in respect to those endeavours*.

I further considered the larger democratic implications of social media's role in contentious politics, following the normative visibility conditions proposed by Dahlberg (2018) and the postulates of radical democratic theory (Mouffe) (see Chapter 2). To do that I looked at whether the conflict in the activists' mobilisation online spaces tends to be constructed in agonistic or antagonistic terms (Chapter 9), and whether they are successful in building and sustaining a coherent and solidary collective identity (a "we") during mobilisation (Chapter 10). The research sub-questions considered in relation to that were **RQ2c): How do the civil society actors construct and represent the conflict on social media?** and **RQ2d): To what extent do they manage to develop and sustain a coherent collective identity and inter-group solidarity during mobilisation?**

This concluding chapter discusses and reflects on my empirical findings in respect to the research questions and expands on my arguments. The discussion is structured around the empirical chapters and the questions addressed in each, as well as the main empirical and theoretical contributions of the findings. It is followed by an overview of the limitations of the research and concludes with reflections about the broader implications of the findings for our understanding of the democratic role of social media in contentious politics.



## **RQ1 Challenges faced by civil society actors that attempt to cross the border delineating civil from political society in post socialist contexts**

*Understandings of the roles and aims of civil society: populist, technocratic and liberal-moralist motivational and legitimisation discourses (RQ1a)*

This study contributes to the understanding of the relationship between civil and political society in post-socialist contexts (Howard 2010, Mastnak 2005, Cohen and Arato 1992; Lewis 2008; Spasić 2003; Goertzel 2010; Yang 2009), as well as of the dynamics *within* civil society in Bulgaria (i.e. Stoyanova, 2018). In respect to that the analysis of twenty-seven in-depth interviews conducted with activists from a range of protest groups linked to three broad social movements led to two key findings.

First, it demonstrated that in line with previous theorisation on the topic the understanding of civil society as independent from and *opposed* to the state and partisanship is a strong characteristic of Bulgarian civil society's public-political discourse. The study further showed that civil society occupies a central place in two kinds of discursive framings adopted by actors involved in contentious politics: legitimisation discourses and motivational discourses. As a motivational discourse, the idea of civil society is invoked by individual activists and groups in order to justify their motivations to mobilise and act *politically* – i.e. by stressing the democratic role of the “citizens” in holding political institutions and elites accountable and their right to participate in and influence decision-making processes (see also Zuckerman 2014). The analysis demonstrated that such motivational discourses locate civic participation *outside of* (and even *in opposition to*) the formal institutions of power, and also distinguish it from the sphere of ‘politics’, where self-interested, partisan and manipulative political parties are said to operate (Mastnak, 2005).

On the other hand, in legitimisation discourses that seek to represent the causes of activists to the broader public and win its trust and support, the concept, or discourse, of civil society is used to suggest selflessness, independence and authenticity when it comes to the pursuit of the greater common good. Here my interviews found that either the *popular* and *moral*, or the (neutral) *expert-technocratic*, dimensions of civil society are emphasised in order to distinguish it and its goals from what are supposed to be the particularistic or financially-driven interests of political elites, embodied by state institutions and mainstream parties. In the so constructed discursive frames, a boundary is drawn not just between civil society and the state, but also between civil and *political* society (Chapter 5). This finding is in line with discussions in the literature on civil society discourses in CEE, and their a-

or anti-political, as well as moralist or technocratic orientation (Gagyi and Ivancheva 2019; Gagyi 2015; Mastnak 2005).

Second, the analysis demonstrated that what results from that is a symbolic de-politicisation of civil society (Mastnak 2005) that restricts *political* society within the narrow confines of institutional and party politics. This de-politicisation was further shown to have two dimensions that act as mirror images of each other. The first takes the form of the essentialising of civil society as united, uniform and incompatible with contestation and conflict, and to its identification with either “the people” of classic populism, or “the citizens” of what I have called liberal-moralism, whose constitutive “Other” consists of formal institutions, parties and political elites (“Them”). The second involves the adoption, particularly by actors working in the NGO sector, of an elitist technocratic discourse of (neutral) expertise (Bryld 2000). In both cases the conflict is constructed in a – or anti-political ways, not based on, say, ideological or political differences, but on morality or the possession of expertise. This resistance to embracing traditional politics and the principles of liberal democracy (i.e. difference) is similar to what previous research on contemporary forms of civic participation has found in respect to other contexts (Zuckerman 2014).

This finding also reflects what others have argued about the similarities between populism and technocracy (i.e. Caramani 2017, Bickerton and Accetti, 2017, Urbinati 2014), in respect to their oppositional stance to representative democracy (i.e. the state) and partisanship, or in other words, their “anti-politics”. What the study demonstrates is that in contexts like CEE where political divisions *within civil* society were strategically and/or ideologically played down by the original dissident movements against the authoritarian regimes, civil society actors transpose this form of anti-politics into the *political*. A key contribution of the study is that it identifies a third kind of anti- or a-political orientation in civil society discourse, different from populism and technocracy – a form of liberal-moralism, which is adopted by actors who nominally identify with liberal-democratic values, while taking a very similar to populism’s anti- or a-political stance and moralism that downplays the existence of conflicting interests in society, and offers a homogenised, yet at the same time elitist, notion of “the citizens”.

#### *Perceptions of the challenges faced by civil society actors in Bulgaria (RQ1b)*

Chapter 6 further showed how the symbolic depoliticisation of civil society leads to the contestation and problematisation of the social identity and homogeneity of the civil society subject during mobilisation. This becomes especially apparent when different groups try to reach beyond their activist cores and to mobilise wider support for their causes on social media. In the Bulgarian context where local political idiosyncrasies and high polarisation

make it hard for a chain of equivalences to be established between otherwise relatable (in other contexts) issues (for instance between environmental and social-economic concerns), *connective action* (Bennett et al. 2012)- associated with the use of personalised action frames that bring a diverse set of people and issues together - can result in ideological clashes and conflicts that perhaps would not occur in other contexts. Whilst studies of social movements have long identified the focus on single issues as a strategic and tactical dilemma for protest actors (i.e Barkan 1979), my analysis identified an aspect of that dilemma that can be linked to the idiosyncrasies of the local context- i.e. the strong aversion to *the political* on the side of civil society and hence to identification with particular political ideologies (esp. leftist) or partisan framings of issues and solutions. The thesis thus demonstrates that the cultural and political context in which contentious politics take place needs to be taken into account when looking into the long-term efficacy of connective action in respect to *maintaining* solidarity and collective agency.

Furthermore, the restrictive effect in regards to “the political” can obstruct the flow of ideas and cooperation between civil society actors on the one hand, and political society actors such as parties or elected representatives, on the other (see Howard 2010, Goertzel 2010). Because they start from a moralist and apolitical, or even anti-political notion of civil society, civil society actors in Bulgaria try to keep away from partisan political discourse in a bid to maintain a claim on democratic legitimacy on the basis of superior moral values as representatives of the ‘pure and good’ civil society. What they mostly manage to articulate instead in their role as “civil society watchdogs against the corrupt state” is an *anti-program* – for instance, judiciary reform, anti-corruption, or being “against all outrages” of the political elites. The potential for collaboration with or transformation of civil society activists and organisations into *political* actors with a coherent political program, such as parties, particularly in instances where contentious politics on their own are seen as ineffective in inducing policy changes, is thus also limited: the actors’ authenticity and legitimacy are automatically put into doubt once they cross the boundary between the morally idealised and essentialised civil society and the vilified political society of partisan interests and ideological clashes. Instead, issues and goals pursued by these actors end up requiring to be represented in legitimisation discourses as non- or a-political and unequivocally moral, which opens the door to delegitimising claims built upon contested definitions of the common good (as evidenced in Chapter 8).

As the interviews-based analysis further showed, Bulgarian civil society actors operate in a political and media environment where the distribution of power is highly unequal and skewed towards various political elites and oligarchs, who utilise different tactics to try

divide them and attack their legitimacy. Those include co-optation of group members, take-over of their Facebook groups or pages, the spread of online misinformation through “troll armies”, and the organisation of “contra-protests”. My study also showed that the civil society actors perceive the Bulgarian oligarchy-controlled media environment as *particularly* challenging – i.e. as characterised by the prevalence of *uncivil* forms of communication practices, such as the spreading of propaganda and fake news in an attempt to discredit and demonise “inconvenient” to the status quo activists. In that respect, the tensions at the level of civil society identified by the research often play into the hands of the activists’ political opponents, and social media makes this easier. Based on the accounts of the Bulgarian activists, the Bulgarian elites’ appear to be becoming more savvy at manipulating the web and social media in their favour (see for instance Morozov 2009b; Morozov 2009a), and they employ similar “dirty digital tricks” identified in respect to other contexts (i.e. Treré 2015) with the aim to control, delegitimise and oppose their opponents.

## **RQ2 (a and b) Social media and the challenges of gaining visibility and trust in the Bulgarian media ecology**

### *Visibility on social media: democratic opportunities and challenges (RQ2a and RQ2b)*

Analysis of the interview data identified three main challenges that civil society actors in Bulgaria face in adopting social media for expanding visibility and mobilisation of support. First, the study found that, similarly to research on other movements such as Occupy (i.e., Kavada, 2015), the way Facebook structures communication and control over it on its platform blurs the boundaries between inside and outside of a protest movement, which can engender and make visible conflicts over representation, decision-making processes and collective action framing. In other words, the provision of participatory affordances (i.e. the possibility to “join” an event and post and comment on it) yet a simultaneous hierarchisation of control over those (i.e. *limiting* participants’ ability to post or comment), together with the fragmentation of communication and decision-making across different social and digital media sites (i.e. closed Facebook Groups, Skype and Messenger chats, email lists, Facebook Events and Pages) can stir tensions and conflicts between the “core” and the “periphery”, leading at times to the *demobilisation*, instead of *mobilisation*, of peripheral actors. When switching from one communication approach (or logic) to another on social media in particular can often bring out these inter-group hierarchies, tensions and conflicts to the forefront of the mobilisation efforts (i.e. Bennett *et al.* 2012), in effect fragmenting the movement (see Chapter 8).

The research thus provides further evidence to the argument that Facebook's affordances can in fact contribute to the establishment and maintenance of hierarchies within a protest movement, rather than flattening them, with control over communication in the "official" groups and pages ultimately remaining in the hands of the core activists or organisations (cf. Kavada 2015). Facebook's affordances' (such as Pages) *main* function was shown to be the maintenance of a strategically controlled "online presence" and "brand visibility" in the social network, rather than bottom-up organisation and coordination of protests or campaigns. As Dahlgren (2018) notes, the political economy of the internet, structured around few corporate giants like Google, Microsoft, and Facebook (Fuchs 2014b; Van Dijck 2013; Franklin 2013) renders the net thoroughly commercial and although this reality does not preclude civic uses, it still addresses and embeds the user in dominant online *consumerist* discourses and practices (rather than of citizenship), regardless of whether her intentions are civic or political. The chapter for instance demonstrated that Facebook Pages' discourse and affordances treats civil society organisations or individual activists who use Facebook Pages to increase their reach as "businesses", whose aim is to enhance and control the visibility of their "brand", rather than as actors interested in the norms and aims of democratic participation (cf. Dahlgren 2018).

Second, the study showed that the "networked individualism" (Barry Wellman 2001) and self-centered communication (or "mass self-communication", to use Castell's term) pushed by social media through their logic of operation (Klinger and Svensson 2015b) and particularly embraced by grassroots activists who see themselves as "opinion leaders" or "influencers" (cf. Tufekci 2013), can prove problematic for keeping a protest movement or group united as a *collective* agent in the long term, as has been previously shown as well (i.e. Fenton and Barassi 2011). Many of the activists instead end up operating as a network of "media personas" that share a common basic frame of reference of Us vs. Them. They do not act as official spokespersons of a group or movement, but use their profiles to offer *personal* points of view. This can however be counter-productive when attempting to unite supporters around a coherent political program, particularly at the stage when they try to act as a *de facto* opposition or to become a party.

The study showed that changes in the groups' dynamics or organisation's structure can also lead to interpersonal conflicts, which the nature of communication on Facebook (lateral and fast, yet also "encapsulated" within *local* personal networks where "everyone knows each other") can enhance or escalate. In that sense, social media, although helpful in maintaining the visibility of a particular discourse within one's network of followers, or at times even in respect to the mainstream public sphere, are also seen as engendering "granulation" of the communication, "atomisation" and "hyper-individualisation" (see Chapter 8). Thus, when it comes to collective action, while maintaining "consensual

enclaves” and hiding *political* dissent (Sunstein 2017; Pariser 2012) through the encapsulation of support within narrow yet highly antagonistic counter-publics (see Chapters 7 and 10), social media can also make *interpersonal*, ego-driven conflicts *more visible across* an activist networks, and even to their escalation. In other words, the same internet characteristics that allow for the quick circulation of “personalised action frames” and which thereby make “connective action” possible (Bennett *et al.* 2012, 2013), can also lead to fragmentation and demobilization of collectives.

Here we thus have a case of the individual mode taking precedence over the collective, with the technology providing the means for political participation, yet reducing it to private and individualised expressions circulated at speed that can lead to a loss of experience of solidarity (cf. Dahlgren 2018). Not surprisingly almost all respondents noted that meetings “in real life” are crucial for maintaining solidarity in their activist networks and groups, and that “virtual only” interaction often engenders the opposite effect. This corroborated what scholars (i.e. Effler 2010; Juris 2008; Gladwell 2010) have argued in respect to the implications of live interactive political participation for the generation and strengthening of collective identity (i.e. the creation of ‘strong ties’), and thereby for long-term efficacious political agency.

Third, the study demonstrated that the way Facebook structures and organises the communication on its platform is not always well-suited for gaining *wide-reaching* visibility outside of a relatively narrow network of friends and followers with (similar) interests in politics, particularly when it comes to non-elite actors with fewer resources, links and less skills in “gaming” the social media “attention economy” (cf. Bastos and Mercea 2016). That is because Facebook tends to fragment visibility on its platform into distinct “spaces” that operate under different rules of engagement and levels of openness – i.e. into personal profiles, groups and pages. The generalised distrust in parties and “the political” that permeates Bulgarian society tends to translate onto the social network as well, with “political” activity often looked at with suspicion and/or discouraged in the interest-based groups into which part of the “Bulgarian Facebook sphere” is divided. Thus Facebook’s fragmentation of parts of the Bulgarian online public sphere into hierarchically organised spaces, resembling more networks of “consensus enclaves” (Pariser 2013, Sunstein 2017) than contestational publics (Dahlberg 2018) that are often under the control of gatekeepers with different (from political or democratic) agendas, makes it hard for politically minded civil society activists to engage the “general public” in discussions around the *political* issues they deem important (see Chapter 7). Therefore, in line with Eliasoph’s (1998) argument, the culturally coded context of the Bulgarian Facebook “interest groups” can act to *inhibit* political talk, and the identities the admins try to maintain within (i.e. groups for

“mothers” or for “skiers/mountaineers”) do not necessarily intersect well with the requirements of political engagement (Storsul 2014).

Some actors (like those linked to the populist groups) try to go around that problem by setting up and maintaining their *own* networks of Facebook pages and discussion groups, and aggregating as wide an audience as possible within them. However, their anonymity, as well as the ease of infiltration by “opponents” and “trolls” often leads to conflicts over the control of visibility within these spaces, as well as to “behind-the-scenes” co-optation and lack of transparency.

*Different kinds of publics and counter-publics and their democratic implications (RQ2a)*

The research showed that context is particularly important when looking into the *kind* of (counter) publics (Neumayer and Svensson 2016; Svensson *et al.* 2015; Downing 2008; Warner 2002), or cyber-populist “online crowds” (Gerbaudo 2017a; Gerbaudo 2018) that the use of social media by non-elite actors engenders. As my analysis showed (Chapters 7 and 9), the publics of different Bulgarian civil society groups, even if set up in *opposition* to the “status quo” are not necessary counter-hegemonic (i.e. Gerbaudo 2018) or contributing to the expansion of democracy from a radical democratic perspective (cf. Dahlberg 2018), due to the idiosyncrasies of the local political imaginary.

First, although through their publics the actors linked to populist groups seek the exposure of the practices of power elites, the communication within them does not aim at contesting or revising hegemonic discourses of exclusion (see Neumaeyr 2013, Dahlberg 2018; Gerbaudo 2018). Instead, as we saw in Chapters 7 and 9, these publics and the actors that identify with them tend to privilege and normalise ethno-national and hetero-normative identities, often to the exclusion or even the denigration of others.

Furthermore, they are also not normatively oriented towards “reasoned argumentation”, but rather towards practices of attention-grabbing via “trickery” – i.e. through the manipulation of Facebook’s algorithms and social media’s logic, for instance by sharing “clickbait” or even “fake news” materials, in a bid to stir and maintain *political affect* (Papacharissi 2015) that can be later utilised as a motivational source for contentious action. Sometimes this is also done with economic motives (see Chapter 7). Therefore, the practices and discourses that constitute these actors’ publics cannot be said to be autonomous from the coercive and instrumental influences of economic power (cf. Habermas, 2006), since they revolve around adapting, or succumbing to the demands of, the profit-driven social media logic of visibility (i.e. van Dijck and Poell, 2013; Fuchs

2014b), and are thus not necessarily conducive to expanding their democratic role (cf. Dahlberg 2018).

Similarly, the study showed that although the networked publics constructed by the civil society actors associates with the liberal “side” (both grassroots protesters and those linked to NGOs) aim to confer visibility on power holders by subscribing (at least normatively) to professional journalistic and deliberative standards of reasoned argumentation through the provision of (accurate) information (Dahlberg 2018), they often adopt an elitist stance that constructs the “Other” as *illegitimate* interlocutor, due to his or her lower social status, educational level etc. (see Chapter 6). In other words, instead of expanding visibility to marginalised voices (i.e. people who have “existential problems” like food or paying their bills), and thus radicalising democracy, the networked public constructed by these civil society actors shuns them and their concerns as irrelevant or illegitimate to “proper” civil society (i.e. it construes them as “anti-citizens”, see Tsoneva 2017b), even as it, at the same time, constructs itself as a *counter-public* on account of its marginalisation in relation to the mainstream public sphere (Neumayer 2013). Thus, they also cannot be considered *anti-hegemonic* as Gerbaudo has suggested about similar protest movements elsewhere, such as Indignados in Spain or Occupy in the US, or as Mouffe (2019) imagines in her left-populist radical democratic vision.

Moreover, the visibility strategies of the activists linked to liberal case study also tend to depend to a large extent on the logic of social media’s “attention economy”, and therefore similarly cannot be said to be autonomous from economic influences—namely those of Facebook’s business model and the kind of visibility and visibility practices it enforces and promotes on its platform, such as individualisation, always-on engagement and interaction, fast circulation of emotionally loaded “shareable” and “likeable” content, etc. (i.e. Klinger and Svensson 2015b; Gilroy-Ware 2017). For instance, as evidenced in Chapter 6, activists from this “side” of civil society, despite their orientation in principle towards the normative ideals of “discourse ethics”, admitted to succumbing, on some occasions, to spreading deliberately false sensationalist information in a bid to stir up momentum behind their protests. In other words, tactics oriented towards visibility on social media are not necessarily amenable to fulfilling the visibility conditions that are congruent with normative democratic ideals (cf. Dahlgren 2018).



*Visibility vs. visibility on your own terms on Facebook: the challenge of appearing authentic and gaining trust in virtual interaction (RQ2b)*

The study contributes to the knowledge of how trust is negotiated on social media (i.e. Quandt 2012; Daniels 2014). First, Chapter 8 showed that the trust oriented strategies and practices of different activists are underpinned to some extent by different notions of what constitutes an *authentic* and *legitimate* civil society— one built around the idea of *competence* or expertise, the other on integrity and morality (cf. Mayer et al. 1995; Quandt 2012). In respect to the latter, both the (neo)liberal and populist grassroots cases were shown to foreground performative antagonism, whereby the actors build their reputations by stressing, through various acts of mediation, their integrity and differentiation from the “Other/s” (see Chapter 8).

From the perspective of radical democracy, however, these approaches to legitimation can be problematic as they tend to be anti-political and to negate the existence of pluralism of values, worldviews and interests by positing a particularistic outlook as a universal moral principle, or by privileging a technocratic orientation to social issues and conflicts that dismisses “the political” altogether and sublimates it under invocations of “expertise” and “neutral facts” (cf. Urbinati 2014). Furthermore, although performative antagonism (i.e. Eyerman 2006) lends itself particularly well on social media (see for instance Sorensen 2018a, Sorensen 2018b) it is not necessarily conducive to expanding the terrain of democracy. In addition, having different sections of civil society judge the authenticity and legitimacy of the other actors on the same political playing field through different and often incompatible criteria can lead to a break-down in communication, and further rise in social distrust and polarisation, and therefore in an inability of civil society to hold power holders to account successfully or to pursue their collective *political* aims effectively, by for instance forging coalitions or collaborating with wider range of actors.

Second, the study showed the extent to which Facebook’s affordances can support or obstruct the activists’ *political* aims, particularly in respect to the ambiguous positions often adopted by civil society actors engaged in contentious politics in Bulgaria. As demonstrated in Chapter 8, Facebook’s affordances thus sometimes interfere with the protesters’ wish to be *both visible* and *visible on their own terms* (Dayan 2013, Tufekci 2013) and often require that they chose between *visibility* and *security/privacy and visibility* and *the appearance of authenticity* (cf. Dencik 2015; see also Enli, 2015; Haimson *et al.* 2016, Fuchs 2014b, pp.153-178), particularly where the idealised notion of “independence” and “spontaneity” of civil society is concerned (see Chapter 8). What my research shows is that on Facebook civil society actors can be forced to choose between

being visible and being visible *on their own terms* in a similar way they are in respect to the mainstream media, for instance in cases when they need to be disruptive in order to attract attention, but risk negative coverage (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993, p.122). These tensions become particularly apparent in respect to formal civil society organisations (i.e. NGOs) trying to organise a “grassroots” citizen protest in a context that is characterised by hostility towards and distrust of parties and (foreign-funded) organisations, or to grassroots activists from smaller cities or communities, who want to avoid the negative consequences of personal and individualised visibility in a hostile (to activism) local environment.

Thus, the way Facebook structures visibility and enforces „authenticity“- where both “safety” and “findability” are being posited by the company as dependent on a “real identity” model- in fact can come into conflict with alternative conceptions of safety that foreground obscurity or invisibility in order to mitigate personal risks (Haimson et al. 2016, p.1). Given that Facebook’s policy of enforcing on users the disclosure of certain personal data (like the “real name” policy) has been also linked to an attempt to satisfy the basic “trust” requirement of capitalist market relations, on which its data commodification and targeting advertising model depends (i.e. Fuchs 2014b, p.153-178), the platform’s amenability to participatory politics and the expansion of democracy can be questioned.

## **RQ2 (c and d): Conflict framing, collective identity and the democratic challenges of the Bulgarian (social) media environment**

### *Conflict framing and different kinds of “online crowds”*

According to Gerbaudo (2018), “social media discussions have provided gathering spaces where the ‘lonely crowds’ produced by the hyperindividualism of neoliberal society could coalesce, where the atoms of the dispersed social networks could be re-forged into a new political community, into an ‘online crowd’ of partisan supporters” (p. 750). In the thesis I asked the question: What kinds of “online crowds” are these in the Bulgarian context? And in particular: How do they construct the conflict between “Us” and “Them” at the centre of their mobilisation efforts?

The systematic content and discourse analysis presented in Chapter 10 led to three main findings. First it showed that in their attempt to appear legitimate (i.e. non-partisan) and universalise their struggle while also differentiating themselves from other (often counter-hegemonic) groups, civil society actors in Bulgaria adopt different kinds of anti- or a-

political communication logics: a classic populist (i.e. Engesser *et al.* 2017b), or an elitist liberal–moralist one, that act as reverse images of each other in that they both play down the existence of *political* conflicts and partisan interests *within* civil society.

Second, the analysis demonstrated that in highly polarised contexts like the Bulgarian one, not all civil society actors that embrace liberal democracy nominally as a value construct their opponents as adversaries in the framework of pluralistic agonism when engaging in contentious politics. As we saw in Chapter 9, when small activist groups mobilise around culturally and/or politically polarising issues, they can manage to maintain a strong collective identity and intergroup solidarity. Their discourse, however, is particularly prone to incivility and *antagonism* (see Chapter 8), not only towards the political and economic elites, but also towards other members of civil society, constructed as illegitimate “Others”. In other words, the study showed that the strongly moralist and anti- or a- political framing of such, in fact, partisan civil society protests, even if declaratively embracing “liberal democratic values” and “civility” as a defining characteristic of “us”, can engender highly antagonistic, exclusivist and uncivil discourses, very similar to those underpinning the contentions framed in more classically populist ways (i.e. Mudde 2004).

Third, the study showed that the encapsulation of communication on Facebook within groups and/or networks of predominately like-minded citizens (i.e. the activists’ personal networks or civil society “sides” where “everyone knows each other”) (cf. Sunstein 2017) means that protests tend to draw support mainly from the activists’ social media “filter bubbles” (Pariser 2012) or “echo-chambers”, forming *different kinds* of “online crowds” (Gerbaudo 2018) that often posit themselves not just in opposition to the power elites, but also in opposition to one another. As the study demonstrated these online crowds (or cyber-publics) can be said to be similar to the extent that they adopt and/or are subject to social media’s attention economy and logic of aggregation (Chapter 7), yet different in respect to *how* they adopt that logic and also how they construct themselves as a public – with one in this study exhibiting a populist mode of communication (Engesser *et al.* 2017b), while the other taking on a hybrid form of a populist communication logic (“the noble citizens” vs. “the corrupt elite”) yet an elitist-liberal discourse of citizenship (see Chapter 10). The communication logics under which they operate- populist or liberal-moralist- tend to claim legitimacy through the antagonistic performance of moral superiority (rather than of agonistic opposition to a legitimate adversary on *political* grounds), and can be therefore highly polarising in respect to other members of civil society. Thus, similarly to what others have noted (e.g. Nagle 2017), discussion and debate in some of these publics can become less civil and more aggressive towards and exclusionary in respect to the Other. This can be potentially problematic for democracy from a radical democratic perspective, which

foregrounds instead pluralism and the agonistic expression of *political* conflict in respect to particularistic interests.

*Sustaining collective identity, connective action and solidarity on Bulgarian Facebook (RQ2d)*

The analysis identified three implications for civil society actors in Bulgaria that pursue *political* aims when it comes to their ability to gain trust and sustain a coherent collective identity while trying to broaden support during mobilisation on social media.

First, the content analysis demonstrated that broad social media-underpinned grassroots protests with vague contradictory populist framings that try to appeal to as wide a public as possible (i.e. to “the people”) are hard to sustain as *collectives* with common agency on Facebook. This is because the generalised publics the activists establish around networks of Facebook pages and groups (see Chapter 7) and try to draw support from exist almost exclusively as “online crowds” (Gerbaudo, 2018) that encompass highly heterogeneous (and often randomly aggregated) actors with diverse identities, political orientations and ideological outlooks. This ultimately leads to an amalgamation of sometimes incompatible “personalised action frames” (Bennett *et al.* 2012) on the same mobilisation page that can easily end up in conflict with each other instead of linking together in a “chain of equivalences” constitutive of an inclusive populist “we” (cf. Laclau 2005), and thus can lead to inter-group polarisation and erosion of trust and solidarity.

The broad, generalised character of such groups and pages, their *anonymity*, as well as the random aggregation of participants on them (sometimes through “tricks” that manipulate the algorithm, see Chapter 7) also makes them easy targets for trolls and opponents to infiltrate and/or co-opt, sow divisions from within, or hijack for their own hidden political or economic agendas. For instance the interviews revealed that it is not uncommon for large anonymous Facebook pages and groups to be “taken-over” by rivals or co-opted by ex-collaborators, and instrumentalised for shady political purposes, with the general audience aggregated on there often unaware of what goes on “backstage” (see also Rone 2019 on a recent discussion of similar practices in respect to the Indignados movement). The anonymity of many of these groups or pages is also not particularly conducive to building and maintaining trust in the online media sphere (see also Daniels 2014). For instance, by remaining anonymous and by putting forward the Facebook Page itself as the embodiment of the people’s struggle for sovereignty, the activists behind NPAAO tried to downplay or mask any actual political ambitions they might have, and thus enhance their legitimacy as civil society actors. This anonymous-populist articulation of social and political conflict on Facebook, however, encountered a problem of

representation and embodiment, raising questions such as “Who is behind the protest”? and “How can we trust you?,” thus failing to win legitimacy and the trust of the potential supporters the activists were trying to mobilise (see Chapter 10).

Second, the content analysis showed that the organisationally - driven protests are relatively more successful in sustaining intergroup civility, trust and solidarity, perhaps because they are the most likely ones to subscribe to, at least normatively (see Chapter 5), a Habermasian discourse ethics (i.e. reasoned argumentation). Thus, discussions or arguments on their mobilisation pages stayed civil and relatively polite, even when they took the form of interpersonal conflicts and arguments around framing, strategies, tactics and leadership (see Chapter 6), possibly because these pages tended to be moderated with civility and politeness in mind (see Chapter 7). The organisationally-linked activists also tend to draw support to a large extent from *pre-existing* networks of members, volunteers and other experts who already have an interest or stake in the issue at hand, rather than from large Facebook groups or pages with randomly aggregated publics, and therefore show more internal- consistency in the designation of Us and Them divides and the analysis of problems and positing of solutions, and this more potential for long term efficacy and sustained oppositional activities.

Third, Chapter 10 demonstrated that, as Dahlgren (2018 p.1) notes, political affect in itself is not a guarantee for political efficacy, as it is easier to express one’s discontent and “get it off one’s chest” than to follow through via action (i.e. Gladwell 2010 on “slacktivism”) – which is something the activists themselves were all clearly aware of (see Chapter 7). For instance, the content analysis of the *failed* mobilisation effort of the anonymous Facebook page NPAAO showed high levels of both externally- *and* internally- directed antagonism and impoliteness on the event page (see Chapters 9 and 10), suggesting that performative antagonism towards Them on social media is not enough if the Them is vaguely and incoherently defined, as it can fail to engender a coherent solidary We. In cases where a strong sentiment against a *clearly defined* Them engenders a strong sense of a collective “We” and thereby a coherent and solidary collective actor (such as in the Anti-Night Wolves case), the democratic character of that actor and its discursive practices, as we saw in Chapter 9, is also not guaranteed. In fact, in such cases the actors’ performative *antagonism* towards Them, including towards “other” members of civil society (which, as we saw in Chapter 8 is part of some grassroots’ activists’ legitimation strategy on social media) can stimulate incivility and high polarisation, even if they claim alignment with “liberal democratic values”.

## Limitations and future research

### *Focus on one country*

In this study I chose to focus on one country - Bulgaria - in order to explore the role of social media in contentious politics and participatory democracy in a post-socialist context, which, as already noted, is often ignored by research in this area. A more quantitative comparison with similar protest groups in other CEE contexts, or with well researched movements from Southern or Western ones would have allowed me to draw broader conclusions on the role of social media for participatory and contentious politics and the democratic implications in respect to *different* democratic contexts. Focusing on one country, however, has allowed me to provide a deeper, qualitative analysis of the interaction between contextual factors and the strategies and practices of *different kinds* of civil society actors, and their implications.

### *Focus on social media alone*

When I started the PhD I was initially considering including a mainstream media - related element. That would have given me an overview of not simply how the civil society actors *think* the mainstream media represent them, but of how the media *actually* do so, thus providing me with a deeper understanding of the dynamics and contestations going on not only *within* civil society, but also *between* civil society and other actors on the democratic arena – namely the media. Due to space and time limitations, that element was left for further research. Focusing on social media alone, however, has allowed me to explore in depth *different aspects* of the role they play for contentious politics, including for gaining visibility and trust, and collective identity building.

### *Focus on one social media platform*

I chose to focus on Facebook because it is the main social media platform used in Bulgaria by all kinds of civic and political activists, as well as by elites, journalists and commentators, and has become an alternative public sphere in a way that Twitter tends to be in other countries. Future research could include consideration of the role of less popular platforms, for instance, compare front stage and backstage communication (i.e. communication via Skype or Messenger), and the ways the different performances of “authenticity”, as well as the identity and conflict frames, get negotiated *across* platforms. A focus on Facebook –which is the most popular platform in the world- however, has allowed me to explore in a more nuanced way the complexities and contradictions its use for democratic participation entails. It has also allowed me to consider the implications of its monopolisation of the “online public sphere” in peripheral new democracies like Bulgaria.

## Key Implications

The thesis contributes original empirically- based understanding of the potential of civic actors in new democracies like Bulgaria, who operate on the border between civil and political society, to establish democratic legitimacy and “radicalise” democracy along the lines of agonistic pluralism (cf. Mouffe). The study showed that the Bulgarian civil society actors’ ambiguous position in respect to “the political”, as well as their almost exclusive dependency on foreign profit-driven corporate social media platforms for gaining visibility and mobilising support, limit significantly their ability to hold power to account, sustain a solidary collective “we”, and to construct and mobilise around alternative (and progressive) *political* projects aimed against the status quo (cf. Mouffe 2019). In that respect, social media’s democratic role to a large extent depends on local political dynamics, as well as civil society discourses and imaginaries. At the same time, its democratic role is also limited by the very logic of its operation, which is oriented towards profit-making through the exploitation of users’ data, attention and affect, rather than towards the democratic expansion of the public sphere and the accommodation of the participatory and visibility needs of non-elite civil society actors.

First, the findings of the thesis corroborate and expand on some recent discussions on the dynamics and conflicts *within* civil society in CEE (see for instance Gagyi 2013; Mikuš 2016; Tsoneva 2017a, 2017b, Stoyanova 2018). On the one hand, the study demonstrated that the actors from the liberal and NGOs-linked “side” of Bulgarian civil society tend to be ideologically ambiguous and to operate on the basis of a moralist We (the righteous ones) against Them (the corrupt ones) discourse, similar to that of populist parties and movements/groups (Mudde 2004, 2017). Simultaneously, they subscribe to an elitist, expert-oriented discourse, which, in its aversion to issues of socio-economic nature, frames social problems in too abstract, liberal-technocratic ways. This often makes expansion to incorporate the daily concerns of ordinary people- i.e. via “personalised action frames”- difficult. At the same time, by bypassing the official representative political institution of Parliament, yet pitching themselves on social media as a de facto *a-political opposition* to those in power and as representatives and advocates of a supposedly homogenous “citizenry” or “people”, while also excluding a big part of the Bulgarian population from that signifier (see Chapter 9; also Tsoneva 2017b), the protest organisers invite questions about representation and their legitimacy.

Furthermore, 30 years after the fall of the state socialist regime, these actors’ pro-European, liberal, pro-market discourse has lost its hegemonic position, and is now treated as one of many ideologies competing in the public sphere (see Stoyanova 2018; Ivancheva and Gaguy 2018). As the study has demonstrated, it gets juxtaposed to a more

populist discourse of economic equality, direct democracy, “sovereignty of the people” and/or national sovereignty against globalist and neoliberal forces, including NATO and the EU. The actors subscribing to this discourse, however, also tend to operate at the border between civil and *uncivil* society (Kopecky 2013) due to their often exclusionary, nationalist and/or illiberal positions and worldviews, which makes their activities and aims rather problematic from a normative democratic perspective oriented towards pluralism, liberty and equality (cf. Mouffe). The implications for Bulgarian democracy is further polarization of civil society along “Us” – “Them” axes.

Second, the thesis demonstrates that although social media in Bulgaria offer opportunities to grassroots activists to “stay visible” it is mostly through personalised forms of expression and communication within loose networks of Facebook “friends” and “followers” and/or randomly aggregated “online crowds” around groups and pages. Although during the mass protest mobilisations of 2012 and 2013 groups initially formed around core activists that were regularly meeting in person to coordinate protest activities, six years later these civil society actors operate mainly online- through their websites, blogs, Facebook pages and groups, and their personal profiles (Tufekci 2013). The idea of community-based organising “on the ground” in small towns and areas outside of the capital, although present in their conceptual horizons as “indispensable” is no longer so much on their practical agenda, due to lack of resources, manpower, time, etc. They thus rely primarily on individualised “connective action” when attempting to mobilise support. However, although the activists’ social media activities to an extent expand their visibility in the (online) public sphere, they often fail to win them the *trust* and support of citizens beyond a narrow circle of people who already know them “in real life”. In that respect, social media’s role in enhancing their mobilisation effectiveness and sustaining its long-term potential can be said to be limited by a lack of parallel offline activity.

On the other hand, the study showed that formal civil society organisations are normally better placed at *sustaining* a support-base over time due to the maintenance of data-bases and email lists of volunteers, members etc. as well as professional networks with other stake-holders, which they can tap into during mobilisation. They, however, are limited in their ability to *expand* support beyond that base, due to their often technocratic and elitist framing of issues and their aversion to popular politics and concerns and political discourses. In addition, the reliance on social media, and particularly Facebook, for much of the organisation and communication of their protest campaigns often presents them with a choice between being efficient and being democratic, as well as being visible and appearing “authentic” (as civil society actors), which can result in a loss of legitimacy in the eyes of potential supporters.



Third, the fragmented, oligarchy-controlled and unreliable mainstream media in Bulgaria means non-elite civil society actors are generally deprived of visibility in the public sphere, or tend to receive the “wrong” kind of visibility. They thus find themselves almost exclusively reliant on social media platforms for their visibility and mobilisation efforts, as well as for countering the constant aggressive propaganda directed at them. This dependence on a foreign social media corporation (i.e. Facebook) that frequently and non-transparently changes “the rules of engagement” on its platform – i.e. the algorithms that control visibility and the community norms and standards - puts them in an insecure position where they have little control over their own visibility and constantly have to catch up, adapt, re-gain lost ground (i.e. followers and support-base) and/or re-fashion their strategies in accordance with the platforms’ *profit – driven* logics of operation. This translates into vulnerability for civil society, and by extension for participatory democracy in Bulgaria.

Furthermore, the platforms themselves are not usually aligned with democratic normative conditions of visibility and participation, such as transparency, equal access, deliberation, and civility, nor with the long-term strategic aims of NGOs, but with the (short-term, fast-paced and “viral”) needs of the “attention economy” (Dahlberg 2018, Gilroy-Ware, 2017, Klinger and Svensson 2015a, 2015b). For instance, Facebook’s current requirement for payment in order to boost visibility on its platform was seen by many respondents from grassroots groups and organisations with limited resources as in fact further privileging well-resourced elite actors, who already have access to the mainstream public sphere. This contributes to the argument, as laid out by Dahlberg (2019) in a recent talk, that Facebook’s profit-driven, targeted-advertising business model is in fact in an antagonistic relationship with public sphere communication, envisioned from a normative (radical) democratic perspectives (see also Franklin 2013; Fuchs 2014b; van Dijck 2013).

The study thus demonstrated that *both* Facebook’s affordances (determined by its business model) and aspects of the local context intermesh in a particular way that influences *how* different civil society actors adopt social media’s affordances in pursuit of visibility and for mobilisation, as well as the extent to which the latter are conducive to their needs, and to expanding participatory democracy in the country more generally. On the one hand the thesis showed the importance of taking into account the context in which the actors construct their subjectivities and alternative publics, and the *relative* democratic quality of the discourses they adopt in the process. On the other, although social media do offer civil society actors in Bulgaria the means to become more visible in a political and media environment that is hostile to them and their activities, my research established that issues stemming from their self-understanding and political/ideological orientation, the discursive and political context in which they operate, the limited resources they have in

comparison to their opponents, as well as the platforms' ownership, structure, and logic of operation can also limit their scope of action, and impede their mobilisation and solidarity-building efforts. In other words, the local context can be said to have an influence on social media's democratic role. This study therefore challenges techno-deterministic notions that see social media, due to their relatively autonomous, lateral, networked and connective character, as automatically amenable to the needs of non-elite actors and participatory democracy more generally (i.e. Shirky 2009; Rheingold 2012; Jenkins 2006; Benkler 2006).

The point here is that political participation through social media does not occur in a vacuum but is conditioned by both existing external circumstances, as well as citizens' resources and practices. All these factors are shaped by power relations in different ways. In the Bulgarian context, both the mainstream media *and* social media become arenas where the blurred, yet symbolically significant, boundary between civil society, politics and the state is bitterly contested, particularly during time of contentious politics, when activists need to gain wider visibility and to win the trust of potential supporters by demonstrating or defending their "legitimacy". As the thesis showed, however, social media can both promote *and* impede the visibility and mobilisation efforts and collective identity building of different civil society actors. The study thus supports views such as Margetts et al.'s (2015) that social media, while facilitating collective action through numerous 'tiny acts of participation', are also changing the dynamics of democracy by engendering new 'chaotic pluralism' the consequences of which are unknown yet.

Finally, one of the important findings of this study is that Facebook – including its technological affordances, regulatory framework and the ways in which different users adapt to it – is constantly changing: the platform scholars looked at and wrote about in relation to the Arab Spring and the Occupy Movement, and which the protest actors considered here used back in 2012-2013, is not the same platform adopted today for protest activities. This makes unqualified references to 'Facebook' (and other digital and social media platforms) highly problematic. The study therefore further challenges techno-deterministic notions that see social media as static technologies that exist outside of, and have one-directional transformative effects on the social. In fact, these technologies are embedded in social, political and cultural contexts which shape their *own transformation* through time (for instance through the introduction of new regulatory frameworks to address or restrict certain "bad" uses or "bad" actors, or through adaptations to the market logic of digital capitalism) as much as the technologies themselves, in turn, affect, shape and/or transform social action and the contexts in which they operate. Their social effects can therefore be said to be complex and contingent on other social, political, economic and cultural factors (i.e. MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999).

As a conclusion, I would suggest that non-corporate alternatives, which are set up and operated with normative democratic principles in mind, and which allow for local citizen control, need to be looked for and/or developed if the challenge of polarisation and decline of trust within civil society is to be addressed. In the current political climate in Bulgaria where “official” civil society players like the liberal NGOs are losing legitimacy in the eyes of the general public, incorporating more practices encouraging the active participation of citizens through alternative, publicly controlled platforms that are oriented towards pluralistic agonism and deliberation, rather than brand management and attention engagement, could be a step in the right direction of “expanding” normatively-oriented participatory democracy beyond the technocratic and elitist NGO sector, and breaking away from civil society’s dependence on corporate profit-driven and unpredictable social media. Such alternative social media should encourage the “politicisation” of civil society by encouraging and supporting pluralistic agonism, instead of encouraging populist (or liberal-moralist) claims- making based on performative moralistic antagonism.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

BSP- Bulgarian Socialist Party

DEOS- Dvijenie za Evropejsko Obedinenie i Solidarnost (A Movement for European Unification and Solidarity)

DPS- Dvijenie za Prava i Svobodi (A Movement for Rights and Freedoms)

DSB- Demokrati za Silna Bulgaria (Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria)

CEE- Central and East Europe

GERB- Grajdani za Evropejsko Razvitie na Bulgaria (Citizens for a Democratic Development of Bulgaria)

SILA- Sdrujenie na Internet Lubitelite na Avtomobili (Association of the Internet Car Appreciators)



## **Appendix A: Interview Schedule**

The interview schedule contains 20 main questions that are to be discussed with all interviewees. The guide includes additional prompting and follow-up sub-questions to be used when needed. The questions were designed to probe the self-perceptions of the activists in respect to their role and aims as civil society actors, as well as their social media strategies and practices in trying to gain visibility and trust in the media ecology, as well as to mobilise support.

**The question are divided according to three focus points:**

- General questions about the organisation or group and their protest activities
- Questions about strategies and practices in respect to social and mainstream media
- Questions about the actors' self-definitions and representations

## Interview Schedule for Civil Society Actors

### General group or organisation-related questions

1. Please describe your history with the group (first involvement, role within the group and main responsibilities that entails)?
2. Please describe what you do as a group/organisation (main activities, aims, values)
3. What is the structure and organisation of your group
  - How many people are involved in your group? What are their backgrounds? What are your relationships? (were you friends, colleagues, etc. before forming the group?)
  - Are there leaders and main decision makers, or is it a horizontal structure)
  - How are decisions taken?
  - How often do you meet (if at all)?
  - How are meetings organised?
4. How much do supporters or potential supporters contribute to and shape your activities (definition of aims and problems, mobilisation, etc.).
  - For example, do you correspond with supporters and potential supporters? In which cases do you take into account their suggestions, criticisms etc. ( if at all).?
  - Could you give examples of cases where you have and where non-organisers influenced the direction of your campaign and/or activities?

### Questions and strategies and practices

*Success/Failure ( Strategic aims)*

5. Turning now to strategies, in your opinion what makes for a successful mobilisation?/protest?
  - Please give an example of a successful campaigns, protests etc. your group has been involved in or organised, in your opinion.
  - Explain what made it a success.

*Online communication strategies and practices aimed at increasing visibility, mobilising support and building trust*

6. Could you describe how do you use the Internet to mobilise support for your protests and campaigns? Could you illustrate with concrete examples and steps you take?
  - How are the decisions to organise a protest taken? i.e. do you monitor the media for developments around the issues you consider relevant to your cause, do you get provoked by developments in your professional environment, etc.).
  - What social and/or digital media do you use?
  - How do you use them?
  - Who is normally involved and what are they responsible for etc.)?
  - Has your use of digital and social media for mobilisation changed in any ways in the past 5 years? In what ways? And what sort of considerations/factors drove that change?

8. Who is your online communication aimed at?

- How would you describe your supporters or potential supporters (who are the principal target groups or audiences for your online messages)?
- Who do you think you are most successful in engaging and why?
- Who do you think you are least likely in engaging?
- How would you describe your relationship with, and role in respect to, supporters and potential supporters? (are you one OF them, do you speak FOR them, etc.)?
- How do you think your supporters and potential supporters understand what you are doing?
- How do you think they view your role in the democratic and political processes in Bulgaria?

9. Is that reflected in the way you communicate online and the way you talk about the problem-their causes, solutions? How?

10. What do you do to reach potential supporters beyond your immediate network of established ones? Give some examples of online communication activities you undertake

11. What benefits of using digital and social media for mobilisation could you identify? Could you illustrate with some examples cases when using social and digital media has been beneficial to your campaign and mobilisation efforts?

12. What problems or constraints of using digital and social media for mobilisation and for democracy in Bulgaria more generally, could you identify?

- Could you illustrate with some examples of cases when using social and digital media has created problems for your campaign and mobilisation effort? (for example internal polarisation, loss of trust and legitimacy, fragmentation of the group)?
- How did you deal with the problem/s?

13. Do you think the people you are trying to mobilise trust you and why do you think that is the case (or not the case)? How do you gain the trust of potential supporters?

- What makes online mobilisation campaign trustworthy?
- How is trust gained on social media?
- What do you normally do to gain legitimacy in the eyes of potential supporters and their trust particularly on social media?

#### *Media strategies*

14. *What role do mainstream media play in your mobilisation efforts (i.e. in respect to creating visibility and understanding of the problems you focus on)?*

- *What is your view of the mainstream media coverage of your group and your cause and activities? How do you think they represent your group, your aims and activities?*
- *How do you think they represent your opponents and their goals?*

15. *What role do different "alternative" online media play in your mobilisation efforts and in making the problem and your point of view visible?*

- *What is your view of different "alternative" online media's coverage of your group and cause? How do you think their coverage represents you and your aims?*
- *How do you think it represents your opponents and their goals?*

16. *What do you do to get coverage from the mainstream and/or “alternative” media? Could you give concrete examples of actions/steps taken?*

16 *How do you use social and/or digital media to counter any misrepresentation or disinformation by the mainstream or other media? Give some concrete examples.*

- *Do you think your use of social media influences their coverage, and how?*
- *Have your communication activities been the target of censorship, repression or sabotage by oppositional actors? Could you elaborate and give examples?*
- *How do you usually deal with attempts to silence and censor your communication activities (if you have been the target of such attempts)?*

### **Questions about self- definitions and representations**

*Civil vs. Political*

29. How are you funded

30. Are you members of any larger civil society networks, coalitions etc.? Do you have connections to any political actors, organisations, and parties?

31. How would you describe your group’s (organisation, activist) role in the political and democratic processes in Bulgaria?

32. Do you have a political or a civic role?

- Do you make a difference between a citizen and political mobilisation? What is that in your opinion? Where would you draw the line?
- In which cases do you think it is acceptable for political actors to back and participate in civic campaigns? Elaborate.

### **Final**

33. We are now at the end of the interview. Is there anything you would like to add to what we have discussed?

34. Is there anybody you would suggest I can meet for additional interviews on this subject matter?

End of interview schedule

## Appendix B: Information Sheet



**UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS**

### **INFORMATION SHEET**

**10/01/2018**

#### **Digital media, protests and the dynamics of civil society in Bulgaria**

*You are invited to take part in my research study. Before you decide to participate, it is important for you to understand what my study is about and what will be involved if you decide to participate. Please take time to read the following information carefully, and if you would like more information or if there is anything that you do not understand please feel free to ask me. You do not have to accept this invitation, and you should agree to take part only if you want to.*

#### **What this study is about?**

The study is part of a 3-4 year project investigating the role of digital and social media in social mobilisation in Bulgaria. The project is for my PhD thesis, and this part of the study involves me organising a series of interviews, for which I am hoping to recruit people that have either organised a protest via social media or have been involved in one. I want to hear all about your experiences as a protest organiser or participant and about the ways you use digital and social media for these activities.

#### **Why have I been chosen?**

You have been approached as an admin or a member of a Facebook protest group (or page). I am interested in you as someone who has used social media to mobilise people around an issue (or a set of issues) or because you have showed interest in participating in a protest organised by others by joining a protest group or liking a page they have set up and by participating in the discussions in that group or on that page. As such your input will bring valuable experiences and make an important contribution to my study.



**What will happen if you participate?**

You are invited to take part in two face-to-face (or where not possible –Skype) interviews. Each interview will last for around 60 minutes. I will be conducting the interviews with you. In the interviews, I will ask you about your experiences of protest organisation or participation and about how you have been using social and digital media for these activities.

During the interview, I may ask you to show me some of your social media posts relating to the protests being discussed and discuss your experiences of making them. Some potentially politically sensitive questions may be asked in the interview about your experience of mobilising people and/or protesting (such as involvement in any violent or contentious protest activities), but you have the right to not respond.

**Will your taking part in this project be kept confidential?**

Yes, a rigorous mechanism will be employed in this project to ensure your privacy and confidentiality. Only I will have access to personal data and your contact details will be stored separately to ensure your anonymity. All personal data will be stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998) and will not be passed on to any third parties. All the research data will be stored in separate folders on a specifically designated drive provided by the University of Leeds which will be password protected, and all the paper written materials will be stored in separate locked cases.

In the write-up of the research, the data will be presented completely anonymously. First, your legal name and personal data that could identify you will not be used. I will give you a pseudonym by which I will refer to you in my thesis. There will be a code sheet that contains your name and the pseudonym that I give you, and this will be only for the purpose of my own referencing. I will be the only person that will be able to access the code sheet of pseudonyms.

**Will I be recorded and how will the recordings be used?**

The interviews will be audio-recorded and your words will be verbatim transcribed for later use in my PhD thesis and direct quotes will be translated into English. The audio recordings will be used only for analysis. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

**What are the risks in participating in this study?**

I do not foresee any risks or hazards for participants taking part in this research. However, if you should experience any discomfort or disadvantage, or are concerned about the potential political sensitivity of some of the topics discussed as part of the research (such as mobilisation against authorities or participation in contentious protest activities), you should let me know immediately. The research offers no direct benefits for participants other than an opportunity to share your experiences.

**What are the benefits in participating in this study?**

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will contribute to our common understanding of how democracy works in the digital age and what we can do to improve it.

I can offer you some drinks and snacks during the interview, and I hope that you will find the experience enjoyable and rewarding.

**What will happen to the results of the research?**

The results of this research will be published in academic publications and reports and presented at conferences. Quotations from the interviews may be used, but the quotation will only be in the English translation, and your identity and personal information will remain confidential.

If you would like me to let you know about future publications connected to this project, please let me know and I will inform you.

**If you have further question about this research, who can you contact?**

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please feel free to contact me, **Nely Konstantinova**. I am a PhD researcher with the School of Media and Communications in the University of Leeds, United Kingdom.

Email: [mendk@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:mendk@leeds.ac.uk) Telephone number: 00359889226323 (BG number) or 00447507968874 (UK number).

If you do not feel comfortable to contact me, you can contact my supervisors, Dr Julie Firmstone (J.A.Firmstone@leeds.ac.uk) or Dr Giles Moss (G.S.Moss@leeds.ac.uk) in the School of Media and Communications, University of Leeds.

**Thank you very much for your time and invaluable contribution to this study!**

## Appendix C: Consent Form

<p><b>Consent form for research project:</b></p> <p><b>Social Media, protests and the dynamics of civil society in Bulgaria</b></p>	<p><b>Add your initials next to the statement if you agree</b></p>
<p>I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated [<i>insert date</i>] explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.</p>	
<p>I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw up to a week after the final interview without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline. Data already provided will be destroyed following withdrawal from the study.</p>	
<p>I understand that if I agree to be interviewed, it will be audio recorded.</p>	
<p>I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.</p>	
<p>I agree for the data collected to be stored anonymously by the researcher for up to four years after the original findings of the study are published and to be used in relevant future research.</p>	
<p>I understand that other genuine researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.</p>	
<p>I understand that other genuine researchers may use my words in publications, reports, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.</p>	
<p>I agree to take part in the above research project and if I have further questions or concerns I will contact the lead researcher (on 00359889226323 or via email: <a href="mailto:mendk@leeds.ac.uk">mendk@leeds.ac.uk</a>) or her supervisors.</p>	

Name of participant	
Participant's signature	
Date	
Name of lead researcher	Nely Konstantinova
Signature	
Date	

## Appendix D: Content Analysis Codebook

### D1. Codebook Design Overview

The codebook breaks down the representation of the political conflict into specific aspects that can be related to the way social and/or political conflicts are framed in the media (cf., Vladisavljević and Voltmer, 2017, Vladisavljevic, 2015), as well as to general orientations to democratic norms and ideals, national identity and different political ideologies. The unit of analysis is a post or a comment. The specific aspects coded for in each post or comment for includes:

- 1) the presence and kinds of references to perceived problems or causes of problems (e.g. whether those are related to political institutions, political culture, the judiciary, the economy, international actors, identity, or the media), including problems implied in any posited solution (for instance, if the comment calls for judiciary reform, then the problem, or the cause of problems, is taken to be the judiciary);
- 2) the actors the post or comment criticises or designates as opponents/adversaries/enemies (Them) (cf. Vicary, 2010);
- 3) the identity frame references (i.e. the way We/Us, incl. the universe of allies, is designated and represented) (cf. Vicary, 2010);
- 4) the presence of blame and/or polarising/divisive, uncivil and confrontational/impolite speech (adopted from the MeCoDEM Coding scheme 2014; cf. Vladisavljević and Voltmer, 2017, Papacharissi, 2004)

The coding follows the structure of the posts and their tails of comments as it appears on the Facebook Event Page. Posts and comments are therefore to be coded in order, as sometimes judging how to code a comment depends on the discussion/s preceding it. Here *the context* plays an important role for the coding of each post or comment, not least because the posts and tails of comments found on Facebook resemble conversations more than contained textual units, such as newspaper articles. The aim of the of coding is to produce a general overview of what the focuses of the discussions happening on the pages are – i.e. which Them actors or problems are discussed the most.

## **D2 Coding US and Them - general instructions**

The coding of *We/Us* and *Them* is loosely based on Vicary's (2010) linguistic approach to frame analysis. The focus of this analysis is on a) the Subjects (who is doing the action) and b) the action (but also intentions, abilities/possibilities, definitions, obligations, characteristics, beliefs) associated with the Subjects. In other words, what "We" or "They" do/will do/can do/are/must do/have/believe etc.

### **D2.1 Coding Them**

We code for up to three "Them" (or "Other") actors per post or comment. That variable may include:

- 1) direct adversaries identified (or implied, see below) in the posts or comments, that is, actors who are held responsible for a problem, against whom the protest is organised, and with whom the protesters find themselves in direct confrontation;
- 2) more general opponent actors identified in the comments, whose positions, ideas, actions etc. are criticised or described in negative terms, or who are seen as standing in the way of the realisation of the desired solution, or who are seen as advocating a position or as having an ideological standing contrary to that of the protesters. The criterion for coding an actor as opponent ("Them") is not that he or she takes a position that is the precise opposite of the protesters' position, but that the actor is identified (by the protest organisers or participants) as an opponent concerning the issue of the protest or, in other words, that his or her position and/or actions are criticised in one way or another.

Sometimes the *Them* actors can be *implied*, and not directly referenced. For instance, if a post identifies explicitly the Prime Minister as an adversary, and the following comment (under the post) also follows on that criticism without explicitly identifying him or her (i.e. uses "he" or "she") it is still coded as containing a reference to the Prime Minister as an adversary.

## D2.2 Coding Us

We code for the presence of up to three “Us” identity frames in the posts or comments that can be said to designate different “levels,” or aspects, of the collective identity:

1. expressions of collective identity via claims/demands/identifications made as a “we”, that is, from the point of view of the organisers and participants in the protest, as well as expressions of individual identification or solidarity with the protest, its aims and values (i.e. “I was there”; “I support the demands for”); the actors protesting, including the organisers and participants in the protest, i.e. “the protest”, “the protesters”, the organisations or groups organising it;
2. a broader identity frame that establishes a link between the protesters and those they identify with and/or speak in the name of (i.e. “the citizens”, “the people”, “the Bulgarians”, “the Bulgarian people”, “the poor”, “the liberally-minded people”, “the democrats”, “the right”, “the left”, “the patriots”, “the nature lovers”)
3. any other actors, who are described in positive terms, and/or are seen as contributing to the realisation of the solution advocated or as advocating a position congruent with that of the protest. These supportive actors are identified as such not because they have exactly the same position as the protesters, but on the basis of the them being identified as an ally of the protest, their position being praised or support for their position being expressed.

## D3 Coding internal contestation (You)

We code for *internal contestation* (Abdelal et al.’s 2006) via two variables:

1. The first refers to any criticisms expressed in respect to the protest itself– i.e. its framing, organisation, leadership, legitimacy of organisers, internal discussions etc., with the aim of capturing the presences, scale and kind of *inter-group conflicts* on the mobilisation pages. The categories for this variable were developed using a mixture of inductive and deductive analysis of a sample of comments from across the four cases.
2. The second codes the presence of any criticism, blame and/or contestation directed at an organiser/protester or another actor participating in the discussion, i.e. at an “Internal Them” (or “You”) actor. “You’ is coded when the comment is referring to the organizers of the protest or addressing directly someone else on the page in order to criticise them, confront them, argue with them, correct them etc. “You” is NOT coded when the comment references the organisers or addresses another actor on the page in order to agree with them.

## **D4 Coding external and internal levels of polarisation and discourse quality**

The coding variables for polarisation and discourse quality (in respect to internal You or external Them) were developed by, on the one hand, adapting the MeCoDEM coding scheme (MeCoDEM Codebook, 2014; Vladisavljević and Voltmer, 2017) and Papacharissi's (2004) method of coding for civility and impoliteness in discourse, and by using qualitative methods, on the other.

### **D4.1 Coding polarisation**

There are three "levels" of antagonism present in the posts/comments coded for in order to judge the overall external and internal polarisation on the page (adopted from the MeCoDEM Codebook 2014; Vladisavljević and Voltmer, 2017):

1. moderate comment
2. somewhat antagonistic comment
3. strongly antagonistic comment

In cases where a comment or post contains *more than one* Them actor, code the *most antagonistic* reference. The coding is trying to gauge and compare the *general* level of antagonism in the discourses on the protest pages, rather than any differences in the way various Them actors are referred to on each page. Thus, regardless of how many strongly antagonistic references to a Them actor one comment or post contains, it is counted as *one* instance of strong antagonism in the overall discourse on the protest pages.

### **D4.2 Coding Uncivil and Impolite speech (discourse quality)**

There are two more variables evaluating the quality of the discourse in respect to Them or You (cf. Papacharissi, 2004):

1. ***Uncivil speech***
2. ***Impolite, or confrontational speech***

GENERAL PROTEST EVENT VARIABLES				
Variables	Categories			Instructions/description
				In this section variables are coded at the level of the Facebook Event set up for the protest
<b>PROTESTORG1 DESCR</b> (PTRTESTORG 2DESCR)				Name of main protest organiser
<b>PROTESDATE</b>			Mm/dd/yyyy	Date protest called for, found on the protest event page
<b>PROTORGTYP1</b> (ORGTYP2, ORGTYP3)		1	Formal organisation/trade union/NGO/political group	Type of protest organizer
		2	Informal/grassroots civil society group	
		3	Individual citizen/s	
		4	Mixed	
		5	Unknown/unclear	
<b>INTERESTED</b>			0-5000	number of people that have indicated themselves as "interested" on the Facebook event page
<b>GOING</b>			0-5000	Number of people that have indicated themselves as "Going" on the Facebook event page
GENERAL POST/COMMENT VARIABLES				
Variables	Categories			Instructions/description
				In this section the variables are coded at the level of the individual post or comment (including the About section)
<b>CID</b>			0- 5000	Number of the post, comment or About section entry from the database
<b>ACTNAME</b>			(string)	Facebook name (anonymised as pseudonym) of actor who has made the post or comment
<b>ACTORTYP</b>		1	Protest organiser	Type of actor making the comment; protest organizer refers to the official protest organiser/s as appearing on the event page; protest participant is



				someone posting or commenting on the page, who is not an organiser
		2	Protest page participant	
		3	Unknown	
<b>CDAY</b>			1-31	day of post/comment; for the About section take the date of setting up the Facebook event
<b>CMONTH</b>			1-12	month of post/comment;
<b>CYEAR</b>			two digits, e.g. 16= 2016	year of post/comment
<b>POSTYP</b>		1	Post	type of post/comment
		2	Comment to post	
		3	Reply to comment	
		4	About section	
<b>AIMAGE</b>		0	No	Does the post/comment contain a link to an image or a meme?
		1	Yes	
<b>ARTICLE</b>		0	No	Does the post/ comment contain a link to a media article or blog?
		1	Yes	
<b>ARTICLTYPE</b>	10		Mainstream media	Type of media outlet post/comment links to
		11	TV	
		12	Newspaper	
		13	(Just) online outlet	
	20		Non-mainstream media	
	30		Blog	
	98		Uncodale	
	99		Other	
<b>AVIDEO</b>		0	No	Does the comment contain a link to a video?
		1	Yes	

<b>CREACT</b>			0-2000	Number of times comment has been liked (or reacted to via the other emoticons)
<b>CSHARES</b>			0-500	Number of times post has been shared (indicated under it)
<b>CREPLIES</b>			0-500	Number of replies a post or comment has
<b>PROTEST FRAMING</b>				
<b>PROBLEM_</b> <b>POLINST</b>	00		No cause of problem related to political/state institutions identified	Captures the way the social, political etc. and/or intergroup/protest-related problems are framed (or defined) in the discussions taking place on the protest event pages. Codes the presence of references (direct or implied) to different kinds of problem causes in each comment or post. If more than one sub-type of problem cause is referenced in the same post or comment, code the first one mentioned or the one that dominates, i.e. is repeated the most times
	10		Political/state institutions general	Codes general statements in regards to the political/stat institutions. For example, "the institutions are broken"
		11	Political/state institutions are too authoritarian or repressive	
		12	Political/state institutions are too weak/inefficient	i.e. incompetence/inaction of political elites
		13	Corruption of political elites	i.e. oligarchic dependencies
		14	Betrayal of national or the citizens' interest by the political elites	i.e. calling them "national traitors"
		15	Lack of transparency in decision making processes	
		16	Unfair elections	
	98		Uncodable	
	99		Other	
<b>PROBLEM_</b> <b>POLCUL</b>	00		No cause of problem related to political culture identified	
	10		Lack of democratic culture	Codes references (direct or implied) to lack of democratic culture as a cause of social etc. problems
		11	Weak/apathetic civil society	

		12	Anti- or non-democratic attitudes or behaviours of citizens	i.e. illiberal values of other citizens
		13	Support for/acceptance of corruption and/or non-democratic practices	Can relate to either practices of domestic or foreign elite actors, i.e. criticising other citizens for supporting "Putin's autocratic regime"
		14	Polarisation, intolerance between different political or social groups	
		15	Lack of support for direct democracy	i.e. through referendums, or for "sovereignty of the people"
		16	Nationalism/appeal of far right ideas	
	20		Democratic culture	Codes references (direct or implied) to (liberal) democratic culture as a cause of problems
		21	Society too tolerant/liberal /decadent/secular	Also lack of respect for traditional (Christian) values
		22	Too many protests, mobilisations, civic disruption	
		23	Too much liberalisation/lack of authoritative control	
		24	Lack of nationalism/patriotism	
	30		Geopolitical orientation	
		31	Anti-Western/EU/American attitudes	
		32	Pro-Western/EU/American attitudes	
		33	Russophile attitudes	
		34	Russophobe attitudes	
	98		Uncodable	
	99		Other	
<b>PROBLEM_ JUDICIARY</b>	00		No cause of problem related to judiciary or rule of law identified	Codes references (direct or implied) to judiciary or rule of law as a cause of problems
	10		Judiciary, rule of law general	
		11	Unreformed judiciary	

		12	Lack of independence of judiciary system	i.e. of judges, the prosecution etc.
		13	Corruption in judiciary system	
		14	Injustices going unpunished	
		15	Inefficient/Ineffective judiciary system	
		16	Lack of rule of law	
		17	Violation of laws or the Constitution	
	20		Police and security services	
		21	Police corruption/brutality/impunity	
		22	Police ineffectiveness/partiality	i.e. police taking the others' "sides"
	98		Uncodable	
	99		Other	
<b>PROBLEM_</b>	00		No economic causes of problems identified	Codes (direct or implied) references to economic and/or economy-related causes of problems
<b>ECONOM</b>				
	10		The economy, general	
	20		Socio-economic and class related	
		21	Poverty, unemployment	
		22	Inequality, big difference between rich and poor	
	30		Structural	
		31	Capitalism/neo-liberalism/free-market	Or any pro-market, right-wing economic policies
		32	State interference in the economy	
		33	Underdevelopment	Incl. deindustrialisation
		34	Overdevelopment	i.e. construction boom in protected areas
		35	Privatisation	
		36	Interests/rights of business/landowners/developers not protected	Or need to be protected
		37	Communism/socialism	Or left-wing redistributive policies
	40		Corruption, oligarchic dependencies	
	98		Uncodable	

	99		Other	
<b>PROBLEM_ IDENTITY</b>	00		No identity-related causes of problems identified	Identities refer to Us/Them antagonism where Them are construed as being a threat to Us (identified with normality)
	10		Identity-related causes, general	
		11	Religious identities	i.e. Christian vs. Muslim (but can include secular)
		12	Ethnic	i.e. Bulgarians vs. Roma
		13	National	i.e. Bulgaria vs. Russia or Turkey
		14	Transnational/Regional	i.e. Bulgaria vs. European or Balkan
		15	Political	i.e. communists vs. democrats
		16	Gender/Sexual orientation	i.e. LGBT people as a threat to the "normal family"
	98		Uncodable	
	99		Other	
<b>PROBLEM_ INTERN</b>	00		No international causes of problems identified	Codes references to interferences by international actors
	10		International interference general	
		11	Interference by Russia	Incl. "the East"
		12	Interference by the US	
		13	Interference by Turkey	
		14	Interference global/Western institutions (i.e. UN, EU, NATO, IMF, World Bank)	Incl. "the West"
	98		Uncodable	
	99		Other	
<b>PROBLEM_ MEDIA</b>	00		No media related causes of problems identified	Codes references (direct or implied) to problems with or created by the media (in general or in respect to particular outlets)
	10		Media, general	Use code for general statement, like "the media are a problem"
		11	The media do not enable/support the public interest and/or democracy	
		12	The media do not inform the public truthfully	

		13	The media do not hold government and institutions to account/	i.e. do not fulfill watchdog function
		14		
	98		Uncodable	
	99		Other	
<b>PROBLEM_</b> <b>INTERNAL</b>	00		No internal/protest related problems identified	Codes references to inter-group or protest-related problems or causes of problems , i.e. criticisms in respect to the protest itself (see Section F3)
	10		Protest related problems-general	If more than one protest-related reference mentioned, code the first one, or the most dominant one- i.e. the one mentioned the most times
		11	Intragroup communication	i.e. tone of voice, insults, etc.
		12	Lack of tolerance of different opinions	
		13	Organisation/tactics of protest	i.e. logistics, time, day, type of protest/action etc.
		14	Representation and trust	i.e. doubts in regards to motivations, leadership etc.
		15	Definitions/framing of protest	i.e. disagreement on main concerns/aims/strategies
	98		Uncodable	
	99		Other	Write down what
<b>US /THEM FRAMING</b>				
<b>US1S</b> (US2S, US3S)				Codes references to US/We actors and their allies
	00		None	Code the first three WE/US reference per comment or post, in order of appearance.  For instance: “today at the protest we showed that the Bulgarian citizens won’t stay silent”  Code: US1S 2) protest/protesters,

				<p>US2S 5) Bulgaria/Bulgarians US3S 3) citizens</p> <p>If there is only I/Us/We, reference, just code that one.</p> <p>For instance: "We were there today"</p> <p>Code: US1S: 1) I/US/We</p>
	10		I/Us/We	Code if there is no other Us/Them reference mentioned in post/comment (i.e. "We succeeded!")
	20		The protesters/the protest	Includes clear indirect reference via "they" or "it" i.e. "it [the protest] was a success!"
	30		The citizens	Incl. "citizen", "civil society"
	40		The people	Incl. "the noble people", "the normal people"
	50		Bulgaria/the Bulgarians/the homeland/the motherland	Incl. "the motherland is suffering", "the Bulgarian society" etc.
		51	Bulgarians abroad	
	60		Citizens from particular cities	Codes identification with particular cities/towns, i.e. "the Sofia citizens"
	70		The voters/the electorate	
	80		The unemployed	
	90		The workers	
	100		Europe/Europeans/Western	
	110		Particular civil society movements, organisations and/or groups	Codes the organisation/ group etc. behind the protest or any other that is referenced as an ally/supporter/identity frame
		111	Environmental organisations and groups/Environmentally-minded citizens	Incl. "the environmentalists", "the ecologists", "the nature protectors", "the nature-lovers" etc.
		112	(Neo)liberal organisations and groups	Incl. "the right"
		113	Nationalist /Patriotic organisations and groups	Incl. "the patriots", "the nationalists"

		114	Leftist/Anti-Fascist organisations and groups	Incl. "the left"
	120		Particular parties or political organisations	Codes any party or political organisation referenced as an ally
		121	Governing parties/government	Incl. PM
		122	Main opposition parties	
		123	Extra-Parliamentary opposition	Incl. "the city right"
	130		The students	
	140		Professional organisations and groups/trade unions	Codes any professional organisation that is referenced as an ally
	150		Friendly media and journalists	Codes any media or journalist referenced as an ally
	160		Mothers/parents/families	
	170		The Judiciary and Prosecution	
	180		The police	
	190		The Christians	Incl. "The Orthodox Christians"
			Supra-national organisations	I.e., EU, NATO, UN
	200		Other countries	i.e. Russia,
	210		Individuals	Named individual citizens, politicians, celebrities
	220		Slavs/Slavic	
	230		Anti-Russian/Russophobe	
	988		Uncodable	Not clear if its referring to an US/WE frame (see instructions at the beginning of this section)
	989		Other	Write down who and description
<b>US_DESCR1S</b> (USDESCR2S, USDESCR3)			"string:"	Name or brief description and action attributions of We/Us as they appear in post or comment  This variable records all the referential/nomination strategies used in the frame (if any) to describe the US/WE, as well as their action attribution (i.e. what they do) for example "active citizens", "true patriots", "honest people", "national protectors", "the protesters resisted"



<b>THEM1S</b> (THEM2S, THEM3S)	000		None	Codes references to Them actors.  Code the first three Them reference per comment or post, in order of appearance (or if too many, the three dominant ones – i.e. mentioned the most times in the post/comment)
	100		National political authorities and governing elites general	Use for very general references like “the politicians”, “the power-holders”, “power”, “the political elite”
	110		Political authorities	
		111	PM/government/coalition	
		112	Parliament/MPs	
		113	Specialised ministries/ministers	
		114	Individual politicians	Write down name
		115	Local authorities	
		116	Opposition parties	
		117	Extra-Parliamentary parties	
		118	President	
	120		Judiciary	“the legal system”, “the judiciary”
		121	Courts and judges	
		122	Prosecution, incl. Chief Prosecutor	
	130		Executive forces	
		131	Police	
		132	Security services	
	140		Civil society actors general	Code general references, like ‘society’, “the people”, “the citizens”, “the voters”
		141	Individual civil society actors named	
		142	Voters/supporters of government	Including “contra-protesters”/“contra-protests”
		143	Voters/supporters of Parliamentary opposition	
		144	Liberal/pro-European civil society groups or NGOs	Including the “liberals”, “the “liberasts” and other negative references

		145	Nationalist/far-right/conservative groups or organisations	Including ‘the nationalists’, ‘the (pseudo) patriots’
		146	Interest groups incl. trade unions	
		147	Russophile citizens and groups	Incl. nationalist paramilitary pro-Russian groups
		148	Russophobe citizens and groups	
		149	Ethnic and religious groups	
	150		The media	Incl. individual journalists
	160		Bulgarian Orthodox Church	
	170		International actors- Russia	
		171	Russia (government)	
		172	Russia (groups associated with the regime)	For instance ‘the Night Wolves
		173	Russian citizens/people	
	180		International actors- ‘The West’	
		181	US	
		182	EU	
		183	International organisations	UN. IMF, World Bank, NATO
	190		International actors- Other	
		191	Turkey	
		192	China	
		193	Other individual countries	
	200		‘They’/‘Them’	not specified and not clear who the reference is about
	210		‘the communists’, ‘the nomenklatura’	References to the ex-communist elite, incl. to members of the ex-Security Services; ‘the reds’;
	220		‘the oligarchy’, ‘the mafia’	References to the shady economic elites, incl. ‘WHO’, ‘the behind the curtains’
	230		‘big business’, ‘global corporations’	References to big businesses, corporations, for instance. foreign supermarkets like Billa
	240		‘people on the left’	Also ‘the left’, leftists
	250		‘people of the right’	Also ‘the right’

	998		Uncodable	Not clear if it referring to a Them actors (see instructions at the beginning of this section)
	999		Other	Write down who
<b>THEM_</b> <b>DESCR1S</b> (THEM_ DESCRP2S, THEM_ DESCRP3S)			"string"	Name or brief description and action attributions of Them as they appear in post or comment  This variable records all the referential/nomination strategies used in the frame (if any) to describe the Them, as well as their action attribution (i.e. what they do) for example "naïve sheep", "national traitors", "the aggressors", "the corrupt government"
<b>THEM_ANTAG</b>		0	Not applicable	Codes the overall level of antagonism towards Them in general contained by the comment/post  Code if there is <i>at least one</i> reference to a Them actor in the post/comment;  If no Them reference, code 0  If more than one Them actor is referenced in the comment, code <i>the highest level of antagonism</i> expressed towards a Them actor  For instance the comment: " <i>The government doesn't want to do anything about the Russophile traitors</i> " references two Them actors:  1) PM/government 2) Russophile citizens  The first is somewhat antagonist (contains some blame), the second is strongly antagonist (constructs Russophiles as enemies). We code the comment as a whole as being <i>strongly antagonist</i> .

		1	Moderate/neutral	<p>Uses factual or neutral language to refer to an opponent or adversary, or the Other</p> <p>Ex: “the Minister of Environment has made changes to the management plans of Pirin National Park”</p>
		2	Somewhat antagonist	<p>Contains some criticism, blame for the problem/s, negative attributions etc.</p> <p>Ex: “the changes made by the Minister are completely illegal”</p>
		3	Strongly antagonist	<p>Uses strong language, insults, demonising or attacking the Other, portraying the Other as an enemy to be destroyed, annihilated or expelled, portraying divisions as unbridgeable etc.</p> <p>Ex.: “the greedy corrupt’ Minister”</p>
		4	Uncodable	<p>Code only if unclear or very hard to judge (for instance if not clear if the comment is actually ironic rather than antagonistic)</p>
<b>THEM_CIVIL</b>		0	Not applicable	<p>There is no Them actor referenced</p>
		1	Civil	<p>The comment does not contain uncivil reference to Them</p>
		2	Uncivil	<p>The comment contains a verbalisation of a threat to democracy, the assignation of stereotypes or group labels – either mild or offensive-attacks pluralism, and/or threatens others’ rights</p>

				Ex.: “the filthy gypsies”; “the treasonous Russial-lovers”
		3	Uncodable	Unclear, hard to judge
<b>THEM_POLITE</b>		0	Not applicable	There is no Them actor referenced
		1	Polite	The comment does not contain impolite reference to Them
		2	Impolite	The comment resorts to name-calling, aspersions, synonyms for liar, hyperbole, pejorative speak, vulgarity, sarcasm, using all caps, using more than one exclamation marks, and others , when referencing a Them  Ex: “the MPs are idiots”
		3	Uncodable	Unclear, hard to judge
<b>YOU</b>		0	no	Does the comment or post reference a You actor? (see Section F3)
		1	yes	
<b>YOU_ANTAG</b>		0	Not applicable	Codes the overall level of antagonism towards You in the comment/post  If no You reference, code 0 (see Section F3)  Code like THEMANTAG above
		1	Moderate/neutral	Ex: “you need to also consider....”);
		2	Somewhat antagonist	Ex: “Why did you call the protest for the morning when people are at work?”
		3	Strongly antagonist	Ex.: “get lost, troll”
		4	Uncodable	Code only if unclear or very hard to judge (for instance if not clear if the comment is actually ironic rather than antagonistic)

<b>YOU_CIVIL</b>		0	Not applicable	The comment/post does not address a You (see Section F3) Code as THEM CIVIL above
		1	Civil	
		2	Uncivil	Ex: "you are a national traitor"
		3	Uncodable	Unclear, hard to judge
<b>YOU_POLITE</b>		0	Not applicable	The comment does not address a You actor (see Section F3) Code as THEM POLITE
		1	Polite	
		2	Impolite	Ex: "you are talking bullshit"
		3	Uncodable	Unclear, hard to judge
THE END				

## Appendix E: Discourse Analysis - examples

### Example 1 Anti-Night Wolves Case- “Them”

The Outsider Other( Russia and supporting groups	Referential strategies
authoritarianism	“the sick KGB dictatorship in Russia”,” (Putin)the slave master”
aggression and invasion/occupation	“the aggressors”, “scum on Bulgarian soil”, “the thugs”, “ <i>bogatyrs</i> (Russian warriors)”, “Bulgaria’s unwelcomed and unwanted guests”
Night Wolves : militancy and aggression	“a group of militarised motorists”, “Putin’s dogs”, “Orthodox guardsmen-thugs”, “Putin’s hired strongmen”, “ Putin’s paramilitary mob”, “ the night terrorists”
(derogatory) references to the Wolves’ appearance and sexuality/masculinity	“motorists in leather clothes”, “clowns”, “Putin’s travelling circus”, “gay-patriots”, “patriotic Russian homosexuals”, “the so-called vegans of transport”, “the Putinists-cyclists”, “ thugs in frocks”, “ Russian idiots in tight clothes”

The Outsider Other (Russia and supporting groups	Predication strategies
Russia’s aggressive and threatening stance towards Bulgaria in the past, present and future.	they “viciously attacked us in Dobrudja 100 years ago”, “Svetoslav destroyed Bulgaria”, “massacred thousands flowers of the nation in 1944” (they) “aim the destruction of all that is ours for the benefit of Soviet/Russia””, (Russia) “leads aggressive politics which is harmful to Bulgaria”, has “an appetite towards the post-soviet nostalgic classes in the ex-socialist block
The Night Wolves as carriers of aggressive Russian politics	(they) “pass through Central and Eastern Europe with a predetermined media-propaganda charge in order to mark the territory of Russian influence””; (they came here) to make provocations, to show their strength and the government’s favour towards them”
anti-EU and anti-Western values	(they)” talk against the ‘euro-gays””, “insult the European values”, “ are the last thing that brings us anything valuable – either morally or as faith”).
Questioning the Wolves’ (Russian nationalist) integrity and <b>rockers</b> identity	“are with Harleys”, “many are with Honda Gouling, which are Japanese but intended for the American market”, “even their socks are not Russia””; “when in the civilised world they started playing rock, the murzikas hadn’t even changed their flap-ear hats yet”).

The Outsider Other( Russia and supporting groups	Predication strategies
Russia's aggressive and threatening stance towards Bulgaria in the past, present and future.	they "viciously attacked us in Dobrudja 100 years ago", "Svetoslav destroyed Bulgaria", "massacred thousands flowers of the nation in 1944" (they) "aim the destruction of all that is ours for the benefit of Soviet/Russia", (Russia) "leads aggressive politics which is harmful to Bulgaria", has "an appetite towards the post-soviet nostalgic classes in the ex-socialist block
The Night Wolves as carriers of aggressive Russian politics	(they) "pass through Central and Eastern Europe with a predetermined media-propaganda charge in order to mark the territory of Russian influence"; (they came here) to make provocations, to show their strength and the government's favour towards them"
anti-EU and anti-Western values	(they)" talk against the 'euro-gays'", "insult the European values", "are the last thing that brings us anything valuable – either morally or as faith").
Questioning the Wolves' (Russian nationalist) integrity and rockers identity	"are with Harleys", "many are with Honda Gouilding, which are Japanese but intended for the American market", "even their socks are not Russia"; "when in the civilised world they started playing rock, the murzilkas hadn't even changed their flap-ear hats yet").

The Insider Other (pro-Russian Bulgarian citizens and groups	Referential strategies
by association to the Other- Outsider or by negative attributions	"the sick KGB dictatorship in Russia", " Russian bedpans", "Bulgarian bedpans of Russia", "Putin's fans", "Russian grovelers," " Russian ass-lickers", "Russian-lovers", "Russian dolls," "Putlerists"), aster"; "the paramilitary idiots"
"fake nationalism" and "treason".	"national" or "domestic" traitors or "their (the Russian's) servants"; also "treasonous garbage, "ruble whores," "Bulgarian enablers", "fascist pseudo nationalists", "Putin's nationalist whores"
paramilitary group as violent, threatening and dangerous , fascist	"the weaponised guards of Russian capital and Russian business interests," "aggressive paramilitary Russophile organisation," "Pro- Russian paramilitary organisations trained to be guerrillas", "fighting groups," "Kolorad" scum", "fatso's in camouflage" "practically neo-Nazi")
Bulgarian welcoming parties as being foolish, meek, gullibility, and uncivilized, undemocratic	"such a moronic people", "zombies", "mob", "mice", " a few million sheep," "a few hundred idiots"; "supporters of Eurasian –totalitarian values"



The Institutional Other (political elites and institutions)	Referential and predication strategies
via association with Outsider –other Opportunistic orientation towards Russia	“Moscow’s bedpans”, “the whole communist-russophile-oligarchic government of the country”, “Borisov, Buchvarova and the whole Russian scum from the government, the Ministry of Interior and the Security Services”) “sold us out to Putinist Russia”, “are connected to Russian economic interests”; “is connected to Russian capital and Russian business interests”
corruption and criminality	“criminals”, “low garbage”, “the servants of the dictators”, the “so- called ‘mafia’, ‘oligarchy’ and pig-den”
lack of patriotism and/or treason	“treasonous populists”
pseudo-elite	“the Bulgarian political and not only political ‘Elites’ of the transition”
ineptitude and lack of action in matters of national interest and security	“is asleep in regards to all of them, as if they don’t exist”, “are sleeping”, “don’t do anything”, “should act”, “need to start acting”, “have no wish to investigate them”, showed “totally inadequate reaction”
The opposition (the Bulgarian Socialist Party) by association with the communist past and their pro-Russian geo-political stance and opportunism	stupid red stink”, “Gotze the agent”, “BCP”; “rouble-receivers”, “the breastfed in foreign toilets scum of the big avdjia Purvanov”
References to the police, security services and judiciary : corruption, inefficiency and lack of reform; also orientation to Russia	“the people’s militia”, “not real police”, “‘reformed’ judiciary”, “unreformed system”, “whores” “is not a Bulgarian state institution”, “is in the service of the Putinists”
Bulgarian Orthodox Church: Treason based on orientation to Russia	is “a Russian creature”; the clergy “are stray dogs and Russian bedpans”

## Example 2 : Justice for all- “Us”

Them 1: Us	Referential and predication strategies ( descriptions and actions)
<p><b>positive qualities and virtues (esp. in liberal democratic sense, such as being vocal, free, determined, valuing democratic principles like the “rule of law” and “justice”)</b></p>	<p>we are “free”, we are “alive and thinking”, we are “honourable”, “We won’t be silent!” “having conviction”, “being determined”, “let’s together protect democracy, freedom of speech and the rule of law”</p>
<p><b>authenticity as civil society actors ( i.e. independence from outside interests and influences and apolitical nature), genuine convictions of the protesters</b></p> <p>(stressed, seemingly in light of the observed deterioration of trust in the group)</p>	<p>“there are no parties involved with us and no one interferes”; we fund ourselves through ; “voluntary and personal contributions”; we “protect our name”; we “are not paid grant-takers”; in our organisation “there is not a single lev from grants and projects”; “there are no paid PRs”; “the political parties their members and sympathisers are participating as citizens, without party signs”; “every one, no matter their convictions” is welcome; “but as a citizens, who wants Judicial reform”; “we are protesting “for free”; “we are “unpaid”</p>
<p><b>agency and determination ( shown through acts or statements of opposition, defiance, and resistance to the political and oligarchic elites)</b></p>	<p>“we have a desire for change and for fighting back against the lawlessness”; “we fight for human rights”; “we won’t be silent”; “we won’t allow it”; “we demand”; “we are categorically against”, “we will cry out loud ‘Enough!’”; “We cried out loud ‘We won’t be silent!’ under the windows of power”;</p>
<p><b>strong feelings of injustice and (patriotic) responsibility</b></p>	<p>we are fed up”, “we are angry”, “we are responsible for the country and our children”, “we care for our country” and “we care about injustice and the battered rule of law”, we are “searching for justice”, “we are obliged, even if only symbolically and as a warning, to be there, so to not allow mockery with the Law and with Justice”</p>
<p><b>importance of civic participation and perseverance in resisting together</b></p>	<p>”let’s be together against the mafia!; ” we “showed strong citizen efforts”; “we ALL need to participate, not just those working in the justice system!”; “All citizens, not just the administration”; “let’s remember this date and prepare once again”; “only we, the citizens” can “have oversight over those writing the laws”.</p>
<p><b>positive qualities and virtues (esp. stressing the liberal democratic character of protesters, such as being vocal, free, determined, valuing democratic principles like the “rule of law” and “justice”)</b></p>	<p>“free and honourable citizens”; “those who can’t stand the outrageousness and the lawlessness of the oligarchy in the country”; those who “want a radical judicial reform, a just and independent Court and an accountable and responsible Prosecution, Romanian style”; “We summon all free and honourable citizens of Bulgaria”; “we invite all Bulgarian citizens, for whom justice is a value”; “this is a citizen march, not political”</p>

## Appendix F: Interview Participants

Respondent reference	Case study (incl. groups/organisation)
Respondent 1	Environmental case/organisation: Coalition "For the Nature"; local NGO
Respondent 2	Environmental case/organisation; Coalition "For the Nature"; local NGO
Respondent 3	Environmental case/organisation: Coalition "For the Nature"; local NGO
Respondent 4	Environmental case/organisation: Coalition "For the Nature"; international NGO
Respondent 5	Environmental case/organisation: Coalition "For the Nature"; international NGO
Respondent 6	Environmental case/organisation: Coalition "For the Nature"; local NGO
Respondent 7	Environmental case/organisation: Coalition "For the Nature"; local NGO
Respondent 8	Environmental case/grassroots: Save Koral, Save Pirin
Respondent 9	(Neo)liberal /pro-Western & environmental cases/grassroots: Protest Network, Save Kara Dere,
Respondent 10	(Neo)liberal/pro-Western case/grassroots: ex-Protest Network, "opinion leader", "blogger"
Respondent 11	(Neo)liberal/pro-Western case/grassroots: Summer 2013– as part of the university student protests
Respondent 12	(Neo)liberal/pro-Western case/grassroots: Protest Network
Respondent 13	(Neo)liberal/pro-Western case/organisation: Protest Network, Initiative "Justice for All", parties DEOS, currently "Da, Bulgaria"
Respondent 14	(Neo)liberal/pro-Western case/organisation: Protest Network, currently "Da, Bulgaria"
Respondent 15	(Neo)liberal/pro-Western case/organisation: ex-Protest Network, currently "Da, Bulgaria"
Respondent 16	(Neo)liberal/pro-Western case/organisation: ex-Protest Network, ex-Initiative "Justice for All", currently "Da, Bulgaria"
Respondent 17	(Neo)liberal/pro-Western case/organisation: ex-Protest Network, Initiative "Justice for All"

Respondent 18	(Neo)liberal/pro-Western case/organisation: ex-Protest Network, Initiative "Justice for All"
Respondent 19	Populist case/grassroots: Winter 2013 protests; ex-SILA (but also environmental and Summer 2013 protests)
Respondent 20	Populist case/grassroots: Winter 2013 protests, nationalists/conservative/illiberal protests; SILA, ex-Facebook page
Respondent 21	Populist case/grassroots: Winter 2013 protests, nationalists/conservative/illiberal protests; SILA, current Facebook page
Respondent 22	Populist case/grassroots: Winter 2013 protests, various anti-governmental/populist protests; ex-SILA, current Facebook page NPAAO
Respondent 23	Populist case/grassroots: Winter 2013 protests; nationalists/conservative/illiberal protests; Moto Club "Great Bulgaria"
Respondent 24	Populist case/grassroots: Winter 2013 protests, nationalists/conservative/illiberal protests; various Facebook groups and
Respondent 25	Populist case/grassroots: Winter 2013 protests, various nationalists/conservative/illiberal protests; various Facebook groups and pages; informal group Peoples' Social Movement;
Respondent 26	Populist case/grassroots: Winter 2013 protests; various Facebook groups and pages; various nationalists/conservative/illiberal protests; informal group Peoples' Social Movement
Respondent 27	Environmental & populist case/grassroots: environmental protests, Winter 2013 protests; various Facebook groups and pages