Activism in Bosnia-Herzegovina:

Struggles against Dual Hegemony and the Emergence of "Local First"

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The 2014 protests and plenums in Bosnia-Herzegovina were widely noted for their insertion of economic and social justice topics into the stale public discourse of ethnocracy. They also signified a potential to break with an anemic civil society shaped by international intervention, technocratic "project logic" and apolitical service provision. This article argues for treating these struggles in reference to the dual nature of the hegemony created by both local ethnonationalists and international liberal intervenors. It applies a Gramscian perspective to the processes by which hegemony is created and (re)produced via consensus in civil society. The challenge to dual hegemony can be seen in the central focus of contestation on social justice in economic arrangements as well as in the alternative logics of engagement and organizational forms in society. We describe the tensions arising from this dual challenge in terms of the degree to which they contest or reproduce the predominant anti-politics, a stance of distancing from dialogue or even contact with political actors and institutions. We conclude that the events during and since 2014 have strengthened the means to build an alternative third bloc via a "local first" approach, containing heterogeneous forms of local-scale action with explicitly political strategies.

Keywords: *activism; Bosnia-Herzegovina; 2014 protests; plenums; hegemony*

Introduction

In February 2014, Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) drew global attention not seen since the 1992–1995 war. The violent police response to striking workers in multi-ethnic Tuzla, the former heart of industrial Yugoslavia, sparked demonstrations and riots across the Federation that left a dozen government buildings burnt out and forced several cantonal governments to resign. The intensity, determination, and scope of these protests indicated a previously unattained level of public discontent.[1] For a moment, the passive position long ascribed to BiH's citizens was discarded, and new-found solidarity was lived through direct democratic participation in plenums. These open fora were public spaces for formulating collective demands towards the government and constituted an alternative public sphere in which criticizing ethnic elites

became possible. In addition to the novel scope of the protests and experienced direct democracy, the focus on social conflict and demands for "social justice" were also novel for post-war Bosnian protests.

What soon became apparent was that the overwhelming majority of donor-supported non-governmental organizations (NGOs) did not support the struggle, either materially or morally. From a naive position, this was a surprise: Many had been working on "democratizing" society for twenty years and shied away when finally, thousands of people participated in a deeply democratic way. Their non-performance becomes more understandable, though, given the initial reaction of the High Representative for Bosnia-Herzegovina as a major point of reference for NGOs in BiH. On February 8, Valentin Inzko stated that EUFOR troops were ready to intervene if the situation escalated, thereby underlining the primacy of security concerns for international actors. Although over time these concerns diminished,[2] the relationship between the imagined "International Community" (IC) and NGOs on the one side and plenary activists on the other continued to be guided by mistrust—foremost by the activists themselves, who in large part refused to cooperate with the NGO sector and requested that international embassies not get involved.

This article argues that the potential of the activists' struggles to "reclaim the political" can best be understood in reference to the dual hegemony of ethnonationalism and the liberal peace. The literature on activism in Bosnia both before and since 2014 has frequently described the consociational Dayton-established institutions and predominantly ethnic parties as key elements that preserve the hegemony of ethnonationalism and hinder progressive mobilization.[3] In contrast, Horvat and Štiks focus attention on the hegemony of (neo)liberalism that delegitimizes leftist politics while supporting (mere) electoral democracy and the free market.[4] Our interest is to understand the struggle of 2014 and thereafter in its duality, challenging the hegemony of both ethnic politics and the liberal peace.

These references to hegemony in Bosnia invoke but do not fully reflect Gramsci's understanding of hegemony as based on ideational as well as material power.[5] Within the literature on activism in Bosnia, Jansen has highlighted most explicitly Gramsci's understanding of hegemony to include both coercion but also consent—the way that hegemony frames how political struggles can be waged. He turns to the metaphor that these are foremost about who establishes the "rules of the game." While acknowledging that material power shapes and guides what is possible by activists and popular mobilization, in this article we examine the dual nature of the ideational struggles in reference to the (re)definition of what constitutes a "good society" and the logics of engagement employed to achieve it. Despite sanguine analyses that the events of 2014 pointed towards the potential to "reclaim the political," our empirical material based on interviews with key activists and plenum documents points to the persistence of anti-political stances in the lack of willingness to talk to elected officials, parties, and institutions and in calls for "expert" governments. Anti-politics is based on the understanding that since politics (*politika*) is inherently corrupt, the best way to maintain

popular legitimacy is to avoid any contact. Anti-political actions by the plenums also included restricting participation by those with experience in local government and international organizations which limited potential constituencies. The persistence of anti-politics isolated the activists from developing ideological alliances and from engaging in political substance with parties and institutions. Thus, despite contesting ideational power by demands challenging post-war economic arrangements focused on social justice and practicing new forms of social organization, the activists and plenums also reproduced the persistent anti-politics of the post-Dayton period.

This theoretical exploration and empirical elaboration of "dual hegemony" has relevance for debates regarding the potential for bottom–up struggles in sites of international intervention. Namely, this empirical data supporting "dual hegemony" contributes to the literature on the hybrid nature of material power within liberal peace interventions, for example, regarding constitutional arrangements, state institutions, and political economy.[6] As noted above, much of the literature on activism in BiH is in reference to the persistent ideational and material power of ethnonationalism. However, the potential for bottom–up material and political struggles has also been shaped by twenty years of post-war civil society (CS) strengthening interventions based on liberal conceptualizations of CS and democratic governance.[7] Hence, we see a co-dependent, uneasy stalemate, described in detail by Bell and Pospisil as "formalized political unsettlement,"[8] an inherently hybrid institutional structure that contains but does not resolve the conflict and in which local and international actors compete. Bell and Pospisil meticulously describe what, in their essence, are struggles over hegemony in the ideational and material spheres, waged both between ethnonationalist parties and against international intervenors. The hybrid state[9] is thus not dominated under one hybrid hegemony but rather denoted by vastly different visions of statehood competing for support from and influence over the populace—a situation we refer to as dual hegemony.

The struggles of 2014, more than the previous mobilizations, indicate how activists contested the dual hegemony of ethnonationalism and the liberal peace ideationally and materially. Our article embraces Jansen's attention to the struggle against the "foreign-sanctioned national-clientelistic machine" but further explores the implications of this duality in terms of challenges as well as available opportunities.[10] The investigation will be guided by the research question "In what ways do Bosnian-Herzegovinian activists challenge the understandings of politics and society produced by the duality of ethnonationalism and the liberal peace?"

This exploration of the bottom–up potential within conditions of dual hegemony has utility for explaining the emergence of what we term "local first" approaches to activism since 2014. By "local first" we mean a strategy of pursuing geographically local action with explicitly political strategies. "Local first" can be understood as a means to become political by building popular legitimacy in opposition to "dual hegemony." Earlier research has found that citizens in Bosnia-Herzegovina are most supportive of efforts that solve concrete needs, while a focus on political and civil rights is perceived as abstract and not connected to everyday struggles.[11] Our research

on "local first" approaches thus nuances academic debates about the alternatives to the predominant "anti-politics," characterized by phrases such as "reclaiming the political" and "alter-politics."[12]

We begin with a discussion of three areas of focus in the literature: BiH as an ethnocracy and international protectorate; the intricate relationship of civil society to intervention and Gramsci's critical perspective on CS as a tool of domination; and finally, the recent waves of contentious activism. Our empirical findings discuss mobilizations in 2014 and thereafter as attempts to articulate a counter-hegemonic alternative opposed to both existing loci of material power and their ideational foundations. Mobilizing around social justice, the protests and plenums contested the focus in Bosnian politics on ethnic identity as much as the pervasive international focus on neoliberal economic reforms. The struggle also addressed logics of engagement by challenging both the internationals' concept of "civic" CS organized through the market and local patrimonialism along ethnic lines. We conclude by discussing how and why the dual nature of the challenge resulted in problems and limitations including fractionalization and the avoidance of coordination to prevent co-optation. On a more positive note, the final section discusses the potential as well as unresolved tensions that come with "local first" strategies.

Civil Society in the Shadow of the Liberal Peace and Ethnonationalism

The Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) divided the country into the Republika Srpska (RS) as a centralized entity with a large Serb majority (achieved through ethnic cleansing), the Federation of BiH as a federal entity consisting of ten rather autonomous cantons populated mostly by ethnic Bosniaks and Croats, and Brčko, a small autonomous district under international control.[13] Joint state-level institutions were designed around consociationalism, power sharing between rather autonomous ethnic elites that was inscribed into the state by the division of state institutions along ethnic lines and extensive veto rights for each ethnic group.[14] The institutionalization of democracy with ethnicity as the guiding rationale of politics supports characterizations of BiH as an "ethnocracy"—defined by Lise Howard as "a political system in which political and social organizations are founded on ethnic belonging rather than individual choice"[15]—with limited democratic substance. In procedural terms, the political system is an institutionalized democracy, albeit highly complex and limited to its constituent peoples. However, these "democratic" politics have repeatedly failed to produce substantive democratic policies in which "the public good is achieved, citizen preferences are represented, [and] governments become accountable."[16] The logic of ethnocracy benefits ethnonationalist parties by constructing ethnic groups as homogeneous blocks led by their respective elites, thereby undermining the potential for the politicization of intra- and inter-ethnic

class antagonisms. Under the architecture of procedural democracy, the ethnic card (based on memories of ethnic violence and the fear of its repetition) has been used successfully by elites to substitute for democratic substance for two decades, demonstrating the longevity of war crimes in producing fear and thereby control.

While democratic procedures were put in place early on, the focus on institutional reform and multi-party democracy did not create a "functioning" new state as envisaged by the IC.[17] By the end of the 1990s, international discourse shifted towards CS strengthening as a way of sidestepping "uncooperative" local elites, solving ethnic tensions, anticipating reintegration, and enabling post-war democratic transition—in short, solving the Bosnian puzzle. The goal changed from a rather short-term focus on reshaping institutions to a long-term focus on "social engineering" to diminish the harmful influence of nationalism and to build a "vibrant" CS according to Western ideals. Civil society development and active citizenship became seen by the IC as crucial to democratization and reconciliation processes. The underlying theoretical assumption of the IC was one of the state being "open to and under the control of civil society, [and] responsive to the advocacy campaigns of the local civic groups."[18] However, political deadlock since 2006 gradually led to the realization that the implementation of CS strengthening strategies instead fostered apolitical NGOs frequently focused on narrow and technocratic change, weakening the responsiveness to citizen concerns and solidarity between CS actors.[19]

Civil Society as Ideational Dimension of Hegemony—in the Footsteps of Gramsci

The research on CS strengthening highlights theoretical questions about the nature and role of CS. In Michael Edwards's classic *Civil Society*, CS is discussed first as a "part of society" in the shape of (neo-)Tocquevillian "associational life."[20] In a balanced associational "ecosystem," formal, professionalized associations can only constitute the "skeleton," while informal groups and grassroots initiatives are necessarily self-determined and -initiated. In the internationals' narrow conception of "associational life," however, mainly the former were recognized as potential agents for change.[21] As in drafting the peace agreement, existing CS elements originating from socialist Yugoslavia were only infrequently recognized by international actors,[22] and service-providing and policy-oriented professional NGOs were created from scratch.[23]

Second, CS also refers to "the good society," a desirable social order.[24] The concept of the "newly built" CS in BiH was based on liberal assumptions derived from projecting the Western European concept of CS and guided by expectations of BiH's inevitable progress towards joining the European Union.[25] The de-contextualized approach inherent in early CS strengthening projects—implemented mainly by external actors, following fixed, external standards with little contextual awareness, and characterized by inflexibility, dependence and conditionality—was conceptualized

as integral to the attempt to radically transform the country's value and societal base. The externally provided, neoliberal vision of the "good society" led to NGOs being accountable to international donors instead of an independent public sphere. The resulting artificial CS has little in common with the Eastern and Western European CS models that grew "organically"[26] and has "imprisoned or even disabled local agency in unintended ways."[27]

As a result of these characteristics, the utility of "civil society" as a conceptual framework to explain political developments, particularly including bottom–up challenges, has been contested in the post-war literature. The most well-developed of these critiques focuses on the intimate connection between the "CS" concept and its exploitation within foreign-funded and -designed CS strengthening interventions. Sampson states that the intervener-driven "project society" in Bosnia acts as a means towards the control of what is considered "CS" by acting upon and perpetuating cultural boundaries and political asymmetry between actors (the interveners) and their subjects (citizens).[28] Deacon and Stubbs found already in 1998 that programs supporting NGO development subvert the assumed political meaning of CS by constructing and strengthening servile local NGOs and weakening their ability to address grassroots concerns.[29] CS is also the object of intervention and seen as a means to achieve donors' political goals for Šavija-Valha. He notes that linear and fixed donor assumptions result in repeated and inflexible interventions in a vain attempt to create a "vibrant CS" as a precondition for government accountability.[30] Most explicitly, Bilić rejects CS as a concept to explain activism because of its lack of purchase for the complexity of political and social interactions and its definitional elasticity in addition to its intimate connection to intervention.[31]

The ongoing and active intervention exactly around the meaning of "civil society" and the evident resistance to the processes of CS strengthening as a political project call for adopting a critical perspective on the underlying power dynamics. Here, Antonio Gramsci's perspective is useful because it focuses on CS as a tool of domination. In Gramsci's understanding, CS is the ideational part of institutions that creates and (re)produces hegemony through consensus about the "rules of the game" within the material limits established by the state. From a Gramscian perspective, we can say that CS in BiH is fragmented, similarly to material power within the state itself. The Western, international fraction—justifying, advertising, and entrenching the ideational influence of "universal" liberal standards and their perpetuated control by international actors—can be seen as competing with three local "homogeneous national-religious communities,"[32] aligned with and supporting the respective ethnic elites. Given this institutionalized fragmentation of both the ideational and material spheres, recognizing the duality of hegemony is a prerequisite for understanding the tensions counter-hegemonic activism faces.

Both the proponents of liberalism and ethnonationalism seek to gain popular support for ideational positions regarding their visions of the state.[33] International CS discourse in BiH emphasizes "the rights of individuals to pursue their self-interest

rather than collective rights, and simultaneously upholds and obscures the interests of state and capital."[34] Local fractions, on the other hand, depend on interest groups such as unions and veterans' associations embedded in the ethnic logic of patrimonialism with the state as a source of employment and protector of majority ethnic group rights. The resulting competition over support from and influence upon the population leads to considerable dispute regarding ethnonationalism as well as human rights, the rule of law, secularism, women's equality, minority rights, and other liberal credos emphasizing individual rights. At the same time, both local and internationally legitimate CS reject the notion of (bottom–up) class struggle as a driver of societal development and focus of political contestation and thereby disguise the role of and relation between the state and capital.[35] Protest waves during and since 2014 focused on social justice provide the basis to explore the potential for a third, nascent fraction that utilizes contentious action to build counter-hegemonic ideational (and, eventually, material) power—sometimes opposing ethnic CS and political parties and sometimes also the international fraction of hegemony-producing institutions.

The Recent Rise of Contentious Activism

In the first fifteen years post-Dayton, few (progressive, non-nationalist) protests took to the street, and most of them were rather short-lived, single-issue demonstrations. Notable protests were disconnected workers' struggles against privatization and factory closures throughout the 2000s, the 2008 Sarajevo protests against street violence and the 2009 Tuzla University protests, in which plenums were first organized in BiH. The RS, in particular, remained a quiet idyll for its politicians, with pressure from the streets rare.[36] Activists connect the lack of protest despite ample grievance to the absence of a strong protest culture.[37] The population's responses to the property damage and confrontations with police that briefly emerged during the 2014 protests also indicated that this is exacerbated by the still-existing collective traumatization from war, making people hesitant towards forming large crowds expressing dissent.

The literature on activism in BiH that focuses on framing and political opportunity structures indicates the ways that activists and the authorities frame the ideational struggle in order to build, and in the case of the authorities weaken, support among the population.[38] For example, Touquet analyzed the framing of the 2008 Sarajevo protests in regard to an articulation of citizenship values, local identity focused on Sarajevo rather than ethnicity (providing evidence of the early development of "local first" approaches), and anti-politics. This analysis focuses on anti-politics vis-à-vis the construction of politics (*politika*) in Bosnia-Herzegovina as a dirty and immoral category, as a "separate universe of (immoral) values, of people who pursue power for the sake of it, who are egotistical and untrustworthy."[39] The authorities responded with discrediting counter-frames, labeling protesters as an uncivil and violent mob, directed by political parties and supported by foreigners. Her analysis addresses the

de-legitimizing accusations that the SDP and Naša Stranka, two opposition parties articulating non-nationalist ideologies, were supporters of and benefited from the protests. This analysis shows the reproduction of anti-politics through the responses of the authorities and points to its ideational strength among the population. Our argument, in contrast, places the positionality of activists vis-à-vis *both* the foreign actors and (even opposition) political parties more centrally in explaining the struggle to articulate an autonomous and legitimate identity around which to mobilize.

Scholarship on Bosnian activism has positioned the events of 2014 within a sequence of protest waves from 2012 characterized by more confrontational repertoires of action and more sustained mobilization. The evidence for this includes the "Picin Park" protests in 2012 in Banja Luka, stretching over one hundred days of continuous street protest,[40] the 2013 "babylution" protests in Sarajevo motivated by the existential danger to infants caused by political deadlock, the annual "white ribbon" protest commemorating victims of ethnic cleansing in Prijedor,[41] and, most notably, the riots, protests, and plenums in February 2014. A key question, then, for observers of Bosnian politics is whether this sequence indicates an increasing potential for contesting anti-politics through the creation of an alternative understanding of *politika*, an "alterpolitics" in the language of Eric Gordy.[42] Mujkić's analysis of 2014 emphasizes the participants' learnings, particularly in terms of "reclaiming the political," that authorities were ready to use repressive measures to maintain power and that the media and the middle class were loyal to the regime.[43] Our empirical research adds to this literature about the potential for new forms of *politika* by a detailed examination of the ideational aspects along which activists contested dual hegemony during 2014 and how activism has changed since.

Empirical Analysis

The empirical analysis is based on twenty-six interviews with key activists from six cities conducted from 2013 to 2016 and written demands and communication between plenums on one hand and government institutions and the public on the other.[44] Six pre–February 2014 interviews addressed the question of the legitimacy of activist initiatives for citizens, political actors, and international donors. Ten Skype interviews were conducted from January to April 2015 with activists, and an additional seven interviews were conducted from October to December 2015. An anonymized list of interviews is available in the online supplemental materials, and in the text, informants are identified with a code. In addition, participant observation was conducted in 2014–2015 during the Sarajevo and Tuzla protests and plenums, during a conference in Vienna that included plenum activists and international representatives,[45] and in an activist-initiated social and political center in Banja Luka. Documents were collected by cross-referencing plenum and independent websites and Facebook pages. The analytic approach to the empirical data is thematic analysis

following Bryman's conceptualization.[46] It facilitates reconstructing, displaying and problematizing the construction of counterhegemonic understandings of politics and society by analyzing prominent themes present in local activism before, during, and after the 2014 protests. The interviews were coded using ATLAS.ti software and following recommendations in Saldaña's coding manual.[47] The thematic codes were further grouped in coding families and correlated for further analytical purposes.

The Return of the Social

This section will establish the social character of the 2014 protests by analyzing plenum demands and activists' discourses. Protesters not only opposed local political structures but also international actors eager to frame the uprising as "civic." The activists' and plenum discourses indicate the meaning of the "social" and reveal struggles to articulate an alternative to both the "ethnic" and "civic" rules of the game.

Most activists articulated "social justice" as the leitmotif of the 2014 protests. In the words of a Sarajevo activist, "[d]emand for social justice is what unites protesters,"[48] most famously expressed by the slogan "we are hungry in three languages" carried as a prominent banner.[49] Social justice was also a long-term goal, after achieving initial demands, for Sarajevo plenum participants. "These requirements are only the beginning. In the light of our long-term goal—a society based on social justice, it will be necessary to create other fundamental changes that also cannot and should not wait too long."[50] Because of its central role, "social justice" requires some unpacking. Social justice was thematized in demands to reduce benefits for political actors, restore state control over privatized companies, prosecute economic crimes, and articulate everyday economic concerns. Demands for reduced benefits for political actors were prominent, and indignation about "white bread" (ongoing payments to officials who had resigned) entered the media and popular discourse. Multiple demands sought to reduce public sector salaries and incomes, demanding a limit as a multiple of the average salary (three locations) and in "accordance with the current economic situation" (Sarajevo). The demands therefore contested post-war economic arrangements by seeking a more equal income distribution.

The focus on privatization demonstrates social justice as righting post-war wrongs and injustices. This discourse included elements of restoring the pre-1992 economic and social order as in demands for the "revision of privatizations" of specific companies (three locations) and generally (five locations). The most specific articulation was to "void privatization contracts" and "return the factories to the workers and place them under the control of public authority" (Tuzla). Social justice as criminal justice was implicit in calls to prosecute economic crimes (three locations), most expansively in the "entry of legitimate investigative organs into all subjects of post-war privatization" (Sarajevo). Furthermore, demands encompassed increasing social services and opportunities for state-supported social mobility and reformulating the

relationship between capital and labor inscribed in state regulations. In this regard, the activists' social justice discourse adopted a populist focus on everyday economic concerns. "Social justice is about social conditions, about everyday life, something everybody can unite around" (BL3). Finally, then, social justice encompassed all these understandings most broadly as demanding a thorough redefinition of the social contract implicit in current Bosnian statehood, reflecting a vision of politics focused on the social in contrast to ethnicity.

The "return of the social" to political discourse has been widely reflected upon as a major result of the protests of February 2014.[51] These analyses have focused on its significance for local power structures by breaking up the imagined homogeneity of ethnic blocs as the basis for politics within an ethnocracy. The reception of this shift by international power structures, however, has received significantly less attention. International actors repeatedly attempted to frame the uproar and subsequent plenums as "civic"—highlighting issues of corruption, the rule of law, and human rights while omitting substantive political demands for socio-economic redistribution, investigation of privatizations and increased social services.[52] Doing so both denied the movement's contestation of the liberal idea of civil society and its envisaged changes to politics. This soon opened a second front for the activists eager to retain the uprising's radical character. The "civic" label was widely rejected as an effort to guide them into the "old" and well-trodden apolitical paths, taming their potential to constitute a radical movement threatening the economic order.

> The trouble here is what we see from my group as an attempt at pacification, and the taming of the political energy is this sort of lame term of civic . . . not even movement, civic initiatives. Then you can talk of the agenda such as human rights, rule of law, which are extremely empty terms in BiH nowadays, have been for the last twenty years. We are explicitly talking of changing the political order of things. Which to us is impossible without changing the socio-economic terms of our lives. (SA2)

International actors—after a brief shocked phase in which High Representative Valentin Inzko threatened to deploy troops—soon started making advances. While ignoring most of the social demands, plenums were embraced as directly democratic, civic initiatives fighting corruption, nepotism and nationalism (and thus supporting the IC's vision of reform). Rejecting this embrace became a difficult endeavor, as the protests indeed were organized as direct democracy and did challenge corruption, nepotism, and nationalism—because they lead to and disguise social injustice. Reactions to this attempted framing varied significantly. While some activists (from larger towns and with more political experience and awareness) clearly rejected the "civic" label, others embraced it, leading to differences and tensions between the activists and complicating coordination efforts. These heterogeneous strategies will be further discussed in the section on "local first" activism.

Plenary activists in 2014—for the first time on such a massive scale—voiced an independent, third vision of the state as serving socio-economic needs and

guaranteeing the social rights of all its constituents, independent of ethnicity. In many aspects, this third vision is not new but builds on and connects to memories of former Socialist Yugoslavia. This was visible in the calls to revise privatizations, which indirectly or directly harkened back to the juxtaposition of "social" (*društveno*) ownership and the Yugoslav system of worker self-management (*samoupravljanje*).[53] Reviving and building on memories in itself constitutes resistance against the current dual hegemony, as both hegemonic blocs systematically obfuscate and negate positive references to the Socialist past. Thus, to the degree that the activists and plenums' concerns articulated a coherent social contract, it was one heavy with the echoes of Socialist Yugoslavia. However, while inspiration was partly sought in the past, plenums and subsequent local initiatives also posed ideas for how to establish new "rules of the game" that are a genuine product of the present moment. This challenge to the logics of engagement will be analyzed in the following section.

Competing Logics of Engagement

A second feature of the protests and plenums that demonstrates a struggle against dual hegemony is the positioning of activists vis-à-vis conceptualizations of "civil society." This was most visible when contesting participation by professional NGOs that were seen as articulating "civic" discourses that represent donor interests. Many NGOs avoided openly supporting the protests or plenums, and many activists voiced suspicion and even outright hostility towards the NGOs, banning them from participation (SA3, SA4). This stance was new in the 2014 protests, and activists attributed this to learning about the negative impact of visible NGO identifications for popular legitimacy in the "babylution" protests in 2013 (SA3). The plenums' rejection of cooperation with (most) NGOs was explained mainly by their assumed dependence on the IC and their stabilizing role on the political system (note the implicitly Gramscian analysis here). International actors' requests towards activists to "bridge the gap" to NGOs to build a more comprehensive movement were interpreted as demands to accept and become subordinate under the IC-promoted model of civil society. Instead, they were met by counter-claims towards the NGOs to step down from their professional, detached, apolitical positions and join the movement on its own terms: "They (NGOs) are there, if they want to join at some point, join on the terms that are not professional, then we can talk about it" (SA2).

These continuing tensions arose not only from diverging ideals of the "good society" but also from fundamentally different understandings of the means to reach these in terms of motivation, organization, representation and participation. The activists' critiqued the neoliberal logic of engagement in "civic" civil society—based on the market logic of the third sector, structured by donor conditionalities, aimed at producing small-scale, superficial short-term outputs, and distributed as one-directional charity to passive recipients. "Ethnic" civil society, on the other hand, was

seen as exclusive, structured by patrimonial power relations, and reproducing ethnicity's central role. In contrast, activists' alternative visions of social and political engagement are sketched out conceptually to explain the obstacles to cooperation in an overarching coalition.

Political Dependence through "Follow the Money"

In activists' discourse, professionalized NGOs were viewed as an extension of the intervention due to financial dependence. Their "follow the money" market logic was thought to undermine their stated goals due to a focus on institutional interests and competition between like-minded actors, constituting a civil sector as part of the market rather than as individuals, informal initiatives and organizations genuinely contributing to the "good society." "[A] great number . . . are really profit organizations, I mean that they are receiving a lot of money. . . . I think NGOs lost the main thing and that's doing something because you really want to help" (TZ3). Allegations of corruption, personal benefit, and even criminal behavior created a generally negative perspective of NGOs in which community and grassroots organizations driven by an authentic will to "do good" were seen as exceptional. Self-censorship was used to explain the initial hesitance even of grassroots NGOs to support the protests and plenums. As put by one activist, "[NGOs] were afraid first and foremost of the new political situation. They didn't know how to read it. They were afraid that their involvement might negatively . . . reflect on their donors. So, they actually [self]-censored themselves" (TZ2).

Perceptions of the compromised role of "ethnic" CS actors in the struggle for the "social" can be seen in attitudes towards labor unions and veterans' organizations. Unions could be expected to have key importance given that workers' protests were the trigger and workers' struggles against privatized employers were a salient issue. Here, activists portrayed unions as an integral component of the ethnocratic status quo by controlling and pacifying the fury of workers for decades. For the President of the alternative Solidary Union, the President of the dominant Federation Alliance of Unions "*always collaborates with the government, and he uses this money for his collaboration with them*" (TZ5). The leader of one established Alliance member union also critiqued the Alliance's decision not to provide organizational support or call on its members to protest.[54] Veterans' organizations were also seen as deeply embedded in the logic of "ethnic" CS, meaning dependent on close ties with ethnic elites. The Sarajevo plenum emphasized the perceived failings of veterans' organizations via demands regarding veterans' interests including to unify multiple veterans' organizations.

Opposing the subjugation of "civic" CS under the rules of the international donors' "market," as well as obedient patrimonial relationships to local political actors, the activists stressed the importance of financial (and political) independence through the voluntary work of normal citizens as exemplified by the plenums. For some activists, however, the initial blanket rejection of donor funds has developed into a pragmatic acceptance of some donor support while prioritizing autonomy and pursuing

long-term alternative strategies such as cooperatives. Nevertheless, autonomy in the choice of aims and means continues to be seen as crucial for voicing a fundamental critique of both the local political system and the IC.

Organizational Forms and Ideational Influence: "Project Logics" and Formalization as a Party

The activists' struggle against dual hegemony also addressed the hegemonic organizational forms and structure of CS actors. The repeated refusal to introduce hierarchies and to turn informal groups into legal entities such as NGOs or parties—as suggested by multiple international actors—reflected the rejection of top–down structures both within and between CS initiatives and organizations. Professionalized NGOs were seen as following a set chain of command, which was pushed onto the activists' efforts. "All of them were requesting this, formalize it. Register it. Register it as an NGO, as a political party. Do whatever you will but formalize it and then we can talk. And by talk I believe they meant we can give you cash. And you have to do what they want" (TZ4). The underlying international goal was understood as creating a unified actor that can be co-opted and steered, with an agenda cleansed from transformative aims: "Many activists . . . are concerned about this danger of institutionalization and professionalization and support by the current institutional mechanisms, which are very much either ineffective or underpinned or driven by the neoliberal agenda" (TZ1).

Aside from the activists' ambitions to maintain autonomy vis-à-vis IC material power and organizational logic, they also perceived the ideational power of "project language" as a threat: "[D]uring the Sarajevo plenum, . . . possibly the widest spread fear among people who were participating was that someone is going to turn them into a project. . . . [T]hey (European Union) speak the language that . . . I understand, but I am not quite sure how, why we should accept it. It is the project language, it is the language of goals, and impacts, and effects, it is time limited, it's rather sort of linear in a way" (SA2). The underlying "project logic" was discussed as resulting in top–down technocratic approaches predominantly focused on service provision and short-term goals. This focus was rejected as a de-politicized approach prevalent among the civic sector, incapable of changing the broader picture and in effect stabilizing instead of contesting the political system. In contrast, activists stressed the importance of continuous work in their local communities including political education, networking, and other activities that cannot easily be measured in the short run but that are nevertheless deemed necessary for comprehensively building a movement from the bottom up.

The activists' rejection of calls to formalize also extended to the rejection of parties as formal political actors to a degree that delineated the persistence of anti-politics. "In no way do we want to enter the political waters, no way a party, politics doesn't interest us. We are interested in supervising the work of institutions. The plenum is not a means

of division, it is a public good for all citizens."[55] Elected political bodies, in several cases communicating openness to hear protesters' demands and even nominations for those who should replace the resigned governments, at times were met with a fierce insistence on alternative logics of engagement. The plenums challenged representation by elected representatives by not responding to requests to appear and state their demands. Some plenums rather countered that elected representatives "come to them" on a level playing field with all citizens. At the same time, the plenums communicated that political party members were unwelcome because they would attempt to co-opt the plenums for their own purposes. Appointing plenum representatives to state demands was also resisted because individual leaders or spokespeople are vulnerable to co-optation. Opposing hierarchical organizations as undemocratic, instead they pointed to the horizontal structure and informal character of the plenums—fluidly changing groups without (constant) hierarchies and based on direct democratic principles assigning equal weight to each voice—as an alternative way of organizing first of all their own initiatives, then civil society in general and, in the most utopian sense, society at large. This rejection of institutionalized procedures may also be considered in light of the long-standing emphasis of previous state-building ventures on procedural democracy, which has ever failed to deliver on promises of eventually also producing substantive democratic outcomes.

To sum up, the activists contested the hegemony of internationally supported "civic" CS in which CS professionals are the best representatives of citizens and progress is made based on politically "neutral" expert knowledge. Dual hegemony is demonstrated in that they also contested the discourse of ethnonationalism as exclusionary and homogenizing, thereby undermining horizontal solidarity and social struggles across ethnic borders and entrenching exploitation within these imagined communities. The alternative vision of CS we have attempted to trace here as potentially counter-hegemonic consists of a heterogeneous mix of individual activists, fluid informal groups, community centers, and grassroots organizations. Coordination within and between them is organized horizontally and collaboratively. The experiences of the plenums thus have become elements of an emergent "social" conceptualization of CS that is being built foremost at the local scale. The corresponding counter-hegemonic vision of society aims for a fundamental transition according to the lived experience of its citizens, who in large numbers are seen to represent themselves through struggle.

The Rise of "Local First" Activism

This section will elaborate on the dilemmas the struggle against dual hegemony has posed for activists during and since the 2014 protests and plenums. These dilemmas result from the struggle to maintain legitimacy by avoiding the perception of co-optation by both local and international established powers. The result is a heterogeneous picture of post-2014 activism. One trend, however, is the continued development of what we term a "local first" approach focused on issues that

are concrete for citizens and salient at a local scale. This trend can be understood as a further sign of a turn away from procedural matters enshrined in the Dayton constitution and towards matters of substantive democracy. As a conceptual approach, its utility includes the recognition of contextualized responses to dual hegemony and heterogeneous local experiences of the conflict and post-conflict period and therefore of different potential alliances based on dynamics at the local scale. Tactically, it may enable building popular legitimacy by engaging in local struggles that nevertheless have broader symbolic meaning.

The "Compact for Growth" initiated by Germany and the UK illustrates the difficulty of dual struggle. Positioned as a reaction to the protests of 2014, this initiative practically served foreign interests by obfuscating previous international failures while yet again rewarding established political parties eager to claim progress towards EU accession.[56] The few policy changes contradicted social justice demands, adopting instead further liberalization and flexibilization as superficial remedies to post-war dispossession.[57] While objecting to its contents, activists were neither able to build alliances with opposition political parties nor with other CS actors such as unions that actively opposed the initiative, so that Germany and the UK managed to hijack the attention plenums had stirred internationally to pursue their own goals of further neoliberal reforms.

In struggling to contest both fronts simultaneously, the plenums at times reproduced rather than contested anti-politics. The Sarajevo and Tuzla plenums (among others) were invited to send representatives to local governments, while international actors advised the formalization of the plenums as a means of obtaining legitimacy and a precondition to dialogue. Both of these paths to obtaining recognition and influence were rejected, and instead the plenums adopted a strictly non-hierarchical and informal structure. This position of "purity," adopted by the plenums to avoid both local and international political actors, at times isolated the "movement" and undermined thorough politicization and ideological formation of many of its constituents. In rejecting any dialogue with institutions and elected officials, the plenums positioned themselves above the (however limited) legitimacy of democratic procedures. The rejection of political parties led to an embrace of "anti-politics" in that the plenums' way is one of purity by the rejection of any politics as "dirty politics"—for example, when the Zenica plenum distanced itself from a prominent activist who publicly endorsed a party.[58] Anti-political stances were also seen in demands for expert governments to replace elected ones to improve their conduct and results (three locations). In these examples as well as in calls for "basic human rights" and the prosecution of economic crimes (i.e., the rule of law), the plenums and activists challenged the liberal peace while reproducing its conceptual register.

Rejecting the material and ideational power of political parties, NGOs and the IC simultaneously made establishing a comprehensive identity around which to mobilize more difficult, and this has become more pronounced in the period since 2014. Establishing independent positions regarding many pressing issues is made more difficult by the constant risk of perceived and/or real co-optation by one of the blocs.

Especially entrenched state-level discussions such as regarding constitutional change have shown significant lacunae in the activists' position—not because there is nothing to be said about constitutional change, but because establishing a recognizable political position is hampered as many possible solutions are already represented among the ethnic parties and the IC. This urge to avoid both local and international power holders thematically added to the reluctance to include individuals from the local levels of government and international bodies, which together limit the potential constituency and breadth of future mobilization. Finally, outreach attempts by international actors successfully attracted "moderate" or pragmatic actors and were seen as co-optation by more radical elements that remained isolated and weakened.

Our research indicates that these problems of dual struggle result in a complex and heterogeneous picture of post-2014 activism. The breakups of local plenums and of the inter-plenum and subsequent "5f7" network—over questions such as how to deal with international financial supporters, whether and how to become a political movement, and whether to formalize or not—can also be explained by this tension. More pragmatic initiatives (aptly delineated by the suggested name "movement for a normal BiH") and more left-leaning groups drifted apart mainly over their positions towards international actors. This split, then, can be read as an indicator of the success of international attempts at the co-optation and pacification of parts of the activists as "civic initiatives."

The complexity of the dual struggle may also explain a trend towards locally scaled approaches observable during and since 2014. During the 2014 plenums, transformative social justice claims requiring entity and state-level legislative changes (i.e., revisions of all privatizations, and investigations of origins of private wealth) were in tension with a focus on more local levels of government and varied local and narrow formulations of demands. A bottom–up community development understanding of change which we term "local first" grew throughout 2014. It is demonstrated in the following quote by contrast to that of donors:

> They don't quite see it. They also don't see why you do some things that are completely outside of anything strategic at the moment. But for us it is just like a big puzzle. You're adding pieces. And sometimes the piece you're adding is on the far end of the puzzle. And that means, you know, being in your community. . . . For them, spending a month talking to people who go to public debates on the draft budgets is not necessarily seen as education in these circles. . . . Going there talking just for three hours with people, to them would not qualify as work. As educational work. For us, yes." (SA2)

Although "local first" can also describe struggles including the 2008 Sarajevo protests and the "Picin Park" protests in 2012 in Banja Luka, the 2014 protests strengthened this tendency. "Local first" strategies have been indicated post-2014 in local-scale struggles such as supporting the re-opening of the Dita factory in Tuzla and the national museum in Sarajevo.[59] Such struggles were also successful against the closing of one hospital and the exploitation of the Una river by a hydropower plant.[60] Each of these acts, while being local in scope, also carried symbolic meaning

that resonated with the wider demands of 2014, but this time some went beyond demanding to themselves producing change. The re-opening of Dita, a company that was privatized, stripped of assets, and led into criminal bankruptcy, self-organized by its workers after years of public struggle, in particular sent strong signals across BiH.[61] In the struggles in Sarajevo, activists protesting the decay of public institutions were able to foster public outrage over the non-provision of social and cultural services and force bureaucracy to take action. Again, while being local in scope, these struggles also denounced perceived wrongs on a more abstract level. Similar "local first" approaches can also be seen in the Sarajevo initiative "Dobro kote" that began in 2016 and focuses on engaging neighborhoods to revitalize abandoned common spaces (SA5). In this process, it reflects the themes from 2014 in its successful attempt to activate voluntary contributions in time and material donations for the shared goal of reclaiming the commons. The initiative also mobilized eight hundred petition signers and participated in a local planning meeting in opposition to the taking over of a revitalized space by a commercial development.

"Local first" also highlights the continuity between the protests and plenums and the responses to the devastating floods of May 2014, which contributed to their disbanding because activists perceived an emergency requiring immediate and sustained action. On the surface, the shift from protests and plenums to the emergency flood response appears as a retreat from the political into charity. However, Mujkić's analysis supports the continuity of actors and strategies between the protests and flood response, highlighting their lack of public leadership, horizontality, and assemblies with open participation, bypassing and distrust of political institutions, and reclaiming of public spaces.[62] Rather than a retreat from the political, the flood responses contributed to strengthening "local first" approaches in the way that they responded to concrete needs while dismissing ethnocratic institutions and reaching across ethnic lines.

"Local first" has utility as a way to conceptualize the current moment for bottom–up agency based on recognition of the heterogeneous local experiences of the conflict and post-conflict period. While "social justice" was a unifying theme across the protest and plenum sites, the context specificity of the claims also challenges the homogenizing focus of ethnocracy and the identity politics that underwrite it. For example, the plenums in Tuzla, with its continued history of multiethnic politics, placed less emphasis on asserting their autonomy from co-optation than in divided Mostar, which experienced stronger repression. "Local first" instead recognizes different potential alliances based on dynamics at the local scale. Some trade unions were accepted as active supporters, while others were discounted as supporters of the status quo. In addition, it augments arguments about "reclaiming the political" and "activist citizenship," that is, when citizens act "in a way that disrupts already defined orders, practices and statuses," by explaining the available means for achieving substantive changes.[63] "Local first" encapsulates the heterogeneous issues that have emerged since 2014 based on their salience at a local scale. While temporarily losing visibility and civic energy on a national or entity level, this trend to "go local" helped

post-2014 activists to establish popular legitimacy via local struggles with broader symbolic meaning. "Local first," in this way, also offers a pragmatic compromise allowing both political and anti-political activists to continue their struggles, often under the radar, without submitting to the pressures of co-optation by one of the two hegemonic blocs.

Conclusion

For the last twenty years, BiH has been governed as a hybrid state under the dual hegemony of local ethnonationalism and international liberalism. This hegemony has been reproduced both in the state, where international actors have established the right to intervene and ethnic group rights have been institutionalized, and in civil society, where explicit or de facto ethnic CSOs have become clients and a "civil sector" was created consisting of professionalized NGOs accountable foremost to donors. Protest waves prior to 2014 challenged the dual hegemony foremost in opposition to ethnonationalist political actors. The latent struggle against dual hegemony became more publicly expressed in 2014 in the rejection of the "good society" and the logics of engagement in CS offered by both the international and ethnonationalist blocs. Most notably during and after the February 2014 protests, an emergent third bloc was constructed along the themes of the "good society" as a socially just one and logics of engagement in CS that build on the voluntary mass participation of citizens, organized bottom–up and crossing ethnic boundaries.

Adding to the obvious challenge posed to the material power of state institutions, our research indicates activists' struggles against ideational power within CS. These were directed both against co-optation, "project language," and re-framing as "civic initiatives" by international actors simultaneously to opposition to CS as ethnically divided clients and anti-politics as a form of consent to the continued rule of the established parties. The emergent activists, however, are not homogeneous in their positioning towards the IC and "civic" CS, as became obvious in the rising tensions within the activist scene and a growing split between leftist and moderate or "pragmatic" activists. In the absence of a strong, united movement, those collaborating with international actors risk being reframed and used to serve international interests or being perceived by former allies as traitors or opportunists. Attempts of engagement with activists by local moderate politicians or parties may also stir mistrust and provoke withdrawal from everyday politics, thereby nurturing a continued stance of anti-politics that blocks the identification of ideological allies or engaging in a pragmatic politics that prioritizes policy changes and engages in dialogue.

The article has argued that adapting Gramsci's understanding of hegemony to the inherently hybrid nature of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian state has purchase for understanding the potential and limitations of bottom–up agency. This is because the dual nature of the struggle was indicated both in material as well as ideational struggles. Second, we have argued that activists during and since 2014 have adopted a "local

first" approach, which helps to frame the means available to "reclaim the political" and produce substantive democratic outcomes given the conditions of dual hegemony. "Local first" as a theoretical lens brings the benefit of recognizing heterogeneous local experiences of the conflict and post-conflict period.

"Local first" was found as a medium-term way to continue collective action between protest waves and build legitimacy in local communities. Neglecting entrenched procedural discussions such as constitutional reform, the turn to the local enables avoiding the question of compromise or alliance with the hegemonic blocs. We return to the question of whether "local first" as a strategy of recent protest events indicates an increasing potential for contesting anti-politics through creating an alternative understanding of *politika*. "Local first" is a pragmatic strategy in response to dual hegemony that has grown since 2014, yet includes heterogeneous approaches divided by questions of purity, persistent echoes of anti-politics, and questions of formalization and cooperation. The potential in this shift to the local is in the degree to which it is not conclusive but rather represents a temporary strategy allowing for continuous struggle in the face of adverse conditions and the highly heterogeneous constituency of the "third bloc."

Supplemental Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online.

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Notes

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