

'*Sistem te laže!*': The anti-ruling class mobilisation of high school students in Bosnia and Herzegovinaⁱ

1. Introduction

On 20 June 2017, a group of 200 high school students gathered in front of the Cantonal Ministry of Education in the Bosnian city of Travnik. The students assembled to oppose the educational system known as 'Two Schools under One Roof', that segregates Bosnian children on the basis of their ethnic status in over 50 schools across Bosnia and Herzegovinaⁱⁱ. Through colourful banners and energetic chants, the students in front of the Ministry vocally denounced ethnic segregation and the active role of politicians in sustaining the system. 'Two Schools' has also been the subject of academic research. Its origins from post-war reconstruction have been studied (Božić 2006), but also the profound effects of segregation on the students (Tveit et al 2014), and the ethno-political forces in Bosnian politics that keep the system in place (Swimelar 2013). However, much less scholarly attention has been devoted to the ways in which the students themselves deal with their own everyday experience of this school situation. The ethno-political projects of the ruling political class are shaping much of Bosnian society, but the students are equally political agents in an environment in which their ethnic status seems to determine many of their actions (Mujkić 2007).

Therefore, this article will focus on the political agency of the protesting students, from the emergence of their movement in the nearby city of Jajce to the day of protest in Travnik. By offering an outline and analysis of their actions and ideas, the article will contribute to knowledge on the ways in which Bosnian youth negotiate their relationship with the ethno-political Bosnian state. This generation of young Bosnians is commonly described as an apathetic and disenchanted 'lost post-war generation' (a narrative mentioned in, but not endorsed by, Hromadžić 2015: 179; Palmberger 2016: 213). I argue that the Jajce students use precisely those feelings of disenchantment to perform overt resistance against a ruling class of politicians in Bosnia. After providing a brief context of Bosnian politics and education, I will analyse the protesting students by examining the actions of their protest movement, called *Naša Škola* ['Our School'], which developed in the year prior to the demonstration in Travnik. By following *Naša Škola* throughout the year, their underlying ideologies and motivations can be discerned and analysed. Moreover, I offer a background of two recent anti-elite protests that have several characteristics in common, to show the foundation on which the students have built their protests. This analysis shows that,

despite the common narrative on their apathy and powerlessness, the political agency of Bosnian youth deserves attention, and must be understood in the context of previous overt expressions of political disenchantment.

2. The current situation: institutionalised ethnicity in politics and education

2.1 Institutionalised ethnicity in Bosnian politics

The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, better known as the Dayton Agreement, was signed in December 1995 to end the war that had cost over 100,000 lives and displaced 1.5 million people as refugees. The agreement was not just supposed to put an end to the ongoing hostilities in the country. Another long-term goal of the peace accords was to establish an institutional framework that would enable the new country of Bosnia and Herzegovina to develop an independent, modern democracy and a viable civil society. Therefore, Annex 4 of the Dayton Agreement defines the new Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Constitution is based on the democratic theory of consociationalism, which attempts to maintain stability in previously divided societies through processes of power-sharing, self-rule and proportional representation of every ethnic group (Lijphart 1977). In Bosnia's Constitution, ethnic groups that are entitled to be subject of this power-sharing model are Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims), Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Serbs. Their new, constitutional status is that of a 'constituent people', a term that institutionalises the exclusive political status and rights of the three main ethnic groups, but similarly excludes the participation of citizens who do not belong to those groups (Mujkić 2007: 113).

The design of ethnic power-sharing is reflected on state level through a rotating three-headed Presidency, and formalised ethnic balances in the Council of Ministers and the House of Peoples, and through veto mechanisms employed by politicians of all ethnic groups to secure their ethno-political interests (Bahtić-Kunrath 2011: 900). Political power is heavily decentralised into political territories that are designed to be ethnically homogenous (Bieber 2006: 21). Bosnia and Herzegovina is divided into two entities, Republika Srpska (RS) and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH, or Federation). Bosnia can be seen as a confederation in which decentralised institutions hold relatively much political power (Bahtić-Kunrath 2011: 900). The entity of FBiH, where the protests discussed in this article have taken place, is split into ten cantons. The institutional design of the FBiH is more decentralised than the RS, in which political jurisdiction is largely concentrated on entity-level. Each of the ten cantons in the FBiH

holds jurisdiction in many areas, for example through Ministries of Health, Culture, and most importantly for this article, Education.

Institutions on both state and lower authority levels are designed to accommodate the power of the three 'constituent people'. At lower administrative levels, the entity of Republika Srpska maintains the dominance of Bosnian Serbs, and the ethnically homogenous cantons of FBiH secures the ethnic dominance for either Bosniaks or Bosnian Croats. The unique way in which Bosnia's Constitution has been realised, allows ethnicity to become the most salient identification marker in political life. Whereas constitutions normally accommodate a *demos* to form and thrive, in Bosnia '*ethnos* pretends to be *demos*' (Mujkić 2007: 117). Essential democratic functions, such as representation of the political individual and decision-making, are for a large part based on an individual's membership of an ethnic community. The participation of the individual citizen in the political community depends on their kinship to an ethnic status (Mujkić 2007: 116).



Figure 1: Map of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Jajce and Travnik protests took place in the Central Bosnia Canton (6). Image reproduced under the Creative Commons license (author: TUBS).

2.2 Institutionalised ethnicity in Bosnian education

The political decentralisation has led to high degrees of autonomy for lower levels of government in certain fields, one of them being education. Consequently, Bosnia has thirteen different Ministries of Education: one ministry in the RS, one in each FBiH Canton, and a coordinating ministry on the level of the FBiH. Since the protests of concern took place in the FBiH, the role of the RS Ministry of Education will not be discussed in this paper.

Most educational decisions are left to the cantonal ministries, but the distinction between primary and secondary education applies to every canton: primary schools teach children for nine years until age 14 or 15, after which they choose a secondary school for three or four more years. Secondary schools have either a technical or general character, which prepares students for entering respectively technical or academic tertiary education (Mršić 2017).

Given the lack of jurisdiction on the national or entity-level, no entity-wide education system or curriculum is in place in the Federation. Three different curricula are in use, devised and supervised by pedagogical institutes claiming to represent the three ethnic groups. The cantonal ministries are in charge of allocating the different curricula to schools, basing their choices on the ethnic composition of a municipality. The differences between the curricula are profound. Various content analyses of the curricula and their textbooks have led to the corresponding conclusion that each strongly focuses on the glorification of the titular ethnic group, concomitantly portraying the other ethnicities in negative terms (Low-Beer 2001; Bartulovic 2006; Torsti 2007; Karge 2008). Another distinction that politicians have turned into a major dispute is the official language of the curricula. In many cases, students are separated on the basis of the argument that their languages are incompatibleⁱⁱⁱ, which renders a single curriculum impossible (Palmerberger 2016: 97; Toe 2016). These differences leave the impression that there are three 'national stories' present in Bosnian education (Perry 2003: 32).

Given the dominance of either Bosniaks or Bosnian Croats in most Federation municipalities, the choice of curriculum is relatively straightforward. In Jajce, for instance, ethnic cleansing in the war led to a post-war dominance of Bosnian Croats, and thus the two schools there follow the Croat curriculum. In the first years after the war, Bosniak and Bosnian Serb children that had returned after their forced relocation in the war were forced to assimilate into the existing curriculum, or relocate to schools far away from home (Pašalić-Kreso 2008: 364). In the present day, most schools with ethnic minority students have a

'national group of subjects' system in place, which requires them to take certain subjects (geography, history, nature and society, religion, and mother tongue) in their own national curriculum. The choice of curriculum and education for ethnic minorities continue to play an important role in the Federation's education, and particularly in the town of Jajce.

In some cases, municipalities decided to establish two schools with two different curricula in one building. This phenomenon, commonly known as 'Two Schools under One Roof' approach, served as the direct catalyst for the Jajce students to protest. It is therefore important to gain a better understanding of what this system entails. Essentially, 'Two Schools' is a system in which two different schools, each following a Bosniak or Croat curriculum, are housed in the same building. Students are of the same age, have the same degree of schooling, are born in the same village, and are taught in the same building. Yet, they attend schools with different curricula, names, administrations and school boards. The students even use different entrances, or attend at different times (Božić 2006: 328). Currently, the 'Two Schools' system divides 57 high schools in three ethnically mixed cantons in the FBiH (Shaheed 2015: 10). Various politicians have actively demonstrated their reluctance to put an end to 'Two Schools', often using rhetoric that emphasises the essential differences between the ethnic groups. In 2007, then-Education Minister of the Central Bosnia Canton, Greta Kuna, argued that '[t]he "Two Schools under One Roof" project will not be suspended because you can't mix apples and pears. Apples with apples and pears with pears' (Owen-Jackson 2015: 129). According to the current Minister of Education, Katica Čerkez, the merging of two schools would imply an 'imposition of languages' that are not the same. The Minister refrains from discussing the current divide because she does not want to interfere in 'private human rights of children and parents' (Diskriminacija 2016).

By discussing the institutionalisation of ethnicity in Bosnian education, I wish to emphasise the powerful role politicians play in maintaining the *status quo*. Presenting the different curricula and mono-ethnic schools as fundamental features of their ethnic group, politicians essentialise ethnicity by framing ethnicity as an innate characteristic to a human being (Berger and Luckmann 1967). Kinship to an ethnic group is therefore an immutable and essential cornerstone of existence. The importance of education as a tool of establishing ethnic and national attachments has long been acknowledged in nationalism studies. Political elites use schools as primary locations in their quest for national legitimacy, whether through training in national myths, symbols and histories (Smith 1991) or through the imposition of a shared 'high culture' in compulsory education (Gellner 1983). In Bosnia, it can be argued that politicians use

the institutions of the school to draw essential and natural boundaries between their ethnic group and other ethnic groups. By invoking the idea of separate ethnic groups, political elites try to ‘evoke them, summon them, call them into being’ (Brubaker 2004: 10). In the previous section on Bosnian education, I focused on such efforts of Bosnian elites, without acknowledging the natural existence and homogeneity of these groups.

I believe, however, that the efforts of political elites are only one side of the story. In the words of Eric Hobsbawm, nationalism, while ‘constructed essentially from above, (...) cannot be understood unless also analysed from below, that is in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people’ (Hobsbawm 1992: 10). The need for a focus ‘on the ground’ has been acknowledged in sociology (Wertsch 1998: 146), and nationalism studies in particular (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008: 537), where there has been an overemphasis on the analysis of ‘production’ by political actors, thereby neglecting the powerful dynamics of ordinary people’s agency. A focus on the ownership of ordinary people allows for an analysis of the ‘consumption’ of nationalist ideas and messages (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008: 537). Scholars should acknowledge and emphasise the ability of ordinary actors to become political agents themselves, to act upon and transform the messages top-down political actors convey. As Walker Connor has concisely put it, scholars should not question ‘*what is*, but *what people believe is*’ (Connor 1994: 93, original emphasis). Therefore, the focus in the remainder of this article will be on the actions of those ordinary actors, the high school students that initiated the protests in Jajce and Travnik over the course of the 2016-2017 schoolyear.

3 The build-up to the Travnik protest

3.1 History and significance of Jajce in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Jajce holds a significant place in Bosnian and Yugoslavian history. Ruling the Kingdom of Bosnia from its fortress in the 15th century, and being one of the last towns to surrender to the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century, Jajce has commonly been referred to as ‘the City of Kings’ (Sahovic and Zulumovic 2012: 249). In 1942, the foundations of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia were laid in Jajce, which propelled Jajce into a highly symbolic place during Tito’s Yugoslavia (Sahovic and Zulumovic 2012: 249).

During the Bosnian War, Jajce lost its glorious appeal and turned into a fierce battlefield. Its previously multi-ethnic character was turned upside down by two occupations. First, the ethnic cleansing of all non-

Serbs after the army of Republika Srpska took control, followed by the expulsion of the Serb population towards the end of the war, when the Bosnian and Bosnian Croat armies gained control of the city (Dahlman and Ó Tuathail 2005: 653). The uneasy peace between the two groups, and the fighting and ethnic cleansing during the war left Jajce in ruins. Bosnian Serbs who had not left the region moved to the nearby town Jezero, in Republika Srpska. Bosnian Croat returnees were welcomed by the new local government, dominated by the Bosnian Croat party HDZ. For Bosniaks to return proved to be more difficult. Local Bosnian Croat politicians were actively obstructing the return of Bosniaks to their homes, and in March 2005, less than half of Jajce's Bosniaks had returned to their pre-war homes (Dahlman and Ó Tuathail 2005: 657).

The cold reception of the original Bosniak residents has not dissolved. Although everyday social relations in Jajce should not be seen in the same light as the case of ethnically divided Mostar, the political situation in Jajce continues to be polarised (Beharić 2017a). Local power relations are divided between the major Bosniak and Bosnian Croat parties, reflecting the demographics of the city, with each ethnic group constituting almost 50 percent of Jajce's population (Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2016). However, the initial dominance of one ethnic group over the other is still tangible, with many of Jajce's economic resources, business and heavy industry controlled by Bosnian Croats (Dahlman and Ó Tuathail 2005: 656).

3.2 June 2016: Announcement of a new high school in Jajce

The Central Bosnia Canton has the most 'Two Schools under One Roof' in the country. People who were forcibly displaced from their previous multi-ethnic community, often saw their town dominated by another ethnic group. In many instances, local politicians and international reconciliation organisations created a 'Two Schools' situation to, in their view, prevent uncomfortable ethnic tensions between Bosnian Croats and returning Bosniaks (Perry and Keil 2013). The two high schools in Jajce, however, remained organised along the Croat curriculum, despite high numbers of Bosniak returnee children. In line with the 'national group of subjects' regulation, Bosniak high school students are entitled to language instruction and religion classes according to the Bosnian curriculum (Beharić 2017a).

Schools in Jajce are ethnically segregated until the age of 14 or 15, organising their education based on their national curricula. After primary education, children either go to *gimnazija Nikola Šop* ['Nikola Šop High School'], named after Jajce's most famous (Bosnian Croat) poet, or *strukovna škola Jajce*

['Vocational School Jajce']. Both secondary schools use a Croat curriculum. In June 2016, this educational situation became the subject of fierce debate, when the Assembly of the Central Bosnia Canton agreed on the development of a new vocational school in Jajce, intended to be organised along a Bosniak curriculum. The proposal triggered around 30 students to protest in front of the two existing schools. Disapproving of the idea, they stated that it would lead to new ethnic divisions, and that 'they are all as one' (Al Jazeera Balkans 2016). Another protest saw nine students marching through the streets of Jajce, waving the national flags of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia. This 'inter-ethnic march' gained supporting statements of the Office of the High Representative (OHR) and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), two prominent organisations in Bosnian politics (Freeman-Woolpert 2016). Combined with extensive media coverage of the students' opposition, this criticism led to the Canton's Assembly's eventual decision not to go forward with the plan (Freeman-Woolpert 2016).

3.3 2017: Student movement *Naša Škola* organising against new school

Distrusting politicians in general, and assuming the temporary nature of a postponement of the plan, the students had serious concerns that the Ministry would pursue the development of a new school in a later phase. Indeed, in March 2017, the Ministry of Education announced the start of the Bosniak curriculum school from September 2017 onwards. According to education officials, the appointment of teachers and administrative staff had already begun. Moreover, the plan was allegedly supported by a petition of 500 parents of Bosniak pupils, who were in favour of the new school (Freeman-Woolpert 2017).

The Ministry's second announcement triggered more organised opposition. Cooperation between the parent council, teacher council and student representatives led to a survey on the Ministry's plan among staff and students of *strukovna škola Jajce*. While only a very small number endorsed the development of a Bosniak curriculum school, the majority of respondents showed their support for an extensive revision of the current Croat curriculum to better suit the wishes of every ethnic group (Knezević 2017). In the weeks and months after the Ministry's decision, opposing voices became more frequently featured in the news. Samir Beharić, a youth activist and former student of *Nikola Šop* spoke in various articles of his support for the emerging resistance, his own high school experiences, and the political situation in Jajce (Beharić 2017a; Beharić 2017b; Knezević 2017; Bešlija 2017). Current Jajce high school students were given a voice as well. One student, presented as being 'at the forefront of the struggle', stated that

‘passing on experiences of hatred stemming from the war is not a solution’ (Knezević 2017). In other articles, students described the profound effects of segregation on their everyday lives: ‘When I started attending the first grade of the secondary school, where we weren’t separated, I cannot describe the feeling when I could finally sit with and talk to somebody who you were forbidden to have contact with (...)’ (Ahmetasevic 2017). Three school friends from Jajce, active in the protests, recall the negative first impressions they had of each other, just because of their separation: ‘Then we befriended, and then we realised we had made a mistake. (...) We only see the human being, (...) and we laugh at children who make insults’ (Maglajlija 2016).

More students started to organise opposition in what would eventually become *Gradanska inicijativa Naša Škola* [‘civic initiative Our School’]. The small group of students that initiated the march in June 2016 was still involved, and had been receiving support by the local youth centre, *Centar za Obrazovanje i Druženje Jajce* [‘Centre for Education and Gathering Jajce’], from the very beginning. Together with other local activists and the NGO Nansen Dialogue Centre (NDC), they managed to set up a small-scale movement, albeit not very structured (Chaghouani 2018: 70). This rudimentary way of organising proved eventually to be the start of the *Naša Škola* initiative, in which student organisations outside of Jajce became involved as well. Presented as the product of this initiative, in June 2017 a protest was announced in front of the Cantonal Ministry of Education in Travnik, an hour’s drive southeast from Jajce (*Naša Škola* 2017a).

On the 17th of June, only three days before the protest in Travnik was planned, Jajce mayor Edin Hozan announced abandonment of the plan for a new Bosniak curriculum school in Jajce. On the Facebook page of *Naša Škola*, the main mode of communication for the protest, a triumphant message was widely shared. The message celebrates the efforts of a small group of high school students to prevent ‘another negative example’ of educational segregation (*Naša Škola* 2017b). According to the organisers, this decision shows the possibilities for ‘true change and reconciliation in society’ when people unite. Their targets are ‘all politicians’ who tried to deprive young people of many opportunities by separating them on the basis of their national group, or ‘*nacionalni ključ*’. *Naša Škola* closed their message by announcing that the protest in Travnik would still take place three days later in order to meet with Cantonal Minister Katica Čerkez and discuss the wider problem of educational segregation (*Naša Škola* 2017b). One of the organisation’s students emphasised that the march must go on, ‘so she [Minister Čerkez] does not think she is rid of us now’ (Stockmans 2017). The group also said to bring demands to the meeting: the

abolition of the 'Two Schools' solution, a single curriculum that would be tailored to suit all students, and the introduction of a working group of high school students, NGO representatives and experts (Mišeljić 2017).

4 Travnik protest

4.1 20 June 2017: Students in front of the Ministry of Education, Travnik

Tuesday 20 June 2017 was a warm day in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with temperatures in Travnik rising to thirty degrees Celsius. Just before midday, around 150 high school students^{iv} had gathered in front of the Cantonal Ministry of Education. Most of them lined up on the parking area directly in front of the building's entrance with a small number of students seeking cover from the burning sun underneath a small collection of trees next to the car park. The students, most of them aged between 15 and 18, were seemingly excited: they were laughing, chatting, chanting and clapping, and a general cheerful vibe could be felt. The protest was initiated to prevent a specific policy measure from being executed, but it also gained a more hopeful character since its primary goal had already been achieved. Feelings of victory appeared even more when the students from the *gimnazija Nikola Šop* made their entrance. As their principal had prohibited the students to attend the protest and threatened them with expulsion, most students had covered their faces with masks of poet Nikola Šop, after whom their school is named. The Jajce students were not the only ones to be obstructed in attending. A protest organisers said that he was delighted with the final turnout, after hearing many stories of parents not allowing their children to travel to Travnik, or of other students who had not managed to organise transportation. Moreover, he expected that the protest would receive extensive coverage in the news, given the large number of journalists and cameras. Indeed, in the following days and weeks, many national and international media paid attention to the students' 'victory against segregation' (e.g. BBC 2017; Klix.ba 2017; Reuters 2017).

In order to show the distinction between themselves and the politicians inside the Ministry building, the students formed a straight line that blocked the exit of the car park. Most of the students carried banners with slogans and bright illustrations. The collection of banners held up above their heads formed a colourful palette of anti-segregation statements against the blue Bosnian sky. Taken together, the slogans give a decent idea of the ideas, targets and purposes of the protest, and of the protest movement that was formed in Jajce.

Many slogans were directed towards the politicians who the students saw as the cause of segregated schooling in the first place, but more importantly, as those most directly responsible for maintaining the system. The main reason the students had assembled in Travnik was because of the unwillingness of Education Minister Čerkez to cancel the new Bosniak-curriculum school in Jajce. However, it was not the actions of one individual in power that the students saw as the most problematic issue. Instead, their discontent was primarily with the system of unreliable, corrupt politicians ruling the country. Through slogans such as *Segregacija je loša investicija* [‘Segregation is a bad investment’], *Znanje nije roba* [‘Knowledge is not a commodity’], *Smrt politici – Sloboda obrazovanju* [‘Death to politics, freedom to education’] and *Milion KM za podjele* [‘One million Bosnian Marks for divisions’], the students criticised the ruling political class and their prevalence of personal interests and capital over the future of Bosnia’s younger generations. Just as corruption has become embedded in Bosnia’s political and economic life (Transparency International 2017), young people’s negative views on the ubiquity of corruption in politics were clearly detectable. Several reports have addressed the distrust of youth in politics. According to the interviewed youth, the ‘dirty’ political arena is best avoided and commonly associated with corruption and personal enrichment (NDC and Saferworld 2012; UNDP 2012). In her research on Bosnian youth in Mostar, Azra Hromadžić argues that the perception of the pervasiveness of corruption in the ruling class has led to a post-war culture of equating corruption with the Bosnian state (Hromadžić 2015: 178). This distrust in the state can be traced back to socialist times, in which politics, and thus the state, was seen as a realm of immorality (Touquet 2015: 398). Similarly, the everyday political reality for Bosnians has become the ruling class, whether local, national or international politicians, who have no genuine interest in the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina but only their own self-interest. The many slogans at the protest referring to the economic interests of politicians fit in this narrative.



Figure 2: Protesters at the demonstration in Travnik, 20 June 2017.

The protesters' discontent with the ruling political class was not only visibly present through their banners, their discontent was expressed vocally as well. Alongside chants like 'Together in school' and 'We will not have Two Schools under One Roof', one particular song generated recognition and enthusiasm among the students. The song *Sistem te laže* ['The system is lying to you'] by Serbian hip-hop collective Beogradski Sindikat had been a hit across the Balkans in 2016, and its chorus was passionately chanted on the Travnik car park. The lyrics describe the continuing depressing situation of post-Yugoslav societies, despite all 'protests, reforms, democracy and new technology' (Beogradski Sindikat 2016). The first verse aligns with the post-war culture of pervasive corruption, as group member Dare delivers the lines 'And still in government we have lying puppets, they follow their orders and steal everything for themselves' (Beogradski Sindikat 2016). In Travnik, it was the chant-like chorus of *Sistem te laže* that reflected the dissatisfaction of the protesters most aptly:

Sistem te laže,

ne veruj šta ti kaže.

Ovaj život je borba,

od rođenja do groba,

zato ustani odmah!

[The system is lying to you,

don't believe what it tells you.

This life is a battle,

from the cradle to the grave,

so rise up immediately!]

(Beogradski Sindikat 2016)

It is no coincidence that this music was involved in the demonstration. Since the ending of the wars in Yugoslavia, hip-hop movements in various post-Yugoslav countries have emerged, united by firm convictions against the corruption of the ruling political class and renewed violence between ethnic groups (Sito-Sutic 2007; Cvetanović 2016). In the weeks leading up to the protest, *Naša Škola* attracted the support of several famous artists, such as Serbian hip-hop artist Marčelo (Source.ba 2017) and Bosnian rapper Edo Maajka (Pogled.ba 2017). A common theme in the lyrics and public appearances of all these artists is their detachment from the dominant ethnonationalist narrative of politicians (Kovać 2013: 302). The students seemed to recognise their own grievances in the music of these artists, and used it as an important mode of expression in their own protest.

While the colourful and loud collection of students continued to take up the car park space, a delegation of *Naša Škola* entered the Ministry's building, having accepted an invitation of Minister Čerkez the movement had received earlier. The students outside were waiting for their return, and when they did, accompanied by Čerkez, they flocked to witness her statement. The Minister dismissed the students' accusation that she, or other Bosnian politicians, could change the system. According to Čerkez, the school system was a product of the Dayton Peace Agreement and its Constitution, which was drafted by

the international community. She expressed her confusion as to why the students would ally with the international community, the actual causers of the problem, and she suggested they go ‘to the disco’ instead of fighting a system that cannot be changed (Mišeljić 2017).

This interaction between the high school protesters and a politician in power is not particularly unique, nor do the Jajce and Travnik protests exist in a protest vacuum. In the years before these student protests, more civic demonstrations, small and large, had been organised throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina. Most notably, the June 2013 protest in Sarajevo and the February 2014 mobilisations in many cities in the Federation, saw thousands of citizens take to the streets to criticise the political *status quo* in Bosnia. Those protests originated from a strong discontent with the ruling class, and their accountability to the citizens. In both cases, the dismissive and reactionary responses of the politicians in power left the opposition even more resentful. Minister Čerkez’s response to the students shares similarities with the ways in which politicians handled the previous protests. However, I would like to argue this is not the only similarity between the protests. In the next section, I will place the protests in Jajce and Travnik in the context of a series of protests that took place in Bosnia in 2013 and 2014. I argue that the origins and anti-ruling class narrative of the protests in Jajce and Travnik must be understood in light of these recent mobilisations.

4.2 Student movement in Jajce and Travnik as the product of previous protests

The way in which the students took a stand against the ruling political class and their corrupted and ethnonationalist politics cannot be dissociated from the ideas and actions of protesters in 2013 and 2014. In June 2013, over fifteen-thousand protesters in Sarajevo took to the streets to protest the unwillingness of politicians to adopt a new law on the Bosnian *Jedinstveni Matični Broj Građana* [‘Unique Master Citizen Number’ identification number (better known by the acronym JMBG), an impasse that made it impossible for Bosnian new-borns to make use of basic social services. A year later, a small-scale workers’ protest against privatisations and factory closures in the north-east city of Tuzla expanded rapidly to many other cities and towns in the Federation, and took a potent and sometimes violent turn (Mujkić 2016: 227). After a few days, the street demonstrations were replaced by a more sustained critique of the political system, through the organisation of the plenum. The plenum is a form of direct democracy, and represents a non-hierarchical place in which the voices of all citizens are heard, especially those minority voices that tend to be overlooked or ignored in traditional politics (Mujkić

2016: 228). At its height, the plenum in Sarajevo and Tuzla drew around 1000 participants (Murtagh 2015: 154).

The rationale behind the organisation of this form of new democracy was similar to the grievances heard in the street demonstrations preceding the plenum, as well as in the JMBG protest the year before. Citizens united against a common enemy that they felt was not capable of ruling the country. This *korumpirani sistem* [‘corrupt system’] was the corrupt ruling class of ‘parties that compose the structure of government, the NGOs which work for these parties, and the international organisations which through their actions support the *status quo*’ (Kurtović and Hromadžić 2017: 285). The same common enemy had been singled out during the protests in Jajce and Travnik. Due to their prevalence of personal interests over the future of Bosnians, the ruling class of politicians had been deliberately maintaining the ethnic segregation in education. Citizens’ distrust in immoral politics has been present in Yugoslav and Bosnian society for a long time (Touquet 2015: 398), but it was usually paired with strong feelings of disempowerment, and the basic need for survival in a corruption-dominated system (Kurtović and Hromadžić 2017: 269). The protests that happened in quick succession across the country were the first major signs that active political mobilisation against this system could take place, and could make an impact.

Secondly, both the 2013 JMBG and 2014 plenum protests were characterised by their efforts to build solidarity based on social justice instead of ethnic status (Murtagh 2015: 154). The new identification number concerned not just some ethnic groups, but was of importance to the wellbeing of all Bosnians. Likewise, the socioeconomic problems of poverty and unemployment that underpinned the plenum protests transcended ethnicity. Both protest movements tried to unite Bosnian citizens across ethnicities through grievances that applied to them all. A similar theme can be seen during the mobilisations in Jajce and Travnik, where the students were concerned with the wellbeing of their fellow students through quality education instead of ethnic differences. The small group of students that organised the ‘inter-ethnic march’ in Jajce during the summer of 2016 named their initiative ‘Friends without Nationalism’, and the follow-up movement, *Naša Škola*^v, organised the Travnik demonstration under the slogan ‘*Pridružite se borbi za bolje obrazovanje!*’ [‘Join the fight for better education!’]. The students argued that the differences between ethnicities do not form the root of the problem. The actual issue at stake was the future of all Bosnian children because the ethnopolitics of their politicians put the quality of their education at risk. In an open letter directed to the Ministry that *Naša Škola* published a few weeks before

the Travnik protest, these arguments are clearly outlined. According to the students, the new Bosniak-curriculum school would lead to high costs, an expensive school administration and a sharp drop in the number of students enrolled. The most important objection was that the new mono-ethnic school would be at the expense of the quality of education for the students (*Naša Škola* 2017c).

5 Conclusion

In this article, I have looked at a protest movement in the Bosnian city of Jajce led by high schools students who are often named part of a ‘lost generation’. Through an analysis of the movement’s actions, I have argued that their underlying narrative used the feelings of apathy and disenchantment attributed to this ‘lost generation’ to voice their dissatisfaction with the larger system of the ruling class of politicians. The politicians’ prevalence of personal political and business interests over the future of Bosnia’s younger generations has maintained an ethnically segregated education system. In order to come to a better understanding of the origins of the student protests, and to show that they did not appear in a protest vacuum, I have placed them in the context of two major civic mobilisations in Bosnia in 2013 and 2014^{vi}. Through these protests, Bosnian citizens showed that they no longer accepted the ways in which politicians circumvented people’s everyday grievances by engaging in corrupt ethnopolitics. I have argued that this anti-elite narrative was also the primary underpinning of the *Naša Škola* movement in Jajce. Secondly, the article emphasises the importance of considering ordinary Bosnians, and Bosnian youth in particular, as political agents, even if the institutionalised ethnopolitical framework of the Bosnian state provides reasons to think that the voice of Bosnian children is smothered. In the ‘constantly shifting, morally confusing, and nationalism-prone context’ of Bosnian society, individuals negotiate their place towards the state and its politics (Hromadžić 2015: 180; see also Bougarel, Helms and Duijzings 2007; Jansen 2015; Brković 2017). The students in Jajce and Travnik used their agency to show their discontent with the ethnopolitical framework imposed by the ruling political class.

It is too simplistic to state that the students duplicated the narrative, but I believe that placing the student protest in line with the previous protests does help to understand its emergence. For a large part, the importance of the protest context that I have laid out can be found in the awakening of young people’s political agency. Just as rebellious youth in Sarajevo had shown the elites that ‘they are a force to be reckoned with’ (Garić-Humphrey 2018: 188), the ultimate decision of Minister Čerkez to cancel the new school was a sign to the Jajce students that ‘all political decisions can be reversed when we really want

it' (*Naša Škola* 2017b). The long-term success of the previous protests marked a shift in political consciousness and optimism that helped the Jajce students to find the confidence to mobilise resistance to the ruling political class. It is important to view this hopeful optimism of Jajce's students in Bosnia's political context of institutionalised ethnicity, in which individuals are expected to behave according to the expectations of their ethnic elites (Mujkić 2007: 116). In Jajce and Travnik, students did the complete opposite: they acted as political individuals that were not bound to the ethnopolitical frame of the ruling class.

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ⁱⁱ I interchangeably use ‘Bosnia and Herzegovina’ and ‘Bosnia’ when referring to the country.

ⁱⁱⁱ Since the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the linguistic question in Bosnia has proved to be politically divisive. Politicians of all ethnic groups have not ceased to essentialise the differences in the origins, grammar and pronunciation of the languages that stem from the language that was previously known as Serbo-Croatian (Greenberg 2008: 138-156). It is important to mention that the languages are mutually intelligible, although Serbian uses the Cyrillic alphabet.

^{iv} My estimation is in line with some news articles (Mišeljić 2017; Spaic 2017), while another article estimated almost 300 students attending the protest (Klix.ba 2017). Information for which I do not present secondary sources are my personal observations during the protest.

^v The movement’s full name, *Građanska Inicijativa "Naša Škola"* [Civic Initiative ‘Our School’] tells something about their intentions. In previous protests, movements identified with the term *gradjani*, in order to come across as citizens, rather than members of an ethnic group (Touquet 2015: 394).

^{vi} This article does not engage in discusses the Pravda za Davida [‘Justice for David’] protests, which recently drew thousands of people to the streets and squares of Banja Luka and Sarajevo after the suspicious death of David Dragičević. Given their anti-elite character, the protests are undeniably relevant to the protests discussed here, and they deserve further scrutiny.