

# **LAUGHING OUR WAY TO THE PUBLIC SPHERE: Humorous Contentious Performances of Social Movements**

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## **Abstract**

Humorous contentious performances are very popular with social movement activists, despite being relatively understudied and undervalued in the field of political science. Moreover, if scholars focus on them, it is usually in the context of democracies. Inspired by the cultural tradition of social movement studies, this thesis explores the perceived effectiveness of the use of humorous contentious performances in environments where the access to the public sphere is limited, making protest participation difficult. Through an analysis of the mobilization of the public, recruitment, internal group dynamics and relations with the authorities, the perceptions of the use of humour by the activists are assessed as effective, ambiguous and not effective. The nature of this research is exploratory and is based on a comparative study of three movements: The Polish Orange Alternative; The Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party; and a recently formed Serbian Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own movement. Through a discourse analysis of conducted semi-structured interviews and available interview excerpts, it was discovered that in three out of four indicators, the use of humour is perceived to be effective, regardless of whether the movements managed to reach their tangible goals or not. This enhances our knowledge of direct civic action and helps to legitimize humour as an important protest tool.

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I usually try to avoid half-hearted, tacky monologues but despite my cynicism, I have to admit that the two years I spent at CEU were life-changing. I found there all the things money cannot buy: love, friendship, expertise, and adventure. I really hope that CEU will stay the same for the next generations to come! Looking back, there is a number of people who stood by my side for most of the time, and I would like to use this space to express my gratitude and love.

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# 1 Introduction

*I applied to Central European University because of its original mission: to promote civil society organizations, activism, and aspire to bring about social change. As a researcher, artist and activist coming from a region burdened with Soviet legacy, I saw what strong civil society can achieve. After the governmental attacks forcing my alma mater to leave its home of 26 years, I was happy to see that a small group of students decided to make a stand. They did not expect to reverse these events, but wanted to show dissent and make sure that it will not be forgotten. As I was observing the mobilization of their small movement, their drive and enthusiasm, my interest in social movements grew even more. During the protests, I saw people of all ages, genders and nationalities. Instead of listening to political speeches, they preferred to come to the student movement's stand: chanting, dancing, or punching barrels with big plastic sticks, happy for finally being given an opportunity to express their opinions, and surprised it could be fun to do so. These images stayed with me while writing this thesis.*

To enjoy a dose of political humour, it is usually enough to turn on the TV and listen to an evening show of a famous comedian of our choice. However, humorous contentious performances are much more diverse than political jokes: from demonstration banners and chants, to street theatre and graffiti, many social movements in various geographical regions chose humour as a “weapon” in their fight against governmental injustices. However, the use of humour by social movements has for long been overlooked by political science scholars and even nowadays is sometimes perceived as not “serious enough” to focus on despite its popularity with social movements’ activists. On the other hand, scholars who study the use of political humour (for instance, Sørensen (2006, 2014, 2016)) usually focus only on democratic environments where the public sphere is easily accessible and humorous political criticism is more common.

The aim of this thesis is to shift the focus from democracies to environments with a limited access to the public sphere, and explore the use of humorous contentious performances by social movements which chose humour as their main strategy in their fight against governmental injustices. I explore this issue through:

- (1) *repertoire of actions* (i.e. specific contentious humorous performances),

- (2) *perceived effectiveness of the use of humour* by activists in terms of four indicators: mobilization of the public, recruitment of new members, enhancement of internal group dynamics, and help with dealing with authorities. It is assessed as *effective, ambiguous and not effective* depending on the responses of my interviewees and data available from other primary sources.

The focus on perceptions is not a novelty, inspired mainly by the cultural approach to social movements' studies (Johnston and Klandermans 1995, Goodwin et al. 2001, Flam and King 2005, Johnston and Noakes 2005). It also draws inspiration from earlier works of Tilly and his concept of WUNC (worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment) which is directly derived from activists' perceptions as well (2008, 72). The causal chain of the effectiveness of the use of humour is inspired mainly by two theories of humour: Incongruity and Relief theory.

My cases are limited to the Central Eastern European region in an attempt to limit intervening factors due to the similar historical legacies of the countries. They include the Polish Orange Alternative which emerged after the introduction of the Martial Law in 1981 and ceased most of its activities by 1989; the Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party established in 2006 and famous mainly for its anti-anti-immigration campaign in 2016 ridiculing the anti-immigration stances of the Hungarian ruling party; and a recently formed Serbian Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own movement, a protest response to the development of the Belgrade Waterfront Project.

The research goal of this exploratory study is hypothesis-building with a hypotheses and ideas for future research presented in the Discussion and Conclusion section. My data collection strategy is primarily based on a consultation of primary sources (documents produced by the movements, available interview excerpts, and information obtained during semi-structured interviews with activists that I conducted in Serbia), however, I also double-check my results against data from secondary sources. Because the indicator of perceived effectiveness is highly subjective, I decided to focus on those who were in charge of employing humour in their activities, i.e. the activists. To see possible changes over time, I concentrated on those activists who spend a considerably long

period of time in the movement and held important roles (founders, public speakers, creative managers).

I am convinced this topic can be of interest to both scholars and grassroots activists and can enhance our understanding of possible forms of direct civic action and its impact both on activists and bystanders. If proven effective, this research can also serve as a legitimizing tool for humorous protests as a “serious” tactic, not only a playful game. I also believe that despite the analysis being focused solely on the Central Eastern European region, its results, just as humour, can be applied more generally.

This Introduction is followed by a theoretical chapter, three case studies, discussion of results and a conclusion. The theoretical chapter is divided into four sections introducing the study of humour, environments where humorous contentious performances can be used, the link between humour, politics and social movements, and the methodological framework of this thesis. The next chapter presents three case studies: the Polish Orange Alternative, Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party and the Serbian Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own movements. The specific focus is on the analysis of types of humorous contentious performances and their perceived effectiveness. The final Discussion and Conclusion chapter offers a comparative analysis, emphasizing similarities and differences between the cases, possible changes over time, and a hypothesis that was built as a result of the exploratory study. It also outlines possible avenues for future research.



## **2 Theory**

### **2.1 Humour and Politics**

#### **2.1.1 Why Humour?**

The virtues of using humour have already been acknowledged by experts in many fields, from health to peace building (Martin 2004, McCreaddie and Wiggins, 2009, Zelizer 2010). This being a political science research, I depart by observing an inconsistency in the existing studies of humorous contentious performances. On the one hand, empirical evidence shows that humorous techniques have been very popular with activists. Satire, jokes, humorous street theatrical performances or other stunts criticizing the political situation or societal issues, both in democracies and oppressive regimes, have been employed extensively throughout history in various countries. Hart and Bos (2007) collected a list of humorous social protests, with examples varying from the Latin American Zapatista movement, the Italian Gasparazzo satirical comic journal, to humorous guerrilla used by the German student movements in the 1960s, and ending with the most oppressive regimes of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Speier (1998) also speaks about the universality of humour as a strategy of resistance and critique, even though different environments might require different humorous strategies (this will be discussed further on).

On the other hand, scholars are pointing to the lack of focus on humour in political science, which they explain by the fact that it is possibly perceived as a topic not “serious enough” to pay attention to. For instance, Sørensen (2014), one of the main researchers of humorous social movements, shares experience about presenting her research: whereas ordinary citizens and some activists react enthusiastically, seeing humour as something positive and useful, scholars tend to be more sceptical, understanding humour as entertainment with no big potential for social movements’ practices, and hence a subject of little relevance for political science (2014, 22). While humour is usually seen as non-serious and light-hearted, politics is understood as something of a grave importance (Kutz-Flamenbaum 2014, 294). This would partly explain the scarcity of relevant

political science literature (for examples, see Hassan 2013, Kutz-Flamenbaum 2014, Sørensen 2014 and Yalcintas 2015).

This scepticism has deeper roots. Some sources stress the potential negative aspects of its use, and the transformation of humour from a “powerful weapon of the weak” to a tool maintaining the status quo. For instance, Mulkay (1988, 209, 212) warns that humorous messages appeal only to those already convinced, thus underscoring existing political divisions. Similarly, Benton (1988, 54) claims that political jokes cannot achieve anything at all. Even some activists perceive the use of humour as potentially harmful, mainly from a fear of being considered foolish and not serious enough to negotiate with (Kutz 2014, 297). This difference in opinions on humour and the empirical evidence of the popularity of its use suggests that this field of study can open some interesting questions and is worth exploring further. The following sections introduce my topic of interest in more detail, linking each of its components to the relevant literature, and starting with the study of humour itself.

### 2.1.2 Theories of Humour

The focus in this thesis is on political humour used by social movements criticizing injustices and oppressive authorities. It can be understood as anything causing amusement and its shape can vary from a street performance, to a satirical social media post or a simple slogan in a demonstration (Sørensen 2006, 2014, 2016). I acknowledge that this is not the only way how humour can be used, as it often serves as a tool to ridicule minorities or humiliate the vulnerable (Sørensen 2014, 54). But these instances, however crucial, are beyond the scope of this paper.

When it comes to the study of humour, we can identify three dominant theories. The oldest one is *Superiority theory* which emerged from ancient Greek philosophy (Plato 1978) and was forwarded by Hobbes (1651). Humour here is understood as an aggressive way of showing who is superior: a type of mockery whose purpose is to raise oneself by bringing down the target of the ridicule

(Morreall 1983, 1987). *Relief theory*, in contrast, perceives humour as a psychological mechanism which helps the body to “let off steam,” i.e. to release stress and nervous energy so that one achieves the state of mental balance (Morreall 1987, Billig 2002). It can also be understood as a way of expressing forbidden ideas, taboos and to show resistance (Freud 1960). The most recent theory stressing the importance of humour both in politics and ordinary life is *Incongruity theory*. According to its proponents, we laugh because we are faced with an incongruity (ambiguity, inconsistency), i.e. a situation where ideas we are presented with do not fit together. Once we realize this incongruity, we arrive at a stage of surprise (an “a-ha moment”) (Morreall 1983). Humour is, thus, created as a result of a conflict of what is expected and what is actually presented in the humorous situation (Latta 1998, 106; a “ha-ha moment”). Although *Incongruity theory* is nowadays the most widely used, we cannot expect one single theory to explain every possible instance of the use of humour. Whereas *Incongruity theory* tells us how humour is generated, *Relief theory* can help us understand why individuals laugh at particular jokes or choose to use humour in particular situations, and *Superiority theory* explains certain types of aggressive humour (Sørensen 2014, 53).

In this thesis, my understanding of the effects of humour is derived mainly from *Incongruity theory*. While using humour, a clear, serious message is camouflaged by foolishness. I also expect *Relief theory* to play an important role, mainly in instances where oppressed citizens find refuge in humorous contentious performance which give them new possibilities to express their dissent. Which theory proved to be the most useful is assessed after the case studies.

## 2.2 Humour and Contentious Politics

### 2.2.1 Democracies versus Oppressive Regimes

Humour and politics have been linked together throughout most of political history (Speier 1998). As Bakhtin (1984) in his work on Rabelais points out, humour was a very powerful tool of social protest already in the late medieval and early modern era. The reason is quite straightforward: during carnivalesque festivities, the existing hierarchies between the nobles and the subordinates were suspended. Costumes provided anonymity and political protest was tolerated as long as it was in the form of joking (theatre plays, pranks etc.). Protesting in a humorous way was accompanied by a certain level of innocence and protection, because it could look foolish if a ruler punished an acting fool. The same applies also to other ritualized settings (e.g. mock parades during charivari demonstrations in France (Tilly 1986, 32)).

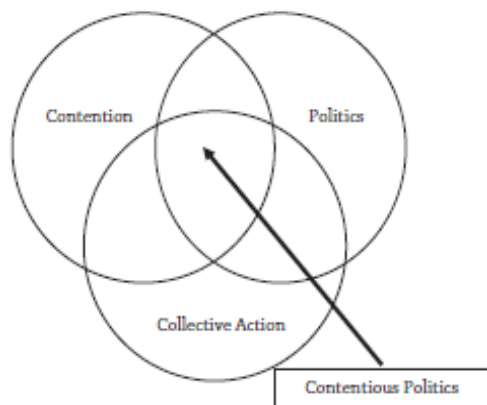
A fool, who is stereotypically perceived as someone who should not be taken seriously, has usually escaped formal punishment and held a certain type of immunity because of his perceived innocence (Klapp 1949). Certain types of “fools” had also an institutionalized character (e.g. royal jesters). Hart (2007, 5) links this phenomenon to professional comedians nowadays who are often able to present harsh truths and political criticism in an easier manner than political activists – through joking, sarcasm and laughter. In this, perceivably “less serious” manner, the message is still spread and the desired awareness raised. Branagan (2007, 3) also argues that presenting messages in a humorous way makes them more digestible for the audience, while at the same time retaining the seriousness of the content.

The question is, in what kind of environment is it useful to use humour? Kutz-Flamenbaum (2014) presents two contrasting opinions (Kutz-Flamenbaum 2014, 296). On the one hand, some scholars claim that humour can flourish only in democratic societies supporting open debates and free speech, and will not be tolerated in non-democratic states where its use can be prevented by repression, political threat (Hayat 2007), or dogmatic ideology (Bayat 2007). In democracies, we

can count numerous humorous and satiric public contentious performances initiated either by social movements (e.g. Santas handing out gifts from the supermarket shelves organized by the Danish Solvognen Group), activists (Baby Trump Balloon Flown over London), or other political actors (Sørensen 2016, 43 and 56; Khan 2018). In democracies, the public sphere is easily accessible and humour serves as a useful tool for expressing political dissent. On the other hand, as Hart's collection (2007) and other empirical evidence show, humour has been present even in extremely repressive societies, such as Nazi Germany, during the Nazi occupation of Denmark and Norway (Stokker 1995), or all over the totalitarian Soviet Union and its satellite states (Shehata 1992, Kenney 2002, Romanienko 2007). Recently, humorous protest banners and other humorous performances were used during the protests in Egypt (Hassan 2013, Helmy and Frerichs 2013) and Turkey (Yalcintas 2015). However, humorous protests did not always happen on public squares, sometimes they had to be more subtle, peripheral or hidden depending on the type of political regime, as, for instance, in the case of private jokes during the Soviet regime (Hart 2007).

Some scholars (e.g. Boyer and Yurchak 2010; Haugerud 2013) point out that it is in the times of crisis and oppression when humour is very likely to be used and accepted by the audience, as it disrupts daily stereotypes of fear and apathy of the public. This resonates with the concept of *misbehaviour* presented by Edwards (2014, 213) who claims that in more repressive regimes, where the protest space available for the activists is not that wide, humour and other creative or artistic acts might seem to be the only source of resistance left, because open political protests are violently repressed. However, this does not mean that these protests will not be repressed at all. Governments are still in control of coercive means, like the army or police, which means that large-scale violence remains a possibility (Tilly 2008, 7), but the reactions of the regime might be softer. However, these authors do not provide any kind of empirical evidence for their claims. For this reason, I chose the relationships with the authorities as one of my research indicators to see whether humorous protests really do serve as a form of protection from repression. However, before we proceed further, some conceptual clarifications about contentious politics are necessary.

### 2.2.2 Conceptual Considerations



**Figure 1: Components of Contentious Politics (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 10)**

The concepts of misbehaviour and contentious performances are derived from the field of *contentious politics*. “Contentious politics involves interactions in which actors make claims bearing on other actors’ interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs, in which governments are involved as targets, initiators

of claims, or third parties. Contentious politics thus brings together three familiar features of social life: contention, collective action, and politics” (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 7) (see Figure 1). These forms of collective action are distinct from market relations or representative politics, because they capture an arena where ordinary people directly confront elites, authorities, and challenge the status quo (Tarrow 2011, 30). Because of my focus on humour, I deal primarily with the concept of *transgressive contention*, where protests “cross institutional boundaries into forbidden or unknown territory. This either violates standard arrangements or adopts previously unknown forms of claim making,” for instance, humorous theatrical performances (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 62). Two factors determine the choice of contentious actions: the capacity of the government to intervene and the regime’s state of democracy, i.e. different strategies are necessary in different regime types (Tilly 2008, 19).

As Tarrow argues (2011, 125), in more oppressive regimes where pluralism and access to legitimate political participation are limited, citizens are more sensitive to symbolic types of protest because these performances “add amusement or excitement to public politics; help solidarity to grow through the interaction of the ‘performers’ in protest actions; and are appealing because they disrupt the routines of life in ways that protesters hope will disarm, dismay, and disrupt opponents” (Tarrow 2011, 121). Disruption breaks with routine, startles bystanders, and leaves elites

disoriented, at least for a time (Piven and Cloward 1977). In my opinion, this could be achieved even more easily if the performance is creative and appealing to the audience, for instance, by employing humour.

Building on Tarrow's claims, I argue that the public is apathetic about and fearful to be involved in politics because in oppressive regimes, backsliding democracies or other illiberal regimes, their access to the public sphere is either limited or non-existent. In Habermas' understanding, "the public sphere is a sphere which mediates between society and state, in which the public organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion" (Habermas 1964, 50). Whereas the state authority is not a part of this sphere, radio, television, newspapers and magazines are tools supposed to enable citizens to express themselves in an unrestricted manner about issues of general interest (Habermas 1964, 49). However, in societies where the state has control over the media and exercises oppression, citizens are deprived of the possibility to publicly communicate their political stances in an open and free manner, which creates frustration, fear and apathy. Because of these mechanisms of state control, there is a need for alternative ways of public communication. Among these, we can count leaflets, pamphlets, Internet fora, as well as strikes and creative demonstrations which aim to disrupt these regulations, even if only for a while (Szymanski-Düll 2015, 666).

Fraser (1990) calls these alternative forms of communication "counterpublics." When one is not able to voice their concerns in the prevailing public sphere, these excluded groups create discursive counterpublics in which they can express their oppositional opinions (Fraser 1990, 67-68). In other words: "through identification and articulation of dissent, one demands access to the prevailing public sphere. By this [...], a counterpublic is created and pushed into the realm of the visible and audible. In this process, the person articulating their dissent becomes a political subject" (Szymanski-Düll 2015, 667). By using humorous contentious performances, nonviolent social movements take part in the creation of counterpublics and once again give the audience a possibility to publicly voice their opinions. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that in

highly repressive regimes, such opportunities could still be halted by oppressive measures. The question is, what exactly are social movements and how can we study their use of humour? That is be the focus of the next section.

## 2.3 Humour and Social Movements

### 2.3.1 Nonviolent Social Movements and Contentious Performances

In *social movements*, “actors engaged in collective action are involved in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents; linked by dense informal networks; and share a distinct collective identity” (Diani 2003). Actors usually stress their distinct nature from other political actors because of their employment of “unusual” political behaviour, i.e. “politics in the streets” in the form of public protests, in contrast to voting and lobbying known from traditional representative politics. They continuously invent new disruptive forms of action to challenge the authorities, which are often unusual, dramatic or of questionable legitimacy. Their actions need to be innovative enough to catch the attention of mass media and the public and convince those of the urgency and importance of their cause (Della Porta and Diani 2006, 28-29, 165, 181). One of these creative strategies is also the use of humour.

In this thesis, I understand social movements according to a definition presented by Tilly and Tarrow as “a sustained campaign of claim making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim, based on organizations, networks, traditions, and solidarities that sustain these activities” (2015, 11). In this respect, social movements are involved in *contentious politics*, where they use *contentious performances* (“ways in which one set of political actors makes collective claims on some other set”) which employ various *contentious repertoires of action* (“arrays of performances currently known and available within some set of political actors”) (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 14-15). A social movement campaign can be defined as “a sustained challenge to power holders, in the name of a population living under the jurisdiction of those power holders, by means of concerted public



displays of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment, using such means as public meetings, demonstrations, petitions, and press releases” (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 148).

There are three dominant theories concerned with social movements’ mobilization and functioning. One of the oldest approaches is the highly rational *resource mobilization theory* (RMT). Before the 1960s, scholars interested in collective action were mainly concerned with explaining individual participation in social movements. Grievances were considered the main driving force of an otherwise relatively rare movement participation of arational or irrational actors. However, the professional-looking movements of 1960s Northern America presented a shift which called for a new theory of social movements (Jenkins 1983, 528). RMT is strictly against the claim that mobilization or movement participation can be predicted directly from the level of grievances because participation requires time, energy and money, which means that poorer populations are less able to react to these grievances. It identifies the necessary mobilizing resources in the larger society (governmental and religious groups, constituencies, donors). It also draws attention to the role of media which enable movements to communicate their message to the public. RMT is inspired by an economic theory of supply and demand, taking into account demands for change (sentiments, preferences, tastes, values, grievances), and costs and benefits of attempting to realize these demands. It proposes a highly hierarchical model of social movement organizations (SMOs) (McCarthy and Zald 2001, 535-536). The subsequent *political opportunity (political process) theory* rejects the social movement organization model proposed by the RMT and focuses instead on macro-structures. Scholars in this tradition stress that social movements are shaped by the broader political system, i.e. a set of constraints and opportunities which structure what possibilities are available to the movement. This theory slowly evolved into a political process theory which establishes an interplay between institutionalized politics and social movements. Grassroots settings, such as work, neighbourhood, personal networks or the church, are recognized as crucial in facilitating and structuring collective action and public mobilization (McAdam et al. 1996, 2-4).

Both of these theories have been heavily criticised for being too structural and ignoring phenomena like culture, collective identity or emotions (Goodwin and Jasper 1999). After the so-called cultural turn in the social movements' studies (see Johnston and Klandermans 1995, Klandermans and Staggenborg 2002, Flam and King 2005, Johnston and Noakes 2005), a new approach centred on *collective action frames and framing processes* emerged (Benford and Snow 2000, 612; Johnston and Noakes 2005). These scholars focus on the question of how social movements construct meanings, i.e. the production of mobilizing and counter-mobilizing ideas and definitions (collective action frames). In this theory, movement actors are viewed as agents who are actively and consciously involved in the process of the meaning-construction which is aimed at antagonists, bystanders, observers and constituents in order to mobilize them to act (Benford and Snow 2000, 613-614).

I believe that the cultural approach is the most appropriate for the purposes of this thesis. What is crucial here is the emphasis on the role of agents, i.e. the activists, who are not passively waiting for opportunities to emerge, but are actively engaged in the construction of meaning and shaping of views (and also emotions) of the audience (Snow and Benford 1988). In this sense, strategies employed to mobilize the public and raise awareness are a result of conscious decisions and planning (Kubal 1998). These activities are also referred to as a *strategic dramaturgy*. This concept denotes that activists are well aware of the symbols their messages include and stage their public appearances carefully to make them resonate with the public (McAdam 1996, 348). In other words, the activists understand protests as a type of stage performance, where everyone has a particular acting role. Alternatively, this process can also be labelled as the *choreography of protest* (Flam 2005, 4), where activists carefully choreograph their performance, strategically choosing the way in which their message will be presented, both in terms of content and design. In line with the cultural approach, I perceive humorous protests as a type of consciously and strategically chosen strategy of framing of the movement's messages which aim to mobilize the public, recruit new members and/or help the movement achieve other stated goals. The link between humour and social movements is explored in the next section.

### 2.3.2 Nonviolent Social Movements and Humour

One of the first attempts to categorize the manifestations of humour and the way in which it shapes social movement action is presented by Hiller (1983). He argues that humour is an important means of communication and influences relationships within a movement (Hiller 1983, 258). Inspired by him, Kutz-Flamenbaum (2014) presents her own model focused on the forms, purposes, and audience humour is supposed to target. She distinguishes two types of humour: *external* and *internal*. *External humour* is directed to an audience outside the group. It is used mainly in the form of frames (phrases or symbols interpretatively putting together ideas the movement wants to stress) or tactics (performances, street theatre, or direct action which helps to get the movement's message to the audience). *Internal humour* plays a role in the maintenance, strengthening and growth of the social movement and touches upon questions such as loyalty and support for leadership, establishment of collective identity, prevention of burnout and enhancement of engagement (Kutz-Flamenbaum 2014, 297-300). The concept of internal humour is similar to Hiller's (1983) as it also focuses on a movement's internal dynamics, but is much wider.

As for now, the most detailed and extensive attempt to explore the potential of humour as a strategy used by social movements was done by Sørensen (2006, 2014, 2016). Sørensen developed her own theory of using humour in nonviolent resistance, called *humorous political stunts* (Sørensen 2014, 154). She distinguishes five different types of humorous political stunts: *supportive*, *corrective*, *naïve*, *absurd* and *provocative*, with each of these further specifying what humorous techniques are used:

- ***Supportive*** stunt is framed as if it was an attempt to help, support, or protect the target of criticism from harm, the dominant discourse is exaggerated and overemphasised (e.g. John Howard Ladies' Auxiliary Fan Club in Australia).
- ***Corrective*** stunt hijacks the identity or messages of the target of criticism in order to show the public an alternative version of truth (e.g. the Yes Man Group in the US).

- By looking naïve and not aware that their actions can be interpreted as a protest, social movements using ***Naïve*** stunts point to unequal relations just by indirectly implying them (e.g. Santa performance of the Danish Solvognen group).
- Participants in ***Absurd*** stunts deny rationality altogether, portraying themselves as crazy clowns pointing towards absurdities in the society (e.g. Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army in the UK).
- ***Provocative*** stunts in a humorous way protest against those in power directly and openly (e.g. Serbian Otpor movement) (Sørensen 2016, 36-55).

However, Sørensen and others are mainly concerned with examples from democratic countries. In my thesis, I am interested in how humour is employed in countries with severely limited access to the public sphere. Details of my analysis, data collection and case selection are outlined in the next section.

## 2.4 Methodology

Even though humour can be to a certain extent used almost everywhere, different environments require different strategies and have different effects on the perceptions of activists involved. Because the literature gives detailed examples mainly from democracies, my interest is in environments where peoples' access to the public sphere is limited. My research question is:

*What is the perceived effectiveness of the use of humorous contentious performances in environments with a limited access to the public sphere?*

*Limited access to the public sphere* is conceptualised here as regimes where the state authorities control the media and public protesters face a danger of repressive responses to their activities. In these cases, conventional ways of protest as we know them from democracies are not possible and social movements are forced to come up with alternative ways of protesting. I picked movements which were active during such periods and used humour in their public contentious performances

targeted against the government. More about my cases studies is provided in the data collection and case selection section below.

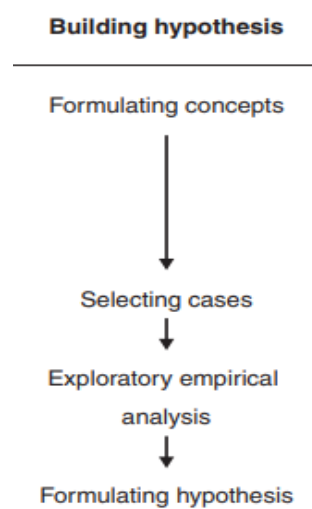
*The use of humorous contentious performances* refers to the social movement's *repertoire of actions*, i.e. specific humorous activities the movements used during their contentious campaigns. I also note any possible changes over time.

*The perceived effectiveness of the use of humour* indicates how effectively the activists perceive the humorous contentious performances to be. This indicator is analysed alongside four different indicators which reflect main issues the movements dealt with: *perceived effectiveness of the use of humour in mobilizing the public, recruiting new members, enhancing internal group dynamics and helping the movement in dealing with the authorities*. The last indicator is directly derived from the theory of innocence attached to humour which is supposed to lead to lower oppression. Based on the data, I assess these *as effective, ambiguous and not effective*: *effective* if all respondents agreed and there is no ambiguity in their answers; *ambiguous* if their responses diverge or are ambivalent; *not effective* if respondents agree humour was not effective or the stories they present point in this direction. I also stay open to any other possible indicators that might emerge during the data collection.

Although a subjective concept, the interest in perceptions of activists is not new in the field of social movements' research (Passy and Giugni 2001, Einwohner 2002). However, the main focus has usually been on the perception of efficacy and success of one's membership in the movement, not on the perception of effectiveness of specific strategies. Researchers have mainly been interested in a critical reflection whether one's membership is worth it or not, which was usually unrelated to the rate of successes and failures of the movement's activities (Passy and Giugni 2001, Einwohner 2002). Therefore, even in the case of movements with very low success rates, activists sometimes still perceived their membership as worth it. This is also true for the concept of WUNC (collective worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment) introduced by Tilly (2008, 72). Besides "numbers," all other indicators refer to subjective perceptions. This suggests that although

perceptions exist outside of the objective, measurable reality, they can often provide us with paradoxical but illuminating results. If we look at social movements operating in environments with limited access to the public sphere, our expectations might be that these movements did not achieve much due to oppression or other obstacles. However, the activists can still perceive their strategies as effective, revealing some interesting insights about our understanding of civic action.

#### 2.4.1 Case Selection and Data Collection



**Figure 2: The research process (Rohlfing 2012, 11)**

The nature of my research is exploratory and follows guidelines provided by Rohlfing (2012, 11) (see Figure 2). Because there is no literature providing a complimentary comparative analysis of how humour can be used by social movements in environments where the access to the public sphere is seriously limited, the research goal of this thesis is hypothesis-building. This is provided based on data obtained during an exploratory empirical analysis of my chosen case studies.

Because of the lack of relevant theoretical grounding, my cases are distribution-based, with a focus on typical cases. There were also other considerations for choosing my cases: the availability of necessary data,

my language abilities, prominence of humour in the movements' contentious performances, and their belonging to the same geographical region.

In terms of scope conditions, the spatial boundary of my cases is the Central Eastern European region: Poland in the 1980s after the introduction of the Martial law, and Hungary and Serbia in recent years, both of which Freedom House recognized as partly free in 2019 (Freedom in the World 2019ab) and which were identified as partly free in terms of freedom of the press already in the preceding years (Freedom House 2018ab). By choosing cases from the same geographical region with similar historical trajectories, I hope to limit possible intervening factors, even though I am aware that I am not fully able to control for all, because my cases are not natural experiments.

The temporal boundary is different for each of the cases and presents the time when contentious movements were active. In all three cases, my period of analysis stops with the social movement transforming into a more formal political body, i.e. when the movement turned into a political party, participated in local elections and/or its members ran for important political positions (the Senate, presidency etc.). The period of focus ranges between 1981-1989 for the Polish case, 2006-2018 for the Hungarian case, and 2014-2017 for the Serbian case. The temporal line also serves as an indicator of potential changes over time. The substantive boundary introduces a condition that the movements chose humour as their main tool for their contentious performances which were directed against the regime's injustices.

My first case study is the Polish *Orange Alternative* (*Pomarańczowa Alternatywa*), which was very popular mainly in the city of Wrocław in the 1980s and dates its roots back to the introduction of the Martial Law (1981) which brought about severe oppression. This movement relied entirely on the use of humour and absurdity in its performances. The second case study is the Hungarian *Two-tailed Dog Party*, a movement which uses provocation and absurdity to raise awareness about the regime's non-democratic practices. My final case is Don't Let Belgrade Down (*Ne Davimo Beograd*), a recently formed Serbian movement established as a protest response against the Belgrade Waterfront Project, which uses satire and humour to raise political awareness. I analyse these movements in a standardized way based on their repertoires of action and four indicators of the perceived effectiveness of the use of humour.

My data collection strategy was two-fold. To analyse the perception of effectiveness, I focused on those who personally use humour in their contentious performances, i.e. the activists. Because this indicator is highly subjective, I based my analysis on primary sources written by the activists and available interview excerpts. If these were not available or did not provide enough information, I conducted *semi-structured qualitative interviews* based on the topic guide provided in Appendix 1, and a subsequent discourse analysis. Interviews (both those conducted and recorded by myself and

others) suit my focus the best because they give me a possibility to explore personal stories, narratives and attitudes of the activists, data hardly achievable through other means, taking into account that observation is not possible because some of the movements already ceased their activities. I attempted to reach saturation by approaching activists who were active for a considerably long period of time and/or held important positions in the movement. However, there are certain limitations connected to this data collection strategy. It is impossible to anticipate reactions of the chosen interviewees and there is always a possibility that they call the interview off at the very last minute or not reply at all. There is also a possibility that no interviewees are found. During my research, I encountered two of these issues:

1. Because the Orange Alternative was active primarily in the 1980s, it proved basically impossible to contact its former members for interviews. However, I managed to collect a large number of direct quotes, online interviews and other primary documents, including a “biography of the movement” written by Waldemar Major Fydrych, the founder of the movement. This “biography” includes descriptions of most of the movement’s actions and personal accounts of eleven Orange Alternative members, five of which were original editors of the Orange Alternative magazine and the most active members in charge of its activities (Waldemar Major Fydrych, Andrzej Dziewit, Wiesław Cupała, Zenon Zegarski and Piotr “Pablo” Adamcio (Fydrych 2014, 67)). In total, I believe I managed to gather rich enough data collection to reach saturation and satisfactorily answer my research question. Because the names of the members are publicly available, I decided not to anonymize them.
2. Concerning the Two-Tailed Dog Party, I tried to conduct a personal interview with Gergely Kovács, the founder and the most active member who personally decided about the movement’s humorous nature, convinced of its effectiveness. Unfortunately, after a couple of weeks of negotiations, Mr. Kovács cancelled our meeting on the day of the interview and has stopped replying since then. Because he is in charge of the movement’s email address, I did not manage to reach out to any other member. However, I managed to collect



a number of interview excerpts with Mr. Kovács available online, which included information I needed to answer my research question. For this reason, I believe that despite initial problems, I gathered enough data to conduct my analysis.

3. Concerning my last case study, I managed to obtain a travel grant and spent a couple of days in Belgrade conducting fieldwork. During my stay, I managed to conduct a number of informal and formal (recorded) interviews with people responsible for different roles in the movement. My main informer is one of the founders of the movement who is until today the main organizer of its activities, “the wheel of the movement.” My second interviewee is another founding member and one of the main public speakers of the movement. My third interviewee used to be a “creative manager” of the movement who joined Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own a couple of months after it was established. This person was in charge of most creative actions and a leading figure during the community-building artistic projects. This interviewee stopped being actively involved after the movement participated in the Belgrade city elections but is still supportive of its activities. All three interviewees together provided me with a full account of the movement’s history, its activities and their perceptions of how humour helped them along the way. Because their responses were largely overlapping, I am confident I managed to reach saturation. For confidentiality reasons, I left their identities anonymous, referring only to their official roles in the movement.

For particular repertoires of actions, I once again consulted primary and secondary literature, mainly sources which provided excerpts of interviews and quotations from the activists. I also addressed this topic during the conducted semi-structured interviews. To increase the reliability of my results, I double-checked my findings against other sources of information as well.

### 3 Case Studies

#### 3.1 The Orange Alternative

##### 3.1.1 Contextualization: Poland in the 1980s

The 1980s in Poland were a “stormy” period marked with a deep political crisis (Tyszka 1998, 311). Strikes starting in Lublin and the Baltic seaports were concluded with an agreement signed in Gdansk on August 31, 1980 between the regime and the strikers led by Lech Wałęsa. This agreement, besides others, allowed the foundation of independent trade unions and the creation of Solidarity (Solidarność). Solidarity soon became a mass dissident movement with 10 million members acquired in the first month of its existence. This presented a big threat to the regime authorities. On December 13, 1981 the party leader and the Prime minister General Wojciech Jaruzelski announced the imposition of the Martial Law (Tyszka 1998, 312). Although the law was suspended one year later and officially called off on July 22, 1983 a lot of severe regulations (mainly those limiting the freedom of assembly and free speech) stayed active until the fall of the communist regime in 1989, with many political opponents kept in prison.

All associations, institutions and trade unions were officially suspended, including Solidarity (Tyszka 1998, 312), which continued its activities underground. Independent media, providing any alternative access to the public sphere, basically did not exist, at least not officially. The nation, whose society and opposition were pushed to the corner, entered the period of the so-called normalization (Pomaranczowa Alternatywa n.d.). As Myszta (1992) writes, the declaration of the Martial Law had two major effects on people’s perception of social reality. Firstly, it seemed like people were obliged to commit themselves to one specific project of social reality: the regime’s or the opposition’s (Solidarity). Secondly, restraints on social life had a severe impact on individual psychology, with citizens trying to find alternative ways of expressing dissent (Myszta 1992, 61). This was a proper environment in which a movement like the Orange Alternative could emerge.

### 3.1.2 Genealogy of the Orange Alternative

The Orange Alternative (in Polish: Pomaranczowa Alternatywa) is an artistic and anarchistic oppositionist movement established in the city of Wrocław in the 1980s. Its founder was Waldemar “Major” Fydrych, a history and art history student, who derived his inspiration mainly from the avant-garde surrealist and Dadaist movements. Between 1986 and 1990, they organized over sixty public contentious performances called “happenings” all over Poland. These became highly popular and usually attracted hundreds or thousands of participants (Pomaranczowa Alternatywa n.d.). Although their most active years were in the second half of the 1980s, their roots date back to the period of the legal existence of Solidarity (Misztal 1992, 58). Initially, the Orange Alternative was a name of a student magazine circulated during student strikes before the introduction of the Martial Law, and issued by the New Culture Movement, a student association legalized at the University of Wrocław in 1981 (Misztal 1992, 59). This association became the main platform of artistic opposition for students and young intelligentsia. It derived its inspiration mainly from the Western counterculture of the 1960s, which becomes obvious if we take into account that they organized the first Peace March in the Soviet dominated region (Pomaranczowa Alternatywa n.d.). Their objective was to challenge opinions of the young generation and make them think critically.

Why Orange Alternative? Orange is exactly in the middle between the two major political powers in Poland at that time: Red symbolizing the Communists and the left, and Yellow symbolizing the Church and the right (Pomaranczowa Alternatywa n.d.). Its members were criticizing both of these poles for limiting the freedom of thought, trying to present an alternative. This resonated with some citizens who did not approve of either of the two poles. Even a highly popular member of the Wrocław chapter of Solidarity, Józef Pinior, admitted: “I was weary of Solidarność; especially the fact that they were forming more and more alliances with the Catholic Church tired me. This is not supposed to be a criticism of the church, but I didn’t think these close ties were right. They resulted in a loss of independence. The Orange Alternative helped me to take off my mask” (Kenney 2007, 357).

The Orange Alternative was not involved only in publishing surrealist stories. A more open expression of dissent found its place soon after the declaration of the Martial law. Whenever people wrote anti-government slogans on the walls, they were painted over with a multi-coloured paint. Major saw his chance and decided to cover these stains with drawings of small dwarves (Beszlej



**Figure 3: Dwarf graffiti (Fydrych 2014, 92)**

2009, 11) (see Figure 3). “We’ll paint dwarves on those patches. There are thousands or tens of thousands of paint patches in Wroclaw, and probably a million in the entire country. If a million dwarves get painted on a million patches, people will find strength and the government will fall”

(Fydrych 2014, 91). Soon, drawings of small dwarves appeared on walls in most cities. As happy symbols, they presented a stark contrast to the government’s attempt to control people through fear and horrors imposed on them through the Martial law (Fydrych and Dobosz 1989, 31). As Major explains: “Dwarves will not accept threats, dwarves are happy and will laugh. In this psychological war, it was the dwarves who were winning, for he who laughs is not afraid” (Beszlej 2009, 12-13). The drawings also started to be considered dangerous by the regime, which gave them a new meaning and showed people that in order to fight Communism, one does not need to be involved in a direct clash with the authorities. Symbolic types of protest was a fruitful alternative. However, Major soon came to realize that graffiti was not going to bring about a revolution (Fydrych 2014, 103), and a more “drastic” action was needed. An idea of “happenings” emerged, i.e. public performances which carefully combined art, children’s play and political dissent (Tyszkla 1998, 318). Deriving their inspiration from the Theatre of the Absurd (Romanienko 2007, 141), the aim was to make people reflect about the dissonance (incongruity) of the two worlds surrounding them. On the one hand, people were struggling on a daily basis because of the lack of consumer goods and other constraints, while the government was celebrating the victory of

socialism. This was a clear manifestation of the surrealist quality of the “socialist democracy” under the Soviet domination (Tyszką 1998, 318; Beszlej 2009, 14).

Because the authorities considered any type of public gathering as a potential threat, including humorous performances, Major and others were frequently arrested and interrogated, even if only for a couple of hours. Sometimes, they were forced to leave their flats prior to another happening to avoid arrests. However, the interrogations were sometimes tended just as surreal as the happenings. As Major explains: “Can you treat a police officer seriously when he is asking you a question: Why did you participate in an illegal meeting of dwarves?” (Beszlej 2009, 16) Using force against dwarves singing childish songs and giving away candy often made the militia look ridiculous. Even General Jaruzelski recalls telling his Minister of Interior, General Kiszczak, that they should leave the Orange Alternative alone, because any attacks on this movement make the state security forces worse off (Pomarańczowa Alternatywa n.d.).

### **3.1.3 The Orange Alternative and Humour**

As Major and his colleagues admit, by using humour and absurdity, they wanted to fight with the dullness and monotony of the regime and make protests interesting and entertaining, i.e. to bring fun to the streets (Misztal 1992, 62). As Skiba (1989) confirms, “the aim of the Movement was to free the people from that narrowly perceived rationalism of life, pulling them out of lethargy and despair, and discharging the pressure due to deepening feeling of nonsense and doubt which overpowered the young generation of Poles” (Skiba 1989, 4).

Their repertoire of actions was very diverse, ranging from graffiti of dwarves, surrealist student magazines, sarcastic radio broadcasts (Fydrych 2014, 236) and smaller contentious performances (e.g. the first free soda fountain in Wrocław, or an attempt to sabotage the Polish economy by filling tram ticket machines with toothpaste (Fydrych 2014; 218, 223)), to bigger happenings attracting hundreds and thousands of people. This diversity was supported by colourful costumes (orange or red hats to personalize dwarves), props (Aurora cruiser during the Eve of the October

revolution happening (Beszlej 2009, 17)), posters, funny slogans (“Long Life to the Undercover Agents” (Misztal 1992, 62)), and two types of flyers. The first set were simple invitations (“Come, you won’t regret it”), whereas the second added special instructions which could but did not have to be followed (Szymanski-Düll 2015, 6). For the happening called “Day of the Secret Agent in 1988” (see Figure 4), the instructions were as follows:

Accordingly, we ask you to wear black glasses, a hat, a trench coat or a leather jacket or alternatively a cloak. Take wiretapping equipment with you: an auditory tube, a funnel or a microphone. Microphones integrated into umbrellas or canes are advisable. Those of you who love Scotland Yard are asked to appear with tobacco pipes. Bringing along dogs could be an advantage. . . Behave freely, ask passers-by to show you their documents. Show them the inside of your coat, where your badge of office will be clearly visible (Szymanski-Düll 2015, 670).

At times, the flyers also included special instructions for the militia:

Special instructions for Provincial Office of Internal Affairs.  
 At 16.00 we begin checking IDs.  
 At 16.03 we invite people to board our Nysas.  
 At 16.15 we arrest people with tails and listen to Sto Lat being sung.  
 At 16.25 we get hold of the veterans and move to the third stage of the happening (Fydrych 2014, 135).



**Figure 4: “Day of the Secret Agent” flyer (Fydrych 2014, 130)**

Happenings started to be staged in 1986 and got bigger and more popular since 1987, soon spreading outside of Wrocław to all major Polish cities. The most comprehensive compilation of the Orange Alternative’s happenings can be found in the Master’s thesis of Krzysztof Skiba, the leader of the movement’s branch in Łódź (Skiba 1989). In total, there were around 26 bigger happenings in Wrocław, 9 in Warsaw, 10 in Łódź and other in Gdańsk, Poznań, Kraków, Białystok, Olsztyn, Rzeszów, and Lublin. Some happenings inspired by the style of the Orange Alternative spread also to Moscow, Leningrad, Prague and other cities (Skiba 1989, 7-47).

Each of the happenings ridiculed a different aspect of the absurd socialist reality, be it either an imposition of nonsensical national holidays (The Great October Revolution), military operations (1968 Invasion to Czechoslovakia) or everyday problems connected to the shortages of everything,

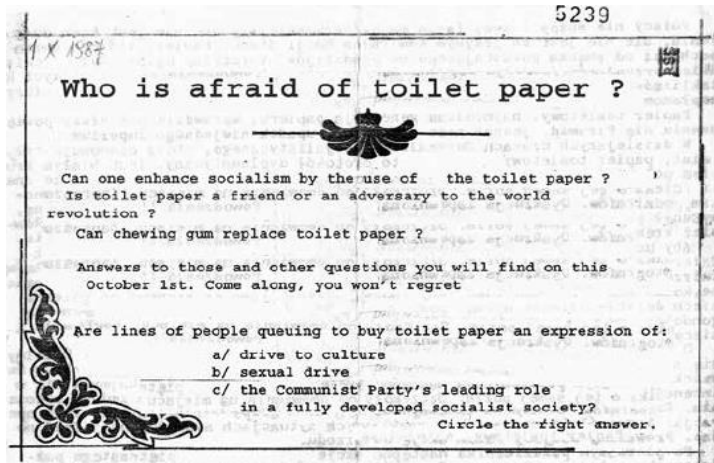


Figure 5: Quiz attached to the “Who is afraid of toilet paper” flyer (Fydrych 2014, 125)

including the toilet paper. One of their flyers stated: “Socialism, with its extravagant inclination to sharing of goods and its eccentric societal model, has elevated toilet paper to the most heavenly dream. Right now, this dream cannot be achieved” (Szymanski-Düll 2015, 672).

To bring this issue to the public discussion, the Orange Alternative organized a happening called: “Who Is Afraid of Toilet Paper?” (see Figure 5) (Szymanski-Düll 2015, 672) They also organized a number of events aimed at kids, the biggest one being a carnival-like Revolution of Dwarves in 1988 (Fydrych 2014, 172). During the Children’s Day, they sang children songs and provided chocolate and sweets, while throwing leftover candies at the surprised militia (Misztal 1992, 64-65).

However, their possibly most remarkable happening was the “Eve of the Great October Revolution,” which called for a celebration of the Revolution already on its Eve. The performance was a re-enactment of historical events, including several fighting units and paper models of battleships (see Figure 6). They chose “Bar Barbara” as Wrocław’s Winter Palace, where they



Figure 6: Battleship Potemkin during the “Eve of the Great October Revolution” (Fydrych 2014, 266)

planned to have red borsch as a symbol of victory after the battle. It is necessary to note that the happenings were scripted only partially, which made them unpredictable. They relied on the spontaneity of the main characters but also on activities of other “actors” – from the audience members to the omnipresent police officers.

### **3.1.4 Impact of the Orange Alternative**

The Orange Alternative ceased its activities in 1989-1990 after an unsuccessful attempt by Major to get elected into the Senate and become president (Fydrych 2014, 177). It became active again in 2001, although on a much smaller scale. The question is, did the Orange Alternative fulfil its aim to become an alternative to both the government and Solidarity? According to Szymanski-Düll (2015), to some extent it did. As an independent movement, it managed to mobilize people from all social classes and age groups, and helped them slowly overcome their fear and apathy, which becomes obvious through testimonies of the participants and through the growing number of people who joined the activists on the streets (Szymanski-Düll 2015, 674). Solidarity and Orange Alternative member Józef Pinior confirms this observation (Kenney 2007, 357-358).

The movement’s contribution was a reactivation of Poland’s culture of protest, which had been in decline since the Martial law, thereby paving the way for the trade union Solidarity later on (Szymanski-Düll 2015, 676). Even Solidarity became interested in the activities of the Orange Alternative. As Bogumiła Tyszkiewicz recalls: “When the Orange Alternative became big, when more and more people participated in the happenings, we peaked the interest of the grown-up oppositionists...” (Kenney 2007, 342). The growing interest of Solidarity supporters is also obvious from the fact that Solidarity logos and slogans like “Solidarność lives” sometimes appeared among the Orange Alternative banners that typically said things like “We love you nonetheless.” One photo of Jakubczak’s collection also shows a group of people dressed as dwarves, while holding a sign typical for Solidarity (Szymanski-Düll 2015, 675). According to Tyszka (1998, 321), the humorous performances of the Orange Alternative also bore a deeper, broader message – to re-



conquer the public space which under the regime became captive and ruled by routine. “Laughter which suddenly started to sound on Świdnicka Street, in the very centre of Wrocław, was the first sign of the liberation of 'real existence' in Poland. The political liberation came later” (Tyszka 1998, 321). Thanks to its humorous contentious performances, the Orange Alternative managed to create a counterpublic, a space where formerly apathetic citizens could once again express their political dissent, even if in an absurd and childish way. “After the ominous, bloody events of 1981-82, laughter, parody and satire were the most efficient means of political struggle” (Tyszka 1998, 320).

### **3.1.5 Perceived Effectiveness of the Use of Humour**

#### ***1. Mobilization of the public: effective***

Since the beginning, the members of the Orange Alternative were convinced that their activities would eventually manage to expose the absurdities of the regime and force citizens to mobilize. This is consistent with the Incongruity theory of humour where the initial “ha-ha” moment of seeing a funny performance transforms into an “a-ha” moment when the audience realizes the seriousness of the message (e.g. missing toilet paper). As Agata Saraczyńska remembers, not only kids and students but also older citizens were largely positive about the movement’s activities, eager to join them during their happenings and, what is more, ready to protect their dwarves if necessary. As one of the activists remembers: “The militia came and forced us into their car. Children were crying because they were putting away their dwarves. And when they took us away in the car, people outside were lining the street” (Kenney 2007, 307). The movement managed to attract people of all genders, age groups and social classes, including some of the more conservative political activists belonging to Solidarity. It also managed to catch attention of the media, mainly abroad. As Major explains, independent national media were almost non-existent or completely underground, so it was the members of the Orange Alternative with connections to the West, especially Zenon Zegarski (Fydrych 2014, 187), who succeeded in bringing international outlets to

Wrocław, which then reported about the political climate in Poland and the movement's activities (Fydrych 2014, 157).

The activists believe that the Orange Alternative was successful in mobilizing people for several reasons. Firstly, the movement did not acquire anyone to commit to help with organizing the happenings. As Albin, the semi-formal spokesperson of the movement, explains: “[Within the Orange Alternative], there was a group that called for the happenings, helped to realize the various events, and was always part of the actions. Then there was a group of people who came to the happenings. . . . What the Orange Alternative accomplished was to create situations where normal people could [and did] take part in” (Kenney 2007, 303-313). Secondly, for a lot of people, participating in these happenings was simply fun which helped people forget about their daily struggles. As Skiba, one of the members, describes:

One didn't believe one's eyes looking at Świdnicka Street and seeing the crowds that were playing there. Some of these usually serious people were behaving like children. It was like they disengaged with the blockades of fear. Everyone knew that they were surrounded by militia, that militiamen were there, yet they did what they wanted. They gave out that silly toilet paper; they walked around in red jackets and hats, and celebrated the October Revolution. . . . I was under the impression that it was how they overcame their fear...Back then, absolute freedom reigned on Świdnicka Street. From a certain point on, they all did whatever they wanted (Kenney 2007, 358).

Skiba is not alone. Also other activists kept emphasizing their conviction that humour helped to create an alternative space of resistance mainly by easing mental barriers of citizens caused by fear and apathy. This account is in line with the *Relief theory* of humour which understands it as a form of refuge from oppression and trauma. The activists' perceptions are supported by interview excerpts with some bystanders. As one of them remembers:

I don't know Major. Actually, I don't even know any of those who are always at the head of the parade. But I try not to miss any of the Orange Alternative's happenings. This is because I want sometimes not to fear the militia and their clubs. I come to convince myself that not every day must be depressing and dirty; I come so that at least once every few months, for a few hours, I can show everyone – and perhaps myself most of all – that I can be just like people somewhere in the ordinary, normal world. I can laugh, have fun, be provocative. I need this for my psychological health. I don't want always to think about the fact that there is no milk for my child. Such a

happening, once very few months, is an orange alternative to reality (Kenney 2002, 190).

## ***2. Recruitment of new members: ambiguous***

Despite the popularity of the movement's humorous performances, it did not manage to attract many volunteers. Most core activists were university students. The same was true for other branches of the movement outside of Wrocław. However, the movement's recruitment strategy was quite limited as it did not really demand people to help volunteer with organization of the happenings. Instead, they were happy if supporters just came to join the fun on the streets (mobilization) (Fydrych 2014, 237-290).

At the same time, Major notes that the humorous performances of the movement became so popular that students from other cities started contacting the movement to ask for a permission to establish their own branches of the Orange Alternative in their respective cities. This was true, for instance, for Krzysztof Skiba who founded the Łódź branch, and according to Major, became one of the most prominent propagators of the mission of the movement and its humorous performances (Fydrych 2014, 237-290). This means that although the movement failed to recruit many volunteers in Wrocław, humorous performances increased its visibility and helped to spread the movement to other cities.

## ***3. Internal group dynamics: effective***

While reading the "biography" of the movement, it becomes clear how important humour was for the internal dynamics of the movement. Having fun together while working on something perceivably meaningful strengthened the relationships between the core Orange Alternative activists who started to treat each other as family members, or, as Major liked to label them, fellows from the same military rank committed to stand by each other's side no matter what (Fydrych 2014). Humour also played a crucial role when activists were trying to overcome fear from the

possibility of “being arrested and threatened for any possible absurd reason” (Interview with Krzysztof Skiba in *Beats of Freedom* 2010). Despite being under surveillance and facing danger of imprisonment (Major, Cupala, Pinior etc.), they relentlessly kept coming up with new exciting ideas regarding their next happenings, slogans, radio transmits, and costumes. As Zusanna Dombrowska notes: “being part of the Orange Alternative meant nothing else than to be prepared to go to jail for being a dwarf” (Kenney 2007, 320). In order to overcome their fear, the activists pretended that the militiamen are just another actors participating at their happenings. They were frequently joking about being followed and possibly arrested. As was mentioned earlier, at times they even send around special instructions to the militiamen with a timeline of when to start checking IDs and arresting people (Fydrych 2014, 135) to mock the regime’s repressive nature which helped them to mentally overcome their fear.

Most of the founding members stayed committed to the movement until the regime change in 1989, with humour serving as a bonding and remembrance tool for the members. Even the “biography” itself serves as a tool praising the movement’s chosen humorous and as an evidence of how humour managed to bring and keep the core team together (Fydrych 2014).

#### ***4. Relations with the authorities: not effective***

From the interview excerpts and the “biography,” it is obvious that Major and his fellow activists expected humour and absurdity to help them while dealing with oppressive forces. They were not so naïve to think that their activities would be left unnoticed but they did not expect to be arrested, only having their IDs checked or asked to stop. When they were singing children’s songs in the city centre and wearing funny, dwarves-like colourful hats, Major “assumed that the militia would run around and rip the hats off of peoples’ heads.” When the militia started arresting them, it came as a surprise (Szymanski-Düll 2015, 670). Similar surprise was waiting for Skiba and his two friends. Their first humorous performance in Łódź attracted around 2000 people, while they were throwing sweets on the crowd and chanting fairy-tale slogans. But the performance was finished quicker than

expected when the militia arrested them and kept in custody for 48 hours (Fydrych 2014, 275-277). The Orange Alternative actually expected the militia to take part in their humorous performances. For this reason, they often drafted specific instructions that they delivered to the police stations before their happenings (Szymanski-Düll 2015, 671). However, the expectations of being understood as innocent just because they were behaving in a foolish and absurd way did not materialize. From a movement that the militia did not know existed, the Orange Alternative soon became an enemy. The militia characterized their actions as a disruption of public order and kept them under close surveillance. They had a whole file of records under the cryptonym “MEDIUM.” (Szymanski-Düll 2015, 671) In these records, they clearly stated how dangerous they perceived the Orange Alternative to be:

Cloaked in an air of apoliticalness, [this group] propagates harmful contents aimed against our state, which intend to undermine and ridicule its institutions and structures, as well as its sanctioned/acceptable forms of societal action. During the happenings, school children are being instructed how to act when confronted with organs of the MO, turning them into a potential basis for future oppositional pools. According to operative investigations, it is to be expected that this group’s activities will escalate. Furthermore, it seems probable that their attempts to infiltrate other social classes will intensify. (Szymanski-Düll 2015, 671-672)

It is clear that humour in this case did not have any positive effect on the way the authorities dealt with the movement, and as was mentioned above, activists had to mentally prepare that they might be imprisoned simply for dressing as dwarves, something unimaginable if the humorous innocence theory worked.

## 3.2 The Two-Tailed Dog Party

### 3.2.1 Contextualization: Backsliding Democracy in Hungary

In 2019, Hungary became the first partly free EU country (Freedom in the World 2019a). This is a result of a democratic backsliding which started in 2010 when Fidesz, a political party led by Viktor Orbán, won 53 percent of the popular vote in general elections. The disproportionate election law translated this result into 68 percent of the seats in parliament, giving Fidesz a constitutional supermajority (Bánknuti et al. 2012, 138-139). The new ruling party immediately introduced changes into the political system, with constitutionalism being its first victim. In the first year, the constitution was amended twelve times (Bánknuti et al. 2012, 138-139), only to introduce a whole new document in January 2012, which included 32 controversial “cardinal laws” that cover crucial aspects of Hungarian life. These changes weakened the system of checks and balances, disempowered the Constitutional court and limited the independence of judiciary. The Fidesz government also managed to compromise accountability institutions, such as the Ombudsman’s Office, the Budget Council, the State Audit Office, the National Bank, the Fiscal Council, the Central Statistical Office and the Election Commission (Bánknuti et al. 2012, 145; Kornai 2015, 35). In practice, legislative and executive branches are no longer separate in Hungary, and are both under control of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán: “a pyramid-like hierarchy has emerged and solidified, with Orbán at its summit” (Kornai 2015, 36).

The country is also facing fast centralization, accompanied by controversial economic policies, including nationalization of private pension funds (Kornai 2015, 36), near disappearance of independent media with the rest used for governmental propaganda (Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018, 1177), attacks on academic freedom (among others the Central European University and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (Zgut 2019)), harassment of civil society institutions (Kornai 2015, 35, 37), and stigmatization of poor and homeless (Kornai 2015, 39). At the same time, the government keeps spreading the rhetoric of hatred and xenophobia.

Orbán proudly describes his regime as an illiberal democracy (Kornai 2015, 42). Already in September 2009, he predicted that there was “a real chance that politics in Hungary will no longer be defined by a dualist power space... Instead, a large governing party will emerge in the centre of the political stage [that] will be able to formulate national policy, not through constant debates but through a natural representation of interests” (Bánknuti et al. 2012, 145). This prophecy became a reality. However, after eight years of Orbán’s rule, there is not much democracy left. Even though elections are still held (but their fairness is questionable (Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018, 1175)), it is almost impossible for any new actor to win the elections due to an uneven playing field caused among others by gerrymandering of elections districts (Bánknuti et al. 2012, 145). Even in the case of victory, the current system will be very difficult to reverse (Bánknuti et al. 2012, 145). As the Hungarian case shows, even a consolidated liberal democracy can erode.

### **3.2.2 Genealogy of the Two-Tailed Dog**

The Two-Tailed Dog (in Hungarian: Kétfarkú Kutya Párt) was established in 2006 in Szeged as a grass-roots movement (Boszik 2018) by a prankster and graffiti artist Gergely Kovács (Case and Palattella 2016). Identifying itself as “a group of artists devoted to social and political questions which will one day win the elections” (Two-Tailed Dog Party n.d.), this movement is committed to non-violence and direct action, and uses several types of public contentious performances to achieve its objectives. Its goals include: “promoting active citizenship, creating a meaningful political dialogue, not a rhetorical blame-race, when necessary: take over activities neglected by local authorities, and fostering a civic attitude” (Two-Tailed Dog Party n.d.).

The movement’s main activities include small renovation and community-based projects (e.g. sustainable gardening (Boszik 2018), and building of bus stops (Two-Tailed Dog Party 2019e), children playgrounds, benches, and provisional street lights (Two-Tailed Dog Party 2019d)). If the movement’s “passivists” (as they call themselves (Two-Tailed Dog Party 2019e)) cannot solve the issues themselves, they use creative and humorous activities to nudge authorities to act (e.g.

Garbage Renovation in Zugló (Boszik 2018); Human Chain in Szentendre resulting in the removal of piles of garbage and debris; Four-Colour Action in Szeged after which the local authorities repaired broken pavements etc. (McChrystal 2017)). If a nation-wide problem is concerned, they launch awareness-raising campaigns to show what the state was supposed to take care of (Two-Tailed Dog Party n.d.). One of the recent examples is a video of masked Two-Tailed Dog party members smuggling soap and toilet paper into hospitals in order to highlight the catastrophic state of the Hungarian healthcare (Illyes 2018). They also launched free classes for students (Two-Tailed Dog Party 2019e), and worked to improve living conditions of the homeless (Two-Tailed Dog Party 2018). “The main difference between us and the other parties is that we try to do something instead of just talking about the problems,” says Kovács. “This should not be our job, but sometimes we can force the government in this way” (Stemler 2019). They are also actively bringing taboo topics into public debates and mock governmental propaganda in order to disperse fear and anxiety of the citizens (Illyes 2018).

In the wider public, The Two-Tailed Dog is known as a satirical party with a catchy slogan: “The only party that makes sense” (Newsweek 2018). It was officially registered as a political party in 2014 after being rejected many times by the Capital Court which ruled that neither its name, nor its goals were serious, and their name was harmful to morality (Hungary A.M. 2014b, 6). These decisions were eventually overruled by the Kúria, the highest judicial authority in Hungary (Kuria n.d.). However, the party’s registration approval came at the very last minute, which prevented its participations in the 2014 parliamentary elections. As its leader jokingly commented, they still had “16 minutes to collect signatures” (Hungary A.M. 2014b, 5). In the 2018 Parliamentary elections, the Two-Tailed Dog Party received 1.73% of the votes, but did not obtain any seats (Budapest Business Journal 2018). The party also participated in the 2019 EP Parliamentary elections with a programme ridiculing the ruling party (Two-Tailed Dog Party 2019a) and obtained 2,63% of the votes (Kovács 2019).



### 3.2.3 Two-Tailed Dog Party and Humour

The programme of the Two-Tailed Dog Party promises, among other things, free beer, eternal life to all citizens (Hungary A.M. 2014b, 6), adoption of the Russian rubble as a national currency, or exiting the EU, while offering the EU to join Hungary in exchange (Hungary A.M. 2014a, 7). The main purpose of these funny promises is to mock the current political situation in Hungary where “traditional political parties are not treating voters like adults. They are also making impossible promises without making it clear to the voters that their promises are unrealistic” (Hungary A.M. 2014a, 7). Sometimes dressing up as animals (from a conviction that people have lost trust in classic



**Figure 7: Two-Tailed Dog Party's "chicken candidate" interviewed on state-run media (Novak 2018)**

human politicians (Boszik 2018)) (see Figure 7), the Two-Tailed Dog Party strives to offer an alternative to the government of Viktor Orbán. They often make use of humorous public performances and invite anyone to join in (Barát 2017, 544). According to Suzi

Dada, one of the oldest members of the movement, the message of the party ought not to be about “hatred or despair, towards which people are all too inclined here. Instead we should learn how to laugh at something together. Then a solution becomes possible” (Case and Palattella 2016). István Rév, a Hungarian historian, agrees: “The Two-Tailed Dog Party is a refreshing group in a rightly depressed country that has lost its sense of humour” (Case and Palattella 2016). The Two-Tailed Dog does not only target local and national political elites, but also malfunctioning public institutions. For distributing stickers proclaiming “Our trains are deliberately dirty,” and “Our trains are deliberately late,” the founder of the movement was unsuccessfully sued by the Hungarian State Railways (Jacobs 2018).

Its repertoire of actions is very diverse, including humorous street art (graffiti, stencils, posters), theatre performances, film, music, video games, guerrilla gardening, public renovation projects, demonstrations, petitions and other public happenings all over Hungary (Two-Tailed Dog Party

2019e). They also publish several satirical newspapers (Two-Tailed Dog Party 2019b, Two-Tailed Dog Party 2019c). Their aim is to help



local communities, criticize the regime by revealing absurdities of its actions, and fight with negativity and apathy of the population (see Figure 8) (Two-Tailed Dog Party 2019e). “We have decided to do pretty, funny and useful things rather than just whining before we get a heart attack or cancer from sheer desperation” (Two-Tailed Dog Party n.d.).

Figure 8: Two-Tailed Dog Party’s posters (McChrystal 2017)

### **3.2.4 Impact of the Two-Tailed Dog Party**

The actions of the Two-Tailed Dog Party are not only about absurd promises bringing smiles to the faces of bystanders, they already proved to have a real impact. During the 2016 Hungarian referendum on the migration quotas proposed by the EU, the movement encouraged voters to cast an invalid ballot. These efforts were also supported by the creation of a special mobile app which enabled people of a similar mindset to connect together. In total, the number of invalid votes amounted to 6.2% of the casted votes, which together with a low turnout turned the referendum results invalid (Newsweek 2018).

Possibly the biggest public campaign so far was initiated in April 2016 as a response to hundreds of anti-immigration billboards installed by the regime with slogans such as: “If you come to Hungary, you may not take jobs away from Hungarians,” or “If you come to Hungary, you must respect our culture.” The government also planned to build a fence on the borders with Serbia to prevent potential migrants from entering the country (Case and Palattella 2016). The movement perceived this campaign as toxic for the mood in the country with a negative effect on the society, and decided to counter it. As they believe: “Millions are bashing the migrants now online, while they probably have seen more UFOs than migrants during their lives” (Zalan 2016). Besides satiric remarks (e.g. “Of course, we Hungarians loved that Iron Curtain, we miss it very much, people have been expressing their strong demand for building a similar curtain for years now” (Case and Palattella 2016)), the Two-Tailed Dog together with an alternative news blog Vastagbőr launched a campaign to raise three million forints in order to buy billboard spaces. That was an extraordinary but successful move, with the Two-Tailed Dog obtaining the target amount in only seven hours.



**Figure 9: “Anti-anti-immigration” billboard (Case and Palattella 2016)**

After two weeks, this anti-anti-immigration billboard campaign (see Figure 9) raised thirty-three million forints which were used to print nine hundred posters that directly challenged the governmental claims (Barát 2017). Although it “jokes

around much more seriously” now after becoming a “serious political party” (Case and Palattella 2016), it stays true to its original nature. As its founder argues, it is time to get serious, not to become serious, because he is convinced that “they are much more effective as pranksters” (Case and Palattella 2016).

### 3.2.5 Perceived Effectiveness of the Use of Humour

#### *1. Mobilization of the public: effective*

As we could see in the movement's statutes, their main goal is not winning Parliamentary elections (Illyes 2018), but raising awareness of sensitive issues, and making the public more engaged by dispersing their fears and anxiety (Two-Tailed Dog Party n.d.). The founder of the movement has no doubts about the effectiveness of humour in these. In line with the Incongruity theory of humour, humorous framing is perceived a useful tool for mobilizing the public by exposing lies and absurd governmental propaganda, when an initial "ha-ha" moment is soon followed by an "a-ha" moment when the recipient realizes this incongruity. As one of the passivists explains, reacting humorously is the best possible way of responding to the actions of the government and connecting people together (Nolan 2017). The main idea is to raise awareness of serious problems and making people mobilize by making them laugh, not frustrated (Two-Tailed Dog Party 2019e).

Humour also helped in creating a new discussion platform, i.e. an alternative counterpublic where people can express dissent by relieving their fears (Relief theory of humour). In a country filled with hateful propaganda, humour provides an alternative mobilizing factor, rather than violence or hate speech. As Kovács explains, the movement wants to get people mobilized and engaged in something positive, that is why he prefers creative community projects to big political campaigns. "The political atmosphere is so hate-filled, it needs humour to keep people sane. One supporter told us we were the reason he hadn't left Hungary" (Agence France-Presse. 2018). By showing that it is still possible to have fun and joke about what is happening in the country, people get assured that the government has not yet "managed to completely destroy the society, there are still millions of people who are thinking differently and this is why I think that our campaign is important" (Grabow 2016). This approach encouraged people to become interested in previously inaccessible political topics, and join the activists in their humorous performances, be it either a protest march or an artistic community project.

## ***2. Recruitment of new members: effective***

As Kovács explains, the initially small movement grew in numbers over the time and now 50-100 passivists volunteer regularly (Grabow 2016). Their humorous, satirical nature and awareness-raising campaigns combined with an active social media strategy helped to attract new members, especially in times when extra help was needed. For instance, during the anti-anti-immigration poster campaign, over 1000 new passivists volunteered (Grabow 2016). At the same time, all these people, including lawyers helping the movement, are involved free of charge, which Kovács considers one of the most important indicators of people joining the movement out of conviction that its aims and humorous strategy are important and useful (Grabow 2016). This, once again, shows the true nature of the 'Two-Tailed Dog': rather than a conventional political party, it resembles a civil society organization trying to bring about positive change in the society.

## ***3. Internal group dynamics: effective***

For Kovács, humorous community projects and small-scale humorous awareness raising performances are the most important things that Two-Tailed Dog is engaged in. That is because these activities enable the core team to work on something together with all the passivists the movement managed to recruit. "I think it's very important that a party does something together with its activists, something that has sense and is fun and is making the city more beautiful" (Grabow 2016). Doing something fun, but useful and meaningful helps with group bonding. Activists feel comfortable with each other, make friendships more easily, while perceiving their activities to be valuable and worthy their time. Because all Two-Tailed Dog Party activists volunteer for free, the conviction that they are doing something important but at the same time entertaining is very important for the functioning of the whole movement (Grabow 2016). Without these people, the movement would not exist and/or its activities would be more difficult to pursue as logistics and planning would be halted due to problematic internal group dynamics where people find it hard to work together and/or are unable to commit themselves to the cause.

#### ***4. Relations with the authorities: ambiguous***

Because the government has most of the country's media under control, it is difficult for the movement to inform about their activities. Therefore, they resorted to social media and their own website as their main communication platforms. As Kovács explains when asked about their relationship with the state media: "We have no relationship with them at all. We know from people working there that we can't be mentioned on state media, but it's also clear to see. We simply don't appear on public TV or in state news agency MTI. Quite often news about us appear on BBC or Euronews without the Hungarian public television mentioning it ever" (Grabow 2016). This was challenged in 2018 when the state-run television broadcaster had to give a 5-minute time-slot to a representative of each opposition political party running in the 2018 Parliamentary Elections (Novak 2018). The Two-Tailed Dog also caught attention of the pro-government media during its anti-anti-immigration campaign. Because of the unprecedented financial support the movement managed to raise for its billboard campaign, it was immediately accused of being supported by George Soros and other "suspicious" sources (Petrovszki 2016).

In fact, besides an occasional negative mention on the state-run media, the government does not seem to feel the need to use oppressive measures against this humorous movement (if we do not count several legal claims raised against the movement by state-sponsored institutions that the Two-Tailed Dog Party mocked in its campaigns). However, it is difficult to assess whether this is because of the "innocence" attached to the movement through the use of humour or because of something else. Nevertheless, Kovács believes that humour plays an important role in dealing with the authorities because he is convinced that if people laugh at authorities, they are making it hard for them to classify them and intervene against them (Nolan 2017).

### 3.3 Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own

#### 3.3.1 Contextualization: Serbia in Recent Years

The regime of President Slobodan Milošević left the country in a desolate state. “His legacy, put simply, was the destruction of the former Yugoslavia, the impoverishment of millions, over 130,000 deaths and millions of ruined lives” (The Economist 2006). After getting ousted from power in 2000, Serbia was expected to start democratizing. Yugoslavia’s UN membership was retained, it became a member of the Council of Europe, the local currency (dinar) became relatively stable, and Milošević was extradited to The Hague. However, new President Koštunica and Prime Minister Djindjic were in a constant political fight with each other, partially halting the country’s development process. Eventually, Djindjic was assassinated in 2003 by a common action of members of Milošević’s security service and organized crime (Pribicevic 2004. 107).

The political situation now is also far from optimal. Although Serbia entered negotiations with the EU, the country is “stuck in a stalled Europeanization” (Castaldo and Pinna 2018, 267), halted, among others, by the stagnating Kosovo negotiations (Matusek 2019). According to a 2018 report, economic inequality has also been rising, with inequality index of only 26 Ginis if consumption is included in the equation (Lakićević 2019). This becomes more obvious if we look at the “average salary” which is in fact out of reach for a considerable number of population. In 2016, the total disposable income of 80 percent of the Serbian population was below €344, i.e. €30 lower than the “average salary” in the same year (Krek 2018). Rigid austerity measures led to a reduction of pensions and salaries, high unemployment, violations of worker’s rights, corruption and a loyalist system where only those close to the ruling party have an easy access to sound career opportunities (Pešić 2017). Electoral processes, and the independence of the judiciary and media freedom are also declining (Lakićević 2019).

According to the report by the Serbian Anti-Corruption Council, “the Government controls media instead of media controlling Government” (Castaldo and Pinna 2018, 265). This is thought to be

directly connected to the presence of Aleksandar Vučić in Serbian politics (Hopkins 2019). As a leader of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), Vučić is a former minister of information in Milosević's government who drafted the infamous 1998 Law on Public Information (Castaldo and Pinna 2018, 271). As a reformed nationalist, he became Prime Minister in 2012 and a president in 2017 (Hopkins 2019). Under Vučić's tight rule, journalists and media outlets are facing arbitrary tax investigations, limited ad revenue, and hate propaganda campaigns (Matusek 2019). Serbia was proclaimed partly free by Freedom House in terms of freedom of the press, and fell 10 points to 76<sup>th</sup> place on Reporters Without Borders Index (Hopkins 2019), leaving the European Commission concerned about Serbian compliance with accession criteria (Hopkins 2019).

Another worrying development is connected to the Serbian institutional setting. The electoral playing field is more and more uneven with the ruling coalition pacifying and compromising non-partisan observers and destroying the opposition through the use of threats, pressure, misuse of state institutions, and smear propaganda campaigns. Because of that, the opposition became unable to control and substantially influence the election process (Dinić 2017). This was obvious during the presidential elections in 2017 which are considered unfair and irregular, as Vučić ran for a presidency from a position of a Prime minister with almost absolute power, trying to avoid a second round at any cost. As he said: "I see only a battlefield...If you've entered the political ring, then come in, put the gloves on and fight...I'm in the political ring, I've put on the gloves, and I'm fighting. End of story" (Veljković 2017). After "kidnapping the presidency" (Pešić 2017), Vučić became a real sovereign of the Serbian regime, controlling executive power as a president and legislative power through an obedient parliament (Veljković 2017). Prime Minister Brnabic is understood to be only a loyal puppet because she alone is unable to secure necessary support. The president, thus, did not directly usurp the power, but did so through elections (Gligorov 2017).

The deterioration of democratic institutions has sparked a number of mass protests. However, Vučić dismissed the protestors' demands, challenging the opposition's prospects of winning



potential snap elections (Hopkins 2019), saying that he will not give in to blackmail from opposition politicians (Matusek 2019). “We need to listen to the people, but I will never be ready to listen to political leaders who destroyed the future of this country” (Hopkins 2019). The protesters were criticizing governmental influence over the media and violence against journalists and opposition leaders, as the initial trigger for the protest was an assault on opposition leader Stefanovic who was beaten unconscious by masked attackers (Hopkins 2019). During a press conference the next day, he held up his shirt to show bruises, inspiring the “No more bloody shirts!” protest slogan (Matusek 2019). Other protests are organized as part of the “1 of 5 million” events which are a direct response to President Vučić saying that free press is not guaranteed “even if there were 5 million people on the street” (Matusek 2019). However, despite the protests being organized on a number of consecutive weeks, there was barely any coverage of the events in the news (Milenković 2016). Because of that, the protesters stormed the headquarters of the Serbian national broadcaster, trying to report about what is happening in Belgrade on the national TV (RTS). However, the RTS refused to voice their message, protestors were forcibly removed from the building and a couple of them arrested. Quite ironically, the last time the RTS headquarters were stormed was in 2000, when president Slobodan Milošević was forced to resign (Citizen Truth Staff 2019).

### **3.3.2 Genealogy of Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own**

Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own (in Serbian: Ne Davimo Beograd) was founded as a grass-roots movement focused on sustainable city development, trying to enhance citizen’s participation in local politics. It turned into a protest movement after the announcement of the planned development of the Belgrade Waterfront Project, not only criticizing possible problems this construction could cause but also an absolute lack of transparency surrounding it (Delauney 2016). Its slogan “Whose city?” “Our city!” openly speaks against negative urbanistic changes conducted without any prior consultation with Belgrade citizens. Its symbol, a big yellow duck, can be seen all over the city (Bills 2018), and is a metaphor for fraud, implying that the Belgrade Waterfront Project

is nothing else than a big fraud (Delauney 2016). They have two main goals: to “stop this criminal and absolutely insane project,” and to make citizens more involved (Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own Creative Manager, personal communication, April 6, 2019). Since the movement’s establishment in 2014, and especially in the period of 2016-17, they managed to organize some of the biggest protests Belgrade has seen since the fall of president Milošević in 2000 (Sestovic 2018).

The Belgrade Waterfront, the main reason why Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own mobilized, is a €3bn development project aiming to revitalize the riverside surrounding the Belgrade main train station. The plan is to construct a shopping centre, luxury hotels, apartments, parks, brand new opera house and skyscrapers. Although such a project might seem unproblematic and desirable, its realisation raises criticism. The biggest trouble is the lack of transparency. The company funding the project is called Eagle Hills, a developer based in Abu Dhabi and run by a friend of President Vučić (Marjanovic 2017). The main evidence speaking about a possible conflict of interest is the fact that this developer was appointed without any bidding process (Delauney 2016). The contract is also highly unfavourable. Not only did the city renovate and give to the company for free public property that now serves as PR headquarters, it also committed to invest €2-billion worth of land, while Eagle Hills is investing only €25 million (Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own Founder, personal communication, April 6, 2019). One if the contract’s clauses also states that the Serbian government has to adopt any necessary laws and do anything to prevent any possible obstacles (Bills 2018). This includes preparation of the communal and traffic infrastructure, including a relocation of the main bus and train stations (Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own Founder, personal communication, April 6, 2019), with all costs covered from public money. The urban plans of Belgrade were also changed to fit the framework of the project (Marjanovic 2017). “The government said there would be no tender because 'we have the best investor already.' They just announced it would be done this way and covered it by changing the laws where necessary or just ignoring them where they couldn't change them,” one of the members explains (Delauney 2016).

Over the years, the riverside Savamala district has also become a cultural artistic hub with numerous galleries, pubs and art centres. Some of this will get lost in the process as well (Staff and Agencies in Belgrade 2016). What is particularly troubling is an incident which happened on an election night in April 24, 2016 when a number of buildings in the Savamala district, which stood in the way of the Belgrade Waterfront, were demolished by 20 mysterious masked men. According to the local media reports, these men were supposed to hold the inhabitants hostage, bound them, and take their mobile phones while bulldozers were destroying their homes. One of the witnesses later died in a hospital (Staff and Agencies in Belgrade 2016). What is even more troubling about this incident is that the city officials and police were probably directly involved, with police closing down those two streets for traffic during the incident and the city officials providing heavy machinery. The electricity was also cut down. When citizens called the police to report the incident, no help arrived (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Founder, personal communication, April 6, 2019).

Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own has been organising resistance against the Belgrade Waterfront since the very beginning. At first, they focused on architectural, urbanistic legal and social issues that this project raised, like the possible collapse of the traffic. They also proposed amendments to the City Commission in an attempt to stop the construction on legal grounds (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Speaker, personal communication, April 5, 2019). However, it soon became clear that nothing tangible was going to come out of such activities, with the Commission trying to explain that no changes were possible (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Founder, personal communication, April 6, 2019). After the unfavourable details of the construction plan were revealed, the movement included economic factors into their analyses. However, as one of the activists explains, complaints at public hearings and other gatherings were not fruitful because of a heavy governmental propaganda in favour of the project, portraying Belgrade Waterfront as an opportunity to create more jobs and give the city a new identity (Marjanovic 2017).

Because of that, the movement changed its strategy and started organizing protests, demonstrations, panel discussions, workshops, funny performances, blockades and other public contentious performances. In the period of 2014-16, it protested at each stage of the construction (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Founder, personal communication, April 6, 2019), including the day when the contract for the Belgrade Waterfront with Eagle Hills was signed and the foundation stone was ceremonially laid (Marjanovic 2017). The movement was slowly becoming more visible, with protests usually attracting around two thousand people (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Founder, personal communication, April 6, 2019). However, it was not until the aforementioned incident in April 2016 when the popularity of the movement drastically increased. During a protest against this incident, thousands of outraged citizens joined the activists, and the movement grew in numbers (Delauney 2016). Protesters called for the resignation of various police, government and city officials, but barely anyone was held accountable (Staff and Agencies in Belgrade 2016). However, prime minister Vučić eventually admitted that the city officials were behind this episode (Delauney 2016), calling them idiots and excusing the incident by claiming that the buildings were scheduled for a demolition anyway (Staff and Agencies in Belgrade 2016).

The violence in April 2016 made clear that there is much more at stake than only one project. “From then on, we got much more visibility and everybody wanted to protest because it was not any more about one project which you can support or not. It was all about the main principles of democracy” (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Founder, personal communication, April 6, 2019). From 2016, the protests grew massively, with tens of thousands of people on the streets (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Founder, personal communication, April 6, 2019). However, these slowly calmed down in 2017 when the movement started preparing for Belgrade city elections, which it lost with 3.4% of the votes (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Founder, personal communication, April 6, 2019). After the elections, Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own went through a vast reorganization and became a serious political initiative that cooperates with other local organizations, provides policy recommendations, works on the establishment of a shadow government and eventually, in a couple

of years, maybe a national political party (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Speaker, personal communication, April 5, 2019). In the meantime, the Belgrade Waterfront continues being developed. However, it is expected to take decades to complete and probably will not be used by ordinary citizens whose average wages do not allow them to enjoy luxury apartments and gourmet restaurants (Bills 2018).

### **3.3.3 Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own and Humour**

Initially, Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own was not a humorous movement. "To tell you the truth, our approach was not humorous at all. We were really into the procedures, into the breaking of law, into the institutions and stuff like that... but the problem was that we did some really wonderful analyses and nobody cared, the institutions didn't care, the media wouldn't publish us..." (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Speaker, personal communication, April 5, 2019). Because of this lack of attention, the movement realized they needed to change their approach to gain visibility (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Speaker, personal communication, April 5, 2019).

The first test was at a City planning Commission hearing. The movement submitted amendments to a draft regarding changes of the Belgrade urban plans and asked citizens to do the same. Eventually, around 2000 letters were sent, and as the procedure states, everyone had a right to present their amendments at a public hearing (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Speaker, personal communication, April 5, 2019). As they explained to me, the movement expected this meeting to be a charade, with city officials mechanically rejecting all the amendments (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Creative Manager, personal communication, April 6, 2019). For this reason, they prepared a performance to disrupt this meeting. If they behaved orderly, they would give legitimacy to the apathetic approach of the officials who would then claim that everything was done according to the procedure. Instead, they arrived with beach equipment, including life vests, balloons and rubber ducks, playing and fooling around like kids (see Figure 10).

Their message was that if the Belgrade on Water project continued, the whole city would drown and they would need safety equipment to save themselves, hence the name of the movement. The expectation was that because of such a disruption, the officials will stop the session and become open to a serious discussion. This did not



**Figure 10: Beach equipment at the City planning hearing (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Creative Manager, personal communication, May 3, 2019)**

happen. Thanks to this performance, it became clear that there is not any real legal procedure that would take citizens' opinions seriously (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Founder, personal communication, April 6, 2019). It was also the first time when the movement used humour for political mobilization and introduced the rubber duck as their symbol. They finally managed to catch media attention and their popularity started raising (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Speaker, personal communication, April 5, 2019).

Because their first humorous performance was a success, the movement realized this was the right strategy. "I think it was actually the right way to do it because if you start from the beginning by only explaining things, people get tired very quickly. You need to simplify things and maybe make it a little bit funny to actually get it to the people" (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Creative Manager, personal communication, April 6, 2019). Since then, they always tried to come up with some scandalous humorous performances. As the founder explains: "We were the best known as those crazy people that always do something strange and get media



**Figure 11: Announcement of a protest (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Creative Manager, personal communication, May 3, 2019)**

attention and make good protests” (Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own Founder, personal communication, April 6, 2019) (see Figure 11).

One of the most useful tools for gaining attention proved to be social media. In fact, even the name of the movement is derived from one of their Facebook events (Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own Founder, personal communication, April 6, 2019). They used their Facebook page to advertise upcoming activities and calls for volunteers, to spread awareness through satirical articles or posts, and to promote the movement. For instance, during one of the first online campaigns, the creative manager asked people supportive of the movement to send their photos in order to hand-draw a duck on them. These people then changed their profile photos to show their support online (Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own Creative Manager, personal communication, April 6, 2019).

With time, their repertoire of humorous contentious actions got very diverse, ranging from funny chants, songs, videos: anything that would increase their visibility. Banner-making workshops organized before every protest became a popular community-building exercise during which supporters interacted with activists and discussed how they can get involved. The banners were usually funny or sarcastic, playing with word puns (e.g. Phantom-mala referring to the masked men destroying Savamala streets) or popular culture slogans and idioms, always with a hidden serious political meaning (e.g. “Justice is slow...but too slow;” “Vučić, arrest us all!”) (Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own Creative Manager, personal communication, April 6, 2019). Because most of the core members were connected to the Belgrade art scene, the movement became well-known for their beautiful hand-painted props: a target of criticism from people who were calling for a serious political fight (Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own Creative Manager, personal communication, April 6, 2019). The movement also designed a “duckautomobile,” a Renault 5 from 1983 with a duck attached to it that they used to get to more distant areas in order to distribute leaflets (Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own Founder, personal communication, April 6, 2019) (see Figure 12). Similarly, during the Days of Belgrade, the movement participated in an official regatta race, floating a huge

“duck boat” down the river to the amusement of bystanders, until they got arrested by the river police (Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own Creative Manager, personal communication, April 6, 2019) (see Figure 13). This was not the only incident. During one protest, the police even stopped two trams to block the view of the protesters, inspiring them to come up with their motto: “Whose city? Our city!” In a response to this incident, the movement created their own improvised “trams” and tried to hide the mayor during one of his public speeches (Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own Creative Manager, personal communication, April 6, 2019).



Figure 12: “Duck-automobile” (Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own Creative Manager, personal communication, May 3, 2019)



Figure 13: “Duck regatta” (Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own Creative Manager, personal communication, May 3, 2019)

### 3.3.4 Impact of Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own

While speaking to the activists, it was obvious how disenchanted they were about the continuing Belgrade Waterfront construction violently changing their city. It seemed they did not achieve any big victory, did not deliver anything tangible, and even got beaten by the ruling party in the Belgrade municipality elections (Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own Speaker, personal communication, April 5, 2019). However, all of them agreed that they succeeded in other things. “We sort of failed in stopping this project happening but in the end I think it really helped a lot... in a sense that people realized that they can fight against things, that they are allowed to complain when something is bothering them, that politics is not something, you know, shameful” (Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own Creative Manager, personal communication, April 6, 2019).



The speaker of the movement agrees, believing that they managed to get citizens more involved, made them aware of what was happening, and safeguarded everyone's right to go on the streets to protest. They also inspired other groups, contributing to the growth of civil society (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Speaker, personal communication, April 5, 2019). During the last 25 years, there were not any real developments of Belgrade which would take into account needs and wishes of the citizens. Initiatives like Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own at least bring some hope to the people (Marjanovic 2017), and stand up for those who are truly endangered by the city politics and do not have resources to defend themselves (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Speaker, personal communication, April 5, 2019). Most importantly, they managed to succeed at least partially despite how small their access to the public sphere was due to oppression and state media capture (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Founder, personal communication, April 6, 2019).

### **3.3.5 Perceived Effectiveness of the Use of Humour**

#### ***1. Mobilization of the public: effective***

After initial failures to attract attention from the citizens and the media, Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own managed to become proficient in staging shocking, absurd humorous performances which were entertaining enough for the public to start paying attention and join them in their activities, and also for the media (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Speaker, personal communication, April 5, 2019). All interviewees without hesitation agreed that humour brought them visibility, massively contributed to their popularization and with the recruitment process. Activists driving around the city in a "duckautomobile" or huge ducks seemingly floating in the protest crowds were easy to remember. As a result, even people outside of Belgrade who do not remember the name of the initiative are aware of "these weird people with the duck," showing how much their popularity spread (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Founder, personal communication, April 6, 2019)

In the later protests, it became obvious that it did not matter what age, gender or education background people had. Citizens who used to be afraid of being politically active and taking sides,

their apathy fuelled by repression and disappointment, suddenly appeared on the streets. For the creative manager, it felt like the rubber ducks and funny protests somehow opened up the political space and citizens became more eager to participate (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Creative Manager, personal communication, April 6, 2019). Previously apathetic and fearful citizens who perceived politics as boring, shameful and something to be avoided suddenly saw that it could also be fun (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Founder, personal communication, April 6, 2019). Previously inaccessible, technocratic political discussion became more inclusive. In this respect, humour served as a universal language uniting everyone, be it either the elderly, parents with kids, or young students (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Creative Manager, personal communication, April 6, 2019).

However, not everyone was attracted by this type of tactics, accusing the movement of not taking the situation seriously enough. The activists counter this claim by saying that humour proved to be the most efficient and the easiest way of getting their message across and raising awareness (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Creative Manager, personal communication, April 6, 2019), proving claims presented by the Incongruity theory. They believe that people usually get tired if they are presented with expert analysis full of abstract academic language, and because of that stop listening (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Creative Manager, personal communication, April 6, 2019). Humour manages to present these problems in a more palatable and accessible form.

At the same time they admit that they could have pursued a more personalised, door-to-door campaign (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Founder, personal communication, April 6, 2019) and/or instead of humorous anti-campaigns introduce a positive, relatable political vision (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Speaker, personal communication, April 5, 2019). However, these discussions did not emerge until they lost the city elections.

## ***2. Recruitment of new members: effective***

Just as with mobilization, humorous performances were very important in the movement's recruitment process. Because a team of 20 people cannot organize everything, there was a need for volunteers who were called to participate through social media. Humorous performances increased the attractiveness of the movement, helped with reaching out and presented politics in a fun and exciting way. As the speaker argues, humour actually worked too well because they recruited over 2000 people but had relevant tasks only for around 250, which left some people disappointed (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Speaker, personal communication, April 5, 2019).

The creative manager reported that he/she was actually one of the people who got recruited to the movement after seeing some of their activities online. As a formerly apolitical person, the creative manager decided to approach the activists in order to get involved in actions which looked fun but were nevertheless sending a serious message. With the movement becoming more serious during the city elections, some people decided to leave the movement, including the creative manager (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Creative Manager, personal communication, April 6, 2019).

## ***3. Internal group dynamics: effective***

All interviewees agreed that humour played an absolutely crucial role. Laughing to tears together while staying late at night to prepare their next humorous action, facilitated group bonding, creation of friendships and established a family-like environment (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Creative Manager, personal communication, April 6, 2019). For many, the openness created through mutual laughter was their favourite thing about the movement. Because of that, once the movement became more serious, people started leaving, making the group dynamics more complicated (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Founder, personal communication, April 6, 2019).

All interviewees also mentioned that humour was especially important in times of great risks when oppression was at its peak, leaving activists stressed and scared. After discovering that members

are under surveillance or are being spoken about in propaganda media, they needed some kind of relief, which humour provided, just in line with the Relief theory (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Creative Manager, personal communication, April 6, 2019). Because of humour, they turned scary situations into something easier to deal with (e.g. making fun of policemen following them) which preserved their enthusiasm and determination to continue (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Speaker, personal communication, April 5, 2019).

Last but not least, humour turned political participation into something fun and exciting, while preserving the seriousness of the situation. As one of the members summarised: "This is great, I'm with good people and we are having fun and I think that we are doing a good thing [...] We are joking about stuff but still protesting against a scary oppressive government!" (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Founder, personal communication, April 6, 2019).

#### ***4. Relations with the authorities: ambiguous***

Answers here were quite ambiguous. The founder argued that having an ambiguous character made it difficult for the authorities to categorize and fight them. "I think that the best thing that we did, actually, is being a group that is a political actor, yet it's not; serious, yet hipster; having fun, but still sending a strong message. It's something new to all other political actors that cannot put us in one box." (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Founder, personal communication, April 6, 2019) The founder also told me that people connected to the authorities confidentially shared that they were honestly scared that the yellow duck was going to be a strong political movement and "they couldn't trash them as they trash typical political actors and typical political parties because they were so innocent" (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Founder, personal communication, April 6, 2019). The creative manager said that the regime probably did not see them as a real threat because of their funny approach, but most likely would react in the same way even if their activities were more serious. At the beginning, the regime did not mind too much, but once they grew, they become a threat (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Creative Manager, personal communication, April 6, 2019).

In contrast, the speaker does not believe that humour helped them at all because they were often harassed by the authorities (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Speaker, personal communication, April 5, 2019). Already at their first protest, they got arrested (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Creative Manager, personal communication, April 6, 2019). This was not the only type of repression the regime used. In the first 100 days of the movement's existence, several members appeared 40 times in the governmental propaganda media, including the headlines. They were portrayed as enemies of the state, foreign agents, and Soros or Rockefeller collaborators who are not only trying to bring down the regime but to destroy the whole country (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Speaker, personal communication, April 5, 2019). The problem is that the symbol of the duck was also used in other protests which gave the government ammunition. As Vučić said: "Come on, isn't it so obvious that in three different countries protesters use the same symbol of a duck? It's all connected and somebody on much higher level organizes that" (Marjanovic 2017). Vučić even held their photos on TV, calling them traitors. Because the ruling party has most of the means of public communication under control, fighting propaganda is very difficult (Sestovic 2018). As a public speaker of the movement, my interviewee was a frequent target. Someone even created a fake Facebook profile similar to his and shared lies in his name in discussion fora.

Additionally, activists' phones were tapped, they were frequently followed by the police, and their truck was confiscated. During the city elections campaign, people dressed as police officers with fake IDs even attempted to abduct the main face of the movement. At the national elections, a fake party was supposedly running under the movement's name (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Speaker, personal communication, April 5, 2019). However, despite the government trying to stop their activities, the movement still achieved a lot and showed that protesting is still allowed.

## 4 Discussion and Conclusion: Humour and Limited Public Sphere

Concerning the theories of humour presented at the beginning of this thesis, *Incongruity* and *Relief* theories both proved to be relevant for understanding causal chains leading to humour being effective in certain matters. *Incongruity theory* with its concepts of “ha-ha” and “a-ha” moments was helpful for understanding why humour is useful for awareness-raising helping with mobilization of the public, whereas *Relief theory* explained the importance of humour in giving citizens a possibility to express their dissent in an oppressive regime through the creation of an alternative public sphere (a counterpublic). At the same time, the cultural approach to social movements’ studies that I based my methodology on enabled me to focus on the agency and personal experience of the activists and adequately tackle the question of the perceived effectiveness of the use of humorous contentious performances.

Looking at the case studies (The Polish Orange Alternative, The Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party and the Serbian Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own movements), we can find more similarities than differences (see Table 1 in Appendix 3). In all three instances, humorous contentious performances were consciously chosen as the movements’ main strategy to increase their visibility, and help with achieving their stated goals. Concerning the perceived effectiveness of the use of humorous performances, the activists perceived them as effective in three out of four indicators. The most contested indicator was the humour’s effectiveness in helping with dealing with the authorities: two movements see it as ambiguous and one as not effective at all due to heavy, continuous oppression targeted against the movement. This is somewhat surprising because according to the theory, humour was expected to provide a certain level of safety from oppression because of the innocent appearance of the activists. However, this was not reflected in the obtained data. In contrast, in terms of mobilization, group dynamics and recruitment, the results are almost unanimous, with only recruitment having one ambiguous response. Throughout both the analysis and the interview process, I was also trying to stay open-minded to see if any other than my chosen indicators

emerged, and kept my topic guide only semi-structured to accommodate this. However, no other issues were raised.

In general, expressing political opinions in an entertaining, at times childish way was perceived to be effective and positive for the public and the activists alike. This resonates with the cultural tradition of the social movement studies (Johnston and Klandermans 1995, Goodwin et al. 2001, Flam and King 2005, Johnston and Noakes 2005), and specifically with the causal chain proposed by Flam and King (2005). Their focus is on *emotional management*, namely on the phenomenon of “emotional re-framing.” According to their causal chain, mobilization of the public is reached through a transformation of a “*cementing emotion*” in the society (fear and apathy in oppressive regimes) by a subversive “*counter-emotion*” (laughter), which changes passivity into action (2005; 12, 20). According to this logic, humour is supposed to serve as a helpful tool in the creation of a counterpublic which gives citizens living in environments with a limited access to the public sphere an opportunity to express dissent. Both activists and audience members often mentioned how participation in humorous performances helped them overcome their fear and/or apathy and become politically involved again, giving possible empirical evidence to this causal chain. However, more research needs to be done if this theory is to be generalized. A possible way forward would be a comparative study of movements from various geographical locations and/or regime types.

In my analysis, I also looked at changes over time. This was relevant only for types of humorous contentious performances (i.e. the repertoires of action). In all three cases, the movements’ humorous performances started as very subtle (graffiti, satirical newspapers, small performances), but slowly became more diverse and open to public participation, eventually attracting thousands of people. Concerning the perceived effectiveness of the use of humour, the perceptions were relatively steady and not time-dependent. The only exception was initial scepticism before humorous performances were employed in practice. However, important challenges emerged once the movements decided to participate in politics.

When the movement transformed into either a formal political party (Two-Tailed Dog Party), a more serious political initiative participating in city elections (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own) or its members tried to run in the Senate/presidential elections (The Orange Alternative), the public support suddenly dropped. In other words, mobilization of the public did not transform into election votes. What is more, in the case of Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own, once the movement started losing humour and became more serious, a number of core members left. After the recent Ukrainian presidential elections (Fisher 2019), we can see that humour definitely does have its place in politics and even comedians can be elected to the highest political posts. My hypothesis is that it is this change from a humorous to a serious movement which is harmful in terms of support, as it confuses supporters and makes the movement look part of the feared and often hated establishment. Future research should focus on this issue in more depth. One possibility would be to conduct a within-case study of Zelensky's presidential campaign to understand why he succeeded and possibly compare this with another within-case analysis of an individual or a movement which failed to transform its popularity into electoral votes. Was he successful just because he stayed true to his comedian nature? And are there any differences between democratic and repressive settings?

It is important to note that this research was not without certain limitations. To decrease the possible intervening factors, I focused only on one geographical region with similar historical legacies and regime types in terms of a limited access to the public sphere. The time-span of my focus can also be perceived as too short. Therefore, I do not claim my results to be universal. An extended geographical (more diverse regions), temporal and substantive (both democratic and oppressive regimes) comparative analysis would be needed to ground such a claim. Future analysis could also analyse the mobilization effects of specific humorous contentious performances. What is more likely to bring people to the streets: graffiti or a street theatre? And does the regime type make a difference?



Despite these limitations, this research still has several contributions. Firstly, it expands the field of social movement studies by focusing on a perceived effectiveness of a specifically chosen contentious strategy from the perspective of the activists themselves. Although perceptions are subjective, they play a crucial role in civic action and can reveal paradoxical and illuminating results. Even if no tangible, objective gains are achieved, certain tactics can still be perceived as effective and worthy of use. Secondly, as was indicated at the beginning of this thesis, humour is often understood as a field not serious enough to pay attention to. By showing the popularity of this strategy and the perceived effectiveness of its use by the activists who are based even in repressive societies, I wish to challenge this scepticism and spark a discussion about the treatment of humour as a legitimate and important tool of protest. Lastly, it can also serve as an inspiration for grass-roots activists who are already active in contentious performances.

## 5 Appendices

### 5.1 Appendix 1: Draft of the Interview Topic guide

#### TOPIC: HUMOUR AND CONTENTIOUS POLITICS

##### INTRODUCTION

- About myself (name, what I study, why I need this interview)
  - Focus & purpose of study (diploma thesis, explain my research)
  - **GO THROUGH THE CONSENT FORM**
  - The process: discussion ; duration (max. 60 mins); recording (needed for transcription)
  - Ethical issues: confidentiality of discussion (anonymised data) & **withdrawal at any time**
- Any questions / clarifications?
- **PERMISSION TO RECORD – START RECORDING**

##### ICEBREAKERS

Weather; Food; Travels; Jokes

##### OPENING QUESTIONS (the movement in a nutshell)

How and when did they join the movement

- *probes: what drove them – friends involved? Any specific event or characteristic that caught their attention?*

Their involvement

- *probes: specific responsibilities, how long did they stay*

What did they like about the movement

- *probes: any specific characteristic?*

The movement

- *probes: goal; how would he describe it in 1-2 sentences?*
- *Short run-down of the history*

##### KEY QUESTIONS (specific events, humorous performances)

Describe the happenings and other activities (repertoires of actions)

- *probes: what exactly was happening, ca. how many people involved, specific costumes/ rituals/ singing?, always the same or different actions? – graffiti vs. happenings vs. demonstrations*
- *specific use of humour? Was it a consciously chosen strategy?*
- *changes over time?*

### The use of humour

a. Achieving goals

- Probes: what was it? did humour help?
- Did they achieve what they wanted?

b. Mobilization

- *probes: feedback from the audience, how actions received, effects on the audience?*
- *media attention?*

c. Recruitment

- *probes: did they want to recruit, do they think humour helped? (why, why not?)*

d. Internal group dynamics

- probes: did humour help with bonding, group atmosphere? How? Why?

### Response from the regime

- *probes: jail, arrests, fear, intimidation*
- *did humour help to limit these? Protection? Innocence?*
- *Do they think the responses would be stronger if they pursued a conventional political protest?*

## **CLOSING QUESTIONS**

Looking back: Reflections about their involvement, what would they change?

Looking forward: Where is the movement going now?

General: The power of humour in politics

## **PERSONAL DETAILS**

Age:

Gender:

How long in the organization:

**THANK YOU!**

## 5.2 Appendix 2: Interview Consent Form

Project topic: Humour and Contentious Politics

Please, read the following information carefully.

My name is Lucie Janotová and I am a Master's Student at the department of Political Science at Central European University (CEU) in Budapest, Hungary. This interview is being conducted for the purpose of my Master Thesis which focuses on the use of humour by social movements in contentious, protest politics. It is an informal, semi-structured interview whose main goal is to get to know your personal story and experience as an activist in such a movement. I am not interested in "hard data", such as numbers, exact years etc., but your own narration, feelings and views.

All the information you provide will be processed for the thesis purposes only, and will be anonymised and treated with confidentiality. No person with the exception of me and my thesis supervisor will have an access to this data. Because a subsequent transcription of the interview might be required, I will have to record it. As stated, the recording will not be shared with any other person and will be treated anonymously, so that no one can identify you. If you, for any reason, start to feel uncomfortable during the interview, we can take a break and continue later, or you can withdraw at any time.

If you have any additional questions, please ask me now.

In case you have any doubts regarding the purpose, technique, or fairness of this interview, do not hesitate to contact my supervisor, Professor Nenad Dimitrijevic ([dimitrij@ceu.edu](mailto:dimitrij@ceu.edu)).

I thank you very much for your help and cooperation, I very much appreciate the time and information you share with me.

Date and place:

Signature:

### 5.3 Appendix 3: Summary of Case Studies

Table 1: Summary of the Case Studies

Name	Country, City	Founded	Repertoires of Action	Main Events	Perceived Effectiveness of the Use of Humour
<b>Orange Alternative (Pomarańczowa Alternatywa)</b>	Poland: nation-wide (Wrocław, Warsaw, Łódź, Gdańsk, Poznań, Kraków, Białystok, Olsztyn, Rzeszów, Lublin, and abroad)	the 1980s	graffiti, surrealist student magazines, sarcastic radio broadcasts, small contentious performances, large contentious performances (public happenings) + costumes, props, posters, slogans, flyers	Manifesto of Socialist Surrealism (1981); First tactical painting of dwarves graffiti (1982); Tubes – the first happening (1986); Toilet Paper happening (1987); Eve of the October Revolution happening (1987); Revolution of Dwarves (1988); Major's Electoral Campaign (1989)	1. Mobilization: effective 2. Recruitment: ambiguous 3. Group dynamics: effective 4. Authorities: not effective
<b>Two-Tailed Dog Party (Kétfarkú Kutya Párt)</b>	Hungary: nation-wide (Budapest, Debrecen, Szeged, Szentendre, Zugló and other)	2006	humorous street art (graffiti, stencils, posters), theatre, film, music, video games, guerrilla gardening, renovation projects of public spaces, protests, petitions, awareness-raising campaigns, satirical newspapers, public performances, online satire	local and parliamentary elections campaigns (2006 and 2010); anti-anti-immigration billboard and poster campaign (2016); mandatory quota referendum campaign (2016); Parliamentary elections campaign (2018); EP elections campaign (2019)	1. Mobilization: effective 2. Recruitment: effective 3. Group dynamics: effective 4. Authorities: ambiguous
<b>Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own (Ne Davimo Beograd)</b>	Serbia: Belgrade	2014	online satire, smaller and bigger street protests, humorous forms of transportation (duckautomobile, duck regatta race), "Facebook frames," songs, videos, poems, petitions, workshops, panel discussions, banner-making	City planning Commission hearing (beach equipment protest performance) (2015); Protest against the signing of the Belgrade Waterfront contract (2015); Protests after Savamala violence (2016); "Duckautomobile" (2016); City elections (2017)	1. Mobilization: effective 2. Recruitment: effective 3. Group dynamics: effective 4. Authorities: ambiguous

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## 6.1 Interviews<sup>1</sup>

- Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own Creative Manager. May 3, 2019. Interview by email.
- Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own Creative Manager. April 6, 2019. Personal interview.
- Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own Founder. April 6, 2019. Personal interview.
- Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own Speaker. April 5, 2019. Personal interview.

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymised interview transcripts are available upon request. Please contact me on my email: [Janotova\\_Lucie@student.ceu.edu](mailto:Janotova_Lucie@student.ceu.edu) for further details.