

AUTHORITARIANISM AND SOCIAL MOBILIZATION IN AZERBAIJAN: SUBJECTIVITIES, LOGICS, FANTASIES

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Abstract

Drawing about post-structuralist discourse theory (PDT) and Lacanian psychoanalysis, this thesis examines authoritarian practices, social mobilization, and resistance in Azerbaijan, which was marked by the hunger strike of political prisoner Mehman Huseynov in December 2018-January 2019. It analyzes collective identity formation, the role of fantasies in the politicization of de-politicized people through the articulation of the common demand in social networks and in the protest rally. Following Laclau and Mouffe's post-structuralist political theory and Essex School of Discourse Analysis, this research distinguishes social, political and fantasmatic logics in order to illuminate authoritarian practices, their contestation, and formation of mass protest identity and discourse. This work raises the issue of depoliticization and marginalization through authoritarian practices and examines the possibility of resistance.

Keywords: Post-Structuralism, Identity Formation, Lacanian Psychoanalysis, Laclau and Mouffe, Resistance, Azerbaijan

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Introduction

“Freud had to deal all his life with ghosts... psychoanalysis has taught that the dead – a dead parent, for example – can be more alive for us, more powerful, more scary, than the living.

It is the question of ghosts.”

Jacques Derrida, “Ghost Dance”

Social mobilization in authoritarian states has always been an actual topic for researchers from different social and political sciences. Azerbaijan, which is located in the South Caucasus region, is a post-Soviet country, which is often described as an authoritarian state.¹ The country is ruled by the family of Aliyevs since 1969 (with a break between 1987-1993). Ilham Aliyev took the office after his father’s death in 2003, and his presidential mandate after his fourth re-election in 2018 is still ongoing. In the recent decade, the ruling regime eliminated the logic of political competition, many political activists, NGO members, journalists, and bloggers have been arrested. Leading international human rights organizations recognized them as political prisoners.²

Anti-regime movements and social mobilization in Azerbaijan have its own history in Azerbaijan that may explain many things. The first such mobilization with clear political goals happened in 2003, after Ilham Aliyev’s victory in presidential elections. A number of international observers stated that the elections were rigged.³ After the brutal police suppression of the 2003 uprising, Ilham Aliyev started the policy of authoritarian hegemony. A constitutional

¹ Freedom House, “*Freedom in the World 2018, Azerbaijan*”, available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/azerbaijan> [accessed 28 May 2019].

² Ibid.; Amnesty International Report 2017/18, *Azerbaijan*.

³ Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper, *Azerbaijan: Presidential Elections 2003*.

referendum in 2009 abolished presidential term limits and legitimized pressures on media. The Venice Commission of the Council of Europe (Azerbaijan is a member state) criticized these changes as a step back from democracy.⁴

These changes allowed Aliyev to be re-elected in 2013 and 2018 presidential elections. Crackdown on opposition and NGOs especially intensified after 2013 elections. A number of prominent members of the civil society were arrested and prosecuted, youth activists were condemned with false charges as drug possession.⁵ These politically motivated oppressions started after the case of social mobilization, which was against a number of unaccountable soldier deaths in the army of Azerbaijan. This campaign was followed by two rallies in the center of Baku, capital of Azerbaijan, in January and March 2013. Despite this mobilization was led by youth movements and not by classic opposition parties, the government's reaction was highly authoritarian. Despite a part of the arrested persons was "pardoned" by President, the civil society had been demoralized and progressive youth movements experienced marginalization. After these events, arrests and "drug" prosecutions of opposition members and activists have been normalized, and the general population both in urban and rural areas mostly ignored these oppressions.

In my thesis, I investigate the mass mobilization case of Mehman Huseynov, a well-known blogger, who started a hunger strike in prison in late December 2019 – January 2019. His hunger strike turned into a mass hunger strike implemented by both political prisoners and civil

⁴ European Commission for Democracy Through Law (the Venice Commission), "Opinion on the Draft Amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan," 2009.

⁵ Human Rights Watch, "World Report 2013: Azerbaijan", available at: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2013/country-chapters/azerbaijan>

society members, accompanied by the virtual #FreeMehman campaign and a huge demonstration on January 19.

Mehman Huseynov was in prison for two years, convicted of libel for saying he had been tortured by police in January 2017. In late December 2019, he faced with new charges in prison, namely “resisting a representative of the authorities with the use of violence dangerous to [the representative's] health and life.”⁶ Right after he started a hunger strike. This case attracted international attention and resulted in Huseynov’s release from prison on March 2, 2019, and President Aliyev’s declare of the necessity of judicial and social reforms. On March 16, most famous political prisoners were released, including those who joined the mass hunger strike.

In my thesis, I investigate how a hunger strike of one political prisoner turned into the mass mobilization and solidarity despite the authoritarian system of rule.

Research Question and Theoretical Framework

My thesis explores the following question: How may social mobilization be facilitated in an authoritarian country and which strategies and situational events might be used for that?

Saying authoritarian country, I mean a country where the ruling regime uses a number of oppressive tools as censorship, daily propaganda, control of the courts “which allow it to limit political mobilization or opposition and monopolize the discursive construction of the political.”⁷

⁶ “Azerbaijani Blogger Released From Jail After Serving Two Years”, Radio Free Europe, accessed May 28, 2019. <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijani-blogger-released-from-jail-after-serving-two-years/29799681.html>

⁷ Adam Standring, “Portugal and the European Union: Defining and Contesting the Boundaries of the Political,” in *Comparing Strategies of (De)Politicisation in Europe*, ed. Jim Buller, Pınar E. Dönmez, Adam Standring, Matthew Wood (Springer International Publishing; Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 131.

I understand mobilization as collective action by people from different segments of society, which are gathered for a common goal or goals.⁸ Research question explores the organization of the mass resistance movement in social media and its transformation into a real-life protest rally. Following post-structuralist political discourse theory, my focus is the construction of protest identity and the emergence of political subjectivities in the situation of “organic crisis” in the de-politicized society of Azerbaijan.

I analyze the emergence of the resistance movement through the post-structuralist angle based on the existing theoretical literature on the discursive construction of identities and subjectivities and I understand political change in terms of disruption of hegemony.⁹ In my work, I draw upon the political theorists of populism and mass movements, namely Laclau and Mouffe and their followers from the Essex School of Discourse Analysis. I also appeal to psychoanalytic political theory for a better understanding of the ‘psychology of masses’ as Lacanian psychoanalysis proposes a useful theoretical toolkit for the analysis of mass movements. For this purpose, I draw upon Slavoj Žižek¹⁰ and Laclau’s follower Yannis Stavrakakis.¹¹ Through the analysis of social media and my own participatory experience, I explore the construction of common fantasies and goals for the rescue of a hunger-striking political prisoner in order to demonstrate how this fact may cause the emergence of the protest identity in the situation of de-politicization and marginalization of protest.

⁸ Schock K. 1999. People power and political opportunities: social movement mobilization and outcomes in the Philippine and Burma. *Social Problems* 46(3): 355–375.

⁹ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985); Jason Glynos and David Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory* (UK: Routledge, 2007); David, Howarth., Norval, AJ. And Yannis Stavrakakis. *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis Identities, Hegemonies and Social Change* (Manchester University Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Verso, 1989).

¹¹ Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1999).

Significance of the study

My thesis contributes to the empirical studies of resistance and social mobilization in authoritarian countries. In general, resistance and collective movements have always been a research object for a post-structuralist thought. For Michel Foucault, issues of power, domination, and possibilities to resist were always important.¹² Most famously, he suggested that power relations presuppose the existence of resistance, even if a certain form of power is extremely dominant and takes away any opportunity to resist and reject the power, a resisting subject still has a choice for a silent resistance.¹³

Such proponents of discourse theory, as A. Norval and D. Howarth extensively wrote about the resistance to apartheid in South Africa. They apply Gramscian, Foucauldian and PDT concepts in their works. Drawn upon Gramsci, they argued that new identities emerge in times of crisis.¹⁴ They examined how the Black Consciousness Movement constructed unity between different ethnic and political groups of the black people in South Africa by opposing them to a common enemy, white racism.¹⁵ The concept of blackness is considered as an empty signifier that united various demands and identities

Cengiz Gunes explained how Kurdish guerilla movement PKK played a crucial role in the mass mobilization of Kurds in Turkey from discourse-theoretical perspective. The author used such notions as myth and dislocation to highlight how new Kurdish political subjectivities were constructed. The author argued that “the contemporary myth played a significant role in the

¹² Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power.”, in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984* (London: Penguin, 1994); Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended* (New York: Picador, 2003).

¹³ Michel Foucault, ‘The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom’, in *The Final Foucault* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991).

¹⁴ Aletta J. Norval, *Deconstructing apartheid discourse* (London: Verso, 1996).

¹⁵ David Howarth and Aletta J. Norval, *South Africa in Transition: New Theoretical Perspectives* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1998).

mobilization process and the sedimentation of the PKK's national liberation discourse in practice".¹⁶ He also added fantasmatic dimension to his studies to reveal how affects mobilize people through nationalistic and cultural discourses.

Maksym Zhrebkin explained the mass mobilization during the 'Color revolutions' in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan from different theoretical angles. He argued that the advantage of post-structuralist discourse theory is that it is able to "conceptualize the dynamic interdependence between structure and agency, as well as the formation of collective political identities."¹⁷ He suggested that the collective identity formation and transition stem from dislocation of the previous ideological structures.

Vendula Prokúpková examined anti-Islamic mobilizations for the period of 2015-2016 in the Czech Republic using post-structuralist discourse-theoretical concepts.¹⁸ She analyzed discursive and identity shifts in populist movement before and after the refugee crises, their demands and how the unity was achieved between different actors. She considered the refugee crises as an impactful dislocatory event, which led to radicalization and popularization of anti-Islamic sentiments.

The lack of literature on protest movements and resistance in Azerbaijan is a significant problem for researchers, and my work will be useful for overcoming this lacuna. The case that I investigate is important and influential, as it has had an impact on the state policy. My research

¹⁶ Cengiz Gunes , "Explaining the PKK's Mobilization of the Kurds in Turkey: Hegemony, Myth and Violence," in *Ethnopolitics*, 12:3, (2013), 247-267.

¹⁷ Maksym Zhrebkin, "In Search of a Theoretical Approach to the Analysis of the 'Colour Revolutions': Transition Studies and Discourse theory," in *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 42 (2), (2009), 199–216.

¹⁸ Vendula Prokúpková, "Two Mobilization Waves of the Czech Anti-Islam Movement. Collective Actors and the Identity Change of the Movement 2015-2016", in *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics*, 4(4), (2018), 51-71.

shows the crucial role of the social networks for the emergence of mass movements in non-democratic countries, and its relevance for making a change. It demonstrates the conditions necessary for the emergence of protest identities, its possibility in the situation of authoritarian dominance, and the crucial role of fantasies and identification with a credible figure. Unlike so-called rationalist approaches, using PDT and concepts from psychoanalysis, I highlight the crucial role of fantasies and ‘humanistic’ crisis in politicization of de-politicized masses. In addition, my research reviews the situation in the marginalized opposition of Azerbaijan for 2018 and the beginning of 2019, main trends in it and its positive role in the transformation of virtual campaign in a real-time protest rally.

Despite post-structuralist discourse theory (PDA) has widely been used for the analysis of identities and political subjectivities in popular movements, it is rarely practiced in the context of non-democracy. The approach that I use in this work has a theoretical significance. Going further the classical discourse-theoretical approach, I use the recent “logical” development in this approach, which brings the ontological level of Laclau’s theory to a practical (“ontic level”) usage.¹⁹ The logics approach was applied on the context of mass movements and populism in Venezuela²⁰, however, not widely used for the analysis of resistance movements and practices.

¹⁹ Glynos and Howarth, 2007.

²⁰ Brading, Ryan, *Populism in Venezuela* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012).

Chapter 1: Discourse Theory, Mobilization and Subjectivities

1.1. Post-Structuralist Discourse Theory

Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (1985) may be counted as the beginning of Post-Structuralist Discourse Theory (PDA). Written by Argentinian political theorist Laclau and his life-long partner, Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe, this seminal book opened a new page in post-structuralism and political theory. Drawing upon such post-structuralist thinkers as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, Laclau and Mouffe declared that progressive movements need a new, non-determinist strategy for the contestation of hegemonic regimes and practices. For them, the new Leftist movements should abandon class reductionism of classic Marxism and take into consideration modern political and social movements from feminists to student unions.

However, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* is highly complex work that calls to abandon Marxist essentialism. Schematically, it can be divided into ontological theory, political-identical views and theory of radical pluralism. Their following works, as well as works of their proponents develop and contribute to the aforementioned three levels of post-Marxist theory.

Drawing upon Wittgenstein's notion of "language games", Derrida's radical contingency of discursive structures, Lacan's structural undecidability, Laclau and Mouffe developed post-structuralist understanding of discourse as an ontological category that captures identities and articulatory (meaningful) practices.

In his later works, Laclau continued this tradition and added focus on the affective dimension of subjectivities as co-constitutive in the process of identity formation.²¹ His focus was populist identities and identifications, which makes his theory relevant for a study of protest identity. He argued for a neutral understanding of populism as a necessary element of democracy. In his theory of populism, Laclau highlighted the importance of identification with a certain figure (“ego ideal”), construction of “the People” and unity of different segments of society against a common enemy that makes his theory suitable for my research.

1.1.1. Terminological “explosion”: Discourse, articulation, nodal points, empty and floating signifiers

The notion of *discourse* plays a central role in Laclau and Mouffe’s theory. Discourse theory, following Foucault’s tradition, claims that “all objects and assumptions are meaningful is a product of historically specific systems of rule.” Thus, social reality is constructed through discourses that can be contested, as they are can never “completely exhaust a social field of meaning”.²² In a research based on discourse-theoretical assumptions, social phenome is explained through discourses. Drawn upon Heidegger and Wittgenstein, Laclau and Mouffe do not deny the existence of reality or do not reduce it to language or simply idealism. As Howarth mentions, discourse theory argues that “we are always within the world of signifying practices and objects, such that its denial is logically impossible”.²³ Unlike positivist linguists (critical discourse analysts) followers of PDT tend to focus on “social and political dimensions of discourse from a macrosocial and historical point of view”²⁴ as they understand discourse as what

²¹ Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990); *On Populist Reason* (London: Verson, 2005).

²² David Howarth, *Discourse* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000), 8.

²³ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁴ Jan Zienkowski, *Articulations of Self and Politics in Activist Discourse. A Discourse Analysis of Critical Subjectivities in Minority Debates* (Palgrave, 2017), 94-95.

constructs reality, including political and social institutions. This moment differs them from critical discourse analysis (CDA), which is concerned with linguistic microstructures.

Following post-structuralist ontology, proponents of discourse theory argue for ontological instability and impossibility of wholeness of structures. The role of discourse, therefore, to establish a closure *as if* the polysemy of discursive elements does not exist. Thus, e.g. an authoritarian regime's main concern is to present the current reality as unaltered and "the best that can be achieved." However, every discourse remains unstable: "The transition from the "elements" to the "moments" is never entirely fulfilled".²⁵ Thus, discourse theory highlights that temporally fixing is necessary and possible. Another important function of discourse is to draw borders between 'Us' and 'Them' axis. In other words, antagonism emerges as a necessity for every identity formation, and the 'Other' plays a role of the "constitutive outside."²⁶ For Laclau and Mouffe, this 'Other' is the ruling regimes in case of progressive populist movements. For example, for the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa the role of the constitutive outside was played by the apartheid.²⁷ Without the antagonistic 'Other', the articulation of the 'Self' and construction of a strong identity is impossible. Especially it is relevant for my thesis, as my focus is the production of political subjectivities and I show how the presence of the personalized 'Other' is effective and productive.

The second central notion in discourse theory is *articulation*. They define it as "any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of

²⁵ Laclau and Mouffe, 110.

²⁶ Laclau, 1990.

²⁷ Norval and Howarth, 1998.

the articulatory practice.”²⁸ Thus, discourse may be formed only through articulatory practices. The aforementioned notions of *moments* and *elements* are conceptualized as “different positions that appear articulated within a discourse” and “the signs whose meanings have not yet been fixed; signs that have multiple, potential meanings.”²⁹

The third important concept is a *nodal point*. They are “privileged” signifiers, reference points, “points de caption” in Lacanian psychoanalysis. They structure elements into “a meaningful system of moments, into a discourse.”³⁰ For example, in communist ideology the signifier “communism” has a function of nodal point, discursive elements such as “freedom” and “democracy” are articulated as moments of communist discourse through the reference to the nodal point “communism.” In a protest or populist movement this role may be played by a concrete person, too.³¹ Therefore, the fixation of meaning is possible only for hegemonic discourses, while this fixation is still unstable. In other words, this fixation is necessary for hiding the ontological instability and has an illusionary nature. A nodal point is crucial for bringing together different identities and groups of people, including social mobilization. In case of social mobilization, a nodal point is equal to the cause of mass protest.

The concept of nodal point is very close to other important notion of PDA – *empty signifier*. Emptiness is an essential quality of nodal points, they may be interpreted differently by various actors. Hegemony or political projects are thus may be successful only when an empty signifier becomes a nodal point. In Laclau’s political view, an empty signifier, for example, ‘the

²⁸ David Howarth and Yannis Stavrakakis, “Introducing discourse theory and political analysis”, in David Howarth, Aletta Norval, and Yannis Stavrakakis, (eds.) *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: Identities, Hegemonies and Social Change* (Manchester University Press, 2000).

²⁹ Marianne Jørgensen and Louise J. Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (London: SAGE Publication, 2002).

³⁰ Laclau and Mouffe, 113.

³¹ Laclau, 2005.

People' has an ability to unite different segments of society to create a hegemonic project, which will destabilize current states of affairs. Usually, empty signifiers are abstract and ambiguous as they hold together different groups and their demands. Five conditions are necessary for the emergence of an empty signifier: credibility, availability, a politicizing potential, an unequal division of power to unity multiple demands, and a historical and empirical documentation that illustrates the development of a moment into an empty signifier.³²

When it comes to *floating signifiers*, they are objects of rhetorical battles, different rival social actors or political projects and their demands are “fighting over their definition.”³³ In other words, when empty signifiers lose their credibility, they become floating signifiers.

1.1.2. Post-Structuralist Discourse Theory's View of Subjectivity

Laclau and Mouffe, highly influenced by neo-Marxists structuralist theorist Louis Althusser and Freudian psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, established their own view of subjectivity.

First, Laclau and Mouffe reject both rationalist and Foucauldian views of subjectivity. Following Althusser, who declared that subjects are constructed through the state ideological practices ('interpellated'), Laclau and Mouffe argue that subjects are positioned within the discursive structure. However, they reject Althusser's determinist understanding of human subjectivity, too. For Laclau and Mouffe, subjects have various *subject positions*, for example, one person may have such subject positions as 'male', 'working class', 'Labor Party member', 'White' etc. Thus, subjects have different forms of being social actors.³⁴ In case of a de-

³² Eleanor MacKillop, “How do empty signifiers lose credibility? The case of commissioning in English local government,” in *Critical Policy Studies*, 12:2, (2018), 190.

³³ *Ibid.*, 191.

³⁴ Laclau and Mouffe, 127.

politicized society, the subject position of a supporter or member of a certain political power is mainly empty.

The second notion on subjectivities in PDT is *political subjectivity*, the way that social actors act. Political subjectivity is freedom of a subject, an “agency that emerges in the space opened up by a dislocated structure.”³⁵ It is crucial for my research as shows that even an authoritarian hegemony has a contingent nature, political subjectivities are possible to emerge in the situation of dislocation, and this rule is relevant for de-politicized subjects, too.

Summing up, PDT goes beyond both the structuralist determinist privileging of structures over agency and rationalist views of subjects. “Laclau argues that the actions of subjects emerge because of the contingency of those discursive structures through which a subject obtains its identity.”³⁶

In Lacanian term, a subject is split (Freudian *Spaltung*). As I mentioned, not only structures but also identities are always incomplete, *lack* is an integral part of every subject. The effect of this condition is that subjects are always seeking for a subject position that will give the imaginary wholeness, “we are literally thrown into discourses, which are already structured at the moment of our entry.”³⁷ Unlike social constructivists, who have not conceptualized the potential of subject to resist and neglected the affective dimension, Laclau, drawing upon Lacan, applies such notions as a desire of wholeness and enjoyment. After the ‘separation’ from mother, subject finds himself in what Lacan calls Symbolic – limited subject positions for identification. As the

³⁵ David Howarth, “Introduction: discourse, hegemony and populism: Ernesto Laclau’s political theory,” in *Ernesto Laclau: Post-Marxism, Populism and Critique* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 11.

³⁶ Howarth and Stavrakakis, 13.

³⁷ Jakub Eberle, *Logics of foreign policy: discourse, fantasy and Germany's policies in the Iraq crisis* (University of Warwick, 2016), 51.

‘real’ enjoyment (*jouissance*) is always and already lost because of this separation, the subject’s main desire is to back this lost enjoyment and get the ‘perfect’ identity.³⁸ In that sense, individual and collective identities have rather more common than different. They are interconnected and interdependent, as they are constructed at many levels.³⁹ Thus, the lack is an integral feature of any identity and structure. However, the lack and impossibility of full enjoyment do not make subjects passive. In oppose, it only intensifies a desire to get the full enjoyment. This is what political projects promise for their supporters. Engagement in a political project gives a partial enjoyment, but this obtained *jouissance* is not a *full* *jouissance*.⁴⁰

Engagement in politics closely related to such concepts as requests and demands. Requests are made to the locus of power, which has a decision-making function, e.g. a governmental institution. If the locus of power satisfies a request, politicization and possibly populist movement for a certain demand are expected. In this case, a unit which made the request remains as a unit of the “rules of game.”⁴¹ However, when a certain request is rejected, it turns into the unsatisfied demand. When different demands are unsatisfied, a certain political force may unify them and challenge the existing regime of power and its “common sense.”⁴² The aforementioned notion of “empty signifier” is what has an ability to structure these demands and shadow their differences in favor of equivalence. In that case, an empty signifier becomes a nodal point and a popular identity is created.⁴³ These unifications with different units who suffer from unsatisfied demands establish a sense of solidarity between collective and individual identities

³⁸ Stavrakakis, 42.

³⁹ Eberle, 52.

⁴⁰ Stavrakakis, 40.

⁴¹ Ernesto Laclau, “Populism: What’s in a Name?” in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, Panizza, F. (ed.), (London: Verso, 2005), 34.

⁴² Branding, 28.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

and actors. This is what Ernesto Laclau calls a populist identity. Their common demand represents the whole chain, and thus, hegemony, how PDT interprets it, emerges.⁴⁴

Discourse-theoretical understanding of subjectivity shows that in the subjective lack is rather a catalyst of political subjectivity and engagement, and a dislocatory event has a power to politicize de-politicized elements.

1.1.3. The concept of “dislocation.” Myth and Social Imaginary

Dislocation is the moment of rupture, “intervention of the Real” in Lacanian terms, when the contingency of social structures becomes visible for subjects and they feel the fundamental lack.⁴⁵ In this situation, the actual subject positions we identify with “do not seem to provide sufficient direction for our actions any longer and the comfort zone of routinized practices is shattered.”⁴⁶ Such historical events as the collapses of the Imperial Russia or the USSR are examples of “grand dislocation” when new radical political subjectivities (Bolshevism and nationalistic movements in former Soviet republics) emerged. Other examples are ‘color revolutions’ in post-Soviet countries and the “Arab Spring” when the governmental violence against a limited number of protesters transformed into collective movements. For example, in authoritarian Tunisia a man who burned himself caused regional dislocation, which marked the starting point of the “Arab Spring” and transformed into different movements in Arab countries. In the international level, 11/9 caused a global dislocation and resulted in the so-called new world order.

⁴⁴ Idib, 30.

⁴⁵ Howarth and Stavrakakis, 13.

⁴⁶ Eberle, 52.

Putting differently, dislocation is a traumatic event, which may contain physical violence. In case if a dislocative event contains a significant degree of violence and shocking effect, it may cause a radical dislocation of structures. Despite its traumatic function, dislocation also opens new possible identifications for subjects. The rupture of structures and identities brings new positions and emerges agency of the subject and ‘forces’ to make a decision.⁴⁷ Agency, or in other words, freedom of the subject, as much possible as much the structures are dislocated.

Structural dislocation makes possible to emerge myths. Their effectiveness is essentially hegemonic, as they involve the formation of “new objectivity by means of the rearticulation of the dislocated elements.”⁴⁸ In other words, myth is a floating signifier that sutures a society or collective identity as a totality. After the dislocative event, when the lack and incompleteness are made visible, the emergence of new imaginaries is necessary. As Laclau highlights, “myth is constitutive of any possible society.”⁴⁹ For PDT, the new radical subject that emerges within the dislocative event is ‘a mythical subject’, “where the work of myth is to repair the dislocations experienced by subjects in particular situations by providing a new principle of reading of a situation.”⁵⁰ When myth overcomes dislocation and brings together different social actors, it becomes a social imaginary. Myth operates at the level of a particular group’s interests (e.g., working class) and their vision of reality and future, while social imaginary works for more than one actor. Successful occupation of the signifier “the People” may be reached only through a collective social imaginary that works “for many.”

⁴⁷ Laclau, 1990.

⁴⁸ Howarth and Stavrakakis, 23.

⁴⁹ Laclau, 1990, 67.

⁵⁰ David Howarth, *Poststructuralism and After* (Springer, 2018), 163.

1.2. Logics Approach to Post-Structuralist Discourse Theory

Logics Approach to PDT is the further development of Laclau's Discourse Theory. It has been developed by members of the Essex School of Discourse Analysis, namely by David Howarth and Jason Glynos⁵¹ to transform ontological assumptions (contingency and discursive character of the structures) of PDT to an analytical framework. Originally, the concept of logic appeared in Laclau's later work *On Populist Reason*. For his followers from Essex University, "the logic of a practice comprises the rules or grammar of the practice, as well as the conditions which make the practice both possible and vulnerable."⁵² In other words, logic is what makes possible governing practices and social relations. Laclau already distinguished between *social* and *political* logics in his works. Following him, Glynos and Howarth added *fantasmatic logics*.

Social logics capture 'the rule of game' and 'common sense', which characterize social practices and regimes that are understood as taken for granted. These practices are not contested in public discourses. For example, Western neoliberal educational discourses have such social logics as logics of atomization, instrumentalization and competition.⁵³ The entire regime of practices in apartheid may be named as social logics of apartheid. Taking the level of international order, we may distinguish the social logics of state sovereignty, which provides subject positions (states), objects (e.g., borders), rules and practices (e.g., border control).⁵⁴ It is the task of the researcher to recognize the social logics in a certain context and name them. *Logics of Critical Explanation* argue for a self-interpretation as the starting point of analysis. In

⁵¹ Glynos and Howarth, 2007.

⁵² *Idib.*, 136.

⁵³ Glynos and Howarth, 193.

⁵⁴ Eberle, 57.

my project, I distinguish the social logics of authoritarian regime in Azerbaijan through my own experience of living and engaging in politics there.

Political logics are related to the contestation, reproduction or transformation of the discursive order (social logics). Political logics emerge as a result of the dislocation of discursive structures, and “enable us to understand the way a social practice or regime was instituted or is being contested or instituted.”⁵⁵ Political logics construct new identities, draw boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and raise political subjectivities.

Drawing upon Saussurean structural linguistics, PDT “identifies two fundamental relations in language – the associative (or substitutive) and the syntagmatic (or combinatory)”, which were transformed by Laclau and Mouffe to their political theory as two political logics – logic of equivalence and logic of difference.⁵⁶ The logic of equivalence forms common identities and weakens differences between them, uniting against a certain enemy (e.g., the oppressed against the occupants). In left populist discourses such logic constructs the ‘People’ versus the ‘Elites’ dichotomy. Discursive unity between various elements may be created because of a common threat. According to Laclau and Mouffe, social antagonisms are necessary for identity formation, and the logic of equivalence is the political way of creating unities.

The logic of difference, in oppose, weakens the (possible) unity between discursive identities and actors, emphasizing distinctiveness. Also, the logic of equivalence simplifies the political boundaries, while the logic of difference articulates difficulties of politics. In a situation of war, when external enemy threatens to destroy the entire country (and its social logics), the logic

⁵⁵ Glynos and Howarth, 106.

⁵⁶ *Idib.*, 106; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985.

of equivalence prevails, and different political parties work together. After the war, the logic of difference dissolves the former unity. In the level of international relations, the war against Nazi Germany and its allies, or the ‘War on Terror’ are good examples of how the logic of equivalence has been replaced by the logic of difference afterward. Thus, the logic of equivalence and a ‘Constitutive Outside’ are interconnected categories. Political logics explain the formation of temporary unity in Azerbaijan between different political parties and newly politicized subjectivities.

Summing up, political logics contest the hegemony (social logics) through two interconnected logics of equivalence and difference. For a successful counter-hegemonic project, the logic of equivalence between different social demands should prevail. Only the creation of successful equivalence chains can break the existing “rules of game”, establish new institutions, and change the social logics in a more or less degree. As Glynos and Howarth highlight, “they are equivalent not insofar as they share a positive property (though empirically they may have something in common), but, crucially, insofar as they have a common enemy.”⁵⁷ Thus, empty signifiers have an ability to bring together different social actors and create a new common identity through the logic of equivalence.

The third logics, *fantasmatic*, are added by Glynos and Howarth mostly drawing upon Jacques Lacan. As I mentioned earlier, Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of subject had been developed from Lacanian psychoanalysis. While political logics ‘provide a politically-inflected signifying frame within which to show how social practices come into being or are transformed’, fantasmatic logics reveal ‘why specific practices and regimes “grip” subjects.’⁵⁸ In other words,

⁵⁷ Glynos and Howarth, 144.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

political logics analyze the signifying operations, and fantasmatic logics concern with the affective side of the identity construction. The aforementioned ontological notions of ‘myth’ and ‘social imaginary’, thus, better fit in the fantasmatic logics. Fantasmatic logics are closely related with the fundamental lack in subjects and with the promise of wholeness. In political projects, thus, fantasies are the key source of energy and direction for a better future.⁵⁹

Importantly, fantasies here are not understood as “unreal” or dreams. Fantasies are important to overcome deadlock and to find a “stable place” for subjects⁶⁰. They not just simplify our lives, but also helps not to feel (at least, constantly) the lack. They are constructed around certain narratives, which have beatific and horrific dimensions⁶¹. When the beatific dimension calls for certain actions that will lead to an ideal result, the horrific dimension highlights a possible disaster scenario. The antagonistic ‘Other’ in fantasies is the obstacle to gain an imaginary fullness. In other words, fantasies at the same time may be a Pandora box as the ‘Other’ is often migrants and minorities, as racist and far-right discourses are usually target weak and unorganized groups as the ‘Other’ who stole the enjoyment of the nation. Besides, fantasmatic narratives also have a transgressive side, which is also associated with the ‘Other’. The excessive enjoyment of migrants who stole ‘our’ money, the myth about sexual potential of black people are examples of such transgressive elements of fantasies.

To sum up, social and political logics are concerned with the form of discourses (social logics) and their transformation procedures (political logics). Fantasmatic logics investigate the affective dimension of discourses and identities. Both political and fantasmatic logics are also

⁵⁹ Branding, 34-35.

⁶⁰ Žižek, 1989.

⁶¹ Glynos and Howarth, 147

analyze the construction of borders in different aspects. While political logics operate with the logic of equivalence and difference and identify boundaries between the ‘self’ and antagonistic ‘other’, fantasmatic logics delve into different aspects of fantasies as narratives about the ‘other’ and stolen enjoyment of the ‘self’.

Rejecting positivist views, Glynos and Howarth’s criticize predicative mode of social sciences. Situated in post-positivist camp, the logics approach “refuses to stretch the validity of explanation to the future.”⁶² In other words, Glynos and Howarth, drawn upon Freud and Lacan, reject the automatization of people, as they have fantasies, desires, and irrationalities. Therefore, people always have the potential to change their way of behavior. *Logics of Critical Explanation* argues for an analysis that answers the question “*Why certain things happened*” and not to aim to predicate the future. Thus, the role of the critical analyst is not to seek for causal mechanisms, but self-interpretation and reflection on his/her experience, context and discourses. Through *problematization*, which is the first stage of the analysis, a researcher discloses elements of articulations and critically *explains* events.

1.3. Data and Research Design

In my research, my main concern is to answer how the hunger strike of the political prisoner politicized masses in Azerbaijan and engaged them in social mobilization both in the virtual and public fields of life. Both internet media and social networks (Facebook, YouTube and Instagram) texts are used as data. Political parties’ behavior that played a crucial role in the

⁶² Eberle, 65.

transformation of the virtual mobilization to the real protest will also be analyzed from PDT positions.

For the analysis of the social media posts, I use the #FreeMehman hashtag. The most popular and relevant posts are taken for the analysis of the whole movement and its traces. As a post-structuralist researcher, I analyze the hunger strike and social mobilization from the interpretive stances.

First, I outline the social logics of the hegemony in Azerbaijan before Mehman Huseynov's hunger strike. I rely on the international human rights organizations' reports and my own experience of being an activist in Azerbaijan. I limit the time frame of reports as 2013-2018 because 2013 was the year of political repressions against opposition members and civil society and the third re-election of I. Aliyev. I argue that 2013 was a year of transformation to full authoritarianism.

Second, I describe the emergence of the mass mobilization as political logics. I distinguish the whole case between the mobilization through social networks (virtual mobilization) and opposition parties' unification for the common rally in Baku (real-life mobilization).

When it comes to fantasmatic logics, I analyze Huseynov's hunger strike reception in de-politicized society of Azerbaijan through such concepts as identification, myth and social imaginary. For fantasmatic logics, my focus is social networks and mobilization in the virtual sphere.

Importantly, I also take my own experience as an observer and participant of the social mobilization movement. My experience helps me to identify and describe logics and fantasies of mobilization. As it is a descriptive and interpretative research, a strategy of participant observation provides me with necessary knowledge about the authoritarian hegemony and its logics. Experience of the position of participant in the analyzing social mobilization also provides me with knowledge and understanding of common fantasies and aims. However, my political position may be criticized as my limitation, as it potentially makes me biased towards the authoritarian regime. I argue that as a post-structuralist researcher, I take critical and ethical stances towards the regime that I identify as oppressive. At the same time, my research is critical towards the social mobilization and marginalized political opposition. This fact makes me more neutral still critical observer and participant.

Chapter 2: Logics of the authoritarian regime in Azerbaijan

In this chapter, I define social logics of the authoritarian hegemony in Azerbaijan. Social logics are not only those parts of reality that are perceived as a “common sense”, but also daily practices and things that are not questioned in public discourses.⁶³

By an authoritarian hegemony, I mean a regime that formally has constitution and elections, which is not fully closed but at the same time oppresses potential threats, ignores the logic of democratic competition and de-politicizes masses.⁶⁴ Thus, the state system in Azerbaijan is defined as electoral authoritarianism, where elections are neither free nor fair.⁶⁵ Speaking in

⁶³ Glynos and Howarth, 171.

⁶⁴ Andreas Schedler, *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition*. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2006).

⁶⁵ LaPorte, J., “Hidden in Plain Sight: Political Opposition and Hegemonic Authoritarianism in Azerbaijan,” in *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 31(4), (2014), 339–366.

PDT terminology, elections in an authoritarian state have not a dislocatory effect that may bring a real change and has no sense for the majority of population.

Aliyevs family, namely patriarch of the family, Heydar Aliyev started his rule from 1969 until 1987 as the first secretary of the Azerbaijani Communist Party. After the collapse of the USSR and independence of Azerbaijan, nationalist forces took the office for the period of 1992-93. After this short period, Heydar Aliyev retook power and became the third President of the independent Azerbaijan Republic and ruled until his death in 2003. After his death, his son Ilham Aliyev was declared as the new President. 2003 elections were sharply criticized by international observers.⁶⁶ After a 2009 constitutional referendum two-consecutive-term limit has been removed and I. Aliyev was re-elected a president in 2013 and 2018 elections (both elections were highly criticized by independent and international observers). Freedom House 2012 report says that in 10 years rule of Ilham Aliyev Azerbaijan has been transformed from the “semi-authoritarian rule to full-fledged authoritarianism.”⁶⁷

I identify two key social logics of the authoritarian regime in Azerbaijan: the logic of de-politicization and logic of marginalization. I rely on the international human right organizations’ reports as well as on my own activist experience in identifying and naming both logics. Identifying them lets me make clear *what* had been disrupted and contested by the dislocatory event and which conditions has been changed during the social mobilization.

2.1. Logic of De-Politicization

⁶⁶ Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper, *Azerbaijan: Presidential Elections 2003*; OSCE/ODIHR. “Election Observation Mission Report: Republic of Azerbaijan, Presidential Election, 15 October 2003.” (Warsaw: OSCE, 2003).

⁶⁷ “Nations in Transit 2012 – Azerbaijan,” Freedom House, accessed May 28, 2019 <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2012/azerbaijan>

The situation of a contemporary democracy requires the existence of different and rival political forces which are engaged in the struggle for a hegemonic position until the next elections. Elections, in that sense, have a dislocatory function. In a democracy, a ruling political force normally acknowledges a temporary character of its position. Often the party, which gains enough support, seeks for an alliance with other parties, creating the chains of equivalence.

When it comes to authoritarian regimes, the situation is completely different. In the contemporary authoritarian regime with an electoral institution and other elements of democracy, the ruling regime de-politicizes the very possibility of political competition and contestation of its ruling practices. Thus, the authoritarian hegemony hides the contingent character of the discursive order. As Griggs and Howarth point out, the logic of de-politicization “seeks to expunge conflict and contestability, in short politics, from the practices of policymaking and democratic governance.”⁶⁸

In Azerbaijan, TV channels, including private ones, are under the control of government. A plurality of opinions and diversity are excluded, and TV channels present only the government’s (or the ruling New Azerbaijan Party’s) activities. In addition, TV channels alongside with schools and public institutions promote the Heydar and Ilham Aliyevs’ cult of personality. A huge number of public places as parks, hospitals, museums, the international airport in Baku and others are named after Heydar Aliyev.⁶⁹ The symbolic presence of the ruling family in daily life has been normalized and played a crucial role in de-politicization of masses. Through the practices of the daily symbolic state violence through TV channels, public banners,

⁶⁸ Steven Griggs, David Howarth, and Eleanor MacKillop, “The Meta-Governance of Austerity, Localism, and Practices of Depoliticization,” in *Anti-Politics, Depoliticization, and Governance*, ed. Paul Fawcett et al. (Oxford University Press, 2017), 202.

⁶⁹ Arsene Saparov, “Contested spaces: the use of place-names and symbolic landscape in the politics of identity and legitimacy in Azerbaijan,” in *Central Asian Survey* 36(2) (September 2017):1-21

state institutions, the regime covers over the social reality and discursive order as natural and sedimented as much as possible. Thus, a political protest becomes irrational and nonsense as politicization itself is seen as a threat, thus, subject position of a political protester is seen as a practice of “madness” by de-politicized subjects. The very possibility of a political change in the ruling regime does not articulate in public discourses and debates, as they are under control of the ruling regime.

2.2. Logic of Marginalization

The second social logic of the authoritarian regime in Azerbaijan is the exclusion and marginalization of the domestic opposition. As was mentioned, TV channels ignore opposition members and usually do not give them a voice. It happened after the 2009 changes in constitution and Aliyev’s re-election in 2013. Without having any voice, opposition members have the only way to spread information: social media and websites. Since 2017, “over 20 websites have been blocked in Azerbaijan”⁷⁰. These websites are usually articulate discourses of opposition and have a huge audience in the country.

Dozens of political activists and civil society members had been arrested after dislocatory events in 2013 January and March, when thousands of people protested in Baku against the deaths of young (usually 18-21 years old) army conscripts. After demonstrations, seven members of the progressive movement NIDA were arrested “on drugs and other charges related to an alleged plan to instigate violence at a peaceful protest.”⁷¹ This crackdown continued in 2014-

⁷⁰ Arzu Geybulla, “Azerbaijan’s blocking of websites is a sign of further restrictions online,” 31 August 2018, accessed May 28, 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/azerbajians-blocking-of-websites/>

⁷¹ Human Rights Watch, “World Report 2014: Azerbaijan Events of 2013,” accessed May 28, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/azerbaijan>

2015, when several members of civil society, including well-known investigate journalist Khadija Ismayilova were arrested. They were freed only after serious international pressure on the government in 2016.

Coming to the opposition, in an authoritarian hegemony, they have a legal right to exist but not to have a voice in public. The logic of marginalization excludes them and other democratic or other actors from participation in public debates, because they may publicly contest the legitimacy of the ruling regime. For public demonstrations, the ruling regime allows the opposition to gather in unpopular places in Baku to make them invisible and to remain isolated. Opposition members are not allowed to have a business, having a profitable position for a publicly politicized person is impossible. Also, they do not have visible offices to meet and mobilize voters and supporters (only one opposition party, Musavat, which openly criticizes the regime has an office that is placed in the suburbs of Baku).

Often articulated naming ‘anti-national elements’ in presidential speeches about the political opposition show how the logic of marginalization has been articulated in the governmental discourse. The naming strategy that I. Aliyev articulates de-facto deprives of the legitimacy of political opposition.

In other words, people’s choice is rather to be de-politicized and not to speak (or write) publicly their opinions on the current state of affairs. Thus, both logics are interrelated. Fear to be a marginalized and excluded subject leads to de-politicization. In its turn, de-politicization enables exclusion as a regular, normalized condition. Unlike 2003-2005, when thousands protested against the regime, in post-2013 Azerbaijan such protests had been nonsense. Political prisoners also did not have public support.

Chapter 3: The case of Mehman Huseynov

3.1. Mehman Huseynov: a representative of “the People”

Mehman Huseynov, a young video blogger started his career in 2013. Usually, he has recorded social issues from problems with drainage channels to chief executives’ and government officials’ luxury houses and presented his content with humor and sarcastic style of narrating. However, his style has not been radical in terms of contestation of the ruling regime/family or has not contained support to the opposition parties. These factors and charisma have made him popular in different segments of the Azerbaijani society.

However, Ilham Aliyev’s decision to make his wife a Vice President was openly criticized by M. Huseynov. After his sarcastic poll in Baku on this decision, he was arrested in January 2017 for “disobeying a lawful order” and was fined. After this case, he publicly condemned the police for torture and ill-treatment and was arrested again for “giving false information about his detention and treatment.”⁷² As a result of the trial, Huseynov was sentenced to two years of imprisonment on defamation charges.

Public perception of this case was rather passive. After two years in prison, shortly before the upcoming release, Huseynov was accused of with a new set of charges, “accusing him of alleged physical violence against a prison officer.”⁷³ According to Huseynov, he “heard him (Ali Abdalov) fall to the ground and shout that Huseynov had attacked him. Huseynov’s lawyers

⁷² Arzu Geybulla, “In Azerbaijan, a hunger strike is the only remaining hope for justice,” *Open Democracy*, 21 January 2019, accessed 28 May 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/in-azerbaijan-a-hunger-strike-is-the-only-remaining-hope-for-justice/>

⁷³ *Ibid.*

requested access to the surveillance videos from the area, but officials have said the surveillance cameras do not have recording memory cards.”⁷⁴

On December 26, 2018, Mehman Huseynov announced that he starts a hunger strike as a protest to the new charges that could keep him detained for another seven years.⁷⁵ The significance of this move is that a hunger strike had not been articulated by a well-known personality in Azerbaijan. Despite the fact that a hunger strike was used as a resistance practice by political prisoners before, these personalities were not as popular and representative of ‘people’ as M. Huseynov. Thus, this move had a shocking effect on society and was perceived as a ‘last straw’ for silence.

3.2. Mass mobilization in social media: dislocation and its effect on behavior in social networks

Shortly after the announcement of the hunger strike, public campaign was launched on Facebook. #FreeMehman hashtag was used for hundreds of posts every day with the demand to free him.⁷⁶ Shortly after, the campaign was transformed into Instagram, and hundreds of users attempted flooding accounts members of the ruling family with such comments as “FreeMehman” and “AzadEt” (“Make (him) Free”).

Mehman Huseynov’s hunger strike, thus, is best to be understood as a dislocatory event that broke the de-politicized condition in the society of Azerbaijan. People *identified* themselves with Mehman, and their subjectivity was formed through this identification. Identification with a

⁷⁴ Giorgi Gogia, “Unjustly Jailed Blogger Faces New Charges in Azerbaijan,” Human Rights Watch, January 10 2019, accessed 28 May 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/01/10/unjustly-jailed-blogger-faces-new-charges-azerbaijan>

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Arzu Geybulla, “In Azerbaijan, a hunger strike is the only remaining hope for justice,” Open Democracy, 21 January 2019, accessed 28 May 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/in-azerbaijan-a-hunger-strike-is-the-only-remaining-hope-for-justice/>

certain figure (as identification with parental figures) or idea (state, nation, ideology) plays a central role in identity formation. Acts of identification is the only possible way for a subject to overcome dislocation.⁷⁷

M. Huseynov's hunger strike dislocated social logics and forced people to make an ethical choice to defend Mehman, who has been re-articulated as 'one of us', 'ours Thing'. Interpreting in Lacanian terms, his hunger strike as a method of resistance made him a visible subject of the Real, which cannot be symbolized. As repressive practices were normalized through the logic of marginalization of political activists, M. Huseynov's hunger strike had an effect of the "invasion of the Real" into the symbolic order, which caused dislocation and disclosed that "something is wrong", thus, raising political subjectivities in de-politicized majority.

I consider Mehman Huseynov as an empty signifier of the social mobilization, and his hunger strike as a dislocatory event. Despite usually an empty signifier is a certain idea (e.g., 'our homeland') or identity and concept ('Blackness'), Laclau mentioned that personalities also may become empty signifiers, e.g. in 1960s and 1970s Argentina, Perón was "very careful not to take any definitive stand in the factional struggles within Perónism' and thus, his condition was ideal 'to become the "empty signifier" incarnating the moment of universality in the chain of equivalences which unified the popular camp."⁷⁸ Mehman's position was also similar, as he expressed different demands and expectations of people with different identities, including marginalized oppositional identities and de-politicized subject positions. For the marginalized opposition, he was a representative of the demand of democratization and releasing of political

⁷⁷ Laclau, 1990, 76.

⁷⁸ Eleanor MacKillop, "Leadership in Organisational Change: A Post-Structuralist Research Agenda," in *Organization* 25, no. 2 (March 2018), 211.

prisoners. For the de-politicized majority, it was a demand to be “protected” from officials and to be represented by a non-marginalized subject.

Importantly, local pro-governmental media outlets attempted to reject the fact of his hunger strike, thus, they tried to ‘cancel’ an empty signifier or to lose its credibility and to make it a floating signifier, which would be rather an ‘apple of discord’ and non-reliable person for identification.

Chains of equivalence, thus, had been created between such more or less marginalized groups as political opposition parties (the Popular Front Party, Musavat Party, Republican Alternative Party), civil society, independent activist groups and associated social media pages, and de-politicized segments who joined the virtual mobilization. “Free Mehman Huseynov” turned into an empty signifier and nodal point that enabled to build an alliance between different social actors and to raise political subjectivities. Moreover, thousands of people openly contested the regime’s policy and collectively wrote short texts as comments on the ruling family accounts on Instagram. Online petition was signed by 5 762 people on Change.org.

Hunger strike as an act had a dislocatory effect on the de-politicized society. Facebook users on popular pages compared Mehman Huseynov with figures from the recent history of Azerbaijan with a status of a ‘hero’. This fact allows me to define Mehman Huseynov as the ‘Caring Other’ of de-politicized Azerbaijanis. The ‘Caring Other’ is related to the desire to be protected from the “thefts of our enjoyment.”⁷⁹ Mehman Huseynov in his video blogging practices has targeted government officials and their luxury lifestyle. In his video Mehman has

⁷⁹ Jason Glynos, “Neoliberalism, markets, fantasy: the case of health and social care,” in *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*, 19(1) (2014).

always been with so-called ordinary “unpolitical” citizens, e.g. the older, financially unfavorable people, workers etc. For example, a popular 1-minute clip on Facebook and YouTube with more than 250.000 views shows how Mehman helped an old woman to cross a flooded road or helped other (and probably poor) old woman to carry wood.⁸⁰ Background song has following lyrics:

“What can we do without you?

Be strong, you are our hope.

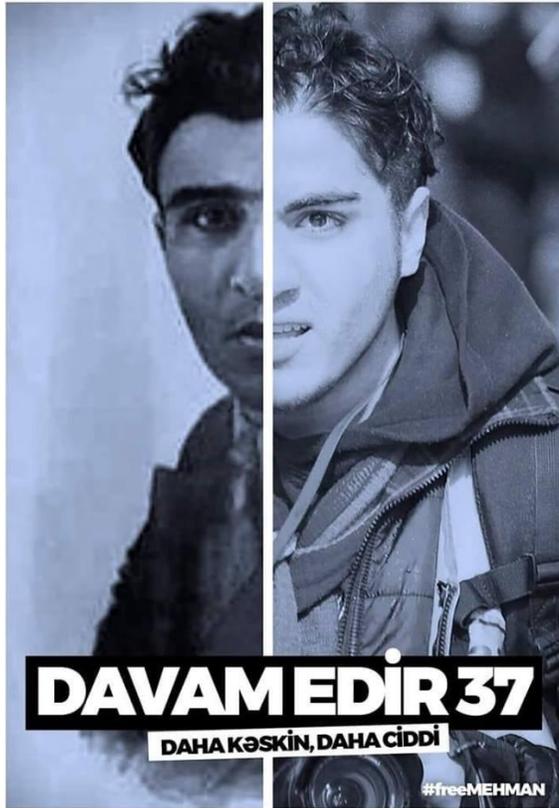
We all support you,

Beautiful days – that is what you deserve.”⁸¹

In another symbolic poster, Mehman Huseynov was compared with a young Azerbaijani poet Mikayil Mushfig, who were repressed by the Stalinist regime in 1937. Their faces were depicted in a way that half of the face belong to M. Mushfig, the second half to M. Huseynov with the text under ‘37 is continuing’, which is the reference to 1937 repression in Azerbaijan (picture 1). Thus, the government was associated with the Stalinist regime, while Mehman Huseynov was imagined as an innocent young victim, who has a representative function and “works for the wellness of the nation.”

⁸⁰ “Möhkəm dayan - Mehman Hüseynova həsr olunur” (“Bes Strong – to Mehman Huseynov”), accessed 28 May, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b7FLtTgRu5o>

⁸¹ Translations are mine.



Picture 1

Overall, M. Huseynov's enormous popularity played a significant role in the process of identification with him as with the "Caring Other" and made his name the nodal point of the collective movement.

3.2.1 The Personalized Antagonistic Other of #FreeMehman

The antagonistic (constitutive) 'Other' is a necessary element of every identification and discourse. Building around empty signifier 'Free Mehman Huseynov', however, does not fully abandon the logic of de-politicization. Especially taking into account the fact of the symbolic violence of the cult of personalities of the ruling family, not politicized majority were not ready to target the ruling family directly. The 'Other' was personalized in the face of prison officer Ali

Abdalov, who condemned Mehman Huseynov in a ‘physical attack.’⁸² Personalization of enemy helped to strengthen the identity of Huseynov’s supporters. I argue that the ‘Other’ as the government itself would be problematic because of the social logic of de-politicization, while the ‘Other’ as the state officer was unproblematic. It does not mean that the ‘Other’ was reduced to one man, rather, the ‘Other’ was personalized by his name and allowed people openly condemn him in unethical and ‘unmanly’ behavior, use abusive words etc. Otherwise, the construction of a strong identity would be impossible.

Thus, both ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ dichotomy was organized around personalities in the discourse of #FreeMehman. While Mehman had the status of the “representative of the ordinary people”, prison officer Abdalov was associated with the state repressions, false accusations and obeying, a bad example for the nation.

3.2.2. Fantasmatic logics of social mobilization

Narratives about Mehman Huseynov as well as the identity of his supporters make possible to trace the fantasmatic logics of the social mobilization. In the identity-creating fantasy of the discourse of mobilization Mehman Huseynov played a role of what Jacques Lacan called *objet petit a*, the ‘object-cause of desire.’⁸³ In other words, Mehman Huseynov was a lost enjoyment of the constructed People, who were suffering because of the ‘Other’: the regime, personalized in the face of Ali Abdalov, a prison officer. Many comments on Facebook and YouTube articulated the ‘lack’ of the Azerbaijani subjects: ‘We are weak and unworthy, and our weakness leads to such situation that our hero is suffering in the prison.’ This lack is the cause of the desire to free him, which raises a political subjectivity to obtain justice towards ‘our’ Caring

⁸² Arzu Geybulla, 2019.

⁸³ Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection* (London: Routledge/Tavistock, 1977).

Other. Thus, his hunger strike caused dislocation, which disclosed the lack in de-politicized subjects, making them relatively free from the authoritarian social logics. As Laclau points out, “[D]islocation is the source of freedom. But this is not the freedom of a subject having a positive identity – for then it would be only a structural position – but freedom derived from structural failure, so that the subject can only build an identity through acts of identification.”⁸⁴

In other words, people started to identify themselves with Mehman as a representative and ‘Caring Other’ of people. This identification was emotional rather political or sexual (e.g., with pop-star). Laclau, drawing upon Freud, highlights that the degree of emotional bond with a leader provides the strength of the group identity, which had been experienced by the advocacy campaign.

After more than 10 days of Huseynov’s hunger strike, other political prisoners and activists joined him and declared a hunger strike.⁸⁵ Despite the pro-governmental media stated that Mehman Huseynov stopped his hunger strike, his lawyer denied this information. Thus, the government’s attempt to deny the very fact of his starving and to weaken the signifier ‘Free Mehman Huseynov’ was unsuccessful. The number of Mehman’s supporters were raising day by day, and many social media users from Azerbaijan changed their avatars to pictures with Mehman’s photos.⁸⁶

To sum up, I described fantasmatic logics that is presented in narratives of spontaneous political mobilization in Azerbaijan. Such authors as Zizek and Glynos distinguish beatific and horrific dimensions of fantasmatic narratives. First, following a certain scenario subject may gain

⁸⁴ Laclau, 1990, 76.

⁸⁵ Geybulla, 2019.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

the wholeness of identity (beatific dimension), or, otherwise, a disaster scenario may destroy "us."⁸⁷ The obstacle to gain the imagined fullness of being is the 'Other', who stole 'our' enjoyment. This enjoyment, thus, turns into the object cause of desire (*objet petit a*). In order not to face the horrific consequences, 'we' should act, e.g. collectively and politically.

In the case of Mehman Huseynov's campaign, the beatific dimension of the fantasy is a hashtag of movement – #FreeMehman. Mehman himself as the 'Caring Other' was imagined as the 'stolen enjoyment of the People' who deserves a better life as a friend of the "ordinary people." As comments on social media show, people often blame 'the People' as a collective agent for 'impotence' and 'weakness'. Thus, everyone who identifies with the 'ordinary people' of Azerbaijan should take urgent actions. Government's silence about Huseynov's hunger strike only intensified the number of supporters, especially their collective flood comments on Instagram on the ruling family members' accounts after a call for this in popular pro-Huseynov pages.⁸⁸ Thus, unsatisfied demands resulted in the growing number of supporters and collective virtual actions.

The transgressive element is common for fantasmatic narratives. A transgressive element supports "particular discourses and identities by presenting an 'obscene supplement', something inappropriate and 'between the lines.'"⁸⁹

In the case of Mehman, the antagonistic 'Other', which was personalized in the prison officer, represented a transgressive element of the fantasy. His 'unmanly and slavish' accusation made him a transgressive subject of the fantasmatic narrative about Mehman. It is worth to

⁸⁷ Glynos and Howarth, 147; Zizek, 1989.

⁸⁸ Geybullayeva, 2019.

⁸⁹ Eberle, 62.

mention that in the patriarchal society of Azerbaijan false accusation and obeying in a ‘dishonor act’, especially by a male subject, is highly inadmissible. Abdalov’s act led to the “deanonymization” of his address and mobile number, as well as his family members names, including his son. After this, “many have called for him to be punished for laying down false charges against Huseynov.”⁹⁰

Chapter 4: “In the Name of Mehman”: Political Logics and the Protest Rally in Azerbaijan

In this chapter, I analyze the next step in social mobilization for political prisoner Mehman Huseynov. After the analysis of fantasmatic logics, which are projected in social networks, now I turn to political logics of the protest movement. The protest rally was held in Baku on January 19 and was organized by the “National Council for Democratic Forces”, in opposition umbrella group which is associated with the Azerbaijani Popular Front Party. However, the second opposition party, the Republican Alternative Party (ReAl), also joined the protest rally. First, I briefly describe both parties and key aspects of their ideologies. After, in order to illuminate the temporal unity of main opposition forces and participation of de-politicized masses in a political event, I analyze the political logic beyond this – the logic of equivalence.

4.1. Main Oppositional Parties

4.1.1. The Azerbaijani Popular Front Party

⁹⁰ JamNews, “Why Azerbaijani blogger Mehman Huseynov went on hunger strike and stopped – reactions from the public, international community”, January 8, 2019, accessed 28 May 2019, <https://jam-news.net/new-protests-and-arrests-in-azerbaijan-as-public-reacts-to-imprisoned-bloggers-hunger-strike/>

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, which had caused a radical dislocation, new popular identities had emerged. And it can be argued that a hegemonic identity in many post-Soviet countries was nationalistic, which was the very opposite of the official Soviet ideology.⁹¹ Azerbaijan was not an exclusion. After the overthrow of the socialist government, nationalist parties, such as the Popular Front Party and Musavat formed the government (1992-1993). However, conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh, spoiled relations with Iran and Russia, raise of nationalist movements among ethnic minorities and inner conflicts between allies resulted in Heydar Aliyev's rise to power in 1993. In 2000, the Popular Front Party divided into reformist and classic wings, and Ali Karimli, a young political leader, became the head of the reformist wing. After 18 years, he has still been the leader of the party, and his critics often accused him in an authoritarian rule in party and unsuccessfulness. However, his numerous supporters argue that in the situation of authoritarianism it is necessary for an opposition party to be ruled by one experienced man. Ali Karimli is often described as a charismatic and idealistic man, and his supporters identify themselves in him. In fact, the Popular Front Party is associated with his name. It can be argued that ambiguity of his personality has led to a deep layer within the logic of marginalization, which prevents the de-politicized masses to be politicized. Translating into PDT terminology, Ali Karimli as a sign is rather a floating signifier, despite the Popular Front's attempts to make his name fixed and to have positive connotations. Occupying the subject role of the 'leader' within the discourse of the Popular Front Party, Ali Karimli, however, has a status of the floating signifier as his role is contested in various discourses. The lack of credibility prevents him to become an empty signifier and represent demands of various segments of society. This fact weakens discourse of the Popular Front Party and makes possible to raise the alternative

⁹¹ Zhrebkin, 213.

oppositional discourses. Party's activists are often faced short and long-time imprisonment, and the majority is rather unlikely to support them.

4.1.2 The Republican Alternative Party: A New Hope

The Republican Alternative Party, formerly the Republican Alternative Movement was formed in 2009 by a few young activists and associates itself with civic nationalism. Its leader Ilgar Mammadov, who has a reputation of an intellectual man and a Central European University graduate, was sentenced to seven years imprisonment in 2013 for his political activities⁹² and was released in 2018. ReAl often articulates elections as the only way to politicize people to make changes. Overall, ReAl's supporters usually represent the middle-class, unlike the Azerbaijani Popular Front Party, which is more known as a "radical party" which potentially may cause "the loss of job" in the de-politicized society.

For certain segments of the society, e.g. for the urban middle class, ReAl is a new hope and is seen as an alternative to the "traditional" opposition discourses. However, a deeper analysis of its reputation and perception as an 'intellectual' party is not the goal of my research. For my research is important to mark that relations between the Republican Alternative Party and Azerbaijani Popular Front Party are difficult as activists of both parties blame each other in "uselessness" and shape their identities based on the differences between them. The main articulating difference is the excessive submission of the leader by the APFP members, while activists of the latter accuse the Republican Alternative Party and its leader in opportunism and in the lack of a political will to radically articulate democratic demands.

⁹² Central European University, "Azerbaijan: Doubling Down on Repression", accessed 28 May 2019, <https://www.ceu.edu/event/2016-02-08/azerbaijan-doubling-down-repression>

4.2. In the name of Mehman: The Protest Rally

The Azerbaijani Popular Front Party announced a protest rally on Facebook, and its leader Ali Karimli gave several interviews to alternative media outlets. The number of views is almost 80.000 for one of such interviews.⁹³ In his interview, Ali Karimli articulated that the first and main demand of the protest rally is to release Mehman as well as other political prisoners. However, the main goal of the protest was Mehman Huseynov. Ilgar Mammadov, the leader of the Republican Alternative Party was also invited by A. Karimli himself and accepted his invitation openly on his Facebook page, despite the difficulties between parties and ambiguous perception of this decision.

Thus, the political logic of equivalence activated in this situation. Two major oppositional forces found a common ground, namely the demand to support the “Caring Other” of “the People.” It led to the active participation of de-politicized people in the 19 January protest rally. The logic of equivalence, thus, was not just between two major opposition parties, but plus de-politicized people. Signifier “Mehman Huseynov” as a nodal point of #FreeMehman campaign, created a populist discourse, which unified different social forces and identities in a common unsatisfied. What is important, #FreeMehman discourse and its logic of equivalence came to predominate over the logic of difference, which was the hegemonic logic before the campaign between two opposition parties, from one side, and between the opposition in general and the majority of the population, from the other side. “Mehman Huseynov” as a master signifier of the populist discourse established a political project and discourse of solidarity, which were gripped by the common fantasies about the “Caring Other” and the demand to free him as the

⁹³ “Reason why you have to come to 19 January protest – Ali Karimli”, accessed 28 May 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vDONIAMAagc>

dominating articulation. Moreover, the discourse of the #FreeMehman campaign created a “space of interdiscursivity” “that links various, previously separate discourses” and when “previously incongruous subjectivities, objects and practices can be perceived as naturally related entities.”⁹⁴ Thus, the subject role (“supporter”) of the #FreeMehman discourse was the prior one that united different social actors, while other political identities and discourses became secondary. This condition allowed politicizing de-politicized people as well as unifying two contradicting actors, enabling the emergence of political subjectivities. These features made the campaign’s discourse temporary hegemonic in two ways. On the one hand, as a result of dislocated social logics, the logics of marginalization of opposition and de-politicization of population turned into irrelevant in the Mehman Huseynov case, on the other hand, the campaign’s discourse and its demand unified previously opponent and rival forces through de-actualization their identities and inner struggle.

Despite the protest rally held in an unpopular and associated with the Popular Front Party “Mehsul” stadium, according to independent and opposition sources, the number of participants in the protest rally was up to 20.000.⁹⁵ For Azerbaijan, this number meant a significant increase in citizen participation in a protest rally. Foreign media outlets used such wordings in headlines about the protest rally as ‘Thousands Rally’, ‘Crowded Rally’, ‘Thousands Protest’, ‘Protest Mounts in Azerbaijan.’ Before 19 January rally, protest rallies in “Mehsul” stadium usually consisted of members and supporters ‘traditional’ opposition parties, e.g. the Popular Front and

⁹⁴ Tomas Marttila, *Post-Foundational Discourse Analysis: From Political Difference to Empirical Research* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 189.

⁹⁵ RFE/RL’s Azerbaijani Service, “Thousands Rally In Baku Calling For Release Of Political Prisoners,” January 19, 2019, accessed May 28, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/rally-in-baku-calls-for-release-of-political-prisoners/29719285.html>

Musavat Party. However, Mehman Huseynov's case and its logics of equivalence canceled social logics of marginalization of opposition and negative connotations with the Popular Front Party.

4.3. Government's Reaction and The End of Identity

In this part of my work I examine government's reaction to Mehman Huseynov's hunger strike and to public advocacy campaign. Doing this, I rely on the pro-government media and official statements.

4.3.1. 'He eats'

Facing with unexpected reaction both in local and international levels, officials declared that Huseynov stopped hunger strike after day and eats.⁹⁶ Pro-governmental media and officials announced that international support to Mehman Huseynov is a "false propaganda of anti-Azerbaijani forces" and Huseynov is used 'against national interest.'⁹⁷ On January 8 a pro-governmental human rights defender Sahib Mammadov had a meeting with Mehman Huseynov and claimed that Mehman Huseynov "eats milk products." However, the fact that the government refused to present Mehman Huseynov himself led to public mistrust and the campaign had been continued.

Speaking in PDT terms, it was an attempt to weaken the credibility of an empty signifier. Credibility along with availability are necessary conditions for an element to become an empty signifier and to make able to represent multiple demands. In oppose, floating signifier is an element that is not (temporally) fixed and different social actors and discourses claim to fix its

⁹⁶ Trend, "Int'l organizations making unfounded claims against Azerbaijan silent about incident in Armenia," 28 January 2019, accessed 28 May 2019, <https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3011707.html>

⁹⁷ Lamiya Adilgizi, Joshua Kucera, "Pressure mounts on Azerbaijan to free imprisoned blogger," 14 January 2019, accessed 28 May 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/pressure-mounts-on-azerbaijan-to-free-imprisoned-blogger>

meaning. Thus, when an empty signifier loses its credibility, it becomes a floating signifier.⁹⁸ The pro-governmental media and official discourse attempted to weaken the credibility of the personalized empty signifier ‘Mehman Huseynov’, however, the lack of visual proves made this attempt feeble.

4.4. The end of the campaign: Cancellation of the antagonistic ‘Other’

Three days after the mass protest rally, on January 22 President Ilham Aliyev instructed the investigating authority to terminate the new criminal case against Mehman Huseynov. On the same day, media reported that Mehman Huseynov and Justice Lieutenant Ali Abdalov have reconciled and presented a video, where Huseynov in a humorous manner made peace with Abdalov. Thus, the personalized antagonistic ‘Other’ was canceled by Mehman himself and the advocacy campaign reached its goals. Despite activists of the Azerbaijani Popular Front Party perceived the fact that Mehman made peace with Abdalov negatively, the dominated position was rather mixed. In a popular pro-democratic Facebook page HamamTimes, two fantasmatic narratives could be traced on commentary section about this news. When some users highlighted that Mehman has a “child heart” and is a “pure good boy” and the fact that “we reached our goal”, others showed their disappointment and even accused Mehman in betrayal as he “followed (governmental) scenario” and made a mistake.

Going back to Lacanian psychoanalysis, I argue that despite the fact that public campaign reached its goals, politicized subjects felt the lack at the moment they reached their main goal. As Lacan argued, subject’s fundamental lack cannot be filled through the engagement in discursive

⁹⁸ MacKillop, 2018.

(symbolic) order.⁹⁹ As soon as the identity and discourse of ‘Mehman Huseynov’s support’ vanished, subjects found themselves in a situation of new dislocation. Despite in this case dislocation was rather positive, subjects found that ‘something is still wrong’ as the identification with the ‘Caring Other’ expected ‘something different.’ This expected ‘something’ is the imagined full enjoyment that fantasied a result of the beatific dimension of fantasy.

While a part of supporters tried to rationalize disappointment through the re-articulation of the failed nodal point as “he is not what we expected, but he is still our”, others fully felt the lack as a result of the ‘end of the subject position’ and ‘end of the symbolic identification’ and love changed to hate.

Mehman Huseynov was released from prison on March 2, and continued video blogging. Before the traditional Nowruz holiday in Azerbaijan, President Aliyev pardoned over 400 prisoners, among them 51 recognized political prisoners, including those who joined the hunger strike to support and express their solidarity with Mehman Huseynov.¹⁰⁰

However, the ruling regime has not changed its authoritarian nature at the time of writing this research. Arrests of activists, the existence of political prisoners and pressure on the local independent media is continuing to practice, however, in a less violent way, e.g., imprisonment for a long time have been excluded. Both social logics remain the same after the campaign, and their renaming is still impossible. At the same time, President Aliyev declared that certain reforms are necessary in order “to transform Azerbaijan into a developed country.”¹⁰¹ The logic

⁹⁹ Lacan, 1977

¹⁰⁰ Freedom House, “Azerbaijan: President Pardons Dozens of Political Prisoners,” March 18, 2019, accessed May 28, 2019, <https://freedomhouse.org/article/azerbaijan-president-pardons-dozens-political-prisoners>

¹⁰¹ “Ilham Aliyev: goal of reforms to transform Azerbaijan into developed country,” accessed May 28, 2019, <http://vestnikkavkaza.net/news/Ilham-Aliyev-goal-of-reforms-to-transform-Azerbaijan-into-developed-country.html>

of difference again is the dominating logic within the opposition camp, and only a new political dislocation will make possible to follow directions of future development of Azerbaijan and its society. Either positive (democratization of institutions and politicization of society) or negative changes (intensification of authoritarian practices) are possible, as the future is unpredictable in terms of the post-structuralist discourse. However, #FreeMehman campaign's positive impact is that it made possible to experience collective identity formation for many de-politicized subjects, and this experience may have an important role in the future possible collective resistance and solidarity movements in Azerbaijan.

Mehman Huseynov continues video blogging in his specific and humorous manner and despite he had lost his status of empty signifier, he has remained the huge audience consisting of both politicized and de-politicized people.

Conclusion

Drawing upon Post-structuralist Discourse Theory (PDT) and Lacanian psychoanalysis, this thesis has analyzed the case of social mobilization in a country with an authoritarian system of rule. I distinguished between social, political and fantasmatic logics in order to illuminate the situation before and during the social mobilization in Azerbaijan. Social logics of the authoritarian state that I identified highlighted difficult situation with human rights, normalization of imprisonment of activists in society, and de-politicization of masses through everyday practices of symbolic violence. Through two interrelated logics of de-politicization and marginalization, the ruling regime successfully transmitted from the semi-authoritarianism to fully-fledged electoral authoritarian system. In my research, I showed how these logics make the ruling regime durable, excluded pluralism and the logic of debates. The logic of de-politicization

has made the possibility of political change a tabooed topic, while the logic of marginalization constructed local opposition parties as ‘others’ and legitimized repressions against political activists.

The topic of my thesis, social mobilization in the name of imprisoned video blogger Mehman Huseynov explained reasons behind the disruption of normalized repressive practices. I analyzed how after two years in prison, facing with new charges, Mehman Huseynov’s hunger strike caused what PDT names *dislocation*, which rendered visible the contingency of the authoritarian symbolic order. To illuminate fantasmatic logics, I turned to the discourse of Lacanian psychoanalysis, and I explained that M. Huseynov’s hunger strike was an ‘invasion of the ‘Real’, an event that cannot be represented in the symbolic order of Azerbaijan. This dislocatory event caused further identification with Mehman Huseynov as with the fantasized ‘Caring Other’ of people and opened a space for political subjectivities. Thus, the discourse of #FreeMehman campaign was established and de-politicized masses joined the public campaign in social networks.

My thesis, drawing upon Laclau and Mouffe, shows how empty signifiers and nodal points have an ability to represent demands and the possibility of a human being to become an empty signifier of the collective movement. While for de-politicized masses Mehman was the ‘Caring Other’, who represented their numerous social problems and demands, for political parties and civil society he was a symbol of a suffering political prisoner and a demand to free all of them. The antagonistic ‘Other’ of the campaign’s discourse was personalized in a prisoner officer, who accused Mehman in new charges.

In my work, I described two rival opposition parties of Azerbaijan in order to illustrate the political engagement between them ‘in the name of Mehman’ and following successful and historical protest rally in Baku. Through the logic of equivalence, I explained how dislocation created a space of interdiscursivity between different discourses and identities, and how empty signifier ‘Mehman Huseynov’ united different segments of society.

Analyzing government’s failed claim to deny the very fact of the hunger strike, I described it as an attempt to weaken an empty signifier and turn it into a floating signifier. However, this attempt was not provided with facts and did not lead to the dismissal of the public campaign. However, Huseynov’s peace with the prison officer before his release resulted in the destruction of the empty signifier and as the advocacy campaign reached its goals, the identity and discursively constructed subject position were ended. Drawing upon Lacan, I explained reasons behind people’s disappointment about Mehman Huseynov’s behavior as a new dislocatory event, which marked the end of the unity and mass politicization and disclosed the fundamental lack in subjects.

My thesis proves that the formation of a resistance movement and mass politicization are possible in a situation of authoritarian hegemony. It demonstrates applicability and workability of post-structuralist and psychoanalytic theories in organizational and mobilization studies and highlights the crucial role of fantasies, unsatisfied demands and empty signifiers in the establishment of unity and their potential to politicize people.

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