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# RECLAIMING DEMOCRACY IN THE SQUARE?

INTERPRETING THE  
MOVEMENTS OF 2011-12



**Armine Ishkanian and Marlies Glasius**  
with Irum S Ali

# CONTENTS

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The Squares and Beyond</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Generational Protests?</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Demands and Aspirations</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Relationships with Other Actors</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>International Connections</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Summary and Conclusions</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Appendix – Coding Fields for Global Survey</b>	<b>34</b>

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We are solely responsible for the content of this report and the views expressed are our own and do not in any way represent the views or the official position or policy of the Robert Bosch Stiftung, the London School of Economics and Political Science or the University of Amsterdam.

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# INTRODUCTION

**In this report we examine the demands and aspirations, for greater democracy, rule of law, social justice, and dignity and against inequality and corruption that brought people into the streets and squares across the globe in 2011-12.**

2011 was the peak year of civil unrest, protest and movements for democracy and against austerity across the globe. In 2011, alongside the global anti-austerity (eg, Occupy Wall Street, the *Indignados* in Spain, etc.) and pro-democracy movements of the Arab Spring, there was also a rise of civic activism across some former Soviet countries including Armenia, Georgia, Russia and Ukraine (Lutsevych, 2013, Ishkanian, Forthcoming) as well as in countries across Asia (eg, South Korea, Japan, Malaysia, etc.) and Latin America (eg, Chile, Mexico). On the face of it, the protests that emerged in 2011-12 against austerity, inequality and financial mismanagement in the West had a totally different set of preoccupations, aims and ideas than the democracy movements. Equally, the national and local manifestations of the western anti-austerity movements on the one hand and the democracy movements on the other hand have been considered to be very similar to and influenced by each other.

The anti-austerity and pro-democracy movements that emerged in the past three years around the globe are an expression of anger and address concerns around the lack of democracy, social justice and dignity (Glasius and Pleyers, 2013) and they are driven by a “collective re-imagining of democracy, of its practices, and its relation to everyday life” (Kaldor and Selchow, 2012, p. 7). The protestors were united by a sense of indignation, “both in the sense that they were indignantly angry and in the sense that they were being treated with little of the dignity owed to citizens” (Calhoun, 2013, p. 28) and some have argued that the protests represent a tipping point in a “globalization of disaffection” (Biekart and Fowler, 2013).

The aim of this project is to provide a fresh and informed perspective on recent movements (2011-12) and our research began by examining the following:

- 1 The shared commonalities as well as the divergences and different trajectories and demands of the movements.
- 2 The generational aspect of the mobilisations.
- 3 The relationship of movements with other actors including non-governmental organisations (NGOs), trade unions, and political parties, and their transnational relations.

In this report we consider what happened not only in the squares, but more importantly how movements have developed and transformed beyond the squares and what impact they have had on political, economic and social developments in their respective societies. We found that these movements introduced new ideas and brought a significant change in public debates about the economy, systems of governance, democracy, as well as the role of the state and citizens. Our research showed that the experience of mobilizing or camping in the squares also inspired people to become more active in their own local neighbourhoods and communities following the protests in the squares.

Many questions remain about the broader or longer term impact and achievements of the protest movements of 2011-12. The situation in many of the countries discussed in this report is still in a period of transformation. For instance, the situation in Egypt is rapidly changing and has even drastically changed from when we conducted the fieldwork in May 2013 to when the report goes to press (September 2013). Of course it remains to be seen how events will develop (not only in Egypt), but it is clear that 2011-12 was a moment in time when masses of people, feeling unrepresented by those who govern or claim to represent them took to the streets and squares to voice their anger, indignation, and demands for a more equal and just future.

It is important to keep in mind that the issues and problems which brought people into the streets and squares in the first place, whether in Cairo, Athens, or London, have not been adequately addressed let

alone resolved. The anger and indignation with the lack of democracy and social justice as well as the persistent corruption and inequality which fuelled the initial demonstrations in 2011 and 2012 remain. Governments have at times ignored the demands of protestors, instead moving ahead with deep public spending cuts and further austerity measures that significantly shrink the welfare state. More worryingly, some governments have introduced political forms of repression and even police violence in order to suppress or curtail protests.

In the late spring and early summer of 2013, we observed the emergence of new sites of protests in Brazil, Bulgaria, and Turkey. These protests were emerging while we were doing our research, thus while they shape our thinking, we did not focus on them in our research. What the manifestations of 2013 demonstrate, however, was the continuing salience of the strategies and repertoires of mobilizing and occupying public squares and the currency which the ideas and discourses from the mobilizations that emerged in 2011-12 continue to hold.

### **Methods: the Global Survey and Qualitative Field Research**

The research consisted of two inter-connected approaches. The first was a global survey of media reports and self-published materials (eg, blogs, websites, and Facebook pages) about movements that emerged in 2011 and 2012. The second method was field research in five cities where there had been protests: Athens, Cairo, London, Moscow and Yerevan. From April – August 2013 we conducted research in these five cities where we examined the demands, strategies, actors, as well as the relationships between movement actors and institutionalised civil society actors (eg, NGOs, trade unions). In addition to examining what can be called paradigmatic cases of each type (eg, Cairo as the typical example of a pro-democracy movement and Athens as the typical example of an anti-austerity movement) we also examined other lesser known cases (eg, Yerevan). In each city we conducted semi-structured interviews with activists, representatives of NGOs, trade unions or political parties. Most interviews lasted approximately

60 minutes. The interviews were conducted in English or the local language with interpreters when necessary. All interviews were anonymised, then translated into English, transcribed and analysed using NVivo software.

In the global survey, we examined the mobilizations that emerged from 1 January 2011 – 31 December 2012 and collected data according to 10 coding fields (see appendix). Our selection criteria were the following:

1. Size – mobilizations had to include a minimum of 50 people.
2. Type of mobilization – encampment and/or street mobilization.
3. Length and duration – ten days/events over a three month period.

The benefit of the global survey was that it allowed us to consider the spread and scope of the protest movements and the peak periods of activity across the globe and to examine the transnational diffusion of ideas, practices, and repertoires as well as any existing linkages between protests. It demonstrated that 2011 did indeed see the highest level of mobilisation, but also that there were multiple peaks. It made clear that demonstrations in different countries often referred to each other in their slogans, and that in many cases, slogans and chants levelled broad criticism against the entire political and economic system, rather than making specific demands.

## Global Protests 2011-13



Timeline	Protest cities
<b>Quarter 1: January – March 2011</b>	Arab Spring: Tunis Cairo Amman Beirut Sana'a Algiers Manama Tripoli Rabat
<b>Quarter 2: April – June 2011</b>	Madrid Athens Delhi
<b>Quarter 3: July – September 2011</b>	Lisbon Paris Santiago
<b>Quarter 4: October – December 2011</b>	Occupy New York Occupy London Global Occupy Protests
<b>Quarter 5: January – March 2012</b>	Yerevan
<b>Quarter 6: April – June 2012</b>	Moscow Mexico City Prague
<b>Quarter 7: July – September 2012</b>	Tokyo
<b>Quarter 8: October – December 2012</b>	Delhi Ljubljana Victoria
<b>Quarter 9: January – March 2013</b>	Dhaka Sofia
<b>Quarter 10: April – June 2013</b>	Cairo Istanbul Rio Rome



However, the global survey also had its limitations. Although the media coverage of the global protests during this period was diverse and varied greatly in nature, it primarily focused on the large encampments and mobilizations. While it seems reductive to attempt to generalize on the nature of media reporting, a closer inspection of the materials gathered for this survey revealed a few visible trends in the way protest was represented across the globe.

A notable aspect revealed by the global survey was the media's focus on violence. When protests were peaceful and cooperative with the police, they often failed to make the pages, both in print and on the internet of media reporting. However, in all the regions that were surveyed, there is a preponderance of sources available on "clashes between police and protesters": cases of arrests (both pre-emptive and during actual violent outbursts during rallies, encampments and marches), the use of violent tactics on the part of the police like the use of tear gas, water cannons, baton charges and kettling;<sup>1</sup> as well as cases where protesters have intentionally "provoked" the police.

Also, great focus was placed on how police dealt with protests that became encampments and how these sites were maintained. The eviction of protesters from encampments also often drew more media coverage than the activities and demands of the encamped protesters themselves. There are countless reports of these events at Occupy Wall Street, Occupy London Stock Exchange and 15-M Los Indignados camp in Plaza del Sol in Madrid, which are three of the most well documented movements. The Arab Spring protest media coverage was also replete with reports of army brutality against civilian protesters, and notable media coverage was always given when governments felt the need to bring out riot police to quell protests in addition to the regular police force, as occurred in New York, Madrid, Rome, London, Mexico, Tunis, Cairo, Delhi, and Istanbul, to name a few cities.

What the media regularly ignored were the efficient, democratic and often very effective informal internal structures of management and organisation, including general assemblies, people's assemblies and working groups that emerged in these encampments which were often cited as being very important features of the camps by our respondents. Media reporting on the protest movements stops once the movements are evicted or leave the square. Yet as we discovered, for many movements, this period after the square was very important in taking the struggle and the issues to the local communities and neighbourhoods.

For these reasons, the in-depth qualitative fieldwork in the five cities became very important and provided us with greater insight into why and how people mobilized in the squares, their experiences of mobilization and beyond, as well as their demands and aspirations and relationships with other actors. The findings presented in this report draw on both the global survey and our field research.

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<sup>1</sup> "Kettling" is a police technique used to control large crowds during demonstrations.

# THE SQUARES AND BEYOND

**While 2011 was the peak year, these protests did not emerge from a void but rather had links to previous movements and that in each location activists drew on their previous experience of or involvement in earlier movements.**

For instance, in Athens, one event that was cited by our respondents was the December 2008 killing of teenager Alexis Grigoropolous in the Exarcheia neighbourhood in Athens, which led to nights of protest and rioting. This event, which coincided with the beginning of the economic crisis in Greece, was seen by many as a precursor event. According to one respondent, “The tipping point comes when people realise that their future will be much worse than their past. This happened in May 1968 when people realised this and in Greece it happened in May 2008 when you had the killing of [Alexis] Grigoropolous” (Athens, 9 April 2013).



*Plaque in memory of Alexis Grigoropolous in Athens it reads “Here, on the 6 of December 2008, without any reason, a child’s smile was extinguished from the innocent fifteen-year-old Alexis Grigoropolous by the bullets of unrepentant murderers” (photo by Armine Ishkanian).*

In Cairo, origins are more various, but the 2004-05 Kefaya movement which focused on election monitoring appears to have been a passage way for many activists. Even more of our respondents also mentioned universities and human rights centres as sites where there had been some space, although not free of harassment, for political discussions and activities. A veteran activist joined such a centre “because it was the only space where you could really criticize the government throughout the 2000s” (Cairo, 22 May 2013) whereas younger

respondents first became politically aware and active through such centres: “The real engagement that I feel was fruitful and really beneficial were the student activities at the university, the political awareness activities, these were actually the simulations for the real developments” (Cairo, 19 May 2013).

In London, two events which were frequently mentioned, particularly by younger activists in their late 20s and 30s, were the 2003 anti-Iraq war movement and the Climate Camp movement (2006-2011). While citing these movements, respondents were also keen to point out how the current anti-austerity movement is trying to learn from those experiences by finding new modes of direct action and protest including “occupations and more radical demonstrations that aren’t A to B marches” (London, 3 June 2013) and to become more inclusive, by “breaking out of the white middle class ghetto of activists and to take a lead and direction from people who are worst affected by poverty” (London, 24 May 2013).

A key issue everywhere has been to re-think the methods of protest and to move away from one day demonstrations to more long term actions. In Moscow, while the Occupy camp at Abai near Chistye Prude only lasted for eight days, it was seen as distinct from the typical demonstrations that had occurred in Moscow. One Occupy Moscow activist said,

People wanted to talk to each other and to make their own decisions and not just to go into the square and shout “Putin go away!” The assembly was a perfect place to get people to talk and for them to say what they want and to start to make projects inside society (Moscow, 7 June 2013).

## ***The Importance of the Square: shared public space***

A notable aspect of the media coverage globally, as mentioned earlier, was a keen interest in those movements where protest manifested itself by means of encamped occupation of physical space. The most prominent examples of this include the 15 May Los Indignados movement in Plaza del Sol in Madrid,

Spain; Occupy Wall Street in Zuccotti Park, New York; Occupy London Stock Exchange in Paternoster Square, London; anti-corporation protesters Blockupy Frankfurt at the European Central Bank headquarters; anti-austerity and pro-democracy protesters in Syntagma Square, Athens; and those protesting the lack of affordable housing in Tel Aviv, Israel. Media coverage of these “tent cities” was very common, with a specific interest in the demographic make-up of those encamped. These semi-permanent and intensely visual manifestations of protest, with colourful tents, banners and large scale posters seemed to catch public imagination.

We found that while the mobilizations in the squares were often seen as the high point of the movements, and many respondents would frequently refer to Syntagma, Tahrir, St Pauls, Chistye Prude, or Mashtots Park, it was recognised that maintaining that would be difficult. Nearly all respondents who had been involved in encampments in the squares spoke of this experience as one of solidarity, unity, even a “religious experience” (Cairo 22 May 2013) in which one could get a glimpse of the utopian possibilities. One Occupy activist in Moscow also described it as “a kind of heaven” adding,

When the [Occupy] camp was destroyed many activists were really depressed because there had been created new kinds of relationships where there was no property and it was an extremely friendly society ... I don't know how but we could create that small society where everyone is welcome and for Russians it's very hard to talk to people you don't know. But there it was very easy to come and talk ... And even it was very strange that lefts and rights were together (Moscow, 7 June 2013).

These periods in the squares were seen as being distinct from daily life and full of possibilities and hope. As one respondent from Cairo said,

Tahrir Square was like a big utopia. It was self-governed. Everyone was on equal footing. The upper middle class guys

sitting next to the very poor farmer. It was an amazing time; however it was full of delusion... During the 18 days in the square, it was a very nice time, everyone felt there is a huge movement of awareness everyone cares about politics and for this country [Egypt] to be the best country in the world. But that was to me a delusion. I believe it was a big delusion. There was no real deep thinking of a path for the revolution. No one knew what would come after Mubarak. No one even agreed upon this stuff (Cairo, 18 May 2013).



*Clinic in Tahrir Square (ISTOCK)*

But another respondent from Cairo pointed out the difference between the actual lived experience in the square and how it is remembered by participants. She stated,

The 18 days are remembered by the people who lived through them day by day as utopian 18 days... and people look back really nostalgically to the 18 days, although these were the most nerve-wracking days. Very few moments were lovely moments. There was violence, anxiety. Everything was unknown. People were fighting amongst themselves. Not in the square but at home because of the tension. It was not an easy time at all (Cairo, 18 May 2013).

While the mainstream media ignored the organisational aspects of the encampments, these were regularly reported by non-mainstream media such as blogs and forums and discussed by respondents in interviews. In these encampments horizontal organizational structures were instituted by protesters in an effort to avoid creating the hierarchal power structures they were protesting against. Strictly enforced methods for addressing the gathering meant that an academic and an unemployed labourer had the same amount of time at the microphone and the same opportunity to be heard. There were direct democracy parliaments where motions were proposed, discussed and passed or rejected, with minutes of the proceedings being published on the internet, as were the rules that governed how the working groups and assemblies were conducted. Any member of the occupation had the right to start a working group and any changes to methods of governance were voted on and decided through consensus decision making. Additional pastoral services like libraries, exercise classes, separate spaces for women and welfare provision were also set up to enable those camping to have a higher quality of life. These methods were adopted in Athens, Barcelona, London, Madrid, New York, and Toronto to give a few examples.



*Occupy London Library, November 2011 (Photo by Armine Ishkanian)*

While respondents described the encampments as an inspirational time that changed people's outlook on the possibility of social change, the occupations had to come to an end because long-term camped occupations are a very demanding method of protest. As one respondent from Occupy London explained,

Something that is often is missed is that a lot of people from 15 October (2011) to mid-February (2012) put on hold the rest of their lives. People put their studies and jobs on hold. Relationships were broken, they lost their homes. So when the camp was evicted, people realised that they had to sort out their own lives and this of course had an impact on the movement. Just in 2013 we are seeing the recovery now as people are finding an equilibrium and are finding time to come back to contribute to Occupy (London, 12 June 2013).

Once these movements left the squares, the mainstream media began to write their obituaries and ask questions like what did they accomplish? What happened to Occupy? We found that in many instances, the move from the square led to a new period of activism; one which flew under the media radar and was concentrated in local neighbourhoods. Beyond creating a sense of solidarity and unity, the squares also introduced certain practices which have continued beyond the squares such as the general assemblies, working groups and other forms of solidarity (Pleyers, 2012). Some respondents also stated that some of the people they met in the squares have become their friends and that this has led to new forms of cooperation and collaboration. But in some instances, there was also a feeling among respondents that once the mobilizations in the squares ended and daily life resumed, that there was a betrayal of the spirit of the square and that some of the cohesion, unity and solidarity that existed in the square has now dissipated.

### Beyond the Squares

In Athens, after Syntagma Square, there has been emphasis on solidarity economy including food parcels, social pharmacies, electricity reconnection, direct selling by farmers to consumers, community self-help centres, etc. One of the slogans of the solidarity movement in Greece is “No One Alone in the Crisis” [see photo]. As one respondent explained,

This experience made visible a new form of organization in the eyes of ordinary people that things can be done in a different way. When the occupation of Syntagma Square finished, when people went back to their daily lives, they carried with them the spirit of solidarity that had started at the square. For instance, some people began to support the social solidarity economy (Athens, 11 April 2013).



*In speech bubble it states: “No one alone during the crisis” and the on the right is the name of the solidarity group based in the Chaidari suburb of Athens – “NET (ISTOS) – Solidarity Action in Chaidari” April 2013 (Photo by Armine Ishkanian)*

Following the eviction of the Occupy camp in February 2012, members of Occupy London created different working groups that continue to meet on a regular basis. These include the Economics Working Group, the Real Democracy Working Group, the Equality and Environment Working Group, etc. The Occupied Times newspaper, founded in October 2011, is an on-going initiative which emerged from Occupy London but is no longer affiliated with OLSX.

Additionally, in 2012, some, Occupy activists and squatters helped the local community in Barnet to take control over Friern Barnet Library which had been closed by Barnet Council while the local community had been protesting against the closure of the library. It took the squatters and Occupy activists to climb in through the open window so as to physically re-open and occupy the library space which had been closed by the council. While Barnet Council attempted to evict the squatters, the local community demonstrated their support for the squatters and began shelving the over 10,000 donated books they had received from supporters in the re-opened library. Eventually the local community was granted permission by a court to keep the library open. This victory came about due to a symbiotic relationship and alliance between the Occupy activists and the local community.

One respondent said,

The Friern Barnet Library occupation showed me that it's a really practical, grassroots coming together of two worlds. There's my world, which is the local, saying "Bugger off, we'll have our neighbourhood library!", and Occupy saying "We'll instigate and spark and do what we can and then you can take over". I think that was a beautiful coming together (London, 29 April 2013).

In Moscow, after the Occupy camp was broken up people who had been involved in the camp began to work on a smaller, more localised scale. As one respondent said:

We have a couple of hundred people who are newcomers to political activism and they are mostly left and they do initiatives like trying to make a cooperative. For Russia this is very innovative. It's a coffee cooperative. Some other guys are trying to make a school, like free educational projects. Another is doing human rights work (Moscow, 7 June 2013).

These indicate that people are trying to keep alive some of the practices that developed in the square and to build from the bottom-up in specific localities.

Finally, as we have seen, there is always the possibility of return to the square. For instance, Athenians returned to the square to protest against the abolition of public broadcaster ERT. In July 2013 a group of activists who had been involved in the Occupy Mashtots Park movement spearheaded a campaign to defeat the newly introduced 50 per cent price hike in the cost of public transportation. They held protests outside Yerevan city hall and organised "Free Car" carpools which transported people to their destinations and held daily general assemblies at Mashtots Park. Following two weeks of intense action, the mayor's office rescinded the proposed fee hike. The second revolution in Cairo, problematic though its outcome may be, also shows us that the recent mobilisations are not "ephemeral" as the media sometimes suggest: once there has been an outbreak of mass mobilisation, people will become involved in a different, more local and perhaps less intensive way, but they will return to the square when they find sufficient common cause again.

# GENERATIONAL PROTESTS?

**Another question that is often asked in the mainstream media is who are these people in the squares? Where did they come from? One of our assumptions going into the research was that these were generational protests similar to 1968. And that both the anti-austerity and the democratisation movements could be considered generational movements of what may be termed the “precarious generation”, growing up in a neoliberal environment where neither work nor public services could be taken for granted.**

With the emergence of the global Occupy movement, beginning with Occupy Wall Street in Zuccotti Park, whose slogan was “We are the 99%”, protestors took aim at the broader neoliberal, capitalist system arguing that “Capitalism Is Crisis” and demanding a more just and fair democracy. Some of the media reports we examined in our global survey showed that Occupy Wall Street was described by many media sources as being full of privileged youth who did not have the demands of work or responsibility, thus allowing their prolonged presence at the protest. However, surveys carried out among those encamped, revealed that 49 per cent of those encamped were under 30, but that one in three was over 35 years old and 1 in 5 was over 45 (Milkman et al., 2013, Cordero-Guzman, 2011). So while the notion of disaffected youth may have played a very visible role in the media presentation of Occupy Wall Street, the reality was that the protesters were a far more diverse group.

In the Middle East, both during and in the wake of the Arab Spring, the youth element of the movements was hard to ignore. In the case of protests in Morocco, where the movement was initially labelled the “February 20 Youth Movement”, and especially also in Tunisia, there seemed to be a larger number of young people at the heart of the dissent. They were voicing their discontent at the high levels of unemployment, especially among the young, the corruption that runs through all aspects of public and private life in the country and the lack of political freedom. In Egypt, the protests were initially called the “The Youth Revolution”. Yet on closer inspection we found that in Egypt as well as in Tunisia and Morocco, protests were more varied

in terms of age and there seemed to be a diverse coalition of people spanning a wide range of ages, professions, social classes and political orientations.

In South and East Asia the response to the global wave of protest, 2011 was both less severe and less widely covered by the media. However, the Occupy movement did find resonance in protests that spread across Seoul, Kuala Lumpur, Tokyo and other cities. In the case of Occupy Merdeka (Malaysia), the protesters were clearly mainly university students and younger people under the age of 25 who were demanding a safer, more fiscally and ecologically responsible future. While the anti-nuclear protests all over Japan (especially in Tokyo and Fukushima in mid-2012) drew a diverse array of Japanese protesting against nuclear power and the government’s lack of an appropriate and transparent response, the majority of those who encamped at Fukushima and led the lion’s share of the protest in both cities were students. India’s two big protest movements during our period of study, the anti-corruption protests triggered by the arrest of a fasting protester, Anna Hazare (starting in April 2011 and continuing in a variety of forms until the year’s end) and those in response to the brutal rape of a young university student on a bus in Delhi (December 22, 2012), were again diverse in the spectrum of protesters gathered, but in both cases, the media noted the large numbers of young people within the ranks.

While the Latin American region did not escape from the impact of the global wave of protest that occurred during this time, in these regions protests were mostly in response to particular governmental parties (eg, Mexico), government policies (eg, anti-drug war marches in Mexico and Colombia) or around environmental and economic issues (eg, anti-mining and mining company protests across South America). In Chile, a large student movement mobilized against the high educational fees and the neoliberal policies more generally in 2011. While students had made demands to the government in May 2011, following government inaction, on 5 August 2011 over 100,000 people protested in Santiago and associated rallies were held in the other cities in Chile.

The region where the generational narrative of the protests has taken root most strongly apart from the Middle East is in Southern Europe, where they are seen to be fuelled by the rage of a “precarious generation”. The fallout from the financial crisis in Europe has created a raft of youth in Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece and other Mediterranean nations who are faced with limited prospects of employment and families that are bearing the brunt of government measures to implement austerity. The protests turned into encampments in Madrid, Barcelona, Rome and Lisbon to name but a few cities. The notion of “indignation” was first expressed by the May 15 Movement in Madrid where protesters were labelled “Los Indignados” (the indignant ones), by the media. The term “Indignados” was quickly taken up by youth across the other nations and their banners, demands and slogans expressed their outrage at a future that was uncertain and financially fraught and a state that had turned its back on those who needed them. France is a notable exception in this case as youth unemployment is not as much of an issue as in the nations mentioned above.

Through our qualitative research in the five field sites, we also found that there is a generational aspect to the protests in that young, middle class educated people are at the core of the protests and they play a very important part in organising, mobilizing and campaigning. The generational issue was often expressed as the generation that grew up and had its sensibilities shaped by a system of neoliberal governance which focuses on individual responsibility and the enterprising individual. But whether the protests were a manifestation or outburst of a “precarious generation” varied from place to place. Certainly in Athens as in Cairo and London there is a generation that is growing up in a context where neither jobs nor public services are guaranteed. Indeed, there is concern that they may be worse off than their parents. Driven by anger, indignation, and shattered expectations young people are mobilising and taking their protests to the streets. As one respondent from London said,

I was born the year the Berlin Wall fell down. And for my generation growing up there was this kind of feeling that there is no alternative

to free market capitalism and all of a sudden that brims over. And students and young people go from being the most de-mobilized, demoralized, conformist wing of the labour movement to suddenly become the most radical and vibrant wing of the labour movement (London, 3 June 2013).

According to a young Islamist in Cairo,

The new situation, the young leaders as we can name them and the activists that emerged from the revolution, we are able to sit together and talk together. Yes we are different. We have different objectives maybe... But still we are able to talk together and I believe this generation will not take the country to some sort of confrontation like the early leaders that we are facing and we are actually suffering their bad mentalities and their negative dealing with situations (Cairo, 22 May 2013).



Young protestor in Cairo with placard about teachers' wages (ISTOCK)



In the former Soviet countries, respondents discussed the generational divisions about attitudes and expectations from the state and understandings of citizenship. The new generation that was born in the 1980s and 1990s and which grew up following the collapse of the Soviet regime was seen as being freer and more independent. As one respondent from Moscow explained,

I feel the older generation, the generation of my parents, do not strongly support all these protests and if they do, then they do so in silence. They don't really believe anything can change. They have been raised in a way that you shouldn't cause trouble and you should not distinguish yourself or stand out... they are afraid to go out on the street (Moscow, 12 June 2013).

In Yerevan, the rise of a new generation in the post-Soviet period was also seen as an important factor in the growing number of protests. As one respondent said,

I would call this activism an outburst period of the new generation which was not born and raised in the Soviet times. This generation is more open minded than the previous generation and obviously this new generation is going to have an outburst when it experiences injustices (Yerevan, 27 July 2013).



Occupy Mashtots Park protestors stopping a lorry on 16 February 2012, Yerevan, Armenia (Photo by Hayk Bianjyan)

While acknowledging the importance of the generational aspect of the mobilizations, this is only part of the story and if we only focus on the protests as a generational outburst, we risk overlooking the fact that these concerns were shared more widely. In particular, with an ageing population in Europe, the precariousness of the elderly was of great concern to many activists we interviewed. The presence of protesters of all ages and varied economic backgrounds and even political affiliations (liberals, nationalists, socialists, anarchists, etc.) is proof that the protests were about much more. An important aspect of the 2011-12 mobilizations was that alongside experienced activists, there were new people, what some called "ordinary citizens" or "non-activists" who had joined the mobilizations. In this context it is more important to consider why "ordinary citizens" joined the mobilizations, and understand the relationship between them and the more experienced activists, than to focus exclusively on their age.



Members of the Greater London Pensioners' Association participating in a demonstration organised by Occupy London and anti-cuts groups in Canary Wharf, London 16 June 2013 (photo by Armine Ishkhanian).

### Heterogeneous Actors

As Charles Tilly wrote, "the art of social movements consists in drawing a common coalition out of a heterogeneous set of actors" (Tilly, 1986, p. 586) and this heterogeneity of actors was an important feature of the recent mobilizations. For instance in Athens, a number of respondents stated that there were many first time protestors in Syntagma Square because the austerity in Greece had become so extreme that there

were now people joining demonstrations who had been previously well-off. One respondent said, "This was the first time that people who had never before participated in demonstrations came out to protest (Athens, 11 April 2013). Another added, "For the first time in Greece, the older generation, people like my mother, went to protest" (Athens, 8 August 2012).



*Protest in Syntagma Square, Athens 2011 (ISTOCK)*

This was a very important point, and many respondents in all of our field sites noted that people were becoming more conscious of the problems and recognising that they had a responsibility to deal with them. A member from a solidarity self-help group located in the suburbs of Athens told us,

The aim is not to be a charity. The aim is that people face problems and understand that they have to self-organise. It is not just about giving them food, but teaching them how to fight for their rights themselves. It is to get them off their sofas and their beds and into action. This is not just activism, but also a political intervention, we have a multi-dimensional approach to get people to participate and become part of the solution. It is aimed at getting people to wake up and to resist (Athens, 9 April 2013).

In Cairo, a middle-aged rural anthropologist, said,

I've never been some sort of member of a party or a formal group or an underground movement. Not really not formally. Still, I'm

not... but the kind of movement or activity that I appreciated very much was, and that I found that it fit me, again I'm not alone in this, was after the murder of Khaled Said, this Facebook called "We are all Khaled Said" appeared... it cast a wide net, it was very inclusive for young people who were not political, but were doing things or wanted to do things that would not be considered political in a sort of classical conventional sense. Yet within this group emotional feelings and feelings for the country changed into a political force and I think that was part of the inputs of the momentum of the mobilization for the 25 of January ... So that's for these young apolitical kids. But also for me (Cairo, 18 May 2013).



*Occupy Abai, Moscow, May 2012 (photo by Agnes Blais)*

In Moscow, respondents explained that mobilizations such as those contesting electoral fraud and to a lesser extent Occupy Abai, have played an important role "for the self-consciousness of the people" (Moscow, 5 June 2013). As an activist in the Occupy Abai camp explained,

It's very strange but before 2011 it was like people mostly didn't know what was going on in Russia. Then we had the Khimki Forest protests and they made visible our society's problems and of course then came Occupy. Everything has changed from two years ago. Before when you opened up the newspaper you saw ten per cent of politics and 90 per

cent of shit. Now politics has become very trendy, but two years ago it was strange to talk about politics and no one wanted to talk about it (Moscow, 7 June 2013).

Another respondent stated that while the “active phase” of the protest movement had ended, people were “slowly becoming more conscious of the problems in Russia. They are awakening” (Moscow, 12 June 2013).

The notion that people had to wake up or awaken was very strong in Yerevan, where a number of respondents described the current wave of protests as a “zartok” (awakening) amongst the young generation and a growing consciousness of and sense of citizenship. One of the slogans of Occupy Mashtots Park was “The Time of the Self-Determined Citizen” which was aimed at getting people to recognise not only their rights but also responsibilities as citizens which activists defined as participating, exercising their voice, and taking ownership of problems facing their society. One respondent explained that while they have “achieved some changes in consciousness” and more people were joining protest actions and civic initiatives, this was largely concentrated in Yerevan and was not prevalent in the provinces (Yerevan, 8 June 2013). Activists from Yerevan have now been reaching out to communities in smaller cities and towns so as to widen the impact and levels of participation.

#### **Communication: the possibilities and limits of social media**

Much has been made about the role of social media and its use by young activists by the press and even some academics (Mason, 2013, Castells, 2012, Center for Liberation Technology, 2010). Our global survey revealed that both the print and online media were keen to highlight how protesters all over the globe were taking to Twitter and Facebook to spread information, share intelligence, gather followers to the cause and most importantly to mobilise activists in the physical world. However, media reports sometimes play up the internet presence of protest groups as a means of discrediting their actual

physical manifestation on the street and to accuse movements of being about “clicktivism” ie, online activism that does not manifest itself in physical protest, rather than serious movements for change. On the other hand, media outlets have themselves been keen to interact with the social media aspects of protesters by encouraging both observers and protesters themselves to contribute news, photos and opinions to on-going media coverage.

In interviews, Facebook and Twitter were cited by many of our respondents as having played an important role at the level of organising and keeping people informed and connected, and even for campaigning.

In Egypt in particular, much has been made about the use of Facebook in kick starting the revolution. One respondent, talking about the Khaled Said page already mentioned above, said,

One of the things of this Facebook page was recognizing that we are so many. We are so many that are frustrated. This always gives you courage and increases your abilities to know your strength (Cairo, 22 May 2013).

And according to another,

Sometimes it is portrayed as if Facebook is frivolous and for the middle-class kids, versus the workers. No. Because in villages and poor areas there is access to internet. And sometimes people would have it at home or on their mobile phones. And this is the only opportunity to participate (Cairo, 18 May 2013).

In Armenia, respondents also cited the importance of Facebook in helping to organise and mobilise. Moreover, given that more Armenians live outside the borders of the Republic of Armenia than inside it, Facebook and YouTube were cited as important tools for connecting with Armenian diaspora communities around the world. As one respondent stated,

Social networks have a big role in organizing our work. At this time our only resource is the internet. I would not say that we use it completely, but day by day we become more skilled, and the resources are getting more. Our issue is not only making active those living in Armenia, but also the whole community of Armenians, and I can state that we have results during these two years. I can see their [the diaspora Armenians'] involvement in all ways: in means of informational and campaigns, financial, professional and also their presence physically in Armenia. (Yerevan 27 July 2013).

In Moscow, almost all the interviewed activists insisted on the important role of the Internet and some connected it to the rise of a new generation of citizens. One respondent claimed "TV is for zombies" adding that in Russia, two regimes co-exist: one in Moscow where people have a lot of Internet based information and one in the towns and countryside, which is dominated by public TV (Moscow, 4 June 2013).

While we found that social media played an important role in helping to organise and mobilise people, many respondents pointed out the limits of social media in reaching out to groups beyond the narrow networks and the necessity of developing and maintaining face to face contacts. Despite the uses, many were also quick to recognise the limits of these new technologies and pointed out that large swathes of the population did not have access to Facebook or indeed the Internet. For example, as respondents from Cairo stated, the workers who arrived in Tahrir Square did not come because they received an invite on Facebook but because they had been told by friends or colleagues. Respondents also cautioned against Facebook determinism and pointed to the limits of Facebook and other social media. As one respondent from Athens said,

People need to leave Facebook and their coffees and to go outside. Facebook is one of the biggest problems of humanity...I think social media is humiliating because they

have made a good way for people to think they are participating. If you hear what the FBI and CIA say about Facebook, they say "Thank you [Mark] Zuckerberg for creating it, you have made our job easier!" (Athens, 13 April 2013).

While a respondent from London stated,

I don't think social media is the cause of the student movement if that is the next question [interviewer confirms that is not the next question]. Good because that is the most boring journalistic question which I get asked all the time (London, 3 June 2013).

Moreover, respondents stated that however useful social media may be it doesn't exclude the need to reach out to people and build face to face relationships and trust. As one respondent explained, "We try to meet with public sector workers face to face in order to make them see the impact of the austerity and cuts which they are implementing" (London, 22 April 2013).

# DEMANDS AND ASPIRATIONS

**Some of the overarching questions about the movements in the squares are: what were their demands/targets and what did they achieve? Below we discuss their targets and aspirations.**

Democracy was one of the most widely shared aspirations among our respondents in the five cities. There was a great degree of consensus across all our sites as to what democracy cannot be reduced to: it is not just “the ballot box”, or electing representatives every four years. What democracy meant and how it was understood, however, varied from place to place and from person to person. Overall we found a deep disappointment with representative or electoral democracy and a growing demand for deeper forms of citizen participation, coupled with a continued insistence on the rule of law. Although of course we found many shades of opinion about what constitutes democracy, common elements included an insistence on the rule of law at the minimum, a close connection with social justice (less so in Moscow) and a conception of democracy as practices in which citizens take part on a daily basis.

## Democracy

### Democracy as Rule of law

In all of the cities, respondents expressed a deep concern for the rule of law. According to some respondents in Athens, the rule of law is in retreat. A journalist told us,

Liberal democracy has taken a few steps back that five years ago were unthinkable. The police posted these pictures of HIV-positive women on the Internet ... they published all their personal data, their names, where they were born, everything to “protect the public”. And there has been quite a bit of torture, it has been intensifying all of these three years. And the press writes, yes, it is wrong to beat up prisoners, **but** they are criminals (Athens, 11 April 2013).

In Moscow and Yerevan, democracy was connected first of all to the rule of law. As one respondent

from Yerevan said, “For me democracy is that if there’s a law then it functions for all. And if someone violates it, it should be restored by law” (Yerevan, 31 May 2013). In Cairo, a respondent said, “For me democracy can be the protection of the rights of the least privileged citizens. It can be the protection of the rights of minorities. It can be the assurance of equal treatment of those who are more likely to be discriminated against” (Cairo, 21 May 2013).

### Democracy as Participation and Voice in Decision-Making

While describing what democracy should and should not be, people have been trying to put into practice more participatory or direct forms of democracy. In Athens, various people referred to the classic Athenian system to underpin their sense of what democracy should be,

Our main aim of the Squares was to create a political culture and to demand REAL democracy; direct democracy was modelled on the ancient Athenian democracy. So for us this type of organizing is a matter of democracy. We organise and hold assemblies that are very participatory and inclusive. So we encourage this at the local level (Athens, 11 April 2013).

According to a Cairo activist who also participated in Occupy Wall Street,

Democracy is that people really run their own daily lives on all levels. On the municipal level or the local level, they would control their food, their prices, their things and on the higher level the governorate would do their policies...So people would have real access. I don’t just go and vote for a new dictatorship every four years (Cairo, 25 May 2013).

Democracy is not exclusively conceived as a means of state governance. A young Cairo activist holds that “Democracy is a culture, an obligation. At the popular level we use democracy for formulating our revolution in the family, in the streets ... I think that

the absence of democracy at the formal level is a result of the absence of democracy at the popular level" (Cairo, 20 May 2013).

A respondent from Athens also uses the term democracy in this societal and even personal sense: "for instance, at the school, the meeting isn't just the parents and teachers, but also includes the children. We want to redefine democracy from below and outside of state institutions" (Athens, 8 April 2013).

In Armenia, respondents described how Occupy Mashtots Park created a new culture of participation. One respondent said,

People try to live a more collective life; they try to establish democratic culture. The collective life means that when I do something, it affects others' as well ... People realize that they are the owners of this country. It is a change of values for me (Yerevan, 9 May 2013).

### **Democracy as Social Justice**

In conceptualising democracy as social justice respondents emphasised the importance of equality. The global Occupy Movement issued the boldest and most well-known critique against the global capitalist system, by coining the slogan "We are the 99%". The slogan was coined in the summer of 2011 and popularised at the Occupy Wall Street protest to encapsulate the economic argument that since the 1970s, the increased concentration of income and wealth amongst the top one per cent of the United States population is unacceptable. It also refers to the belief that the remaining 99 per cent of the people are paying the economic and social price for the greed, corporate misconduct and lack of economic regulation of this minority. This has been one of the most popular slogans to transcend across the various protests that were sparked by and in response to Occupy Wall Street.

There were Occupy camps in three of the cities where we conducted field research: London, Moscow and Yerevan. While all of these protest movements shared a concern with growing inequality, they also had local

specifications. Several of the ten demands issued by Occupy London on 26 October 2011 explicitly link democracy with social justice. (Occupy London, 2012). Below is a list of some of those demands:

- The current system is unsustainable. It is undemocratic and unjust. We need alternatives; this is where we work towards them.
- We do not accept the cuts as either necessary or inevitable. We demand an end to global tax injustice and our democracy representing corporations instead of the people.
- We want structural change towards authentic global equality. The world's resources must go towards caring for people and the planet, not the military, corporate profits or the rich.
- We stand in solidarity with the global oppressed and we call for an end to the actions of our [UK] government and others in causing this oppression.
- This is what democracy looks like. Come and join us! (Occupy London, 2012).

Occupy Mashtots Park in Yerevan saw itself as operating in "a different socioeconomic context [than in Wall Street] adding that its focus was on the "oligarchy" [or] "people above the law" who, having economical [sic] and political resources, place their interests above those of the people" (Wikipedia, 2013). Occupy Mashtots Park activists held a mock funeral of Olig Garkhian (ie, Mr. Oligarch) in which they paraded a *papier-mâché* figure of an oligarch around the streets of central Yerevan followed by lamenters and drummers. The words "corruption", "monopolies", "indifference", "theft", "impunity", and "illegality" were written on the "corpse" (see photo, page 20).



*Occupy Mashtots activists participate in the funeral of "Mr Olig Garkhian" (ie, Mr Oligarch), 22 April 2011, Yerevan, Armenia (photo by Inna Mkhitarian)*

In Moscow, although the Occupy Abai movement embraced many practices and aspects of other Occupy camps including the general assemblies, canteens, open air lectures, etc, it did not have a clearly articulated agenda around social justice or indeed democracy largely because it brought together leftists, liberals, and nationalists into one camp who while sharing an anger with the ruling regime were also divided on developing a common strategy and agenda of demands. As one activist explained,

In [Occupy] Abai, we divided up the responsibilities. The liberals had to run the kitchen, the nationalists and those from the right were responsible for the security and the left was doing everything else, including handling the money (Moscow, 7 June 2013).

The lack of widespread concern with and focus on social justice in Moscow is probably connected to the fact that many of the protesters and activists were from middle class backgrounds and were employed in skilled jobs. Yet respondents recognised that the situation in Moscow is very different from that in other parts of Russia where unemployment is more common.

In Cairo, there was a strong insistence by respondents that social justice was closely linked to democracy. As one respondent from Cairo said,

My perspective on democracy is not only the election or voting stations. Many countries have elections. But from my perspective I haven't democracy. How is democracy without social justice? How is democracy without equality? So sometimes you can find a democratic system but that's not really democracy... The total economic freedom without the control of the state, is not democracy. It's no changes in education, it's no democracy. No health insurance, it's no democracy. And no social services, social insurance, not democracy... (Cairo, 22 May 2013).

And in this context of democracy as social justice, there were concerns that democracy was being eroded by the growing privatisation of state assets and public services. There was concern that private interests had taken over democracy. One respondent from Athens said, "Democratic practices mean bring power to the people. It means renationalising assets and bringing democracy to how the market works" (Athens, 8 April 2013).

This critique of the growing privatization was echoed by a respondent from London, who said,

I think our democracy is miss-functioning, but no one has the political will to take on democratic reforms. Unfortunately, the state has allowed a lot of private and corporate interests to take over a lot of the decisions about investment and the economy, especially in the City of London. So we're trying to make public spaces public again and resist that kind of encroachment (London, 9 May 2013).

But social justice is not always connected to democracy: it is also affirmed as a value in and of itself.

## Social Justice

While social justice was often acknowledged to be "extremely important" by our respondents (but much

less so in Moscow than in the other contexts), again it has a number of layers:

- first, that there should be less inequality;
- second, that the state should not collude in inequality but protect the underprivileged;
- and third when formulated more concretely, that it should provide access to health care and education.

But even in Moscow, where social justice was not one of the main demands either in Occupy Abai or indeed in other protest movements, many respondents recognised that there is growing inequality in Russia. One respondent said,

There is no social justice at all. All natural resources have been sold to “KGBists”. They are all millionaires. For a long time they have been stealing from the people, the national property and the state budget. In that sense, if you are in power you enter the very circle which has access to the source of money from the state budget. You can steal that money and send it to the West to buy a villa on the Côte d’Azur where you send your family and that’s it. You live here where you can steal and then you move and stay there [abroad] to enjoy your wealth (Moscow, 14 June 2013).



Street demonstration in Moscow. The banner from Avtonom, a group of Libertarian Communists, reads: “Direct Democracy, Social Justice”. 12 June 2013 (photo by Agnes Blais).

In Cairo, many of our respondents identified “Bread, Freedom, Social Justice” as the most significant slogan of the January 2011 mobilisation in Tahrir Square, and emphasized that freedom and social justice were interdependent. This view was represented by both secularist and Islamist parts of the political spectrum. While some respondents formulated social justice in terms of education and health care, another widely shared concern was for a minimum *as well as a maximum* wage to narrow the gap between rich and poor.

While respondents spoke about social justice, they also emphasised the importance of people taking responsibility for problems, thus it wasn’t about just sitting back and expecting the state to do things for you.

Here it is important to differentiate between the notion of responsibility mentioned by respondents and the concept of “individual responsibility” which is a core concept within neoliberalism that highlights the need for citizens to become an “entrepreneur of himself or herself” (Ong, 2006). The responsibility people talked about was a growing consciousness of citizenship and the need to be responsible beyond oneself, to contribute to society and to take ownership of problems. But this was not about absolving the state of its responsibilities to citizens by outsourcing its functions and duties to private corporations. On the contrary it was about getting the state to fulfil its obligations towards citizens. This was very well expressed by a respondent in Yerevan, who said,

People are demanding things from the state and they want the state to function as a state. That is the ultimate thing. That is why there is so much focus on rule of law. Because when there is proper rule of law, then the state functions as a state and the country becomes a proper country (Yerevan, 6 August 2013).

In Greece and in the UK, the discussion isn’t about social justice per se, but about the role of the state in welfare and how public services are being cut, rolled back, and privatized at an alarming rate. For instance, in Athens, we found that the notion of



“social justice” does not translate well into Greek. As one respondent said,

No one in Greece uses the term “social justice”. We use the term justice but not social justice. We call it the social state ... The social state should provide a net for the poor, and should be able to protect the vulnerable. Because we see that the first to be affected by the cuts were the vulnerable, the pensioners, those on benefits, the mothers (Athens, 8 April 2013).

But as a number of respondents argued, in recent years the “social state” has been dismantled and destroyed. One respondent explained,

I believe the state responsibilities have now been taken over by the people because the state does nothing. There are 1.5 million unemployed who don't have access to basic health care. So the state is nowhere to be found. This is a very basic need and a fundamental right to have access to a doctor or a hospital, but 1,000s of people don't even have access to the medications they need. As for rights, we have rights which are being taken away from us. Everything that we gained in the last 150 years we have lost in the past three years. We had gained these through very hard and painful fights and now they have been lost (Athens, 10 April 2013).

In the UK, where the government has been instituting massive public spending cuts and “opening up services” through the neoliberal inspired Big Society agenda, respondents were concerned that despite the rhetoric of participation and responsibility the Big Society was simply a “thin veil over a nasty idea” (London, 8 May 2013) or a “Trojan horse” for the privatisation of public services as one respondent explained,

In the context of Big Society, the Government has used the language of community action and responsibility for its

own ends...they are using it to justify cuts to public services but they are also using it as a Trojan Horse to privatize public services. Because privatisation is not popular in this country, rather than saying we're selling off public services to private corporations, they are saying people can have choice and charities can come forward and bid to take on local community services (London, 30 April 2013).

While Occupy London was not about cuts specifically, in recent years there has been an explosion in the number of anti-cuts groups that are opposed to the cuts and also organisations that are FOR public services. These include groups such as Disabled People Against Cuts and Black Activists Rising Against Cuts as well as groups based in particular neighbourhoods in London including Islington Hands Off Our Public Services and the Haringey Alliance for Public Services to a name but a few.

## Dignity

What dignity could mean was varied. In Cairo, the first and most emotive association is with treatment by the police, civil servants and politicians, which has often caused people to feel humiliated. As one Cairo activist explains, “If I want to renew my license, so if you go to do that, you must stay four days, staying in very long lines in the sun. And if you can find someone who has connections, who has a care for me, officers or generals, they finish this process in a few minutes. And you stay four days in a really bad place in the sun or snow. It's not dignity” (Cairo 2 May 2013).

Various respondents have pointed out that the demonstration on 25 January 2011, that sparked the eventual ouster of Mubarak, was so successful in part because it was held on “the Day of the Police”, to protest against police brutality, and that in the next few days, in many Cairo neighbourhoods, people spontaneously torched their local police stations.

But dignity also has another dimension: “Dignity has no meaning when you enter a hospital that has 300 beds and 500 patients” (Cairo, 20 May 2013). As one respondent said,

Dignity is usually contained in the right not to be tortured. The right to bodily integrity, the right not to be detained for any reason. Things like that ... But we had a picture of one of the workers holding up a banner saying: where is my dignity? And in that case he was asking for the standard of living. And then you go to the social and economic rights. And there again the dignity is the core concept because if you cannot make ends meet and if you cannot have enough food for your children by the end of the month, where’s your dignity? (Cairo, 21 May 2013).

In Athens, the indignity of poverty and dependence also have an important psychological element: “Dignity? Yes, absolutely it is very important. That is why we fully disagree with the activities of the Church and the mainstream media who promote philanthropy and charity. Helping people isn’t about charity. It is to help alleviate them from the crisis and to support them psychologically” (Athens, 9 April 2013).

Finally, both in Athens and Cairo, dignity, and the lack of it, are sometimes conceptualized at the **national** level, in terms of democratic sovereignty: “To me dignity is not to pay the public debt, to work less hours and to resist the occupation of Greece by the crooks and especially the technocrats from Germany. So in the case of Greece the Troika<sup>2</sup> is destroying our dignity” (Athens, 10 April 2013). “It’s quite sad, this dignity thing, asking for aid. How are we supposed to feel dignified when we’ve been asking for IMF loans for the past half year? They don’t want to give it to us. How am I supposed to feel dignified when that happens?” (Cairo, 20 May 2013).

The personal and national levels are felt to be connected. An angry and desperate shipyard worker at a solidarity meeting we attended in Athens said, in the same breath: “I am really proud and my dignity doesn’t allow me to ask for help. But now I am in real need and I have dependents. I need help. I don’t care where the help comes from. Everything is a lie. Greece has been sold” (Athens, 10 April 2013).

In London, the concept of dignity was not widely used. Some stated it was a continental European or more specifically, a “Mediterranean trope” (London, 24 April 2013) associating it with Spain or Greece (London, 3 June 2013). The only context in which dignity had strong resonance was in the disability movement. As one respondent said,

Dignity is at the heart of the disability movement. It’s about dignity and the barriers that dehumanize and that remove that dignity...Take one case in point. The work capability assessment is all about proving your un-worth it’s all about proving how much you CANNOT contribute to your society in order to be financially remunerated for your ability to not contribute. What we are doing is defining our contribution in employment terms. It’s about pounds per hour terms...That is dehumanizing people and taking away their dignity (London, 22 April 2013).

In Yerevan and Moscow, while the word “dignity” was not used, respondents stated that they were fighting against the indignity and humiliation which is engendered by corruption, the lack of rule of law, and impunity of oligarchs.

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<sup>2</sup>The word “Troika” is used to refer to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Central Bank, and the European Commission.

# RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER ACTORS

## **One of the questions which interested us and which is largely ignored in media reports is the relationship of these movements with more institutionalised civil society actors or political parties.**

We were interested in learning whether and how these movements are connected to formal, professionalised NGOs, trade unions and political parties and whether such relations are necessary for scaling up impact. Thus we asked respondents to consider whether there were relationships and if so, whether these relationships have changed over time.

## **NGOs**

While some critics, including government officials in the various countries, have attempted to denigrate the movements by describing them as NGO projects funded by international donors or foreigners, it was quite clear from our research that a) NGOs did not initiate the protests and b) that there was often an ambivalent relationship between the formal, professionalised NGOs and the movements that emerged in 2011 and 2012. For instance, one activist from Occupy London said,

Some people said Occupy London was set up by NGO type people and then they left because they thought it would be a disaster. But that is not true, it was started by activists, and once it started it grew spontaneously (London, 9 May 2013).

We found that while individual NGO employees often support and even join protest movements in their individual capacity, creating organisational level relationships is more problematic. One reason that was given in London was that NGOs often have a relationship with or receive funding from statutory bodies, hence it becomes very complicated for them to criticise those same bodies. Furthermore, within the UK context, there is a long tradition of charities remaining outside of politics so as to maintain their independence (Kendall, 2010). This has meant that registered charities often shy away from groups which are overtly political

or have an explicit political agenda. And yet, we found there is much contact that occurs “behind the scenes”. As one respondent said,

Voluntary organizations do come to us from time to time, but it's a bit more complex due to NGO politics. I mean, a lot of people involved in this group work themselves in NGOs. The benefits of that are that you have network and knowledge and you know who to talk to. People who are involved in this group are all highly networked and knowledgeable about the political scene in the UK. We all bring our experience of having worked in voluntary organizations. So it's not just our grass roots experience, but professional experience in NGOs as well. This means we know both sides of the fence! For us this group is a way to get away from the world of NGOs because they can also go so far (London, 9 May 2013).

This was echoed by respondents in other cities. For instance, one respondent from Yerevan said,

If you look at the activism, those people, who have been employed in the NGO sector, they work more professionally than people who were out and joined the protests afterwards. Maybe those people are enthusiastic and concerned about issues, but they do not have those skills to take things forward (Yerevan, 9 May 2013).

In Moscow too, we were surprised to hear that a young anarchist had organised a seminar with a human rights NGO. When we asked whether it is common for anarchists in Russia to collaborate with NGOs, he said “I work in an NGO ... I mean it's just a great job that gives you more time. It's better to work at an NGO than a café or something” (Moscow, 4 June 2013).

Like this young man, we found many pragmatic individuals who find the NGO model constraining but continue to work for them, meanwhile

channelling their energies through protest and direct action groups.

Yet, in spite of these contributions, there was also criticism from activists that NGOs failed in their mandates. As one Occupy London activist said,

Regarding relations with NGOs, I can't say how exasperated I am with them. The fact that we had all these people who are homeless and were drug addicts and alcoholics coming and disrupting a political protest and none of the homeless NGOs came to deal with that. None of those charities showed any constructive help whatsoever. And they should've done, it was a divine opportunity for them to develop relationships with those people and to get them off the streets and off the drugs. It was a kind of frontline rehabilitation centre for a lot of people who couldn't organise their own lives. I think that was an extraordinary failure for the NGOs and it was a political decision (London, 9 May 2013).

What was interesting in the case of Egypt was that after the uprising, money for civil society began pouring in from international donors. Presumably this was supposed to support and strengthen civil society but as one respondent – who again worked for an NGO himself, but also engaged in much other, unpaid activity – explained, it was not having the desired effect. He said,

After the uprising there have been millions or billions sent to civil society but no supervision of it. Everyone would take a lot of money and spend it on whatever. Also, this other problem is that civil society in Egypt is that they do not know how to do a proper research. It's a very big problem here in Egypt... The majority of NGOs are very, very politicized and very, very unprofessional. There's a general crisis in Egypt of unprofessionalism in the media, civil society and other aspects (Cairo, 18 May 2013).

In Russia, there has been a crackdown on NGOs that began with the return of Vladimir Putin to the

presidency in 2012. Shortly after coming to power, Putin supported the passage of the "foreign agents" law in July 2012. This controversial bill requires all foreign-funded NGOs involved in political activity to register as "foreign agents" in Russia. Given the existence of this law, NGOs face great repression and challenges when they attempt to address issues that are deemed as being political. For this reason, while some recognise the need to scale-up the grassroots protests that have emerged in recent years, they are also cognizant of the enormous obstacles they will encounter. For this reason, the grassroots protest groups have demonstrated an aversion to politics (Moscow, 5 June 2013) and have focused on localized issues rather than broader structural or institutional demands. Russia is an extreme case of repression of NGOs and civil society, however, in the context of the "War on Terror", such explicit but also implicit forms of repression of civil society have been growing around the world (Howell et al., 2008). For instance, in the UK, in recent years, there have been some attempts to de-legitimize campaigning organisations and groups, including UK Uncut, by labelling them as "embryonic terrorist groups", "extremists" and a "significant threat to democracy" (Moses, 2011, O'Hagan, 2013). In the case of 38 Degrees, which is one of the largest campaigning communities in the UK, Conservative MPs have questioned the independence of the group and attempted to delegitimize their campaigning efforts by alleging that 38 Degrees supports the Labour Party (38 Degrees, 2012).



Protest from Moscow Sakharov Square, 24 December 2011 (ISTOCK)

## Trade Unions

Trade unions were largely criticized by respondents in the five cities we interviewed in for their lack of vision and support and were seen as corrupt or too close to power. In Athens, according to one respondent: “becoming a union leader in Greece is one step to become an MP. So they are treated as traitors” (Athens, 8 April 2013) “It is a big bureaucracy and all the leaders live well and have no links with the working classes and the people hate them” (Athens, 10 April 2013).

In Cairo too, the old, recognised trade unions have no legitimacy whatsoever, even though they are now being opened up: “if any elections took place in any of the syndicates, you will find that either the Brotherhood end up getting it, or rich businessmen who are actually affiliates of the former regime are trying to take over.” (19 May 2013). At the same time: “Trade unions, of course before the revolution we didn’t have but three independent trade unions. All others were following the state, so they did not have a role also. But now we have a boom of independent trade unions and they are participating quietly in the protests that are happening” (Cairo, 18 May 2013).

In London while the large trade unions have been critical of the public spending cuts, many of our respondents felt they had failed to effectively engage with the local anti-cuts groups and to take a lead in mobilising the resistance against austerity measures. Some respondents expressed their disappointment and even disillusionment with trade unions. One respondent said,

The story of the last three years is that the big trade unions let down the radicalness of the student movement; that the leaders of the trade unions let down the potential of the students that was created in 2010 (London, 3 June 2013).

Another respondent echoed this sense of disappointment with the trade unions. He said,

In 2010 there was a very positive thing that the trade unions joined with others in the mass protests and demonstrations. One of

them was with 500,000 people which was the largest ever trade union organized demo and there was a feeling of optimism that there would be a growing anti-cuts resistance. But the trade unions, for some reason, stood back from effective action. There were big strikes around pensions, but that wasn’t the issue that would unite the whole movement. The issue that would unite people was the cuts to public services, but the unions effectively did virtually nothing about the cuts and instead tried to protect their historic positions. So I think people are struggling with the strategy. What is the unions’ strategy? (London, 30 April 2013).

The sense of disappointment with trade unions was only surpassed by the disillusionment people expressed with political parties and politicians.

## Political Parties

In London, Athens, Moscow, and Yerevan there was little faith in parties and they are seen as too corrupt, impotent and beholden to private interests. For instance, one respondent from Yerevan said,

One reason why we are seeing what we are seeing in Armenia today is because all the activists involved share consensus around the fact that the formal political structures and parties are completely discredited from top to bottom and so it remains for the people to act (Yerevan, 6 August 2013).

In Athens though, we found the relation between activists and the Syriza party to be somewhat more ambiguous: some of our interviewees were members of Syriza, but separated this affiliation from their civil society activism, and it became clear that Syriza supported some solidarity activities, but with a low profile.

In Cairo, while both the old parties and the Muslim Brotherhood were widely discredited as obsessed only with the capture of power, roughly half of the people we interviewed, always from a civil society background, were now involved in some newly formed or yet unrecognised

political party. This included a wide array of orientations: social-democratic, socialist revolutionary, liberal, left-Islamist, and Salafist. This gestation of political pluralism is now being squeezed in the confrontation between the army and the Brotherhood.

In London, there was ambivalence toward political parties. Since we were speaking to anti-cuts or anti-austerity groups they were opposed to the current Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition Government, but more than that there was a sense of disillusionment with the parties and that they are essentially the same. Several respondents criticised the opposition Labour Party for not taking a strong enough stance against the cuts and austerity measures.

In Moscow, there were concerns that opposition political parties and leaders would exploit or attempt to take over the protest movements. One respondent described the arrest of the political party leaders as being “positive” for the Occupy movement because it allowed people to organise rather than be dominated by the opposition political leaders (Moscow, 5 June 2013). An Occupy activist said,

They clearly realised that Occupy is not good for them. They could not control us. There were big opposition demonstrations in June and we [Occupy activists] tried to go on the stage and to read our text about real democracy. But we were just banned. They said that we are sorry but we had more important speakers like poets, actors, and people from TV shows (Moscow, 7 June 2013).

In Yerevan, respondents echoed these concerns that the protest movements would be used by political parties. As one respondent stated, “Civic activists do not trust political parties” (Yerevan, 8 May 2013) while another argued that political parties are competing with civil society and “sometimes they’re trying to use the [social] capital and potential of civil society to further their own aims” (Yerevan, 8 June 2013).

This lack of connection to formal civil society actors as well as political parties was one of the reasons why people took to the streets and squares in the first place. Feeling that their voices and concerns were not

being heard or represented, they mobilized so as to be heard. The lack of trust and faith in representative democracy has already been discussed, but even more worrying is that the official charities and NGOs are also losing touch with the people they claim to represent. Becoming ever more professionalised and corporatized, they lose touch with their grassroots constituents. As one respondent from London said, “We are the disaffected, the pissed off, the subversives within the conventional world of voluntary action. The voluntary sector has become privatized, corporatized and dead-headed. So we increasingly now align with and see our future with the direct action and radical movements” (London, 29 April 2013).

While this lack of connection is understandable, it also raises certain dilemmas for groups seeking to have a broader policy or political impact. In particular, given the more structured and hierarchical model on which political parties and trade unions are organised, engaging with leaderless movements is “complicated” as one trade union representative from London explained,

Our relationship with Occupy has been complicated...As an organization they are difficult to talk to, as they are very amorphous. Even if someone is in a “leadership” role or undertaking some tasks, these change very often and the people change very often. It’s harder to have a structural relationship with them. They have less of a tactical blueprint that you can support and not much of a strategy. Whilst I share the anti-globalization and anti-bank sympathies, just occupying the space at St. Paul’s didn’t seem to have a purpose. We want to build a working relationship, but if your ways of working are so different, it’s hard to engage (London, 8 May 2013).

Thus while horizontal models such as general assemblies and consensus based models of decision-making are suited to small groups, it becomes unclear how and indeed whether horizontally organised, leaderless groups can fruitfully engage with hierarchically structured, formal organisations such as trade unions and political parties which seek to engage with leaders or representatives of movements.

# INTERNATIONAL CONNECTIONS

**Observing the global media during the upsurge of global protest that began in 2011 and still continues, one cannot help but notice the profusion of similar slogans, banners and rallying cries.**

Globally voices seemed to be crying out for and against the same things: an end to corporate greed, misconduct and a lack of regulation; the curtailment of austerity in response to the global economic crisis; the creation of jobs; the implementation of “real” democracy that gave the power back to the people; the restriction of military power and the rejection of a global capitalist economic system that had clearly failed.

The global survey demonstrated that movements referenced each other for inspiration, with many a square around the world being called another “Tahrir Square” in honour of the Egyptian revolution.



*Sign from Paternoster Square in London, October 2011 (photo by Armine Ishkanian).*

It would be tempting to look at the diffusion of those slogans and sentiments and conclude that connections were being made between these different protests that created a global web of “movements”, linked to and affecting each other. However, our findings show that while many protests and encampments in varied locations across the world were protesting along similar lines, physical connections between activists at a movement or collective level were uncommon. The frustrations may have shared some degree of universality, but

the movements, despite their presence on the global stage through social media, were organized and propelled in a nationally-oriented manner, often in response to very specific government policies and social conditions. That being said, we cannot discount the impact that the visual representation of the protests and slogans had in inspiring other groups to come out onto the streets. A particularly pertinent and clear example of this is the way that the Arab Spring protests unfurled across the Middle East, with each subsequent uprising clearly motivated and stimulated by the previous.



*Banner in front of St Paul's Cathedral, London, November 2011 (photo by Armine Ishkanian).*

Voices, placards and banners crying “We are the 99%” seemed to spread across the world in the third quarter of 2011. The global survey revealed protesters using this rallying cry not only in cities across the United States, but also in London, Kuala Lumpur, Melbourne, Amsterdam, Helsinki, Tel Aviv, Tokyo, Seoul, Hong Kong, Athens, Madrid, Barcelona, Brussels, Dublin, Frankfurt, Istanbul and Rome, to mention but a few. The slogan manifested itself in various other forms such as “I am the 99%” and “The 99% include ...”, where there would be mention of various disenfranchised groups. In addition, a common trope across many cities where protests emerged in the latter half 2011, was the widespread use of the “Occupy” logo and brand.

Other slogans that seemed to resonate across the world were those calling for greater democratic

freedoms and an end to dictatorship and those demanding a move beyond merely procedural democracy, such as “Real Democracy Now” (“Democracia Real Ya!” in Spanish). Others highlighting the failure of the economic system at large and encouraging people to look beyond the current global economic crisis were also shared, with “It is not a crisis, it is the system” or “Capitalism is Crisis” being popular ones. These were particularly common amongst the protesters of the southern European nations, but also in London, which were undergoing a spate of severe austerity measures, especially deep cuts to public services and welfare, in response to the economic crisis.



*Banner “Capitalism = Crisis” from demonstration organised by Occupy London and anti-cuts groups in Canary Wharf, London 16 June 2013. (Photo by Irum S Ali.)*

As mentioned previously, the proliferation of slogans and shared concerns create an impression of an interconnected movement. However, the on-the-ground reality as revealed by both the survey and the in-depth interviews carried out show that while individual level connections between activists across movements have occurred and are desired, broader level links are mostly confined to Facebook interactions and shared tropes of protest. The localised socio-economic realities of each nation are the key propellers of the concerns that are highlighted by each protest movement.

Quite a few of the Cairo activists, whether from a cosmopolitan-liberal or a Marxist or an Islamist

background quite naturally think of themselves as being part of a global movement. An Arabic-speaking student explained that “in the beginning I have seen the Western protests as a luxury, compared with our situation in Egypt. They are protesting for some luxury demands. But after second thought I have reached the conclusion that they protested for a dysfunction of the system and this is the common ground of the Arab revolution and the Western protests” (Cairo, 21 May 2013).

In Athens, there was a stronger national orientation, whilst at the same time activists saw their predicament as being part of at least a European, if not a global situation. Interestingly, some respondents asked about the Arab Spring said “They are fighting against a different kind of dictatorship than we are fighting” (Athens, 8 April 2013) and “there they have another type of fascism”, making a distinction while resisting the simplification that the west is democratic and the rest is not.

One respondent from London, commenting on the similarities between the anti-austerity and pro-democracy movements said,

I think because I and a lot of my friends are 20-30 year olds, there does seem to be a generation thing. We are highly educated, feel highly passionate, but there is also a sense of despondency, a sense of betrayal, hopelessness – about the climate, about the war in Iraq and the complete failure on the part of the political leadership to in any way challenge the status quo and really make fundamental changes in people’s lives. So I think that is shared between the Arab Spring and the UK in the sense of we have to do it ourselves. I think the conditions there are far more severe, the day to day suffering and oppression and we don’t get shot at for protesting. But the generational feelings, there is definitely a cross over there (London, 9 May 2013).

This brings us back to where we started on the issue of generations and the shared concerns and feelings.



Mobilizations are occurring in response to national level policies and political development; however, as discussed above, there are individual and at times, group level, connections.

Groups in different countries also express their solidarity with each other. This became quite apparent during the Occupy Gezi protests in Istanbul in the summer of 2013. One Occupy London activist said,

I find it interesting with people commenting that Turkey isn't the same as Occupy [London]. What is fascinating is that we feel the same. The Turkish activists are writing to us and we are trying to sustain them and help them. So of course, everything is localized and what is happening is connected to the local struggles. But it's all concentrated in such a moment of time that there must be some connections and to me it's the practices in which it's happening. The fact that you have a camp and all the camps form in the same way. And you have a library, the school, the canteen; it's all the same (London, 12 June 2013).



*Protest in Moscow to support the Occupy Gezi demonstration in Istanbul, 1 June 2013. (ISTOCK)*

# SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

## **2011 was a peak year of civil unrest, protest and movements for democracy and against austerity across the globe.**

In 2011, alongside the global anti-austerity (eg, Occupy Wall Street, the Indignados in Spain, etc.) and pro-democracy movements of the Arab Spring, there was also a rise of civic activism across some former Soviet countries. In this report we have examined the commonalities and divergences of the protest movements which emerged in 2011-12, the generational aspect of the mobilizations and the relationship of movements with other actors including non-governmental organisations (NGOs), trade unions, and political parties.

### **Squares and beyond**

The experience of spending multiple days together in an encampment or square occupation was regarded by many activists as a special utopian time of discussion, mutual respect and solidarity between people with very different outlooks. Afterwards, that spirit of the square was often felt to have been dissipated or even betrayed. Yet it is important to note that, in all the contexts where we interviewed, respondents affirmed that participants in the square movements had not just returned home, but had turned to local activities, often against budgets, for public services or environmental initiatives.

### **Generational element**

There is a generational aspect to the protests in that young, middle class educated people are at the core of the protests and they play a very important part in organising, mobilizing and campaigning. The generational issue was often expressed as the generation that grew up and had its sensibilities shaped by a system of neoliberal governance which focuses on individual responsibility and the enterprising individual. Driven by anger, indignation, and shattered expectations young people are mobilising and taking their protests to the streets. They are seen or see themselves as freer and more individualistic, and less ideological in their approach to politics and protests. At the same time, there was also an element everywhere of middle-aged or elderly

“ordinary citizens” joining the protests, and taking an active but untraditional interest in politics.

### **Social media**

While many commentators have placed a major emphasis on social media, we found that while it played an important role as a mobilizing tool and a way to circumvent censorship or lack of interest by the mainstream media, at the same time, activists everywhere are keen to point out that social media does not cause social protest, and that it can only complement, not replace face-to-face meetings and that it may even have demobilizing or uncivil effects.

### **Demands and Aspirations: democracy, social justice and dignity**

At the more abstract level, there is a strong shared concern with democracy, and a widespread and strongly worded feeling that elections alone are a very insufficient form of democracy. Accountability of civil servants and politicians, and the rule of law were often mentioned as a necessary and endangered element of democracy. In Armenia and Russia, this was equated with the impunity of economic and political elites who flouted the law. Equally, the hold of corporate elites over the state, and the resulting inequality and lack of basic services, were identified as a threat to democracy. Finally, democracy was described by some as requiring constant active participation by citizens in decisions that affect their lives.

Social justice as a concept does not resonate everywhere, but there is a clear set of social justice demands being articulated in different contexts: first, that there should be less inequality; second, that the state should not collude in inequality but protect the underprivileged; and third when formulated more concretely, that it should provide access to basic social services.

Dignity is an emotive concept in Greece and the Arab world, but much less so in other contexts, although the underlying concern of not wanting to be or feel humiliated may be more universal. This comprises both a demand for freedom from harassment by civil servants, especially police, and a demand for a

basic socio-economic condition that allows one to live in dignity. Dignity is connected both in Athens and Cairo with a sense of (lost) national self-determination in the engagement with international organisations such as the EU or the IMF.

### **Relations with formal civil society**

Across all settings, there was agreement that NGOs had not been involved in the organisation of protests and camps, and there was much criticism of NGOs, who were seen as being too close to the state, market-oriented in their way of working, and in some contexts corrupt. At the same time, there was a recognition that support from NGOs, or at least from people working in NGOs, came with valuable skills and resources. In each of the five cities, people were interviewed who turned out to work for NGOs, but considered this as their day job, not necessarily as core to their activist identity. Official trade unions were even less relied upon; they were seen as bureaucratised and tamed, but both in Cairo and Moscow new independent trade unions were being formed, which were considered simultaneously closer to the workers and more part of the broader protest movements. Although there are some local differences, there has generally not been a clear link between the movements and (opposition) political parties: this is unsurprising since it was disaffection with the entire political system, not just with the government of the day that drove people into the street in the first place.

### **Transnational relations and identities**

The activists of 2011 and beyond are strongly focused on their local, usually national struggles. They are well aware of protests in other countries, and formulate both differences and underlying commonalities between their own movement and other mobilisations. Some have travelled, and many have transnational links, but these are more often at the level of personal ties rather than organisational links between movements.

### **Impact**

The problems and concerns that led protestors into the streets and squares in 2011-12 have not been

adequately addressed let alone resolved. The anger and indignation with the lack of democracy and social justice as well as the persistent corruption and inequality which fuelled the initial demonstrations in 2011 and 2012 remain.

The protests over the past three years have raised awareness and engendered public debate around a range of issues including inequality, corruption, tax justice, debt, as well as specific welfare policies adopted by governments.

As we have discussed in this report, people have become more active in politics, whether that is at the national level or in their local communities. As one respondent from Athens said,

I can say for sure that people have become more active, more involved in the political process, they have come off the couch; they believe much less what the mass media says. Some have become involved in local assemblies, some have joined Syriza, or Golden Dawn, some went to demonstrations when they never had done before (Athens, 9 April 2013).

Governments have at times ignored the demands of protestors, instead moving ahead with deep public spending cuts and further austerity measures that significantly shrink the welfare state. More worryingly, some governments have introduced political forms of repression and even police violence in order to suppress or curtail protests. At the same time it is clear that the movements we have described are far from ephemeral, leading us to expect more mobilisation and conflict in the coming years.

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# APPENDIX – CODING FIELDS FOR GLOBAL SURVEY

- 1** The specific dates of mobilization and the period of mobilization (ie, length of time in the square, etc.)
- 2** Peak numbers reached in each mobilization
- 3** Repertoires – was the mobilization a street demonstration, a camp, etc.
- 4** The demands and discourses emerging in the mobilizations.
- 5** Instances of self-conscious referral to other protests (eg, when the London Occupy protesters described their protest as Tahrir Square, etc.)
- 6** Information about the informal structures of the mobilizations – in other words, did they have committees; how was decision-making handled, etc.
- 7** Links to and relations that mobilizations had with formal organisations such as trade unions, professional NGOs, political parties, and especially with donor organisations, etc.
- 8** Use/non-use of violence by demonstrators and against demonstrators.
- 9** Conclusion – petering out; violence; police eviction; disbanding.
- 10** Activity after 1 January 2013

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