Undecidable decisions

An application of agonistic pluralism to an environmental
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Abstract

As natural resource management is inherently riddled with different opinions and ensuing conflicts, there is no consensus that doesn't necessarily exclude parts of society. At the same time, there is a need to manage natural resources in order to prevent their depletion by a few. According to Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, this undecidability renders every decision that is taken an act of power that favours one possibility over others. This study provides a framework to analyze the paradox of undecidability in a conflict case around the construction of a hydroelectric power plant around the river Isel in Austria and the conflicting designation of the river as a protected area. Sensemakings from in-depth interviews and a media analysis are used to analyse identity construction, hegemonic projects as well as discursive strategies of depoliticization and politicization. The conflict case also gives input to how participation processes in environmental conflicts could look like, if it took Mouffe's agonistic pluralism into account.

Keywords: environmental conflict, agonistic pluralism, democracy, agonism, antagonism, post-politics, politicization, depoliticization, natural resource management, participation

Abstract

Weil Umwelt- und Bioressourcenmanagement grundsätzlich von verschiedenen Meinungen und daraus resultierenden Konflikten geprägt ist, gibt es keinen Konsens, der nicht Teile der Gesellschaft ausschließt. Gleichzeitig müssen natürliche Ressourcen verwaltet werden, um ihre Nutzung durch einige wenige zu verhindern. Laut Chantal Mouffe und Ernesto Laclau macht diese Unentscheidbarkeit jede Entscheidung zu einem Machtakt, der eine Möglichkeit gegenüber anderen bevorzugt. Diese Arbeit stellt einen analytischen Rahmen vor, um das Paradox der Unentscheidbarkeit auf einen Konflikt um den Bau eines Wasserkraftwerks an der Isel in Österreich und um die konkurrierende Nominierung des Flusses als Naturschutzgebiet anzuwenden. Bedeutungskonstruktionen aus Interviews und eine Medienanalyse werden angewandt, um Identitätsbildung, hegemoniale Projekte sowie Diskursstrategien der Entpolitisierung und der Politisierung zu analysieren. Diese Analyse des Konflikts trägt zur Diskussion bei, wie Partizipationsprozesse in Umweltkonflikten ausschauen könnten, wenn sie Mouffes agonistischen Pluralismus mit berücksichtigen würden.

Keywords: Umweltkonflikt, agonistischer Pluralismus, Demokratie, Agonismus, Antagonismus, Post-Politik, Politisierung, Entpolitisierung, Umwelt- und Bioressourcenmanagement, politische Partizipation

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1 Introduction

In this introductory chapter I lay out the basic thoughts behind my research in three parts. First, I introduce the research problem I have identified and at the same time elaborate on previous approaches to the problem by the literature. The second part describes the research questions and aims I tackle with my thesis. I introduce and contextualize the theoretical framework I work with in the third part of this chapter.

1.1 Research problem

Natural resource management (NRM) needs decisions in the context of conflicting opinions of how to manage natural resources, often excluding different sides from the process. Authors such as Stiglitz (2007) or Demaria *et al.* (2013) emphasize that there is a need to manage our commons in order to prevent its exploitation and depletion by a few. However, when faced with conflicting views over the exploitation, protection or other usage of natural resources, decision-making processes often lack democracy. Decision-makers and other participants in conflicts often deny the legitimacy for opposing actors to be involved in the process. This exclusion can take place without giving any space for opposing sides to meet, but it also happens in conflict situations, in which actors try to facilitate participation (Vasstrom, 2014). The goal of participation is often to reach a consensus according to criteria such as scientific facts, rational deliberation or legal frameworks among a group of people who are perceived as 'stakeholders' (Hansen *et al.*, 2016). At the same time, the anticipation of this consensus often excludes types of knowledge, emotions and interests conflicting with the interpretations of science, law and rationality that are used as basis for the consensus (Kothari, 2001; Lawrence & Turnhout, 2010; Clausen *et al.*, 2010; Buijs & Lawrence, 2013; Ångman *et al.*, 2016). Sometimes the consensus to be decided on is already predefined and there is no real possibility for actors to change the outcome of the decision-making (Backlund & Mantysalo, 2010).

Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau deal with this problem in their theory, calling it the paradox of undecidability: Society is pluralist and inherently riddled with conflict over power, as there are always different aspirations and viewpoints. A final resolution of these differences is impossible and decision-making never ceases to exclude possibilities in the process (Mouffe, 2005; Laclau, 1996). Politics means to come to terms with the undecidability and to constantly find a balance between an avoidance of exclusion mechanisms and the need for decision-making. Mouffe gives her own answer on how to find this balance with her concept of agonistic pluralism (Mouffe, 2005; Tambakaki, 2014).

Mouffe's and Laclau's theory is useful in analyzing this problem, because they actually recognize its existence. Other democratic theories such as Habermas' instead claim that society is manageable through "legitimating procedures and communicative rationality" (Kapoor, 2002, p 472). Mouffe's postmodern theory of agonistic pluralim conflicts with these modern views, as she advocates for "more messy" politics, "characterized by ongoing contestation between plural social groups" (Kapoor, 2002, p 466). This might be one of the

reasons why there are hardly any consistent empirical applications of agonistic pluralism (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). I claim that recognizing the problem of undecidability, consciously reacting to the power imbalance of exclusion mechanisms and creating a different process according to what Mouffe suggests could lead us to a more constructive, more just and ultimately more democratic decision-making process.

Within NRM, there are some applications of Mouffe's and Laclau's theory, but they are quite limited in their inclusion of concepts from the theory. Most of them focus on the destructive aspects of conflicts: There is a broad body of literature that discusses how undecidability is a lot of times denied and instead replaced by depoliticization discourses (Goeminne, 2010; Swyngedouw, 2010; Pepermans & Maeseele, 2014; Berglez & Olausson, 2014; Maeseele *et al.*, 2017). Also the concept of antagonism between enemies has been applied to cases (Ozen, 2014). Hallgren (2016) looks at how agonistic pluralism can help us identify destructive and constructive speech elements in communication around NRM conflicts. Nobody has yet holistically applied a wide range of concepts from their theoretical work to an empirical NRM context. Consequently, the NRM literature does not yet sufficiently discuss how politics can deal with communication around undecidability in a natural resource management context.

1.2   Research aims and research questions

The overall aim of my research is to provide a framework of how to analyse environmental conflicts using Mouffe's and Laclau's theoretical framework through the answers to these four questions. I lay out a complex picture of the communication processes involved in a specific environmental conflict case. As a second outcome, I give directions on how we can learn from these communication processes in relation to democracy in the same specific conflict. With this, I want to give inspiration to a more constructive, just and reflexive approach to democracy within NRM. My research is explicitly not directed towards condemning/advocating for what is actually debated within the conflict case that I look at (such as the construction of a hydroelectric power plant).

In order to fulfill my aims, I formulated four research questions. My first research question focuses on translating the theory onto the way actors in the case study make sense of the conflict they are involved in. I look at what they perceive as given when talking about the conflict and how these sensemaking processes overlap or differ among different actors. This research question not only gives me a base for the other research questions that I have, but I also identify with which theoretical concepts Mouffe and Laclau (2014) as well as Mouffe (2005, 2007, 2013) these articulations correlate.

RQ1   How do the involved actors make sense of the conflict they are involved in?

My second research question also relates to sensemaking of actors involved in the conflict. I identify *we* and *them* constructions made by the actors directly involved in the conflict. I analyse these constructions based on Laclau's and Mouffe's (2014) theory about identification with collective identities and discuss how these identities are formed in antagonistic relation to each other.

RQ2   What (possibly antagonistic) collective identities do the involved actors co-construct around this conflict?

In my third research question I analyse the different discourses actors reinforce concerning the apparent need for a decision as well as if and how they deal with the inherent exclusion of decision-making.

RQ3   What discourses do the actors involved in the conflict reinforce and appropriate as a reaction to the undecidability of political decision-making?

With my fourth and final research question, I discuss a possible solution to the paradox of undecidability. I suggest ideas how Mouffe's agonistic pluralism can be adapted to natural resource management, exemplied with the conflict case according to the answers to the other research questions.

RQ4   How could decision-making processes in natural resource management (NRM) conflicts based on Mouffe's (2005, 2013) agonistic pluralism look like, exemplified with the conflict case?

1.3   Theoretical context

This chapter is devoted to introducing the theoretical context that my research problem is based in. I elaborate on specific aspects of the theory throughout the whole thesis, which is why here I refrain from getting into too much detail.

1.3.1   The constitution of the political

Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau are considered post-structuralists and post-marxists in their approach to political philosophy (Tambakaki, 2014). Based on Carl Schmitt and Antonio Gramsci, they claim that antagonism is an inherent aspect of society, as it is impossible to create a 'unity of the people' (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014). They see antagonistic confrontations as the basis of what they call the 'political'. Societies are ridden with conflicts and confrontations over the universal good and over power. Mouffe (2005) states that conflicts are a sign that a democracy is alive and pluralistic. She calls this approach a 'dissociative' approach of defining what the political as, as it emphasizes the conflictual aspects of society (Miessen & Mouffe, 2010).

   Mouffe denounces 'associative' approaches to the political such as the one by Hannah Arendt that emphasize that people can "act in concert" (Miessen & Mouffe, 2010, p 124). She claims that a consensus cannot be reached through acting in concert. Objectivity has to be established through acts of powers. As any objectivity is socially constructed, there is no ultimate foundation for what is true or what should be the case. Mouffe states in Errejón & Mouffe (2016) that any order is permeated by a certain undecidability and contingency. This is why every political consensus is a hegemonic project that has succeeded in its attempt of domination over other hegemonic projects and it therefore excludes other possibilities.

   As post-structuralists, Laclau and Mouffe deconstruct binary oppositions such as the one of the constitution of a *we* against a *them*. To articulate a we against a them in a conflict means to articulate the struggle against subordination under another hegemonic project. The construction of a collective identity is only possible in relation to another collective identity that is perceived as outside. However, this means that the 'them' is constitutive of the 'we'. As a result, in political conflicts, power relations are not external processes taking place between preconstituted identities, but the emergence of identities is inherently interlinked with power (Mouffe, 2005).

1.3.2   Decisions and undecidability

Recognizing the legitimacy of citizens to participate in decision-making processes means to recognize the inherent undecidability of political decision-making (Mouffe 2005). Political decisions create order in a pluralist context and turn the undecidable terrain of the political into hegemonic projects that compete with each other in a battle to dominate over other hegemonic projects (Mouffe, 2005). Since order is based on the exclusion of other

possibilities, a non-exclusive consensus is a "conceptual impossibility" (Mouffe 2005, p 33). This is why there cannot be a final resolution of conflicts (Mouffe 2005). There is a need for decision-making in politics in order to manage a society, but political leadership means to make decisions in undecidable terrain. Mouffe calls this 'the democratic paradox'. She recognizes that we will "for ever be confronted" with this paradox, "for which there can never be a final solution" (Mouffe, 2005, p 139).

Laclau (1996) claims that decisions are self-grounding and are not determined by an objective structure outside the subject. The subject takes the decision itself, even if the decision is dependent on the context and thus the structure, in which it takes place in. He writes: "To take a decision is like impersonating God. It is like asserting that one does not have the means of being God, and one has, however, to proceed as if one were Him. The madness of the decision is this blind spot in the structure, in which something totally heterogeneous with it—and, as a result, totally inadequate—has, however, to supplement it" (Laclau, 1996, p 57). This means there is no rational ground for taking decisions; decisions are always political and thus striving to fulfill a hegemonic project.

Laclau (1996) and Mouffe (2005) refer to Derrida, when explaining their concept of undecidability. However, Norval (2004) makes clear that their accounts of undecidability differ from Derrida's own. Derrida would especially contradict the notion that the subject takes the decision. He would emphasize more the structural determination of decision-making. Due to the structure, "alternative possibilities are foreclosed [to the subject] and, as a consequence, are not visible as alternatives" (Norval, 2004, p 148). Norval (2004) explains that according to Derrida, a decision can only be called a decision after it has already been made, because only then other possibilities could arise as a choice to the subject. In the moment of the decision-making, the subject is entrenched in undecidability. "So the decision first of all has to go through a terrible process of undecidability, otherwise it would not be a decision" (Derrida, 1973, p 66).

1.3.3 Politics, democracy and agonistic pluralism

The political is different from politics. According to Mouffe (2005), politics are the practices, discourses and institutions that want to create an order and to manage society in a context of conflict and diversity. Politics are always influenced by the antagonistic dimension of the political.

Mouffe proposes her own concept for renewed democratic politics. Mouffe (2013) advocates for what she calls agonistic pluralism. In this concept, antagonism is not eradicated, since conflicts, domination and violence are inherent for a pluralistic society. However, Mouffe (2005) sees the need of controlling and limiting this notion of antagonism in society by institutionalizing it. Democratic institutions need to give participants in a conflict a *common symbolic space* to fight over power. Mouffe (2005, p 102) acknowledges that adversaries in a conflict can cease to disagree and compromises are 'part and parcel of politics', but such compromises are usually 'temporary respites in an ongoing confrontation'. She calls this the *conflictual consensus*. As the consensus excludes some possibilities by creating a hegemony, it fosters possible resistance and counterhegemonic projects.

Mouffe puts her concept in opposition to other concepts of democracy such as deliberative democracy or participatory democracy models. Some theorists – such as Benhabib (1992) or Habermas (1983) –, like Mouffe, recognize the imperfection of the ideal of a complete consensus (Kapoor, 2002), but do give solutions such as rational deliberation or inclusive public deliberation (Lidskog & Elander, 2007). Mouffe dismisses rational deliberation, using her argument that any consensus reached through deliberation again reinforces authoritarian mechanisms of exclusion of other possibilities (Kapoor, 2002).

2 Research design

2.1 Choosing a case

I want to conduct a case study in order to go deep into a specific context. I was looking for a case, in which I could observe the dilemma of undecidability. Because my background and family connections to the area gave me easy access to conflicts in the region, I focused my search on an Austrian context and consulted both media reports and environmental NGOs for more information.

   In the end I chose the conflict around the river Isel. Isel is the biggest river of East Tyrol (Osttirol), a region within the federal state of Tyrol and one of its nine administrative districts (as District of Lienz). The conflict stood out, because media articles such as Nindler (2014a), Pirkner (2014a), *„Wir wollen kein Naturreservat werden"* (2014) and Oblasser (2016) strongly suggested notions of antagonism between concurring collective identities around the construction of hydroelectric power plants as well as around the concurring establishment of a Natura 2000 area at the river and its tributaries. What especially caught my eye, were the reports Pirkner (2014a); Pirkner (2014b) and Funder (2014b) about the escalation of attempts to bring conflict parties together at round tables. I assumed that I could observe several concepts from Mouffe's and Laclau's theories in this conflict, allowing me to create the framework for environmental conflicts that I aimed for.

2.2 Conducting interviews

My main method for gathering data was to conduct interviews with actors involved in the conflict. I conducted seven in-depth one-to-one interviews in January 2017. The interviews lasted between half an hour and an hour each. All of them were conducted in the local German dialect; the transcription was done in Standard German. The interviewees were politicians, administrators as well as people engaged in civil initiatives and environmental NGOs:

1. Anna Maria Kerber from the local environmental women's group *Iselfrauen*, 11th January 2017 in her home in Oberlienz

2. Wolfgang Retter from the local environmental NGO *Netzwerk Wasser Osttirol*, 11th January 2017 in his home in Lienz

3. Olga Reisner, head of the district administration in the district of Lienz, 11th January 2017 in her office in Lienz

4. Anton Steiner, mayor of Prägraten, 11th January 2017 in his office in Prägraten

5. Dietmar Ruggenthaler, mayor of Virgen, 12th January 2017 in his office in Virgen

6. Ingrid Felipe, vice-head of government of Tyrol and head of the environmental department, 13th January 2017 in her office in Innsbruck; present during the interview was also her press secretary Paul Aigner

7. Gebhard Tschavoll, campaign leader for Alpine rivers at WWF Austria, 13th January 2017 in his office in Innsbruck

Whom I interviewed and whom not, limits my analysis. I chose my interview partners according to research within media beforehand. I wanted to interview people from different sides of the conflict, who, according to the media articles I had read, were in one way or another engaged in the conflict through their profession or their political engagement. I consciously tried to have interview partners from different sides of the conflict. Interviewees suggested other actors, e.g. staff from the communication agency VICO, which worked for the municipalities, or members of the local civil initiative against the construction of the hydroelectric power plant. Due to financial and time constraints, it was not possible for me to arrange interviews with them.

I decided not to foreclose the names of my interviewees, as they are or were all publicly involved in the conflict. A lot of things they said in my interviews were congruent with what they had said in public on their websites, in media or in public meetings. However, the transcripts of my interviews are not publically available, as they contain information that I myself do not put in context and they thereby exceed my responsibility. I consciously avoid reproducing accusations and judgment in order not to stir the conflict with my thesis. I often paraphrase what my interviewees said rather than giving direct quotes because of this. My interest in the case is analytical, not investigative.

I tried my best not to force concepts and definitions onto the interviewees both before and during the interview situations, because this might have changed the way they make sense of the situation. I consciously refrained from calling the case a *conflict* in my e-mail correspondences and in the introduction of my purpose of study at the beginning of the interviews. I instead spoke of the case as a *situation* ('Situation') or, at most, a *debate* ('Auseinandersetzung').

The interviews were semi-structured. Based on Creswell (2014) and Alvesson (2011), I collected themes that I wanted to ask interviewees beforehand. I came up with concrete questions and readapted them during the interviews. I let my interview partners lead me to themes that they themselves found important that I didn't cover or emphasize enough. My opening question to all the interviewees was to describe the situation in their own words.

I recorded all interviews but the one with Olga Reisner. Due to regulations in the district administration she was not allowed to give me permission to record. I used my fast writing skills and did my best to literally write most of what she was saying. I avoid using literal quotes from the interview with her due to the missing recording.

2.3   Triangulation with media analysis

In order to increase validity, I triangulated the interview data with a media analysis. The media analysis was not at the center of my research, but I could add negative and discrepant information to what was said in the interviews, analyzing if sensemakings overlapped between what was said in the interviews and newspaper articles. I found this important, as the conflict was not available in the beginning of 2017 as it was at its height in 2013 and 2014.

I gathered articles from three different newspapers, all of which have a local and/or regional focus: *Kleine Zeitung*, *Tiroler Tageszeitung* and *Dolomitenstadt*. I gathered and analysed 72 articles that were published between 2012 and 2017. The selection of newspapers was based on the interviews. I asked all participants about the role of media in the conflict and which media outlets they found relevant. I chose these newspapers over several others that were mentioned in interviews, as I saw the need to limit the amount of newspapers due to time constraints and these three seemed to cover different approaches to

the conflict. Most interviewees acknowledged that media, especially local and regional newspapers, had been important in the conflict. Steiner and Tschavoll were critical of the way media contributed to the conflict's escalation. Tschavoll mentioned that media were mostly reporting, when the conflict was heated: "That's just what works and gets attention".

I am aware that there is an inherent bias in every media report on political conflicts. I would like to lay out the biases that interviewees have identified:

1. **Kleine Zeitung** is seen as one of the most important media in the region. Steiner said that the newspaper was "rather neutral up to on our side", i.e. the side of the collective identity that was for the construction of the power plant and against the Natura 2000 protection. Retter and Kerber criticized that the newspaper became, first carefully, then heavily, biased in favour of the construction of the power plant, once Ruggenthaler's sister became editor-in-chief. Interviewees mentioned that the previous editor-in-chief had been "rather critical" (Kerber) and heavily biased against the construction of the power plant (Ruggenthaler) respectively.

2. **Tiroler Tageszeitung** is a regional newspaper. It is the most wide read newspaper in North Tyrol and also common in East Tyrol (*MA 2016. Presse*, 2017). Retter found that the newspaper reported 'correctly' on 'both points of view'. Steiner and Ruggenthaler were divided; they said that some journalists with the newspaper were being 'very well open' and some having 'huge problems' with 'the whole topic' (Ruggenthaler). Steiner highlighted that the newspaper had a close relation to the regional government, especially to politicians from the conservative party (ÖVP).

3. **Dolomitenstadt** is an online magazine focused on East Tyrol. Kerber acknowledged that *Dolomitenstadt* was "rather on our side" and "a bit critical". Retter considered the magazine 'open-minded': "He [the editor-in-chief] knows what we still have and is not too modest about that". Steiner called the magazine 'difficult', as it was critical of the magazine's bias against hydroelectric power plant.

2.4 Meta-theory and operationalization

My research is constructivist. I look at different context-specific layers of meanings that the participants of the conflict co-constructed by themselves as well as by interacting with other actors and society as a whole (Creswell, 2014). Since Laclau and Mouffe don't give any indications for empirically observing meanings (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002), in order to analyse this in interview situations, a metatheory is needed. I use symbolic interactionism for this. According to Blumer (1986) and Charon (2007), people make sense of a situation by defining it in the context of the given and past social interaction they had and interaction with their self in the present situation and past situations. This definition of a situation, or sensemaking, is the basis of the actions that people take. These actions and the understandings behind them co-construct the conflict.

As the analysis is based on specific interview situations, it cannot be generalised out of it. Sensemakings in the interview could be part of a narrative that the interview partner wants to convey in the interview situation (Alvesson 2011). They might for example have wanted to seem like constructive communicators, as they knew that my research is about communication. However, even if people don't say the 'truth', the fact that they say something in the specific context of the interview is analysable (Alvesson 2011). I try to study my interview partners' sensemakings in the specific interview situations, not their attitudes. I tried to tackle this limitation both with the triangulation and negative information from other interview partners.

While symbolic interactionism gave me a meta-theoretical way to understand the interviews, the analysis itself was based on a comparison with Mouffe's and Laclau's

theoretical work. Using Laclau & Mouffe (2014), I claim that sensemaking as a way to construct social objectivity takes places through discourse. Laclau & Mouffe (2014) explain that a discourse is a system of meanings that is constituted by the exclusion of other meanings. Some discourses dominate over others. In their hegemony, these systems of meanings constitute what we perceive as social objectivitiy. Mouffe (2013) explains that the common world has to be articulated, not composed. Words only have a meaning, when they are placed in relation to other words through the practice of articulation. I try to identify discourses in my interviewees' sensemakings.

In my operationalization of Laclau and Mouffe, I developed a list of important concepts from their theory with definitions and, if applicable, empirical ways to observe them in speech situations. The concepts I initially worked with were hegemony, antagonism, politics, identity, identification, adversary, undecidability, conflictual consensus, agonism, rationalization and affects.

2.5   Data analysis

I coded both the interviews and the document and media analysis according to these initial concepts. For most themes I could identify sub-themes and interrelations between these. During the coding process I identified more and more other themes that were apparent in the sensemakings of the conflict case. The further I came with the analysis process, the more detailed the themes became. During the writing process, I abductively came back to the theory and brought the themes together into a framework according to Mouffe and Laclau.

I translated all original quotes from German into English.

3 Making sense of the conflict

In this chapter, I describe how some actors involved in the debate around the river Isel made sense of the conflict in the interview situations. I describe how the sensemakings differed and overlapped between different actors and I analyse them with concepts from Mouffe's and Laclau's theoretical framework. The chapter answers my first two research questions *How do the involved actors make sense of the conflict they are involved in?* and *What (possibly antagonistic) collective identities do the involved actors co-construct around this conflict?*. I start off with the answer to the latter.

3.1   Collective identities

According to Laclau & Mouffe (2014), identities are constructed as the binary difference to what is outside them, for example other identities. However, the outside is always present in the inside "as its always real possibility" (Mouffe, 2005, p 21). They call this deconstructive concept the *constitutive outside*. This means that the identity of opponents could not exist, if it wasn't for their opposition to a constructed identity of proponents. In politics, collective identities are the main space of confrontations over power (Mouffe, 2005). A collective identity constitutes a *we* against a *they* in a fight over the articulation of a hegemonic project, over what it perceives as the *common good*.

   While the strongest collective identities that interviewees made sense of were institutional identities, I focus on patterns of antagonistic identities that were built around the hegemonic projects that were at stake in the conflict case:

- Participants of the conflict co-constructed binary identities of *opponents* and *proponents*.
- Participants of the conflict co-constructed collective identities around space.
- Participants of the conflict thought that gender played a role.
- Participants of the conflict placed the collective identities in a historical context.

3.1.1   Opponents and proponents

The most prominent collective identities were binary identities of opposition and proposition. They were co-constructed in antagonistic relation to each other around what was perceived as the common good. *Group 1*: Those advocating for the construction of the power plant and/or against the protection of the Isel river and its subsidiaries under Natura 2000; and *Group 2*: Those advocating against the construction of the power plant and/or for the protection of the Isel river and its subsidiaries under Natura 2000.

   I first recount how interviewees constructed who was belonging to which side. Then I elaborate some cases that subverted the binary construction by shifting sides or by being conflicted in their alignment with one of the sides.

In my thesis, I don't talk about *proponents* or *opponents*, as, according to the sensemakings of my interviewees and the selected media, they could be used for any of the two sides. Instead, I refer to Group 1 and Group 2.

3.1.1.1 Who was who?

I start off by analysing who was seen as part of Group 1, those for the power plant and/or against Natura 2000 protection. All interviewees counted the mayors of Virgen (Ruggenthaler) and Prägraten (Steiner) as part of this group, both of whom were interviewed as part of this research. Tschavoll called this side of the conflict 'the mayors', emphasizing the key role of mayors of municipalities involved. Several interviewees from both groups and media also mentioned the mayor of Matrei as well as the construction company INFRA and the communication agency SVWB/VICO, both of which worked for the municipalities of Virgen and Prägraten. Also large parts of the inhabitants of Virgen and Prägraten were framed as being part of this group, especially by Ruggenthaler and Steiner, but also Tschavoll. Steiner and Ruggenthaler emphasized the results of a referendum that had been held about the conflict issue within their municipalities and had shown overwhelming support for this side. A local civil initiative was founded for the construction of the power plant. Ruggenthaler said their motivation was to support the municipalities in their struggle.

To Group 2, those against the power plant and/or for Natura 2000 protection, most interviewees identified the environmental NGOs and civil initiatives that were involved in the conflict (WWF, Umweltdachverband, Alpenverein, Iselfrauen, Bürgerinitiative gegen das Kraftwerk Virgental, Netzwerk Wasser Osttirol). Three interviewees – Tschavoll, Retter and Kerber – identified with at least one of these groups. Felipe and Steiner emphasized the value of environmental protection that they perceived as the unification among these groups. Also Felipe, who was interviewed, was framed by all other interviewees and even more so by the media article Pirkner (2014a) as being part of Group 2. Felipe distanced herself from the environmental NGOs and intiatives. She mentioned that they were rightfully demanding a lot from her, but went too far by asking her to resign from her political positions at one point during the conflict. Still, Felipe underscored: "They want the same as I do". Both Steiner and Ruggenthaler included the Green Party – and with it, Felipe, who belongs to the the Green Party – in this group. They emphasized that the party financially supported the civil initiatives of this side. Both also implied that left-wing politics in general were part of this group, especially when talking about the alignment of journalists with this group:

> "But there are studies through which one knows nowadays that in the German-speaking area around 70% of all editors are situated quite left-wing and so you know, in which direction they are going to lean when writing. And […] hydroelectric power plants are a taboo for them. That is a topic that is a taboo story from the beginning, just like wind power." (Ruggenthaler)

Retter saw the Green Party as a 'very approachable partner'. He mentioned that also some politicians from the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) were supporting their cause.

Lastly, Olga Reisner framed herself and the institution of the district administration as a neutral instance. She was surprised that I approached her about being interviewed, as she didn't see herself as part of the conflict.

3.1.1.2 Shifting identities

The collective identities of Group 1 or Group 2 were not stable throughout the process of the conflict. Here I describe shifts in identities interviewees made sense of. Some of these shifts were from one Group to another, which according to Mouffe (2005, p 102) means that these actors were going through "a radical change in political identity".

Several interview partners made sense of the regional government of Tyrol shifting from from Group 1 to 2. The constitution of a new coalition coincided with the demand from the European Commission to nominate the Isel as a Natura 2000 area. The Green Party came into the government and Felipe became head of the environmental department in Tyrol. Both Kerber and Ruggenthaler made sense of how leading politicians from the government had been involved in the conception of the power plant idea and had been positive about its construction before. Ruggenthaler described: "As soon as the government changed, i.e. from Black-Red [= coalition between the People's Party and the Social Democrats] to Black-Green [= coalition between the People's Party and the Green Party], it was like a switch was flipped." Both Steiner and Ruggenthaler then saw the regional government as the main opponent to their cause. Some media reports indicate that the shift had not gone as smoothly, as my interviewees framed it: Nindler (2014b) and Nindler (2014c) claim that there were tensions about the Isel between the two political parties involved in the new government.

Some interviewees discussed the shift in involvement of some municipalities in the conflict. Several municipalities (Virgen, Prägraten, Matrei, Kals and Hopfgarten among others) had formed a project group for the construction of hydroelectric power plants. The municipalities of Kals and Hopfgarten eventually left the group. Ruggenthaler and Steiner framed their exit from the collective identity as a political deal with the regional government: "[…] they have divided us in a horrible way" (Steiner). Steiner claimed the former mayor of Kals not only stopped being a proponent of Group 1, but actively opposed it together with the regional government. Tschavoll commented that the mayor of Kals wanted to protect his own construction plans of a power plant by leaving Group 1: "The mayor of Kals then stayed out of this polemic discussion, for sure stood out positively, but in the background always said, 'the project that we want, we want to get that'".

Kerber and Retter noticed a shift in the newspaper Kleine Zeitung, once the editor-in-chief had changed. According to them, while the newspaper had been "open-minded" (Retter), "pretty okay" or "rather critical" (Kerber) before, afterwards the newspaper was taking more and more the sides of Group 1. This was specially apparent, once Natura 2000 had come into the picture, according to Kerber. They suggested that this shift was connected to the new editor-in-chief being Ruggenthaler's sister.

Steiner and Ruggenthaler emphasized the subversion of Group 2 on several occasions. Steiner explained that for example some people in their project development group were affiliated with the Green Party and could translate "the mindset of the Greens" for them. Both Ruggenthaler and Steiner mentioned that a professor from an environmental agency in Klagenfurt, who did an assessment for their cause, was affiliated with a university institute that is connected to WWF. Steiner also criticized that Group 2's interest in the region disappeared, when the apparent resolution was found: "With the Natura 2000 designation they apparently reached their goal and ever since you don't hear anything from them anymore. They already have strategically completely different focus points at the moment."

Several interview partners made sense of identity shifts from Group 1 to Group 2, once the area had been nominated for the Natura 2000 program and the construction of the power plant became more unlikely. Kerber for instance talked about a situation where a documentary film about the Isel river was screened and people from Group 1 stood in the spotlight: "In the front were in the end those who hadn't done anything and a lot against [the Isel]. They let themselves be pictured, for the Isel. I think that's how it will be from now on." Ruggenthaler countered this image: "But you also have to look at the story neutrally and not exaggerate as if we had conciliated with Natura 2000. That won't really happen."

3.1.2   Spatialization of collective identities

A recurrent pattern in the conflict case was the projection of collective identities onto space. A *we* was constructed in opposition to a *they* from a place-based angle in the context of

community, norms, behaviour and speech (Gray, 2003). I describe two lines of conflict: First, the inhabitants of municipalities in Virgental (Virgen and Prägraten, to a lesser extent also Matrei) as a collective identity constituting and constituted by inhabitants of other municipalities in East Tyrol (such as Lienz). Secondly, the people from East Tyrol as a collective identity constituting and constituted by people from North Tyrol.

3.1.2.1   Within East Tyrol: Just two villages or everyone?

A majority of interviewees talked about a collective identity of *inhabitants from the villages of Virgen or Prägraten* (to a lesser extent also of Matrei) in relation to *inhabitants from other parts of East Tyrol*.

For some, antagonism was constructed more clearly along the lines of this conflict than along the lines of the opponents vs. proponents. The collective identity of inhabitants from the villages of Virgen or Prägraten was seen as inclusive for both Steiner and Ruggenthaler. They made clear that legitimacy to participate in the debate for them didn't derive from the support of their plans, but instead from living in their villages. People from Group 2 from their villages were seen as legitimate participants in the debate. Ruggenthaler claimed that both opponents and proponents from within their village participated in their participation processes (Iselrat, Iselforum). He emphasized that both sides got the same information and both sides could develop their arguments at these forums.

The relational identity of inhabitants from other parts of East Tyrol on the other hand was excluded from the conflict by Steiner and Ruggenthaler, which was criticized by Kerber. Steiner and Ruggenthaler emphasized the antagonistic element of the collective identity of inhabitants from their villages in relation to outside interventions: They framed the contributions of opponents from outside their villages as ridiculous, not understanding the mechanisms and effects of a hydroelectric power plant. Steiner explained that members of the Iselfrauen group from Prägraten and Virgen were 'pretty interesting and good', while members of the group from outside the villages were perceived as intruding into the villages' internal agenda with their 'militant' mission. Kerber opposed this viewpoint, claiming legitimacy in the decision-making process, since construction on one part of the river would have affected the river Isel as a public water commons as a whole and the river was relevant for the whole region of East Tyrol: "Well, just all of us brought that into the conversation a lot, that the people in the Virgental are not legitimized to construct a power plant up there and thereby to influence the main river of East Tyrol so-to-say."

Several interviewees claimed that it was important to have people from within the two villages being active in the debate. Steiner mentioned that opponents to the construction plans from outside their villages would never have the acceptance or credibility as opponents from within their communities. Kerber, Retter and Tschavoll agreed that it was important to have people locally opposing the plans and not only opponents from outside the villages. However, they added that it was also beneficial and relevant to have people from outside as support to locals in the debate. Retter explained that he, living in Lienz and having a broader perspective of the issue, could give local opponents important contacts and support.

3.1.2.2   East Tyrol and North Tyrol

Another collective identity in antagonism described by most interview partners was *people from East Tyrol* in relation to *people from North Tyrol*. East Tyrol and North Tyrol are the two constituting parts of the federal state of Tyrol. East Tyrol is geographically not connected to any of the other eight administrative districts of the federal state, all of which are situated in North Tyrol.

This spatialized identity was stronger framed as related to the opponent vs. proponent collective identities than the previous one. Agents within Group 1 (such as the mayors) framed several agents within Group 2 (such as WWF, the Green Party or the regional government) as people from North Tyrol and themselves as people from East Tyrol and the

other way around. Ruggenthaler and Steiner emphasized that the regional government reacted very differently to similar areas of importance for environmental protection, depending on whether they were situated in East Tyrol (like their villages) or in North Tyrol. Both Ruggenthaler and Steiner as well as other Group 1 representatives in selected media like Heubacher (2015), Nindler (2015d) and Ruggenthaler (2015b) referred a few times to the municipality of Ischgl in North Tyrol. The municipality had area to be protected, but was not designated as a Natura 2000 area. They argued that the area in their villages was designated a Natura 2000 area by the regional government to compensate for not sufficiently protecting areas in North Tyrol due to its extensive tourism industry: "That is exactly the unfair part about it, that the Virgental has to pay for approvals by [the] Green [party] for different projects in the Oberland part of North Tyrol [remark: such as the one in Ischgl]" (Ruggenthaler). Steiner claimed that the decision to protect the Isel would bring votes in Innsbruck and with 'Green clientele', thus having a 'politically stabilising' effect. Both Ruggenthaler and Steiner situated the Green Party through their sensemaking as an outside entity intervening, making decisions over their land from far-off, more urban and more economically well off North Tyrol. Steiner put it this way: "They don't care, whether we are here or not."

Also agents that associated themselves with Group 2 framed the regional government as an outside entity from North Tyrol in antagonism to East Tyrol. Felipe herself reinforced this image: "I was, I don't know, in no district more often than in the district of East Tyrol and I have justified everything, both in media and in personal conversations, whatever came my way. […] Two members of the regional parliament […] and the president of the federal state were in there about this topic and talked to the mayors". Paul Aigner, Felipe's press secretary, mentioned the antagonism, when explaining why they didn't organise events in Prägraten or Virgen: "But to come into the village from Innsbruck together with experts, into the village hall [… would have just been a] good opportunity for fighting". Retter mentioned the development funding program of the regional government for the Isel region as an example of another intervention from outside, reinforcing the image of antagonism between North Tyrol and East Tyrol.

The antagonism between East Tyrol and North Tyrol was also applied, when people were originally from North Tyrol and had already been living in East Tyrol for quite a long time (like both Retter and Kerber). In the interviews, both Kerber and Retter mentioned that they are originally from North Tyrol. Steiner indirectly referred to Kerber, describing her as "an academic from the Inn valley who had moved here". He described that this is one of the reasons why Kerber would never have the same credibility as local people from Group 2.

Retter flipped the argument around and criticised that also in Group 1, there were interventions from people from North Tyrol. He emphasized that both the politicians and the construction company who proposed the construction of a bigger power plant in the first place were from North Tyrol. Retter argued that it is part of the mentality of people in East Tyrol to be prone to interventions from outside: "Not being proactive on your own, not starting something up on your own. Then of course they are happy [about interventions from outside], when they don't have to do much on their own".

Representatives from Group 2 several times emphasized that NGOs such as WWF and Umweltdachverband, which came from outside to East Tyrol, were an important addition to local initiatives from Group 2. They had professional and financial capacities that supported the collective identities' hegemonic projects.

3.1.3 Gender

Several interviewees mentioned that the lines of conflict tended to run along a division of gender. Especially Kerber emphasized this part. The collective identity as women who fight for the protection of the Isel river was a major factor in the creation of the Iselfrauen initiative that Kerber was one of the founders of: "I would have never done something like that, hadn't other women participated." Several people identified with Group 2 (Felipe,

Kerber, Retter) emphasized that the other side was dominated by male politicians. Referring to female Green politicians whom he saw as part of Group 2, Steiner emphasized their gender as well.

3.1.4   Historical context

Almost all interviewees put the collective identities they made sense of in relation to earlier conflicts.

Several interviewees compared the case to the conflict around the constitution of the closeby National Park Hohe Tauern in the 1980s and early 1990s. Reisner said that "even the sentences were the same" back then. Felipe explained that that conflict had also revolved around Natura 2000 and that there were "scars from the past" that effected this case. Steiner mentioned that the public participation in his village had been similar, but had also then been overruled: The National Park was constituted anyway.

Some put the conflict in the context of debates around hydropower that had been going on since the 1960s (Retter) and 1980s (Tschavoll). Retter also saw the National Park conflict related to hydropower The National Park would still have a bad standing with some, "because the myth persists that the National Park back then would have prevented the big power plant." Retter said the conflict described here was "a smaller problem in comparison to earlier, much bigger ones". Retter hinted at the existence of a spatialized antagonism between East Tyrol and North Tyrol in the historical context of hydropower conflicts: "Wallnöfer [former head of government in Tyrol] apparently said over there that East Tyrol is a special situation. There is a much more intense resistance [against hydropower]."

3.2   Hegemonic projects

In this chapter, I elaborate on how the interviewees made sense of what they disagreed on. These issues are the *common good* that the participants in the conflict wanted to reach (Errejón & Mouffe, 2016). As they perceived these to be contradicting, they fought against each others' claims of what the common good is, hoping that their project would eventually dominate over others and become hegemonic. These fights are what constituted the antagonistic collective identities I descibed (Mouffe 2005).

Rather than listing all hegemonic projects that I could identify, I picked out those that I perceived to be the strongest. In the first two sections, I introduce ideas of progress and development for the affected municipalities that were partly constructed in opposition to each other: a hydroelectric power plant and nature tourism. I then introduce how the interviewees made sense of the public participation process, followed by the sensemakings around the need for environmental protection. Finally, I introduce how Natura 2000 entered the discourse of the conflict and how this EU program for environmental protection was framed by the interviewees, often in contradiction to other hegemonic projects.

3.2.1   Hydroelectric power as a chance

Hydroelectric power was constructed as a chance for economic development of the involved municipalities and thus as a common good. This was perceived to be the hegemonic project of Group 1. Ruggenthaler said that one of the main drivers behind the thought of building a power plant was that his municipality saw in it a chance to become more financially independent: "And for us it would really have been a thing to have a base in order to secure our existence also with future income." He explained that social expenses in the municipality were increasing constantly and there would be the need for an additional income. Ruggenthaler saw an injustice between the regional government and the municipalities. He argued that the regional government was wealthy, but municipalities like his were "starving and don't know how to [react]". He suggested that this was done on

purpose, so that municipalities would not gain too much power in relation to a centralized regional government. To a limited extent, Kerber, Tschavoll and Retter understood the situation and the need to work against the financial misery, but took different conclusions (see next chapter Nature as a chance): "No, I do understand, if planners come and promise some mayor everything under the sun" (Retter). Tschavoll understood that inhabitants of the municipalities saw the power plant also as a chance to get jobs.

Kerber, Retter and Tschavoll criticised that the plans to construct the hydroelectric power plant were not financially viable. Kerber said that there was not thorough examination of the economic viability of the construction plans. Retter said that wind power plants would be much more economically viable than a power plant on an Alpine river. Tschavoll denied that a lot of long-term jobs would be created through the power plant: "Fact is that these projects give very little added value and especially jobs, once they are up and running."

There was also a discussion around whether hydropower could help to combat climate change. Ruggenthaler saw hydropower as a chance to react to the threat of climate change. He explained that his municipality has a strong focus on being climate-friendly (which also Retter acknowledged). Ruggenthaler said: "[We] have of course noted that water in any case plays a role for energy production in order to be able to make a contribtution to climate change also with it." Kerber criticized this approach. She argued that a deterioration of river statuses could be dangerous, when facing climate change:

> "That you look out to save water resources. Whether that is for dry periods. Or that you also advocate for widenings, so that, once there is again heavy rain, floods can be contained. There have been mudslides back then and I don't want to know [what would have happened], if not the Isel had been there to carry that away."

3.2.2   Nature as a chance

Especially Group 2 of the opponent-proponent collective identity built up nature as a common good counternarrative to the one that saw the hydroelectric power plant as a potential driver for economic progress and development (which I elaborated in the previous chapter). Felipe, Retter and Tschavoll emphasized that the region had a big potential for nature tourism. According to them, the Isel river could contribute to raising the touristic profile and the image of the region of East Tyrol as a whole. Carefully countering the narrative of nature as a driver of economic progress, Retter mentioned that it is questionable to see the Isel river mainly as a source of financial income. The main focus should lie on its inherent natural value (see Environmental protection).

Tschavoll and Retter claim that labels such as 'sanctuary', 'heart river of East Tyrol' or 'river jewel', which are used among environmentalists to advocate for the cause of the river, could be valuable for further building up and strengthening tourism around the river. Tschavoll said: "If you are an opponent and you shortly turn off the intuition to be against and you think then that at some point- that we don't have any other possibility than to use it for marketing, then you can actually be happy about such […] catchy labels".

Felipe focused on promoting the comparison with a best practice example from another region in Tyrol that could unite both environmental protection through Natura 2000 and economic progress through tourism, the Lech valley. She said that the comparison with the Lech valley made an impression in East Tyrol: "And there have been more and more people, citizens, but also stakeholders, for example from the Chamber of Commerce or from tourism, that have realized, well, it is really not terrible. If we use the chance instead, then we can get something positive out of it."

Steiner was critical of this. While he acknowledged that nature tourism is one of the two main pillars of his municipality's economy, he was critical of the potential of protected nature to contribute to it. He emphasized that this narrative could not solve the current financial challenges of the municipalities Prägraten and Virgen: "I am convinced that untouched nature will be worth something at some point. I just ask myself if I will still get

to experience that in my lifetime. And we live here now. And we have to set the course for our generations to come."

3.2.3 Involving the public

For Ruggenthaler, Steiner and Kerber, the participation process, especially the one in Virgen and Prägraten, was an important topic in the conflict. Also other interviewees made sense of the process. Issues that came up repeatedly were the limits of participation, participation meetings and a citizen consultation.

Ruggenthaler said that participation had been an important factor from the start. As soon as the power plant plans got more concrete, the population was supposed to be involved:

> "And then it was pretty fast a thing in the village council: If we continue with this issue, then we of course need- We have to act with the public. We can't do something in secret. There are still strategies noawadays that you prepare everything, in secret, and then the whole story is revealed. And then you quickly conclude and that's it. And we have said, no, we want to develop the story together with the people. Was a big goal for us."

Ruggenthaler and Steiner organised participation councils (Iselrat) and finally participation forums (Iselfroum), to which all inhabitants of Virgen and Prägraten were invited. These meetings gave citizens access to information around the planning. Ruggenthaler said that through these meetings, they realized that opinions among the population varied quite a bit. Both he and Steiner emphasized that the meetings gave citizens the ability to participate in the decision-making: "And in the end it came to the point that we had several different alternatives examined and then we even let the population decide in a process, which alternative they want" (Ruggenthaler). Steiner emphasized that the participation process was 'open', also to representatives of Group 2. Kerber was very critical about these meetings. She called them "make-believe democratic", as they gave the impression to involve the public, but the decision to build a power plant had already been made: "Maybe they can discuss, if it should be situated five meters more to this side or to that one, but the basic decision- that is basically predetermined and not questioned at all anymore."

On 17th June 2012, there was a public consultation among the citizens of Prägraten and Virgen. Steiner and Ruggenthaler said that the consultation had been planned in the participation process from an early stage on. The citizens voted on whether their municipality should "advocate for using hydropower on the upper Isel for creating renewable energy and join planning, constructing and running an environmentally sound hydroelectric power plant" (Pirkner, 2012). Among a quorum of about 74% in Virgen and about 79% in Prägraten, about 72% of voters in Virgen voted yes and 38% no, in Prägraten 60% yes and 40% no. Ruggenthaler and Steiner said that these results gave them legitimacy to continue with the planning process and that they interpreted the results as absolutely positive for their cause. Also Retter acknowledged that the consultation was a 'strenghtening of the mayors'. However, Retter, Tschavoll and Kerber said that the results were 'extremely exaggerated' (Kerber) or 'blown out of proportion' (Retter). Retter and Kerber argued that the population had been massively influenced by the mayors and the communication agencies that had organised the process. According to them, the citizens didn't have knowledge about the complexities of the decision-making (i.e. to the discourse around Hydroelectric power as a chance), but were rather encouraged to think for their own short-term benefit: "Well, should a citizen say no, when he says, wow, we will get a cash cow" (Retter). Tschavoll and Felipe criticised the way the question at the consultation was asked, misleading citizens into a vote about renewable energy.

There was a stark contrast in the way participation was framed by the municipalities and by the regional government. As explained in Within East Tyrol: Just two villages or everyone?, Steiner emphasized that the participation process was targeted towards 'our own population' rather than to people from outside the villages. Kerber criticized this aspect: "the Isel now doesn't only belong to two municipalities that can decide about it, but it is public water property and then others just have to be included in the decision". The

nomination of the area for Natura 2000 by the regional government on the other hand was also criticized for its lack of involvement of local communities, e.g. in the media article Ruggenthaler (2015b). Representatives of Group 1 called the process of designating the Isel and its subsidiaries as a Natura 2000 area an 'environmental protection dictatorship' according to media articles like Nindler (2014c) and Funder, (2014a).

3.2.4   Environmental protection

One of the hegemonic struggles in the conflict was about whether the river and its subsidiaries should be protected and if its protection should be strengthened through a nomination for the European Union's Natura 2000 programme.

Group 2 made sense of environmental protection as a common good that they were fighting for. Several interviewees made sense of why they thought the river had a high value and needed to be protected. Retter and Felipe used one of the most cited (in selected media like Heubacher, 2013; Blassnig, 2014; Nindler, 2015c) arguments for the need of the river's protection; that the Isel river was the last free-flowing glacial river in the Alps. Because it was the one of the last of its kind, it needed strong protection. Retter called the Isel an "examplary river, as we will need it in the future". Both said that scientists were supporting this argumentation. Several interviewees mentioned the plant *Deutsche Tamariske* (*Myricaria germanica*), whose protection was cited as an argument for the need to nominate the Isel and its subsidiaries as a Natura 2000 area.

Steiner and Ruggenthaler on the other hand argued that the value of the river was exaggerated. Steiner denied that the tamarisk plant could be found in the area of his municipality and criticized the use of labels such as 'river sanctuary' or 'last free-flowing glacial river'. He mentioned that environmentalists used terms like these to manipulate the public for their political agenda. He said: "Canonizing does the Pope in Rome and not WWF somewhere on the planet". Tschavoll reacted to the criticism. He acknowledged that there are parts of the river that are not in a good condition anymore, but that the label could be well justified for the river as a whole.

The debate also revolved around whether the claim that the area needed to be protected was based on scientific or political grounds. Ruggenthaler and Steiner emphasized that this plant or other important species could be found in other areas that were not nominated for Natura 2000 for political reasons (such as areas in Kals or Ischgl): "The other Tyrolean municipalities should follow suit. Look at Ischgl, where you get away with an *Arktischer Schwemmrasen*. The legally protected good is there, so you would have to do it." Ruggenthaler said: "Well, there have been political deals. It is in the background- When you look: Yeah, we haven't nominated Ischgl, because some people complained there. Well, hello, the EU doesn't play along these rules either." Felipe reacted by saying that for the nomination it was not important to nominate all areas where the tamarisk plant could be found, but to protect its habitat in order to secure the population. Felipe justified the different approaches to different areas using a legal approach to the conflict:

> "The Isel and all its subsidiaries are technically qualified for a Natura 2000 designation. You could easily take responsibility for that and say, everything should be protected. Because all of it is just in good quality. Well, but legally it is not necessary in our opinion, because the legally protected good can be preserved, if you preserve all of the Isel and some parts of its subsidiaries."

While until 2013, the discourse focused on opposition and proposition related to the hydroelectric power plant, it then shifted. The push for the area to be nominated as a Natura 2000 area was a strong hegemonic project that provoked discussion and counterhegemony. Some collective identities shifted and wording was more and more framed around being *for* or *against* the Natura 2000 protection. The shift in the discourse also meant that now the biggest opponent in the eyes of Group 1 was the regional government.

With the shifting discourse, the tamarisk plant became a symbol for Natura 2000 and counterhegemonic projects were directed against it. Reisner said: "There are people that

threaten coworkers of mine, because they find a tamarisk". Tschavoll claimed that representatives of Group 1 tore out tamarisk plants to make it seem like none could be found in their area.

3.2.5   Natura 2000 vs. locals

By local Group 1 representatives, Natura 2000 was continuously framed as the opposition to hegemonic projects such as the power plant, economic development, agriculture and other land use. The devaluation of Natura 2000 became a hegemonic project to fight for.

Actors in the conflict made clear that the Natura 2000 protection would make the power plant construction impossible. Felipe said: "Run-of-the-river power plants sound pretty lovely in comparison. But with it, you would have had to relocate the Isel in its pathway." Retter claimed that Natura 2000 does not always prevent hydroelectric power plants, but that it did stand in opposition to the plans in this case: "Being for a power plant doesn't automatically mean being against Natura 2000 and the other way around. There are examples of power plants - however, those look different - in Natura 2000 areas".

Representatives of Group 1 were often critical of environmental protection, because it was seen in contrast to economic development that they saw necessary for the region (as in the media articles *„Wir wollen kein Naturreservat werden"*, 2014; Hatz, 2014; *Bevölkerung braucht Klarheit*, 2014). Retter quoted a banner that representatives of the civil initiative of Group 1 had held at an event in 2014: "We only have the graveyard left, if Natura 2000 comes".

The reasons to counter Natura 2000 were diverse. Felipe claimed that Natura 2000 had a bad reputation among the population of East Tyrol because of misunderstandings about its implications. According to her, people feared that they wouldn't be allowed to do anything anymore: "The myth is: there is a restraining order." Steiner mentioned that there were people who were representatives of Group 2 who were against the power plant plans, but not for the nomination as Natura 2000, as agriculture was an important factor in his municipality and Natura 2000 would be an obstacle in agricultural cultivation.

3.3   (Not) Reaching a resolution

As the conflict was not very present in media anymore at the beginning of my research, I had gotten the impression that the conflict was dormant. The Isel river and some of its subsidiaries had been nominated as a future Natura 2000 area in 2015 according to the newspaper report Nindler (2017), the plans for constructing hydroelectric power plants were halted in Prägraten and Virgen according to Nindler (2015a). In this chapter, I describe if interview partners perceived the situation as the end of the debate or if they saw a possible continuation of the conflict. I wanted to find out how sensemakings overlapped or differed from Mouffe's concept of the *conflictual consensus,* which claims that a final resolution of a conflict is impossible due to the inherent pluralism and resulting antagonisms in society (Mouffe, 2005). Conflicts can be temporarily halted in what may seem as a consensus, but they may be taken up again (Mouffe, 2005).

3.3.1   Is there a 'resolution'?

When I did my interviews in January 2017, there was a divide among the interviewees whether there was an 'end' or a 'resolution' of the conflict. Interviewees from Group 2 tended to see the conflict as resolved. Both Tschavoll and Kerber emphasized that the protection of subsidiaries such as Schwarzach and Kalserbach was still under debate, while the protection of the Isel itself was perceived as finalized. Kerber said: "Well, the Isel in that sense is actually more or less done." Tschavoll mentioned that WWF is not completely satisfied with the situation. The media article Nindler (2017) indicates that also the European Commission asks for these subsidiaries still to be nominated. Representatives

from Group 1 still fought for their hegemonic project to be fulfilled. Ruggenthaler and Steiner said that their plans were indeed halted at the moment, but that they would still consider taking legal steps against the Natura 2000 nomination. Steiner acknowledged that they would have little chance of success.

3.3.2 How did it come to the 'resolution'?

There were quite different sensemakings among the interviewees about how the apparent resolution had been reached. Several interviewees from Group 2 emphasized the role of scientists and the Natura 2000 nomination as crucial. Retter and Kerber mentioned the role of civil society resistance to the power plant: "If you want, you can put it like this: If we hadn't resisted, we wouldn't have gotten anything" (Retter). Retter highlighted that power plant projects like this one were not economically viable anymore, as the energy price was so low. Ruggenthaler on the other hand emphasized that 'political deals' were important in constituting the current situation: Group 2 had made alignments with representatives of Group 1, dividing the collective identity and thus gaining strength for their hegemonic project.

3.4 Preliminary conclusions

When analyzing my interview partners' sensemakings, I did so using the concepts of collective identities, identity shifts, hegemonic projects and conflictual consensus. This gave an overview of what the conflict was about, who constructed it and what is its current state. I claim that the framework that came out of the analysis could easily be adapted to other conflict cases. It is a rather simple analysis framework that emphasizes the lines of conflict, the power structures behind them and how these are connected. I highlight collective patterns of antagonistic interaction as a key element of NRM conflicts, taking into consideration that antagonistic identities are inseperable from the hegemonic projects at stake.

   The chapter (Not) Reaching a resolution questions the normalization of consensus by showcasing how different actors approach the apparent solution and how they diverge in their sensemakings. I showed that, for some, the conflict has lingering potential to reemerge, while others reinforce that it has ended, as their hegemonic project is dominating. An analysis like that deconstructs the hegemony of the consensus; some possibilities are oppressed in favour of others. It reveals the notion of undecidability that is inherent in decision-making.

   The dangers of analysing collective identities are generalization and simplification. There are many different and sometimes contradictory ways to identify within a group of subjects, who identify with the same collective identity. Identities are discursive constructions and a subject can only *bear* an identity rather than *being* the identity as a discursive totality (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014). In my conflict case, it was apparent that there are patterns of antagonistic identities that permeate the conflict. However, by emphasizing the differences within collective identities and the identity shifts, I showed as well that these patterns are unstable and chaotic.

4 Undecidability and its companions

In this chapter, I tackle my third research question *What discourses do the actors involved in the conflict reinforce and appropriate as a reaction to the undecidability of political decision-making?*. I analysed interviewees' language use in their sensemakings, identified patterns and related these patterns to the theory. I could identify four different discourses as a reaction to the dilemma of undecidability: rationalization, moralization, antagonism between enemies and agonism.

Mouffe (2007) differentiates two kinds of discourses: those that negate antagonist collective identities and those that don't. Like authors such as Pepermans & Maeseele (2014), Tambakaki (2014) and Beveridge (2017), I use the terms *depoliticization* or *post-politics*, when referring to Mouffe's critique of the negation of antagonism, in contrast to *politicization* that leaves space for antagonism. I placed rationalization and moralization under depoliticization, while I see antagonism between enemies and agonism as politicizing.

I further divide the four discourses into destructive and constructive ones along the lines of Hallgren (2016). Antagonism between enemies and the two depoliticizing strategies are destructive, as they "narrow the space for ideological conflict" (Pepermans & Maeseele, 2014, p 223), negate the undecidability of the political and close down the debate by delegitimizing the other's need and/or right to participate in the process. Only agonism is constructive, as it recognizes undecidability as a relevant factor.

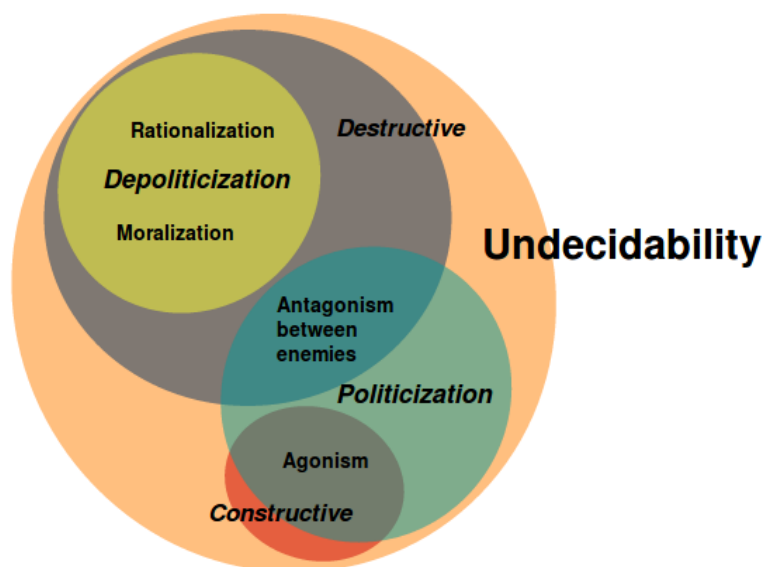I brought the different concepts together in the graph below:

Figure 1. Conceptual visualization of de-/politicizing and de-/constructive strategies of handling undecidability

4.1 Depoliticization

I call two strings in Mouffe's theory depoliticizing: rationalization and moralization. Rationalization is a strategy that limits political participation to those actors - 'experts' - that can contribute to an argument with seemingly objective arguments (such as scientists or the legal system). Moralization on the other hand denies actors' right to participate in a decision-making process, because they don't fulfill certain moral criteria (Mouffe, 2007).

   Depoliticized strategies are political, but negate the inherent antagonism in any political process (Mouffe, 2007). Rationalization constructs antagonistic identities between those who are 'rational' and those who are 'irrational', while moralization draws antagonistic identities between 'good' and 'evil'; both draw lines of 'right' and 'wrong'. By pretending to be 'neutral', these discursive strategies hide the violence they ecercise (Mouffe, 2005).

   Depoliticization undermines the importance that passions and affects play in democracy. Mouffe explains that they are impotant in "securing allegiance to democratic values" (Mouffe, 2005, p 95). She analyses that passions are one of the strongest drivers of politics and that people who emphasize the importance of rationality or morality in politics are not able to confront passions (Mouffe, 2007).

4.1.1 Rationalization

Rationalization claims that antagonism and violence are mechanisms that are only present, when rationality has not yet prevailed over archaic passions. For Mouffe (2005), there is nothing like 'rationality', 'absolute truth', 'objectivity' or 'neutrality' that can be claimed in a conflict. Objectivitiy is constructed through acts of power (Mouffe, 2014). Mouffe (2005) relates this mechanism to Wittgenstein: our perception of 'definite content' is based on our practice of specific 'forms of life'. It is not generalisable and cannot represent everybody in a unified consensus. Any construction of objectivity inherently carries traces of acts of exclusion of other possible hegemonic projects, i.e. unrecognized violence hidden behind the appeals of 'rationality'. If a plurality of legitimate forms of expressions is denied, the very basic element of the constitution of a democratic citizen is denied: the legitimate possibility to resist against the dominant hegemonic project (Mouffe, 2005). This is why Mouffe (2005, p 22) calls rationalization a 'threat to democracy'.

   I could observe ratioanlity claims, to different extents, with all of my interviewees. Actors often claimed fact-based 'expert knowledge'. They tried to strengthen their hegemonic projects by using rationality as a justification for the inherent undecidability, at the same time trying to shut down the debate, as there apparently was an 'objective', depoliticized way to look at things. I I talk about how science and technology as well as the legal system are framed and how different actors wished for rational deliberation.

4.1.1.1 Science and technology

In depoliticization discourses, science is commonly framed as a means of knowledge production that transcends policy contexts and can justify acts of exclusion based on rationality. I could observe this with all actors that I interviewed. This is something that Lidskog & Sundqvist (2002) criticise: Science and policies strongly interlink, as those who interpret science as a grounds for political decision-making do so in the context of the policies they themselves propose. The interpretation dialectically gives justification to the policy.

   Actors referred lots of times to the need of a 'professional, objective' ('fachlich') process, when nominating areas for the Natura 2000 program, in selected media (Nindler, 2015b; Nindler, 2015c; Nindler, 2015d). Felipe claimed she used science as a basis for the decision-making process: "There is no question about wanting to or not, but really of natural science facts, water ecological and limnological". Retter emphasized a few times the importance of working with facts and evidence-based knowledge. Referring to a situation, in which somebody called him a fundamentalist, he commented: "I can't help it

that this is the last glacial river that flows like that, of which all scientists today say- 30 people and the leading experts of the field wrote to the regional government that this is an example of a river like we need it in the future."

As actors from different conflicting sides reinforced this discourse, the objectivity claims and with them the hegemonic projects behind them clashed. Steiner and Ruggenthaler quoted a study by an institute they commissioned, while Felipe, Retter and Tschavoll referred to other science that supported their claim that the area needed to be protected. Several interview partners claimed that the other side was using facts in a wrong way, did not understand the science or was intentionally lying. Ruggenthaler for example said about the scientist who had written the report commissioned by them: "He then made a proposal for a designation on objective grounds. And the federal state of Tyrol and Felipe have made a proposal for a designation on political grounds".

4.1.1.2 Law

For some, the legal system was another source for objectivity claims in decision-making, as it led to the strenghtening of their hegemonic projects. These claims denied the political elements of the legal system: Laws are created and can be changed by politics. Kerber and Retter strongly praised the Natura 2000 framework as a legal ground for decision-making. Both of them and Felipe emphasized that the citizen consultation in 2012 was not legally binding. Kerber argued that since the consultation was basically about an issue that is grounded in EU law, it was not 'debatable' in the first place. Both she and Felipe mentioned that it is questionable or absurd to assume that people in two villages could decide over Natura 2000 as a legislative frame given by the EU. Reisner went into this direction too, criticising the mayors implicitly for playing 'Gallic village' (in reference to the rebellious village against the Roman empire in the *Asterix* comics). She reasoned that the conflict didn't happen on a factual basis, as communicating laws would be especially complex.

An issue that has come up several times in the interviews is the time pressure that was put on the conflict by the European Commission. I would claim that rushed decisions that neglect the democratic aspect of decision-making decrease the space for agonistic confrontation and thus open up the space for more destructive discourses such as antagonism between enemies.

4.1.1.3 Rational deliberation vs. emotions

Different interviewees wished for rational deliberation, often in opposition to emotions. Reisner acknowledged that it is unavoidable to have emotions in a conflict, but that emotions should be met with rationality. Ruggenthaler and Steiner accused their opposing side of using emotions as a way to bring forward their hegemonic project, which would have made it hard to have a rational deliberation: "There was always rather 'Isel is a sanctuary'. Well, you cannot question a sanctuary and that is about it. Objective approaches were almost impossible" (Ruggenthaler). Retter upheld rationality as an ideal by framing himself as one of few environmentalists who are able to participate in rational deliberation with outside groups.

4.1.2 Moralization

Mouffe (2007) writes about the use of morality to justify exclusion mechanisms in post-politics. Moral passions are more and more portrayed as a 'right' reaction to what is perceived as immoral, 'evil', 'wrong' or, in extreme cases, as an 'absolute enemy'. This doesn't make politics more moral, but antagonisms are translated into moral categories. While Mouffe (2005) explains that liberal-democratic values such as justice and equality indeed should be the basis of decision-making, there has to be a constant pluralist debate around what they mean. In moralization, politics are insulated from pluralism "by trying to fix once and for all the meaning and hierarchy of the central liberal-democratic values"

(Mouffe, 2005, p 93). This process strengthens antagonisms and leads into the direction of friend-enemy relations (as described later in Antagonism between enemies), which in turn could be a danger to the basics of democratic values and institutions (Mouffe 2007).

I could observe moralization to a lesser extent in the conflict case than rationalization, but moral objectivity claims were present on different sides of the conflict. Kerber argued that Group 1 had no sense of 'responsibility for nature', implying that environmental protection is a moral value that transcends pluralist debate. She argued that environmental protection is something that concerns everybody. The river Isel wouldn't only concern two villages and not even East Tyrol, but that through its special status as the last free-flowing river in all of the Alps, the legitimacy to decide over what happens to the river goes beyond the local sphere. Steiner used moral categories such as 'totalitarian' or 'extremist' to delegitimize parts of Group 2, while emphasizing his own humanist values.

4.1.3 Political frustration

One of the key elements of post-politics for Mouffe (2007) is political frustration. Lots of people don't feel represented in the hegemonic consensus-oriented political system of the Third Way. Instead, they shift their vote to politicians and political parties that frame themselves as an alternative to the dominant consensus and as a bloc against a perceived elitist establishment.

This seemed to have happened in Virgen and Prägraten. Both Ruggenthaler and Steiner drew a connection between the rising success of the right-wing populist party FPÖ in national elections in their villages (such as the Presidential elections 2016), the lack of democracy in the Natura 2000 designation process and the feeling of powerlessness among the local population in their municipalities. Ruggenthaler and Steiner both stated that the inhabitants of their villages were not inherently more right-wing than people anywhere else. Instead, the success of FPÖ would correlate with their frustration: The villagers had voiced their opinion in the 2012 consultation, but it had not been considered in the decision-making process.

4.2   Politicization

Politicization strategies are those that recognize that there is an antagonistic dimension in the political (Mouffe, 2007). Mouffe differentiates between two different 'venue[s] of antagonism' (Mouffe, 2014, p 26): antagonism between enemies and agonism. While agonism recognizes undecidability and opens the debate, antagonism between enemies does not. Like depoliticizing strategies, I would place antagonism between enemies close to what Hallgren (2016) calls a destructive conflict. Agonism, on the other hand, I would put close to what he calls constructive conflict.

4.2.1   Antagonism between enemies

Mouffe (2007) argues in reference to Carl Schmitt that, if not controlled and institutionalized, antagonism can turn into a relationship between enemies. In such a relation, participants in a conflict allege that the others question their identity and their existence (Mouffe 2013) and/or they don't recognize the others' legitimacy of participating in the decision-making process, because they conflict with their hegemonic project. Mouffe (2007) is very negative about antagonisms that are framed as a relation between enemies, because they can lead to violence and 'the destruction of the political commons' (p 69).

4.2.1.1   Opponents and proponents as enemies

In my interviews and media analysis, I couldn't observe that the conflict around the river Isel escalated into physical violence. However, interviewees made sense of other forms of

violent communication. These usually took place along the opponent-proponent lines of the conflict: Retter and Tschavoll mentioned different situations, in which actors who were part of one group were verbally attacked or threatened by actors they identified with the other group. Reisner talked about mothers who were insulted when picking up their children from the kindergarden. Retter said that 'scorched earth' would remain after the conflict in the community, as these personal attacks and negative feelings could not just go away: "That went through families. That is the worst in my opinion, that that is necessary."

I would also categorize the sensemakings about the deplantation of protected tamarisk plants as antagonism between enemies. While Retter and Tschavoll talked very negatively about the deplantation, Steiner denied that the plant had existed in his village before the conflict erupted. The tamarisk plans were one of the main reasons why the area was up for a designation as a Natura 2000 area. Deplanting them would mean to symbolically delegitimize the ecological arguments of Group 2.

Group 1 felt delegitimized, when constructive suggestions for compromises such as financial compensation for environmental protection were derided and declared stupid. Both Ruggenthalter and Steiner criticized this.

4.2.1.2 Spatialization among enemies

Several actors made sense of a (de)legitimization to participate in the decision-making process according to an identification with a certain spatial area such as the municipalities of Prägraten and Virgen in opposition to municipalities outside or the region of East Tyrol in opposition to North Tyrol.

A sensemaking that appeared a few times in media articles such as „Wir wollen kein Naturreservat werden" (2014) and Hatz (2014) and in interviews with Group 1 representatives was the one that actors from outside denied the locals' right to exist in what they perceived as their land. Steiner emphasized his own personal connection to the area in the interview and said: "And we live here now. And we have to set the course for our generations to come." Steiner framed environmentalists as a collective identity outside of the municipalities of Virgen and Prägraten that tried to threaten the existence of the cultural landscape in the municipalities: "[…] militant, totalitarian environmentalists won't succeed in ending the 4000 years old cultural landscape here in Prägraten or in the Virgental or anywhere else." Connected to this, Steiner and Ruggenthaler made sense of this by framing WWF as 'war-like'. They referred to the uniforms WWF representatives were wearing at a press conference that, according to Funder (2012), took place in Prägraten in 2012 and said that they reminded them of military uniforms. Tschavoll was aware that Steiner and Ruggenthaler had this image of WWF. He said about Group 1: "[…] I have picked up that there were very targeted attacks really against WWF as an ambigous organisation that actually just wants to pick a fight."

As a counterpart to feeling threatened by the outside, non-locals were sometimes delegitimized of their participation in the decision-making. For Steiner, if agents of Group 2 were from outside Prägraten and Ivrgen, they were not legitimate partners in the debate. Steiner made sense of this by claiming that those who live in an area have the legitimacy to decide over it. Both Retter and Tschavoll recognized the dilemma and emphasized the need of a convincing rationality in such a situation: "What authorizes me to tell people there 'Defend yourselves against that', as an outsider. You always have to ask yourself, do you have clever arguments, if you go into such a debate" (Retter).

Kerber was opposing the discourse around space. She criticised the construction of spatial antagonisms in general as simplified strategies of trying to realize hegemonic projects: "When we don't like something, we don't have anything to do with it [the European Union]. Then it's like the evil Vienna or the evil Innsbruck. Then it is good for being a scapegoat. Those on the top make it so hard for us […]."

4.2.2   Agonism

Participants in agonistic confrontation are not mere enemies, but rather *adversaries* or *friendly enemies* (Mouffe 2005). They are friends, because they share a passionate commitment to democratic institutions and democratic values such as equality and liberty. They recognize each others' legitimacy to participate in the decision-making process rather than being indifferent or negative to the others' right to having a standpoint. And they are enemies, because they fight for their hegemonic interpretation over what the common democratic institutions and values mean to be implemented (Mouffe 2005).

The agonistic way to react to undecidability is different from the other three discursive strategies I have talked about so far. Agonism recognizes and accepts undecidability as a relevant factor. "Politicization never ceases because undecidability continues to inhabit the decision. Every consensus appears as a stabilization of something essentially unstable and chaotic" (Mouffe, 2005, p 136). Agonism opens a confrontation that could lead to adversaries ceasing to disagree (e.g. by finding a compromise), "but that does not prove that agonism has been eradicated" (Mouffe, 2005, p 102).

In the following sub-chapters I elaborate on spaces of agonism that I could identify in the conflict process as well as on the perceived and non-perceived need for agonistic confrontation. Only very few times different actors from both sides also consciously referred to both sides of the proponent-opponent spectrum as legitimate participants. Kerber for example said about the mayors: "[…] that the mayors […] and you have to acknowledge that, that they are at their financial limits. On the one hand, that they just need money. That they look for it, is completely legitimate."

4.2.2.1   Is there a perceived need for confrontation?

Several interviewees such as Steiner, Ruggenthaler, Kerber and Tschavoll missed a constructive space for communication and confrontation ("culture of debate", Tschavoll) between opposing collective identities. The existing meetings between conflicting identities were not perceived as enough.

Tschavoll claimed that both the opponents and proponents were completely "hardened fronts". Even if there were attempts of agonistic meetings between antagonistic collective identities, nothing changed. Aigner said that organizing a meeting between antagonistic collective identities in the affected municipalities would have reinforced the hardening of the fronts: "[… this] would probably also not have contributed anything to any of the two sides. Instead, it would have [reinforced] what was already there, which is a nice space for fighting [each other]". Similarly, Ruggenthaler said that despite everybody's willingness to participate in communication, communication didn't work because of a persistance on hegemonic projects: "Well, they have always been open for conversations, no question, just not for the subject matter. That is, openness for conversations, yes, the subject is completely off hands. They have rather always said that the Isel is a sanctuary."

Retter claimed that Group 1 was not willing to participate on an eye-to-eye process with people who think differently: "The communication is not wanted." Tschavoll said that this hardening of the front led to the conflict being decided in the legal sphere, i.e. the depoliticization of the conflict: "Because there was just no synopsis. In our opinion it just can't go on, because it is incompatible and because these are just two things that don't fit together. And the mayors have always emphasized that anything goes."

4.2.2.2   Spaces for agonism?: Meetings between collective identities

In this chapter, I describe how interviewees and the selected media made sense of the communication at meetings between antagonistic collective identities and I analyse to what extent these meetings met the criteria that Mouffe (2005) has for the common symbolic spaces for agonism. I will focus on two meeting forms that, to me, seemed like they could

have partly been spaces for agonism: Iselrat and Iselforum on the one hand and round tables on the other.

One opportunity for opponents and proponents from Group 1 and Group 2 to meet were Iselrat ('Isel Council') and Iselforum ('Isel Forum'). Both Steiner and Ruggenthaler emphasized that people from antagonistic sides were participating in the events and that the exchange was fruitful. This made these events a common space for people to meet in a setting with legitimation of antagonistic opinions. However, the participants all were from Prägraten and Virgen (see Spatialization of collective identities), which gave them one unifying collective identity in a spatial context. Felipe criticised this, mentioning that she was not invited to participate in the forums: "They held assemblies, but they didn't invite us." The events also were depoliticized: Steiner and Ruggenthaler framed their own role as one of neutral organisers, providing a platform for the public to discuss and decide over the power plant plans, even if they themselves clearly had a political role. Kerber criticised that Iselrat and Iselforum were no real political space, as they were not meant to tackle the actual controversy, the construction of the power plant. According to her, the politicians already had decided that the power plant would come before initiating the participation process.

Two round tables to discuss the nomination of the area as Natura 2000 took place, one in June 2014 in Matrei (Funder, 2014b), another one in July 2014 in Kals (Pirkner, 2014a). Felipe was the initiator. She said that she wanted to have the round tables "consciously very open". The roundtables were meant to, in an institutionalized way, bring people from different positions together as adversaries (Felipe, Kerber, Tschavoll). Felipe invited decisionmakers from concerned villages and the construction company as well as representatives from the economy and tourism, NGOs and civil initiatives. Retter and Kerber said that they perceived the round tables as controversial, because the political decision-makers were not used to being eye to eye with civil organisations: "That was not very easy for them. They are just not used to that." (Kerber) Steiner contradicted this sensemaking. The only time he used the word 'we' and included representatives from Group 2 from outside of the two villages was, when he talked about the roundtables: "All of us are equal partners in the conversation." Referring to Luhmann, Reisner argued that the more people with different interests and perspectives are involved in a decision-making process and the knowledge spectrum gets better. She mentioned the roundtables as an attempt to do that.

Even though the setup of the round tables was meant to be a common symbolic space, at least partly they reinforced antagonism between enemies. Several actors framed the second round table as one of the most escalated situations in the conflict, where people delegitimized each others' participation in the conflict. Kerber said that a participant from Group 1 strongly attacked Felipe on a personal level. Steiner talked about the same situation from the opposite perspective, emphasizing that Felipe didn't let the participant from Group 1 speak. Reisner and Steiner also mentioned that the round table in Kals marked a shift in collective identity of some mayors originally associated with Group 1 (as described in Shifting identities): "If those who should perform in unity, don't perform in unity, you sense that" (Reisner).

The round tables also had elements of depoliticization, which I would strongly see as contributing to their escalation. Steiner and Ruggenthaler criticised that Felipe denied her own strong political involvement in the process by moderating one of the round tables. Also the focus of the round tables seems to have been on the legal aspects of the conflict and on finding a rational consensus. Steiner criticized that the results were predefined by the initiating regional government.

There were also smaller meetings between antagonistic collective identities. Steiner explained that they consciously tried to reach out to and had meetings with representatives of antagonistic collective identities. Retter for example recounted a meeting between his association, Ruggenthaler and the construction company in Virgen. He said that both sides tried to convince each other, but stayed put on their positions: "There is no one that says:

well, that makes sense. Now I am against it or I will in the future..." Ruggenthaler criticised that Felipe didn't communicate with them enough. Felipe on the other hand criticised that even though they invested lots of time and efforts in communication around this conflict, the perception was still that she didn't communicate enough.

Steiner implied that representative politics themselves could be an agonistic space. He made sense of his relation to other politicians, even if they were from opposing collective identities such as the Green Party, in a way of 'adversaries' or 'friendly enemies' rather than as 'enemies': "When we meet, we always keep honour and respect. And we anyways address each other informally with 'du' [rather than the formal 'Sie' way of saying 'you' in German]."

4.3   Preliminary conclusions

In this chapter, I showed that actors reinforced four discourses as a reaction to undecidability in their sensemaking of the conflict case: rationalization, moralization, antagonism between enemies and/or agonism. Like Pepermans & Maeseele (2014), I argue that processes of politicization and depoliticization have to be observed on the discursive level. Their dynamic nature makes it hard to associate them with specific actors or institutions. Interview partners made sense of several, sometimes contradictory discourses in reaction to the dilemma of undecidability. Most actors in the process saw the need for agonistic communication processes and a cultured, constructive debate in the same interview situation, in which they themselves reinforced the very exclusion mechanisms that created a destructive debate.

The conflict case confirms the view that there is a wider depoliticization process in the environmental sphere (Swyngedouw, 2011), which is part of a broader post-political consensus orientation along the lines of neoliberal 'Third Way' politics since the fall of the Iron Curtain according to Mouffe (2007) and Rancière (2016). While the extent to which interviewees engaged in the different discourses varied, the strongest discourse I could observe was rationalization through claims of science, law and rational deliberation around the construction of a hydroelectric power plant and environmental protection. The political/antagonistic aspects of debate around environmental issues are especially prone to be hidden behind objectivity claims. Individual action and technological innovation rather than political struggles are seen as solutions to environmental challenges. This prevents socio-ecological transformation from happening and keeps actions against environmental issues within the boundaries of consensus-based politics of neoliberalism (Maeseele *et al.*, 2017). Other researchers have identified this for example in relation to climate change (Pepermans & Maeseele, 2014) or genetically modified organisms (Maeseele *et al.*, 2017). Lidskog & Elander (2007) see a trend that science-based decisions in the environmental sphere value ecology more than democracy, advocating for authoritarian decisions based on science. They call this trend 'eco-authoritarian'.

I believe that an analysis of these four discourses in specific NRM conflicts can help to identify exclusion both in specific NRM cases and in structural mechanisms that hinder democracy. Rationalization claims for example were strongly made in relation to Natura 2000, which indicates that the current setup of the Natura 2000 program is used and co-constructed as a driver of post-politics. Both Pinton's (2001) and Heijden's (2010) make sense of this. They criticize that the implementation of the program is almost solely relying on a "predominant role" (Heijden, 2010, p 107) of science rather than involving civil society actors from different political and spatial levels in the decision-making process. Heijden (2010) explains that Natura 2000 in its conception is based on central planning. The program hardly includes any possibilities for participation of civil society, different political levels or different types of scientific knowledge. The European Commission as a technocratic rather than a politically elected body is given the biggest role in the management of the program. I argue that these aspects hide and suppress the antagonisms

that can erupt from nominating areas for the Natura 2000 program. This leaves little space for democratic citizens to voice their opposition. In this conflict case, it led to political frustration in the local community, which in turn strengthened support for a political party that Mouffe (2007) sees as dangerous for democracy.

Although my analysis is anthropocentric, I suggest that the discourses described here can be applied not only to human-human interaction, but also to human-nature interaction. Here I add to Mouffe and Laclau, who don't talk about non-human subjects as legitimate actors in politics, and claim that non-human actors can actively engage or be engaged in antagonisms. I give one example of the latter. I describe how a plant species has been framed as an enemy and harmed in symbolic acts that were targeted against the hegemonic projects these plants represented. I place this example in the discourse of antagonism between enemies, where I would also place for example the wolf killings that von Essen & Allen (2017) describe. An analysis of depoliticizing rationalization discourses in human-nature interaction could be based on ecofeminist political philsophy (Mallory, 2010). It could look at if and how actors deny legitimacy to non-human entities on the grounds of objectivity claims such as the nature-culture divide.

5 Agonistic pluralism and natural resource management

In this section, I tackle my fourth and last research question *How could decision-making processes in natural resource management (NRM) conflicts based on Mouffe's (2005, 2013) agonistic pluralism look like, exemplified with the conflict case?*. I start off by describing what I consider key elements of agonistic pluralism according to my reading of Mouffe. I then translate these outlines to the management of the conflict case.

5.1 Key elements of Agonistic Pluralism

Agonistic pluralism is Mouffe's concept of the institutionalized transformation of antagonism into agonism as a discursive strategy to deal with undecidability. She refers to her model as one of 'radical democracy', as it wants institutions to be more radically egalitarian and democratic (Mouffe, 2014). Some key elements of agonistic pluralism:

- Recognition of both 'the political' and the undecidability that goes with it (Mouffe, 2005);

- actors recognize their opposition's right to participate in the debate and do not put this right into question, even if they fight each other's ideas like enemies (Mouffe, 2005);

- participants in a debate share the "ethico-political principles of liberal democracy: liberty and equality" (Mouffe, 2005, p 102), but they fight over how to adapt these principles into practice, so that they become the 'common good' (Mouffe, 2005, p 104); these principles are usually framed in a constitution (Mouffe, 2007);

- passions are legitimate aspects of politics; agonistic pluralism "mobilize[s] those passions towards democratic designs" (Mouffe, 2005, p 103);

- conflicts are legitimate aspects of politics and their suppression is authoritarian; however, there needs to be "some limits […] to the kind of confrontation which is going to be seen as legitimate in the public sphere" (Mouffe, 2005, p 93); these limits should be seen as political and contestable;

- conflicts can never be fully resolved due to the inherent antagonism in society: "Adversaries can cease to disagree, but that does not mean that antagonism has been eradicated" (Mouffe 2005, p 102). The closest that conflicts can get to a resolution is a *conflictual consensus*, which is one that stays contestable and dynamic. This consensus is accompanied by legitimate dissent. It is "essentially unstable and chaotic" (Mouffe 2005) and never final;

- a vibrant democracy gives citizens the possibility to identify with collective identities along their interpretation of ethico-political principles; Mouffe, 2005

cites e.g. radical-democratic neo-liberal, social-democratic and liberal-conservative as examples of such collective identities;

- collective identities should differ and clash with each other in their interpretations in order to give space to the passions of citizen; otherwise collective identities could crystallize outside the agonistic space of democratic politics and lead into violent antagonism between enemies (Mouffe, 2005).

5.2 Radical democracy around the river Isel

As outlined in the research problem, there is a need for decisions in natural resource management. Also in the conflict case described here, there is a need to decide what should happen with the contested area. The aim of this chapter is to identify how decision-making in the context of the conflict around the river Isel could (have) look(ed) like, if it took the factor of undecidability into account and reacted to it by institutionalizing agonistic confrontation into agonistic pluralism. I mix perceived needs and suggestions from the interviewees with own observations, inspired by the theory and the other applications. In my analysis, I dismiss Depoliticization and Antagonism between enemies. Instead, I try to strengthen Agonism.

5.2.1 Institutionalizing agonistic participation

In order for conflict cases like the one described here to become agonistic, also legal frameworks need to be politicized. Mouffe (2005) argues that in a democratic system, justice always has to stay a question without a definite solution: "To present the institutions of liberal democracy as the outcome of a pure deliberative rationality is to reify them and make them impossible to transform" (p 32). This means that Natura 2000 as a legal institution needs make space for agonistic confrontation. Natura 2000 needs to consider not only science in its decision-making processes, but also needs to demand participation processes on different political levels.

An agonistic participation process, how I imagine it, is inclusive and exclusive at the same time. Mouffe makes clear that a participation process needs to decide between opposing alternatives, which ends in act of exclusion: "It means that there will be some alternatives that will not be adopted, which will in fact be negated" (Miessen & Mouffe, 2010, p 127). As Miessen puts it: "Any form of participation is already a form of conflict" (Miessen & Mouffe, 2010, p 121). Agonistic participation, as I imagine it, doesn't end in a consensus, but it increases democracy on different political levels.

Both Heijden (2010) and Lidskog & Elander (2007) indicate that the way forward from central planning could be multi-level governance that takes different political levels – local, national, regional and international – into account. All of these levels should give institutionalized opportunities for confrontation along the lines of metacommunication, agonistic meetings and politicization of science. I agree with Lidskog & Elander (2007) that environmental problems are inherently tied to different political levels and decision-making around natural areas cannot only happen e.g. on the local level, but the solution is not to fall into a depoliticized discourse of 'the environment concerns everybody'. Instead, it is necessary to institutionalize possibilities for concrete actors to clash on different political levels and to fight over hegemonic projects around natural resource management. This would institutionalize place-based antagonisms, as described in Spatialization among enemies.

An agonistic mode of institutionalized participation is not a conflict resolution, but it argues for constructive conflict (Raitio, 2016) and includes mechanisms of repoliticizing the debate: "By precluding the possibility of a complete reabsorption of alterity into 'oneness and harmony', this insistence on the need to leave the conversation on justice for ever open establishes the basis for a project of 'radical and plural democracy'" (Mouffe,

2005, p 76). An agonistic mode of decision-making is only temporary and recognizes its undecidability. Any taken decision stays contestable.

5.2.2 Metacommunication

An application of the theory to an empirical conflict case needs metacommunication about the decision-making process along the lines of "a shared understanding [...] of the difference in ontology and epistemology" (Hallgren, 2016, p 21). Participants need to get a basic understanding of what agonistic pluralism means. All participants in the conflict need to accept the meta-communicative assumption that there is no perfect decision and that there is an inherent antagonism in every decision that is taken. Participants need to commit to becoming adversaries, which means accept the other's right to bring forth arguments that contradict theirs and that they have the right to participate in the process.

The metacommunication is mutually interlinked with the creation of a common symbolic space. In order for the metacommunicative process to happen, there is a need of a common symbolic space. In order for the common symbolic space to be formed, participants need to commit to the metacommunicative process; they need to accept to participate in the same decision-making process with their opponents.

In the conflict case, participants from different collective identities have voiced their interest to talk about the process and to have common meetings with opposing parties. This suggests that there was the potential to reach an agreement on the metacommunicative process.

5.2.3 Agonistic meetings between collective identities

Agonistic meetings are a possibility to create a common symbolic space. Here I suggest how the meetings I described in Spaces for agonism?: Meetings between collective identities could have been improved.

In agonistic meetings, conflicting collective identities would receive the right to participate in the decision-making process by accepting the metacommunicative agreement on agonistic pluralism. There is an act of exclusion here, as those who don't accept the metacommunicative setup lose their right to participate in the democratic process as a whole. The meeting itself becomes a collective identity, a *we* as the participants in opposition to *them* who don't participate.

This group process could be used in meetings to strengthen the institutionalization of antagonism further. The group could discuss metacommunication on a micro level. A group agreement on how communication should take place between the participants could translate the macro level of accepting agonistic pluralism into this micro level of constructive speech acts, as Hallgren (2016) describes them. Along the lines of Mouffe's common democratic principles rather than her conflictual consensus, the agreement would serve as a basis of how participants of the process talk to each other. Similarly to speech regulations in parliaments (Mouffe, 2014), representatives of different collective identities could check whether this agreement is fulfilled or not. This setup of facilitation would be a reaction to the participation processes in the conflict case, all of which were criticized for not having neutral enough facilitation.

The meetings should give collective identities the possibility to clash with each other. Meetings that are organised as agonistic participation cannot remain on levels of one-way communication, e.g. decision-makers giving information to the public or decision-makers answering questions from the public. The process should allow to institutionalize affects such as fear rather than excluding them from the process. Rather than presenting one predefined solution, ignoring affects and advocating for reaching a consensus, hegemonic projects should be able to clash with each other. This starts from the frame of the agenda of the meeting: Rather than only discussing whether a specific area should be protected or not, the process could be framed around what the common good is that the participants in the process wish to see (Vasstrom, 2014).

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Representatives of different and opposing collective identities should be invited to the process. Representatives should have conflicting hegemonic projects (such as e.g. environmental protection, hydropower as economic development, tourism as economic development, agriculture, etc.). This has been done on a regional level with the roundtables organised by the regional government and, on a local level, Iselforum and Iselrat organised by the municipalities.

The meetings can be used to look into finding compromises. Mouffe (2005) acknowledges that adversaries can cease to disagree. She sees compromises as "part and parcel of politics", but such compromises are usually "temporary respites in an ongoing confrontation". It is quite unclear from her writings what Mouffe means with this 'part and parcel of politics'. Collective identities could give each other incentives to come to a conflictual consensus. Rather than arguing for immediate solutions, exchange between conflicting identities can lead to more creative solutions that take the underlying causes and conditions of hegemonic projects into account (Raitio, 2016). Heijden (2010) describes another conflict case in Tyrol that was constructed around hydropower vs. Natura 2000 as an example of a reached compromise. The Lech river has been designated a Natura 2000 area with lots of resistance from local community members who wanted to use the area for hydropower. The dissent turned into a compromise, when the area benefited from the protection also economically from tourism.

The danger of working with compromises is that, as soon as they are reached, they can be normalized as a depoliticized consensus.

5.2.4   Politicizing science

A way to enhance the process agonistically is to look at knowledge claims in a politicized way. Lidskog and Sundqvist (2002) advocate for a co-production of knowledge between science and decision-making: "Co-production means that uncertain or contested science can grow stronger if the policy context is 'right', while on the other hand, a weak policy context can become stronger through the support of science" (p 85). Scientists and policymakers involved in the research could involve local knowledge. They should engage in a confrontation about the science and see the translation of science into policy not as a given, but rather as a politicized process. Like Hallgren (2016) describes, people are allowed to contradict interpretations of data and conflicting interpretations of data can be legitimized in the process rather than eradicating some on the basis of others. Science needs to involve dialogue with and participation of the public (Lidskog & Elander, 2007). "In this way causes and effects become functionally interrelated; production of knowledge is also production of policy" (Lidskog & Sundqvist, 2002, p 85).

Hallgren (2016) gives an example of how politicized science could look like in his analysis of a case around the Swedish river Emån using Mouffe's theory. Farmers and biologists disagreed about the way the statistical interpretation of a population analysis of a certain fish that lived in the area was done. He writes that this was constructive, "as it involved arguments about the statistical theories and procedures on which valid statements about reasons for catfish population changes should be based and how these changes should be evaluated" (Hallgren, 2016, p 23). Through engaging in the debate in this speech situation, both collective identities, farmers and biologists, gave legitimacy to the other's participation in the debate. Hallgren (2016) explains that continued debate could have made the conflicting sides be able to come to an understanding why they disagree.

Applied to the case, this would mean for scientists to collect data on the relevant species and other natural features around the river Isel and its subsidiaries that are in discussion about being protected. Already the data collection could be an open process involving local knowledge. It could take place with the involvement of locals. The interpretation of data should include the inherent antagonism that they ensue in a conflictual terrain such as my conflict, in which different hegemonic projects clash with each other. Should the area be protected? Which borders should the protected area have? Does the protection exclude

power plant projects? All of these questions are political and the answers to them reflect the hegemonic projects that are part of the conflict. Different interpretations based on different hegemonic projects should be accepted as legitimate parameters influencing the decision-making process rather than constructing hegemony around depoliticized rationality claims.

5.2.5   Making antagonisms visible

Mouffe (2014) emphasizes the importance of showing antagonisms in the public sphere, as this gives legitimacy to society's pluralism and helps to keep the debate alive, even if a conflictual consensus is eventually reached.

Mouffe (2014) talks about museums as spaces for agonistic confrontations. Mouffe cites the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) as an example of a politicizing museum. The museum saw itself as a space for debate and conflict. It organised meetings between artist collectives and social movements to come up with artistic practices for local challenges. The museum also set up a forum to urban planning in antagonism to another urban planning forum that was happening at the same time in Barcelona. This alternative forum opened agonistic space, as it created legitimate space for opposition to the other forum. The Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana focused on showcasing antagonisms between artists rather than just showcasing a diversity of art, like a lot of museums according to Mouffe (2014) do by hiding behind a veil of pluralism. Opposing artists' hegemonic projects against each other in a museum gives the viewer the possibility to identify with a collective identity.

The possibilities are vast: Natural resource management could cooperate with artists and activists. Local museums could showcase hegemonic projects around the Isel. Information signs, monuments or art installations in the contested area could talk about the conflict. Nature tourism could talk about antagonisms in guided tours. Documentary films could be made. I would also claim that research like mine is an agonistic space, as it increases the visibility of antagonisms, gives symbolic space and legitimacy to different hegemonic projects and enhances constructivity.

5.3   Preliminary conclusions

I reproduced Mouffe's normativity of reaching a radical democracy in order to give inspiration for a political rather than a post-political way to deal with NRM conflicts. Some of the generalized conclusions I reached are: 1. There need to be institutionalized forms of participation on the local, regional, national and international level. 2. Participation necessarily ends in exclusion, as a decision is made, but needs to offer institutionalized ways of reopening the debate. 3. Participants in a conflict need to have a metacommunicative agreement on shared legitimacy of participating in the process. 4. Meetings need to give participants the possibility to clash and to reach for compromises rather than normalizing a consensus. 5. If science is perceived as relevant in NRM, it needs to become politicized in co-creation processes. 6. Antagonisms need to be made and to stay visible in the public sphere.

The generalization of these claims can be questioned, as they are built on my learning from the specific conflict case I analysed. None of the claims have been fulfilled in the conflict around the Isel, as the claims are constructed as the negativity to what I perceived as harmful for democracy in the case. Some claims might be fulfilled in other NRM conflicts. For other cases, claims that have not been formulated here might be more relevant.

Radical democracy is not a simple or practical solution, as it takes time and resources. Follow-up research from a legal perspective could look into pragmatic starting points of its application in NRM: What institutionalized processes of participation are in place in NRM? How do they need to be changed in order to fulfill the claims I make? Which of these changes are feasible, given the capacities and limits of NRM?

6 Conclusion

With my research, I have developed a framework for analyzing environmental conflicts based on Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. The first part of the framework enables to give a complex picture of conflicts. The framework emphasizes those aspects that focus on notions of antagonism, such as (unstable) antagonistic collective identities, their interrelation with hegemonic projects and a look at antagonistic sensemakings around whether the conflict could be seen as 'solved'. In the second part of the framework, I have identified four different discursive strategies, with which participants in the conflict case responded to the paradox of undecidability: rationalization, moralization, antagonism between enemies and agonism. I have placed these in wider discourses of politicization and depoliticization as well as in the normative categories of constructivity and destructivity.

I observed that the conflict case around the river Isel happened strongly on a destructive level. I analyzed how the conflict is part of bigger depoliticization processes in the environmental sphere. In my analysis, I emphasized the destructive usage of objectivity claims around science and the Natura 2000 program in order to delegitimize democratic participation.

In the transformative last part of the research, I identified leverage points for agonistic pluralism in NRM conflicts, which tackles the dilemma of exclusion in the context of needed decision-making in a constructive way. Using learning from the destructive elements of the conflict case around the Isel, I laid out how an agonistic mode of participation can look like, including different types of knowledge, affects, political levels and a recognition of undecidability. I claim that agonistic pluralism demands more than just a public participation meeting striving for consensus, but instead an institutionalized process that radically leaves space for antagonism. Radical democracy means to create a process that comes to an unstable and repoliticizable decision.

Future research could advance the suggestions I have given in my answer to the fourth research question and build further suggestions for radical democratic measures in natural resource management. Action research projects could conduct some or several of these measures on different levels of governance. The challenges and learnings from these projects could be compared to previous action research based on deliberative democratic models (such as Nielsen *et al.*, 2016). More research could be done on the pragmatic obstacles to implementing agonistic pluralism in NRM; analyzing participation procedures from a legal perspective. I also suggested to add to Mouffe's theory with ecofeminism and to look at depoliticization within human-nature interaction.

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