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“A Foras, Out”: Youth antimilitarism engagement in Sardinia

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Aide Esu

Abstract

This paper presents a short review of the *A Foras, Out* movement in Sardinia and examines its youth branch, the student collective (*Collettivo studentesco*) for university and high school students. Since the late 1960s, grassroots movements, associations, committees, political groups, antimilitarists and ecologists have struggled against land occupation by NATO and other military forces and called for the drastic reduction or elimination of military activities on the island that was later related to the emergence of environmental risk and diseases. By participating in networked collective actions, these young activists reclaim the land occupied by the military and elaborate a legitimisation-based political rhetoric that undermines the legality of the presence of military bases in Sardinia. The young activists emerge as social actors in engaging debates within the movement about of civil disobedience practices that sometimes cross the boundary of illegal practices (e.g. cutting fences around military areas to stop training). Their engagement pushes the actions of the senior non-violent antimilitarist activists into a new, not yet defined practice of antimilitarism incorporating diverse political platforms: from independence movements to traditional workerism, anarchists to radical left-wing movements. We analyse the youth group’s agency in transforming antimilitarism from general pacifism into a mixed antimilitarist-eco, neo-independence movement calling for new regional sovereignty.

Keywords: Youth agency, antimilitarism, illegal practices, social movement

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«أخرجوا من هنا»: نشاط الشباب ضد المؤسسة والممارسات العسكرية في سردينيا

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أيدي أيسو

ملخص

تتميز سردينيا بكونها واحدة من أكبر المستوطنات العسكرية في أوروبا حيث تستضيف القوات المشتركة لمنظمة حلف شمال الأطلسي وقوات عسكرية إسرائيلية، التي تقوم بمناورات حربية. منذ أواخر ستينيات القرن الماضي، دعت الحركات الشعبية والجمعيات واللجان والجماعات السياسية والمناهضون للعسكرة وعلما البيئة إلى تقليص كبير في الأنشطة العسكرية في الجزيرة أو إلغائها. وفي أواخر التسعينيات، أدى ظهور الأمراض والمخاطر البيئية المتعلقة بالأنشطة العسكرية إلى تجدد انتشار الحراك ضد الممارسات العسكرية واحتلال الأراضي. وقد اعتبر الناشطون السياسيون الاحتلال استيلاء على الأراضي يهدد الصحة العامة ويقوض حقوق السكان المحليين. تشكل حركة « *A Foras, Out* » مظلة لمجموعات ولجان محلية مؤلفة من كبار الناشطين المناهضين للعسكرة، من النساء والشباب، الذين ينتمي بعضهم إلى جماعات متطرفة» ويشارك هؤلاء في منصة لمقاطعة وسحب الاستثمارات وفرض العقوبات ضد إسرائيل (BDS). تقدم هذه الورقة استعراضاً موجزاً لهذه الحركة مع تحليل لفرع الشباب، أو التجمع الطلابي (Collettivo studentesco) لطلاب الجامعات والمدارس الثانوية. يحاول هؤلاء النشطاء الشباب، من خلال المشاركة في شبكة أعمال جماعية، استعادة الأراضي التي احتلها الجيش ويعرضون خطاباً سياسياً قائماً على الشرعية يهدف إلى تقويض شرعية وجود القواعد العسكرية في سردينيا. يبرز النشطاء الشباب كفاعلين اجتماعيين يشاركون في نقاشات عامة داخل الحركة حول ممارسات العصيان المدني التي تتجاوز أحياناً حدود الممارسات القانونية (مثل قطع سياج الأسلاك الشائكة حول المناطق العسكرية لوقف التدريب). تدفع مشاركتهم هذه تصرفات كبار النشطاء اللاعنفين المناهضين للعسكرة إلى ممارسة جديدة غير معلومة الحدود لمناهضة العسكرة تتضمن برامج سياسية متنوعة: من حركات الاستقلال إلى العمالية التقليدية، ومن الفوضويين إلى الحركات اليسارية الراديكالية. تقدم الدراسة أيضاً تحليلاً لدور مجموعة الشباب في تحويل معاداة العسكرة من النزعة السلمية العامة إلى حركة مختلطة مناهضة للعسكرة والاستقلال الجديد تدعو إلى سيادة إقليمية جديدة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التمكين الشبابي، مناهضة العسكرة، الممارسات غير الشرعية، الحركة الاجتماعية

لا تعبر الأفكار الواردة في المخطوطة عن افكار هيئة تحرير المجلة أو عمادة البحث العلمي في جامعة بيت لحم. يعتبر المؤلف المسؤول الوحيد عن مضمون المخطوطة أو أية أخطاء فيها.

Introduction

The island of Sardinia hosts most Italian military facilities. It stands as one of the largest military settlements in Europe and hosts North Atlantic Treaty Organization joint forces and Israeli military forces, which simulate war games. The first military base, the Inter-service Test and Training Range of Salto di Quirra (PISQ), opened in 1956 and has become one of the most important experimental military training centres in Europe. That same year, on the southern island, the second-largest Italian military base (today a major training hub for North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO] joint forces), and the military airport in Decimomannu, the first Air Weapons Training Installation of NATO forces in Europe, were established. In the early 1960s and 1970s, the military land seizure was extended to the northern island. In the La Maddalena archipelago, a United States military base was built on Santo Stefano Island before being closed in 2008. Another aerial military centre was established on the western side of the island (Capo Frasca). According to the Sardinian government data, military occupation covers 373.72 square km of the island's territory, constituting the most important impact of the military presence in Italy and Europe; 60% of military-occupied territory in Italy is in Sardinia. The military activities in Sardinia attracted great public attention in 2012, when the state prosecutor opened a criminal investigation into them and their impacts in the PISQ area, leading to restrictions on military activities for more than one year. Concerns about environmental risk and health strengthened antimilitary feelings among residents and political groups.

This paper discusses on-going research on youth agency in the large, antimilitary protest group *A Foras, Out*, centred on the slogan '*No bases, not here nor elsewhere*'. The movement *A Foras, Out* is an umbrella of local groups and committees composed of senior antimilitary activists, women and youth, some of whom belong to radical groups and participate in the Boycott Divestment and Sanction (BDS). We wish to examine the contributions of the student collective to inspiring a new strategic practice of civil disobedience promoting actions that cross the boundary into illegality: cutting fences around military areas to stop training, which inflicts economic damage on the Italian state.¹ We explore how youth agency integrates antimilitarism practice with different political agendas, such as independence movements, traditional workerism, anarchism, feminism and radical left-wing movements in general. We question whether youth agency has transformed antimilitarism from the general pacifism of the early 1970s into

a mixed antimilitarist-eco, neo-independent movement calling for the island's sovereignty. Are they acting as citizens who want their rights to be recognised (Fraser, 2000)? Do they want to go further and affirm a discourse that emphasises the double sense of colonialism on the island (Akibayashi & Takazato, 2009), from NATO, foreign countries, the military and the Italian state as a 'colony of the colony' (McCaffrey, 2002, p. 10).

We explore whether this practice is aimed at pushing the action across a new frontier to radicalise perspectives and make the local population aware of the necessity to build their present and future by breaking the dependency on the military and the state. Conducting participant observation and interviews with group members and collecting documents (public releases on social networks or in the local media), we analyse the youth collective's contribution to the movement. Unlike in the past, the *A Foras* movement dares to push protests into more visible, radical practices and elaborate new strategies, including symbolic occupation and trans-passing of the military zone. Furthermore, inspired by other territorial movements (della Porta & Piazza, 2008) promoting communitarian land defence, such as the NO Tav Movement, *A Foras* agency tends to be more inclusive of the interests of the local population and the development of alternative projects. At the time of writing, we consider the following reflections to be the first step in the analysis.

Sardinia militarisation an island among many others

Islands have commonly been targeted by militarisation strategies (Vine, 2009). In many cases, islands have a history of colonisation or are still considered to be colonies (Lutz, 2009). The literature has focused on US military bases around the world, highlighting post-Cold War geopolitical strategies (Johnson, 2004; O'Loughlin, 2005) as new forms of imperialism and colonisation (Gerson, 2009; Noenoe, 2004) accompanied by economic power strategies (Vine, 2009). In this context, the study of civil–military relations can concern resistance, protests and collective actions (McCaffrey, 2002) led by autochthones and sometimes supported by transnational networks. The cultural specificities, identities and interests of local populations can be at stake and part of the antimilitary argument (Akibayashi & Takazato, 2009; Kajihiro, 2009).

Within this context, Sardinia appears to be one island among many sharing the same destiny and subject to the same decision-making process. Ambiguity and

secrecy are associated with this state commitment but seldom associated with the state dependence on US international relations. A Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) report, made available under the 1996 Freedom of Information Act and partially revealed by Wikileaks, divulges the analysis supporting the selection of Sardinia:

Italy is a big aircraft carrier in front of Mediterranean; it protrudes to East and peers to the Orient. In the middle, there is Sardinia, which is part of this aircraft carrier but hasn't the annoying problem of people and cities. It's a kind of free bridge, cheap acres almost uninhabited. The population is tough and leathery but, as well know, unable to organise collective action and share initiatives. The island is poor, and thus easily corruptible with few hundred jobs in the military bases. (Porcedda & Brunetti, 2011, p. 3)

The military seizure started during the implementation of the Marshall Plan, a post-World War II intervention to support the recovery of southern Italy. Applying the special status granted by the new constitution, Sardinia set up a regional government and implemented an economic plan to overcome post-war poverty. A debate on modernity and the possibility for modernisation to contribute to creating an equal economy arose in intellectual circles and public gatherings. The original orientation of the economic recovery plan towards modern agriculture soon shifted to an industrial economy based on state intervention (Sapelli, 2011). Following the CIA analysis, military facilities were built in poor, sparsely populated rural areas, with high unemployment and emigration rates. Previous research on the local media representation of military activities in Sardinia, has shown how the military was portrayed as a leading agent of modernity (Esu & Maddanu, 2017). Compensation for expropriated land was not systematically given, so some municipalities opened cases against the military and the state, especially when the occupied lands were governed by collective use legislation (Cacciarru, 2013). The local press reported a little on protests against the military but never created a collective movement, corroborating the US analysis.

In the early 1960s, the local newspaper *Unione Sarda* operated part in the wider post-WWII context in which Cold War discourses and ideologies polarised the debate so that these military activities were interpreted as part of national defence and as agent of modernisation for this isolated, underdeveloped area. Following this track, the local press in this period supported the government's political and socio-economic rhetoric. Without infrastructure and essential services

(e.g. roads, electricity and sewage systems), some towns on the periphery were portrayed in the late 1950s and 1960s as places needing state intervention. The rhetoric of modernisation created the illusion of industrial development led by the state. Similarly, the local press positively highlighted the establishment of military bases as a promising investment opportunity. This dependence justified a national development plan that included constructing military bases. In the following years, the local press praised the experiments carried out in the PISQ as technological advancements of which the Sardinian people should be proud. Military excellence and aeronautic advancements were presented positively as opportunities to modernise the island.²

However, the literature on risk agrees that environmental issues become more visible after the Chernobyl radioactivity alarm. Starting in the 1960s, the local press reported on some military accidents and crashes, but the first major risk concerning military activities in Sardinia came in 1974. After a warning, reported by the Corsican bimonthly journal *Kirn*, media and public opinion indicated concerns about radioactive mud in the La Maddalena Archipelago due to military activities around the US Navy base. Those reports prompted claims and protests from ecologists, pacifists and members of Sardinian pro-independence movement. The information about dangers and risks was openly related to military activities. The topic of risk connected, on one hand, the visible effects of military activities and, on the other hand, the secrecy maintained by officials. In the public sphere, questions arose about the top-secret institutional answers to coverage of military activities on bases. In 1977–80, some scaremongering headlines on the front page of local newspapers revealed suspicions about nuclear experiments.³ Local media spread fear of the radiation menace across Sardinia, relating international and local warnings alarms and risks.

The La Maddalena fear of radioactivity due to the nuclear submarine base triggered pacifism protest movements in 1976 (19 August) and in 1988, with a Greenpeace base assault (24 June). Pacifists viewed American imperialism as the main danger associated with the Italian state's lack of national sovereignty due to the US submarine base in La Maddalena (Dessy, 1978). Some *A Foras* activists took part in both pacifist and antimilitarist protests against the military bases at this time. The founders of *Gettiamo le Basi* (Toss away the bases), a Sardinian committee fighting against the military bases for years, denounced the health risks and collected information on military activities dangerous to the population and the environment.

Even before the state prosecutor investigation, local committees and environmental grassroots associations emerged in the PISQ territory, mostly among the intellectual middle class. Indeed, pacifism and the ecology movement remained urban phenomena until the new millennium. Then a remarkable shift in the local press's portrayal of military activities helped draw attention to the dangers generated by the military practices. Reports enriched by personal testimonies from local doctors and veterinarians about animal deformities and the dramatic prevalence of lymphoma in residents of Quirra, a village on the perimeter of the PISQ base, contributed to representing a different scenario. Even after this alarm, local mobilisations generated apathetic reactions, as Angela testifies:

We did some demonstrations. The most important was against the [second] Iraq war. [...] Before 2001, when people began to talk about the Quirra syndrome, there was complacency. [...] Talk about the military base was a taboo. In fact, when we started talking about that, we generated a storm [...] You know, the military base has always been considered a development vector. (A., activist with Su Giassu Association)

Local activism was a pioneering vanguard, closer to an urban culture and ecologic sensibility than the concerns of local residents. Activists were perceived as expressing intellectual worries, far from the local population focused on fears about unemployment. Activists felt frustrated at their inability to mobilise the population, sadly ascertaining they were substantiating the CIA's estimation. Despite the rising number of deaths, residents gave up, feeling powerless confronting asymmetrical power relations. Paradoxically, they acquiesced to the loss of family members, saying '*now, they are dead, we can't do anything*' (Angela interview). The peculiar pollution by nanomaterials made risk imperceptible. Local committees reported mixed feelings in the general population: '*they fear to know; they prefer to ignore and turn away from issues*' (Marco, son of lymphoma victim, interview). Very few chose to speak about family loss. Cultural barriers also contributed to passivity as publicly discussing family health problems related to scary issues was considered a shame. Forty years of civil–military relations based on a company–town culture developed ties of trust to the military. For years, the military cemented that trust by offering services, such as a theatre, cinema and summer camps for students. Residents were trapped in a web so that a true mobilisation never happened, even when the

investigation started, and the alarm became public. Feelings regarding the state prosecutor's investigation were contradictory, becoming openly antagonistic when he decided to restrict all military activities and prohibit farming activities in the PISQ area for more than one year.

'A Foras': a new antimilitarism on the move

At the regional level, the investigation opened a new direction, showing that high-ranking military officials were not invulnerable, and a state prosecutor might advance allegations of 'injury and aggravated disaster' against them. Although the local population was quiescent, something began to shift public opinion on the island. The local newspaper, so supportive in building consensus on the military enterprise for more than twenty years (Esu & Maddanu, 2017), launched a warning campaign supporting the organisation of the first regional protest against military bases in 2014. This rally gathered political parties, regional deputies, associations, local committees and residents and mobilised the energy into a collective group. The initial open assembly consolidated into the movement *A Foras, Out*, with the aim to stop military activities, demand the decommissioning of all military facilities and obtain adequate compensation to restore the compromised environment.

In this movement composed of cross-class, inter-gender, inter-generational activists, the youth component, *Collettivo studentesco*, emerged in September 2015, when *A Foras* gained public prominence. It stopped the Trident Juncture, NATO's largest training camp in the South Sardinia (Teulada), revealing the changing action of new antimilitarism strategy guided by *Collettivo studentesco*. A student team supported by delegates from local committees took the leadership of this reticular organisation of local committees and independent groups. A regional network representing local activist shaped this flexible organisation, valuing local militancy and, for the first time, establishing a stable regional movement. *Collettivo studentesco* is composed of university undergraduates tutored by former student activists in radical groups. Weekly meetings share practical knowledge from past student protests, such as how to write protest leaflets, organise rallies and manage clashes with police. The group capitalises on previous experiences acquired during university protests against anti-neoliberal policies in Italy, participation in the Syntagma Square movement in Athens during the Erasmus mobility and activism in the Italian territorial movements, such as No TAV, NO MUOS and NO Dal Molin. *Collettivo studentesco's* internal

cohesion has grown since 2015, when it first squatted in an abandoned school in the historical district of the main Sardinia city. The move, as it declared in a statement, was due to

the ambition to satisfy the needs of political engagement in the youth community and the citizens excluded from services and spaces of sociability. Our action wants to give dback to the population a neglected space and build a participation space open to cultural and social activities. (Sa Domu leaflet, *Why we occupy*)

Counter-culture performativities and creativity (Mayer, 2009) lie at the heart *Sa Domu* (The House) squat. As Pruijt (2013) observed in other European urban contexts, this squat action constitutes ‘deprivation-based squatting’. The occupation responds to two main needs: to face the housing crisis in the city, especially among students and disadvantaged people, and to develop an entrepreneurial squatting based on a counter-cultural perspective—a politically oriented practice aimed at producing alternative social relations and artistic performances. *Sa Domu*’s open space, according with the squatting literature (De Moor, 2016; Martinez, 2013; Pruijt, 2013), is crucial to grounding the movement. It offers a meaningful physical space to capitalise on the heterogeneous experiences of the composite group under the *A Foras* umbrella. Militancy, pacifism, the Genoa Social Forum and independent movements develop a cross-fertilisation of practices, languages, strategies and political cultures. These intertwining networks provide ways to connect differences, going in the direction of social movement theory so far demonstrated (Diani, 2014). The young members of *A Foras* see the No TAV movement as a new way to create consensus among local populations, radical movements, social centres, antagonists and anarchist groups. The theorisation of this experience seems to inspire some activists to reconquer or create trust with the local population in Sardinia concerned by .military activities and their effects

Recent Italian territorial movements, such as No TAV, No MUOS and No Dal Molin, lie at the centre of spatial politics in the terrain of resistance practice (Armano, Pittavino & Sciortino, 2013; della Porta & Piazza 2008; Fois & Paragano, 2011; Maggiolini, 2013). Those movements focus on how space creates symbolic meaningful opposition, as evoked in the antagonistic *No* in the movements’ names. For *A Foras*, the major issue is not defence of territory from an external threat, such as a high-speed train that would change an ecosystem

(No TAV), the installation of a mobile user objective system to detect military threats (No MUOS) or the expansion of a NATO base (No Dal Molin). The island's territory is irreversibly damaged in some areas, and other lands seized for military activity need in-depth recovery interventions. After 60 years of military exercises, the mutilation of the environment, landscape and people is beyond repair. Consequently, the movement calls for the radical action of closing all military facilities to attempt to undertake an alternative development of the territory. The action of resistance, like other cases, incorporates "specific symbolic meanings, communicative process, political discourses, religious idioms, cultural practices, social networks, economic relations, physical settings, envisioned desires and hopes" (Routledge, 1996, p. 517).

Creativity plays a major role in expanding innovation and symbolic communication tools. The cross-contamination of the Sardinian language as an affirmative source of pride is extended to the names of the movement groups and the squatting house. The main innovation practice has replaced the traditional non-violent approach. Stopping military activities is no longer a matter of rallies or political protests. The youth branch of *A Foras* has pushed the action further, organising rallies during planned military trainings to break fences and interrupt military exercises. The radicalisation of the action has moved the rallies into clashes with the police. Before rallies, activists circulate guides on how to behave in case of arrest or injury, and some dress in ways to protect the exposed upper body. The clamp become the logo of the movement, displayed in internal and media communication to recall that the political action has taken a new path. Clashing practices are associated with increasing knowledge about the military activities, history of the military occupation and related environmental and health issues. Expand the knowledge on the military activities is at the core of the thematic laboratories and research, aiming at creating knowledge on the effects of militarisation to develop counter-expertise to oppose the official discourse and the rhetoric of national political institutions. This approach appears to mark a discontinuity with the practices developed so far, which have focused on an antimilitary discourse denouncing the health risks of military activities.

Envisioning a future for the island free of military activities prevails over ideological positions. An ecological-oriented view associated with a renewed desired for political independence contributes to reformulating the anticolonial discourse. The rejection of military colonisation is associated with new pride in Sardinian identity, an affirmative action of a new subjectivity able of developing

its own future. This path goes in the direction promoted by Fraser (2000), calling for citizens to fight for the right to be recognised, affirm their right to sovereignty and demanding the cessation of any military activity and the recovery of territory.

Young women play a relevant position in the movement, critiquing patriarchal language and thinking from a gender perspective. During assemblies, they highlight linguistic sexism, pushing male activists towards a more gender-sensitive interpretation of the social reality of the occupation. Women innovate the aesthetics of the rallies, adopting a Dadaist approach in contrast to the male-fighter approach seeking to confront the police.

A lasting weak point remains: the low involvement of residents living around the military bases. This issue rose soon after the rally in Quirra on 28 April 2017. This meaningful holiday, Sardinian Day, was selected to organise peaceful participation by the most affected population, but it resulted in a failure.⁴ Fewer than 500 people showed up and were forced to stay in place, encircled by the police. Opposition between the violent and non-violent approaches arose. The radical vision aiming to push forward the action called for opposing the war machine through far-reaching actions, not only cutting fences and stopping training activities but also committing sabotage against civilian companies working with the military. However, Kumone Otzastra Sarrabus (KOS), a local committee operating around the Quirra area, openly raised the question of residents' fear of being involved in police clashes. The fruitful diversity in *A Foras* clouded over, becoming a source of conflicting positions described by the committee:

No one single person or political party in power is able to solve the military occupation in Sardinia. It is a political problem, so we need to organise collective action for a strategy to develop a pluralistic participation. [...] Moving in this direction, Kumone Otzastra Sarrabus leaked on the web the pictures of the NATO flotilla displacement in the Sardinia South shore. We are in *A Foras* as we practice a human and political experiment. (KOS leaflet, 5 May 2017)⁵

Internal debate followed during a five-day summer camp, not far from the April's rally. The risk of getting stuck on this polarising issue was overcome in the sharing process activated by the camp. The involvement of 200 people, who rotated through thematic activities (e.g. health, economic and land recovery activities), eased internal differences. The camp was prepared through traveling

information meetings from northern to southern Sardinia to present the first report issued by *A Foras* on the military occupation. The KOS's direct involvement in the organisation helped mitigate potential conflicting views. Local residents got more involved in the working groups and the social activities (e.g. music and artistic events). Cross-fertilisation of languages was proposed through an exhibition on symbols and images attempting to develop a collective imaginary of the movement, as well as allowing artists to stand up against the military occupation. Forty-three writers, musicians, painters and performers have signed so far the stand-up manifesto against militarisation.

This set of actions has taken the first steps towards a community-based movement. The dream of militants inspired by the No TAV appears to be not so unrealistic. However, the movement has a long way to go. Some episodes of sexual harassment and LGBT discrimination have opened an internal debate about patriarchy and sexual discrimination. An unplanned women's assembly during the summer camp explored how to fight patriarchal culture in the movement.

Open questions

As stated in the introduction, this paper discusses an on-going research, so many questions remain open to further analysis. Young activists have pushed radical actions, driving the movement off a traditional political path onto a new path with contradictory challenges. How effective are violent practices for this community-based movement? Is this movement ready to include in its internal debate issues raised by women and LGBT community? How does this hopeful, community-based movement take into consideration this intersectionality? Last, but not less relevant, how will the colony-in-the-colony discourse raised in the independent political arena be articulated by non-independent activists in the future?

Endnotes

1. This disruption creates economic damage to the Italian state, which rents aerial, sea and ground space to foreign armies and private research centres at 50,000 euros per hour.
2. The words 'success' and 'successful' are often associated with the PISQ in local press (Unione Sarda) reports: 'After the recent success, new

short range missiles experimented' (9 September 1957, p. 2); “‘Dragon’ Powerful rocket successful shoot’ (23 May 1968,p. 8); ‘First Sweden shoot successful in Perdasdefogu’ (9 October 1968, p. 8); and ‘Rocket Skylark successful at Salto di Quirra’ (5 December 1968, p. 8). See (Esu & Maddanu, 2017).

3. ‘Mini-atomic explosions in Sardinia?’ (17 June 1977, pp. 1–2) and ‘Also nuclear missiles in Sardinia fortress’ (21 October 1979, pp. 1–2). See (Esu & Maddanu, 2017).
4. Sardinia Day celebrates the 28 April 1794 revolt against the Piedmont Administration.
5. This document was distributed by the Kumone Otzastra Sarrabus Committee during the assembly on 25 May.

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