

How Bosnia's Protest Movement Can Become Truly Transformative



Popular plenums continue to assemble and refine their demands and popular protests continue

I and other observers came away the most recent Sarajevo plenum on Friday night, February 21st, impressed by the organization, the management, and the general disposition of the wide range of citizens attending. The direction of the proceedings was overwhelmingly handled by the young, with women heavily represented. Following a brief recapitulation of the rules for the plenum, representatives of other such plenums - Konjic, Fojnica, and Mostar - spoke and appealed for solidarity. The two-minute statements by citizens covered a wide range of topics, but with a frequent focus on economic injustice, privileges of the political elites, and the lack of accountability for their misdeeds. Previous waves of privatization have been a perennial topic, as have the salary levels of officials.

Change Is Not Assured

Meanwhile, at least in Sarajevo, the street element of the protests has lost momentum. Saturday's and Sunday's protests were thin (today's had approximately 100-150 participants at 15:00), and city residents are expressing irritation at the regular diversion of traffic on the city's main thoroughfare. And the violence and destruction of two weeks ago put many citizens, otherwise inclined to support or empathize the pro-

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testers' demands, in a worried posture - as well as providing reminders of the 1992-1995 war.

Fears that the protests and plenums could be hijacked by established political interests remain, but they have dissipated since February 7th. At the Friday Sarajevo plenum, I neither heard nor saw anything that led me to believe that any of the potential political beneficiaries of a Federation Government collapse - Fahrudin Radoncic, Zeljko Komsic, or Nasa Stranka - held any sway with the assembly.

It's clear that despite the long-existing combustible ingredients for the recent outpouring of social discontent, all the major actors - the BiH political class, the international community (especially the EU) and established civil society/NGOs - were all caught flat-footed and have been scrambling to react. This helps explain the tendency to react to these protests by sticking to long-established talking points, thereby further demonstrating how out-of-touch they are with the woman and man in the street.

I am personally convinced that major and meaningful positive change can emerge from these protests. But that long-overdue change is not assured. From my vantage point, two factors will

determine whether this barely two-week-old protest movement can have a transformative impact on Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The first is its breadth. Polling has long demonstrated that popular concerns with economic matters, corruption, and impunity are universal in BiH - perhaps most pronounced among Serbs in the RS, but felt in the same order of magnitude across the board. RS President Milorad Dodik is the most vulnerable politician, simply because unlike in the Federation, where power is diffused (and therefore responsibility is difficult to attribute), there is only one godfather in the RS. HE clearly knows this. Anecdotal evidence points to efforts to pre-empt, suppress, and intimidate popular displays of discontent in the RS - including with heavily armed police patrols. Dodik and his underlings have attempted to portray the protest movement as Bosniak-based, even anti-Serb in character. There is no evidence this is the case.

"Coordination Mechanism"

In Croat-majority areas of the Federation, the established elites have attempted to paint the protests as a rising wave of Bosniak dominance from which Croats need to be protected. Echoes of this view can be heard in Croatia as well.

Again, this is far from the truth, judging from all I have seen and heard. But even in some Bosniak-majority parts of the Federation, fears that this new element might spark conflict have been voiced.

Yet so long as that attempted spin is not defied by reality that people can see and experience (e.g., contradicting the media dominance of the vested political class), the more that viewpoint is likely to stick among the average BiH Serb or Croat. It seems that if the revolutionary virus does not spread to all corners of BiH, the established interests are more likely to keep it compartmentalized. Only the popular plenums can take such initiative. To hijack one of the EU's favorite terms, there appears to already be a sort of "coordination mechanism" among the plenums to develop their demands for the Federation Government, with the Tuzla plenum taking the lead in convening it. Widening this, with emissaries sent to meet with counterparts and just ordinary citizens elsewhere in the country, where manifestations of popular discontent are smaller, not yet evident, or actively deterred, could be a next step. This movement has to expand and cohere to overpower the entrenched status quo. As one speaker at Friday night's plenum in Sarajevo put it, the unifying theme must be "all for one and one for all."

The second necessary ingredient to make this movement transformative - rather than merely palliative - is depth; developing a prospective, positive agenda. To date, and understandably, the protests and the plenums spawned by them have focused on policies, practices, and acts which generate popular anger and resistance. This justified anger is still scatter-shot and broad - the Sarajevo working group to develop demands, for example, is still compiling and rationalizing its list, which included 49 demands as of Friday. But their common denominator is that political leaders and those in administration have been unaccountable - both politically and legally. Solving this problem, as opposed to just remediating past injustices, is not a one-off deliverable; it requires systemic mechanisms and procedures - changes to constitutions, election laws, jurisdictions, etc. It is unrealistic to expect such proposals to be delivered in such a short timeframe. But it is absolutely essential that such proposals emerge organically from the popular level. The

established political elites have every incentive to avoid actual accountability, so will not act in this direction. Nor is it likely that they will emerge from any internationally-driven process, as many seem to be proposing these days.

Discredited Political System

Aleksandar Hemon and Jasmin Mujanovic in their New York Times op-ed "Stray Dogs and Stateless Babies," identified a systemic factor which impedes political accountability - party list voting. Direct election of parliamentary representatives in discrete electoral units, first-past-the-post, would generate much more responsive legislatures. It would also break the power of the party



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leader oligarchs. This is but one potential ingredient in a popular agenda for durable change. Another question is whether to enter the political fray directly. On Friday night, one man's proposal to do so by assembling a new party to compete in the upcoming October 2014 general elections was heavily booed at the Sarajevo plenum. This is a clear reflection of how discredited the entire political system has become in BiH. Based on their lived experience, people have understandably given up on electoral politics as a mechanism for achieving social improvement or change.

I am personally conflicted by this. Prior to the protests, I was convinced that the October 2014 elections would achieve no change; I expected voter turnout to be abysmal. Whatever the results might have been, even the introduction of a new political force, I saw no likelihood of improved government performance or accountability. Even new and legitimately progressive elements, which some new parties purport to be, would have to a) achieve a supermajority in all levels of government, or failing that, b) decide to

remain as opposition, occasionally blocking the worst legislation, but not driving an agenda or c) sell-out by joining in a coalition with the established parties, consoling themselves that it would be worse if they didn't (while of course partaking in the prevailing system of patronage, becoming corrupted and therefore part of the problem). So I certainly can understand the popular inclination to keep the political process at arm's-length.

Yet I was also convinced even then that a latent, potential constituency for change existed throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina - among all self-identified groups and constituent peoples. The problem was that this huge majority - well over two-thirds of the population - thought they were outside the norm, rather than being the average. In BiH's early spring, the green shoots of popular self-awareness are beginning to show. If this continues to blossom and is extended throughout the entire body politic of the country, it would be a total game changer. The electoral route should not be dismissed out of hand. Given the systemic imperatives and incentives of the current Dayton political system - built by oligarchs for oligarchs, and given an international seal-of-approval - I maintain my deep doubts that it is possible to change the system through the system. I believe that revolutionary, not evolutionary, methods are most likely to achieve positive change in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Two Options

The necessary ingredients for revolutionary change in BiH - near-universal popular dissatisfaction at two decades of malgovernance and asset-stripping, recognition that the system is rigged, willingness to finally stand-up and be counted - have begun to emerge and can be applied in a number of directions, both extra- and intra-institutional. The two options to establish a rules-based country that works for all its citizens (however they choose to identify) are both revolutionary: classical revolution, or electoral revolution - in which a supermajority hijacks the system with the declared intent of changing it to serve the citizenry at large. Both avenues remain possible - and both require broadening the constituency for change and aligning that constituency around demands for a new, responsive and accountable system.