

The revolt rocking Bosnia

Wednesday 26 February 2014, by [ROBERTSON James](#) (Date first published: 11 February 2014).

James Robertson analyzes the sources of the explosive protests against corruption, privatization and repression that are shaking every part of a divided country.

BOSNIA IS burning. Over the past several days, tens of thousands of workers, students and citizens have taken to the streets across Bosnia and Herzegovina to call for the resignations of local and federal governments.

In one of the largest and most confident displays of civil resistance since the civil war of the early 1990s, demonstrators occupied streets and town squares; confronted riot police armed with batons, rubber bullets, tear gas and attack dogs; and destroyed the headquarters of local governments and the largest political parties.

The wave of protests, which are still expanding, have tapped deep into the contempt many in Bosnia feel towards the country's political class and have directed it into demands for a new form of government focused on reversing the trend of deindustrialization, economic collapse and unemployment.

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THE PROTESTS began on February 5 in the northern industrial town of Tuzla after a group of around 3,000 workers and their supporters occupied the streets surrounding the cantonal government to protest the privatization of local companies. According to reports, the demonstration turned violent after police deployed attack dogs, tear gas and indiscriminate beatings in an effort to disperse the crowd.

The following day, clashes erupted again as several thousand more citizens took to the streets to confront police and voice their support for the workers' demands. The government's resignation was added to the list of demands.

Public anger reached a new high on Friday 7 when demonstrators broke through police lines and ransacked the local government building, smashing computer monitors, throwing documents to the cheering crowds below and setting the structure ablaze. The same day, the local government resigned.

Far from disavowing the violence of the crowd, the workers of Tuzla defended it in their public statement—and said that the resignation of the government is only the first step in a much wider transformation of Bosnian society [1]:

"Accumulated anger and rage are the causes of aggressive behavior. The attitude of the authorities has created the conditions for anger and rage to escalate. Now, in this new situation, we wish to direct the anger and rage into the building of a productive and useful system of government."

The statement went on to outline several aims, including reversing the process of privatization, guaranteeing the rights of laid-off workers, forming a new government whose members should be subject to public scrutiny and who come from outside the existing political class, and leveling the salary of government employees to those of industrial workers.

Reacting to events in Tuzla, mass protests quickly spread to other regional centers in Bosnia and Herzegovina—Bihac, Zenica, Mostar and Sarajevo, as well as smaller towns throughout the country. These demonstrations displayed the same willingness to confront police, target the political elite and demand the formation of a new government whose key responsibility should be social and economic justice for the whole population.

In Sarajevo, thousands have occupied the central squares, fighting with police and attacking government buildings. In Mostar, a city still physically divided by the battle lines of the civil war, Croat and Bosniak Muslim protesters came together to attack the offices of their respective political parties. In the industrial town of Zenica, protesters set the local government headquarters ablaze.

While the Bosnian government, the international media and U.S. and European Union spokespeople have condemned the violence, the protesters are united in their defense of what they argue is a justifiable expression of anger. As a recent graffiti tag puts it: “He who sows hunger, reaps rage!”

On February 8, protesters gathered once again to begin to repair the destruction from the violence the day before. According to one protester quoted in the Independent: “Now we’ll clean up this mess, like we’ll clean up the politicians who made this happen.”

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ONE OF the most striking dimensions of these protests has been the pronounced hostility toward local and federal government, and toward political parties across all ethnic and ideological divides. Not only have we seen protesters burning government and political party buildings and attacking the cars of government personnel, but they have unanimously called for the resignation of all current governments and the formation of new “non-party” governments.

In this sense, these protests need to be understood as an expression of what Elizabeth Humphreys and Tad Tietze identified as “anti-politics.” Speaking of Russell Brand’s call for revolution, they explain the term [2]:

“The starting point for understanding why Brand’s intervention struck such a chord is the crisis of representation that leads most people to see politics as completely detached from their lives. Crucially, this detachment is not caused by the political class being less “representative” of their social base than in some previous era; rather, its lack of a social base makes the political class’s actual role in representing the interests of the state within civil society more apparent.”

This “crisis of representation” explains why the uprising in Bosnia and Herzegovina today has manifested itself as a general hostility to all forms of political society on offer. The protesters are targeting not the specific policy of a certain political faction, but the entirety of what they see as a cynical and self-serving elite, whose interests are entirely at odds with those of the population.

The anti-political vitriol we are seeing in the streets of Bosnia and Herzegovina today has its roots in the specific form of government enforced on the country at the end of the civil war in 1995.

From the period after the Second World War through the end of the 1980s, Bosnia and Herzegovina was one of six republics that made up Yugoslavia—one of the so-called “socialist” countries of Eastern Europe set up, with some exceptions, especially in Yugoslavia, on the model of the Stalinist

system in the USSR. Yugoslavia was formally recognized as the homeland of three key national groups—Croats, Serbs and Muslims (known as Bosniaks).

With the onset of economic crisis and the rise of nationalism, Yugoslavia fragmented into its component parts. The battle over borders among the key national groups in Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia—and the political and diplomatic involvement of the U.S., Russia and the European powers—ensured that the break-up would not be a clean one.

Bosnia and Herzegovina was a flash point of the conflict. Between the years 1992 and 1995, forces representing different ethnic groups, including the Yugoslav National Army and paramilitary forces from Croatia and Serbia, fought a bloody war for control of Bosnia's territory, undertaking sieges of cities, carrying out waves of ethnic cleansing and even campaigns of genocide in an attempt to create ethnically homogeneous and contiguous territories.

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THE CIVIL war came to an end with the signing of the U.S.-brokered Dayton Accords in 1995. In an effort to satisfy the claims of rival forces, the peace negotiated between Croatian, Bosniak, Bosnian Serb and Serb representatives left a country divided into two entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, made up of largely Croat and Bosniak populations, and the Serbian Republic, dominated by Bosnian Serbs.

If the civil war ruptured the national heterogeneity of Bosnia completely, Dayton continued the process by imposing a form of government organized around representation of ethnic communities. In the years since Dayton, complicated legal and political structures have been imposed within each of these entities in such a way as to entrench and reproduce the ethnic division of the country. Electoral politics has become merely an extension of this system of division, with political parties organized around their respective ethnic fiefdoms.

The political class of post-Dayton Bosnia, in other words, has thrived off the state's in-built divisions, seeing its structures as solidifying their social base and having enormous political investments in maintaining the status quo at the expense of the country's population.

Blogger Jasmin Mujanovic has summed up the explicitly anti-democratic nature of this state [3]:

"The present constitutional structure in [Bosnia and Herzegovina] has created essentially an apartheid state that has institutionalized formerly mythologized"ancient ethnic hatreds"and made them a reality. We have segregated schools which serve only to reproduce xenophobia and chauvinism, and a political establishment that profits from the reactionary squabbling which these ethnic-fiefdoms, these modern-day Bantustans engender."

"The contemporary Bosnian state cannot even extend basic democratic rights to all of its citizens—only those belonging to the so-called"constitutive nations,"and even then only those living the appropriately homogenous locales, can really secure some semblance of supposed representation."

This system of ethnic representation carries with it an unwieldy and expensive bureaucratic apparatus. The cost of running the Dayton state consumes around 66 percent of the country's budget, putting added pressure on an already crippled national economy. Furthermore, the complicated system of legal and political checks and balances offers enormous opportunities for individual representatives to block the effective running of the state. Members of parliament can stop or significantly hamper the passage of legislation if they feel it to be in the interests of their ethnic constituency to do so—another mechanism whereby ethnicity is engrained in the fabric of the

state.

The result has been the emergence of a political culture in which the discourse of ethnic interests is cynically manipulated on an everyday basis and increasingly detached from the real concerns of the majority of citizens.

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IN THE past year, this system of representation has come under sustained protest by the population.

In June 2013, thousands of demonstrators took to the streets to force the political class to break a legislative deadlock that was having disastrous consequences [4]. The deadlock concerned a new law governing the assignment of citizen ID numbers—while the political parties engaged in all manner of bureaucratic wrangling, newborn children failed to receive ID numbers. In effect, they were denied citizenship.

Anger erupted across the country when news emerged that children requiring advanced medical care in the EU could not leave Bosnia due to the government's inability to resolve the deadlock. The protests cut through the ethnic logic of the post-Dayton state. Across the divisions, thousands of people came out, calling for an immediate resolution of the issue—and to express their contempt for all the ruling politicians.

The events in June 2013 gave expression to a gradual but real realignment of the key social antagonisms in Bosnian and Herzegovinian society. From vertical antagonisms between rival ethnic groups cemented during the civil war and reproduced by Dayton, increasingly, we are seeing a horizontal antagonism between the Bosnian political elite and civil society.

The artist Damir Niksic has summed it up this way: "This is a new paradigm, a new Bosnian paradigm. In other words, we're no longer talking about ethnicities, tribes, races and nations. Now we are talking about the proletarians, the unemployed, the reserve army of labor."

Niksic's claim is not an exaggeration. The protests in Bosnia today have expressed more than just a frustration with the political class; they have explicitly called for a new political system governed by the principles of social justice. They have successfully mobilized the "anti-political" sentiments of the population into a set of demands aimed addressing issues of unemployment and inequality in Bosnian society.

In Tuzla, Sarajevo and Bihac, protesters are demanding not just the resignation of the local and federal governments, but also that the salaries of future government ministers be pegged to those of industrial workers. We have seen demands for the confiscation of property from politicians and for the reinvestment of any revenues into reviving local industry.

Rather than merely demanding that government employees obey their own legal system, these protests are calling into question the existing legal order and agitating for a new set of legal norms that prioritize economic and social justice.

Protesters in Sarajevo have even suggested that these are mere transitional demands—stepping stones on the way to a much more radical vision. As one of their declarations put it [5]:

"When these demands are met, we can then ask for the start of conversations and actions at all levels of government in order to establish a more socially just order for all social strata; and for all those whose human dignity and material basic needs have been endangered or destroyed by the transitional theft, corruption, nepotism, privatization of public resources, an economic model that

favors the rich and financial arrangements that have destroyed any hope for a society based on social justice and welfare."

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THE MOBILIZATION of the anti-political sentiments of the population into a program of social revolution must look beyond the borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina if it is to succeed. The movement's ability to offer a viable alternative to the current crisis will turn on its capacity to forge stronger links across ethnic and religious divides, first within Bosnia itself, and secondly across the Balkan region as a whole.

While the current protests are in large part the result of the insurmountable problems of the Dayton model of governance, the particular weaknesses and contradictions of this system have been compounded by the global economic crisis and its specific expressions in Europe's southeast periphery. The wave of privatizations and rising youth unemployment that sparked and have continued to fuel the Bosnian protests are symptoms of a wider social crisis across the entire region.

In 2009, as Europe continued to suffer the impact of the financial crisis detonated the year before, Central and Southeastern Europe witnessed the highest regional rate of unemployment in the world, and youth unemployment rose more than in any other developing region, according to the International Labor Organization. This dramatic rise in unemployment is the result of decades of privatization and austerity, which have been the policies favored by consecutive governments hoping to further "integrate" the region into the wider European economy.

However, as Andreja Zikovic and Matija Medenica have argued [6], European integration, far from offering a solution to the problem of economic decline and unemployment, has accelerated the process of collapse:

"In the Balkans as a whole, the attempt to industrialize to ensure independence from the Great Powers increasingly detached the region from dependence on the Soviet economic zone and led it into dependence on the EU. The most important point to grasp is that the entire history of the market in the region has been one of external linkages of dependency at the expense of internal linkages between economies.

This is best understood if we imagine the Balkans as a bicycle wheel: as a set of spokes attached to the central hub, but having no connection among themselves whatsoever. This is why, from an economic point of view, it has always remained in a semi-colonial economic relationship of poverty and backwardness, which in turn has opened it up to Great Power military domination.

The current processes of EU orchestrated regional integration—such as the Central European Free Trade Association—does not aim to promote regional cooperation because that might enter into conflict with EU integration. In reality, the Balkans is being integrated as a captive market for Western goods and investments, reinforcing trends to deindustrialization and debt dependency."

Two mutually reinforcing processes, each with a history going back to at least the 1870s, lie at the heart of the current crisis: the integration of the Balkan region in a dependent relationship on larger European economies, and the fragmentation of the region into competing nation states. The demands of Bosnia's protests for a reversal of deindustrialization, and for the creation of jobs and a socially just state, puts their movement in direct confrontation with these processes.

While the political elite in Bosnia should be (and will be!) held accountable for the problems, they must also be understood as the local functionaries of a much broader exploitation of the Balkans by European capital. It has been at the behest of Europe's leaders that local industries have been

stripped of state investment, that social welfare has been cut back, and that a new elite has enriched itself.

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ANY BREAK with the current logic of privatization and austerity—policies that lie at the heart of the integration of southeastern Europe with the EU—will necessarily require an alternative program of development outside of Europe's domination. This will only be achieved through forging strategic alliances beyond Bosnia's borders.

There is certainly no shortage of allies for the Bosnian protesters. Since November 2012, we have seen movements of thousands take to the streets and public squares across the Balkans to protest corruption, austerity and unemployment. Governments have been brought down in Slovenia and Bulgaria, and states forced to withdraw particularly unpopular legislation in Albania and Serbia. Meanwhile, Greece has offered the sharpest and most consistent challenge to the EU's policies anywhere in Europe.

The reservoirs of contempt for the political elite run deep through the region, and as local industries close and unemployment climbs, anger will grow. The task for the left will be to thread these disparate but common strands of resistance together into a project of regional solidarity and organization—a political alternative that prioritizes the needs of the majority, using the wealth of the region for a common project of industrial revival and development.

Bosnians are well placed to rise to this challenge. To the extent that the Dayton system made explicit a form of divide-and-rule that facilitated the theft of public wealth and contained class conflict, Bosnia and Herzegovina once again appears as a microcosm of the wider Balkan region.

In their rejection of those politics of divide and rule and in their realignment of the key political antagonisms from conflicts between nations to a conflict between the political class and the rest of society, protesters in Tuzla, Sarajevo, Bihac, Zenica, Mostar and Banja Luka have offered us a glimpse of what a united struggle across the region might look like.

As the Sarajevo-based writer Andrej Nikolaidis noted:

"The unrest in Tuzla is therefore meaningful for the entire region. The message from Tuzla, which is also to be read in Podgorica, Zagreb and Belgrade, runs as follows: 'The game in which the ethno-elites protect 'their people' against the threats of other nations and at the same time undertake the absolutely irresponsible disposal of social wealth is over.'"

As that message spreads outwards from Tuzla, carried on waves of protest, the challenge will be for activists to look beyond the local political elites and see behind them so many European elites who are aiding the attempts to transform not just Bosnia, but the entire Balkan region into a single neoliberal experiment.

A new Balkans is possible—and we are seeing a glimpse of it in the streets of Bosnia and Herzegovina today.

James Robertson, February 11, 2014

P.S.

* <http://socialistworker.org/2014/02/11/the-revolt-rocking-bosnia>

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 31031), [Bosnia and Herzegovina: Workers and citizens' proclamation after the resignation of the government of Tuzla Canton](#) and <http://www.jasminmujanovic.com/1/post/2014/02/the-demands-of-the-people-of-tuzla-sarajevo-english.html>

[2] <http://left-flank.org/2013/10/31/anti-politics-elephant-room/#sthash.bu2q5Mo1.uPd8hZZG.dpbs>

[3] <http://www.transconflict.com/2012/05/a-new-narrative-why-a-bosnian-spring-is-bosnias-only-hope-305/>

[4] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/06/bosnian-parliament-blockaded-id-protest>

[5] See on ESSF (article 31031), [Bosnia and Herzegovina: Workers and citizens' proclamation after the resignation of the government of Tuzla Canton](#) and <http://www.jasminmujanovic.com/1/post/2014/02/the-demands-of-the-people-of-tuzla-sarajevo-english.html>

[6] See on ESSF (article) [Balkans for the peoples of the Balkans](#) <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article31065>