

The Albanian student struggle has reached historic dimensions

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An analysis of Albania's dynamic student protests and the potential for broader social protest against poverty, liberalism and corruption.

Chronology

Tuesday, December, 4 was a normal day in Albania. The news went out that the students of the Faculty of Architecture were boycotting school. The reason was a governmental decision to charge students approximately 30 Euros for each postponed exam. The news spread like wildfire in each faculty of the public universities of Tirana. On Wednesday a few thousand students gathered in front of the Ministry of Education to call for the abrogation of the government's decision. Encouraged by the burst of enthusiasm, the students called for another protest on Thursday. At least 10,000 students showed up. While the government was preparing the withdrawal of the decision on postponed exams, students began chanting new slogans. Everybody was adding demands. The most important one was the lowering by half of all tuition fees. Calling for student democratic participation within the universities, the need for serious public investments in higher education, the amelioration of living conditions in student dormitories and the shaming of corrupt professors were immediately becoming the new lingua franca of the students' protest.

On Thursday the government withdrew from the exam charge. But instead of weakening the protest, this step inflamed it. On Friday at least 15,000 thousand students showed up in front of the Ministry of Education. They were calling for free public education, and other radical ideas in university organization and students' studying and living conditions. Already on Friday it was the biggest protest in the history of Albania not organized by formal political parties since at least 1990-1991, when students and workers brought the bureaucratic socialist regime to its knees. Prime Minister Rama understood that he had lost the legitimacy battle with the students. He declared that in principle he agreed with their demands, but asked for a negotiating process with the students' representatives. On the other hand, he initiated a new strategy by holding the corrupt bureaucracy of public universities responsible and declaring the protesting students his allies. Nobody responded to his invitation. The students in the streets asked that the government capitulate to all of their demands.

The government hoped to gain some time. From Saturday to Monday the universities were closed due to the extended holidays. The number of protesters shrank, and conflicts between the more organized groups among the students erupted.

Nevertheless, on Tuesday, December 11, after the largest masses of students came back to Tirana from their native cities, 20,000-30,000 students gathered in front of the Ministry of Education. It was the largest protest in the history of Albania from 1991 onwards. Large numbers of citizens joined the students. People were bringing food, and water. You could barely move within the crowd. There were scenes of old people crying watching the students and encouraging them. The popular

enthusiasm reached its apogee.

Until the next day, the split between the students on strategy started to weaken the protest.

The struggle for hegemony

Spontaneity is the key word of this ongoing protest. Nevertheless, within the faculties and the crowd, from the first day of the protest, there were three divergent organizing groups. The first two – in coalition – were the student unions controlled by the two main opposition parties: The Democratic Party (PD) and the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI). Standing in their way was the Movement For the University (Lëvizja Për Universitetin – LPU), an independent student organization which has been the main opposition towards the government's neoliberal reform in higher education.

PD and LSI, by using their student unions, tried to turn the protest in a more overtly political direction, calling for the immediate fall of the government. But for the overwhelming majority of the students the university cause was the priority and they didn't want to be manipulated politically. Unable to use the protest, the PD and LSI student unions called LPU activists communist and Marxist-Leninists who were trying to divide the protest.

For several days it was a half-secret struggle within the struggle against the government. There were skirmishes, small acts of violence and a lot of threats. From time to time it was like a real war of position, where the PD-LSI student unions and LPU activists were struggling for each tree, to position themselves better in order to transmit their ideas towards the large multitude of students. While organizationally the parts were equal, PD-LSI were in advantage on the violence front (by using small gangsters in threatening and punching some activists, LPU activists were in a considerable advantage in speeches and creativity (almost all the songs chanted in the crowd came from the LPU repertoire).

Nevertheless, due to the students' call for unity, the two organized groups seem to have lowered the volume of their own internecine struggle.

Edi Rama's solitude

Despite struggle of organized groups for hegemony within the protest, the main factor in the protest continues to be spontaneity. Nobody can speak as a representative. Terms like representation or negotiations with the government have become heretical to the multitude. There are lots of lists of demands towards the government. The only common denominator among the students is: The government should accept all the demands without negotiations! Edi Rama, on the other hand, declares that his government accepts in principle the students' demands but he is not going to give in unless the students come to the negotiating table. While the students continue their resistance and refusal to negotiate, the governmental structures try to create fake student representatives (Socialist Party youth forum students). But still nobody wants to sit at the table of a begging Prime Minister.

This unprecedented resistance and refusal is putting the government in a crisis. Despite the fact that so far all student demands are "economic" – nobody has called yet for the overthrow of the government – the government has sunk to a historic low of legitimacy in the modern history of Albania. Rama's insistence on meeting the students' representatives seems more like a desperate move to save what he can for the survival of his government.

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P.S.

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