

Anarchists in the Bosnian Uprising

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The past two weeks have seen a fierce new protest movement in Bosnia, commencing with the destruction of government buildings and continuing with the establishment of popular assemblies. Unlike the recent conflicts in Ukraine, this movement has eschewed nationalistic strife to focus on class issues. In a region infamous for ethnic bloodshed, this offers a more promising direction for the Eastern European uprisings to come.

To gain more insight into the protests, we conducted two interviews. The first is with a participant in Mostar, Bosnia, who describes the events firsthand. The second is with a comrade in a nearby part of the Balkans, who explains the larger context of the movement, evaluating its potential to spread to other parts of the region and to challenge capitalism and the state.

Interview with a Participant

Give us a brief timeline of the important events.

On Wednesday, February 5, workers from several local companies that were destroyed by post-war privatization organized another protest in front of the Cantonal Government Building in Tuzla. Those workers have been protesting peacefully for a decade, organizing strikes and hunger strikes—which were very common in Bosnia until this month—but nobody listened. For just about the first time in post-war Bosnia, young people organized over social networks to express solidarity with desperate workers. Almost 10,000 people supported their protest on Thursday, February 6; that was when the first clashes with the police happened, and the first attempt to enter the government building.

On Friday, February 7, more than 10,000 people gathered in the post-industrial city of Tuzla in front of the Cantonal Government building, asking for the Prime Minister's resignation. The Prime Minister arrogantly refused to resign. None of the officials came out to speak to them, so people broke through the police lines, entered the building, and burned it down.

On the same day, solidarity protests with the workers of Tuzla were organized in almost all the industrial towns of Bosnia. News from Tuzla spread fast; people in Bihać, Sarajevo, Zenica, and Mostar felt that this could be a moment to try to win a change. After the police attacked protesters in Sarajevo, during which some of the people were pushed down and thrown into the river Miljacka, the crowd fought back, forcing back the police and burning down the building of the Cantonal Government, as well as the buildings of the Presidency (including the state flag), the municipality of Sarajevo Center, and several police cars and vans. In Bihać, people attacked the building of the Cantonal Government and smashed it up. The same thing happened in Zenica.

Everyone was anticipating the events in the ethnically divided city of Mostar. More than 4000 people gathered in front of the Cantonal Government, demanding resignations. Soon, the first rocks were thrown, to great applause. From that moment, more and more people were putting t-shirts, balaclavas, masks—whatever they could find—over their faces; without any police resistance, within a few minutes, the building was on fire. Then people went to the City Hall and burned it down, as well as the building of the cantonal Parliament, Mostar Municipality, and the offices of two leading nationalist political parties that have ruled this city since 1991. That made quite a statement.

Protests are still going on, and people have organized themselves in plenums [assemblies]. Four cantonal governments have been forced to resign. Two of them are negotiating with plenums about forming governments of people who are not active members of any political parties. The

authorities are fighting back hard—spreading fear of another civil war, arresting people, beating them, pressing charges for terrorism and attack on constitutional order...

Who participated? How and why did the protests spread? What limits did they reach?

The participants were from all social groups. Workers, unemployed, pensioners, many young people, demobilized soldiers, activists, football fans, human rights activists, parents with their children...

The people of Bosnia and Herzegovina are the poorest in Europe. Unemployment is over 50%; among young people, it is over 70%. At same time, Bosnian politicians are among the best paid in southeast Europe, and the most corrupt. The healthcare system is the worst in Europe, and social safety nets are almost nonexistent. The society that was one of the most egalitarian in Europe 25 years ago now has a huge social gap.

Capitalism and the process of privatization have completely destroyed the local economy; all the big factories and companies that were saved during the war have been privatized and shut down. All the wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few. There is no production in Bosnia any more, only import. The authorities are taking bigger and bigger loans from the IMF, knowing that they have no way of paying them back—so we can expect to be forced to privatize Bosnian Telecom and Electro-energetic system, the last viable public companies.

Those are the main reasons for the protests. It's hard to speak about the limits; the movement is still continuing on a daily basis, the protests as well as the meetings of the plenums. The demands that are being made by the plenums are clearly social: the revision of the privatization process and the like. Politicians are terrified of losing their privileges, their positions, their wealth, and their freedom; this is causing different political parties to unite against their own people. They are using the mainstream media to discredit protests and plenum participants. Religious leaders are pushed to speak against the protests in churches and mosques. People are being threatened with losing their jobs, and it is very difficult to get a job here. In Mostar, a trade union activist was brutally beaten up by "unknown persons." In Sarajevo, a red Hummer car drove into the crowd of protesters.

What organizational structures were involved in the protests? Did any pre-existing groups or organizations play an important role? How were decisions made? Have new relations or networks resulted?

The protests in Tuzla were sparked by the two Trade Unions of Dita and Polihem Tuzla, but they swiftly grew much bigger. None of the preexisting structures had the credibility or capacity to organize that many people. The protests themselves were spontaneous and chaotic. After a few days, the first organizational structures were formed, The Plenums of Citizens; this is the first time in recent history that the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina are practicing direct democracy. Decisions are made collectively at Plenum meetings. It's a process, and we are all still learning it. All the Plenums of Bosnia and Herzegovina are currently working on forming an interplenum coordination.

Describe the political and strategic differences among the people who took to the streets. Have there been internal conflicts?

As no preexisting political groups had control over the protests, many different people are involved, with different political agendas. The main differences are about the use of force in self-defense and the limits of civil disobedience. But all the people are united when it comes to the social demands. During the plenum meetings, everyone speaks in his or her own name and takes part in the decision-making process, so there are no real internal conflicts yet. Some political parties are attempting to cause such a conflict, but people are sticking together and so far we have resisted this successfully.

Which concrete tactics did protesters employ? Which ones were effective? How did different tactics spread?

Right now, protesters are primarily using road blockades as a form of pressure. Often, they block several roads in the town centers at the same time for hours, which makes the authorities react. It all depends on how many people are in the street on that day. New tactics and strategies are being discussed. Road blockades are proving quite effective, but the downside is that if they occur on a daily basis, some people begin to turn against the protesters because this disturbs their daily routine—they can't get to work or go shopping or whatever.

The tactic that made the politicians fear for the first time in last 18 years—that made many of them resign, that forced them propose many legal acts based on the demands of the protesters—was burning down the institutional buildings and political party offices. Many of the politicians were afraid that people would come to their homes to get them. Some have left the country.

Setting institutional buildings on fire is not going to solve any problems by itself. But most people agree that if this hadn't happened, the politicians would have never resigned, or heard the people's demands. None of us could even imagine 15 days ago that people would organize plenums, that politicians would be forced to negotiate with the people about forming nonpartisan governments, revising privatization, or cutting their salaries down to an average worker's wages.

Speak about nationalism and ethnic tensions in the protests. What has changed since the 1990s?

I am so happy and even proud to report that there is absolutely no nationalism among the protesters, including the demobilized soldiers. This is one of the things that everyone keeps repeating: these protests are social, not national. All the nationalist political parties have tried to turn the social conflict into a national conflict, but so far they have failed. Solidarity among different social groups, different cities, different ethnic groups, and direct democracy experiments mark the biggest change since the 1990s.

Has there been any influence in Bosnia/Herzegovina from the nearby uprisings and protest movements in Greece, Slovenia, Turkey, or elsewhere? What connections exist between comrades in Bosnia/Herzegovina and elsewhere in the Balkans and Europe? How should we compare what is happening in Bosnia/Herzegovina to the conflicts unfolding in Ukraine, for example?

The Turkish and Ukrainian protests have inspired people here to some extent. We are all aware of the repressive nature of the regimes there; if they could rise, why can't we? Most of the active people of Balkans are connected. This is a small geographic area, and the radical left, anarchist, and non-institutional movements are small and weak, so the contacts are mainly individual,

rarely resulting in concrete cooperation. Most often, we organize solidarity actions for each other, solidarity protests. The Balkan Anarchist Book Fair is one of our common projects.

The Bosnian protests have a much different character than the Ukrainian protests. The protests here are strictly social, unlike in Ukraine. It seems that the main demand there is loosening the ties to Russia and approaching the EU; there is a lot of neo-Nazi and radical right involvement. By contrast, the Bosnian protests are openly anti-nationalist.

Is there any chance of a wider wave of uprisings in Eastern Europe, following the so-called Arab Spring? What would that look like, if it did happen? What would be the possibilities and dangers?

It is hard to imagine a Balkan or Eastern European spring. But then again, if desperate and divided Bosnians could rise together against privatization and corruption, organize in plenums and practice direct democracy, then anything is possible! All the conditions are there. This region is poor, the privatization process ended tragically in all the new states, and there are a lot of people without any perspective for the future. If it does happen, it could play out in many different ways. One possibility is that the connections between the neighboring countries would strengthen, potentially taking new forms of economic and financial unions, based on principles that would be much more egalitarian than the present ones. This could pose a threat to the corporate European Union, and it could inspire people to rebel inside the EU.

The danger is obvious—that politicians will succeed in turning the social conflict into an inter-ethnic conflict. This is what they are trying to do in Bosnia at the moment. If capitalists feel seriously threatened, European and US structures will play this card. They have great previous experience with it, in the ex-Yugoslavian region especially.

Are there possibilities for a struggle to develop in Bosnia/Herzegovina that doesn't just call for a new and more honest government, but that rejects the legitimacy of capitalism and the state altogether?

There is a possibility for an anti-capitalist struggle to develop. There are already lots of anti-capitalist banners at protests. Some people's demands are explicitly anti-capitalist. But to reject the legitimacy of the State, there is hardly any possibility. In many people's minds, there are still fresh memories of fighting a war to get an independent state. The majority of people here feel that if the state disintegrated, there would be another war. They have no experience, or even historical memory, of organizing without leaders, political parties, trade unions, or religious institutions. Only a few people know anything about anarchist political theories and practices.

What does the future hold?

We are going to see a minimal increase in social justice, for sure. We are going to see massive cuts to the privileges, benefits, and salaries of politicians at all institutional levels. But it's not going to change the social picture of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The governments will need more funds, they will borrow money from the IMF and other global financial institutions, the debt will increase, and so will social unrest.

It's clear that people are not willing to go on hunger strikes any more, to commit suicide for not being able to feed their children or pay back loans. They are ready for new forms of organizing. Spring is coming soon and more and more people will look for justice in the streets and,

based on recent experience, in non-institutional forms. The current Bosnian economic, political, and institutional situation is so difficult that no one dares to make any long-term predictions, especially in the light of the recent events.

And Elsewhere in the Balkans...

Is there a shared context between the events in Bosnia and the other recent explosions in Eastern Europe—Ukraine, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia? They have taken different forms, but do they spring from common conditions?

These struggles are connected on various levels, in particular in former Yugoslavia. It's not just the shared history and language, nor the attention that our mainstream media focuses on events in other ex-Yugoslavian countries—it is also the fact that Yugoslavian republics were always multi-national, which only increased during and after the war. So information flows widely here, not just between activists. New methods of struggle and mobilization resonate in the collective imagination, and people adopt and adapt them.

As for what is common throughout the former Eastern bloc, I think people are experiencing the same basic problems. After more than twenty years of privatization, concrete memories of the repressive socialist years are fading, being replaced with a constructed nostalgia for a “good old days” that never existed. Meanwhile, people have become disillusioned with capitalism and all those promises about the free market and choice and democracy. In this situation, we see three basic demands over and over.

The first is to preserve the social state that is withering away, to stop the privatization of companies that always ends in massive layoffs and the elites making off with tremendous profits. The second is to throw out the current political representatives, and, more abstractly, opposition to “the system” in general. In former Yugoslavia, everyone has watched for years as the former socialist elites transformed into new capitalist ones, stealing millions while the people got even poorer. Elsewhere in the Eastern bloc, people who started from the same position and ideology of relative social(ist) equality have become interconnected with capitalist elites, using their political power to smooth the way for capitalist accumulation. This brings me to the third common demand: opposition to corruption, a logical conclusion of the other two demands.

During social explosions, these demands can produce different results. Many people seek a new “savior”—in Ukraine, this means the European Union, while elsewhere it means fresh political parties, such as Syriza in Greece. The pace at which cooptation of such explosions can occur, and the degree to which participants are radicalized, both depend largely on how well-organized anarchists and other anti-authoritarians are, and how quickly they respond to events. In Greece, for instance, Syriza knows they have very little mobilization potential compared to anarchist or communist organizations, so it is difficult for them to take over struggles.

What does it tell us that participants in these protests are refusing the forms of nationalism that have inflicted so much suffering in the region?

To understand the situation, we must back up to look at the whole picture. The solution that the “international community” (organizations like the UN, NATO, and EU) offered for the ethnic war of the 1990s was, of course, simply the continuation of this war by different means. With

the Dayton “peace” agreement, they divided Bosnia into three major parts: Serbian, Muslim, and Croatian. All the institutions were tripled, everything was divided—streets, neighborhoods, villages and towns, cemeteries, hospitals, everything.

Practically, that means that if you graduate from a university in the Muslim part of Bosnia, the degree will not be recognized in the Serbian part. If you try to buy a ticket for Serbia in the Muslim part, sometimes they will not sell it to you, and vice versa. These problems caused by nationalism imposed by the elites just compound all the other problems I already described: unchecked privatization, corruption, economic and social breakdown. In Bosnia, unemployment is around 45 percent—60 percent for young people. Ten jobs are canceled every day, while prices and living costs are rapidly increasing.

What is happening now can be understood better in light of the movement Dosta (“Enough”) that started in 2006. Dosta grew from a small internet forum into regular weekly meetings of people in the central square in Sarajevo, getting bigger every week and addressing economic and social issues. It was the first moment after the war in which people came together regardless of nationality, and without being forced to be a part of a tripartite structure. Most of the protests were peaceful at first, but after a young person was stabbed on a tram, they became bigger and more oriented towards direct action. The parliament in Sarajevo was stoned and actions took place against some individual politicians. The organizational structure of Dosta spread into different cities, but it was politically diverse—including everyone from libertarian comrades to people who used it as an opportunity to form communist and social-democratic parties.

So, many years ago already, people turned away from the kind of nationalism that would divide them into Croat, Serb, and Muslim. The problem is that the solution for this was assumed to be that everyone should identify instead as Bosnians. Though it is exciting how anti-nationalistic today’s protests are, the problem is that this rejection of nationalism is premised on a new national identity, and there is little opposition to this sort of nation-building process intended to produce a new unification of people. On one level, this is better than remaining divided into three hostile parts that can be played against each other by the elites of Bosnia, Serbia, and Croatia. Yet as anarchists, we do not see building national identities as a solution for anything.

What are the fault lines within this movement? What will happen next?

Tuzla, the starting place of the protests, used to be one of the most industrialized cities in Yugoslavia, with left-wing (socialist) unions and workers. Privatization hit Tuzla very hard. Workers from five factories were protesting in front of governmental and local institutions for months, if not the whole year—always peacefully, trying to engage someone in conversation. Finally, they simply had enough, came prepared, and started riots.

They were supported by protests in 33 cities. Some people from the traditional left are joining the current administration in calling for new elections, but the message from the streets is clear: no one represents us. After the parliaments, party headquarters, police stations, and other symbols of authority were burned, the institutional left realized that they were not in control of the narrative or of the way the protests were developing. As a result, they want to “normalize” the protests by delegitimizing diversity of tactics. As usual, their efforts intersect with the efforts of the government to crush the movement by means of direct repression: numerous arrests, injuring people during interrogations, and so on.

Right now, the plenums that emerged from the movement are drawing up to 1000 people in Tuzla, Sarajevo, and other cities. The fact that so many people wish to participate in these plenums

reflects how alienated people feel from the so-called democratic process of the parliamentary system, in which the only form of participation is to vote for politicians who differ merely in name. These plenums don't just express deep dissatisfaction with the parliamentary system, they are also a step towards building alternative horizontal decision-making processes.

As for the content of these plenums, the proposals raised there vary from reformist to radical. With such big plenums, it can often happen that there are unequal power relations, excluding women or people who don't have the same experience with public speaking.

Another danger is that people will accommodate themselves to merely making demands. Mainstream media and politicians ceaselessly repeat the same old questions: *Who are you? What do you want? Who can we talk to? What are your demands?* It can be hard not to fall in this trap. But to establish mutual understanding and solidarity, we need time to develop our ideas and desires. It takes time to imagine alternatives beyond reforming the existing system; identifying demands at the beginning of a revolt only closes the political space in which we could form a new vision together. When the elites try to impose their understanding of time and the rules of their game, refusing to cooperate makes us stronger, not weaker. It can also thwart the emergence of authorities within the movement, keeping it decentralized and horizontal.

It's hard to say which direction the revolt will develop. But we can already say that this is an important step towards building a culture of resistance in the Balkans, which can serve as an inspiration elsewhere. Similar demonstrations have already spread to neighboring Montenegro.

Given the experience from Croatia, Slovenia, and other similar struggles, I am afraid that the political space that opened on the streets will close soon, due to the absence of organized networks of libertarian activists. It appears that the dominant discourse will be channeled into the nation-building process—new elections, new parties, and the like—repressing the most radical ideas and class consciousness of this resistance, which is still emphasized by those who remain on the streets. This is not unexpected. My hope is that anarchist and autonomist groups and individuals who found each other on the streets will now be capable of building a stronger network and general culture of resistance, so as to be more prepared next time something like this happens. Because it will.

What is happening is exciting and important, but it is just one episode in a longer struggle. Because of our region's socialist past, we don't have a living history of anti-authoritarian movements; we need to develop the ability to practice horizontal decision-making and direct action during this and future struggles. In that regard, every opening like this is an opportunity to move forward.

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