

Born in Flames, Died in Plenums

The Bosnian Experiment with Direct Democracy, 2014

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“The war is still going on.”
-Graffiti in Mostar

In February 2014, two decades after the war that left Bosnia devastated and divided into three ethnic regions, the country erupted in flames again. This time, it was not ethnic strife, but the rage of people uniting against politicians. For years, these politicians had stirred up ethnic divisions to distract them while systematically looting the country. The result was intense poverty: unemployment was at 44 percent in 2014, and up to 60 percent among the young.

People flooded into the streets. Beating back the police, they burned the parliament and municipal buildings. In the turmoil of the protests, panicked politicians stole money from the national treasury. In Mostar, a city divided between Muslims and Catholics, several politicians sent their families into Croatia through the nearby border. Protests under the slogans “Freedom is my nation” and “Let’s fire all the politicians” drew crowds in 33 cities. People gathered to experiment with direct democracy in assemblies of up to a thousand—something that had not been seen on such a scale in any ex-Yugoslavian country since the last Balkan wars.¹ Outside Bosnia, partisans of direct democracy expressed considerable enthusiasm about what some of them called the Bosnian Spring.

There were many inspiring things about the 2014 uprising—the rejection of nationalism and representative democracy, the visibility of women protesting in what was otherwise still a traditional society, the focus on social and economic struggles rather than ethnic hatred. Many people from all sectors of society were radicalized through the protests.

However, the uprising abated just as the plenums were getting off the ground. At the time, many saw the plenums as the next step after the riots: once the police had been defeated and the politicians put on the defensive, it was time for people to get together and figure out what they wanted instead. Yet a few months later, the government had reasserted control, the plenums had lost all their leverage, and it was back to business as usual.

What defeated the uprising? Was it repression in the streets, or pacification in the plenums? Was it the division *between* riot and plenum? Or would it have died anyway?

“Where were you when we were fighting on the streets?” the old worker demanded of the young people who had facilitated the plenums six months prior. He was still protesting in front of the parliament in Sarajevo every day—only now, just like before the uprising, he and his friends were on their own.

The Plenum vs. the Street

At the beginning, the plenums were an organic expression of the struggle on the streets. Like the protests, they drew people who had never participated in such struggles before. Some people did not feel comfortable in the clashes, yet wanted to speak out about their anger, or to articulate their desires for the future. They came together with demonstrators to form directly democratic assemblies, dubbed plenums.

The plenums served many as a kind of collective therapy. They offered a common space in which people could be heard: for the first time in their lives, they felt that their opinions mattered. They spoke about the war, about post-traumatic stress, about their living conditions, about their hatred of the system that had humiliated them to such an extent that they no longer felt like human beings. “Struggle gave us our dignity back,” many people said.

The procedures of the plenums were intended to keep power horizontal: roles rotated between participants, speakers were limited to a few minutes each, the facilitation was intended to foster inclusiveness and egalitarianism. In some cases, this served to keep the plenums a diverse space. Elsewhere, those who had more formal education were more comfortable in the discussions, as they were used to articulating themselves in a certain public discourse; in some of the plenums, influence accrued in the hands of intellectuals like Asim Mujkić, a professor of political science who repeatedly represented the Sarajevo plenum in the media. Meanwhile, some people who had participated in the demonstrations did not come to the plenums; others came at first, then stopped coming. Some apparently trusted the plenums to represent their needs, whether they attended or not. Others likely resented the idea that anyone was speaking in their name.

Just as attendance at the plenums was dying down, the police were quietly reestablishing control of the streets. The city governments set back up in smaller offices outside the burned buildings.

“What about the people who burned the buildings?” I asked. “Did they participate in the plenums here in Tuzla?”

“No,” she answered, “They didn’t. They sent a representative to the first plenum, before things really got going. He said that if the government didn’t change its tune, they were going to burn the buildings. But after that, none of them came to the plenums.”

I could understand why people who had just burnt down the headquarters of the government would be hesitant to show up to public meetings. Indeed, not long after everything died down, the police began doling out terrorism charges. At the same time, what kind of sense does it make to burn down the offices of the government, and *then* present petitions to them? It seemed to me that the revolt was doomed from the moment that a separation appeared between fighting the old order and seeking a new one.

Institutions vs. Tools

The plenum facilitators and the most active organizers of working groups, who had started their work in an honest attempt to spread the struggle into other spheres of life, found themselves in a position of de facto authority. They were the ones setting the agenda and determining the course of discussions; they became the names and faces of the uprising. It was up to them, it seemed, to identify, express, and prioritize the demands that had driven people to rise up. Most of these organizers never wanted that kind of power—but they wanted the uprising to succeed in changing Bosnian society, and they believed that the plenums were essential to this.

Many of the facilitators were committed to the principles of direct democracy. They trusted that adhering to directly democratic procedures in the assemblies would stave off power imbalances and bureaucracy. But already, in this hope, a subtle shift had taken place: rather than vesting legitimacy in the needs and desires of the participants in the uprising, they were beginning to vest it in the plenums as institutions. Instead of serving as one tool among many with which to solve problems and meet needs, the plenums were becoming an end unto themselves.

As the demonstrations came to an end, the plenums ceased serving as a tool to reinforce the actions people took in the streets. More and more, they took on the role of a traditional protest organization, a sort of watchdog monitoring the government. Only without teeth.

“We didn’t mean to end up in that situation,” said one of the former facilitators of the Sarajevo plenums. “We wanted to help, but not to have so much control over the process. It wasn’t clear to us at the time that it was happening that way.”

Presenting Demands vs. Building a Common Language of Struggle

The riots of spring 2014 gave Bosnian politicians a scare for the first time in many years. As soon as they felt safe again, they retaliated on several fronts. Hoping to discredit protesters in the media, they compared burning the parliament in Sarajevo to Serbian aggression during the siege; this set the stage for them to press terrorism charges later. At the same time, they attempted to channel the movement back into conventional politics, making it less radical, less unpredictable, less uncontrollable. Unfortunately, the plenums turned out to be conducive to this effort.

The Bosnian uprising gave voice to thousands of individual desires, ideas, and needs. But rather than connecting these in a common language of struggle that could preserve what was unique in each while creating a platform for people to act in concert, the consensus-building process of the plenums served to reduce this diversity of voices to a few basic demands.

In an attempt to strengthen the leverage of the plenums, the plenums of various cities made contact and undertook to formulate a list of common demands. Working groups that consisted of fewer and fewer people worked through thousands of demands, joining some together, interpreting and adjusting others, discarding some altogether. It took them until April 9, two months after the riots, to present the common demands of all the plenums to the government at a symbolic protest in Sarajevo.

They received no response. By the time the plenums had reduced everyone’s rage to a few demands, the government did not need to care anymore. This was the last nail in the coffin of the uprising.

“When you came here from Slovenia and told us that the movement would die in the assemblies,” he said, “I didn’t believe you. But it happened just the way you said it would.”

Government vs. Self-Organization

In Tuzla, where the uprising started, the riots had forced the prime minister of the canton to resign. The plenum then demanded that a non-affiliated provisional government be formed until the regular elections. They expected this government to report to the plenum every week. Indeed, they got a provisional government with a professor for prime minister, accompanied by a few ministers who had not been much involved in politics before. Yet it soon turned out that not only were many of these new politicians connected to the established political parties, they were also involved in corruption, which had been one of the immediate causes of the uprising in the first place. It didn’t take long for the newly elected politicians to stop communicating with the plenum and its committees. There were new faces in the government, but the elite had preserved its power.

The second-to-last entry on plenumsa.org, the website of the Sarajevo plenum, is about responding to the floods that ravaged Bosnia in May 2014.² Self-organized relief efforts by the

participants of plenums were essential to helping many people to weather this disaster, while the government did precious little to help. Yet after that, these sites of self-organization were abandoned. The following October, the elections brought one of the conservative parties back to power in Tuzla—the party rumored to have been pulling the strings of the provisional government all along.

And the leader of this new government? A former minister of the interior, who had been in charge of the police.

“I have one enemy. You are not my enemy, the government is my enemy,” the old man said, addressing his old comrades from the plenums. “We said everything we had to say to the enemy when we burned the parliament.”

Democracy vs. Freedom

Over the past few years, there have been several movements in Bosnia, each of them going a bit further than the last. Each of these movements has brought new people into the streets and then subsided—but the question is what happens next. Do these people continue to develop their capacity to act autonomously, building strength from uprising to uprising? Or do they end up joining the ranks of the political parties?

Basing social struggles on the demand for more democracy—whether representative or direct—is especially seductive in Bosnia, where people feel that the Dayton agreement paralyzed the country by enforcing divisions along ethnic lines throughout the administration and daily life. Many people in Bosnia think that the solution to all their problems would be to create a functional, unified state no longer divided according to the Dayton treaty, incorporating everyone from the three “nations” as fellow citizens. They look approvingly to the countries of northern and western Europe as a model for their own. Even many who consider themselves radicals understand direct democracy as a means to this end, rather than a way of restructuring society from the ground up. This may explain why it was such a short step from the direct democracy of the plenums back to the (barely) representative democracy of the government. When we legitimize our struggles by means of the rhetoric of democracy, it opens the door for the partisans of the status quo to justify the *return to normal* on the same grounds. Order must be restored so there can be proper elections!

In fact, the same unemployment, poverty, and ethnic strife that have inflicted so much suffering in Bosnia are spreading all around Europe, from Greece to Finland. Modernizing the government and purging it of “corruption” is not enough to turn a country into a wealthy social democracy; in a capitalist world, there will never be enough wealth to go around. If we limit ourselves to attempting to reform governments—even if that means replacing them with networks of plenums intended to fulfill the same functions of governing—we will never get to the root of the problem. What would it mean to look at the uprising and the plenums as steps towards a totally different social order, rather than a means to revitalize this one?

Perhaps if the plenums had served as spaces for coordinating ongoing action, they could have propelled the uprising further, organizing new attacks to keep the authorities at bay and generating new forms of life outside the capitalist economy. Once the discussions in the plenums became abstract, it was inevitable that regardless of the participants’ and facilitators’ intentions they would be reduced to *delegating*, to *representing*, to *petitioning*. As “direct” as the plenums

aspired to be, they ended up treating the uprising as an expression of desires that had to be represented, not as a space where those desires could be fulfilled. Once the participants understood the uprising that way, it was only natural to address those desires to the government—the proper representational body—in the form of demands. Those demands could only strengthen the government, fatally weakening the plenums.

The Bosnian uprising of 2014 is just one example out of a long line of experiments with assemblies as a tool of revolt. It appears that the assembly cannot serve as a place for envisioning the future and then looking around for some other political body to institute it. That political body will always be the state, which has no need of the assembly. Likewise, the assembly must not become an institution with its own procedures that are regarded as legitimate in and of themselves—if it does, then at best, it will *become* the state. To play a part in liberation, the assembly has to be a tool via which power is exercised directly according to a different logic, a logic that does not concentrate it but disperses it, promoting the autonomy and freedom of the participants.

“This had to happen,” emphasized the young mother in hijab, her voice trembling with emotion, as she gestured at the burnt-out shell of the government headquarters in Tuzla. “The buildings had to burn. The uprising was the best thing that ever happened in my life. I hope it will happen again. It has to.”

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