

What's up with Bosnia?

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Since the beginning of recent struggles in Bosnia, I've received many questions from Western comrades about their character and what is actually going on. A lot of comrades were dissatisfied with media coverage which didn't provide enough information. Initially, I've decided to be careful and not to comment on Bosnia, because I feel like I don't have enough information to provide a deeper analysis. That is the reason why this article is more of a short journalistic analysis. Of course, a final in depth analysis will follow later.

So, what's up with Bosnia?

From Industrial Struggle to Riots

Everything began with demonstrations of workers in five of Tuzla's factories: *Dita, Polihem, Poliolhem, GUMARA* and *Konjuh*. Workers were protesting against privatization of their companies which leads to bankruptcy and lock outs. One could think that this is just another ex-Yugoslavia workers' story, because indeed such cases are pretty common but, maybe precisely because they are so common, the workers went further. Since workers were persistent in their demonstrations, police have intervened by beating up and arresting many of them. That was the spark that turned into a wildfire.

On February 7, Bosnia was on its feet protesting against corrupt government, unemployment and the overall social situation. The situation erupted and masses were on the streets.

In Tuzla, police surrendered to protestors, laid down their shields, helmets and batons, and let the masses storm the buildings. Protestors burned down the headquarters of Tuzla's City Assembly and that of the City Administration. Workers from the five Tuzla's factories issued their demands:

1. Maintaining public order in cooperation between citizens, police and the civil protection, to avoid any criminalization, politicization and manipulation of any protests.
2. Establishing a technical government, made up of professional, non-political party members, uncompromised people, who have not had a single mandate in any level of government, which would lead the Tuzla canton to the election of 2014. This Government shall have the duty to submit weekly plans and reports on the activities and achievement of given objectives. The government's work is to be monitored by all interested citizens.
3. Resolving, by emergency procedure, the questions of regularity of the privatization of the following companies: *Dita, Polihem, Poliolhem, GUMARA* and *Konjuh*, and:
 - bind the length of service and ensure health care for the workers;
 - prosecute the economic criminals and all the actors who participated in it;
 - seize illegally acquired assets;
 - annul the privatization contracts;
 - do a revision of privatization;

- return the factories to workers and place them under the control of public authorities in order to safeguard the public interest, and start production in those factories where possible.
4. Balancing the salaries of government representatives to the salaries of employees in the public and private sectors.
 5. Cancellation of additional payments to representatives of the government, as personal income, on the basis of participation in commissions, committees and other bodies, as well as other unreasonable and unjustified compensations that workers in the public and private sectors don't have.
 6. The abolition of wages for ministers and possibly other government officials, who are getting wage payments after the expiration or termination of their mandate.¹

In Sarajevo, protesters burned down the headquarters of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Government of Sarajevo Canton, along with various cars. Windows were smashed on Hypo Bank. The building of the Archive of Bosnia and Herzegovina got caught in the fire and some material was destroyed. It is worthwhile to note that the facts run counter to the media campaign stating that protesters deliberately set it on fire. Since the material was from the time of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the media have used this incident to discredit the demonstrations.

In Mostar, protesters stormed and burned down the headquarters of the Herzego-Neretvian government. After that, they burned down with Molotov cocktails the headquarters of the City Administration, the *Croatian Democratic Union's*² and the *Party of Democratic Action's*³ HQs. Police didn't intervene, because in last few months they haven't chosen a director of regional police, who is the only person that can activate Special Forces. In these demonstrations, protestors from "both sides of the river" (i.e., both Bosniaks and Croats) participated.

In Zenica, protestors stormed the mayor's office, and he said that he'd offer his resignation if that would help solving the crisis. The Prime Minister of Tuzla Canton, Sead Čaušević, offered his resignation. Was that a first victory for a movement?

According to the Croatian newspaper *Jutarnji List*, in protests in Sarajevo 93 people were injured, of which 73 were police officers and 20 civilians. Overall police repression was really severe and it was one of the triggers for these riots. There are numerous videos showing police beating up people, throwing rocks at them or throwing them in a river. Some European Union politicians even threatened armed intervention⁴ if riots didn't stop. This shouldn't be taken as a mere threat since Himzo Selimović, Director of the Directorate for the Coordination of Police Units in the Bosnian Federation, asked the EU and international community for armed intervention in Bosnia if riots continue going.⁵ After that, he offered his resignation. It's also important to mention how

¹ English translation of the whole text: "Bosnia and Herzegovina: Workers and citizens' proclamation after the resignation of the government of Tuzla Canton"

² Croatian Democratic Union (Serbcro. HDZ) is major Croatian political party in Bosnia. They are democratic Christian party of right centre. Party shares the name with party of the same name from Croatia, because in the 1990s they were originally one organisation.

³ The Party of Democratic Action (Serbcro. SDA) is major Bosniak political party in Bosnia. They are the democratic Muslim part of the right centre.

⁴ "EU to Consider Intervention in Bosnia if Tension Escalates," *Novinite*.

⁵ "Demonstranti se razišli, uspostavljen saobraćaj," *Al Jazeera*.

the Russian government attacked the EU for condemning the riots and used Bosnia to bring up once more the EU's support for oppositional riots in Ukraine.⁶ Are we really going to see an armed intervention in Bosnia?

Many people were surprised by the outburst of anger and violence in such a short time. But was it really that surprising after the "Arab Spring," Greece and other similar struggles we have witnessed recently? Mostly young people participated in these riots and if we take into account how young generations in ex-Yugoslavia literally have no future rare not that surprising. But this was far from mindless violence. Protestors only attacked the symbols of corruption and power, i.e., government and party buildings—exactly the places that are responsible for their situation.

The riots stopped, but struggle continued—now in other forms.

Short Comment on Media Coverage

During the riots, Bosnian media tried to present protesters as a wild bunch of hooligans and vandals that don't have the support of Bosnian citizens. The burning down of the Archive helped them to shape that picture. The media house *Al Jazeera* was one of the biggest media machines with their advice to citizens: do not leave your homes unless it's really urgent and interviews with unionists that were calling the police to organise better in order to repress rioters, and that were supposed to discredit claims how these riots were initiated by workers.⁷

The Serbian and Croatian media in Bosnia tried to present the riots as a Bosniak conspiracy against the other two nations.

There have been few left liberal media that tried to inform objectively or that showed their support for the protests. Also, there are a lot of Facebook groups maintained by protesters that offer an "alternative" to mainstream media.

For primarily English speaking people, it's important to stress that a group of scholars have set up an Internet archive, *Bosnia-Herzegovina Protest Files*, where you can find English translations of all documents that are relevant to the movement. An article posted on the website of Jasmin Mujanović, "*The Demands of People of Bosnia and Herzegovina*," is also really useful, where he grouped all demands that people have issued during these demonstrations.

Political and Economic Background

Bosnia and Herzegovina is probably one of the most complex countries in Europe. The bloody civil war of 1992–1995 was ended by the Dayton Agreement, which was co-signed by Croatia and Serbia, and divided Bosnia into two entities: the Bosnian Federation and Republika Srpska (Republic of Bosnian Serbs), and Brčko District, a self-governing unit that is formally part of both entities. Even with the end to the war, Bosnia and Herzegovina has always been a boiling area because of its administrative complexity and the interests of political elites that frequently provoked national hostility between Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs. Political elites have so far kept people sticking to their national identities. Serbian elites have tried to get more and more autonomy for Republika Srpska; Bosnian elites were trying to get a more centralised Bosnia, while Croatian elites have been fighting for a third entity—a Croatian one. The Croatian Minister of

⁶ "Vijeće federacije RF: Stav Europske unije prema Sarajevu je politika dvostrukih standarda," *Ruski Vjesnik*.

⁷ Dragan Markovinai, "Narodni bunt i medijska demagogija," *Abrašmedija*

Foreign Affairs, Vesna Pusić, recently supported this idea as a possible solution of the crisis in Bosnia.⁸

Since I've mentioned administrative complexity, it's important to comment how it also drags along administrative inefficiency, which affects the lives of the Bosnian people. For example, riots are rooted in protests for the Unique Master Citizen Number,⁹ a number that the government issues and which it hasn't been able to issue. Because of that, newborn babies were not able to receive health care or leave Bosnia to get it somewhere else.

When we are talking about Bosnia, people usually like to emphasise only problems related to national identity, while they "forget" social ones. Bosnia is in a really big economic crisis, that has highly enhanced austerity measures and flexibilization of the labour market, along with well-known problems of 1990s privatization, incredibly high unemployment (44 percent of workers are unemployed!) and a high number of workers that work and don't receive salaries. The privatization of companies in ex-Yugoslav countries usually resulted in companies bankrupting and workers losing their jobs, as new owners were not interested in investing in companies, but only in "sucking out" capital and surplus as fast as possible. That created a whole stratum of rich people which workers despise. Because of the experience of Yugoslav self-managing socialism, workers feel really connected to their workplaces. They cannot understand the new mantra for flexibilisation of markets, nor why "their" companies are bankrupt.

The overall Bosnian economic model is based on opening to investments of foreign capital. Andreja Živković writes how

Until 2008 foreign capital flows fed growth based on imports and consumer debt, but at the same time destroyed industry and created the present debt crisis. On the one hand, an overvalued currency pegged to the Euro enabled the borrowing needed to pay for imports; but on the other, it acted as a disincentive to investment in the real economy and made exports uncompetitive. Given the economy is completely dependent on external sources of growth, and the financial crisis of emerging markets triggered by Argentina will no doubt lead to further reverberations in the Eurozone, Bosnia now finds itself at a turning point.¹⁰

Bourgeoisie: Capitalism, Nationalism and Conspiracy Theories

These riots didn't just wake up the workers of Bosnia, but they also woke up the bourgeoisie. They've seen an authentic movement against them, a movement that was based on social and class issues rather than national ones. And they had to intervene as quickly as possible.

The prime minister of Sarajevo Canton, Suad Zeljaković, resigned from his position. The SDA called for calming down the situation and prosecution of hooligans. But certain Bosniak academics and politicians started to claim that the demonstrations were a conspiracy against Bosniaks that want a more centralised and unified Bosnia. They claim that the demonstrations are organised by the EU to "federalise" Bosnia even more.

⁸ Robert Bajruši, "VOĐEĆI HRVATSKI INTELEKTUALCI PREDLAŽU: 'Evo kako riješiti probleme u BiH,'" *Jutarnji List*.

⁹ Serbcro. Jedinstveni matični broj građanina (JMBG).

¹⁰ Andreja Živković, "The People's Uprising: A Break with Dayton Bosnia?" *Lefteast*.

Serbian and Croatian national elites have tried to present the riots and struggles as a “Bosniak Spring” (Bosnian Serb politician Mladen Bošić compared protests to the “Arab Spring”). For them, these riots are nothing but a conspiracy against their nations and an attempt of new Bosniak nationalist parties to attack cantonal governments in order to create a centralised Bosnia where Croats and Serbs would be just national minorities. These riots were just a Bosniak anti-bureaucratic “Yogurt Revolution.” This argument dominated the national media and was backed up with a claim about why there were no protests outside of the Federation.

The HDZ of Bosnia and Herzegovina claimed that riots were a “classical example of coup d’état on institutions that were created by Washington and Dayton structure of BiH, with the aim of destruction of federal system of Federation BiH and regional institutions of government.”¹¹ They continued how the cry of “This is Bosnia!” meant that a message was being sent to Bosnian Croats. Bosnian (Catholic) Archbishop Vinko Puljić accused the international community for the riots.

Various conspiracy theories were the only sanctuary for the bourgeoisie, which obviously refuses to believe how workers are capable of their own independent thinking and actions.

The President of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, claimed that there will be no unrest in Republika Srpska. For him, the unrest was only in the Federation, because of a Bosniak conspiracy for a Unitarian Bosnia. Later he went to Belgrade to meet with Serbian vice president Aleksandar Vučić, who stated how “people on the other side of the River Drina [in Republika Srpska] are always interested in the opinion of Serbia, which just wants stability.”¹²

But while the Serbian vice president issued his calls for stability, the Belgrade Police Union issued a statement where they showed sympathy for social protests in Bosnia, claiming that a similar scenario is possible in Serbia “where there are also many destitute, unemployed, or employed people not receiving salaries, with corruption at all levels and political manipulation of citizens” and threatened to join demonstrations if they appear in Serbia.¹³ That should be taken really seriously, considering industrial struggles of workers in Kraljevo and Vranje that even blocked a highway on February 12.¹⁴

Croatian Prime Minister Zoran Milanović visited Mostar after the riots and brought the same message of “stability” and wanted to “calm the situation down.” When journalists asked him why he didn’t, as a prime minister of other country, visit the Bosnian capital Sarajevo, he replied that Mostar is “closer.” Of course, the point of his visit was to visit a town with a Croatian majority in order to head off Croats from joining protests.

At the same time, police were arresting Croats who tried to organise demonstrations in Livno against the HDZ in Bosnia. Protests of support were organised in all the major towns of Republika Srpska (but with really few participants) and the workers of the wood industry in Drvar (RS) supported protests. Also, Republika Srpska’s Army Veterans Association issued a statement in which they claim that they’ll start protests if Milorad Dodik doesn’t step down.¹⁵ It is clear how people are, despite bourgeois and media manipulations, trying to show that these demonstrations have a social and class character and how they are refusing to let nationalists turn them against each other. Like the graffiti in Tuzla said: “death to all nationalists.”

¹¹ “Kaos i anarhija u BiH: GORILE ZGRADE VLADE: Gotovo 100 ozlijeđenih, uništeni brojni automobili, devastirane ulice...” *Jutarnji List*.

¹² Marija Ristić, “Serbia, Croatia Meet Bosnian Leaders to ‘Calm’ Unrest,” *Balkan Insight*.

¹³ “Statement by the Belgrade Police Union (Belgrade #1).

¹⁴ “Radnici ‘Jumka’ blokirali autoput kod Vranja.

¹⁵ “Declaration by RS Veteran Union (RS #1).

Plenums: Organisation of Struggle or Its Obstruction?

In Tuzla, Sarajevo, Bihač, Mostar and Brčko, popular plenums were organised. (To be honest, every minute, a new town tries to organise its plenum, so I've probably left some of them out.)

Plenums are direct democratic assemblies, which are inspired by the organisational model used by Croatian students during their university blockades in 2009. On the question of *what is a plenum*, activist Damir Arsenijević replies:

A plenum is an assembly of all the members of a group. It is a public space for debate. It has no leaders or prohibitions. Decisions are made publicly.... A plenum is not a political party, or an NGO, or a one-person association. A plenum is the real, and the only, democracy. A Plenum makes and adopts demands to all the institutions of state power by its own declaration. Everybody stands behind the declarations, because they are the words of us all and the demands of us all. All other modes of activity towards the institutions of state power are a continuation of corruption, party-political thievery, and the pursuit of personal benefit and enrichment at the expense of a robbed people.¹⁶

But, although plenums are usually seen as a positive thing—as places where masses can finally be heard—I have to express a certain scepticism regarding the plenum in Tuzla. My scepticism comes from the persistent ignoring of the original workers' demands by the plenum. The plenum only called for peaceful demonstrations and technical government, instead for the original social questions regarding the five companies.

The workers of failed companies who have for years demanded their rights before the cantonal institutions, and organizers of the protests in Tuzla, organized a Plenum of citizens, in which they called on all citizens to join together and jointly strengthen and decide proposals which will today go to the Board of Tuzla Canton.

The organizers at the meeting stated that the fight for their rights must continue through democratic means and by listening to citizens' demands, and that support had been given by members of the academic community in Tuzla.

We have invited all the citizens of Tuzla and I'm glad that a lot of lawyers, professors, educated and professional people responded. Here we present three points which we propose, they are also expanded. Such is the situation that we cannot do nothing in a hurry, we want everything to be done expertly and according to the law.¹⁷

As we can read from plenum resolutions, it looks like petty-bourgeois experts ran to help workers in their struggle, telling them what is best and realistic to do. Also, the plenum in Tuzla got the chance to propose their own people who will have mandates to form local government.

In Sarajevo, the plenum had more popular demands that can cover the type of demands people proposed:

- Lower salaries and compensation for political functionaries at all levels of government!

¹⁶ Damir Arsenijević, "What is plenum?"

¹⁷ Jasmin Mujanović, "The Demands of People of Bosnia and Herzegovina."

- End compensation with the end of the term!
- Sell the new car pool and invest that money into development of factories in bankruptcy!
- Reform and make transparent public expenditures and revenues!
- Pass the law on property origins!
- Process the suspects for abuse of power!
- Invalidate all illegal privatization contracts and establish the responsibilities of authorities.
- Form an independent anti-corruption commission.
- Damage resulting from protests cover with that part of revenue intended for compensation of government representatives.¹⁸

From all this, we can see how struggle took another shape—from riots to plenums. We'll have to wait to see if any of these demands will actually be put into action. So far it seems that everyone is happy that violence has stopped. But the question of how the plenums relate to struggle still stand.

As we can see from the demands, they are popular demands that are rooted in opposition to politicians and political-economic elites. We can connect these demands to those of struggles in Egypt, Tunisia or Turkey, where everyone also demanded greater democratic liberties and social rights. These kinds of demands have become quite common in protests in ex-Yugoslavia. Let's just remember the Croatian "bando lopovska" (English: gang of thieves!) protests or protests against government in March and April 2011. They have always been an attack on arrogance, corruption and poverty. They have always been a demand for the rule of law and a welfare state—for "righteous society" within existing society. Sometimes, these demands are connected with nostalgia for Yugoslavia and the social security it provided. These demands are a struggle for better living conditions—for a better future.

But people should realise also that all these demands will never be fulfilled. Even when the bourgeoisie is pressed so hard that it has to bow to wishes of the masses, it only waits a moment when pressure is loosened up, so that they can go into counteroffensive. Nevertheless, movements like this help to shape up the consciousness of workers for future struggles. But workers should also think about what to do when the movement dies out. How will they continue their struggles?

Also, it's important that we ask ourselves how this struggle will affect the entire region. Are we to expect similar struggles in Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, Kosovo or Macedonia? All of these countries are in deep economic crisis and from time to time they spawn movements that stand against the political elite. Still, it's unlikely that the working class in other countries will now respond to the situation in Bosnia, but with time no one should exclude joint actions on ex-Yugoslav level.

¹⁸ Ibid.

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