



Political, Economic and Social Crisis in BiH 2014/2015

Protests in BiH

What Will the Governments' Suppression of the Demands and Energy of the Citizens Lead To?

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Introduction – „Listen to the wind or you will hear the storm“

In April, 2013, IBHI published the analysis „Political, Economic and Social Crisis in BiH 2012/2013 – Towards New Policies“. The document presented a detailed analysis of the political crisis that has been present since 2010, the economic crisis and the social situation in BiH. The analysis is still completely solid; the only thing that has changed is that all economic and social indicators have worsened. We will quote one part of that brief that is especially relevant for the analysis to be presented here:

„Can the constant deterioration of social situation, and the lack of prospects for economic recovery due to the complete incompetence and lack of interest of political elites to solve the real economic and social problems lead to social revolt?

Hypothetically, analytically speaking, the chances of social uprising are reduced by apathy, widely present in the population, or more precisely, by the fear of violence ("as long as there is no war"), lack of civic consciousness, "academicism" civil society, the lack of any subject who could initiate social uprising (the unions are semi-partisan organizations), the fact that a large number of the employed work in the public sector, which is directly dependent on the government, etc. To this we add the justified fear of nationalistic interpretation, directing of social rebellion and right-wing populism to which some political parties are prone.

On the other hand, realistically speaking, social uprising in BiH has been around for years and is expanding. It is, for now, partial, robbed workers or one or the other "status" vulnerable social categories demonstrate or strike. So it is regularly fragmented and dominated by the struggle to defend the acquired "status" rights to social transfers, especially with war invalids. An important feature of this "decentralized and divided" awakening of social rebellion in many cases contains an element of self-violence or indirect violence, from hunger strikes to blocking the roads.

Experience from the world from 2011 and 2012 show that poverty also has its limits after which each "spark" is enough to cause a fire of social rebellion that overthrows governments. If the „Arab Spring" countries seem unrelated, the case of Slovenia is very close to us.

Keeping the aforementioned in mind, it may be noted that BiH (unless things dramatically, positively resolve, which will not happen) is in the lobby of social rebellion. It is more realistic to say that the question is not whether a rebellion will happen, but when and how it will happen?“¹

The position expressed in the quoted text become even more relevant when they are supported by analytical evidence. We will limit the arguments to the social situation in BiH.

Since 2011, 23.4% of the population in BiH has been below the absolute poverty line² (in accordance with the methodology used by the BiH agency of Statistics). That is a dramatic increase in comparison to 2007, when 18.6% of the population lived below the absolute poverty line. The situation in both entities is identical to the overall situation in BiH (FBiH in 2011 – 22.7% and in 2007 – 17.4%; RS in 2011 – 25.3% as opposed to 20.2% in 2007).³

It is unclear why ASBiH an entity-level statistics agencies did not calculate the absolute poverty line for 2011, whereas the Household Budget Survey, the basis for calculating it, was conducted for 2011 and its results were published in 2013. Or maybe the reasons for that are clear considering the final results provided here, which are not „politically correct“.

¹ Ž. Papić, S. Cenić, V. Hadžović, T. Dmitrović. „Political, Economic and Social Crisis in BiH 2012/2013 – Towards New Policies“. IBHI, Sarajevo, 2013.

² The absolute poverty line is set at 271 BAM per capita of the first fully grown adult in a household, in 2011 prices. The second adult and children are counted to smaller amounts in the OECD 2 equivalence scale (full adult is valued as 1, second adult 0.5, first child 0.3, second child 0.2, etc.). This means that the absolute poverty line for a four-member household: parents and two children, is set at 569 BAM which is considered to be enough to maintain the existential minimum.

³ See: IBHI/Maastricht Graduate School of Governance. „Poverty in BiH 2011 – Trends and Achievements and Indicators of the Targeting Accuracy of Budgets Transfers for Social Protection in BiH in 2011“ and „Non-contributory Benefits for Social Protection in BiH: What Works and What Does Not“. Sarajevo, 2013.



If, hypothetically, we would extrapolate poverty growth (measured by absolute poverty lines) from the period from 2007 for 2011 to the period from 2007 to 2014, then we would conclude that 27% of the population in BiH lives under the absolute poverty line in 2014 (26% in FBiH and 29% in RS).

These „dry“ statistical data can be easily visualised through indirect indicators: an increase in the number of people roaming through dumpsters, the explosive expansion of shops which buy gold – meaning that all family supplies have dried out and even an engagement ring has to be sold, the changed contents and offers in newspapers ads, etc.

At the same time, new data shows an increased inefficiency of the social protection system in the previous period. The poorest fifth of the population in BiH received only 17.3% of the total non-contributory transfers for social protection in 2011, which accounted for 3.39% of the GDP of Bosnia and Herzegovina that year. In FBiH the poorest fifth of the population received 15.4% of transfers in the same year, whereas in RS 20.07% of those transfers went to the poorest fifth of the population, which is a significant deterioration compared to 2007.

The social protection system in BiH has no influence on reducing poverty, as can be seen by comparing poverty growth with the reduction of the share of the poorest population in receiving transfers from the social protection system. It is status-based and its relatively large budget does not aim to preserve the „social minimum“ (as demonstrated in the protests), but to preserve political power and the ability to „buy“ voters.

The catastrophic floods that affected BiH in May of 2014 will prove to have a major impact on its economy and dramatically increase social problems and poverty in its society. Those consequences are magnified by the incompetence of governments in all levels to act efficiently, mitigate and prevent their consequences. Simultaneously, it has been revealed that the budget items which were intended for civil protection and other forms of mitigating the consequences of natural disasters were inappropriately allocated to filling out the budget „holes“, which is in fact a criminal offense perpetrated by government in all levels.

Protests – What happened and how

Act one – Babies in front of the Parliament

The first wave of the protests took place in early June 2013, as a reaction to not passing the Law on citizens' unique identification numbers (CUIN) and the death of one baby who did not have a CUIN and could not therefore obtain the necessary documentation to be medically treated abroad. Thousands of citizens blocked the building of the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH and the Parliament inside it. The civic protests, peaceful by nature, invoked a turbulent political reaction mainly expressed through theories of BiH institutions located in Sarajevo being endangered and the political crisis caused by RS representatives and part of the Croatian representatives refusing to their ministries and both houses of the BiH Parliamentary Assembly.

The political elites responded to the civic protests by an out-of this-world level of arrogance and boycotting their own legislative and executive duties which should, by definition, be in the service of the citizens.

The government did not understand the protests.

Act two – workers and citizens in the streets throughout BiH

The long-term protests against the governments in BiH, which lasted for several months, started with peaceful gatherings of workers in front of the Government of Tuzla Canton in early February 2014 and quickly, in just a day or two, expanded to a series of major cities in the Federation of BiH: Sarajevo, Mostar, Bihać, Bugojno, Travnik, Goražde, Tešanj etc., but also Brčko District in which the protests, seen as a social uprising, served as a one of a kind cross-entity, or even cross-ethnic link, if one insists on



looking at them from that perspective. The Cantonal Government of Tuzla initially reacted to the protests of its workers through ignorance, just as it reacted to all previous workers' protests, but after they saw that the workers' protests are being joined by groups organised through social networks, the government was intimidated by the sheer numbers within the civic uprising and authorised its police forces to use excessive force. It is important to emphasize that on 6th February, the Government of the Federation of BiH organised a meeting of the federal and cantonal ministers of police of those cantons in which the protests were concentrated. A coordination body was formed in this meeting with the task of maintaining public order in those cities in which the protests happened. This was important because a move such as this could be interpreted as a message by the governments that they will use force to stifle the uprising of its citizens.

As a sign of support to the protesters in Tuzla, peaceful protests were started in Sarajevo, followed by Zenica, Bihać and Mostar. Ultimately, the demonstrators responded to the excessive use of force by the police by furious conflicts on 7th February and burning the buildings of cantonal governments in Tuzla, Mostar and Sarajevo, where the building of the BiH Presidency was also burned, while in Zenica and Bihać the cantonal governments' headquarters were merely stoned. To describe the nature of the protests, it is important to emphasize that in Bihać the demonstrators also stoned the private property of the President of their cantonal government. Despite all of the preventive measures undertaken, parts of the veteran population of RS also protested in Banja Luka for several days.

In order to explain the violence which occurred in the protests, it is important to consider the nature of the previous wave of the dissatisfaction of workers and citizens. The workers, which were deprived of their rights and robbed in the criminally implemented privatisation, spent many years advocating for their basic, legally guaranteed rights: linking service, payment of their social security contributions, payment of salaries which they had not received in years, etc. through different forms of peaceful strikes, even self-harming hunger strikes. The citizens, who were unhappy with the work of political oligarchies, their excessive accumulation of wealth and privilege obtained by passing legislative measures enabling them to privatise the entire state apparatus, protested in similar ways. The social discontent, which was ignored by the governments or channelled through manipulative promises to serve political purposes, or even used for shifting blame between parties, accumulated for almost two decades in order to finally shape up as „lumpen proletariat“ social rage pressed through violence in the protests. To that we must add the fact that the governments instrumentalised trade union managements and successfully divided the trade unions into a series of branch unions, thus disabling the legally regulated mass action of the workers to achieve their guaranteed rights. Simply put, years of ignoring the dissatisfaction of the workers and citizens boomeranged back to those in power, after which they had to find new models to manipulate that dissatisfaction and abuse it for their own purposes.

If the political crisis present since the 2010 elections is added to this, it becomes clear that the social dissatisfaction and growth of social rage are worsened by the disillusionment of the citizens regarding the so-called social democratic parties in power, firstly the SDP in FBiH but also the SNSD in Republika Srpska. These parties did not guide their policies in accordance with the norms of social justice, but towards inflaming the political crisis and the leaderocratic and partitocratic principle of governance. The SDP particularly failed the expectations of the citizens when, after finally being elected in power, it produced the biggest crisis in the government, with apparent nepotism, continued corruption and suspected criminalist governing methods, instead of stabilising the country and enabling its economic recovery.

All the preconditions for an outburst of social rage were fulfilled in early 2014: years of ignoring the dissatisfaction of the workers and citizens, continued political crisis, the growth of economic crisis, continued leaderocratic and partitocratic governance, further extreme accumulation of wealth of the political elites and their tycoons, increased unemployment, increase of general poverty, leading the country into debt slavery and, worst of all, the endless arrogance of the rulers who have done nothing but rearrange one level of governance or another since the last elections. Therefore the only thing left to ask was what will the protest look like, when they will happen and how big they will be. The partial



protests which occurred earlier evolved into mass and, more importantly, long-lasting protests over night, to be transformed into an institutionalised form of civic rebellion by the organisation of plenums.

Any discussion pertaining to the participants of the protests must consider the weight of their results, although at first they may appear not to have any. The protests fully de-masked the current governance system since they were directed towards all political elites, both the vaguely defined position and the opposition (whatever the word *opposition* stands for in the Federation of BiH where practically every party is in some level of government, one way or another). This characteristic of the protests demonstrates that the participants of the protests have a very clear position – this or that political party alone is not what is ruining Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is politics and the described principles of governance. Furthermore, social issues and the principle of social justice finally became the main political issue, for a while at least, in the country where the governments' main occupation was always producing different types of ethnic-based conflicts and political crises. The protests also articulated, for the first time massively and in the broader social context, the issues of criminal, marauding privatisation and the accountability for it, as well as issues of the rulers' immediate political and moral responsibility for it, not just legal responsibility which never functioned anyway. Such powerful protests articulated old issues and social problems in a new way, transforming them into a social conflict with the governments. On the other hand, the ethnic conflict policy which was projected by partisan managements, did not, at least for a while, become dominant in the public space, which should be seen as the long-awaited inception of a new social consciousness among the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Other results of the protests should not be disregarded. What was, until recently, unimaginable in the transition BiH happened in just a few days: several cantonal governments resigned under the pressure of civic rage and protests. In a very short period, the governments of Tuzla, Zenica-Doboj, Sarajevo and Una-Sana Cantons fell, despite a lot of resistance from the cantonal rulers. Until then, governments fell mostly due to deceptive rearrangements of parliamentary majorities and the brutal struggle for power of partisan oligarchies.

It is important to emphasize that the blade of the demonstrators' rage was primarily pointed to the cantonal level of governance, which is where the majority of practical existential issues and rights are resolved, and cantons are perceived as a bureaucratic surplus and burden for the financial stability of the country. Simply put, with their oversized bureaucracy they have been perceived since their formation as an obstacle for any form of efficient functioning of the country's system of governance and, additionally, as a source of social injustice. The demonstrators' demand for an unconditional resignation of the cantonal governments was joined by the request for unconditional resignation of the federal government and formation of expert governments in all levels. To these the demonstrators added a series of other demands: cutting privileges the rulers secured for themselves in different levels of governance, from exaggerated salaries and fees for being in different committees to the so-called "white bread", i.e. receiving salaries even after the expiration of their mandates. The next set of demands relates to auditing the marauding privatisation and punishing those who implemented it. There were also demands for improving the workers' rights and starting production in those companies that fell through due to bad privatisation or are currently on the verge of collapse. And finally, to all of this the demonstrators added a series of very precise measures which, if implemented, would lead to major savings in all budget levels, decrease public spending and enable the economic recovery of the country. Of course, the all-encompassing demands also included those which advocated measures for reindustrialising the country and an urgent cease of further loaning from international financial institutions.

Plenums – Immediate democracy at work or civil society in action

After several days of protests, the citizens self-organised into plenums as a form of immediate, direct democracy. In spite of all attempts of political parties to manipulate them or insert provocateurs, the plenums remained and preserved their original nature as a direct articulation of the interests of the people, those who are deprived of their rights, unemployed and poor. On the other hand, contrary to the



well-established civil society organisations and the “NGO elite”, they showed the true face and possibilities, the essence of civil society, which represents by all means true civic activism.

The protests and plenum changed the nature of political life in BiH and gave it a new, directly democratic character. All those who ignore that, or forget it, as our political parties surely will, will burn in their own historic stupidity and incompetence.

Government v. protests and plenums – The unbearable lightness of manipulation for your own detriment

All in all, in the protests and plenums the citizens showed that they have far more management skills than the rulers, but also that their demands and suggested measures are realistic, quickly enforceable and can represent a serious introduction to resolving the social and economic crisis. Despite singular instances of “wandering” and not being familiar with jurisdictions of individual governance levels, as well as some demands being misplaced, it can be concluded that the citizens of BiH showed exceptional social responsibility and a high level of civility, especially through the work of plenums as a model of direct democracy. Simply put, the citizens’ apathy which was present earlier suddenly proved to be a long-term accumulation of social dissatisfaction, whereas the lumpen proletarian form of violence shown in the early stages of protests evolved into a highly civilized model of direct democracy through the work of the plenums. The plenums are, simultaneously, the most precious result of the civic rebellion which happened early this year which managed to maintain the tensions of the rebellion for a long time (extremely long in the Bosnian and Herzegovinian circumstances of social deterioration). It should be noted that the citizens of Zenica, Tuzla, Mostar, Bihać and Sarajevo protested in the streets throughout February, March, April and even May, while the plenums operated daily in February and the first half of March. The plenums remain as a novelty in Bosnia and Herzegovina, an organisation form that can be reconstituted at any time, either through social networks or in other ways.

Regarding the rulers’ reactions to the protests, the first thing to underline is the initial complete lack of orientation in all levels of governance and all political oligarchies, as well as their failure to understand the extreme situation built by the protests. The governments relied on the previous model - ignoring the protests, believing that there is not enough social energy to start a massive rebellion of the citizens. Afterwards, the initial disregard was quickly replaced by open threats with police force and taking the strongest police forces into the streets, which was followed by the excessive use of force, first in Tuzla and then partially in other cities. However, the accumulated social rage proved to be much stronger than anyone could assume, which resulted in the citizens simply shattering the police forces on 7th February, 2014 and setting the aforementioned buildings on fire. These conflicts demonstrated two important things. The first is that this scope of violence can easily repeat itself in the future. The second is that, in that case, public property will not be its sole target. Events in Bihać during the protests and stoning of the private property of the Prime Minister of its cantonal government suggest this, just as the slogan used by Sarajevo demonstrators: *We go to Poljine*, the location of the villas of party leaders Zlatko Lagumdžija and Bakir Izetbegović. The unambiguous message that the private property of the rulers and their tycoons might be targeted by the next wave of social rage in the future is the reason for their initial fear, which was soon replaced by the intensification of the legislature regulating public gatherings and a series of other moves that clearly demonstrate the rigidity of the rulers’ mindset. By accusing the police of not fulfilling its purpose, as soon as the protests calmed down the rulers decided to supply the special police forces with a significant amount of rubber bullets, water cannons, new guns and other equipment. The deterrence of the demonstrators was then transferred to the legal and court terrain by rigging indictments according to which the demonstrators who burned the said buildings will be charged of terrorism and the destruction of the constitutional order. Such severe charges demonstrate that the initial fear of the rulers, when the system all but collapsed in just a few hours, transformed into a new stage of its rigidity – the use of force and apparent threat of the most severe penalties.

On the other hand, violence from the side of the demonstrators is definitely objectionable. At least two questions can be posed in that regard: Who is to blame for the culture of violence in which young people



of BiH live today and for the sense of insecurity which we all feel, of being faced with either “small-scale” street crime or crime on a larger scale? Equally importantly, we must emphasize that violence has been exerted over the citizens of BiH, especially its workers, since 1996 – from the marauding privatisation to the metastasized corruption. One thing is certain: the citizens, young people and workers are not the ones to blame, and the governments will not be able to escape from their responsibility any more.

The second question is: Who did the violence suit, especially the burning? It definitely did not suit those who protested for their rights and expressed their outrage, but those who needed an opportunity to switch blame or the protests and intimidate potential future demonstrators.

When it comes to violence, we will probably never know exactly what happened and how. Analytically speaking, it is interesting to observe that:

- Government representatives, especially the highest ranking officers of the FBiH Police, started shifting blame on the very first and second day of the protests – the cause of the protests is not important, the violence is what is important.

- This was followed by labelling violence occurrences as terrorism, destruction of the constitutional order and the announcement of major arrests, from the perpetrators to the organizers and logisticians. Except for a couple one-month detainments, these were nothing but idle threats.

The „million dollar question“ is whether the police really is that incompetent or it is perfectly aware of who benefited most from the violence in order to shift blame, intimidate the citizens and preserve power?

The governments simultaneously instrumentalised almost all of the media, both private and public. The demonization of the demonstrators started very systematically by placing emphasis on the violence which occurred and providing broad media space to threats made by police officials (terrorism, destruction of the constitutional order, etc.). Short statements of the demonstrators who spoke about the causes for the protests were not enough to claim a well-balanced representation of the protests. With a few honourable exceptions, the media were instrumentalised overnight and placed under full control of partisan leaders and their political obedient. The demonization of the demonstrators in the media was closely accompanied by revoking images from the war. If we add the fact that the Bosniac elites were joined by the ones from Republika Srpska and the Croatian ones, followed by their quasi-intellectual machine, in order to demonise the protests, it becomes clear that the initial fear from the protests was used by the rulers to initiate a media propaganda war against the demonstrators. And while the Bosniac elite implemented a media hooliganisation of the protests, accompanied by an open propaganda inter-Bosniac political war between the SBB on the one, and SDA and SDP on the other side, the Croatian and elites from Republika Srpska implemented their own media ethnicisation. The Croatian politicians interpreted the protests as exclusively Bosniac and targeted against the Croats, which was symbolically enforced with the burning of the HDZ building in Mostar and statements made by individual HDZ-instrumentalised intellectuals. The elites of Republika Srpska, on the other hand, initiated their own media machine in fear of the protests boiling over the entity border, attempting to fabricate the social situation in RS and maintain the social peace by invoking patriotism and the cause of preserving Republika Srpska.

Notwithstanding the warnings of international political officials that they should listen to and respect the demands of the demonstrators, local politicians decided to ignore them. The fall of a couple of cantonal governments therefore seems as a small sacrifice of pawns in political manipulation in order to appease the social rebellion. By sacrificing a few cantonal prime ministers the party leaders knew that they do not want to make significant changes in the governance system, and then Lagumdžija and Izetbegović started a political war against Radončić, accusing him of organising the protests, inspiring the fires and, being the Minister of Security, preventing the actions of police forces which were supposed to protect the Presidency building. Radončić, on the other hand, tried to instrumentalise the protests to his own benefit and control the citizens' demands through members of his political party. The dirty political conflict ended by Radončić's impeachment from the position of the state Minister of Security, only to continue in the form of a filthy election campaign.



The second phase of protest manipulation by the rulers was marked by their attempts to claim all the demonstrators' narratives and present them as their own policy, as if those narratives targeted everyone but them. Before we knew it, the politicians started speaking as demonstrators in public, even claiming to support the (as they like to say) completely justified demands of the demonstrators. This phase of political manipulation over the protests is highly sophisticated because it relies on usurpation of the entire symbolic and moral capital of the protests. In order to dull the blade of social outrage and possibly steer it towards their political enemies, powerful politicians hijacked the demonstrators' rhetoric and transform it into the new political rhetoric, completely and utterly devaluing and diluting the precise demands of the citizens and obstructing their enforcement. This was apparent from the way in which the formation of expert governments was avoided. The demand for an expert government was met only in Tuzla Canton, although the government is no way 'expert' but comprised, more or less, of members of political parties, while the ruling oligarchies still control its every step through the Cantonal Assembly. In all other cantons, governments were either not formed or impossible to form. After that started the period of technical mandates, which is likely to last until the October elections. The demonstrators' demand for reducing the benefits of political leaders were supposedly passed on through assembly procedures, where they are likely to go through long and manipulative discussions. No attention was given by any governance level to the demands which pertained to workers' and social rights, except for a few early rhetorical messages. The demand for a revision of the predatory privatisation was also manipulated and the Federal Government made a list of suspicious privatisations in only around 20 companies, bypassing even the well-known cases, not to mention those which were not public. In the end it is safe to state that the demonstrators were manipulated and defeated in a highly sophisticated way – through hijacking the rhetorical plan of the protests by the political oligarchy.

However, while the local political elites managed to fully devalue the protests, the international ones took them into account to some extent and tried in vain to focus the attention of the local politicians to their obligation and need to listen to the demands from the protests.

For whom the bell tolls

The fact that local politicians ignore these demands and have already manipulated them shows that social rage will continue to accumulate while its next escalation cannot be safely predicted at this time. One thing is for sure – the unanswered demands of the citizens and inexistence of reforms within the state, as well as within political parties, will lead to further strengthening of the social, economic, political and any other crisis. De-masked political oligarchies cannot wear a new mask to meet the increasing social demands and a transformed social awareness. If we consider the fact that the plenums and citizens may self-organise once more at any time, a new outburst of social rage is to be expected. The only question is when it will happen and at what scale and character. A series of factors shows this: economic, social, industrial and ideological. And, when speaking about ideologies, it should be placed in the foreground that the protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina introduced the idea of social conflict and a shift in the political imaginarium to an ethnically divided society. The idea of social conflict as a new social concept opens a series of questions which the governments successfully managed to hide under the rug for many years and it completely de-masks the current way of governing. The current system managed to sustain itself as governance in the name of ethnic groups, while the protests revealed that it is in fact a harsh rule over ethnicity. The symbolic imaginarium based on ethnic interpretations of the war, ranging from the hero-centric to the victim-centric and projecting onto other ethnic groups as the prehistoric enemy, was shaken in its foundation while new symbols based on the 'masses' hopes for social justice were introduced into the social field. Of course, the new symbols are currently still fragile, however that does not mean that they will not play an important role in the future. Perhaps the best testament to their strength and effects is the fact that SDA, with Bakir Izetbegović as its head, tried to respond to them by war and patriotic narratives, emphasizing that the Presidency building is the symbol of BiH's defence in war, and by exposing a war veteran who was awarded the highest medal of honour, the gold fleur-de-lis, in television, threatening to defend that and other symbols, as well as his country,



with weapons. By reaching out to patriotic narratives Izetbegović and SDA are copying the political elites of Republika Srpska, which suppress social rebellion by invoking RS patriotism. While trying to maintain ethnic conflicts in the social sphere, all three political elites – the Bosniac, Serbian and Croatian – simply fail to see the reality of Bosnia and Herzegovina today and the depth of its crises. Therefore, it is unrealistic to expect from them to enforce the reforms necessary to start its recovery.

By gaining sympathies from the region, the protests were met with solidarity by demonstrators in the capitals of BiH's neighbouring countries, Zagreb, Belgrade and Podgorica and also received a positive response from the capital of Macedonia, Skopje, where the demonstrators provided open support. Although the reactions in the region were positive, in Bosnia and Herzegovina they failed to significantly cross over the entity border and encompass Republika Srpska, or cities in the cantons of FBiH with a Croatian majority. Any analysis of the protests must acknowledge this because it suggests just how deeply the society of BiH is divided on ethnic grounds and how capable the rulers are to take advantage of it to preserve their ethno-nationalistic ideological narratives as a mask which prevents the masses from seeing the realities of society and the depth of the political, social, economic, cultural and an array of other crises. However, that is not the reason why the protests failed to significantly expand from a part of FBiH to other areas. The causes for that lie in the depth and nature of the social crisis in some communities.

Namely, the protests started in those cities which had a, more or less, strong industry before the war, which was robbed or completely destroyed in the process of predatory privatisation. Therefore, the core of the protests laid within the cheated working class which has been living for years or months without salaries, social insurance and below the poverty line. The extent of privatisation plundering and the degree to which the pre-war industry was destroyed are most obvious in the so-called Tuzla industrial pool, then partially in Zenica, while in the territory of today's Republika Srpska there were no similar industrial pools, meaning that there was not a big concentration of the working class. The working class in this area is dispersed throughout a series of smaller towns, and without a big concentration within one urban area in BiH it is unrealistic to expect workers to self-organise independently from the trade unions which are fully instrumentalised by the governments, and rebel against the ruling apparatus. It is the same in cantons with the so-called Croat majority, there are no industrial pools like in Tuzla, Zenica or Sarajevo. The industry is dispersed just as the rudimentary working class is, meaning that there is simply not enough potential to instigate and focus social energy into mass protests against the governments. The fact that mass protests did not expand from the mentioned cities throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina, however, does not mean that they did not have direct or indirect support from those communities which did not organise themselves. For example, one part of the citizens and NGOs from Banja Luka went into the streets to show their direct support to the demonstrators in the Federation of BiH, just as did the citizens of Livno and Drvar.

What this means is that the protests were perceived by most of BiH citizens as social protests, not ethnic, despite all the propaganda machinery of all three ethno-political ruling structures. Even the minimal expansion beyond ethnic borders opened up a space for trans-ethnic social solidarity and, more importantly, by transcending the ethnic, the protests cleared room for a new kind of identification – social and class. This means that the February protests are a paradigmatic social moment, because the prevailing ethnic and ethno-nationalistic matrix, which shaped social identity until then, failed to maintain its identity dominance over the social, class and issues of social justice in the context of the most severe political, economic, industrial and cultural crisis in BiH since the war.

In that sense, the paradigmatic importance of the protests demonstrated the value of new forms of social identity in post-Dayton BiH, which are pushing aside the dominant model of ethnic identity narratives and introducing issues of social justice, class inequalities, harsh exploitation of the working class, criminal and predatory privatisation, mass unemployment and, finally, the (in)justice in the distribution of social wealth in the country in which transition is slowly revealed as the ruthless initial accumulation of capital by the truly corrupt, criminal and, why not say, predatory political and tycoon elites.



This can clearly be seen in the symbolism of the protests. Namely, the symbolic social imaginarium which was developed during the war and after it was based on ethnic and patriotic values, where the war and the aftermath became factories of new social symbols. The protests showed that these symbols are worn-out and that they can no longer be the sole, exclusive unifying factors of collective identity. In other words, in the foot of society, where the academic, religious or political elites have no insight, new symbolic values were created while the old ones changed their nature almost entirely. For that reason, the burning of the buildings of the BiH Presidency, cantonal governments in Tuzla, Sarajevo and Mostar obtained the characteristics of a ritual act in which ethnic and patriotic symbols (created by the aforementioned elites in order to keep the masses in a state of mental submissiveness and within the framework of the ethno-identitary symbolic imaginarium) disappeared in flames and violence. That is why, for example, the building of the BiH Presidency did not represent a symbol of defence for the demonstrators. It represented the *three-headed ruling dragon*, which is a common term in the language of the lower classes. Therefore, it was a supernatural symbol of everything the demonstrators rebelled against. For that reason, the act of violence must be seen as a first-instance socially symbolic act through which the ruling system was terminated with and a new order based on the search for social justice is gradually introduced.

In the described context, the protests awakened awareness of the solidarity of citizens regardless of their ethnic, religious or entity/cantonal identity. This was fully expressed in the 'explosion' of solidarity and hands-on civic activism which we witnessed in May of this year, when lives and property needed saving from the catastrophic floods and landslides in BiH.

We can conclude that the protests are the single most important social event in BiH since Dayton. Paradigmatically, they broke the existing model of social awareness and opened new gateways of action within the so-called direct democracy in a country where representative democracy brought ethnocracy, leaderocracy and partitocracy, and the ruling concepts of collective identities proved to be an ideological lie. That does not mean, however, that the ideological lie will lose its power or even grow stronger in the process of further social disintegration. Perhaps it will become even more attractive that it is now, if the ruling elites combined with academic, media and religious elites manage once again to transform the social conflict into a new ethnic conflict.

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