

Is change coming to Bosnia? Reflections on protests and their prospects

When the protests in Turkey began on the 28 May, what struck me was the centrality of the Mediterranean as the focal area for social movements in the last two years. In addition to the Arab spring (summer and winter), mass protests were held in Spain, Israel and Greece and Italy is experiencing a crisis of confidence in the established party system. Here, democratic governments either fell or could/had to absorb the grievances of many, but the dictatorships in the southern Mediterranean were not able to do so. Turkey is closer to the democracies of the northern rim of the Mediterranean, but the response of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been closer to the authoritarian reflex of its southern neighbours, thereby strengthening the protests.

At first, I was struck that the Balkans had been largely ‘protest-free’ in recent years, unlike neighbouring regions. However, recent protests in Bosnia suggest that social movements against the *status quo* are now reaching the region as well. Of course, the protests in Sarajevo, and other Bosnian cities, had other causes than the protests in Turkey or other countries of the Mediterranean, but they also share a number of features: the protesters are young, urban, feel excluded from politics and government and see no way of changing the *status quo* other than by protest.

What is striking is that the loss of public spaces and parks has been a key feature in the small-scale protests in the last years in the Balkans: protests in Banja Luka in June last year over a park;¹ in Belgrade the cutting down of trees on *Bulevar Revolucije* earlier;² and in Tiranë also over the destruction of a park.³ These protests failed to gather momentum as in Turkey, largely because the local and national politics had different dynamics, but they highlighted the concern not just for parks but also for the symbolic loss of public spaces and, more broadly, a public good to what seems like narrow commercial (and political) interests. Thus, the destruction of a park is a symbolic act that carries more significance than ‘just’ an environmental issue, as Orhan Pamuk expressed in his reflections on the protests.⁴

The current protests in Bosnia are not about a park, but over the lack of a decision. In a country that is more characterised by decisions not taken, and with a prime minister (officially, the Chair of the Council of Ministers) who claims in his government’s defence that:

I think we are not the worst of the world, nor are we a country like Zimbabwe or Somalia,⁵

1 <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/video/aleksandar-trifunovic-o-protestnoj-setnji-u-banjoj-luci>.

2 <http://www.e-novine.com/kolumna/petar-lukovic/35162-Drvo-srpski-parking-neprijatelj.html>.

3 <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/activists-rally-against-road-expansion-in-tirana-park>.

4 <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2013/06/memories-of-a-public-square.html>.

5 <http://www.bh-index.com/bevanda-nismo-dno-svijeta-niti-zemlja-kao-sto-su-zimbabve-i-somalija/#>.

it is the decisions not taken that create the most grief. After the Constitutional Court ruled in February that the current law on ID numbers is unconstitutional, the government has been unable to propose a solution, resulting in newborns not being able to receive official documents. This has meant that newborns cannot get passports and are thus unable to travel. When the small baby Belmina Ibršević needed to travel abroad for urgent medical treatment, but could not get documents, the lack of a decision became a life or death issue, galvanising public opinion and leading to protests.⁶

The Bosnian government is notorious for not taking decisions, since these are caught between the competing interests of the entities and ethnopolitics, where the substance of decisions is trumped by the question of who is to be in charge. Next to ID numbers, this is nowhere as obvious as the dispute in Bosnia about veterinary and sanitary inspections.⁷ Bosnian politicians have been unable to agree on who is to implement the inspections, so thousands of Bosnian farmers are likely to be unable to export their dairy products to Croatia once it joins the EU in July and more rigid controls come into effect. The economic survival of many hangs in the balance, but it has not mobilised protests as the issue over ID numbers.

The response of the political elites to the protests has been ugly. Some tried to ingratiate themselves with them, while others dismissed the protests as either being anti-Serb⁸ or called on citizens to get off the streets and vote in next year's elections.⁹ This response led Eric Gordy to comment on his blog that:

[t]he national game is up. When it worked it produced a generation of politicians who believed that firing up resentment and fear would give them a permanent hold on power. It's ringing hollow and their permanent fear is fading. They have become objects of ridicule. They're over.¹⁰

I wish he was right, but I am more sceptical in my view. Heleen Touquet, in her PhD on new social movements in Bosnia: *Escaping ethnopolis: postethnic mobilization in Bosnia-Herzegovina*,¹¹ looked closely at groups in recent years that have sought to mobilise citizens against the *status quo*. These efforts have largely failed, because they have been unable to build a genuine cross-ethnic constituency or a country agenda that would make it difficult for existing elites to dismiss or ignore them. The new protests have this potential. There are, however, two formidable obstacles: first, how to build an agenda for change to which all citizens of Bosnia can rally; second, how to translate this movement into a political option. Social movements can set the agenda, but change has to come from the political system (unless it is overthrown in a revolution). There

- 6 <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/bosnian-parliament-blocked-until-personal-numbers-law-adoption>.
- 7 <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21573595-politicians-need-work-together-if-bosnia-join-european-union-balkan-dysfunction>.
- 8 <http://www.haber.ba/vijesti/politika/44659-protest-je-maslo-bosnjackih-politicara-zgrada-je-blokirana-i-prozivaju-nas-srbe.html>.
- 9 <http://www.mojevijesti.ba/novost/160516/Bakir-Izetbegovic-se-prepao-naroda>.
- 10 <http://eastethnia.wordpress.com/2013/06/07/something-big-comes-this-way/>.
- 11 For further details, see: <https://lirias.kuleuven.be/handle/123456789/330754>.

are some parties (like *Naša stranka*) that aspire to pursue a different politics than the currently-dominant parties, but it is, at the moment, hard to imagine a country-wide political movement that could be successful and transform the way decisions are taken and how the country is governed. The current political set-up encourages parties to run on mono-ethnic platforms and makes it easy for ethno-nationalist parties to sow the seeds of doubt in change.