

“Sow hunger, reap anger”. Grassroots protests and new collective identities in Bosnia-Herzegovina

Chiara Milan, European University Institute Florence, June 2015¹

In February 2014, the violent reaction of the police to a demonstration organised by the unemployed workers of the privatised factories in the former industrial hub of Tuzla, Bosnia-Herzegovina, sparked solidarity rallies all over the country. The protests soon transformed into the first mass uprising since the end of the 1992-95 war. The paper provides an overview of the 2014 Bosnian civil unrest, analysing the roots of its emergence, the social composition and organisational formats, with a specific focus on the self-organised platforms for the articulation of citizens’ demands called “plenums”, as well as the achievements and shortcomings of such a form of civic resistance.

Tuzla, February 5, 2014. As many other times since 2009, the remaining workers of the recently privatized factories of the former industrial hub of Tuzla, north-eastern Bosnia Herzegovina,² gathered in front of the canton building³ to claim their wages, healthcare, social security and pension payments they had earned but were unable to collect. Students and people from a varied range of social backgrounds joined the rally. Unlike previously, the workers of the bankrupt factories were met with violent police repression. Protesters started to hurl eggs and stones against the building’s wall, while the riot police, intending to secure the entrances of the canton building, reacted with teargas and rubber bullets. The following day, the town of Tuzla was completely blocked, several people were arrested and others injured.⁴ The protests continued, and on February 7, traffic was blocked for several hours and suddenly the canton building was set on fire.⁵

While the protests unfolded in Tuzla, demonstrations staged in other Bosnian cities to express solidarity with the protestors in Tuzla transformed into violent attacks on official buildings and clashes with the police. While the gathering in Banja Luka, the capital of *Republika Srpska*, remained limited to a one-day peaceful demonstration, in Zenica, Mostar, and Sarajevo, urban

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² For the sake of clarity, throughout the paper I refer to Bosnia-Herzegovina interchangeably as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bosnia or BiH (acronym for *Bosna i Hercegovina*, official name of the country).

³ The Dayton Peace Agreement, stipulated in 1995, divides the country into two distinct entities, Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) and *Republika Srpska* (RS), and a third administrative unit, the autonomous Brčko district. Following from the Constitution, the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina appears as a consociational state with a tripartite Presidency where every president represents its ethnic constituency. Three different nations, referred to as “constitutive peoples”, compose BiH: Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims). The Federation of BiH entity consists of ten cantons, each of them with its own constitution, prime minister and government. In turn, every canton is divided into municipalities. By contrast, the other entity, *Republika Srpska* (RS), has no cantons, only municipalities. Whilst the majority of the Serbs live in RS, the FBiH groups together mostly Croats and Bosniaks. Social and economic policies are mostly competence of the entities and cantons (in the case of FBiH).

⁴ Dusica L. Ikić-Cook and Elvira Jukić, “New Protest Clashes Erupt in Bosnia’s Tuzla,” February 6, 2014, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/bosnians-head-for-another-day-of-protests>.

⁵ Emin Eminagić, “Yours, Mine, Ours? We Are All in This Together Now!,” *Viewpoints from Southeast Europe* - Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Office for Southeastern Europe, February 2014.

centres of the FBiH entity, the protests escalated further and became violent. A few days after the beginning of the unrest, the head of Tuzla canton resigned. On the third day of demonstrations, the canton government of another nearby industrial town, Zenica, was torched, and its Premier also resigned.⁶ The same day, both the town hall and the canton building were set ablaze in Mostar, along with the headquarters of the two main nationalist parties, the Croat HDZ and the Bosniak SDA. In the capital, Sarajevo, protesters targeted administrative buildings, throwing stones and setting some offices ablaze. The presidential building, and both the canton and the town council buildings became the target of the rage, symbols of a corrupt and incompetent political class that had plundered the country since the end of the war. At first, police reacted with stun grenades and rubber bullets, and clashes were reported in some areas of the city.

The workers' strike of Tuzla had had a domino effect and soon the protests converted into a general uprising, known as the "Social Uprising" (*Socijalni bunt* in the local language) or "Bosnian Spring" (*Bosansko proljeće*).

The roots of rage

Why did a workers' demonstration in Tuzla succeed in igniting rage all over the country? The outburst of collective rage cannot be understood without taking into account the following conditions:

Plummeting economic and social conditions. During the 1992-95 war, the remnants of the national industrial sector went destroyed. In the aftermath of the conflict, nationalist profiteers engaged in asset-stripping and undervalued the enterprises that were for sale.⁷ What was left of the industrial apparatus was privatised in a non-transparent way, in the absence of an appropriate institutional framework. Key enterprises were thus divided and sold along ethnic lines through a corrupt struggle for power, while irresponsible agencies and badly written contracts facilitated the fraud.⁸ Compounding the cronyism and corruption of those in charge of privatisation, the ruling political parties used the privatisation process as a tool to retain their grip on power. As a consequence of mishandled privatisation, the workers, the backbone of the Yugoslav system prior to its disintegration, faced mass layoffs, as well as the economic dispossession and privatisation of their workplaces.⁹ Following on from economic deprivation, social conditions worsened as well, and people found themselves barely able to survive.

Elite-society cleavage. Over the years, the political class turned a blind eye to the growing discontent and social demands of the population, who were stricken by the economic crisis and impoverishment. A representative system that favours ethnic representation to the detriment of individual citizens deepened the elite-society cleavage.¹⁰ Furthermore, the consociational settings discourage non-ethnic voting, increasing the likelihood of the political class, or "ethno-oligarchy",¹¹ holding on to power by maintaining frustration among their ethnic constituencies, and by constantly fueling their distrust and fear towards the other ethnic groups.

⁶ Klix, "Premijer TK Sead Čaušević Podnio Ostavku," *Klix.ba*, February 7, 2014, <http://www.klix.ba/vijesti/premijer-tk-sead-causevic-podnio-ostavku/140207092>.

⁷ Michael Pugh, "Transformation in the Political Economy of Bosnia since Dayton," *International Peacekeeping* 12, no. 3 (2005): 448–62.(451).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Timothy Donais, "The Politics of Privatization in Post-Dayton Bosnia," *Southeast European Politics*, June 2002.

¹⁰ Asim Mujkić, *We, the Citizens of Ethnopolis* (Sarajevo: Centar za ljudska prava Univerziteta, 2008), 22.

¹¹ Ibid.

Waves of contention and escalation of violence. As scholars on social movements argue, peaks of protests like the workers' ones in Tuzla are embedded into the dynamics of contention that the society in which they emerge constantly generates and develops.¹² Thus, the February protests did not spring up out of the blue, but appeared as the peak of a protest cycle started as far back as in 2012. Workers have been the central actors of this protest cycle. Their action surfaced after an escalation of contentious episodes, such as a homophobic attack on the LGBTQ community in Sarajevo in December 2013; numerous, almost daily workers' protests in Tuzla; university students' small-scale demonstrations all over Bosnia and Herzegovina back in December 2013; and "individual" protests. The umpteenth workers' demonstration would have been passed unnoticed in the country had the riot police not attacked the protesters.

Workers as legitimised actors. The protests did not start in Tuzla by chance. The city has been an industrial city since the Austro-Hungarian times, and had a multi-ethnic fabric before the war. Moreover, Tuzla has a symbolic significance as it was the centre of resistance against Nazi occupation in World War II, and a bulwark against nationalism in the recent war. Tuzla managed to preserve its multi-ethnic character and its tradition of resistance throughout, and after, the war, which made it a unique case in BiH.¹³ As well as this, the city counts on a long-standing history of labour movements, which began with the famous 1920 miners' rebellion. Tuzla nowadays counts on a vibrant civic fabric, composed of students' associations active in the area, and this is owed to the presence of the university – the only one in BiH occupied in 2009 following the example of Croatian students. It therefore does not come as a surprise that the workers of Tuzla spawned the Bosnian protests of February 2014, catalysing the increasing discontent of the groups of the population who bore the brunt of government policies. The workers proved themselves to have a mobilising potential, and owe credit to the reactivation of the weak social networks that emerged during the previous upheavals. As Weiss put it, "their working class identity interestingly seemed to trump their other, more ethnic, affiliations because it was more genuine".¹⁴

Workers are considered legitimised actors since, during the socialist period, they were an essential means "for constructing a cosmopolitan, internationalist, modern, and supranational identity of Yugoslavs".¹⁵ Following the collapse of Yugoslavia, and the privatisation of its factories, the role of workers diminished dramatically. From being a constitutive element of society, workers became the most vulnerable social group. Nevertheless, Yugoslav socialist heritage is still part of the personal biographies of those middle-aged people who marched on the streets and populated the plenums. The social and economic rights workers benefited from during socialist time, lost after the transition from socialism to capitalism are still vivid in their memory. Once celebrated in socialist times as heroes of work, workers are nowadays transformed into its victims.¹⁶

Aims of leaders and participants, grievances and demands

Unlike the previous wave of protests that took place in July 2013, known as #JMBG,¹⁷ the February protests showed a political diversity among protesters, and the birth of cross-class alliances.

¹² Donatella Della Porta, ed., *Democracy in Social Movements* (Basingstoke [England] ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

¹³ Ioannis Armakolas, "The 'Paradox' of Tuzla City: Explaining Non-Nationalist Local Politics during the Bosnian War," *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, no. 2 (2011): 229–61.

¹⁴ Joshua Weiss, "Tuzla, the Third Side, and the Bosnian War," 2002, 12, <http://thirdside.org/tuzlathethirdside.pdf>.

¹⁵ Tanja Petrović, "Museums and Workers: Negotiating Industrial Heritage in the Former Yugoslavia," *Narodna Umjetnost* 1, no. 50 (2013): 96–120.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ With the term #JMBG I refer to the protests taking place in the main urban centres of the country from June, 6 to July, 1 2013, which were provoked by the failure of the national parliament to solve a deadlock in the disbursement of national ID numbers.

At first, at the core of the grievances, stood labour, economic issues and the question of workplaces, the revision of privatisation, the improvement of social welfare, and the fight against unemployment (whose rate in the country had grown to 60% in recent years).¹⁸ As soon as the demonstrators' front widened, the demands expanded as well to include an end to corruption and nepotism, meaningful democracy, citizenship, and social justice. Some requests concerned the resignation of the federal and canton governments, other demands addressed to politicians concerned the suppression of benefits in institutions and public administration; the restriction of maximum salaries of elected officials; the improvement of social welfare; the suspension of criminal procedures against demonstrators;¹⁹ and a freeze of all further loans from the International Monetary Fund until the situation of the country became more stable.

The demonstrators' target was identified as the whole Bosnian political elite, who were held responsible for the mismanagement of the privatisation process of public enterprises and state-owned assets. These socio-economic demands resonated among the population, and proved to be less likely to be manipulated through the use of ethno-national rhetoric. The addition of an economic dimension to the social one facilitated the formation of collective solidarity.²⁰ However, citizens asked for a change in the political establishment without calling explicitly into question the system of representational democracy. Put simply, people rejected the political class but not the political system.

Forms of mobilisation, strategies and tactics of social protest: from spontaneous violence to organisation

The repertoire of action changed drastically from the peaceful occupation of the square in front of the Parliament building during the #JMBG protests, to the Molotov cocktails and stones thrown against administrative buildings and political party headquarters in February 2014. While, during the #JMBG, the protesters claimed in an explicitly non-violent way the right to take back public spaces by occupying them, during the February upheaval they resorted to violence, destroying the symbols of power.

Although at the beginning protests began spontaneously, right after the riots the rage was channelled into a constructive organisational form called the "plenum". In the plenums, defined as self-organised assemblies, or participatory arenas where citizens convened, demands and grievances were articulated in a coherent way and later handed on to politicians. The plenums' model stems from the practices adopted during the occupation of the faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb in 2009, during which the students organised themselves in assemblies called, indeed, plenums.

Drawing on the model from the experience in Tuzla, the city that hosted the first plenum, between February and March citizens organised plenums in 22 different places across the country - although most of them concentrated in the FBiH entity, one of the two semi-autonomous entities that compose the country. Plenums generally worked in a decentralised way through thematic working groups that dealt with media, education and culture, social problems, interplenum cooperation, legal issues, and so forth. Working groups were in charge of collecting and reformulating the demands that emerged during the meetings. Once reformulated, the demands

¹⁸ Chiara Milan, "From ID Numbers to Plenums. Challenging the Bosnian System from Within.", 2014. Paper presented at the workshop "Fringe Politics in Southeastern Europe: Drivers of Change?", UACES Collaborative Research Network on Fringe Politics in Southeast Europe, University of Zagreb, 12-13 September 2014.

¹⁹ Jasmin Mujanović, "Visualizing the Plenum Demands," *Bosnia-Herzegovina Protest Files*, accessed October 27, 2014, <http://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com/2014/05/13/visualizing-the-plenum-demands/>.

²⁰ Chiara Milan, "From ID Numbers to Plenums. Challenging the Bosnian System from Within." 2014. Paper presented at the workshop "Fringe Politics in Southeastern Europe: Drivers of Change?", UACES Collaborative Research Network on Fringe Politics in SouthEast Europe, University of Zagreb, 12-13 September 2014

passed again to the plenum for a final vote, following the rule of “one person, one vote”. All the plenums were coordinated through an organisational body called the “interplenum”, which was in charge of connecting the various plenums across the country. While the interplenum coordinated the demands that surfaced in the different assemblies concerning issues at the government level, each plenum was in charge of articulating demands addressing local issues.

As alternative practices of autonomous self-organisation, the plenums worked similarly to other assemblies that have blossomed since 2011 in many squares of Europe. Likewise, nobody was entitled to represent anybody else, nor to speak on his/her behalf; workers, members of trade unions and other collective actors participated in the plenums solely as individuals, and held the same right to vote as everyone else.

Reaction of the authorities

Domestic political elites

At first, such a violent and unforeseen outburst of rage took the political elites by surprise. In FBiH, four heads of cantons, the local administrative units into which the FBiH is divided, resigned after the beginning of the demonstrations. The FBiH Prime Minister, Nermin Nikšić, publicly accused unidentified hooligans of having organised the riots. However, no politician offered a concrete solution to the problems affecting the country, nor tackled the serious economic issues that gave rise to them.

In *Republika Srpska*, the political elite conferred an ethnic codification to the protests, discrediting the movement as ethnically-driven and threatening one of Bosnia’s constituent people (the Bosnian Serbs) – a strategy usually used to demobilise and preserve control over the masses by constructing an image of an external threat.²¹ As was the case in 2013, such an “ethnic interpretation” contributed to a shift in the focus of the grievances from the political and social level to the ethno-national one. In particular, Milorad Dodik, President of *Republika Srpska*, congratulated the citizens of the Serbian entity for not falling for the provocations of the protests sweeping the other entity, FBiH.²²

The most successful at using the protests for his personal promotion was probably Fahrudin Radončić²³ and his party, the *Savez za bolju budućnost BiH* (Union for a Better Future of BiH - the SBB). Radončić is a well-known tycoon in Bosnia, founder and president of SBB since 2009, as well as the owner of the newspaper *Dnevni Avaz* (the Daily Voice). Minister of security from 2012, Radončić was fired in February 2014, apparently for having refused to use force against the protesters in the country. The (former) security minister openly backed the protests by saying that the rebellion was justified, while his (party) newspaper reported extensively about the happenings throughout the uprising, giving a lot of space to Radončić’s public appearances. Although he had tried to present himself as a “new face” on the political scene,²⁴ Radončić’s popularity and leadership did not appear to increase in the end: his party obtained less than 15% in the parliamentary elections of October 2014.

Again, the alleged manipulation of the protests by Radončić’s party, as well as the hunting of the forces orchestrating the demonstrations, contributed to them being discredited, and diverted attention from the problems of the country to the usual political struggle for visibility.

²¹ Valère Philip Gagnon Jr, *The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s* (Cornell University Press, 2006).

²² Andreja Zivkovic, “The People’s Uprising: A Break with Dayton Bosnia? | LeftEast,” accessed December 16, 2014, http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/break-with-dayton-bosnia/#_edn3.

²³ Paulina Janusz, “Political Parties and Media in BH United against the Demonstrators,” *Bosnia-Herzegovina Protest Files*, February 9, 2014, <https://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com/2014/02/11/paulina-janusz-political-parties-and-media-in-bh-united-against-the-demonstrators/>. (transl.. Eric Gordy).

²⁴ Ibid.

The reaction of the international community

The international community perceived the protests as a threat to the already fragile order of the country rather than as a legitimate outburst of disenfranchised citizens. While, during the 2013 demonstrations, Valentin Inzko, High Representative for the country,²⁵ had intervened to calm the situation down, and therefore recognise the grievances as legitimate,²⁶ in 2014 his intervention had a greatly different note. Speaking on Austrian TV, the High Representative said: "...if the hooliganism continues EUFOR [EU] troops may be asked to intervene".²⁷ By saying that, not only did he discredit the protesters in the same way the domestic elites did, but also restated the sort of neo-colonial power that the EU exercises on BiH. By the same token, the Director of the Directorate for the Coordination of Police Units in the FBiH entity tendered his resignation and called on "the international community and the European Union to consider deploying international military forces in Bosnia if events are to repeat themselves".²⁸

As for foreign leaders, some international prime ministers paid a visit to their supposed Bosnian counterparts: the Croatian prime minister visited Mostar (not the capital Sarajevo), the Turkish foreign minister went to Sarajevo, while the First Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia called the party representatives from RS. Those visits clearly demonstrate the political influence of Serbia on *Republika Srpska*, the vested interests of Croatia in the Bosnian Croat population, and the Turkish perception that the Muslims of Bosnia are of its concern.

Media coverage of the protests

During the protests, the mainstream media (public TV and radio broadcasting) generally discredited the demonstrators by associating them with unidentified "hooligans" from outside Sarajevo looting the city (*Al Jazeera*). In some cases, they published images of the Sarajevo canton building in flames alongside those of buildings burning during the 1992-95 war (*Radio Sarajevo*). With regard to the TV broadcasting, an information asymmetry occurred between the two entities:²⁹ the state-level TV station of Bosnia and Herzegovina reported extensively about the demonstrations, while the FBiH's channel covered the protests to a lesser extent. By contrast, during the first three days of the demonstrations, the TV station in *Republika Srpska* dedicated less than half an hour to the happenings.³⁰ In *Republika Srpska* the media represented the protests as illegitimate, isolated to the FBiH entity, and as undermining the constitutional order – and therefore the very existence of *Republika Srpska*. Along the same lines, the main daily newspapers in *Republika Srpska* devoted little attention to the social upheaval, while those in the FBiH entity reported about them extensively.

²⁵ The High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina (HR) was created in 1995 with the aim of overseeing the civilian implementation of the Dayton Agreement. Together with the Office of the High Representative (OHR), the HR represents the 55 countries and agencies that support the peace process through the Peace Implementation Council (PIC). Valentin Inzko is the incumbent HR since 2009.

²⁶ Chiara Milan, "Occupy Sarajevo: Taking Parliament Hostage in Bosnia," *Roarmag.org*, 2013. <http://roarmag.org/2013/06/occupy-sarajevo-bosnia-herzegovina-protests/>

²⁷ Novinite.com, February 9, 2014 "EU to Consider Intervention in Bosnia if Tension Escalates", <http://www.novinite.com/articles/158040/EU+to+Consider+Intervention+in+Bosnia+if+Tension+Escalates>

²⁸ Andreja Zivkovic, "The People's Uprising: A Break with Dayton Bosnia? | LeftEast," accessed December 16, 2014, http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/break-with-dayton-bosnia/#_edn3

²⁹ Bosnia Herzegovina has three different public TV stations: the state-owned channel, BHT, and the two entity's channels: FTV covering the FBiH territory and RTRS covering *Republika Srpska*.

³⁰ Bojan Grebenar, "The Bosnian Spring' as an Event, News and Instrument in the Context of the Political Culture in Bosnia and Herzegovina," 2014, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung edition.

Conversely, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube contributed to shedding some light into the “informative darkness”.³¹ Social media represented the main tools through which demonstrators and plenums made their voices heard inside and outside of BiH, though their use among protesters was limited to the younger generations. The Internet is acknowledged to have played an important role at the onset of the protests. It was in fact a Facebook group called *50,000 za bolje sutra* (50,000 for a better tomorrow) that first spread news about the rallies in Tuzla. The creators of the Facebook page constantly called on citizens to actively support Tuzla’s workers and to raise their voices against the injustice and nepotism in the country, encouraging citizens to join the rallies.

Alternative media outlets: Other alternative information websites, in particular the Mostar-based *Abrašmedia*, and the online magazine *Buka* (based in Banja Luka), reported about the social unrest, hosting interviews with activists and plenum participants. Last but not least, an open network of activists and academics created a blog called “BiH protests files”³² which provided the translation of the main articles, interviews, and reports of demonstrations and protests in English with the aim of spreading the voice of Bosnian people abroad, and of gathering support from international activists and people interested in the issue.

One year after: results and limits of the Bosnian uprising

It is not an easy task for social scientists to assess the outcomes of disruptive actions. Many factors need to be taken into account when investigating the effect of social movements, and several are the external conditions under which movements produce effects. Similarly, there are numerous unintended consequences that a movement itself cannot control. Did the Bosnian uprising bring about change? In what follows I provide a tentative overview of the results of the February protests one year after their onset, being aware that a 16-month span might not be enough to draft a thorough evaluation of the change that the demonstrations have produced. Every paragraph begins with a key word that summarises the change allegedly produced by the mass protests, as well as the limits hindering further development of the movement.

Challenging power: In the words of most interviewees, the protests managed “to scare politicians” for the first time since the end of the 1992-95 war. Besides threatening the political class, citizens managed, through the protests, to put some issues related to the suppression of benefits in public administration on the political agenda. The disruptive repertoire, used for the first time since the war of the 1990s, empowered citizens, and increased their leverage towards a political class that was considered unaccountable.

Solidarity: The newness of the February protests is certainly reflected in the concepts of togetherness and solidarity that emerged clearly for the first time in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina. The long discussions held during the plenums’ meetings, the working group activities, and the efforts undertaken to coordinate the different plenums show that Bosnian citizens are able (and willing) to overcome nationalistic rhetoric and build ties of solidarity that transcend ethnic boundaries. Ethnic tensions are still in place, but have been set aside in the name of a common solidarity on the ground. The protests proved that civil disobedience and resistance could be accepted as a conventional democratic tool for BiH’s citizens, creating a conducive environment for new protests to take place in the future.

New actors: “Solidarity” became the buzzword during and after the protests. Encouraged by the enthusiasm the February demonstrations generated, and disappointed in their leaders, a group of remaining workers in Tuzla established a brand-new syndicate, named *Solidarnost*

³¹ Paulina Janusz, “Political Parties and Media in BH United against the Demonstrators,” *Bosnia-Herzegovina Protest Files*, February 9, 2014, <https://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com/2014/02/11/paulina-janusz-political-parties-and-media-in-bh-united-against-the-demonstrators/>.(transl.. Eric Gordy)

³² <https://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com>

(Solidarity), which gathers workers from different bankrupt companies. As for the plenums, most of them ceased their activities in May 2014, after having served as coordinating bodies for the organisation of humanitarian relief in the flooded areas of the country after the massive floods that swept the region. Whereas some of them converted into informal groups – movements for social justice (such as *Pokret za socijalnu pravdu* in Bihać and *Neformalna Grupa za socijalnu pravdu* in Prijedor), others are still active (such as those in Zenica and Gračanica).

Network for social justice: Although in the wake of the protests the “spirit of the squares”³³ did not translate into neighbourhood assemblies, the energy spawned by the plenums channelled into a network. The founders chose to name it “5F7” after the crucial days of the demonstrations (5 and 7 February 2014). The network was presented in Tuzla, the epicentre of the upheavals, on January 17, 2015. It gathers civil, non-political movements from all over the country that strive to unite all the different subjects fighting for social and economic justice in the country.³⁴ Whether the informal network will succeed in its attempt to unite and coordinate the different subjects remains to be seen.

February 5, 2015, marked the anniversary of the civic uprising. Although a new wave of protests was expected during the commemoration rallies staged in the main cities, this did not occur, and in fact they were met with a lukewarm reception. A few people, mainly the elderly, took to the streets. What are the factors accounting for such a low participation and, in general, for the failure of the movement to maintain its momentum?

Spontaneity: In an article that appeared in the online independent magazine “Abrašmedia”, Goran Marković, a well-known intellectual, activist and professor wonders: “What have we learnt from the protests?” In his opinion, the 2015 commemoration protests were not as massive as expected owing to several factors, among which their spontaneous nature may be mentioned. As was the case in 2014, in 2015 demonstrations also arose spontaneously: no organisations or leaders drove them strategically and programmatically. While, on the one hand, the spontaneous nature of the protests played a legitimising role, on the other hand the inability to overcome spontaneity and disorganisation prevented the movement from developing further. “People seemed to know what they were protesting against”, Marković commented, “but did not know how to obtain the changes they wanted”.³⁵

Lack of meaningful sustained grassroots activism: Another factor accounting for the movement’s lost momentum can be identified in the lack of meaningful and sustained grassroots work. Apart from some sporadic cases, in the aftermath of the protests there was no constant activism at the base contributing to an increase in citizens’ civic engagement. However, it is fair to note that many well-known activists faced repressive actions, and that local authorities and power-holders consistently threatened them.

Unclear strategy: The uncertainty concerning the role that plenums should play also affected their future. Although at their onset they represented a form of legitimate counter-power, plenums proved unable to transform into a real alternative, remaining mainly a place for the expression of dissatisfaction.³⁶ While some plenums aimed at being recognised as official counterparts by governments, some perceived themselves as performing a watchdog role, and in others participants discussed converting into non-governmental organisations. The fact that no

³³ Costas Douzinas, *Philosophy and Resistance in the Crisis: Greece and the Future of Europe* (John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

³⁴ Klix.ba, “Predstavljena Mreža 5F7, Građani Pozvani Pred Spaljenu Zgradu Vlade TK,” *Klix.ba*, 7, accessed January 17, 2015, <http://www.klix.ba/clanak/150117089>. (author’s translation)

³⁵ Goran Marković, “Goran Marković: Čemu Su Nas Naučili Protesti?,” *AbrašMEDIA*, accessed February 10, 2015, <http://www.abrasmedia.info/content/goran-markovi%C4%87-%C4%8Demu-su-nas-nau%C4%8Dili-protesti>. (author’s translation).

³⁶ Ibid.

common agreement has been reached on the future of the plenums so far prevents the creation of a sound social organisation that could build on their legacy.

For all these reasons, the majority of citizens are not convinced of the effectiveness of taking to the streets once again. Likewise, it is not clear to them what changes new protests might bring about.³⁷

Notwithstanding the widespread expectation that the protests would give rise to a drastic transformation, one year after the Bosnian Spring the political backdrop of the country remains unchanged. The paradoxical confirmation into power of the same nationalist parties ruling the country since the 1990s during the political elections held in October 2014 confirms this trend. New forms of grassroots solidarity emerged in the wake of the protests, but Bosnian citizens appear still beset by worsening economic conditions, corrupt elites, an increasing unemployment rate and inexistent social security, while the young continue to leave Bosnia Herzegovina in search of a better future abroad.

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This project has been funded with support from the European Commission.

³⁷ Ibid.