



Weekly Briefing

**Bosnia-Herzegovina Social briefing:
Reflecting on Bosnian Spring
Ivica Bakota**

China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

Reflecting on Bosnian Spring

2014 protests and lessons learned

February 2014 saw the most promising Spring-type protests in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina. In only 4 days, protests that sparked in Tuzla, a Bosnian major industrial hub in the country's northeast area and one of the most ethnically diversified cities in BH, spread to all major cities in the Federation. By February 6, in 20 major cities were organized multiple protests which quickly got out of control in some places. Thousands of workers, joined by students and citizens were on the streets demanding changes, venting off the anger against the rampant corruption, recalcitrant political establishment and ethno-nationalist oligarchy that have captured the state since the breakup of Yugoslavia. Occasionally, the protests slipped into street riots with an open call for overthrowing the government. Solidarity with anonymous protesters came in from ROS and Croat parts of the Federation where citizens showing solidarity with their countrymen came on the streets concurrently with those aiming to spread the protests throughout the country. Similar protests in following days were organized in Zagreb and Belgrade, supporting the political struggle in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Within four days the protests that burst into violence and threatened to swept across the whole country, suddenly "run out of steam". Just after the politicians recovered from muted shock and professional activists started to prepare more organized gatherings, the people decided to stay at home. War-reminding scenes of ravaged government buildings were possible reason why the number of protesters shrank after February 8 and Bosnian Spring crumbled under its own spontaneity.

Various groups tried to revive the initial wave for changes and organized similar protests that dragged for two months and disappeared. The revolutionary stillness was filled with a mere rhetoric of action by opposition parties, Facebook resistance groups, "salon socialists", each cashing in support for the

elections that were scheduled for October 2014. Post-hoc interpretations and analyses that mushroomed on social media blamed ethno-nationalist elite for distorting purely anti-establishment protests of laid-off workers into conflict with ethnic connotations. Modern “professional revolutionaries” embodied in resistance groups saw the lack of organization and guidance by vanguard parties as a reason for a failure. Lastly, frivolous political groups that turned into “cool civic parties” thought the protest were doomed to fail in the country with imposed constitution and international supervision.

Four years after the protests, Bosnian politicians learned how to cope with protest organizing on social media, more expediently blame “the opposition and international factors” for stirring the public discontent, smear grass-root political activists and negate all political struggle outside the current ethno-nationalist bickering. In containing future protests their main “known unknown” is to predict what Lenin calls *stikhiinost*, or dynamic of sporadic and random incidents which may escalate into big scale protest and unrest. The further east one goes in Europe, the more fatalistic and unpredictable this “unknown” becomes. In societies with highly structured conflict of goals like Bosnian the unrest is even more difficult to foretell. However, possibly defying gramscian critiques of determinist interpretations of working-class movements, the reality of Bosnian bottom-up political struggle is desperately predetermined by “historical inevitability” of cross-ethnic unity of action. As much as pre-revolutionary dynamic remains unknown, “causal primacy” of cross-ethnic action prevails. For Bosnian “ethno-bourgeoisie” it simply means to ignore sparkles from segmented social movements so long as they do not threaten with fire to all ethnic groups.

2018 protests...

In this election year protests were not missing. Factory workers in Zenica had strike march on the streets, medical workers in Canton Sarajevo organized strike demanding better working conditions, Union of teachers in primary

education in Sarajevo organized strike against decreasing standards and increasing bureaucracy in educational institutions. In Republic of Srpska, workers in education and medical sector with slightly decreased intensity held protests from time to time. This union-led organizing with limited, local-based demands hardly ever crosses cantonal, let alone entity borders. The reason can be found in parallel institutions and multiplication of parties involved in social bargaining, but also uncoordinated, competing and even conflicting goals on the national level. For instance, the protests organized in Herzegovina-Neretva canton by the cantonal union of medical doctors in March this year was a reaction on “preferential treatment” of some other same sector trade unions in the Federation. On a grass-root level political organizing, Facebook petitions and free-access single issue groups are proven to be effective for delivering political messages nationwide and across ethnic lines, but they usually rely on a very short attention span of the public and/ or are “too specialized” to be conducive to national protests. Roadblock protests in June against the oil price hike belong to former case, while whistleblowing and various justice-seeking groups to latter. War veteran protests and “Justice for David” petition are two notable exceptions.

In January, war veterans blocked major highways in country demanding from federal government to regulate welfare redistribution to underrepresented majority within this social group. Hundreds of veterans belonging to Army of Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ARBH), Bosniak military force incorporated later into the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, came out on the streets with three main demands: to clean up the “vets lists” in order to strip off “fake veterans” from social entitlements, cut-off financing for all war veteran organizations as they “proved only to serve private and party interests” and increase the pensions for unemployed veterans. After repeated roadblock protests, their demands followed veterans of Croatian Defence Council (HVO) who despite war clashes joined the big protests organized in front of the Parliament building in July. Under pressure from various veteran organizations

and keeping in mind elections in October, federal Parliament passed populist bill, guaranteeing the pension to all veterans who turned 57 years and above.

“Justice for David” are 6 months long protests organized on Krajina Square in Banja Luka. The protests originated from Facebook petition group demanding justice for David Dragicevic, a 21-year-old man went missing in March and found dead after a week of search. Police investigation ruled the death as an accident, which was strongly contested by Dragicevic`s parents and friends. According to their version, David was murdered while police was trying to cover-up the case protecting some well-connected perpetrator involved in the murder. The inconsistencies in the police investigation only furtherly convinced the public that David was murdered, intensifying protests on every day basis in Banja Luka and getting attention in Sarajevo and beyond. The crucial factor that helped protests to cross entity boundary was their openly non-ethnic character. David`s father was quoted saying that his son was “killed by a Serb, just like an innocent Muslim was killed from a fellow Muslim.” On May 15, a large-scale protest was organized in Sarajevo demanding justice for David and Sarajevo-born Muslim Dzenan Memić, also allegedly murdered under dubious circumstances. The protests were fruitful in pressuring ROS Parliament to form a committee to open an independent inquiry about circumstances surrounding David`s death. The committee ruled that evidences indicate on the murder and urged police to reopen investigation.

Both of these cases made a nationwide impact and both gave an impetus for cross-ethnic political struggle. Yet, both also lost the steam while making concessions along the way. War veteran protests started as subaltern organizing of unemployed vets against entrenched clientelism in federal welfare sector. As the protest continued, veteran organizations kidnapped the wave and re-articulated their demands to curry favor their vested interests and reduced protest goals to privileges and pensions. It was political machinery of veteran organizations that at the end coordinated action with Croat veterans and brokered a new law with their patron political parties. “Justice for David”, on

the other hand, retains grass-root organizing, but it prematurely sidelined with ROS opposition parties damaging the image it built that far and diminishing the chances for its relevance after the October elections. Open support it has received from BH Security Minister Mektic and public clashes with incumbent SNSD government reflected on the support it enjoyed in the Federation.

These two protests are exemplifying the challenge for Bosnian political organizing after the 2014 protests, but it also shows “inevitable contradiction” between genuine political struggle and historical circumstances in consociational Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The 2014 protests went farther than any other protest as yardstick for testing the fragility of the system, but they only revealed this contradiction and brought nothing more than that. Except few resignations on cantonal level, hardly any group reclaimed their political rights or benefited from the protests in organizational or other sense. Public participation in policy making as well as the gap between the elite and masses remained unshaken. The protest didn't help to integrate cross-ethnic, class-based identities; instead, according to the most observers, after 2014 general elections ethnic divisions became more entrenched, intra-ethnic political competition didn't generate stable cross-ethnic political organizing. 2014 protests stand as sole example of masses refusing their elites. Still, it was ethnically segmented refusal. The unrest peaked in Bosniak communities and the lists of detainees mostly show Muslim names, just like war veteran protests were Muslim before being moderated by vet organizations or “Justice for David” becoming Serb(ian) after joining political campaign. With the risk of sidelining with ethno-nationalist elite, it can be questioned whether the “solidarity” of Croat and Serb groups with 2014 protests would ever amount to refusal of their own elites and siding with masses across the identity lines. It is the question that predates post-hoc reasoning of any wannabe vanguard organization, but it is the heart of spontaneity for the future protests.