



Weekly Briefing

**Bosnia-Herzegovina Social briefing:
Justice for David: social or political movement?
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Justice for David: social or political movement?

In some of the previous reports, “Justice for David”, a Facebook petition group that turned into peaceful social protest in Banja Luka was mentioned as an example of one of a few successful social, cross-ethnic, grassroots movements in the recent history of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It started in late March 2018 as a spontaneous gathering of Banja Luka citizens who sympathized and supported the cause of a petition group that wanted to clarify the circumstances surrounding the death of David Dragicevic.

On March 18, David Dragicevic, a 21-year old went missing in one of the neighborhoods of Banja Luka, the “capital” of the Republic of Srpska. His dead body was found after few days and police declared the death as an accident. David’s parents, friends and colleagues gathered on Facebook claiming that David was murdered and that the police and public prosecutor’s office tried to hush up the case, allegedly protecting some well-connected figure involved in the murder.

Initial public reaction was vocal in demanding the truth and justice for David, but as the ongoing police investigation gave rather controversial results, the public became overwhelmingly convinced in the murder scenario and mass protests soon followed. Every day at 6pm on Banja Luka main Krajina Square, according to some sources, hundreds of people engaged in peaceful protests, demanding “justice for David” and reexamining the details of flawed police investigation.

By May, the protests continued to have a strong support among student and urban population and were held on a daily basis with the same persistency and attendance, gaining nationwide attention. Banja Luka based journalist and blogger Slobodan Vaskovic started to follow closely the protests and engaged in

independent investigation of David's murder. According to inconsistencies in police reports and eye-witness accounts contradicting the official version of the incident, he concluded that David was murdered.

Within a few days, all major media outlets in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia reported about the "resilient protests for which Dodik has no solution". Radio Free Europe had a few extensive coverages on the protests and BBC published an article suggesting anti-regime character of the protest. Oppositional parties also joined the protest, seizing the opportunity to boost the support for incoming elections. Serb Democratic Party (SDS) leader Vukota Govedarica promised to bring the case to the parliament of Srpska. State Security Minister Dragan Mektic in his feud with Police Dept of the Republic of Srpska claimed that he has an evidence proving a cover-up by some high-level officials.

At the same time, anonymous leaders from Facebook group in charge of the protests were slowly losing the prominence to David's father, Davor Dragicevic who became voracious in refuting insinuations on political underpinnings of the protest. As a war-veteran and declared patriot, he articulated the goal of the protests in apolitical but anti-establishment manner which was conducive to inspire same-minded protests across the entity lines. On May 15, a large protest was organized in Sarajevo where hundreds of people gathered to support justice for David and brought up the similar case of Dzenan Memic, a young Muslim from Sarajevo believed to underwent the similar fate like David in 2016. Within a week after the Sarajevo protest, at least three big protests were held in the Federation. A banner "Justice for David and Dzenan" under which the protests were organized in Zenica, Tuzla and Sarajevo not only gathered several hundred people on the streets demanding justice for these two young men, but its symbolic corroboration announced cross-ethnic and cross-entity movement that could seriously shake up existing quo in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

It was not surprising that under a given strain the Parliament of Republic of Srpska decided in favor of forming a special Inquiry Committee to re-examine the police investigation and make a non-binding opinion on David's case. After half month-long inquiry, the Committee produced 300-pages long report claiming to find the flaws in investigation and ruled that David was murdered.

Politicization of the protests occurred after the Parliament voted for endorsement of the report. On July 3, majority coalition led by the ruling Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) and two "SNSD satellite parties", the Democratic People's Party (DNS) and the Socialist Party (SP) rejected the report as "lacking a competency to rule the case as a murder". Instead, they have proposed similarly written conclusion that gives suggestions to police and judicial bodies in conducting further investigations. Opposition parties led by SDS criticized the conclusion demanding more binding document which would include determining individual responsibility for a misconduct during the investigation and strong-worded critique of the institutions involved in the case.

It could be said that from July the protest became "double-tracked", reflecting the difference between the "street" (square) where uncompromising demand for solving the David's case continued in peaceful manner and the "public space" where increasingly politically motivated rhetoric permeated with conspiracy theories, aggressive revolt and consenting defeat. On the one hand, the "street" gathered more than 10 000 people on July 7, following the rejection of the report. The number of people was decimated during the summer, yet the protests continued on daily basis. According to available reports, the gathering masses intended to defy the government by preparing to sustain a long-term protest. Therefore, they had followed up daily procedures by organizing shifts, assigning logistical support and coordinating daily programs. It is believed that the chief goal was to bridge the summer so that the protest retrieves the impetus in September during the political campaign for October elections.

On the other hand, opposition parties gathered around SDS leader Govedarica tried to depict the protests in anti-government tones. With October elections approaching, the protests became more crowded and “less spontaneous”. Since the protesters have given open platform to everyone wishing to join, some political parties mobilized their members to go to Krajina square and mix with ordinary “civilians”. Meanwhile, on the protest platform, leaders of contending political parties turned the focus from demanding justice to voicing out political grievances with Milorad Dodik and his circles. Corrupt and protectionist system has been increasingly identified with “Dodik`s regime” and the public was led to believe that Dodik himself is the main actor in obstructing the work of justice. In the same manner, media outlets critical of the president of the Republic of Srpska and his political party covered the protests as anti-government rallies. The headlines had in focus Dodik trying to dodge accusations from the protests and avoid direct confrontation with Davor Dragicevic; who, supported by the opposition leaders, has become more convinced that Dodik`s fall is a step forward in pursuing justice for his son.

Soon enough, the protests became political. Some analysts draw conclusions that the protests could seriously complicate Dodik chances for victory or even bring the end to his political career. During the campaign big generalizations were drawn, the protests were amplified as representing political will of “urban and liberal” population of Banja Luka, as opposed to rural and backward parts of the Republic of Srpska where most of Dodik`s supporters live. The main problem was, however, complete absence of political platform or party that could vouch on urban, liberal values and uncompromising fight for justice. But since the protests clearly lacked political leadership, various politicians tried to sympathize with protesters in hope to, at least, incite protest voting and encourage abstainers to go to polling stations.

On October 5, three days before the elections, opposition parties joined protesters in organizing the biggest protest so far. The gathering on Krajina

square at 6pm that day was meant to be the final event in the campaign and the last warning call to Dodik. Several opposition leaders crossed the stage giving the speeches against social insecurity, deep state, “privatization” of public institutions, only occasionally mentioning David and his case. In spite of the fact that, according to the most sources, over 40 000 people gathered on Krajina square, the protest went peaceful as usual and no (big) incidents occurred. The opposition claimed for the protest to be successful and called the day.

In the aftermath of the elections, Dodik and his party declared victory on ballot for State Presidency, President and Parliament of Republic of Srpska. Opposition gathered in coalition suffered a defeat unexpectedly higher than on the previous elections. Despite of this, it seemed that both, ruling SNSD and the opposition returned to business as usual in parliament. A week following the elections, Davor Dragicevic called opposition figures to continue with giving support to protests, decrying Govedarica and other opposition leaders for the sudden “mood change”.

After the elections it was obvious that the protests somehow failed in the political ambitions even though Davor Dragicevic claimed to engage in political campaigning only to boost support for the protest and his pact with opposition was more out of convenience than of ideological convergences. Similarly, as the elections have passed so was the interest of media and social networks. Up to this date, the protests continue in “low power mode”, just as they have started, with dozens of people coming back every day on Krajina square. It is early to say are the protesters preparing for some other political challenge and have they learned anything from these elections. According to Danijela Ratesic, one of the main persons in charge of the protests, they will continue with the protests indefinitely. She also told to media the protesters are preparing to found eponymous NGO organization dedicated to fight for David’s, Dzenan’s and all similar cases, which could indicate that the protesters sobered up in the belief that their social struggle could be solved out by making pacts with the

opposition or taking any political shortcuts. Instead, the protests might assume long-row but more stable fight, which along the way could bring a real alternative to the system and, why not, to Dodik and his party as well.