

From antipolitics to alterpolitics: subverting ethnokleptocracy in Bosnia and Hercegovina

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Post-1995 politics in Bosnia and Hercegovina is characterized by political structures generated by outside actors, ostensibly with the goal of assuring peace and the development of democracy, but in practice maintaining ethnifying monopolies in politics (Pickering 2007) and providing cover for impoverishing neoliberal monopolies in economics. While the paradox of entrusting the construction of a democratic state to the very ethnocrats who have no interest in it has been noted by many scholars (Bieber 2006, Bose 2002, Chandler 2000, Hromadžić 2009), as has the dubious impact of international engagement (Brown 2006, Gilbert 2012, Papić et. al. 2001), the toxic combination of politically-directed monopolisation and privatisation has received scant attention from researchers. This inattention persists despite a high and growing rate of unemployment in an environment where political officials are not only the most generously compensated employees in the country, but also the highest paid in the region. That the systematic dispossession of the population should lead to large scale protests is in no way surprising; more surprising is that the expansion of protest to a massive scale should have taken so long.

Foreseeable as they may have been, as they developed from February 2014 onward in Bosnia and Hercegovina, the protests and the formulation of popular dissatisfaction into concrete demands took on some innovative forms that make them difficult to dismiss as (one more) angry but barely coherent display of outrage. Some of the characteristics of the protests derive from conditions specific to the Bosnian and Southeast European environment, while others point to directions for the development of ground-level political engagement in the contemporary European environment, which has been described as a “post-prosperity” (Krippner 2011) and “post-democratic” (Crouch 2004) one. Some of these dimensions will become clear through a close reading of prominent elements of the protests, together with a comparison of the “alterpolitics” (Innerarity 2012) developing through the protests (and especially through the plena) in Bosnia and Hercegovina with the expression of public dissatisfaction with entrenched elites through a series of “antipolitics” movements in Italy.

Where protests had the greatest impact

Every larger urban centre in the Federation of Bosnia and Hercegovina saw a protest movement of some size and duration develop, although there was not a parallel development in the Republika Srpska. But probably the largest, most durable, most innovative and best-organised movement developed in Tuzla, where the first events leading to the larger wave of activity took place. A plausible claim could be put forward that every major development in the growth of this social movement, from the articulation of grievances in the first instance to the creation of a citizen plenum, originates from the activists in Tuzla. While much of this can certainly be credited to the energy and creativity of the people who have been consistently engaged with the product in that city, it is probably sensible to look at some underlying factors that contribute to Tuzla being a likely place for a particular set of responses to develop.

Certainly one of the first among these is the city’s political history. As Armakolas (2011) traces twentieth-century Tuzla, it was an early-developing industrial centre, an early focal point of labour organisation and left politics, and a centre of Partisan resistance

during the Second World War. Both the leftist legacies in the city and its long multiethnic and multinational tradition (its economic life has long been oriented far more to the wider region than its immediate surroundings) provided adequate support for Tuzla to maintain a non-nationalist position during the war in Bosnia and Hercegovina from 1995, and after the war it remained a centre of social democratic politics and labour activism.

Tuzla's resistance to ethnifying politics made it a target, however. During the war it was singled out by nationalist forces seeking to replace Bosnia's multiethnic traditions with new, exclusive ones, and after the war the political structures established by the Dayton Peace Agreement allowed the power of the city to be diluted. The division of the territory of the Federation into cantons, in particular, meant that activity in the social-democratic city was subject to the oversight of cantonal governments elected with support from the more conservative and ethnically exclusive countryside. At the same time the Social Democratic Party of Bosnia and Hercegovina, which had since 1990 had its strongest base of support in Tuzla,¹ showed an increasing inclination to compromise on issues of concern with the nationalist parties, by way of maintaining its position as a power broker in the broader politics of the Federation.

It was not, however, only the city's political tradition that was undermined. The industrial infrastructure that provided the base for Tuzla's labour activism was also gradually dismantled, its capacity hit in the first instance by the disappearance of the Yugoslav market for the products of its chemical industry, but in greater measure by asset-stripping, budget-skimming and credit-bouncing privatizations. For example the former minerals giant Sodaso, which at one time produced 80% of the table salt consumed in Yugoslavia, saw its production decrease by 90%, its workforce by over 80%, and continuing decline after private owners sent it into receivership (Nurković 2010).² The rapid decline of local industry and the security and wages provided through labour and trade was matched by an expansion in both the size and profitability of the political sector. It would be possible to regard this shift as a massive transfer of power, both economic and political, from the working class to party and bureaucratic functionaries. Among the consequences of this transfer could be counted a shrinking in the earned income and life chances of working people.

In this environment it is not difficult to see why both the radical rejection of the dominant political structures and the clear articulation of social and economic demands developed and gained major resonance. In other environments, however, the development of the movement was less certain, partly because of the operation of a different set of political forces and partly because of a more strongly negative popular response to the rioting that (briefly) accompanied the protests.

Where protests were hijacked

There were some localities in which it was difficult for the protest movement to achieve the same sort of resonance it achieved in Tuzla. In Sarajevo one of the obstacles to achieving popular traction came in the form of riots on the first days of protests. Although early provocations on the part of the police may well have goaded some protesters to a violent response, the events that provoked the largest outrage, in particular the arson in the portion of the Presidency building that contained part of the state archives, was more likely the work of professional thugs engaged for the purpose. Regardless of the sitting authorities' neglect of cultural institutions – an international

¹ The Central Electoral Commission of Bosnia and Hercegovina maintain a listing of results of all elections since 1996 online at <http://www.izbori.ba/Default.aspx?CategoryID=48&Lang=3&Mod=0>.

² The company's periodic reports are available at <http://www.solanatuzla.com/>.

campaign has been dedicated to familiarising cultural activists around the world to the closing and slow destruction of museums in Bosnia and Hercegovina³ -- city and cantonal authorities in Sarajevo were largely successful in highlighting the damage done to the archive, contrasting the gesture to the project of renovating the National and University Library destroyed during the war and portraying its perpetrators in disqualifying, decivilising terms. As self-serving as this strategy was, it apparently had some resonance with some portion of Sarajevo residents for whom the image of burning buildings was greeted with some horror, and for whom it recalled memories of the siege of the city between 1992 and 1995. Consequently at the beginning, particularly with the power of major media harnessed to it, the campaign to discredit the protests and to call forward fears of violence and disorder had a disabling effect.

A related effort to devalue the protest movement was engaged in Mostar, with its reach more limited to the supporters of the national parties. A city that was forcibly segregated during the war, and which for a time functioned as the capital of the "Herceg-Bosna" parastate, its public spaces and institutions remain subject to parceled control by ethnically-based political parties (Hromadžić 2009). The protests sought, among other goals, to articulate shared interests of the larger population against the domination of entrenched ethnocratic parties. Among the buildings damaged on the first nights of protest, when some rioting did take place, was the headquarters of the largest ethnic Croat party HDZ. In this instance the prime minister of neighbouring Croatia, Zoran Milanović, responded: he paid a visit to Mostar and declared the support of his country for the currently ruling institutions in Bosnia and Hercegovina. But he made the gesture in a particularly demonstrative way, travelling not to the capital of the country but to the institutional centre of HDZ, as if to underline that Croatia's support was not to the population but to a portion of the post-1992 elite. A similar effort by neighbouring Serbia (where officials of the Republika Srpska entity were invited to Belgrade to hear declarations of support) underlined that the effort of neighbouring states was oriented to dampening popular enthusiasm for protest by again raising the spectre of disorder and by highlighting the cross-border support enjoyed by ethnocrats.

Indeed in Republika Srpska hardly any echoes of protest could be noted at all. A small effort by veterans' associations and mostly student activists attracted some limited support, but for the most part RS officials actively discouraged public manifestations, deploying at the same time arguments that the absence of protest in the smaller entity indicated that the parties in power there maintained better social conditions and enjoyed greater support. This rhetoric was directed against the Federation and operated with an eye to undermining the legitimacy that RS and the Federation occupy jointly. That it had the additional goal of rhetorically confining the protest movement to the Bosniak population is suggested by the fact that a similar construct was echoed by right-wing Croat media outlets.

Fundamentally, the protest movement ran into difficulty in places where the dominant political party had cultivated a meaningful and identifiable clientele, where partly successful ethnifying political projects had catalysed an atmosphere of surplus repression, and where violence that occurred during the course of the protests called forth memories of the long-lasting and wide-scale violence that occurred as an integral part of the war. However, it was only in the Republika Srpska, where dominant parties have had a greater degree of success in extending control over a larger segment of daily life and where efforts to associate the continued rule of the post-Dayton elite with the "national" interest of an ethnic community, that existing power structures appeared able to silence protest comprehensively. Elsewhere, it appeared that high levels of sympathy

³ The site for the campaign can be found at <http://www.culturesutdown.net>. The principal mover behind the campaign is the artist and university professor Azra Akšamija of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

for the demands of the protest movement competed with high levels of trepidation about the possible return of violence.

Plenum as de-detournement

The greatest risk, especially in the period immediately following the violence of the night of 7 February, was that the protests could be hijacked by political parties, either by way of using the familiar rhetoric of a threat to public security or by efforts to coopt the protests' demands and claim them as part of a party' political programme. In fact dominant politicians and media outlets with one another raced to do both (Janusz 2014). This is where the innovation of the protesters both lifted the profile and extended the longevity of the protests. Through the formation of citizens' plenums generating and articulating demands by means of a direct democratic procedure, the protest movement achieved two milestones: it moved protests away from the streets where they were vulnerable to being discredited, and it took the production of the movement agenda out of the hands of the dominant political parties where they could be detoured and deprived of significance.

Drawing on an older twentieth century revolutionary tradition (the first citizens' plenum was formed in St Petersburg in 1905), the plenum was conceived as a way of articulating citizen demands directly, bypassing official political institutions that were perceived as corrupt and unresponsive. At the same time it was seen as a way of allowing issues to arise in a more concrete and articulated form than symbolic street presence or slogans could achieve, free also of the potential controversy that could (and in a few instances did) arise from confrontations surrounding public protests. The Tuzla plenum developed the first framework, and citizen plenums quickly spread to other major cities in the Federation. Among the responses to plenums by political elites came resignations on the part of several cantonal governments. One prominent figure in the Tuzla plenum described the form as "open, direct and transparent democracy in practice" (Arsenijević 2014), while an anthropologist saw its function as people "reminding the political class that they exist and that they have problems they want solved" (Jansen 2014).

The plenums proved to be the vehicle that moved the protest from expression of outrage to articulation of social and political demands. Citizens who gathered at the meetings produced lists of demands ranging from resignation of local governments and reviews of destructive privatization initiatives to limiting sources of corruption and protecting social welfare and education.⁴ Through peaceful, substantive and concrete discussion, the plenum vehicle both bypassed dysfunctional government structures and addressed the standard critique of protests that they represent an expression of dissatisfaction but offer no solutions. At the same time, the practice of direct democracy recalled some of the more sympathetically remembered moments both of the Partisan struggle and of Yugoslav self-management, a tradition frequently denigrated in the contemporary post-socialist environment but remembered throughout Bosnia and Hercegovina as a bright point in history (Dević 2014). Both in the country and abroad, a discourse developed celebrating the citizen plenums as a precursor of a new form of politics.

As other contributors to the present volume address the plenum phenomenon and its innovative character, there may be reason to discuss some of its limitations. One of the principal limitations involves time: the structure of direct democracy is difficult to sustain for more than a short period, and a elections approach in the latter part of 2014 the established parties have an opportunity to reemerge with reinvigorated claims to

⁴ A graphic representation of types and frequency of plenum demands prepared by Damir Mehmedović can be found at <http://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com/2014/05/13/visualizing-the-plenum-demands/>.

legitimacy. While some political parties have made an effort to adopt as their own some of the demands of the plenums, there is considerable resistance among plenum participants to allowing the movement to be colonised by political parties.

At the same time international actors, whose role of oversight affords them enormous influence in the politics of Bosnia and Hercegovina, have consistently failed to recognise the significance of the protest movement or to acknowledge its autonomy from the post-Dayton elite they are accustomed to treating as (junior) partners. High representative Valentin Inzko responded to events with a promise of the international community to intervene if necessary to preserve the existing power structures. EU enlargement commissioner Stefan Füle paid a visit to Sarajevo as the plenums were getting under way, where he held an unproductive meeting with political party leaders but ignored the citizen assemblies. A former UK ambassador wrote an opinion column proposing a fantasy neoliberal agenda for Bosnia and Hercegovina and describing a Bosnian scholar who supported the protests as “exotic.”⁵ A premature post-mortem of the protests attributed its predicted failure to the inability of the plenums to produce a(nother) political party.⁶ While the UN Security Council placed the social and economic situation in Bosnia and Hercegovina on its agenda, an observer agency predicted, accurately, “most likely the Council will hold the debate and take no action.”⁷

With limitations on the reach of the plenums deriving from both the domestic political establishment and influential international actors, the influence of the movement on policy in the short term might appear uncertain. As a new movement addressing some of the difficulties faced by both protest and antipolitics movements over the past several years, however, its contribution could become meaningful over the long term.

Drawing on the Italian case, where a variety of antipolitical movements have attracted a meaningful level of popular support, it might be possible to suggest that what unifies antipolitical movements is a rejection of mainstream politicians as corrupt, unrepresentative, and nonresponsive to genuine public needs (Mete 2010). Moving beyond that unifying point, however, one encounters a wide range of diversity, with antipolitical movements spanning both right and left orientations, and encompassing forms of activity ranging from intense engagement to disaffection and refusal. Left variants have been concerned with redefinitions of the scope of the political (Barnett 2004) as well as with (re)claiming and (re)appropriating public space (Swyngedouw 2011), and while they have been innovative in terms of procedure and forms of address have faced problems of sustainability and of not all environments proving equally hospitable (Razsa and Kurnik 2012). Meanwhile right variants (as well as initiatives like the Italian “5 star” movement that seeks to transcend ideological division through a more purely conceived populism) succumb repeatedly to the tendency to be transformed into leader-centred political parties incapable of resistance to the system into which they seek to intervene (Diamanti 2014).

The challenge to sustainability of both left and right antipolitics movements appears to derive in part from their moving forces: they are idea- and situation-driven rather than deriving their base from a public and its needs. What distinguishes alterpolitics from antipolitics is the question of representation. The plenum alters the calculus by deriving

⁵ The article by former ambassador Charles Crawford can be found at <http://www.transconflict.com/2014/02/how-to-make-a-new-start-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina-132/>. The “exotic” scholar in question is Jasmin Mujanović.

⁶ The article by Elvir Jukić, “Why Bosnia’s protest movement ran out of steam,” can be found at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/why-bosnia-s-protest-movement-ran-out-of-steam>. It relies on interviews with established party politicians to make the point that social change can only be effected by established party politicians.

⁷ Security Council Report, monthly forecast for Bosnia and Hercegovina, May 2014, available at http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2014-05/bosnia_and_herzegovina_3.php.

the demands it articulates from a social base that is brought forward rather than created – in the Bosnian case, a public that is systematically not represented through its official institutions. For this reason, despite the fact that quiet periods may make the movement appear temporary, and upcoming elections may make the movement appear obsolete, the plenums offer a model that is renewable, resistant to disqualification, and may have a lasting influence beyond the geographic place where it was developed.

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