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Citation for published version:

Stiks, I & Horvat, S 2014, The new Balkan revolts: From protests to plenums, and beyond. in D Arsenijevic (ed.), *The Unbriable Bosnia-Herzegovina*. Nomos verlagsgesellschaft, Baden-Baden, Baden-Baden, pp. 83-88. <<http://www.nomos-shop.de/Arsenijevic-Unbriable-Bosnia-Herzegovina/productview.aspx?product=23285>>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

The Unbriable Bosnia-Herzegovina

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The New Balkan Revolts: From Protests to Plenums, and Beyond*

Igor Štikš and Srećko Horvat

Over the last couple of years we have regularly witnessed popular protests and uprisings in the post-socialist Balkans. The well-known mobilisations, struggles and street violence in the southern part of the peninsula, in Greece and Turkey, have a constant and yet under-reported echo in other Balkan states. These have had a different historical trajectory: after the disappearance of the state socialist regimes, in all of these states, and most dramatically across the former Yugoslavia, a period of violence, conflict or general instability and economic hardship has been followed by a seemingly endless transition to liberal democracy and a neoliberal economy.

Transition was meant to be a process ending in accession to the European Union. But now the EU itself seems to be a project without a clear direction and whose prospects are uncertain: continuing austerity measures, multiple “crises”, from economic to institutional ones, rising unemployment rates, especially among the youth, and a growing right-wing extremism from Greece, France to Hungary. In accordance with Thatcherite ideals, the European welfare state is now almost completely dismantled, labour laws are regressing to the early years of the 20th century, and public services have been gradually privatised. The political regimes in the Balkans have been following this general European trend with similar disastrous results. However, today in many of these states they are for the first time facing a serious resistance coming directly from the streets.

These new social movements reflect a need for a deep transformation of Balkan societies. Given the multi-faceted situation described above, it is unsurprising that the movements differ in their methods of struggle, their ideological orientations and their strategies. They are mostly a reaction to the deteriorating social and economic situation and numerous abuses of power by corrupt political elites. Nonetheless, they often serve as hubs for new ideas and more proactive projects offering a progressive vision of their societies. In this article we will sketch a typology of these movements and actions by dividing them into five main blocs: anti-regime protests, mobilisations for the commons, student movements, workers’ struggles and, last but not least, hegemonic cultural and intellectual efforts.

From Anti-Regime Protests to the Struggle for the Commons

Since the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008, anti-regime protests have been erupting regularly across the Balkans. In Croatia in Spring 2011, for a whole month, up to 10,000 people were marching across Zagreb every evening denouncing the political system and all political parties. In Slovenia in 2012 and 2013 general “uprisings” mobilised the whole country, contributing to the fall of the right-wing government and a number of

* This article is based on part of the introduction to the forthcoming edited volume “Welcome to the Desert of Post-Socialism: Radical Politics after Yugoslavia”, edited by Srećko Horvat and Igor Štikš, London: Verso, 2015.

corrupt officials. In Bulgaria in spring 2013 huge protests triggered by drastically increased electricity bills brought thousands to the streets only to be followed after the general elections by even larger protests in summer 2013. For weeks masses protested against political elites and their ties to powerful mafia and media moguls. In Romania protests have been sporadically erupting since 2010, in response to unbearable social conditions and continuing austerity measures. Similar types of protests, with different intensity, have been seen also in Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Albania.

Probably the most important social upheaval in the post-socialist Balkans erupted in Bosnia and Herzegovina in February 2014. Only eight months after the 2013 protests that for the first time significantly transcended imposed ethnic divisions, on 5 February 2014 workers from several privatised and destroyed factories united on the streets of Tuzla to demand their unpaid salaries and pensions. Soon, they were joined by students and other citizens from all walks of life. Clashes with police resulted in burning of government buildings in Tuzla, which was replicated in other cities such as Mostar, Zenica and Sarajevo. And while the media and political class were denouncing “hooliganism” and “vandalism”, the protesters were busy establishing “plenums”, self-governed citizens’ assemblies that spread throughout the country, from Tuzla itself where the first plenum was formed, to the capital Sarajevo, regional centres such as Mostar and Zenica, and to smaller cities such as Bugojno, Bihać, Brčko, Travnik and others. Most canton governments resigned and cantons’ assemblies mostly accepted — the implementation remains another issue — the main demands by the plenums. After long deliberations open to all citizens, almost uniformly, with some regional variety, they demanded the revision of privatisations, the end of excessive politicians’ benefits, and the formation of new state-level and local governments filled with people with proven expertise and no record of corruption.

In our view, the plenums of Bosnia represent the most radical experiment in non-institutional politics that can be found across the Balkans since the collapse of Yugoslavia. The form is clearly radical, although the participants themselves are of various political stripes and cannot be easily identified as left-leaning or belonging to the left. Enraged citizens simply rebelled against the degrading conditions of social and political life and spontaneously adopted citizens’ assemblies and horizontal forms of democracy as a way to articulate their demands and organise themselves autonomously. The plenum movement shook the foundation of post-war Bosnia and the wider post-Yugoslav region, surprised both ethnonationalist political elites and the international community and opened new spaces for social and political action. The plenums were operational, with various successes depending on the local situation, for almost three months. In various forms, via working groups, many plenums are still active. Engaged citizens understand now that plenums represent a precious instrument that can be easily reactivated. To sum up, a growing social movement in Bosnia-Herzegovina came out of the protests and the plenums and re-defined the public sphere and imposed a new political agenda, this time centred on the question of social justice and equality coupled with a profound critique of the disastrous capitalist economy implemented in this post-conflict country.

All these examples — and the Bosnian one especially — show that for the first time we have more than an anti-government rhetoric per se — instead there is a true anti-Regime sentiment. Not only the state but the whole apparatus on which the current

oligarchy is based is called into question by sometimes chaotically self-organised citizens. The emergence and nature of these protests invites us to rethink the categories used to explain the social, political and economic situation in the Balkans, and elsewhere in post-socialist Eastern Europe. It also compels us to understand the nature not only of state institutions, their weakness or failure, but the nature of the post-socialist Regime that has been (almost) cemented over the last two decades but susceptible to crack under the weight of its own contradictions and products such as, for instance, rampant poverty. Rebelling against these Regimes is all that much harder because they often do not have a single face, no dictator, no governing families and are not characterised by open repression and censorship. These occasional expressions of anger are indeed the seeds of a new political and social dynamics that might result in wider movements. However, they are also characterised by volatility and by random triggers, and are usually followed by confusing and often contradictory political messages.

One of the most developed areas of struggle concerns the commons, the defence of public and common goods such as public spaces (often parks), nature (water, forests, hills, landscape), urban spaces and public utility infrastructure (electricity, railways etc.) Examples are abundant: *The Right to the City* movement in 2009/2010 in Zagreb mobilised thousands in defence of a square in downtown Zagreb; in Dubrovnik citizens organised to defend a nearby hill from being turned into a golf resort; in Bosnia's second largest city, Banja Luka, citizens tried to defend one of the few public parks; in Belgrade smaller mobilisations were triggered by cutting old trees in one of the main streets, so to obtain more parking space, or by destruction of a neighbourhood park; in Bulgaria in 2012 people demonstrated against privatisation of forests; in Romania in 2012 against privatisation of emergency services, and again against an ecologically disastrous gold mine project in Rosia Montana etc. These single-issue movements proved to be channels of general public dissatisfaction and enjoyed support from the vast majority of citizens who see privatisations of the commons or neglect of public interest as intolerable practices. The commercialisation of public education, what many see as the ultimate common and social good, triggered massive student mobilisations as well.

Back to the old Alliance: Students, Workers, and Intellectuals?

Since 2009 strong student movements have developed in Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, and to a certain extent in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and, recently, Kosovo. While students mostly protest in classic ways in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo (by marches, protests and petitions), in Slovenia, Serbia and, especially, in Croatia the student movement extensively experiments with occupations and direct democracy. It is precisely the emergence of plenums within these movements to which we can trace the current Bosnian practices of direct and horizontal democracy.

In this context, it is worth paying special attention to the Croatian case, where an independent student movement articulated a strong resistance to the privatisation and commercialisation of higher education. Their protest against neoliberal reforms in the field of education turned into probably the first strong political opposition not only to the government, but indeed to the general political and social regime. During 35 days in spring and two weeks in autumn in 2009, more than 20 universities all over Croatia were

occupied with students practically running them.¹ In itself nothing new one could say, but the way they occupied and ran the universities deserves our attention for its originality in a much larger context than that of the Balkans or Eastern Europe. They invited to their plenums not only students but all citizens to debate issues of public importance such as education and, in addition to that, to decide upon the course of the protest movement. The most active plenum at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb each evening gathered up to 1000 individuals deliberating on the course of action.² This event gave rise to the movement for direct democracy, which was seen as a necessary corrective of electoral democracy and partitocracy and, possibly, a true alternative to it.

The new Croatian Left, whose ideas quickly spread around the post-Yugoslav space, do not see direct democracy limited to the referendum practice but rather as a means of political organisation for citizens from local communes to the national level. This horizontal model has been used since then by many collective actions across post-Yugoslav space, from Occupy movements to street marches, workers' strikes, and farmers' protests, and, finally, on a larger scale, by protestors in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The recent period is also marked by reinvigorated workers' struggles. They are not uniform and range from classic strikes, workers' influence in running companies in majority state ownership and defending them from further privatisations (*Petrokemija* factory in Croatia), to examples of workers' successful and unsuccessful takeovers (e.g. *Jadrnkamen* and *TDZ* in Croatia) and the models of workers' share-holdership (*Jugoremedija* in Serbia and *ITAS* in Croatia). We are also witnessing a new cooperation between different social movements (such as students) and workers in building a common anti-capitalist strategy.

Finally, there is another type of struggle deserving of attention: namely, hegemonic cultural and intellectual efforts whose aim is to change the general public climate, dominant media discourses, and re-introduce progressive ideas into wider society. Its primary goal is to undermine the (neo)liberal hegemony that since 1989 has successfully delegitimised left traditions and promoted electoral democracy—although often ending up in autocracies—and the free market as the *only game in town*. In the post-Yugoslav context, this general post-socialist orientation was coupled, not always harmoniously, with nationalist-conservative, right-wing extremist and anti-communist dominance. It clashed though with liberal attempts at “democratising” these societies; the efforts focused mostly on institutional reforms and EU integration process that problematised only criminal privatisations and practices—but not the general neoliberal orientation.

Introducing a progressive agenda and radical thinking into the dominant discourse was an almost impossible task until recently. However, the 2008 economic and financial shock, followed by the crisis of the EU, opened a space for until then marginal movements to articulate their critique of the current political and economic regime. These

¹ We have written extensively about the student and civic rebellions that involved occupation of universities but also of public spaces in Zagreb in our book *Pravo na pobunu – Uvod u anatomiju građanskog otpora* [The Right to Rebellion - An Introduction to the Anatomy of Civic Resistance], Zagreb: Fraktura, 2010.

² For a detailed overview of the student actions in Croatia see *The Occupation Cookbook, or the Model of the Occupation of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb*, Minorcompositions: New York, 2011.

attempts range from public gatherings, forums and festivals (such as the Mayday school in Ljubljana, the Subversive Festival in Zagreb or Open University in Sarajevo), summer schools, series of activist and academic workshops and conferences to newspapers, reviews and online magazines (from *Zarez*, *Bilten*, and *Le Monde Diplomatique* in Croatia to *CriticAtac* and *LeftEast* in Romania, or *Mladina* in Ljubljana).

Movements, Plenums, Parties

The political strategies of the movements described above remain for now confined to occasional protests and occupations — often marked by questioning of representative democracy in the name of horizontality — petitions and even referendum initiatives. Although, the model offered by Greek left party Syriza, a coalition of movements engaged in parliamentary politics, is widely appreciated, we cannot detect so far serious attempts at taking these struggles towards institutional politics.³

Nonetheless, what the current protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina clearly show is that protest energy can soon vanish and turn into an even bigger despair, usual fragmentation, or what Walter Benjamin called the “melancholy of the Left”. But, if protests turn into some sort of institutionalised politics — be it the self-created parallel institutions such as citizens-led assemblies and/or new political parties that are ready to face electoral struggles — the progressive movements’ potential for a wider social and political impact can remain strong. Without the protests, the plenums would lose their potential to apply pressure, and without the plenums, the protests would lose their legitimacy and articulation. In turn, any future attempt at party and representative politics will have to be based on, inspired and guided by social movements. In other words, what the Left, in order to get out of its “current impotence”, must rethink is the complex dialectics between the 3 Ps: protests, plenums, parties. Instead of being overwhelmed by new ‘spring(s)’, what we need more than ever is a long-term political and social work that will combine all organisational forms and be open to changing local and global circumstances.

³ Maybe the only noteworthy exception, among a number of small left-leaning parties, so far is a political party in Slovenia (*Initiative for Democratic Socialism*) that grew from street protests. It formed, together with other progressive left parties, a “United Left” list of candidates for the European elections in May 2014 but failed to elect a MEP. Only two months later at the national elections in Slovenia, the United Left won six seats in the Parliament.