

Geographical Overview | **Western Balkans**

From Maribor Spring to Tuzla Revolt: Beyond the Protest Moments in Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia

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The Relation to Past Citizen Protests

There have been citizen protests in Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in the past. For example, there were various forms of protest and quite advanced civic activism in Slovenia in the socialist eighties. In Croatia there were massive protests for more independence in 1971 and around the transitional cornerstone of 1989, while in 1996 around 100,000 citizens protested in Zagreb in defence of Radio 101, a local radio station that tended to be critical towards the regime. There have been workers' protests (Maribor in 1988), nationalistic protests and even pacifist events (YUTEL concert for peace in Sarajevo in 1991). Indeed, there have been civil and uncivil protests in all three countries despite the predominantly authoritarian political culture. What is most different in the newest wave of protests, however, is that for the first time there is a questioning of the transitional promise of 'liberal democracy and free-market capitalism.'¹ This questioning mostly comes from the progressive left, but neoconservative groups, nationalists and populists are also turning towards other forms of civic action, ranging from referendum initiatives to street protests.

The global economic crisis has led to a much broader crisis in Europe. Not surprisingly, the situation in the European semi-periphery and periphery contin-

ues to be even worse. There are some common features between the three countries focused on in this text and other Mediterranean countries – high unemployment rates marked with extremely high youth unemployment rates; increased social inequality and significant rises in poverty; various degrees of austerity policy that have led to a crumbling of the welfare state safety nets; and commercialisation of various public goods and services. There has also been resistance to these systemic tendencies and a significant portion of the planned privatisation plans have actually not been implemented yet. In the case of Croatia, after six years of recession, the GDP has decreased around 12.5% in terms of standard of living. These economic and other structural conditions clearly have an effect on various expressions of civic discontent. As many authors have pointed out, however, the relationship is by no means linear, and protest moments cannot be predicted, especially not solely on the basis of economic facts and figures.¹ In this sense, the analysis of the Slovenian uprising provided by Gal Kirn seems to have found the strongest theoretical foundations, which can certainly be applied in the case of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina and probably beyond. Kirn follows the concept of politics developed by Jacques Rancière ("the politics of dissensus and rupture") and underlines that the ruptures cannot be anticipated nor "simply reduced to objective conditions of the situation or explained by economic arguments."²

While the crisis did not have a causal effect on the protests it did cause a sort of tectonic slide within the civil society sphere in all three countries, a slide

¹ As a reminder, Greece and Spain have been sites of extensive protests but so have Brasil and Turkey, rare examples of countries in which the socio-economic indicators cited above have been moving in a positive direction. On the other side, the Baltic states have experienced a serious economic recession but no protests.

² KIRN, Gal. "Slovenia's social uprising in the European crisis: Maribor as periphery from 1988 to 2012," *Stasis Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1, European University at St. Petersburg, 2014, p. 116.

The issues that are being pushed by the strongest progressive civil society actors have clearly moved in the direction of socio-economic concerns, although in Slovenia and Croatia the struggle related to LGBT rights, women's rights and secularism has also come to the forefront

which in turn manifested itself as the emergence of new forms of civic activism, including protests.³ The issues that are being pushed by the strongest progressive civil society actors have clearly moved in the direction of socio-economic concerns, although in Slovenia and Croatia the struggle related to LGBT rights, women's rights and secularism has also come to the forefront. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the tectonic slide can also be observed, although it is accompanied by the highest degree of tension between new forms of activism and established organisations (accused of living comfortably under the umbrella of 'the international community'). And it is not just about the issues at hand, but also about form and practice. Established civil society organisations (NGO's, i.e. 'institutionalised civic society') have been increasingly overshadowed by ad-hoc informal initiatives, digital activism, direct and often performative activist interventions in space and wider civic coalitions that include 'unusual actors' (ranging from trade unions to popular artists). Rather than providing a description of this slide in the civil society sphere, let us look at the three critical protest moments in all three countries.

Three Critical Protest Moments

In Slovenia, the critical moment is rather clear. It was not the austerity measures adopted in 2012-2013 by the Slovenian government (which included the privatisation of banks, reduction of workers' rights, drastic cuts in funding for education and culture) nor the rise in youth unemployment in 2012 or negative

growth. It was a relatively minor event in the second largest city of Slovenia, in Maribor, that triggered the protests. The mayor, Franc Kangler, introduced hundreds of radar speed guns throughout the city and in two weeks there were unprecedented numbers of speeding tickets delivered to the citizens of Maribor. As Kirn described "The sense of clear social injustice grew once the information about the speed radar initiative leaked: it was a private-public partnership, which benefited the mayor and his partners."⁴ Thousands of people took to the streets of Maribor in the weeks that followed, eventually reaching a quarter of its total population. The protests spread both geographically (to Ljubljana as well as many other cities throughout Slovenia) and in terms of the marked political targets. This spontaneous uprising (*vstaja*) was a surprise even to the main trade unions and opposition parties, it included people who had never been socially engaged before and resulted in the resignation of the mayor of Maribor and led to the ousting of the Slovenian Prime Minister.

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In the case of Croatia it is more difficult to say what the critical protest moment was. The largest-scale and most spontaneous protests were certainly those that took place in the first half of 2011. These 'Facebook protests' took place in Zagreb, initially as expressions of discontent towards the current government by a small group of disoriented young activists. In the weeks that followed the group expanded to ten thousand people and began to es-

³ An important critical overview of this tectonic slide in the case of Croatia has been provided by Paul Stubbs in his article about three waves of activism. STUBBS, Paul. *Networks, Organisations, Movements: Narratives and Shapes of Three Waves of Activism in Croatia*. POLEMOS 15: 11-32, 2012.

⁴ KIRN, Gal. *Slovenia's social uprising in the European crisis: Maribor as periphery from 1988 to 2012*. Stosis, Vol. 2, No. 1. (EUSP, 2014), p. 116.

establish a common denominator. As Štiks and Horvat state, they started to display “more clearly the reasons for discontent, namely the disastrous social situation and a lack of confidence in institutions and a political system breeding corruption and deepening social inequalities.”⁵ Indeed, the novelty of the protests was that they brought different people to the streets who in many cases had previously not engaged in the public sphere, they contained an anti-establishment and to some degree anti-capitalist element and they were truly spontaneous. However, there were nationalist-populist elements as well.

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The other protests that took place in Croatia were different in the sense that they would not have been organised nor sustained without the existence of a core activist group. The student plenum in 2009 was a rebellion of students who were initially protesting against increased tuition fees at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Zagreb, but ended up being a much wider protest against the announced commercialisation of higher education. The student protests spread to twenty faculties across Croatia and served as a source of inspiration for other student movements in the region. The important *Ne damo Varšavsku*⁶ campaign was actually organised by two civil society groups, the Right to the City and the environmental Green Action. This was a campaign against covert deals between a private investor and the mayor of Zagreb Milan Bandić. In this case, it is interesting to note that it was not years of clientelis-

tic and allegedly corrupt practice by the mayor, nor the idea of building yet another shopping centre and unaffordable housing that brought people out onto the streets. The trigger was a relatively minor event; the sense of extraordinary injustice when it was decided to destroy a nearby pedestrian zone at the expense of the city budget. The experience of these two protests certainly fed into the widespread protests that took place in 2011.

In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina there is no doubt about the critical protest moment. The protests that erupted in February 2014 were a radically novel development for the country. As Damir Arsenijević writes, these protests announced a change “from merely voicing dissatisfaction to inventing methods of making decisions that concern the future of all citizens.”⁷ The protests started in Tuzla, a provincial town whose heavy industry was largely devastated during the transition into capitalism (in some ways similar to Maribor). The February protests were preceded by a number of issue-oriented or site-specific protests, most notably the protests that took place in Sarajevo over an outrageous administrative failure, which led to the death of a baby. However, the February protests brought a lot of newcomers onto the street, included violent outbreaks and rose above the ethnic divide, something best exemplified in the slogan “We are hungry in all three languages.” As Arsenijević and several other Bosnian authors suggest, they created civic engagement, enthusiasm and new forms of decision-making practice. While some have argued for plenums to be legalised as accountability mechanisms, a group of activists coming from across the country is struggling to transform the protest moment into a sustainable movement for social justice. The trigger in this case is the continuation of the flawed dismantling of major industry in Tuzla. Again the issue of why the citizen protest started when it did cannot be explained through economic conditions alone, and the tectonic slide within the civil society sphere can be observed, albeit in quite specific conditions.

⁵ ŠTIKS, Igor & SRECKO Horvat. *Welcome to the Desert of Transition!: Post-socialism, the European Union and a New Left in the Balkans*, University of Edinburgh Monthly Review, Vol. 63, No. 10, p. 45.

⁶ In English ‘We will not give up Varšavska,’ where Varšavska is the name of the street which contained the pedestrian area in question.

⁷ ARSENIJEVIĆ, Damir (ed.). “Unbribeable Bosnia and Herzegovina: the Fight for the Commons,” *Southeast European Integration Perspectives*, Nomos, p. 7.

Beyond Protest: Transforming the Energy of the Moment

The protest moments have a value in and of themselves. They are an audible criticism of clientelism, corruption and injustice. They are expressions of discontent with the limitations of representative democracy as well as expressions of anger over growing inequality. Furthermore, they are a strong manifestation of new forms of activism which are much more spontaneous than the project-oriented institution building and largely elitist democracy-promotion efforts of the endless 'transition.' This new wave of activism nurtures a horizontal and deliberative organisational culture, while involving a much greater number of citizens. The protest moments not only carry hope, they also contain a transformative potential that should not be underestimated. The protests have fostered the development of functioning citizen assemblies (*Inicijativa za mesni zbor*, Maribor) and a successful new party in Slovenia (the United Left and within it the youthful political movement called the Initiative for Democratic Socialism), experiments in participatory budgeting (Pazin) and the broadest civic coalition to date in Croatia (*Ne damo naše autoceste*),⁸ as well as some successful plenum practices (e.g. Gračanica) and an attempt to build a nationwide movement for social justice in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is just a sample of some of the progressive practices largely developed on the basis of the protest energy.

Clearly the transformative potential of these citizen protests also has its limitations and undesirable con-

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sequences. In Croatia calls for direct democracy were seconded by neo-conservative groups who successfully pushed through a referendum constitutionally defining marriage as a union of man and woman. Additional space has been created for nationalistic protests by war veterans, largely contentless, populist parties have been formed and activist agenda's hijacked. In Bosnia and Herzegovina the majority of the plenums set up during the protests have been discontinued and a coalition of nationalistic parties reconfirmed through recent elections. In some cases there are also strong, and to some extent unnecessary, tensions between protestors and established civil society organisations, and even paranoia. However, this is also a question of time. Spanish protestors reminded their Bosnian counterparts that two years after the 15M moment they thought not much had changed. They would certainly not say this today. There is transformative potential in all three countries. It may take more time for them to grow but new, homegrown seeds have definitively been planted.

⁸ *Ne damo naše autoceste* means "We will not give away our highways." This campaign brought together five diverse civil society organisations (Croatian Youth Network, Centre for Peace Studies, Base for Workers' Initiatives, Clubture, Green Action, Right to the City nad GONG) and two trade unions.