



BOSNIAN **SPRING**

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SIGNALS NEW POSSIBILITIES
FOR BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

In early February 2014, news of revolution in Ukraine and Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) dominated international headlines. As Euromaidan gave way to the Russian occupation of Crimea, however, scenes of armed militias in Sevastopol pushed the “Bosnian Spring” from the front pages. In Ukraine, the revolution brought the country to the brink of war. In BiH, still recovering from the Bosnian War (1992–95), the protests created the first real possibility for change in nearly two decades.

At the heart of this possibility is the emergence of grassroots popular assemblies, locally known as the *plenumi*. Attended first by hundreds, then by thousands, the plena have created a space for the citizens of BiH to discuss openly and freely the one shared reality that cuts across all complex ethnic, regional, and political divisions: the country’s catastrophic socioeconomic situation. More than 40 percent of the adult population, 50 percent of women, and 60 percent of young people are unemployed. Among the youth, 80 percent declare they would leave BiH if they had the means. Meanwhile, Bosnian lawmakers make six times the average wage in the country, the highest such gap in Europe.

This situation is the result of the byzantine mass of governing bodies established by the General Framework Agreement

for Peace, better known as the Dayton Agreement, in December 1995. The agreement separated the country into two entities, the Bosniak-Croat Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) and the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska (RS), creating a complex patchwork of institutions that employ approximately 180 ministers, 600 legislators, and 70,000 bureaucrats according to strict ethnic quotas. These elected officials and their staff constitute a privileged class that has facilitated the highest rate of corruption on the European continent. Until now, these elites have skillfully manipulated the population by using Serb, Croat, and Bosniak nationalist rhetoric to maintain postwar ethnic tensions and thus prevent united popular backlash against their rule.

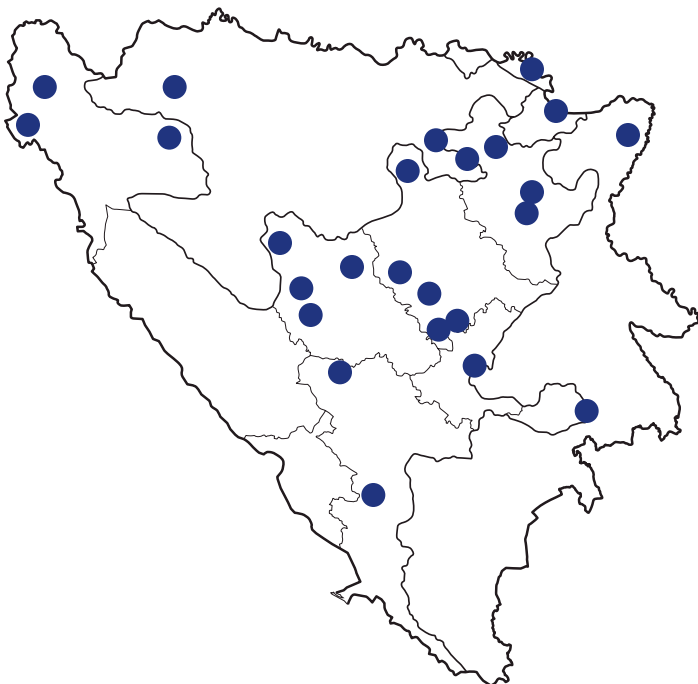
But, on February 4, 2014, a crowd of several hundred unemployed workers from the collapsed Dita, Polihem, Guming, and Konjuh factories gathered in front of the seat of the Tuzla Canton. Chanting “Thieves!” they demanded the government investigate the privatizations of their former employers, the industrial giants where the majority of the population worked during the socialist era. By February 6, approximately 6,000 people gathered in the streets of Tuzla. Officials refused to meet with worker representatives, who were confronted by an increasingly hostile police presence. Running street battles ensued in which a hundred police were injured and eleven cars set ablaze.

The public anger in Tuzla touched a nerve across the country. The next day the protests spread to more than twenty cities and towns, including the major centers of Sarajevo, Zenica, Mostar, and Bihać. In Sarajevo, protestors torched cantonal offices, municipal buildings, and the seat of the presidency of BiH. In Mostar, the jewel of Herzegovina, crowds set fire to government buildings and the local party headquarters of the leading nationalist parties. In Tuzla itself, more than a hundred people were injured as angry crowds stormed and later set fire to several floors of the cantonal government building.

For BiH, everything about the protests was unprecedented: their size, their militancy, and, above all, their effectiveness. In their wake, the premiers of four cantons in the Federation entity resigned, as did the director of the Directorate for Police Coordination, a state-level body. In the RS, a panicked scramble by the authorities resulted in an offer for snap elections, as well as a campaign of intimidation against local activists.

Clearly terrified at what appeared to be a rejection by the BiH citizens of the political establishment as a whole, all three nationalist camps began to blame sinister foreign “centers of power” for the unrest. Moreover, representatives of the leading nationalist parties explained that the socioeconomic complaints of the protestors were only a mask for their true anti-Bosniak, anti-Croat, and anti-Serb agendas. The ethnic narrative was predictable. But, only days after the worst of the violence, a Valicon poll released on February 12 illustrated how detached this “ethnic spin” was from the public’s perceptions: 88 percent of respondents in BiH supported the protests, 93 percent in the FBiH, and 78 percent in the RS. Despite

Locations where the protests took place
(map readapted from Klix.ba)





Zenica-Doboj Canton building the day after the riot in February 2014

the popular support, the spontaneous emergence of the citizen plena has been an unlikely development in a society where few institutions, schools and public utility companies included, are not ethnically segregated and mutual suspicion is meant to inform virtually every aspect of daily life.

The plena have demanded the resignations of entity and cantonal governments, audits of public spending, investigations of failed privatizations, and the creation of nonpartisan, expert governments appointed to be in dialogue with the plena themselves in the period leading up to the October General Elections. In Tuzla, Sarajevo, and Una-Sana cantons, the local authorities have largely acquiesced to popular demands by passing legislation that will cut years-long “severance pay” for officials no longer even employed by the government, for instance. However, authorities in both the FBiH and RS governments remain aggressively obstinate, refusing to meet or even acknowledge the citizens’ demands.

What does this eruption of democratic consciousness tell us about BiH? The implications are paradigmatic. To begin with, there is clearly widespread national disillusionment with the existing political process. Second, Bosnians and Herzegovinians are able and willing to organize across ethnic lines, *especially* on concrete socioeconomic concerns that the political establishment refuses to address. And, perhaps most importantly, the citizens have shown *themselves* to be able to produce and articulate clear demands and policy suggestions regarding how to further this process.

Cynical local (and partisan) commentators have suggested that the meetings constitute an attempted coup d’état or an attack on

the electoral process. After the 2010 General Elections, however, it took sixteen months for a governing coalition to be formed at the state level—one that collapsed quickly thereafter. Since then parliamentary sessions have frequently dissolved into farcical theatrics; it is still not entirely clear which is the ruling coalition and which the opposition. Given the impasse, new elections should have been called years ago. A provision for such elections, however, does not exist in BiH.

Thus, the plena are actually a *deepening* of the possibilities entailed by democratic politics. The aim of the plena is to establish permanent dialogue between elected officials and ordinary citizens, and as such they represent an accountability and transparency mechanism, moreover, one devised by the people of BiH themselves. The logic is one born of nearly twenty years of disappointment: change comes through meaningful, citizen-led democratization not the periodic rearranging of hitherto unassailable and entrenched political elites.

While the plena offer the potential for a democratic transformation in BiH, substantive and lasting change will require a multipronged approach by both local and international actors. On the local level, a truly autonomous and organized civil society that is willing and able to hold accountable the political establishment is still only emerging. Ultimately, civil society initiatives will depend on the appearance of new, genuinely democratic and progressive parties and leaders within the context of established political institutions. Without such parties acting to turn popular will into effective law, the country risks sliding into a permanent conflict between elites



Government building of Tuzla Canton burning

and masses, one where street violence could become a frequent and dangerous occurrence.

The Office of the High Representative (OHR) still has the authority to sanction, penalize, and remove corrupt and obstructionist officials according to the Bonn Powers granted to that office in 1997. Rarely used since 2006, despite being the most volatile postwar period to date, the Bonn Powers must once again become a tool in the OHR arsenal. Indeed, given the disastrous situation in the country since 2010, in particular, it is time for a new High Representative—a fresh, newly empowered agent to assist in BiH's long-obstructed democratization process. All these steps require a concerted reengagement on the part of the U.S. and EU. The inevitability of constitutional reform must be made clear if BiH is ever to be a serious candidate for EU and NATO membership. The country requires a rational and democratic constitutional order, one rooted in established human rights norms and practices. Robust minority rights and protections must replace ethnic quotas.

The international community has long been waiting for the people of BiH to come up with a popular initiative like the plena. Now, the citizens of BiH need international assistance to make their hard-won victories permanent by pushing through critical and urgently required reforms. Failure to accomplish these goals may irreversibly destabilize the heart of southeastern Europe for decades to come. □

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