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Bosnia and Herzegovina:

# Plenums, power, politics

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**For more than two months, in all the cantons of the Croatian-Bosniak Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina hundreds, sometimes a thousand people have been meeting regularly, discussing, taking decisions by simple majority, forming working groups responsible for producing proposals for discussion, ensuring the rotation of their own "moderators"... These popular assemblies - "cantonal citizens' plenums" - represent a new form of popular self-organization, with the aim of controlling the authorities, of dismissing them, of imposing their political choices without aspiring - until now at least - to exercise power themselves. All residents are welcome in these plenums, all of them have the same right to speak and nobody has the right to "represent" a plenum. The interventions are rapid and the moderators have the right to intervene so that the intervention does not deviate from the subject under discussion. The desire to seek unanimity does not interfere with people expressing themselves in a resolutely critical manner.**

The first plenum appeared in Tuzla on February, 2014, on the initiative of a group of workers, activists of the non-institutional socialist organization Lijevi [2] and intellectuals who wanted to go beyond confrontations in the streets and enable the spontaneous popular movement, which had just forced the cantonal government to resign and fraternized with the police, to organize in order to be able to take control of their future. The first proclamation of the plenum of Tuzla (see below) reflected these concerns.

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## Tuzla's Declaration of Citizens and Workers (Tuzla #1)

*February 7, 2014*

DECLARATION 7 February 2014. Today in Tuzla a new future is being created! The [local] government has submitted its resignation, which means that the first demand of the protestors has been met and that the conditions for solving existing problems have been attained. Accumulated anger and rage are the causes of aggressive behaviour. The attitude of the authorities has created the conditions for anger and rage to escalate.

Now, in this new situation, we wish to direct the anger and rage into the building of a productive and useful system of government. We call on all citizens to support the realization of the following goals:

- (1) Maintaining public order and peace in cooperation with citizens, the police and civil protection, in order to avoid any criminalization, politicization, and any manipulation of the protests.
- (2) The establishment of a technical government, composed of expert, non-political, uncompromised members. [They should be people] who have held no position at any level of government and would lead the Canton of Tuzla until the 2014 elections. This government should be required to submit weekly plans and reports about its work and to fulfill its proclaimed goals. The work of the government will be followed by all interested citizens.
- (3) Resolving, through an expedited procedure, all questions relating to the privatization of the following firms: Dita, Polihem, Poliolhem, Gumara, and Konjuh. The [government] should:

Â§ Recognize the seniority and secure health insurance of the workers.

Â§ Process instances of economic crimes and all those involved in it.

Â§ Confiscate illegally obtained property.

Â§ Annul the privatization agreements [for these firms].

Â§ Prepare a revision of the privatization.

Â§ Return the factories to the workers and put everything under the control of the public government in order to protect the public interest, and to start production in those factories where it is possible.

(4) Equalizing the pay of government representatives with the pay of workers in the public and private sector.

(5) Eliminating additional payments to government representatives, in addition to their income, as a result of their participation in commissions, committees and other bodies, as well as other irrational and unjustified forms of compensation beyond those that all employees have a right to.

(6) Eliminating salaries for ministers and eventually other state employees following the termination of their mandates.

This declaration is put forward by the workers and citizens of the Tuzla Canton, for the good of all of us.

source [Bosnia-Herzegovina Protest Files](#)

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In the days that followed, similar plenums appeared in all the cantons of the Federation, while popular demonstrations in Republika Srpska, smaller and less angry, have not led to the emergence of such self-organization.

The heading of the blog of the plenum of Sarajevo summarizes what unifies the citizens who participate: "If you are against the ruling class, bribery, corruption, theft, nepotism, hypocrisy ... join us!" The banners proudly raised by the plenum of Mostar - a town that is separated between a Croatian part and a Bosniak (Muslim) part, a separation that the authorities manipulate so as to promote an ethnic interpretation of the popular struggle - highlight the other dominant aspect of the present social movement, its anti-nationalism: "Freedom is my nation" and "Our unification is your destruction!". As a member of the inter-plenums working group in Sarajevo on March 3 commented, "this town, which for twenty years has symbolized the division of our society (...) can for the first time show that we are a political and not an ethnic nation" [3].

## What is a plenum?

On March 28, the Sarajevo plenum adopted its principles and rules of functioning, for which the project was developed by the working group for questions of functioning. The principles are three in number:

1. Equality and fairness. - All persons in the plenum, including those who have taken part in its organization, represent only themselves, and all participants have the same rights. Everyone has the right to participate in the organization of the plenum and in its working groups.
2. Solidarity. - The plenum formulates common demands. When one person intervenes, the others listen, respecting the principles of the plenum.
3. No violence - The plenum is a space without violence, a space of mutual respect and constructive exchanges."

The rules of functioning that were adopted are an application of these principles. "The plenum has no leader, only moderators who organize the discussion. Moderators are volunteers and change at each session (...). It is only possible to speak on the subject under discussion, the time is two minutes and all participants must introduce themselves. (...) Two people take notes which will be published at the end of the debate. (...) The voting will take place after 30 minutes of discussion. All decisions shall be taken by a simple majority (50 per cent plus one vote)."

The session of 17 February of the Sarajevo plenum - with between 600 and 1000 participants - gives an idea of the atmosphere of these popular assemblies. The plenum was to elect seven persons to present complaints to the authorities, whereas there were thirteen volunteers. After recalling that nobody has the right to represent the plenum and it is only a question of "presenting demands", all the volunteers had to present themselves and then the moderator took a vote on each name, leaving the meeting time to ask questions and the candidates time to reply. Two candidates were booed and the seven who had the most votes were elected. Then one of those elected took the microphone: "Listen, I was chosen, and so it's not to change the decision concerning myself that I am intervening, but why don't we all go together?" Cheers. The moderator therefore submitted this proposal to a vote and it was decided that all those who could would go and present the demands!

From the first session of the plenum in Tuzla, it was clear that the plenums did not want to substitute themselves for the authorities, without however trusting them, and wanting to keep a watchful eye on them. The plenum called for the establishment of a government of "professional technicians" who were not to be members of a political party, who had not been compromised and had not previously exercised a leadership function. That was when the government of the canton of Tuzla had just resigned.

These formulas bear witness to the total loss of legitimacy of the state structures and parties that had carried out, over the last twenty years, the "transition to a market economy", that is to say the restoration of capitalism. This is a serious crisis of the dominant ideology, which was based both on popular hopes that the "transition" would guarantee "a better life" and on the exacerbation of ethnic nationalisms which, while dividing the popular classes, enabled those in government to attribute to "the others" the responsibility for the non-fulfillment of these hopes. The mass mobilizations that were begun in February 2014 by the workers of bankrupt privatized factories in Tuzla immediately placed the responsibility on those who had illegally enriched themselves by stealing, during and after the war (1992-1995), property that belonged to the population, on this "oligarchy of ethnicists and partycrats" [\[4\]](#).

The perception of the Mafia-like character of the politicians and the new capitalists who today dominate the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (and which can also be seen in other regions of the former Yugoslavia) does not (yet?) go so far as to formulate another project of society. The dominant discourse of the movement of contestation is marked by the demand for a state that is understood as a "good organization of society," an ideal state which is doing its job correctly under the control of its population. That is the source of the hopes for a government of honest technicians, but also of the determination not leave it a free hand or, more importantly, to give it a blank cheque.

To this end the plenums, like the one in Tuzla, have established working groups (12 in Tuzla, each of them corresponding to a cantonal ministry; in Sarajevo there are no working groups that correspond to each ministry, since the plenum of Sarajevo has decided to focus its work on questions of social justice). There are also technical commissions (in Tuzla, there are three commissions: logistics, legal and media, and a commission for "contact with the workers "). These committees and working groups prepare the plenary debates on the subjects that they are concerned with and do not have delegated authority from the plenum.

Thus, Bahrija Umihanovic, who had just been appointed Prime Minister, not by the plenum, but by the Assembly of the Canton of Tuzla, addressed on March 12 the legal commission of the plenum - since he saw there an active and influential team within the plenum - to invite them to discuss the future government. The response sums up the dominant conception of the role of the plenums and their desire not to delegate its representation: "Neither the legal commission, nor any other working group, team or individual is authorized to speak on behalf of the plenum of the citizens of the Canton of Tuzla; we hereby inform you that the session of the plenum will take place on Saturday, March 15 at 6 p.m. (...). Therefore, we invite you, as the future Prime Minister of the government, to attend this scheduled meeting in order to present your project to the citizens. We remind you that the Assembly of the Canton of Tuzla completely ignored at its meeting on 10 March the demands of the plenum that were adopted at its last meeting on March 6, when it organized a debate on the candidates for the post of Prime Minister, transmitted by radio and television. There is at present no delegation of the plenum that you can meet and your governmental programme can only be presented to the citizens at the opening of the scheduled meeting of the plenum. (...) We would like to remind you of the priority demands for the future cantonal government, adopted at the session of the plenum on 22 February:

- ▶ Adoption of emergency measures to relaunch productive and commercial activities in the canton;
- ▶ Establishment of an independent group of experts which will examine the privatizations that have been effected or which are underway in the Canton of Tuzla, and to inform the competent authorities of the results of its audit.

In addition, please note that all the working groups of the plenum will submit to the ministers concerned, after their appointment, the demands adopted by the plenum." [\[5\]](#)

The new Prime Minister of the Canton of Tuzla had therefore to appear before the plenum and to listen to the questions and interventions of the citizens for more than five hours. We should note that the plenum did not wish to comment on the new government, but merely to point out that it must carry out its demands. On March 28, the Tuzla plenum made public an explicit press release: "It is not up to the plenum to choose or to nominate candidates for the posts of Prime Minister and of members of the government of the canton."

Selma Tobulic, one of the participants in the Tuzla plenum, commented on this decision in the following way: "The new Prime Minister has repeatedly said that he was not under pressure from any party, but it is important that the citizens understand that you not need to be a member of a political party to be pressurized by it" (11).

## **Demands addressed to the authorities**

The plenums thus began to formulate concrete demands with the aim of changing society.

For example, at its meeting on April 2, the Tuzla plenum began a discussion on the proposals formulated by its working groups on employment and social affairs, as well as on enterprise development. These demands, once

adopted, will be forwarded to the cantonal government.

In the field of employment and social affairs, the plenum demands that the government present a plan of action. In this framework, the first points show a distrust of the offices dealing with employment and social assistance (demand for an audit, the publication of the justifications for the allocation of jobs, a change in the law so that all candidates have equal rights according to clear rules - age, duration of unemployment, social status, etc., verification of social assistance benefits paid in 2012 and 2013 ...). There follow the egalitarian demands. First of all, those directed at the privileges of the elites: abolition of "white bread", that is to say, the right of leaders (ministers and their assistants) to receive their salary after their duties have ceased; abolition of bonuses and other advantages enjoyed by leaders (housing that goes with the job, payment of transport costs, etc.); abolition of material benefits for participation on the boards of directors or supervisory boards of companies in the framework of the institutional functions that they exercise; abolition of the right of public servants to enjoy priority in competitive examinations for the civil service. There follow the demands concerning the provision of jobs for the unemployed: hiring to fill job vacancies; priority for the hiring of unemployed graduates aged between 30 and 35; a review of all administrative jobs. Finally, there are the demands aimed at guaranteeing the rights of all those who have been deprived of them: to ensure the rights of those who have been deprived of them: the right to health care for workers whose employers have stopped paying social security contributions and for the unemployed; reinforcement in terms of finance and staffing of the centres for social protection; benefits to be paid in priority to unemployed mothers.

In the domain of enterprise development, the demands put forward in the debate reflected the weight of small entrepreneurs and of neoliberal ideology: strengthening of the institutions providing support to businesses; changes to the laws restricting businesses (for example, easier and cheaper registration); a radical change in the system of public procurement; the construction of a motorway between Croatia, Tuzla and Sarajevo (to provide easier access to the canton); but also creation of free trade zones...

For its part, the plenum of Sarajevo adopted at its 12th session, held in the open air since the cantonal government had refused it access to the Youth Centre, demands concerning health. First of all, it demanded access to health care for all residents of the canton, and therefore the necessary changes in legislation, within 40 days at the latest (this concerns above all workers who are deprived of social security). Secondly, it demanded that the government and the health insurance department verify within 30 days the supply contracts for goods and services, cancel those that were unfavorable and initiate proceedings against those responsible, and verify how useful were the non-medical jobs in the department, as well as those in the ministry. Thirdly, it demanded the revocation of those administrators employed in managerial positions and in health institutions, who were on the list of "the hundred highest salaries of the Federation" which had been published in the media. Fourthly, it demanded the publication on the websites of the ministry and of medical institutions "of all information concerning the organization, the powers, the responsibilities, the financial transactions and all transactions involving more than 200 convertible marks (KM) as well as that concerning the rights of patients." Fifthly, the plenum demanded the adoption of a system of financial support for those whose state of health required treatment abroad; equal access for everyone with regard to services, medicine and health apparatuses; and the establishment of a transparent system for procurement of goods and services.

It is worth noting the emphasis placed on helping the most socially vulnerable and in this context, the taking into account of the unpaid work of women. Thus the 9th plenum of Sarajevo demanded "the raising of benefits for the most socially vulnerable to the level of the real cost of living in the Canton of Sarajevo; for the minimum financial assistance to the unemployed to be equivalent to one third of the [average] monthly wage in the canton; for payment in cash of at least 50 per cent of the average monthly wage to all women, regardless of their employment status; for a special status for single parents (including fees, assistance and incentives in finding employment, etc.)."

## Citizens' control over the administration

Lastly, the demand for austerity, that is to say for real control and severe limitation of administrative expenditure, comes up regularly in the demands that are formulated. This demand takes into account on the one hand the effective bankruptcy of state governments and the fact that this bankruptcy is the result of the theft, legal and illegal, of society's resources by the oligarchs and "partycrats" who exercise power. On March 13, the plenum of Sarajevo thus demanded a stop to "borrowing from commercial banks" and "radical austerity measures." There follows an explanation: "The austerity measures should in no way worsen the social situation of the citizens of the canton or threaten those social groups who are already vulnerable".

As the invitation to the meeting of the Tuzla plenum on 2 April states, resuming its previous decisions, "the ethnicist and partycratic oligarchy protects those who, during and after the war, took advantage of the confusion to get their hands on enterprises that had been destroyed and put up for sale, as well as on public property, reducing what belongs to everyone by 9 billion dollars, a sum which appears in the accounts. We want a fair redistribution of wealth, the restoration of public property and the arrest, trial and conviction of those who speculated during the war and looted after the war". The text emphasizes that "the plenum of Tuzla estimates that over the last decade the [institutional] political parties received around 200 million KM from the budgets of the municipalities, the cantons and the Federation."

Popular control can also impose citizens' choices on the administration. Thus, after the closure of the Zivinica market by the administration - in order to comply with the regulations - which involved the laying off of the workers of this market, the legal commission of the Tuzla plenum imposed on April 7 a meeting with the representatives of the workers, the municipal administration, the Prime Minister, Bahjira Umihanovic, and the minister for planning and environmental protection, S. Karadzin. Following on this meeting, the administration had to commit itself to opening a temporary market nearby and to allocate the stands in priority to those who had previously worked in the market that had been closed, and to taking the necessary steps to ensure the reopening as early as possible of the traditional market. The next day, the government adopted a decree simplifying the regulations. It was also decided that the plenum would monitor the implementation of these decisions.

## The reactions of the government

The political structure imposed on Bosnia at the time of the Dayton agreements, [6] in particular that of the entity "Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina" limited the political power of the new bourgeoisie. That did not stop it from looting the country and dividing the population along ethnic cleavages, which were largely imaginary. But the weakness of the central state and the ethnocentric ideology of the recently enriched elites did not permit the use of the various armed forces beyond the limits of the ethnic entities. After trying to quell demonstrations by using local police, and in view of the rapid fraternization of the Tuzla police with the demonstrators, four cantonal governments resigned. In the aftermath, the cantonal institutions chose to temporize, giving way to certain demands. Thus the government of the Canton of Zenica -Doboj reduced the salaries and other benefits of members of the executive [7]. The Cantonal Assembly of Sarajevo (the official institution) approved on February 24 the demands of the plenum of the citizens of the capital: establishment of a government of experts, "non-partisan and uncorrupted", an audit of the salaries of politicians; a revision of privatizations; the establishment of an independent commission to establish the responsibility of the police during the violent crackdown on demonstrators on February 7. In Tuzla, the new Prime Minister appeared before the plenum.

But after these first concessions, largely verbal, the cantonal governments did nothing. And the repression, sometimes subtle and silent, was not interrupted.

In Mostar, the elites and the media continued their attempts to divide the population along ethnic lines and one of the active supporters of the plenum, Muharem Hindic, was arrested and beaten up by the police. The police also

regularly intervened to prevent contingents of demonstrators from leaving Spain Square (in East Mostar, the "Muslim" part of the town) and crossing over to the Western ("Croatian") part, so as to be able to describe the demonstrations as "Bosniak".

In Zenica, Benjamin Kaknjo, who is active in the plenum, was beaten up by three people, including the son of the mayor, Hussein Smajlovic.

In Tuzla, one of the activists, whose family was repeatedly threatened by unknown individuals, decided to leave the city.

In Sarajevo, to start with, on March 7 the authorities banned the protesters from "blocking the traffic." Then the canton decided not to provide the plenum with the Dom Mladich (Youth Centre), a meeting place and "a public space, built by generations of Sarajevans", on the pretext that the plenum was not paying the rent!

The plenums were thus obliged to spend their time in the fight against repression and to organize events - leaving that much less time to discuss the transformation of society.

After the ban on meetings in the Youth Centre, a petition launched by 77 personalities - "human rights lawyers, cultural workers, journalists, citizens of Sarajevo" - and subsequently widely signed, "expressed the deepest condemnation of the intention of the government of the Canton of Sarajevo to prevent the ongoing work of the plenum, which is the most authentic and legitimate form of citizens' democracy." Commenting on the attitude of the authorities, the petition says: "They want by all means to suppress the free expression of the thought and the demands of citizens. They want to impose on citizens the discipline of collective nationalist fear. They want to buy rubber bullets and proclaim that dissatisfied citizens are vandals and terrorists. The six leaders want to be alone again on the front pages of the newspapers and thus for everything to return to normal. That will no longer happen." [[8](#)]

The demands concerning respect for the law on the part of the police were formulated by all the plenums. For example, the working group on internal affairs of the Tuzla plenum submitted for discussion, on March 31, the dismissal of the police chief, Samir Aljukic, the revocation of the committee responsible for appointing top police officers and the transfer of these appointments to the plenum, and also the possibility for the plenum to appoint to leading positions in the police people not having the rank of superintendent. On the level of the Federation, it proposed the dismissal of the director of the Federal Police, Dragan Lukac, and a law concerning police officers, putting wages of cantonal and federal officials on the same level.

## Towards a federal plenum?

Once the plenums began operating regularly, some of their participants began to visit other plenums and reported back on their impressions. At the beginning of March members of the plenum of Sarajevo went to Tuzla, Mostar, Konjic ... People from Tuzla and Bugojno spoke in the plenum in Sarajevo. Inter-plenum working groups were established and a meeting of the working groups of Zenica, Orasje, Tuzla and Sarajevo took place in March, during a weekend in Tuzla, in order to build a network of plenums. The goal was to develop a list of common federal demands.

The plenum of Tuzla had rapidly formulated three priority demands, which could only be resolved at the federal level:

"1. Modification of the Law on Public Revenue of the Federation;

"2. Adoption of a law on confiscation of wealth acquired illegally in the Federation;

"3. Abolition of the funding of political parties and organizations from the budget of the Federation."

The minutes of the meeting summarized the discussions: "In order to harmonize demands, which must be done jointly at the federal level of government, inter-plenum activity has begun and inter-plenum work has been established within the plenum of the Canton of Tuzla. The opinion shared by all the plenums is that no canton can or should have a monopoly in the field of the demands of all the citizens of the Federation. In the plenums of the other cantons of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, many demands concern the level of the federal government, and many of those coincide with the demands that have already been adopted by the citizens' plenum of the Canton of Tuzla (abolition of "white bread", suspension of criminal proceedings against demonstrators, differentiation of VAT rates, determining the level of income of civil servants, etc.) and some have already been implemented at cantonal level. But many of these demands must be adopted by the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina on the legislative and constitutional levels. It is therefore necessary to adopt a common position in these domains, so that all citizens of the Federation speak with one voice and can tell our governing oligarchy that they are tired of political and economic violence."

It was a difficult discussion, because tax revenues are transferred to the cantons unevenly, with the intention of dividing the interests of the different populations. Although the allocation of federal revenues to cantonal budgets is based on four parameters (population, the number of students in primary and secondary education and the surface of the canton), the Canton of Sarajevo has been attributed a special status with a coefficient of 2, thus receiving for the year 463 million KM, whereas the Canton of Zenica-Doboj, which has a comparable population, received only 208 million and the Canton of Tuzla, whose population is greater than the Canton of Sarajevo, received 280 million. "The analysis of the budgets for the year 2009 thus shows that the tax refunds to the budgets of the cantons were 909 KM per capita in Sarajevo, 463 KM per capita for Zenica-Doboj and 506 KM per capita for Tuzla. Based on the foregoing, the plenum of the Canton of Tuzla decided to adopt unanimously the demand to amend the law on the public revenues of the Federation to allow for a more equitable distribution between the federal, cantonal and communal levels, respecting the principles of economic equality, solidarity and local autonomy, by leveling the coefficients of equalization between the cantons and abolishing the special status of the capital and the coefficient 2." However, this demand will not appear on the list of common demands of the cantons, because the plenum of Sarajevo did not adopt it...

It was on March 15 that a list of ten common demands, already adopted by the plenums of Zenica, Mostar and Bugojno and published on the website of the plenum of Sarajevo, was presented to the session of the Tuzla plenum. It was decided that the discussion on these demands would continue in subsequent sessions and that all working groups were to discuss the points that concerned them.

A long discussion of these claims finally took place at the meeting of the plenum of Tuzla on April 2. Demands 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 (see below) were adopted unanimously. Demands 1 and 9 were controversial, but were eventually adopted by a majority vote. One demand - "Fixing of the amount of the salaries of elected officials, of those who exercise executive functions and their advisers at the level of twice the average salary of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina" - was rejected by a majority vote. As a result the number of demands common to all the plenums has been reduced to nine.

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## Common demands adopted by the plenums

On 9 April 2014, hundreds of protesters from across the Federation presented the common demands of the plenums.

The plenums concerned were those of the cantons of Mostar, Konjic, Tuzla, Srebrenik, Gracanica, Zavidovici, Maglaj, Zenica, Fojnica, Donji Vakuf, Jajce, Sarajevo and others and their demands were presented to the Federal Government and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

1. Resignation of the Federal Government.
2. Suspension of criminal proceedings against all demonstrators from February 5 onwards.
3. Immediate suspension of privatizations and the sale of public assets. Revision of privatizations and prosecution of those responsible.
4. Abolition of privileges for public institutions and administrations at all levels, including the payment of wages after the end of the exercise of public functions ("white bread") and expenses for their families and for housing attached to the workplace.
5. Abolition of fees paid to members of boards, commissions and other bodies in the public enterprises founded by the authorities of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina on the basis of the budget.
6. Introduction of a progressive income tax for all taxpayers, so that they pay more depending on the increase in the level of their income and their profits.
7. The Parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina must amend the VAT law in order to introduce differentiated VAT rates, with a rate of 0% for basic commodities.
8. Urgent harmonization of pensions in line with the increase in the average wage in the Federation, so that pensions are not reduced, and payment of pensions to those who have acquired the rights [when employers have not paid the contributions of their employees].
9. An immediate stop to loans used to finance the public expenditure of the Federation from domestic and foreign banks or funds.

*Translated by **International Viewpoint***

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The minutes of the discussion at the plenum of Tuzla illuminate these choices:

"With regard to the first demand, that is to say the resignation of the government of the Federation, the participants in the discussion at the plenum have clearly demonstrated their opposition to the government, especially because of its role in the repression of protests in Tuzla on February 5, 2014 and throughout the country in the following days. It was therefore clear that we should not overlook the responsibility of the political oligarchy within this government. But it is not realistic to expect the formation of a new government before the elections [which are scheduled for autumn] and the political oligarchy is not waiting for the elections to present itself as an opposition force. It is for these reasons that the demand was adopted by majority vote.

"Concerning the demand for the immediate abolition of loans from banks and from national and international funds to finance public spending in the Federation, it was pointed out in the discussion that it is not realistic to stop borrowing immediately because of the obligations of the state, especially towards the less well-off socio-economic groups. Such a measure, optimal and highly desirable, would be possible only after the adoption of measures of economic development and of employment of the population, which would lead to an increase in public revenues. That is why this demand was not adopted unanimously.

"The discussion on the fixing of salaries of elected officials and their advisers concluded that this demand was poorly conceived and badly formulated. The participants in the plenum stressed support for the principle that lay behind this demand, but noted that, according to the law on the rights of elected officials, it was possible that in some cases this would lead to increasing the salaries of some of them. They also highlighted the major differences between the categories concerned by this demand and therefore the necessity of treating them separately. Consequently, the general conclusion was that the working group must reformulate the demand and be more specific before the debate resumed on this subject. This demand was therefore rejected by the majority of those voting and it was decided to resume the debate after a reformulation of the demand."

These discussions within the cantonal plenums led to the formulation of nine common demands and on April 9, the delegations of the cantonal plenums gathered in front of the seat of government in Sarajevo to hand them in together. However, the government avoided being confronted with this "plenum of the plenums," deciding to meet on the same day in Mostar, and none of its members dared to appear before the demonstrators.

## Trade union renewal

At the same time as the "plenum of plenums" was demonstrating in front of the seat of government in Sarajevo, workers in the liquidated enterprises in Tuzla - Dita, Guming, Polihem, Poliolchem, Integra, Inzenjering, Hotel Tuzla, Borac, Tuzla Kvarc, Rudar Invest, Banovic and TTU - were demonstrating, as they did every Wednesday, in front of the Tribunal and the Prosecutor's Office. They developed statutes for the future union, which will be called "Trade-union Solidarity" and these statutes have already been signed by more than 700 workers in fifteen enterprises in the canton. The president of the union at Polihema, Enes Tanovic, said that they were waiting until they had regrouped the workers of all the enterprises, and that to do that they were visiting all the municipalities, and then they would deposit their statutes in order to legalize the new union.

This trade-union renewal is important. The national and cantonal directions of the institutionalized unions were in reality passive during the mobilizations that began in February, and sometimes even condemned them. Throughout the country, workers emphasized that these union leaders had given up the struggle for their rights. "Anti-party" feelings went along with the rejection of the union organizations. Building a new union from below, from each enterprise, is therefore a step forward in the self-organization of workers in Bosnia.

## The need for politics

Several years ago, Daniel Bensaïd wrote: "The moroseness and the melancholy of the epoch betray a need for politics, for politics in spite of everything, a need for secular freedom, to no longer suffer a fate but to choose one's own history, without the least certainty of achieving it. To assert the primacy of politics over history and economics is on the contrary to reopen the questions of justice and equality, which are what is really at stake." [\[9\]](#)

The plenums in Bosnia are a practical application of this need for politics, for non-politicking politics, opening up the question of justice and equality, aspiring to transform this society, which is morose and melancholy for the vast majority of its citizens.

The invocation of direct and participatory democracy is permanent. It goes hand in hand with the rejection of parties, which have become instruments for the enrichment of elites, with the rejection of privatization and the affirmation of collective public good. For two months, the plenums in Bosnia have made progress, including by coordinating on the level of the Federation. They continue to present demands, which they are refining, to the authorities. These demands are gradually outlining the contours of a new society. They pose the question of the ownership of

enterprises and social services: private property has gone bankrupt, mired in theft, looting and corruption; there are beginning to be demands for collective property, even though the experience of the failure of the Yugoslav revolution makes such a solution complicated in the popular imagination.

Although they do not aspire to take power, the plenums have become a counter-power. The four cantonal governments made up of "experts", who are "not compromised" and are "non-political party", are already beginning to appear in the eyes of the masses as not being their governments. In this country, which is in fact a protectorate of the European Union, the new ruling class is illegitimate and does not have at its disposition a military force capable of intervening against the population - except in the Republika Srpska (and it is also for this reason that dual power has not developed there) - such a situation can continue. Although at the beginning of February the High Representative of the UN had threatened to employ EUFOR (the military force of the European Union) to restore order, the European Union finally decided to temporize. Because "restoring order" - and thus integrating or suppressing the plenums - is all the more difficult because the "protectors" cannot legitimate either the elites of the Federation, whose corruption is now clear for all to see, nor those of or the Republika Srpska, which partially escapes their control.

Nevertheless, the days of this duality of power are numbered: either the elites manage to put an end to it, or the vast majority of the impoverished population will impose its choices and will therefore have to create its own governments in order to implement them.

*April 15, 2014*

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[1] Since the Dayton Peace Accords (1995), the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina has been divided into autonomous regional authorities: the Republika Srpska (Serb Republic), the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosniak and Croat) and the Brcko District (under the joint jurisdiction of the first two entities, but which is governed under the direct responsibility of the UN representative in Bosnia-Herzegovina). The Federation, which is more decentralized than the Republika Srpska, is also divided into cantons with cantonal governments. The Republic, a sort of protectorate of the European Union, has in reality only a little power: it is the High Representative of the UN who represents the highest authority and has executive powers; the presidency of the Republic is symbolic and collective (one Bosniak, one Croat - who are elected by the citizens of the Federation - and one Serb elected by those of the Republika Srpska) and it is the local authorities which manage the country on a day to day basis. This structure increases the role of the various levels of bureaucratic administration and leads to political parties - dominated by one or other ethnic group - playing an important role in the primitive accumulation of private capital. Since 2004 a military force of the European Union, EUFOR, has been stationed there, with about 7,000 soldiers. Only the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina has an international status.

[2] Lijevi ("Left") was founded by young activists who broke with the Social Democratic Party in 2010. They first founded the NGO "Revolt" and then decided, along with other activists, to create a genuine left political party. Lijevi is active in Tuzla and Sarajevo, has contacts in other towns of the Federation and in Republika Srpska, maintains relations with militant socialist organizations in other countries of former Yugoslavia and participates in meetings of the Fourth International.

[3] Minutes of the 7th plenum of Sarajevo.

[4] This is the formula used in the minutes of the plenum of Tuzla, April 2, 2014.

[5] Communiqué of the plenum of Tuzla, March 13, 2014.

[6] See note 1.

[7] <http://www.balkaneu.com/bosnian-plenums-continue-send-strong-messages-politicians/>

[8] It is possible to sign this petition: <http://plenumsa.org/peticija-javnih-licnosti-vratite-nam-nase/>

[9] Daniel Bensaïd, *Leurs gauches et la nôtre* (Chapter 5, "Un nouveau théologien, B.-H. Lévy", published by éditions Lignes in January 2008, <http://danielbensaid.org/Leurs-gauches-et-la-notre> ).