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Balkans

# The People's Uprising : A Break with Dayton Bosnia ?

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**War has returned to the cities of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Not the nationalist wars of partition of the 1990s, or the cold war of nationalist politicians within an ethnically divided federation presided over by a colonial style High Representative of the Great Powers, but a social war, an uprising of the people.**

Beginning with the revolt of workers from Tuzla against the privatised massacre of industry, angry workers, unemployed youth and war veterans have risen in solidarity, burning cars and government buildings across the Bosnian Federation, and demanding the resignation of the Federal and cantonal governments. The graffiti, "He who sows hunger reaps anger", is the writing on the wall for a political class that has lorded over an entire society without work, with an incredible 63% of those under 24 jobless, while sharing in the spoils of office, the looting of the former state sector, with a small class of parvenu tycoons.

Like a flare over dark skies, the revolt illuminates the real relations of power in the federation.

## Neo-Colonialism and Neoliberalism

Speaking on Austrian TV, Valentin Inzko, High Representative of the Western Powers threatened : "...if the hooliganism continues EUFOR [EU] troops may be asked to intervene". [1] As if in echo, the Director of the Directorate for the Coordination of Police Units in the Bosnian Federation, Himzo Selimovi?, tendered his resignation and, admitting the inability of the police to ensure the safety of members of the Bosnian Presidency, called on the international community and the European Union to consider deploying the international military forces in Bosnia if events were to repeat themselves. [2]

While Inzko and Selimovi? revealed that the EU is the real power behind the state, Milorad Dodik, President of Republika Srpska (RS), congratulated the citizens of the Serb entity for not being "provoked" into action by the protests sweeping the Federation, thus exposing the nationalist structures of divide and rule built into the federation. Meanwhile Alexander Vučić, First Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia, called in party representatives from RS to warn them not to cause any trouble, thereby demonstrating not only the continuing expansionist ambitions of the Serbian political elite, but also the fundamental class solidarity of the Bosnian political elite, normally unable even to agree on whether or not the federation should exist, against the peoples of Bosnia.

Moreover the political class of Bosnia and the EU do not just stand together in defence of privatisation, but have also been imposing an IMF austerity programme now in its fifth year to make the workers of both entities pay for economic collapse. Under the two Stand-by Agreements, budgets have been frozen, public sector pay cut repeatedly, consumption has collapsed, growth flatlined and external public debt has doubled, reaching 32% of GDP. Normally unable to agree on any federal legislation, the federal government last year passed the IMF-inspired Global Fiscal Framework (GFF) for 2014–16, which sets parameters for the entities' budgets and hardwires cuts to reduce the budget deficit for the next two years, rendering neoliberal austerity immune from democratic challenge at the forthcoming elections. And since, as the IMF admits in its latest country report, none of this will actually restore growth and thus revenues, legislation is planned to raise the pension age, increase labour flexibility, and continue with privatisation. [3]

Neo-liberal reform will not overcome the crisis but will only deepen it. As in the rest of the Balkans and peripheral Europe, the economic model is based opening up to foreign capital. Until 2008 foreign capital flows fed growth based on imports and consumer debt, but at the same time destroyed industry and created the present debt crisis. On the

one hand, an overvalued currency pegged to the Euro enabled the borrowing needed to pay for imports ; but on the other, it acted as a disincentive to investment in the real economy and made exports uncompetitive. [4] Given the economy is completely dependent on external sources of growth, and the financial crisis of emerging markets triggered by Argentina will no doubt lead to further reverberations in the Eurozone, Bosnia now finds itself at a turning point.

The political elite is united in its determination to impose neoliberal reforms on which EU accession has been made conditional. It faces a popular uprising that could easily spread to RS, if not across the Balkans. If it is unable to overcome the crisis, which is also a crisis of legitimacy of federalism, then it will, as it did in the 1990s, start to bang the nationalist drum to stay in power ; if this happens then the federation could implode, once again opening the door to Great Power interference and nationalist struggles across the region.

It is precisely this historical pattern that we must recall if we are to understand the origins of the present crisis of political rule and the conditions under which the uprising can create a lasting alternative.

### The Yugoslav Legacy : Market Integration, Nationalist Disintegration and Great Power Intervention

The war of the nineties cannot be viewed outside the context of the disintegration of Yugoslavia induced by the debt crisis of the eighties. In the 1980s Yugoslavia fell under the tutelage of the IMF and pioneered the kind shock therapy and market liberalisation programs that were to become the norm in post-Soviet Eastern Europe in the 1990s. The IMF imposed the closure of inefficient industries and an end to subsidies from the richer to the poorer republics and regions. Faced with widespread worker discontent, and later, menacing strike waves in all the republics, the various republican party elites, starting with the Serbian elite under MiloÅevi?, unleashed a wave of nationalism to hold onto power.

In order to impose the market discipline necessary for the repayment of the debt, the IMF and the EEC demanded the recentralisation of the Yugoslav federation. As a reward for successful reform the EEC dangled the carrot of closer integration. In practice this meant the alignment of the EEC with the positions of MiloÅevi? and Greater Serbian nationalism which sought to improve the competitiveness of the Serbian economy through Yugoslav recentralisation. But the promise of European integration also gave heart to the rich northern republics which wanted to improve their competitiveness by ditching the poor south and joining the EEC. In this way, European integration accelerated the nationalist disintegration of the federation. [5]

The Western powers were divided over the question of Yugoslavia's survival. Following German support for separatists in the western republics of Slovenia and Croatia, Bosnia was destabilised as Belgrade countered with an agreement with Zagreb to partition the republic. The European powers whetted these appetites through successive peace plans that recognised the facts of ethnic cleansing, until the US took advantage of the divisions between the European powers to extend its domination into the vacuum of receding Russian power, intervening militarily on the side of the Croat-Muslim coalition it had concocted to end the war.

## The Geopolitics of the National Question in Dayton Bosnia

The Bosnia that emerged under the Dayton Peace Agreement is a Western neo-colonial protectorate, whose internal policy is largely dictated by the US and EU. The country is divided into two parts : the Federation and RS. It is impossible to make decisions without the consent of both entities. Nevertheless the persistence of the neo-colonial regime, led by the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, is legitimised by the claim that the preservation

of unified Bosnia requires external coercion. In fact it is the federal structure imposed by the Powers at Dayton without any democratic consultation that creates a new framework of nationalist competition which constantly recreates the need for the protectorate as the real executive government and guarantor of territorial integrity.

The multiple "ethnic veto points" and complex power-sharing mechanisms built into the constitution mean that nationalist politicians can paralyse the federal government at will over any issue. For example, for the last two years Bosnia and Herzegovina has been without an effective government, and this was the cause of last June's mass protests in Sarajevo over delays in adopting a law granting infants access to basic health and social services. Furthermore institutions represent citizens only as members of one of the three constituent peoples, force them to identify themselves with one of the three constituent ethnic groups and thus create a party system based on nationalist lines. The resulting paralysis opens the space for the High Representative to act as both legislature and executive, exacerbating both nationalist tensions and the crisis of legitimacy of the political system.

In response to this crisis, the West has sought to radically revise the Dayton agreement, that is, to preserve a united Bosnia by means of its integration within the EU and NATO. It wants to recentralise the federation, to effectively abolish the autonomy of RS in order to counter the return of Russia to the regional scene on account of its new status as an energy superpower. Following on from the US imposed "independence" of Kosovo in 2008 and the Russian veto in the UN Security Council, the conflict between the Great Powers is once again reshuffling the nationalist pack of cards. While the Bosniak elite eventually rallied to Dayton, it now supports the recentralisation of the federation ; and while the Bosnian Serb elite was originally opposed to Dayton it now oscillates between defending Dayton and seeking closer ties with Russia to keep the door open to secession.

If the divisive intervention of the Great Powers is in continuity with that of the 1990s, then at the level of political economy the resemblance is uncanny. Recentralisation is being loudly proclaimed by both EU and IMF as the necessary complement of economic reform. The neoliberal cry as before is that there is too much "big government", placing an excessive burden on the economy, and preventing the kind of integrated market attractive to foreign investors. And while, as in the 1980s, all the nationalist politicians fervently support market reform, they are divided over the recentralisation of fiscal powers. At the same time, the political paralysis of the system is doubled with the failure of market reform to overcome the economic and social crisis. Under these conditions where huge external economic and military pressures collide and combine with nationalist struggles, the conditions are once present for disintegration.

## **The Way Forward : End the Protectorate, Defend the equality of the peoples of Bošnia, Support the Workers' Uprising !**

Any progressive alternative has to face the barbarism at work in the present state of affairs. So far the protests have been pure class protests with little or no sign so far of nationalist contamination. In fact the visible political weakness lies elsewhere, with a widespread call, initiated by the Tuzla workers, for a non-party technocratic government, a government that would inevitably under the conditions of the protectorate be pulled between the nationalist veto and the diktat of the High Representative/IMF. However the major problem is that protests have not spread to RS, although a solidarity rally in Banja Luka of 300 is significant. The strength of the Dayton system of divide and rule is that it acts against this kind of inter-ethnic class solidarity. Thus protests against the IMF austerity programme have never been co-ordinated ; the public sector general strikes of 2009 and 2013 were limited to, respectively, the Federation and RS. Equally generalised working class anger at the political elite can easily be manipulated and transformed into its opposite, support for EU integration as the solution to "corruption" and failure to "reform", as was the case with the recent Bulgarian protests. In this way the system constantly generates a current which naturally switches from nationalism to support for the protectorate, and thus for Great Power intervention, all the while

generating an ever greater charge of crisis and despair.

The way out of this vicious circle is to link the social struggle against the nationalist political class with a democratic struggle to overthrow the imperialist 'protectorate'.

If we return to the beginning of our argument, the social movement faces a political front taking in the EU, the High Representative, the IMF, all local nationalist politicians, together with Belgrade and Zagreb. In order to weaken this alliance, the movement has to call for the abrogation of the IMF agreement, for the expulsion of the High Representative and EUFOR, and for the rejection of any changes to Dayton not based on agreement between the peoples themselves. If the movement develops a practical opposition to imperialist meddling and economic dependency, then it will be able to expose the posturing of the nationalists. For neither support for Dayton, nor opposition to it on the part of the nationalist elites constitutes anti-imperialism : it is always a move in favour of either Russian or US-EU intervention ; and it is always a demand for more neoliberal destruction.

On this basis the movement can legitimately defend the rights of all the nations, including the minorities, like the Roma, who are not represented under the Dayton order. By linking the social question with the national question, it will be possible to take the first steps to overcoming mutual suspicion between the peoples, to creating a trend for unity within the labour movement. In order to move forward the left must show that social equality is inseparable from national equality, and that neither can be realised without an internationalist struggle against the alliance between the nationalists across the region and rival Great Powers. [6]

10 February 2014

[LeftEast.](#)

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[1] For more such threats in the Austrian press see, <http://www.novinite.com/articles/15...>

[2] See 'Sarajevo : 1621', <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijest...>

[3] See Bosnia and Herzegovina : Fourth Review Under the Stand-By Arrangement and Request for Modification and Waivers of Applicability of Performance Criteria, Country Report No. 13/321, November 1, 2013. See <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft...>

[4] See Andreja Živković, 'From the market...to the market : The debt economy after Yugoslavia', in Srećko Horvat and Igor Stiks (eds.), *The Rebel Peninsula : Radical Politics after Yugoslavia*, Verso, forthcoming 2014.

[5] For a history of 'la longue durée' of the European integration of former and post Yugoslavia see Andreja Živković, 'The future lasts a long time : a short history of European integration in ex-Yugoslavia', 25 October 2013, at, <http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/t...>

[6] On such an internationalist alternative today see Andreja Živković and Matija Medenica, available on ESSF (article 31065), 'Balkans for the peoples of th...', at : <http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/b...>