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Bosnia

Tuzla: building solidarities

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On 5 February, people set fire to the government building of Tuzla Canton, rebelling against criminal privatization, unpaid wages, and the corrupt ruling oligarchy. Violence was deemed necessary for people to finally get their voice heard, and overcome poverty. Ministers have resigned, and people have been taking control over political life. Soon after, more than 700 citizens gathered in Plenums, where they practice direct democracy. This "Tuzla effect" has spread throughout other towns in Bosnia Herzegovina... and this blast of anger has gained the streets in Croatia, Montenegro, Macedonia, in such a way that we're already speaking, in France and in Europe, of a Balkan "spring".

But in Tuzla, prospects go beyond a single season. People have been waiting for this moment for twenty years. The situation is charged with such hopes that it is better to hold on to reality - and keep a distance from the vertigo of such an ongoing revolution. It's a matter of proceeding step by step, to build solid bases for a political and social justice meant to last, by being very concrete.

Â Interview with Miroљjub Radomirovi?, jurist, and founding member of the Bosnian political party "Lijeви", "Left".Â

After a first week of "plenums", Tuzlan citizens set up working groups, divided according to the various ministerial departments: Finances; Industry, Energy and Mining; Work and Social Policy; Health; Education, Sports and Culture, etc. You are part of the legal group. Can you tell me more about it? What are your objectives, and priorities for the coming months?

To start with, it's important to distinguish the working group for Justice and Administration - whose aim is to point out the problems in these areasâEuros"from the legal team of the Tuzla Plenum. This legal team is very important for the Plenum. It revises the requirements of each working group, in order to formulate them in the right way. We check the laws that regulate each sector, and we ensure that these requirements meet the legal standards of each department, responsible for a particular problem. So the working groups' requirements need to be concrete! We have put pressure on the government to check all the privatization contracts of our canton. If it turns out that these contracts were not respected, they'll have to be cancelled. Possibilities also exist to prosecute clients who have destroyed companies, even if they respected the contracts. We must make sure that these measures start immediately.

You've already won a victory...

Yes, we got back 1 million BAM (convertible marks, thus 500 000 Euros) due to the cancellation of "white bread", meaning the wages ministers kept earning one year after the end of their mandate. We have other measure to eliminate the different "bonuses" that have been voted over the years by a corrupted and ruthless elite. I'm talking about ministers, but also parliamentarians. Our working group will try to propose a series of amendments... so that we're the ones making the amendments, not them. Every day, we come up with new ideas to implement, so we're not lacking initiatives for the coming weeks.

You're involved in the Plenum's legal team, and you're also a founding member of the political party "Lijeви" (the Left). Can you tell us how your party was born?

We were all members of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), during the opposition. We had the same goal and the same enemy. But when the SPD was elected in 2010, it formed a coalition with the SDA (Party of Democratic Action). The Social Democrats had put a lot of hopes in us, but we were too critical, and we left. We first founded the NGO "REVOLT", to criticize their broken promises. But gradually the NGO lost its sharpness and political aggression. So we decided to establish a true left party. Our struggle is against privatizations and the destruction of factories. Privatization contracts have to be cancelled and the stolen money needs to go back to the state. We advocate for an economy where sectors of public interests will be state properties under social control. Our first actions were in solidarity with the workers struggles from DITA factory. We helped them with media visibility, legal assistance, and food when they were blocking the factory.

At this time, had workers already united in solidarity? What about the unions?

Until now, there were no real solidarities between workers facing the same problems. It was every one for themselves. We've had a problem with unions, 90 per cent of which are corrupt. Today, the situation is getting more relaxed, as the workers can express themselves directly in the Plenums. They don't blindly support the unions, which are now being challenged. Some of these unions wanted to create some collaboration with the organizers of the plenum. But the plenum doesn't work this way. There are no assigned functions, nor representatives. Relations need to change.

Is the Plenum opening the space for a left in Tuzla? Does it enable to consolidate "Lijevi"?

I'm becoming more and more optimistic. Citizens' forums have been forming across the country, despite all the authorities' and media's efforts to discredit them. I'm particularly pleased that my party comrades have begun enjoying a growing reputation and the trust of the citizens, through their ideas and their commitment. You should know that here, in former Yugoslavia, there is such a stigma against communist ideology, that if you share these values, you start with a big disadvantage. And yet, people are coming to us, they're interested in our party. At the same time, the situation was so bad that every hope is on the left.

What are the main challenges to pursuing the revolt today?

We must keep up the pressure on the streets, in parallel with the working groups. What is happening today is the result of years of struggle. The government can no longer act in such an arrogant way, ignoring the workers' demands, as it has during the last twenty years. Our Plenum will continue after the elections, as a force for contestation, but also of real alternatives. The power is ours. The challenge is that people become more aware of their common strength, to build a cohesive society.

Interview by Kassia Aleksic and Ivica Mladenovic