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# First signs of spring in Bosnia

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5 February marked the beginning of the largest demonstrations in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) since the end of the war. The main reason for the protests is the parlous economic situation and the public's fatigue with the corrupt and ineffective political class. Although the protests are motivated by economic issues, they pose a challenge to the stability of the present political and institutional system. The protesters are convinced that the model of government, where the political class formed by parties representing specific ethnic groups are playing the "ethnic card", has worn out. In the areas inhabited by Bosniaks, which are the main centres of protest, the social demands are accompanied by questions being raised about the institutional system, with its ethnic parities and the broad autonomy of the cantons (in the Muslim-Croat part of the country). The fear of the state being centralised has held back the protests from spilling over to the parts of the country inhabited by ethnic Croats and Serbs. In the longer term, tension in BiH will become a challenge to the international community, especially the EU. The assumption that BiH is a country impossible to reform but still stable seems to be no longer correct.

## The flashpoints

The demonstrations started on 5 February in Tuzla, a former industrial centre of BiH and the third largest city in the country. The brutality of the police, the arrests of 27 local activists and the attitude of the government, which did not wish to meet with the protesters, led to the protests spreading to other cities. On 7 February, people took to the streets in Sarajevo, Tuzla, Zenica, Mostar and Bihac. The demonstrators were joined by young people who took advantage of the inactivity of the police and started storming state administration buildings. 384 people were injured in the riots (most in Sarajevo), and more than ten local government buildings were devastated (in Sarajevo, Tuzla and Mostar).

The prime ministers and governments of Tuzla, Zenica, Sarajevo and Bihac cantons resigned as a consequence of the protests. A meeting of residents was held in Tuzla in order to develop an action plan to improve the region's socio-economic situation. Around one thousand people in Sarajevo are making daily demands for the resignation of the government of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) and the it's prime minister, Nermin Niksic. Protests have also continued in Mostar, where the local government has opted not to resign, and in some other smaller towns.

## The growing frustration

The main reasons for the protests are socio-economic issues, frustration caused by the paralysis of state institutions and the disillusionment with corrupt political parties which are focused on conflicts and fuelling and playing on ethnic divides. No major reforms have been carried out in BiH since 2006, unemployment is high (44.8%), and the chances that the economic situation will improve are low (GDP in 2012 fell by 1.1%). Other serious issues include the fact that employment in the public sector (the main source of jobs) depends on political party membership, as well as very low welfare benefits and pensions; this is especially problematic in industrial centres affected by structural unemployment.

The protesters oppose the increasingly complicated multi-level state administration system, which was imposed in 1995 under the Dayton Peace Accord, which was aimed at reconciling ethnic Bosniaks (48%), Serbs (37.1%) and Croats (14.3%). It divided the country into Republika Srpska (RS), which is inhabited by ethnic Serbs, and the Croat and Muslim Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), where cantons vested with extensive powers were created. Each of these local government units has its own executive and legislative authorities. This brings about the need to employ a large state administration, which generates high budget costs. This kind of institutional order allows politicians to shirk off responsibility and blame each other for problems and to play on ethnic divides to maintain power.

**Economic, civic or ethnic?**

Representatives of the young intelligentsia, social activists, war veterans and trade union activists are predominant among the protesters. Initially, the demonstrations were targeted primarily at local governments, and focused on economic demands. The demonstrators demanded the cantonal governments to resign, believing that the non-transparent privatisation processes were among the causes of economic problems. Politicians were also accused of tolerating the non-payment of wages and healthcare and pension contributions, and of failing to act in response to massive layoffs at privatised companies. At first, the demonstrators would usually focus on specific local problems, but as the protests have been developing, political issues have been raised more and more frequently: demands to hold those responsible for privatisation scandals to account, the resignation of the cantonal and federal governments, the formation of a cabinet consisting of experts, the liquidation of privileges vested in the state administration, and a reduction in politicians' wages to the level of the average wage in the private sector.

Demands for a thorough state reform and the liquidation of the cantons have been heard from the protesters. They have been made by civil movements, who are arguing that efficient state institutions need to be created. However, such proposals are unwelcome in the areas inhabited by ethnic Croats and Serbs; a fact which local political elites skilfully capitalise upon, preventing the protests from spreading in the cantons inhabited predominantly by Croats or to Republika Srpska. Most Serbs and Croats support the economic demands and the accusations brought against the political class. However, the fear that a possible reform will entail centralisation carried out by Bosniak elites from Sarajevo is predominant among them. The protesters have not presented any compromise solutions which could reconcile streamlining the work of the state administration and

centralisation of the state with guarantees for ethnic minorities.

### Politicians are playing for time and looking for a scapegoat

The political elite of BiH hopes that the resignations of the cantonal governments will alleviate the tension and discourage further protests. The emergence of more extensive social movements challenging the political system currently operating in BiH in the long term would spare neither Bosniak, Serb nor Croat parties. This is why the parties have been trying to play down the protests, accusing each other of staging them. Bosniak politicians believe that the protests have been organised by Serbs and are aimed at presenting FBiH as an unviable structure. In turn, Croat politicians claim that the protests are being used as an excuse to liquidate the cantons and consequently deprive ethnic Croats of autonomy. The government of Republika Srpska has presented the riots in FBiH as a movement aimed against the autonomy of Serbs and proof that the state is unstable in its present form. In this context, the chaos in FBiH has also been used as an argument for Republika Srpska's aspirations for independence.

### Possible developments

The protests have seen neither the emergence of leaders nor of any political platform of supra-regional significance. There are no concrete demands shared by individual protest centres. The general slogans calling for a transparent government, the accountability of corrupt politicians or more efficient welfare are insufficient for an organised social movement to emerge out of the wave of demonstrations, and they will gradually dissipate. The violent and massive protests have revealed the scale of the problems in BiH, but there is no political force (either internal or external) capable of transforming the energy of the protests into support for reformative actions. The international community, including the European Union itself, has not consulted its preferences regarding the institutional reform in BiH. The EU used to assume that BiH was impossible to reform but stable. Serbia and Croatia are used to defending the *status quo* in BiH, and view any thorough reforms there as pointless.

However, the tension in BiH will heighten, and more protest waves can be expected. A further deterioration of the economic situation is also very likely. A parliamentary election has been scheduled in BiH for October 2014, followed by the publication of the results of the census (the first one held since 1992). And these results may call the grounds of the existing separation of powers between Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats into question.