We are hungry in three languages¹: the February urban social movements in Bosnia and Herzegovina²

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THE NEOLIBERAL, ETHNO-CAPITALIST
“TRANSITIONAL” REGIME
IN PERIPHERAL BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

You robbed for 20 years. It’s enough!

It is impossible to understand the new social movements emerging in recent years in Bosnia and Herzegovina outside the broader contextual framework of the violent
disintegration of Yugoslavia and the transformation of the Yugoslav republics and provinces into separate states defined by neoliberal ethno-capitalistic transitional regimes. The recent history of BiH is a history of imposed regimes of national and market regulation, reflected in all aspects of everyday life. These regimes share the dominant ideology of permanent “transition”, promising a shift from the “dark ages” determining the present into a future space of freedom and welfare. In this way aggressive processes that produce social inequality, impoverishment of the population and a huge unemployment rate are masked with the propaganda of “There Is No Alternative”, implying deregulation, an unrestricted market, social welfare cuts, deindustrialization and privatization, reinforced by historical revisionism erasing memories of Yugoslav socialist experiment.

Silence! Parliament in session

These regulatory regimes were established in a context of the institutionalization of ethnic cleansing and genocide and pressure to build a market economy through structural adjustment, connected in turn to unrepayable foreign loans leading to debt slavery. In Bosnia and Herzegovina the war was ostensibly ended by the Dayton Peace Agreement of 1995, which established new demarcation lines between two so-called autonomous entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (operating over ten constitutional cantons) and the centralized Republika Srpska (with no cantons), as well as the shared Brčko District, established in 2000. A nominal central government was established in Sarajevo with a three-member presidency comprised of the elected representatives of the three constituent peoples – Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs – with the supreme authority vested in the “international community” (notably the USA and the EU) through the office of the High Representative (OHR). This form of government functions as a colonial democratic legitimation mechanism for a social order based on ethnic-oligarchic power relations, ethnic discrimination, and thus also on privileged and untouchable autocrats. This framework produces and maintains structural inequality among Bosnians and Herzegovinians while enabling the enormous enrichment of the privileged by merging real political power with the flows of capital.
Urban space itself in BiH is a constitutive element of the dominant social formations and relations. In the postwar period – marked by drastic territorial/spatial/demographic changes as a consequence of forced and violent ethnic, social and urban cleansing of the territory – identity conflict continued through symbolic self-definition in architecture and urban development. A newly established investment regime is not merely subject to economic factors, it also underpins ruling class hegemony through the ideological options, political interests and personal and family connections of elites (Zev, 2012). In this way former cities and villages of Yugoslavia and BiH became isolated ethnic enclaves or ethno-polis (Mujkic, 2007). This new ethnic-territorial demarcation brought no improvement in living standards to inhabitants of either entity. War and deindustrialization in quick succession produced a huge number of unemployed – over 40 percent – and a drastically impoverished population. Industrial zones comprised around a third of the cityscape during socialism; they now became dead city tissue (Kiril, 2010). The new investor-oriented urban development regime, characterized by the enormous servility of the corrupt bureaucratic state apparatus towards investors, created a focus on the city centers and prestigious neighborhoods through the construction of office parks and business elite housing, while abandoning socialist-built housing districts to decay and degradation. The primacy once claimed on almost all levels by the common was replaced by privatization and fencing.

During the war 37% of housing stock was destroyed and more then 200,000 people were left homeless (Tsenkova, 2009). A large percentage of them still live in unreclaimed collective shelters or are left to their own devices and forced to solve their housing problems in the grey-market private rental sector. In the late 1990s more than 90% of the housing stock was privatized (Tsenkova, 2009), and today housing problems are “solved” mostly through the market, with unfavorable bank loan terms producing individual debt slavery. Huge numbers of people live in overpopulated, inadequate housing, while a dysfunctional model of social housing fails to respond to
The privatization principle is also consistently implemented in the field of public space through aggressive reduction and deregulation. This contributed greatly to the achievement of maximum construction volumes though questionable public-private partnerships and widespread corruption. This transformation did not bypass the existing system of urban parks: these became new construction sites.

*No to bankruptcy!*  

The privatization of the maximum possible number of formerly socially owned enterprises was usually accompanied by the scenario of bankruptcy, without adequate social programs for workers who had become redundant in the new social order. Attempts to launch micro-credit from European funds and other sources mostly ended in fiasco, due to inadequate investment in spending as distinct from production and the overloading of the population with unrepayable loans (Zvijerac, [No date]). The social misery resulting from this socio-economic, political and urban situation occasionally flared up in the dissatisfaction of individuals from the lowest social strata – seeking help through the protests of particular social groups – or through individual gestures of protest often accompanied by hunger strikes, which were consistently and completely ignored. One mechanism for the suppression of these symptoms lay in the systematic deregulation of public space by the ethno-political elites through the introduction of new restrictive regulatory measures for better protection of the system and the status quo. In the center of Banja Luka, for example, public gatherings around the presidential building are banned and one of the city parks is a designated space for expressing disagreement away from places of power, hidden under the treetops.

*He who sows hunger reaps the rage*  

With such measures in place, what happened on the streets was just a blind spot with no real power. Authorities only supported nationalistic groups and movements, while the streets were occupied by rightwing hooligans and nationalistic football fans. Decision-making was confined to an International community clique supported by
local political elites: this contributed helpfully to the maintenance of popular apathy. The widely ranging social, urban, student, labor and union groups and their occasional rebellion and demands were systematically marginalized. Most significantly, any notion of social or class struggle was wiped out or subsumed in the national state of emergency. War was shock and transition was sobering, and after the sobering there was (or so it seemed) nothing.

_We are all foreign mercenaries our state is sponsored by the IMF_

During 20 years of peace the International Community also did a lot to exclude society and social groups from any discussion of the future of the Bosnian and Herzegovinian state. They preferred to stick to political elites and oligarchies in the decision-making process. At the same time the International Community acted as charity that pumped a lot of money into building a new civil society. The result was a huge NGO industry of around 10,000 organizations. Only a small number managed to create a semi-autonomous field for work: the majority reproduced the status quo through programs and projects with an exclusive focus on identity politics, transforming people into dependent victims and potential confrontation into negotiations (Arsenijevic, 2014).

The February movement changed all that. The moment of social unrest spread among the broader population of BiH, leaving beside such priorities as constitutional reform, the EU agenda and nationalism. It shifted the country into a post-war and post-Dayton condition. The change came not from the International Community or the political elites, but as a radical response to their politics.

**IGNORED STRUGGLES**

_You are doing everything to do nothing_

What the regime did not count on was precisely the new solidarity and social cohesion that was built on various bases through the periodic escalation of discontent. Sporadic reactions, resistances and movements across the country, with varying ideological
orientations and approaches, had emerged in response to the socio-economic situation and the abuse of power: these created the new ground for the development of the February movement. The struggles of workers at ruined or privatized enterprises for unpaid wages or preservation of their jobs; urban struggles around common needs; student struggles against increasing tuition charges; initiatives by war veterans fighting for their social rights and the rights arising from the war service; struggles against political elites. This discontent and the demands articulated were consistently ignored by the authorities, who believed that the tacit forms of power established after the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina were far enough removed from the social base that no social movement could seriously threaten, undermine or disrupt them.

One significant sign of the potential for collective radicalization of Bosnian and Herzegovinian reality appeared unexpectedly in the country’s second-largest city: Banja Luka, the headquarters of Serb political elite, negligent of the wider region and infamous for the mass ethnic expulsion of the urban population. The movement emerged as an organized citizens’ response against the privatization of green area in the city where construction of a large residential and business center was beginning. A campaign for green space within the logic of the investor urbanism gave way to urban struggle against the regulation of city space by asset-owner interests inseparable from political power. What distinguished this movement from other outbursts of discontent was the emergence of new practices of resocialization, repoliticization and togetherness though the persistence of so-called “walkers” who expressed their dissatisfaction on the streets every day for five months. The Banja Luka Declaration of Civic Initiative said exactly that: “We stand together beyond our differences!” And: “We come at a time when the ruling oligarchy confirms that we, ordinary people, are the biggest losers of the war and consequent transition. The oligarchy puts profits over people under the guise of national interest, self-interest over justice, and terror over equality” (Deklaracija, 2012). The differences were not, as might be assumed, exclusively those of ethnicity, they also concerned ideology and politics. This indicated the movement’s inability to find precise ideological formations, but its anti-
fascist commitment to a joint fight was clearly stated. However, it is also important to note that this movement failed to link the intellectual and cultural efforts of those still belonging to relatively privileged strata and certain non-governmental organizations with a huge number of impoverished people on the most desperate social plane. Also, the hope for wider emancipatory potential in this movement was a “Procrustean bed” in that the only common denominator among the walkers was the fight for the park, while consensus on other important issues was postponed or impossible. Most of all, consensus on the city’s war history.

*Don’t go out until I get an ID number*

In June 2013 Sarajevo became a new field of struggle in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The movement developed though the struggle for civil registration numbers and grew into a movement against the political elites. The immediate cause was the revelation that the 3-month-old baby Belmina Ibrišević couldn’t get a unique identification number because of a 4-months delay in implementing legislation, and therefore couldn’t travel for urgently necessary medical treatment outside the country. The protesters demanded a basic right to citizenship regardless of political speculation or party interest. They defended themselves against the dominant narrative by the ethnic bases of protest by insisting on the lethal effect of ethnic division on citizens. The demonstrations began on June 5th with the occupation of the driveway in front of the Parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina; it continued as an occupation and blockade of state institutions, keeping the functionaries inside the buildings. The most massive response happened on June 11th when protestors, with the help of taxi drivers, blocked the main street for a few hours. This movement generated a massive response among citizens throughout BiH. Support groups sprang up in Banja Luka, Tuzla, Livno, Cazin, Mostar, Bosanska Gradiška, etc., making the demonstrations the problem of the whole country. The immediate outcome of this uprising was minimal, inasmuch as the Government of Bosnia and Herzegovina (the so called Council of Ministers) adopted only a temporary solution on the issue of identification numbers, but the broad mobilisation brought new energy and laid the ground for what would happen in February.
Protests, whether for basic civil rights or against capitalist regulation of urban life and space, were as a general rule deliberately interpreted as destructive. Participants were accused of working against the interests of one or other of the constituent peoples and against lasting peace as established by the Dayton document; they were said to be backed by foreign agencies or internal enemy forces with their own agendas. In these ways political elites distanced and dissociated themselves from the problems even in terms of the cosmetic application of liberal principles to the state and government institutions.

During the identification number protests, media spin and pressure on Sarajevo demonstrators was tremendous. Once again, protests in Sarajevo were translated by means of a safe cliché into ethnic issues by political officials, who continually asked the question: who is behind the protests? Demonstrations were stigmatized as: a coup d’état, a hostage crisis, an attempt to damaging the country’s reputation, a Republika Srpska lynch mob, riots organized by the rival political parties for their own political ends, and as the attempted murder of high government officials and an attempt to provoke international intervention in Bosnia. In support of the Sarajevo demonstrators and in an attempt to relieve the pressure on them, a local ID number group was organized in Banja Luka, absorbing some of the media and political heat and thereby taking a significant step (both online and offline) against the nationalist rhetoric coming from RS to undermine protest. This also enabled the demonstration to spread across the imaginary demarcations of ethnicity and ethno-institutional Entities (Pejković, 2013). The RS government made a report on ID number protests, with a separate section on developments in Banja Luka, and presented it to the parliament of the Entity. The situation was interpreted as a criminal offense: the kidnapping of the institutions’ representatives. According to this version, the situation culminated when citizens of Banja Luka organized solidarity protests and provided support for protesters in Sarajevo (Oslobodenje, 2013).

*Freedom is not only Tuzla’s club*

The events of February can be taken as a direct continuation of what started with the aforementioned actions. The spark came from the workers protesting in Tuzla, and many joined the reinvention of the “dangerous class”.
TAKING OVER THE CITIES

_Enough with national terror. Where are the wages?_

On February 5th 2014, around 3,000 dissatisfied workers from the Dita factory (cleaning products), Konjuh (wood-processing), Polihem and Poliochema (chemicals) and Resod Guming (rubber), together with Associations of the Unemployed, occupied two main roads in Tuzla, blocking traffic in the city. Following several years of invisible individual and group actions, occupations and struggles, the workers gathered with common demands, calling for resolution of workers’ status and the linking of pension and medical insurance payments to years of service. The workers also demanded a complete revision of all company and factory privatizations, a progressive increase in pensions, the abolition of politicians’ perks and the resignation of the Tuzla Canton Government (Eminagić, 2014). The protest continued over the following days, with gatherings in front of local power symbols: the buildings of the Cantonal Court and the Tuzla Canton government. Following the attempt by riot police to remove protestors from the public space around the centers of cantonal authorities, the protesters entered the cantonal government building and set it on fire. The very same day cantonal and municipal buildings, political party branches and politicians’ official vehicles in Sarajevo, Zenica, Mostar, Bihać and other places were burning, while in Sarajevo protesters set fire to the building of the Presidency of the State of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The protests spread from Tuzla across the country to places such as Bugojno, Gračanica, Konjic, Živinice, Brčko, Fojnica, Maglaj, Srebrenik, Cazin, Orašje, Donji Vakuf, Travnik, Kakanj, Tešanj. From Bijeljina, Prijedor and Banja Luka (cities in Republika Srpska entity) came expressions of support for the rebellion. The workers were joined by students, war veterans, youth, pensioners, the unemployed, lecturers and cultural workers. The demonstrators demanded resignations. Under pressure, four cantonal prime ministers resigned, along with the chief of the Directorate of police coordination.
As a direct response to the escalation of violence, citizens organized themselves over the next few days into local assemblies – plenums – as a form of collective political articulation of the dissatisfaction of the deprived, accumulated over twenty years of the political and economic degradation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The synergy between protests as occupation and plenums as civic parliaments initially induced a state of shock and deep fear among the authorities. This allowed the movement temporarily to take power and to participate directly in decision-making through pressure exerted on local and cantonal chiefs. Apart from forcing resignations in the Tuzla, Sarajevo and Unsko-Sanski cantons, this temporary legislative power also succeeded in abolishing the “white bread” concept, a mechanism enabling politicians to continue receiving full official salaries for a year after leaving their posts.

This transformation of spontaneous protests and outpourings of anger into people’s parliaments or plenums, as new forms of institutionalization of the needs and the will of the citizens, allowed the movement a different form of political subjectivization, with thinking, formulation and decisions happening parallel to and against the elites holding political power. As a basis for their work the plenums used a methodology developed within the region – during the occupation of the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb in 2009 – and distilled into a publication entitled The Blockade Cookbook (Blokadna kuharica). This was adjusted according to the current needs of the plenum and the demonstrations. The Tuzla plenum, for example, started its work with twelve members, but later grew exponentially to include several hundred participants. The plenums welcomed everyone except party activists. Decisions were made based on consensus or on simple majority vote. In order to engage in deeper analysis and articulation of the problems and demands directed at the municipal and cantonal parliaments, specialized working groups were formed, addressing issues such as the status of the workers, ecology, legislature, agriculture, healthcare, social services, urbanism, housing, art and culture etc. As well inter-plenum cooperation was established, coordinating plenum demands
that were directed at the mid-level administration. The results of this cooperation were common demands for the suspension of criminal prosecution of all protest participants, a judicial revision of the privatization process and prosecution of those found to have abused it, abolition of all special benefits for functionaries of public institutions and administration, and the introduction of progressive taxation based on income or profit. Other demands included the amendment of the VAT system through the introduction of a differential rate (to be set at zero for the basic food products) and a temporary moratorium on new public debt to international and domestic banks and funds within the territory of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Sarajevo Plenum, 2014).

The plenums allowed those who had been violently expelled from public space to speak publicly about the problems of their daily life. While the political function of the plenums in articulating demands was crucial, their psychological and therapeutic role must also be emphasised. For more than twenty years people have silently carried inside them the suffering for which they bear no responsibility. That responsibility rests squarely on the well documented regime in power and its proponents. During the plenum meetings, each participant had two minutes to share her or his personal story or to make a proposal. Hundreds took to the microphones: to them and those listening to them online, it became clear that they were not alone. A commonality that had been censored for decades was restored.

After the initial shock that hit the ruling circles, the synergy of protest and plenums rapidly lost its legislative power, although it maintained a loud and immediate consultative presence. In an attempt to make up for the lost advantage, the plenums endorsed the demand for “expert” governments that would temporarily supplant the dominant party-cronyism system. This attempt proved to be against the protestors’ interest. As soon as it was formed, the expert government cut itself off from all those who gave it legitimacy, entangling itself in the same corruption traps set up by the previous party system. In this light we also have to pose question did plenums themselves become a real demobilisation of the movement.

During the February demonstrations and the plenums, a practical and theoretical breach between the civil society organizations and the plenums became obvious. This was most apparent in Sarajevo, where according to those involved in organizational tasks there was no assistance from the NGOs even with such simple matters as...
printing (in contrast to some other cities in BiH). This problem didn’t exclude the nonrepresentational participation of NGO-linked individuals who had invested their time and energy in protests and plenums. But on the theoretical level – which was directly manifested in this practical breakdown – structural antagonisms and political economies very quickly emerged as the main problem. Sarajevo, as the political center of civil society organizations and the nexus where the International Community influenced the civil scene, showed great interest in the plenums’ work. In particular, it was curious about the role of the plenum in the rejection of nationalist logic, but it was appalled to see the problem of Bosnia and Herzegovina addressed in combination with heavy criticism of neoliberal politics. The breach was rooted in the difference between the plenum agendas and the agenda of a civil sector scene that sought to maintain the status quo, spreading an ideology of No Alternative.

Parallel with the important changes achieved through the struggle, the BiH political leaders were attacking the protests on a daily basis, declaring that the protesting cities were held hostage by the “small groups of irresponsible people” (Bunt, 2014).

REPRESSION OF THE MOVEMENT

No-one shall beat us except our police

This urban occupation and articulation of a new politics based on social justice was experienced as a fundamental threat by the ethno-bureaucratic and ethno-capitalist elite. They opposed it directly with the repressive apparatus at their disposal. During the biggest movement activities from February to June 2014, various forms of direct and indirect repression by the regime apparatus and its institutions were applied. In addition to direct police repression, the repressive apparatus included most regime and private media, the Academy of Sciences and its intellectual elites, state universities, the legal and bureaucratic apparatus and the judicial apparatus, which filed criminal charges and lawsuits against participants in the protests and in plenary sessions. In order to understand fully this response to a new “disputed politics” in the making, the situation must be viewed across the whole country, not just at the level of the cities, Entities and cantons where the insurgency escalated. This perspective gives a clearer
picture of the geographical distribution of focal cities within the Federation and an explanation of why cities in RS were missing from the map.

During peaceful protests in BiH, Human Rights Watch reported excessive use of violence. (HRW, 2014). The organization interviewed victims of police violence and registered 19 cases in Sarajevo and Tuzla from February 5th to 9th, including three children during the first three days of protests. Violence had been used on the streets and in custody; along with demonstrators, victims of police abuse included several accredited journalists and observers of the protests. Among registered cases of direct police repression, brutal beatings with serious bodily injury was noted, together with severe verbal aggression and insults. In the same report it is stated that during these events the Law of Criminal Procedure was broken, authority was abused by police, and statements were taken in an unlawful way. That these were not cases of individuals exceeding authority but rather of organized police repression is indicated by the statement of the Director of the Federal Police Administration, Dragan Lukač, who publicly accused the demonstrators of overthrowing the constitutional order and committing terrorist acts. With these claims he criminalized dissatisfied citizens in an attempt to legitimize police violence as self-defense (Fena, 2014).

On the first day all the major media tried to ignore demonstrations, reporting on them as an insignificant event, the rapid spread of protests and escalation of riots subsequently forced all media to cover the events. Following the pattern already mentioned, media in both Entities reported simultaneously on the protests as ‘vandalism’, without explanation of the basic circumstances. Each Entity also accusing each other of spreading anti-Dayton ideas, hooliganism and robbery. Federation media reported that the protests were organized by Chetniks and hooligans not from Sarajevo, even publishing the claim – supposedly emanating from the Sarajevo Interior Ministry – that the demonstrators were paid 25 BAM per person to participate. Meanwhile the major concern of the public media service of RS was that «riots» must not «overflow» and jeopardize the autonomy of Republika Srpska Entity, where there was allegedly no reason for dissatisfaction (Bunt, 2014).

The Academies of Arts and Science also played a role in the repressive mechanism. Particularly telling was the action of the Academy of Sciences and Arts of the Republika Srpska in Banja Luka, where a conference entitled “Color Revolution as an instrument
of geopolitical transformations” was held in April (SRNA, 2014). At the conference participants adopted resolutions proposing a series of measures to protect Republika Srpska from so-called Orange Revolutions, according to these resolutions, aim in the local context to carry out the plans of “Western factors”, abolishing the Dayton Peace Accords and creating a unified Muslim Bosnia and Herzegovina. The February movement was evaluated as a pseudo-popular, manipulative, anti-democratic and failed “Color Revolution”, because it didn’t manage to spill over into the Serbian Republic. The document proposed three basic steps. These are: the zero tolerance of anarchy (including criticism of police hesitation to use force and calls for direct repression); the purchase of new equipment for police forces and their additional training to defend the public space from citizens; the introduction of new measures regarding the funding and the work of NGOs, which would be registered as “agents of foreign interests”, marking them as elements of foreign domination. In addition to strengthening the police forces’ capacity for direct, forcible repression, this document clearly shows the banal and self-discrediting mechanism of the dominant regime in its attempt to mislead the public by connecting all social justice movements to the NGO sector, characterized in turn as a tool of foreign interests seeking to destabilize the RS.

Court and police all protect the gang in power

The bureaucratic and juridical apparatus also played a role in the organized repression of the February movement. During the peaceful protests in cities across the country, the police put constant pressure on the participants by photographing and video-recording people on a daily basis and by checking identification documents. Misdemeanor charges could consequently be filed against those who spoke at plenums or were peacefully protesting. This pressure took on major proportions in May when a larger number of participants received misdemeanor charges with penalties ranging from one hundred to five hundred BAM. As early as February 15th, Federal Police Administration officials submitted to the Prosecutor’s Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina a report alleging a criminal act of terrorism in connection with the offense of endangering the constitutional order, initiating the first charges of that kind in the country’s history (Bihacnet, 2014).
During the plenums and protest on the streets of Bosnian cities, the repression also involved a regulation of the right to public gathering. This kind of pressure and regulation was most prominent in Banja Luka, whereby the already complicated and time-consuming rules for the registration of a public gathering were toughened, undermining the March 8th demonstration and the public celebration of the Labor Day during the movement’s activity in Federation. This intimidation and punishment culminated in the detention of a citizen who peacefully protested alone on the street in Banja Luka, holding signs calling for social justice. He was fined 550 BAM for allegedly protesting in a prohibited place (Klix.ba, 2014), but that was not enough: the protestor was wrongfully declared a psychiatric case on the Night News program of the RS Public Service television channel, in what amounted to a declaration that you have to be crazy to protest in the RS.

Repression was also evident the in financial pressure imposed on plenum participants in some cities, mostly notably Sarajevo, where the non-existence of independent or friendly space and infrastructure meant plenums could be asked to pay rent several times higher than the market price.

In the last months of the movement’s activity, the main tactic of the regime was to try to exhaust its opponent. The street protests and blockades providing the plenums with necessary support began to weaken as pressure and abuse increased in all the ways described above. Together with the lack of concrete results from plenums, this led to frustration in a movement that would very soon face a new problem: the social catastrophe induced by the regime was exacerbated by a flood wave that swept the country. These sudden events were used skillfully to extinguish the last pockets of social rebellion.

**FLOODS AND THE MOBILIZATION OF SELF-HELP THROUGH PLENUM INFRASTRUCTURE**

_You are silent for nothing, it will only get worse_

Four months after the wave of protests began, unprecedented floods and landslides engulfed the country, creating a situation of social catastrophe. Due to immense
material damage vast numbers of people were displaced from their homes, some of them permanently, and to make things worse, the floods shifted the minefields left over from the war. The state’s inadequate reaction forced plenum participants to organize civil self-help, while individual city plenums temporarily took over the collection and distribution of aid.

Plenum participants in Zenica self-organized as volunteers, helping not only with physical assistance and collection of humanitarian aid, but also by monitoring the reception and distribution of aid coordinated by the municipalities and the state (Oslobodenje, 6.6.2014). At the 12th Sarajevo plenum (May 17th), a working group was founded and given the role of monitoring the situation and initiating action through the plenum communication channels (Sarajevo Plenum, 2014). Given the available capacities it was decided that joining existing initiatives and organizations would be the main strategy of support.

Nonetheless, some plenums did not give up their political function. The 13th Sarajevo plenum, for example, sent urgent requests to the city authorities, the Sarajevo Canton and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, demanding the following: immediate adoption of changes to the 2014 budget, redirecting funds reserved for financing political parties into helping citizens and communities in the affected areas. The plenum insisted that all politically appointed officials give up a part of their salaries and other benefits in the coming year for the benefit of the flooded communities and citizens; it also demand that special body, at the level of the Federation and Republika Srpska, be set up immediately to supervise the work of all institutions involved in distributing the aid and damage-repair funds. Citizen representatives should be involved: this would entail thorough restructuring of the civil protection system at all levels. For the plenum to take immediate executive and judicial action to stop all irregularities in the distribution of aid, all market speculation and all other forms of profiteering from the misfortune of citizens and communities. Very soon, however, the plenums were forced to abandon all other activity to concentrate on volunteer duty, providing aid in the flooded areas whether through existing institutions or self-organized initiatives.

The state made masterful use of the emergency to redirect the capacities of the plenums and protests into solving the socio-economic emergency, channeling the newly created solidarity into volunteer work and facilitating it more or less skillfully.
Many have argued that this meant the state failed. In fact, though, the state established its new specific function. Within the overarching catastrophe, the new function of the state came to light as it retreated from active security enforcement into the neoliberal model of catastrophe management, under which the role of the state decreases, leaving citizens to their own devices (Vilenica, 2014). Within this model, the role of the state is to facilitate self-help among the general population.

The end of the state of emergency introduced new elements of catastrophe management. The time came for bans and a strict governance-organizational line, along with various types of economic blackmail and forced “volunteering”. The authorities washed their hands of the responsibility and started distributing the guilt. Thus the Republika Srpska banned any self-initiated volunteering activities, while the mayor of Maglaj municipality, in the other BiH entity, issued an order obliging all capable citizens of Maglaj to put themselves at the disposal of the Municipal Civil Protection Headquarters for the cleaning up of the town. The order also states that any citizens who gather in public areas but are not involved in the clean-up will be detained and processed by the Maglaj police force (Maglajinfo, 2014).

Although the plenum volunteers did an excellent job under the circumstances, they lacked the infrastructure needed to coordinate the action across the whole territory. This lack of capacity also resulted in the absence of political responses to the new repressive mechanisms introduced by the state. Nonetheless, this moment of solidarity, mobilization and shared work produced a new form of commonality and trust that proved to be constructive, contrary to its frequent characterization as destructive. Volunteer mobilization and mutual aid among citizens expanded the bases for a new kind of social cohesion that doesn’t run along ethnic lines, but rather finds its base in existential solidarity.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

*Our unity, your destruction*

After the tectonic disturbance caused in Bosnia and Herzegovina by the organized uprising of the February urban social movement against the ruling regime, what can
be stated with certainty is that it changed public discourse. The movement was the first to call seriously into question the hegemony, binarity and politics of the dominant national, ethnic and nationalist discourse. The movement called into question the repressive hegemony of parliamentary democracy, the hegemony of the International Community and the structural adjustment dictated by countries of the center. The movement restored the centrality of social and economic issues and launched a public debate with a new analytical perspective. And the movement created space for thought and reflection on alternatives to the current political-economic regime. An important shift has occurred, tending towards resocialization of the atomized and individualized society of Bosnia and Herzegovina through the creation of new forms of sociability in the protests and plenary sessions outside the established framework of civil society, along the lines of new forms of self-organization. A further contribution to the emancipatory struggles came from the spread of the direct democracy model, which is now established as a relevant model for future radical emancipation, capable of involving democratically all those whose fate is today decided by the ruling minority.

In addition, the February movement added the cities of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the map of heterogeneous protests and social movements in the wider region: the movements collectively restructuring regional political space and allowing the emergence of new political and social actors.

But the repressive apparatus of the dominant regime still managed directly to disband and indirectly to atomize the movement through the politics of fear and repression, leaving it today in fragments working on various smaller initiatives. After the collective euphoria, momentum and enthusiasm were exhausted, the movement itself was also exhausted by poor results in terms of actual institutional change. Meanwhile the regime managed partly to recuperate the movement by adopting certain of the assemblies’ demands, combining political programs aimed at winning over a larger electorate with the co-opting of ex-movement activists onto electoral lists. This has led to new divisions within the movement and produced distrust and suspicion.

Traces of the social solidarity infrastructure built by the movement still undoubtedly exist and represent a new base for future social movements. A new phase of low-intensity activity followed the exhaustion of the movement’s energy. Several new initiatives and organizations have also emerged from the movement. In Tuzla a new
union for employed and unemployed alike – Solidarity (Solidarnost)– was founded with 4000 members in 22 firms: as an answer to 20 years of inept union activity. In Sarajevo the Movement! (Pokret!) initiative was launched, while in some cities including Zenica and Gračanica plenums continue to operate. These initiatives create a platform for sectorial work and better articulation of the future movements.

The situation on the ground suggests that what lies ahead is a new struggle to build connections and new relationships within local communities and at municipal, regional and state level, through which the hope for equality for all should awaken, materialize and grow, beyond what has proved to be an exploitative, repressive and corrupt regime. Deletion of the gap between the ethnic groups that was cultivated by political parties to cover their own enrichment (not just today but throughout the history of BiH) will be one of the major tasks of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian spring. Existing and future initiatives must take into account important issues that arose in criticism of the movement. In particular, the demand for a clearly defined political position overcoming the traps of mere participation. The movement mobilized many different groups that share a precarious existence but have very different strategic positions in peripheral ethno-neoliberal urban situations. The future movement must build a broader coalition in working and living space, finding a way to articulate a new radical politics. This entails constant knowledge-production and education on how the current system functions so that we can start to speak the same language and build the movement with mutual understanding. Along with the ability to go beyond participation and cosmetic changes in the existing regime, new courage is needed in becoming part of politically radical common experimentation.

Take a flying leap of a galloping goose!

On October 12th BiH is faced with yet another senseless general election. It is confronted with fake, patronizing alternatives that prop up the superannuated platitude of the electoral process as a tool for social change. Two decades of the electoral process in Bosnia and Herzegovina leave a bitter taste that elections are intended only to shift slightly, maintaining the political elite with no real social change. Actual change in BiH society has never been the purpose of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s
political parties. Political party life and electoral occupation of government services has always been a matter of “family” appropriation of those services. Thus, true to form, the High Representative in BiH calls on BiH citizens to vote and to elect a better future?! (Slobodna Bosna, 2014). Elections have become a mechanical routine. In boycotting the elections even the so-called theoretical possibility of change seems to be lost, yet voting means becoming an accomplice in further deepening of ethnic divisions (Mujkić, 2014).

Thus, BiH is in the same structural and political-economic position as before demonstrations and plenums of February 2014. This is where and when we are. However, the all-city uprising in BiH, together with other uprisings of other cities in the region, brought the periphery back into the center of political experiment (Kirn, 2014). This must encourage us to continue taking part in new social and urban possibilities, to go beyond neoliberal ethno-capitalist regimes, omnipresent brutal privatization of every aspect of society, and the unsustainable conditions of our everyday lives.

This will not stop before the end

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NOTES
1. In the title and between the paragraphs in the text there are quotes from protestors’ slogans carried during the February Movement. To be able to understand the slogan in the title the reader should keep in mind that in Bosnia and Herzegovina after Dayton agreement, in 1995, three languages got official status, Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian, in line with the idea of the three constituent peoples. Although Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian differ in a number of ways, these differences do not impede mutual intelligibility. Suffice it to say that excessive emphasis on language divisions and insistence on translation to formal languages is largely product of ethical-political decisions and politicization of linguistic differences.
2. The text was handed over in October 2014.
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