

Damir Arsenijević [Ed.]

Unbribeable Bosnia and Herzegovina

The Fight for the Commons



Nomos

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Introduction

The February 2014 protest and plenums are the only genuinely novel development in Bosnia and Herzegovina since end of the war in 1995. As a popular revolt and a form of political organisation, they put an end to the predominant fascination with the “one” of power—with an image of the unity and homogeneity of power—and they proved in practice that it is possible to disperse and dispose of the symbolic guarantee behind the existing ruling structures. They went further. Anticipated by various site-specific protests that had been manifest in previous years throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina, the February 2014 protests changed from merely voicing dissatisfaction to inventing methods of making decisions that concern the future of all citizens. Up until February 2014, the predominant mode of protest in Bosnia and Herzegovina was one of pseudo-activity, which followed the logic of making records of injustices—of representing the obvious. The political consequences of breaking away from “representation” alone mean that new forms of actively organising politics needed to be invented and tested. All this led to an accentuation of social conflict and the introduction of a sharp divide in the social: breaking from pseudo-activity, to which most of the so-called “civil society scene” has acquiesced, the protests and plenums disrupted the passive fascination with the management of identitarian differences and created an active, practical site for new social ties and new solidarities to be forged, tested, and lived in the street and in the plenum venues. In this reclamation of space, body, and voice, a boundary was crossed: from the “exhibition of dissent to dissent in action.” From now on, the stakes for any future protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina can never be the same.

In the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the February 2014 protests and plenums rescued politics itself. Politics, predominantly considered as synonymous with corruption, nepotism, and clientelism, returned into the public domain as a common concern. Popular revolt escalated in response to unprecedented police brutality and the arrogance of complacent ethnic oligarchs, in whose view, citizens are mere disposable bodies. The fight back against the physical violence, which had been directed at protesters, showed that these disposable bodies still matter and cannot be as easily discarded as they were in the carnage of the 1992–1995 war and through their subsequent post-war exhaustion, as the processes of the privatisation of the commons ground on and poverty stared them in the face.

More importantly, in this fight back there lies a shift: from being a helpless victim, to assuming responsibility for one's life with no external guarantees. In this, a crucial change took place: the position of victimhood was discarded. This is why many who were and are invested in maintaining the status quo, both in Bosnia and Herzegovina and internationally, were quick to condemn this fight back—the “violence” of protesters—in the course of which several government buildings were burnt. Condemnations ranged from claims of alleged re-traumatisation of citizens because of their exposure to images of burning buildings, to the continuation of bureaucratic terror by attempting to criminalise the protests and protesters, and brand this fight-back as an act of terrorism. All these are ideological positions at their purest: the former, through its insistence on war-time victimhood and the creation of trauma, as supposedly some kind of comfort, turns a blind eye to the systemic violence of ethnic oligarchs; the latter through projecting the terror enacted by the state apparatus onto the citizens-in-revolt. However, the “violence” of protests must be defended to the very end. This is a violence that politically opposes and strikes against the disposability of life itself. It is, thus, a strategy for survival and our pledge for the times to come, as its act of creation has brought about a new modality for contemplating and enacting politics.

In the political life of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the February 2014 protests and plenums are primarily a site of renewed enthusiasm and energy, caused by the rupture of a different possibility for life and a move away from mere passive resignation to the only choices previously being posited. The enthusiasm and energy have to be affirmed, as their context is almost 20 years of a predominant ideology that threw all of its persuasive and practical efforts into making impossibility seem convincing. It is worthwhile recalling that, amidst the uncertainty and risk that any true political gesture entails, the renewed enthusiasm and energy gave us all—in the streets protesting and in taking part in the plenums—a sense of being alive and a chance to meet one another anew. Moreover, people who had never met before, and who had hitherto lived in their separate social circles, came together, jointly, to make demands, and in so doing, transformed public space into social space. Solidarity, as a concept and as a practice, was rescued from being held hostage by those who were all too ready to relegate it to history. It became an everyday word and a lived experience that we had to prove through words and actions. Such rekindled enthusiasm is probably best expressed by a newly-met friend who, on our way to a plenum meeting, said: “It feels like a holiday!” In the protests and plenums, people have re-invented ways of declaring and enacting their presence in public spaces. Hence, many strategies and forms were tried and tested: from street marches and protests where it was critically important to “keep bodies moving in space”; through the plenums, as forums, wherein public demands for justice were made; to manifestos, as a means of making demands visible and being able to address them, transparently, to the public and to the authorities. The language in which these strategies were

articulated left no room for ambiguity; the banners reading “We are hungry in all three languages,” “Reverse corrupt privatisation” and “End nationalism” spoke clearly about newly re-identified and new political priorities: that it is still possible to demand freedom, justice, and better life. The protests and plenums were themselves heterogeneous, not only between different cities—Tuzla, Bihać, Mostar, Sarajevo—but also within these cities. However, as a particular political sequence—and the protests and plenums are nothing less than this—they shared the same principle: the principle of the insistence on the “commons,” as that in, which we all partake, on an equal basis. This point of equality is the minimum, lower than which benchmark any future revolt cannot go.

Unbribeable Bosnia and Herzegovina—The Fight for the Commons affirms this benchmark and links the insistence on equality with the concept of “unbribeability”—as an individual and collective refusal to be bribed and coerced into submission and servility. All the contributions in this book uphold such a stance. In the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where privatisation partitioned and sold off social space, causing the collective and individual escape into private helplessness, the insistence on unbribeability means not settling for the crumbs of freedom but reclaiming and returning to common use that which has been stolen through privatisation and maintained in privatised units of all kinds. This is how we recuperate and make, as our commons, not just material assets and natural goods, but “all life” that has survived, with complicated affect, from which we must learn and draw our strength and inspiration. In such recuperation, nobody is left behind. The legacy of previous workers’ rebellions and all anti-fascist struggle, evident in the decisions and symbols of these protests and plenums, is a powerful reminder that we have a tradition that actualises the idea of and the fight for emancipation. This is why the book opens with contributions by two workers who led the strike actions and first protests that started in their factories—Emina Busuladžić from Dita and Miralem Ibrišimović from Polihem. Their accounts stand as powerful reminders how the many have been sacrificed by the self-aggrandising few in the chase after capital and how we are fighting for a dialectically qualitative change, not some tinkering with minor quantitative adjustments. A short note on who “we” are. At the start of the protests in February 2014, some politicians, voicing their contempt for the protesters, called us *bagra* (scum, nothing), a significant appellation that symptomatically said more than they intended. It is precisely in *bagra* that we should notice not just the fantasy of purity that preoccupies the ethnic oligarchs, but, more importantly for us, as the etymology of the word suggests, is the implication that the political scum are daring to claim public space, to speak, and to act heretically.¹ We are now beyond daring. We have already commenced.

1 Most telling in the etymology of the word, dating from the eleventh century, is the evocation of debauchery and the reference to the Bogumils.

This book would have been impossible without the enthusiasm and camaraderie of all the contributors who answered the call to take part in this endeavour. The contributions range from those written in the early days of protests to those taking into account how protests and plenums subsequently developed and the effects of the big floods that happened in May 2014. I am particularly grateful to Tag McEntegart, Nebojša Jovanović and Šejla Šehabović, my trusted collocutors, for their insights and suggestions. Christophe Solioz nurtured the book to its existence. Alma Fidahić and Besmir Fidahić selflessly translated the majority of the contributions. My special thanks go to Vanessa Redgrave and Carlo Nero of “Dissent Projects,” who made it possible for this book to see the light of day.

Damir Arsenijević, 9 November 2014

Contributors

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