



Will Bosnian ethnoelites take heed, finally?

Stefan Ralchev

18 June 2013

Bosnia witnessed unprecedented civic mobilisation in the first weeks of June, one free of ethnic burden, and caused by the inadequate behaviour of the ethno-political leaders of the country. Because of nationalist squabbles at the central state level, a law was not passed in time, preventing newborns from their civic rights and the freedom to receive treatment abroad. Thousands [gathered](#) on 11 June in front of Parliament to express their indignation. There is already one casualty: a baby – Berina Hamidović – [died](#) on 13 June because, her parents say, the administrative hurdles in Bosnia precluded her adequate transfer and treatment in Belgrade. Bosnian Serb and Croat politicians, including the prime minister Vjekoslav Bevanda, [refuse](#) to go to work to Sarajevo citing safety concerns because of the protests. And on top of all that, the members of Bosnia's ethnically constructed tripartite presidency [failed](#) to endorse on June 17 a border agreement with Croatia – weeks before the latter joins the European Union and border controls become more rigid – potentially creating huge difficulties for Bosnian passport holders willing to enter Croatia. Where does this mixture of carelessness and insolence end, one would ask?

I have been [arguing](#) for some time that the only way for Bosnia and Herzegovina to be salvaged from its ethno-feudal quagmire is popular action, most necessarily in the Serb-dominated half of it, Republika Srpska (RS). There the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats party (SNSD), led by RS president and most impressive local landlord Milorad Dodik, has for the last six or so years established a thorough domination of politics and the economy in a visibly clientelistic and corrupt pattern. But exactly a year ago, in June 2012, hundreds of people started [gathering](#) in the RS's administrative centre Banja Luka to protest the destruction of a city park, Picin Park, because of a planned construction of a shopping mall there by a developer closely linked with SNSD and Dodik; the protests then grew to condemn the overall situation in RS, ripe with political corruption and lacking rule of law. That was the first sign of a concerted civil action in RS by people unburdened by their ethnic background or anxieties, a popular move to stop the wrongdoing of those at the top of the political hierarchy.

But it was Sarajevo with its 'Bebolucija' ('Babylution') this early June of 2013 which clearly corroborated the trend: civic activity in Bosnia is on the rise, and this activity comes as a direct reaction to the careless, irresponsible, self-enriching and harmful ways of the country's ethnic elites – Bosniak, Serb and Croat. This was the last straw: because of politicians' ethnic bickering and inability to pass a law on ID numbers in the state parliament (required for the issuing of passports and medical cards), a 3-month-old child, Belmina Ibrišević, was unable to leave the country for a required stem cell transplantation in Germany. This drove parents to spontaneously blockade the state parliament 'until a law is passed' on 5 June, and more and more ordinary people joined the next days. The climax was on 11 June when more than 10,000 people from all across Bosnia – ethnic Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats alike – gathered in front of the parliament building to demand from politicians to do their job: adopt a permanent solution of the ID numbers issue. The spirit of Istanbul's Taksim had moved west to the most unbelievable of settings: a complicated, ethnically divided Bosnia, ruled by ethnic elites controlling strictly defined fiefdoms of economic and political might and using the post-war traumas of their constituencies to lure them to vote along ethnic lines and thus assure for themselves re-election and continuous plundering of state resources. Faced with the absurd and totally unacceptable situation to not be able to register their newborns and provide them with medical treatment for months on end, the people of Sarajevo, Banja Luka, Mostar and many big and small Bosnian cities and towns said, "No more!"

The political party leaders acted as they always do – ethnocentrically, inadequately and arrogantly. The Bosnian Serb MPs in the state assembly saw in the civic blockade and protests nothing but a threat directed specifically at themselves, as they were the ones most vocally opposing a unified, state-level law on ID numbers (they were in favour of numbers differentiating across the border of the two entities, RS and the Bosniak-Croat Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina). Serb MP Aleksandra Pandurević went as far as to [tweet](#) that the "Protests in front of Parliament are fuel for the Bosniak parties and lynch for us from RS. The building is blocked and they are calling to us Serbs." The Bosniak member of the presidency, Bakir Izetbegović, [called](#) on protesters to go home and not come out until the October 2014 general election. And the ethnic Croat chairman of the Council of Ministers, or de facto prime minister, Vjekoslav Bevanda, is still refusing to go to work due to highly dubious "concerns for his safety."

What all this shows is, firstly, how deep national elites have entrenched themselves in their comfortable positions at the top of ethnic-economic fiefdoms, unwilling to "let go of the bone" and at a loss how to react to this totally novel civic solidarity in Bosnia. A new civic constituency aware of its strength will mean inability of the elites to manipulate voters through their regular methods - heightened nationalist rhetoric and reviving memories of the 1992-95 war ahead of each election, so that people vote with their thoughts in the past rather than the future. The ethnic "guardians" are already scared: a sample, though not representative, census held in November 2012 [showed](#) some 35% of the people declared themselves as citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, that is, not falling within any of the three ethnic categories – Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats. Secondly, the protests and the politicians' reaction show how deep mistrust is among the elites (the traditional political party leaderships) almost 18 years after the end of the war and the signature of the Dayton Peace Accords. The Bosnian Serbs minds, particularly, are the territory of these high levels of collective self-victimisation. It may be justified to some extent, given

Bosniaks are still a majority in Bosnia and an overwhelming majority in Sarajevo. But in its huge part this self-victimisation (so well employed by Bosnian Serb elites) is self-imposed; it is a self-perception, a comfort zone in being the regular, collective object of threat in post-war Bosnia. Bosnian Croats, in being the smallest 'constituent' people of Bosnia, also have this sense of victimhood, but not as strong as that of the Serbs. And thirdly, the Bebolucija showed this same mistrust among ordinary Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats is waning if not disappearing. This time they united around a common ethical and life-and-death cause – the law on ID numbers that would allow their children to get treatment as any modern European citizen. Next time, they will unite around something more substantial, or more abstract, and a pattern may emerge.

What is unexplainable is why current Bosnian political leaders do not realise the importance of the latest developments, particularly the Bebolucija. Why are they closing their eyes to these basic shifts in the civic and social mood in the country? Politicians are generally flexible and elusive creatures: they will adapt. But Bosnia's tripartite presidency, against the backdrop of the Baby Revolution and the death of the little Berina, again made a massive blunder by not adopting the border deal with Croatia. It is now endangering Bosnians' access to a neighbouring country, a major destination both on the way to Western Europe and for summer holidays, because of the same old ethnic obstinacy. Bosnian farmers are already "endowed with" a sufficient amount of trouble for their meat and dairy exports to Croatia, due to the failure of Bosnian authorities to agree on single controls before its neighbour's EU entry. But failing all the citizens at the same time on this would be preposterous. When will Bosnia's leaders finally take heed of the interests of their own people?