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**Protests and Plenums:  
Bosnia's Civic Awakening and Youth Participation**  
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Over the past several years, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) has witnessed an unprecedented surge in civic activities. Protests and public gatherings by citizens were held across the country to criticise the unjust workings of the postwar economy and the lack of progress and to demand more transparency and accountability from the governing elites. While popular action and heightened civic engagement have not been unusual for the entire region of Southeast Europe (with the examples of Slovenia in 2012-13, Turkey and Bulgaria in 2013 and Macedonia and Montenegro in 2015), civic activity in BiH may be viewed as special: the country's complicated post-Dayton administrative structure has favoured a form of ethnocentric consociational 'democracy' which is anything but friendly to truly civic, cross-nationality popular engagement. Institutions, political parties and public life in general are practically constructed along three distinct ethnic lines corresponding to the three main, or 'constitutive', national groups: Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats. Yet from 2012 onward there has been a trend of genuinely civic protests and civil action regardless of ethnic background in which a substantial role was played by the youth. The Banja Luka protests against construction in a city park in June 2012, the Sarajevo protests against

the failure of the state to provide unique citizens' numbers to babies that led to the death of a baby girl in June 2013, the rebellion against the failed privatisation process, economic stagnation and corruption which started in Tuzla in February 2014 and the subsequent unique forums of citizens in major BiH towns called the plenums are an example of civic action as it would happen in a modern, civic democracy, which BiH presently regrettably isn't. And youths took active part in the process, organising themselves via social networks and providing support on the ground.

## **Background**

After the 1992-95 war, the Dayton Peace Accords established BiH as a complex, multi-level state system basically centred around a balance of power among the three formerly warring sides: Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims), Orthodox Christian Serbs and Catholic Croats. Probably understandably, Dayton's purpose was above all to put an end to an ethnic conflict rather than lay the foundations of a true democratic system based on civic values. Bosnia now consists of two semi-autonomous parts called 'entities' – the Bosniak-Croat Federation of BiH (FBiH) and the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska (RS). FBiH is in turn divided into ten cantons so that in the majority-Croat cantons Croats can have a certain form of autonomy, given the dominance of Bosniaks as the largest ethnic group. And there are also municipalities both in the FBiH's cantons and in the RS. Above all those is the BiH state – a central level of governance overarching the rest and responsible for foreign policy, defence, state aid, foreign debt and some forms of taxation. This complex division has created an institutional and administrative quagmire and BiH now boasts the unbelievable 3 rotating presidents (from each constitutive nationality), 14 governments (state level, entities and cantons) with their respective ministries and hundreds of municipal administrations. The voting system is such that it guarantees each of the three ethnic groups proper representation and the veto power to block decisions at state level when they are deemed detrimental to the 'vital national interest' of any group. This has produced strong ethnocentric political parties which in times of elections resort to

nationalist rhetoric to garner votes, and important problems in spheres such as the rule of law, the economy or progress on the European Union membership path have remained secondary or unnoticed at all.

The BiH reality has thus alienated citizens from politics, and they keep voting for the nationalist parties out of insecurity and lack of viable civic options, with some rare exceptions. Another source of disillusion has been the impotence of BiH's main partner, the European Union, in handling the institutional and economic stagnation of the country through conditionality and working initiatives for reform and development. Of course, the greater burden of responsibility lies with entrenched Bosnian politicians who have no incentive in changing the system and resist EU efforts at reform, while they keep administering EU and other international aid. But the populace has gradually started to disbelieve the bloc as a true ideal to be pursued, and the EU itself has been disconcerted and inattentive to developments in the BiH and Balkans due to the repeated internal crises it experiences.

### **A true civic action? Overview of popular engagement in BiH in 2012-14**

It is in such atmosphere that several civic actions and processes took place in BiH over the past years that broke the pattern and were hints at a true, cross-ethnicity civil society in the postwar country. Youth was often the engine of these actions and the main carrier of their messages. To be fair, the first expression of such a process was a social initiative which came to existence still earlier – back in 2005 – the *Dosta!* (Enough!) non-violent protest movement. It consisted of youths gathering regularly in front of the BiH Parliamentary Assembly to “promote accountability and government responsibility to the people, and to spark civic participation of all Bosnian citizens, no matter what religious or ethnic group. With several hundred people from 15 cities around the country involved in nonviolent actions, this grassroots movement... established itself as a visible actor in Bosnia’s civil society.”<sup>1</sup> The movement had a

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<sup>1</sup> See Darko Brkan, “Dosta! Movement, Bosnia and Herzegovina”, *International Centre for Nonviolent Conflict*, available at <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/index.php/learning-and-resources/on-the-ground/1139-darko-brkan>.

number of concrete actions, the most popular of which were a protest against high electricity prices and a campaign against the FBiH prime minister's shady purchase of a low-cost flat.<sup>2</sup>

A notable sign of truly civic attitudes happened in the traditionally more restrained and nationally homogeneous half of BiH, Republika Srpska. “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 [the ruling party] SNSD and [its leader Milorad] 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.”<sup>3</sup>

However, the true awakening of non-ethnic civil society may be ascribed to the spontaneous protest against the failure of the BiH state to adopt a law on unique personal numbers for Bosnian citizens, the so-called JMBG (Jedinstveni matični broj građana, or Citizens' unitary identification number), in June 2013. “Because of nationalist squabbles at the central state level, [the] 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 [was] one casualty: a baby – Berina Hamidović – died on 13 June because... the administrative hurdles in Bosnia precluded her adequate transfer and treatment in Belgrade.”<sup>4</sup> The protesters blocked the Parliament building and did not allow the MPs inside to leave it, invoking international news coverage and outcry at the absurdity of the BiH political system. As I argued back then, June 2013 “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

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2 *Ibid.*

3 Stefan Ralchev, “Will Bosnian Ethnoelites Take Heed, Finally?”, *Institute for Regional and International Studies*, 18 June 2013, available at <http://www.iris-bg.org/fls/Bosnia-Ethnoelites-Take-Heed-18.06.2013.pdf>.

4 *Ibid.*

the country's ethnic elites – Bosniak, Serb and Croat. This was the last straw... The spirit of Istanbul's Taksim has 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!'"<sup>5</sup>

Despite the gradual subsiding of the JMBG movement, its effect was clear: the authorities were forced to adopt urgently the law on unique personal numbers and, more importantly, started to take notice of the Bosnian people as a true, non-ethnically divisible watchdog of their actions, not just a mixture of national groups readily manipulated in times of elections. The spirit of June 2013 was resurrected in the most massive, and violent, civic protest in the postwar years of BiH – the so-called riots that started in the northern town of Tuzla in February 2014. The protests grew from regular workers' gatherings in front of the Tuzla cantonal government demanding justice and means of livelihood after a number of failed privatisations in the canton and the resulting dismissed workers. Tuzla used to be one of the largest industrialised areas in the former Yugoslavia, and the market liberalisation process after 1991, characterised by controversial sale of state assets and layoffs, delivered a hard blow on its economy and the population. Tuzla has also always had a tradition in civic organisation and action and unprecedented levels of tolerance and cooperation among its numerous ethnic groups, even immediately after the 1990s conflict.<sup>6</sup> When youths joined the already protesting workers, the crowds grew numerous; but they grew really massive when police used force on the protesters and they started coming in greater and greater numbers in indignation. The protests then spread to other major

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> See Michael Pugh and Margaret Cobble, "Non-Nationalist Voting in Bosnian Municipal Elections: Implications for Democracy and Peacebuilding", *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Jan, 2001), pp. 27-47, available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/425781>

Bosnian cities such as Sarajevo, Mostar, Zenica and even Banja Luka in the RS (with a slightly different demands), calling for a total revamp of the Bosnian system of cronyism, rent, corruption and ethnocentrism and poor and deprived populace; they were non-ethnic in nature, with participants from all ethnic groups (even police fighting protesters in Tuzla was summoned from the nearby RS towns of Doboje and Bijeljina – ethnically Serb police were called to help their Bosniak counterparts).<sup>7</sup>

The protests gradually died away, with varying success vis-a-vis the posed demands, but they left a unique and captivating trace: the self-organisation of citizens in Tuzla and all major towns in the so-called plenums. The plenums were gatherings of youth, civil society, academics, other active citizens and even representatives of political parties in big town halls where urgent problems of the respective communities raised by the protest action were discussed; everyone willing had a say; and in the end joint declarations were adopted for specific actions the municipal and cantonal authorities should undertake. And a great deal of the demands were fulfilled. As put by one observer, “plenums highlighted... that people are able to self-organise and talk about concrete political reforms. This is a legacy that will remain... [They] demonstrated that it is not ethnic nationalism that divides Bosnia - social inequality and political dissatisfaction unite the people of Bosnia... [They] provided networks that continue to organise and mobilise. These networks played a key role in organising support for those areas in Bosnia that were hit by the floods in May 2014. This, too, is an important legacy that has managed to bridge the ethnic divide.”<sup>8</sup>

## **The youth factor**

Youths constituted a substantial driving force and presence in all civic (cross-ethnic) actions described above. Youth organisations and networks in BiH have traditionally been active ever since the end of the 1992-95 war, with foci of activities ranging from volunteering in relief action to debating to cultural and political activism to street

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Soeren Keil, “Whatever Happened to the Plenums in Bosnia?”, *BalkanInsight*, 16 June 2014, available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/whatever-happened-to-the-plenums-in-bosnia>.

campaigning to international cooperation.<sup>9</sup> Young environmentalists were the initial nucleus of protesters in Banja Luka in June 2012, before the protest grew anti-establishment and was joined by more youths and citizens of various backgrounds.<sup>10</sup> In Sarajevo's JMBG protests, youths joined at a later stage, after the parents who were directly affected by the JMBG institutional fiasco initiated the civil action in front of parliament. “The young people came to be the striking fist of the protest in Sarajevo, joining with their massive numbers, banners and posters.”<sup>11</sup> A Tuzla youth NGO coordinator accounts for the role of the youth in the February 2014 protests in his home town:

The workers' protests in Tuzla had already been going on for 3 or 4 years every Wednesday in front of the cantonal government building. After a lost friendly football game of local team Sloboda shown live on TV on 4 February, though, disappointed fans who had watched the match in the nearby cafes joined the rallying workers in front of the government building. The subsequent police and media attention made Tuzla youths and citizens of all backgrounds 'notice' the protests, and they joined them the next day for their own reasons of disillusion: high unemployment, lack of perspectives, corrupt and unaccountable government. While on the first day of the protests there were maybe 300 or 400 youths out of 1,000 all in all, the following days, after the police brutality that occurred and after intense social networking, the numbers of young people grew three or four times. Members of youth NGOs started coming from other towns, and on the fourth day the protesting people were about 15,000. Afterwards this spread to the entire country.<sup>12</sup>

Young people were also active participants in the plenums, the direct democracy expression of civic energy in BiH after February 2014. “The plenums were conceived in Tuzla and only then spread to Sarajevo and other cities and towns. They played

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9 Interview with Miralem Tursinović, chairman, Omladinski resursni centar – Tuzla [Youth Resource Centre – Tuzla], an NGO, held in Prishtina, 8 August 2015.

10 “When Fear Disappears: Protests in Banja Luka Entering Third Week”, *CNN iReport*, 13 June 2012, available at <http://ireport.cnn.com/docs/DOC-802568>.

11 Interview with Miralem Tursinović.

12 *Ibid.*

their most important part during the mandate of the transitional governments appointed after the resignations of a number of government officials post-February. How did young people contribute to them? They took part in the plenums, some of them joined the transitional governments themselves, and the youngest of them served as carriers of news and announcers of developments from the plenums via the social networks.”<sup>13</sup>

## **Perspectives for youth participation in BiH**

Youth activism and participation in BiH have been of varying intensity and effectiveness over the last years. The economic hardships and scarcity of perspectives for the young in the country as a result of the controversial transition and postwar stagnation have dealt a major blow, as has the inadequate engagement of external sources of confidence and trust as the EU: “The country’s crippling high unemployment rate – with youth unemployment over 50% - has compounded the frustration amongst young people that there is no future in the current political system. Meanwhile, next door to their EU counterparts, Bosnians have faced the humiliation of travel restrictions unimaginable in the Yugoslav era, leaving young people trapped – educated and un- or under-employed – outside a seemingly increasingly hostile ‘Fortress Europe’.”<sup>14</sup> The Tuzla youth network coordinator shares:

The situation with the young is worse than in 1997-98, when they had just come up on their feet after the war years. The young cannot wait, they are impatient [for things to get better]. The capable and educated have left the country to seek better life abroad, and those who remained are isolated. They find it hard to form a critical mass for action; they are more passive. The young are discriminated against as a group. The government is not doing enough to support them – there is a certain level of dedication by the local authorities, but it lasts only until local

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Heather McRobie, “Listen to Bosnia's Plenums”, *Open Democracy*, 25 March 2014, available at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/heather-mcrobie/listen-to-bosnias-plenums>

power brokers can benefit from the young in some way. Yet there is a decent number of youths who can self-organise under the banner of attaining a change. And it is not just about organising for a protest – it is about humanitarian, cultural, all sorts of sustained action. There are some people from our network who have demonstrated personal ambition and devotion. They come from the NGO sector and are now in politics, on highly responsible and influential positions, and they haven't changed a bit – they have remained devoted to their ideals. That is why I am an optimist.<sup>15</sup>

To sum up, Bosnia and Herzegovina has recently seen heightened civic activity in the form of popular protest action and unique plenums of citizens, a form of direct democracy at the local community and town level. This civic action was unthinkable until several years ago, given the specific postwar institutional structure of BiH, the advantages it gives to ethnic politics and the natural hurdles for true civic, cross-ethnic initiatives. Youth engagement is invariably a part of Bosnian popular democracy of late: young people were the engine or critical mass presence of the *Dosta!* movement back in 2005, the Banja Luka Picin Park protests of June 2012, the JMBG protests in Sarajevo a year after, the Bosnian riots that started in Tuzla in February 2014 and the consequent citizens' plenums. One sad conclusion is that the Bosnian authorities and the European Union are not doing enough to facilitate youths' participation and interaction, gradually leading to disillusion and departure from the country. Action should be taken to support the existing number of young people who are devoted to their ideals and continue to pursue them even when they join the ranks of decision-makers and opinion-makers at a higher level.

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15 Interview with Miralem Tursinović.