DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The mobilisations of spring 2014 in Bosnia: an attempt to break ethnic frameworks and open the doors to political participation

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Protesters chant anti-government slogans during a rally in Sarajevo, February 9, 2014. The demonstrations that began in the town of Tuzla spread to numerous cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Some analysts referred to it as a "Bosnian Spring". Photo: Reuters/Antonio Bronic

In recent years, the Western Balkans have been the scene of numerous social mobilisations: from student protests to demonstrations in defence of the environment and public space; from mobilisations for democracy and against corruption to demands for social and civil rights.

In Serbia, the country's political life over the past decade has been dominated by environmental protests, such as the Rio Tinto protests between 2021 and 2022 and the Ne Davimo Beograd (we won't let Belgrade drown) movement launched in 2014, and the anti-government protests against the regime of Aleksandar Vučić and his Progressive Party (SNS), such as the 1 out of 5 million movement and the Serbia Against Violence movement of 2023.

In North Macedonia in 2017, the so-called Colourful Revolution overthrew the government

of the former prime minister Nikola Gruevski, who had been in power since 2006. In Montenegro, thousands of citizens took to the streets in 2019 in protest against the corruption, clientelism and authoritarianism of the then president Milo Đukanović, who had been in power since 1991, a movement that was christened *Resist*.

In addition, LGTBI pride marches and demonstrations against gender-based violence have taken place throughout the region in recent years.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the most important social mobilisation since the end of the war took place 10 years ago. In February 2014, a rally of industrial workers in Tuzla eventually led to a wave of anti-government protests across the country. The images of burning official buildings in different Bosnian cities and the citizens' assemblies that emerged in the wake of the mobilisations rekindled hope for an alternative to the Dayton system, which was put in place in 1995 as a mechanism to end the war.

A decade later, the country is still articulated by an institutional system that distributes power into ethnic quotas and hinders the emergence of civic political projects that break free of this framework. Over this time, both Bosnia and the rest of the region have experienced a regression in democratic standards and the rule of law.

> Civic initiatives that go beyond nationalist and populist discourse and advocate issues for the common good have proliferated across the region

However, civil society has remained active over this period. Civic initiatives that go beyond nationalist and populist discourse and advocate issues for the common good have proliferated across the region. Such initiatives have opened up the possibility of articulating new, more democratic and participatory forms of governance, offering new hope for democratic transformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Western Balkans.

Bosnian Spring: from anti-government protests to citizens' assemblies

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, protests began on 5 February 2014 in Tuzla, an industrial centre in the north-east of the country. Factory workers protested to demand payment of wages and pensions and compensation for the consequences of the closures of several factories in the area, following shady privatisation processes. Students, pensioners and other citizens joined the protests, dissatisfied with deteriorating socio-economic conditions and high unemployment, but also with the corruption and abuse of post-war structures by political elites for the benefit of a minority. Beyond dissatisfaction with the political class, there was a palpable sense of frustration among the population at the lack of alternatives to a system that had brought the country to a political impasse.

In the following days, demonstrations spread to more than 30 cities across the country, in some cases ending in violence and clashes with the police. Images of burning government buildings in Sarajevo, Tuzla and Zenica attracted the attention of the international media, which at the time spoke of a “Bosnian spring”, comparing it to the mobilisations that flooded countries in the Arab world between 2010 and 2012.

After the first week of protests, the mobilisations became less intense. But at the same time, the protesters started to organise themselves into citizens’ assemblies, *plenums*, through which they expressed their demands, mainly related to the privileges of the political class and the privatisation processes of the factories. Among their demands were the resignation of certain politicians and the formation of a government of experts with non-political profiles. At the heart of the demands was also the reform of the constitutional system that arose out of the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords, thereby completing the country’s democratic transformation.



A local government building in Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina, burns during protests on February 7, 2014, which began with a rally of industrial workers. Protesters set fire to official buildings in several Bosnian cities. Photo: Dado Ruvic/Reuters

The citizens’ assemblies emerged relatively spontaneously in Sarajevo and Tuzla, but multiplied throughout the country, not only in major cities such as Mostar, Zenica, Bihać or Brčko, but also in smaller towns in the hinterland, such as Bugojno and Travnik. The horizontally self-managed assemblies opened the door to political participation by the general population. Social media played a key role in facilitating their dissemination and

coordination.

In some cases, the authorities responded to the protesters' demands. Prime ministers and other political officials in some corners of the Federation resigned and some cantonal parliaments accepted the demands of the mobilised people, at least on paper. The resignations were initially seen as a victory and a sign of change; however, they proved to be merely cosmetic, lacking systemic change and any large-scale impact.

For a few weeks, it seemed the *plenums* would be capable of challenging the *status quo* and offer a transformative alternative, arising out of the Bosnian citizenry itself, 20 years after the end of the war. Yet despite this initial optimism, the assemblies gradually lost muscle, eventually ceasing to be active in April of the same year. Social mobilisation and citizens' demands did not translate into a political project with continuity and electoral possibilities.

Time and hindsight have shown that analyses suggesting a Bosnian spring overestimated the real impact of the protests. This was partly, no doubt, because they drew more from a desire to imagine a different Bosnia that would finally break free of a flawed and discriminatory political system than from the real possibilities the citizens' assemblies had in transforming a system often referred to as the most complex in the world.

The reasons why the protests failed to translate into a political project are manifold and related to the nature of the mobilisations and the Bosnian political-institutional system itself, as well as the reaction of local political elites and the international community. Firstly, the lack of leadership, structure and an agenda that all citizens could embrace made it difficult for the assemblies to continue, while the system itself, structured around ethnic affiliation and representation, hinders the emergence of civic political proposals that break free from this framework. Secondly, the efforts of the political class and part of the media to delegitimise the protests – referring to protesters as "hooligans" and comparing the protests to the war of the 1990s – also contributed to weakening the movement.

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Nor was it helped by the international community's timid response, which insisted on the need to avoid unrest rather than highlighting the democratising potential of the mobilisations, for fear of violent escalation in an already unstable territory. The High Representative at the time, Valentin Inzko, helped frame the protests in warlike terms when he said that the European Union should consider sending troops if the situation were to escalate.

Ethnicity, out of the equation

One of the reasons why the spring 2014 mobilisations and the plenums generated such hope was that ethnic affiliation was left out of the equation. The nature of the citizen protests and their demands broke free of the nationalist logic that had framed political dynamics in Bosnia since the end of the war, challenging the stereotype that the ethnic division of the Balkan country makes it impossible for civic projects that go beyond national affiliation to emerge and unite the population as citizens.

Indeed, at the heart of the protest was frustration with an outdated and flawed institutional system and criticism of its instrumentalisation by political elites, who since the end of the war have stoked nationalist and ethnically divisive rhetoric in order to continue to divide the spoils, maintain quotas of power and avoid addressing issues affecting the population as a whole.

This dynamic of crossed vetoes and constant arguments over the competencies of the different territories and levels of administration has not only brought the country to a deadlock, but also directly harms the citizens' day-to-day life. A few months before the protests, in the summer of 2013, the dispute over the nomenclature of personal identification numbers among political parties in the two territorial entities that make up Bosnia and Herzegovina —the Serb-majority Republika Srpska and the Federation, shared by Bosniaks and Croats— cost the life of a three-month-old baby, who was unable to travel abroad for urgent medical treatment because who could not be given a passport.

Although the protesters' demands were not nationalist in nature, part of the political class used the ethnic card to try to neutralise them. Milorad Dodik, the current president of Republika Srpska —in his first term in office at that time— portrayed the protests as anti-Serb, and claimed their sole aim was to destroy the Bosniak-Serb entity. Although the mobilisations had no ethnic component, it is true that many of the protests took place in the Federation, with the exception of smaller-scale demonstrations in Banja Luka, Prijedor and Bijeljina.

Although the demonstrations' and assemblies' demands were not translated into a political project, the experience of the plenums is valuable as the exercise in direct democracy and citizen political participation it represented. In the following years, further mobilisations took place in Bosnia for different reasons, such as the protection of the territory, the defence of justice and the fight against gender-based violence.

In 2018, the death of young Bosnian student David Dragičević in Banja Luka in strange circumstances sparked a series of protests, starting in the Republika Srpska town and spreading to other cities in the country, eventually gathering together 40,000 people. The young man was found with signs of torture a week after his disappearance, and amid suspicions that the police had covered up those responsible for the action, thousands of citizens took to the streets for months to demand clarification of the case and seek justice.

In recent years, Bosnia has also been the scene of environmental and territorial mobilisations. In late 2020, the population of Jajce successfully moved a petition to stop the construction of a hydroelectric plant in this town in the canton of Central Bosnia. A few years earlier, in the summer of 2017, the local community of Kruščica, a village less than a 100 kilometres from Jajce, succeeded in stopping the construction of another similar plant in the area. For more than 500 days, women from the village blocked the bridge across the river to prevent the machines from arriving.

> Although the demands were not translated into a political project, the Bosnian experience of 2014 is valuable for the exercise in citizen political participation that it represented

In 2019, Bosnia organised an LGTBI pride march for the first time, going on to hold the fifth such march in 2024. In 2023, the murder of a woman by her partner while broadcasting it on social media sparked a wave of protests against gender-based violence in various cities across the country. A year earlier, in 2022, the murder of another woman in Bihać (the main city in the north-west of the country) had already sparked a series of demonstrations demanding the introduction of femicide as a criminal offence and greater prevention of gender-based violence.

Constitutional reform, once more on the table

The unique nature of the plenums lies in the fact that, for the first time since the end of the war, the idea of reform in the Dayton system seemed credible and had emerged from Bosnian citizens themselves, unlike previous attempts. The nature of the mobilisations rekindled hope for possible reform of the Dayton political-institutional system, which was designed during the 1995 peace negotiations in Dayton to end the war.

Under the slogan “one state, two entities, three constituent peoples,” the accords were an attempt to reconcile the different interests of the parties involved and maintain a balance of power to prevent one side from imposing its interests on the others. Thus, the starting point for the Dayton Peace Agreement was not the logic of guaranteeing equality among all citizens, but of guaranteeing equality among ethnic groups.

The agreements divided the country into two territorial entities, Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and established a convoluted institutional system that combines joint power sharing at the state level, based on ethnic criteria, with asymmetric territorial decentralisation of powers between the two entities, which enjoy a high level of autonomy.

The constitution guarantees the representation of the three constituent peoples and gives them the right of veto, a right also held by both entities. It is a complex system that is only

viable if the political elites have the will and commitment to make it work. In practice, the veto mechanism, designed to guarantee the equal rights of constituent groups and to be used only in cases where their “vital national interest” is affected, has become a tool to shield the privileges of the political elites linked to the main nationalist parties, which have abused blocking mechanisms to boycott decision-making and the functioning of institutions. [1]

Apart from its deficiency, the Dayton system is discriminatory towards a significant part of the Bosnian population. The tripartite presidency and the upper house of parliament are reserved for Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats. Moreover, Serb representatives are elected only in Republika Srpska, while Bosniaks and Croats are elected in the Federation. This provision infringes on the political rights of some 400,000 Bosnian citizens (12% of the population) [2] who either do not identify with any of the three ethnic groups or do not live in the territory that chooses their representatives.

> The Dayton system violates the political rights of some 400,000 Bosnian citizens, 12% of the population

Moreover, the fact that political participation, both active and passive, is linked to ethnic affiliation and place of residence hinders the emergence and consolidation of political projects that are not structured around this issue.

The distribution of power quotas along ethnic lines and the resulting concentration of power in specific areas by the three main nationalist parties have favoured clientelism and state capture through, for example, the appointment of positions in public enterprises or services. Lack of opportunities outside these clientelist networks has led to a brain drain and forced many young people to seek a future outside the country. Some 50,000 people, mostly skilled professionals, emigrate from Bosnia each year, and almost half of young people consider leaving the country. [3]

Dayton has been used as a scapegoat to justify the country’s stagnation and dysfunction. However, it is unfair to lay the blame solely on the structures and not the abuse by the authorities. Indeed, the Dayton system was not conceived as a long-term institutional solution for Bosnia, but as a temporary mechanism to end the war and a starting point for nation-building after the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Thus, the problem is not the system itself, but how political elites instrumentalise it for their own benefit. There has also been an unwillingness on the part of these elites to reform the system, as it guarantees them high quotas of power.

The social mobilisation in the spring of 2014 revived hopes of a reform of the Dayton system, almost 20 years after it was established. Several attempts to reform the constitution had been made during the previous decade, all of which failed. The events of 2014 mainly differ from previous cases in two ways. Firstly, until then, it had always been

the international community, above all the United States with the support of the European Union, that had taken the initiative to raise the issue, whereas in 2014 the demand for change came from within the country. And secondly, it reversed the top-down logic of the past, whereby efforts had always centred on closed-door negotiations between political leaders to get them to reach an agreement, sidelining the population. In this case, it was the other way around: the citizens themselves made the proposals.

In the post-war years, important steps towards unifying the country were taken: competencies in taxation and the judiciary were transferred to the central level, and a common police force and army were created. Coinciding with the 10th anniversary of the Dayton Peace Agreement, at the end of 2005, a negotiation process was initiated with the intervention of the international community to try to reach an agreement between the different political parties to reform the Constitution. The initiative followed the publication of a report by the Venice Commission [4] which criticised the Bosnian constitutional system and recommended a number of changes, as Bosnia had started the process of accession to the European Union.

> Bosnia's 2014 mobilisations were hopeful because ethnicity was out of the equation. For the first time since the end of the war, the idea of reforming the Dayton system seemed credible

That was the closest Bosnia has ever come to constitutional change. After months of closed-door negotiations between the country's various political leaders, in the spring of 2006, the main parties endorsed a package of reforms —dubbed Aprilski Paket— [5] to reform the constitution. At the last moment, two of the parties backed down and the measures failed to obtain the necessary majority in parliament. With this failure, and after the October 2006 elections, the necessary momentum was lost and the political will to reach a consensus vanished. In the following years, the talks were revived several times with varying degrees of intensity, but all eventually came to nothing.

The incomplete transition of the Balkans

From the so-called Bulldozer Revolution that ended with the fall of Slobodan Milošević in 2000 to the Serbia Against Violence movement that for several months in 2023 occupied several cities in the Balkan country, the countries of the former Yugoslavia in the last three decades have been the scene of numerous social mobilisations: student protests, demonstrations in defence of the environment and public space, pro-democracy and anti-corruption protests, and demands for social and civil rights.

In the years since the end of the wars in the 1990s, the Balkan countries have undergone a triple transition: from war to peace; from a communist economy to a market economy; and from a one-party system to a pluralist democracy. [6] The European Union has played a key

role in this process, especially the democratic transformation. Historically, the prospect of EU membership and the need to meet accession criteria has acted as an incentive to speed up the transition to a democratic system.

The year 2014 coincided with the start of Jean-Claude Juncker's presidency of the European Commission. In his first appearance before the European Parliament, Juncker closed the EU's door on the entry of new Member States during his term in office. Losing the prospect of European accession negatively affected democratic transformation in the region, abandoning the political and social actors working in this direction.

While democratic transformation is the cornerstone of the European Union's enlargement policy towards the Balkans, fear of escalating instability in an already volatile area means the EU has often wrongly prioritised stability over other considerations, such as democratic consolidation. The European Union has repeatedly fallen into the trap of the stability-democracy dilemma. This logic has meant that, in some cases, the EU has ended up tolerating or even supporting regimes with serious democratic deficiencies and authoritarian practices in exchange for a supposed guarantee of security, contributing to a phenomenon known as stabilocracy.

In the last decade, Bosnia and other countries in the region have experienced a regression in terms of democratic standards and the rule of law. However, civil society has remained active during this period.

Ten years after Juncker's refusal, the European Union finds itself at a different geopolitical juncture. After many years in which EU enlargement had been left on the back burner, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 brought the issue back to the centre of the debate on the future of the European project. While the challenge is daunting, this new reality could once again offer hope for the future of Bosnia and the Balkans as a whole.

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