

Bosnia on fire

7 February 2014

The anger of Bosnia's long-suffering people is finally spilling out onto the street. My friend and colleague from our days at International Crisis Group, Srećko Latal, has been [prophesying](#) this for years and I have to admit I've been skeptical. Bosnian demonstrations usually peter out and they've never gotten close to mass public convulsions of the type you see in Athens or even Paris, not to mention Maidan Square or Tahrir. Last summer's [ID-card protests in Sarajevo](#) aroused a lot of hopes but ended quickly.

This looks different. As I write, the cantonal government buildings are on fire in Tuzla, protesters have broken into the canton government in Sarajevo, there are massive demonstrations in Zenica and Bihać. About 200 policemen countrywide have been wounded, tear gas is on the streets. Tune in to Al Jazeera Balkans for [live coverage](#) (in Bosnian). Interesting to note that all these cities have a large Bosniak majority. About 300 people gathered briefly in Serb-majority Banja Luka and a protest is scheduled in ethnically divided Mostar later today but so far, this seems to be a Bosniak event. Yet it has no visible nationalist component. All reports I've seen show people enraged with ineffective governments, corruption, poverty and general frustration. These problems, these feelings are general across Bosnia. So why is the river overflowing its banks only among one of the country's peoples, at least for now?

Here's a theory: it is because no other community is as marginalised, as disenfranchised and consequently as frustrated as the Bosniaks. There is almost nothing a Bosniak voter can do to affect government policy, which is set by more or less the same group of politicians year in and year out whatever the voters say. Governments are always large coalitions of a self-selecting elite. These people live quite well. In RS, voters may be as impoverished and as disenfranchised with their leaders, but they know they can vote them out come this October - as they have in the past.

If that's true, then the government system in the Federation of BiH needs a root and branch change, going far beyond the current reform proposals. One place to start: get rid of the cantons, which seem to be the target of much of the ire, and replace them with another vehicle to protect the interests of local communities (notably, the Croats for whom cantons function as a consolation prize for an entity of their own).