

Bosnia's Social Impact

10 February 2014

After years of passivity Bosnia shows it can still surprise; maybe two decades of Daytonian slumber have left it, as the poet would have it, defiant after sleep ("prkosna od sna", Mak Dizdar). When the news comes as quickly as this, the commentariat should exercise caution. The truth is no one knows what's going on or what's going to happen. All early interpretations are provisional.

In that spirit, here's another provisional interpretation: Bosnia's social compact has torn apart. Sure, no one loved the system or the leaders, but as long as benefits arrived more or less on time and there were enough jobs for a decent salary and the impoverishment didn't bite too deeply or for too long, it was tolerable. That, I think, was the compact: we, the people, let you, the leaders, enjoy a life of privilege and wealth and in return, you ensure some of it trickles down to us, you keep us housed and employed and insured. (This was almost exactly the old Yugoslav self-managing socialist compact, caricatured by the image of shopping trips to Trieste.) Too little has been trickling down for a long time now and it seems tens of thousands of people are willing to march now to make a simple point: our little emperors, you have lost the mandate of heaven.

If that's right, Bosnia has much more serious problems than I thought. Look at what the protesters are demanding (available in translation on Jasmin Mujanović's excellent blog, [here](#)):

In Tuzla, "Return the factories to the workers and put everything under ~~the~~ control of the public government in order to protect the public interest, and to start production in those factories where it is possible." In Mostar, "Resolving the status of workers from destroyed companies." In Zenica, "Resolve the status of all workers from companies destroyed in the process of privatization, whose rights were denied." In Prijedor, "We demand an increase in employment (resolving the problems of Old Mines in Ljubija)!"

There are a lot of other demands, for transparency, professional government, prosecution of corrupt officials - all components of the kind of modern society Bosnians want and deserve. (Most of southeastern Europe can sign on to this, too.) But the big problem is that in the short term (i.e. over the next decade) things are likely to get worse for factory workers and it's far from clear to me, at least, what anyone can do about it. Yugoslavia had a lot of industrial capacity that is useless in 2014

and that would be dying or dead even if no one had looted it. That's what Bosnia inherited. To recover, Bosnia needs sound political and economic institutions, a free labour market, efficient courts and laws, transparent finance, simplified regulation, much lower and more targeted social transfers, fairly drastic reforms in higher education, lower taxes - and that's going to hurt. It's going to hurt a lot.

The hope, I guess, is that people will be willing to eat dignity - that if there are grounds to hope life will be better for their children, if there are leaders working on creating a sound system instead of dispensing patronage, people will accept their jobs are gone and aren't coming back. There's an echo of this in the demand of the Sarajevo protesters:

When these demands are met, we can then ask for the start of conversations and actions at all levels of government in order to establish a more socially just order for all social strata; and for all those whose human dignity and material basic needs have been endangered or destroyed by the transitional theft, corruption, nepotism, privatization of public resources, an economic model that favors the rich, and financial arrangements that have destroyed any hope for a society based on social justice and welfare.

Yet even this strikes me as a *cri de coeur* for the third way between socialism and capitalism, the third way that Yugoslavia once tried and failed to find, a quest that Bosnia, if it's not careful, could also lose itself on.