

Protests, plenums and politics: An analysis of the Bosnian Spring and its political (dis)continuity.

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the protests in February 2014 in Tuzla, Bosnia-Herzegovina. While these protests resulted in the resignation of local governments, the elections that followed suggest a continuation of ethno-nationalist politics. This research explains how the characteristics that defined the collective identity of the protest movement are undermined over time and how this, together with a lack of strategy, created a negative climate for mobilization at the time of the cantonal elections, October 2014. Hereby, this research shows that while Dayton is often seen as the major obstacle, internal factors also influence attempts at democratization and political reform in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Keywords

Bosnia-Herzegovina, politics, protests, democracy, collective identity, ethno-nationalism, framing.

INTRODUCTION

The legacy that was left by the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina has been defined by ethno-nationalism. The ethnicized political discourse has been said to be the continuation of war by other means.[1] The Dayton peace accords that ended the violence in 1995 was marked by a democratization strategy that leaned on the institutionalization of ethnic divisions.[1] The country was divided into two entities, both with their own government: the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Serbian Republic (*Republika Srpska*). The Federation is furthermore divided into ten cantons and the Republika Srpska into seven regions. Besides this division, the country also acknowledges a national government with three rotating presidents: a Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim), a Bosnian Serb and a Bosnian Croat. The success of ethno-nationalistic political parties is seen as the biggest obstacle in democratization and the Dayton process.[1]

However, one city is often characterized by the relative absence of ethno-nationalism: the city of Tuzla in the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina.[2] Even during the war, there were initiatives by civilians to prevent or combat ethno-nationalism.[2] However, the division in cantons had as a consequence that Tuzla canton was often governed by parties that were elected by the more conservative and ethnically homogeneous countryside. While this may explain why the popular Bosniak party SDA (Party of Democratic Action) has governed Tuzla for many years, the multi-ethnic SDP (Social democratic Party) did get most of their support since 1990 from

Tuzla-city.[3][4] This is not strange, considering that Tuzla has been a multi-ethnic city since before the war, while other cities have become more ethnically monotone. Furthermore, Tuzla today still has an active citizen's movement.[5]

This active citizen's movement was very present when in February 2014 protests against corruption and privatization were initiated in Tuzla-city.[6] These protests, also referred to as the Bosnian Spring, quickly resulted in the resignations of several cantonal governments, after which people organized themselves through plenums, certain citizen's meetings, and put forward a new expert government.[7][8][9] Though while this protest movement started strong, the movement slowly declined after the expert government was appointed and when new elections were held in October 2014, again the ethno-nationalist SDA was elected.[10] This leads us to the question why the protests in February 2014 weren't able to have more influence on the cantonal elections in October. The protests were estimated to have the biggest effect in Tuzla and the city's multi-ethnic history could have provided a positive climate for political change.[4]

To answer this question, the protest movement will be analysed through three phases, each describing a certain changing point for the movement. The first phase describes the start of the protests and the resignation of the cantonal government in Tuzla. The second phase involves the creation of plenums. The third and final phase revolves around the appointment of the expert government and the elections in October 2014. Within these phases, three concepts were used to analyse the mobilization within the movement: leadership, collective identity and repression. It has been argued that leaders play crucial roles in the mobilization of social movements. They can stimulate unity and resist repression by enemies.[10] The second concept is chosen because a strong collective identity can stimulate commitment.[11][12] At last, repression can take on different forms. In this case, repression was present in the form of framing and the targeting of leaders. The term framing refers to a communication technique whereby subjects (people, organizations, events or otherwise) are being described in such a way that it links those subjects (implicitly) to certain values or characteristics. The goal is to let the audience make certain associations with the described and form an opinion based on these associations.

These concepts will be analyzed through secondary sources related to the protests, interviews and statements from relevant actors.

PHASE ONE: ERUPTING PROTESTS

The first phase surrounds the events from February 5th, when the protests started, until February 7th when the cantonal government resigned and the protests calmed down.

The protests were initiated by some of the (former) employees of the factories named Dita and Polihem.[13] These factories were among the many companies in Tuzla that were privatised after the war and who's bankruptcy

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resulted in unemployment. The (former) employees had been protesting for some time but didn't seem to have the capacity to mobilize larger groups.[14] The privatization measure is often described as having failed and being one of the factors that stimulated the large unemployment rate in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which is almost 30% in total and more than 60% among youth.[15] Because this matter of unemployment is an issue that is felt within all groups in Bosnian society, it provided a strong base for what would later bring thousands of people to the streets of Tuzla.[16]

The mobilization stage of social movement is often regarded as one of the moments where leaders play a crucial role.[12] Bosnian academic Asim Mujkic describes the protest movement as one which is actually characterized by its lack of official leadership.[17] While the movement indeed did not put forward one official leader, some aspects of the leadership function were fulfilled within the movement. The (former) employees of the closed factories in Tuzla fulfilled for example an initiating and symbolic role. Then several local organizations got involved by facilitating mobilization within their own networks. This mobilization of existing networks is one of the three necessary conditions to successfully mobilize social movements.[12] Furthermore, two conditions are deemed crucial: (1) historical change or events to create political opportunities and (2) the development of cognitive liberation among the aggrieved population, which moves people from apathy into action.[12] In the case of Tuzla the bankruptcy of the factories served as the historical change or event. The 'cognitive liberation' clearly seemed to be present when reading statements from the individuals involved.[18]

This idea of cognitive liberation also coincides with the narrative of Tuzla's active civil movement throughout history. So while we established that there was no leader to cultivate support and loyalty, the movement did establish a certain collective identity. According to Mujkic this was the evidence of a new division, which shifted from a division between ethnicities to a division between the agents and objects of ethno-political entrepreneurship.[19][17] This new 'class' was, according to Mujkic, characterized by a shared discontent about the political and economic situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Mujkic states that this lack of leadership was part of their tactic to distance themselves from the ruling political discourse, in which leadership is often ethnicized.[17]

Mujkic's theory is not completely irrelevant, when looked at repression tactics of the political elite in Tuzla. Collective identities often provoke resistance and the protest movement in Tuzla was no exception.[13] Most nationalist parties framed the protests in such a way that it seemed like their supporters were targeted. The SDA for example framed the protests as 'anti-bosniak'. [20] The local authorities furthermore described the protestors as terrorists.[21] While this ethnicized rhetoric is not unusual in Bosnia, some say it was intensified because of the upcoming elections.[22]

The protests, however, quickly turned violent, which only played into the frame constructed by politicians and authorities.[23] By naming the protesters 'terrorists' they delegitimized the protest movement and legitimized repression.[24] According to an annual report from Human Rights Watch, the police in Tuzla used disproportionate violence against the protesters.[25] The authorities also targeted people who helped organize the protests, which is an often used tactic in counterinsurgency.[26][27][14] However, the targeting of prominent individuals within the

protest movement only seemed to strengthen the support for the movement and its collective identity.[12][28][29]

From this chapter, it can be concluded that while the protests were initiated by a select group of people, it was suddenly picked up by several networks and initiators and from thereon grew bigger very quickly. Mobilization therefore mainly went through existing networks and structures. The narrative of solidarity was very present and the protest movement was heterogenic in terms of socio-economic background and ethnicity. Through this narrative of solidarity a certain collective identity was formed. This was strengthened by the short term success of the protests – the resignation of the local government – which gave the movement a sense of power. Furthermore, the lack of official leadership placed the movement outside of the political spectrum which prevented corruption by political repressors. The authorities and political parties did try to delegitimize the movement through means of framing but this only strengthened the collective identity and, according to Mujkic, stimulated a new division between civilians and elite.

PHASE TWO: FORMING PLENUMS

The second phase of the protest movement starts February 9th when the first plenum was organized and ends on the 26th of March when the expert government was appointed.[30]

The plenums in Tuzla were organized by some scholars from the Philosophy Faculty from Tuzla University and were used to formulate more concrete goals now that the cantonal government had resigned. A plenum can be described as a people's assembly and can be seen as a form of direct democracy in which everyone can make proposals and vote on specific issues.[31] The demands and proposals that followed from each plenum were sent to the cantonal parliament but were not always implemented.[30] Nevertheless, the plenums did prove to be popular. Approximately 700 people attended the meetings, not including around 2400 people that followed the debates online.[32] The plenums successfully organized participation and mobilization and functioned as a legitimate communication outlet of the protest movement.

The idea of a leaderless movement was even more emphasized in this second phase of the movement. To prevent any hierarchy within the plenums, there was a new moderator chosen for each meeting.[33] By not putting forward any representatives, the movement prevented any collaboration with the government and thus 'any possibility of appropriation by the corrupted regime'. [17] However, the initial organizers of the plenums were often on the forefront in the media. It is clear that in this phase the initiators were actually more distinct even if they did not want to be seen as leaders themselves.[30]

The creation of the plenums further developed the frame of self-determination. Mujkic describes this process as citizens becoming aware again of their power and the possibilities to articulate demands and interests.[34] A clear distrust of the traditional political structure was expressed. Furthermore, the way the plenums were set up also gave the movement more legitimacy, which made it harder for governmental actors to delegitimize and prosecute them.

The three conditions for mobilization that were described in the first phase were also met in the second phase. The resignation of the cantonal government served as historical change or momentum while the existing networks from the first phase were still present. Furthermore, the strengthened idea of self-determination only stimulated the cognitive liberation.

This second phase thus revolves around the transformation of the movement from chaotic protests to an organized and democratic structure. The plenums stimulated a certain legitimacy which made repression less valid. Also, the collective identity of the movement was strengthened by its sense of self-determination. The movement still stayed away from the traditional political structures. Though while the movement didn't put forward any official leader, the initiators of the plenums could be seen as the informal leaders of the group. The election of the expert government changes this, however, and will be discussed in phase three.

PHASE THREE: EXPERTS AND ELECTIONS

The expert government was elected March 26th. All candidates were expected to distance themselves from any political affiliation and abstain from participating in the upcoming elections. Bahrija Umihanic, professor at Tuzla University and former SDA member, was chosen as the expert premier of Tuzla canton.[3] However, from the moment of appointment, the attendance at the plenums slowly started to decline.

In May 2014 this decline was shortly interrupted when there were massive floods in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia, which affected almost one third of Bosnia-Herzegovina, killed 25 people and dislocated around 90.000.[6][35] This disaster, however, prompted new solidarity and participation within the protest movement, for which the plenum provided a base.[26] Just like events in earlier phases, this disaster served as the historical change to stimulate mobilization. The perceived apathy of the Bosnian government only strengthened their idea of self-determination in this case.

However, after the floods participation within the protest movement continued to decline. This was probably also explained by the way the plenums were set up. It cost people a lot of time and energy to keep attending every meeting. Furthermore, the expert government lost support because it 'hadn't done enough' according to some.[36] Besides, the movement didn't have any strategy for the upcoming elections.[30]

Appointing the expert government undermined the political structure of the plenums. The changing of political structures can actually affect the resonance of certain frames.[37] In this case, that meant that the collective identity, which can also be seen as (part of) a certain collective action frame, that was constructed in the beginning of the plenums was undermined when the expert government was appointed. People accepted the leadership of Umihanic and the plenums became irrelevant. This weakened the frame of self-determination and direct democracy and explains the decline in participation.

As discussed, the movement is defined by a distrust against political institutions that are dominated by ethno-nationalism.[17] This distrust is also illustrated by the low turnout at the elections in 2014, namely 54,14%.[38] Furthermore, the media had been under influence of political parties, which could have had a compromising effect on the elections.[39]

Though while politicians continuously influenced the media, there was no sign of significant repression during this phase. This can perhaps be explained by the decline in participation within the protest movement. As explained in phase one, a very present collective identity can provoke resistance and repression.[13] In this phase, however, this identity had lost its resonance and thus provoked less resistance.

In the end, the outcome of the elections didn't differ much from earlier years. The SDA won on both the cantonal level in Tuzla and on the national and Federation level. The multi-ethnic SDP turned out to be the biggest loser in 2014, with its amount of votes more than halved compared to 2010.[10] While the economic and political problems can not only be attributed to the SDP, it were the officials from the SDP that had to resign in several cantons after the protests.

To conclude, this last phase reveals the decline of the protest movement. The decline in participation had several causes. Self-determination was an important part of the collective identity of the movement but was undermined when power was handed over to the expert government. Furthermore, the expert government was perceived as inadequate, which prompted dissatisfaction. However, by the time the elections arrived, the movement had no strategy or momentum to remobilize or otherwise intervene.

CONCLUSION

At the start of this paper a main problem was introduced. Why didn't the protests in February 2014 have more influence on the outcome of the cantonal elections in Tuzla, October 2014? To answer this, three phases within the lifespan of the protest movement were identified and this led to a twofold answer.

First of all, the collective identity that was formed in the first two phases were defined by a lack of official leadership and self-determination. These characteristics were not coincidental, rather, they were crucial to the success of the movement in the first two phases of protests and plenums. However, when the expert government was elected, both the frame of leadership and self-determination were undermined. Secondly, the movement tried to distance itself from the traditional political institutions but also didn't form a strategy for the upcoming elections. This resulted in the inability to remobilize or intervene at the time of the elections. In the answers of our main question it became clear that the concepts of collective identity, leadership and repression tended to interact with each other and affect short term mobilization and long term participation.

The Dayton peace accords institutionalized and legitimized the ethnic division in both politics and society. While international organizations keep investing in democratization and reconciliation efforts, Dayton often seems an insurmountable obstacle. The goal of this paper was not to undermine this issue but rather to show that there is more to be considered when analysing democratization efforts or reform. In this case study, one of the biggest obstacles turned out to be the collective identity and strategy of the protest movement itself. This teaches us not to get stuck on the Dayton dilemma but to look further into internal and external factors, as has been done in this paper.

ROLE OF THE STUDENT

Lisanne Veldt was an undergraduate student working under the support and supervision of dr. Marloes Beers. Veldt's interest in Bosnia-Herzegovina was sparked by a fieldtrip to the country in April 2015 when the aftermath of the floods in May 2014 were still visible. In October 2015 Veldt returned to the country for field research and the conversations she had with people during both of these trips inspired her to look further into the protests in 2014. This is a short version of her bachelor thesis which was written and researched solely by Lisanne Veldt.

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