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Bosnia's civil disorder is a consequence of the stranglehold 'networked' elites continue to have over the country

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*Riots and demonstrations have spread across Bosnia and Herzegovina since 4 February, with many protesters calling for the resignation of the country's government. **Denisa Kostovicova** writes on the reasons behind the civil disorder, including the delicate ethnic balance between Bosnian Serbs, Bosnian Croats, and Bosnian Muslims. She argues that the primary cause of the riots is widespread corruption, which privileges networks of elites while disenfranchising the majority of Bosnia's citizens.*

Violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina has again made headlines nearly twenty years after the bloody war that saw the worst atrocities on European soil since the Second World War. Government buildings burned, while protesters clashed with police. Unrest spread from cities to towns as crowds chanted 'Thieves! Thieves!' and demanded the resignation of their political leaders.

Missing the cause

Analysts have explained the public revolt as the result of Bosnia's dire economic situation, rampant unemployment and systemic corruption. These depictions of what actually propelled the people to take to the streets miss a subtle but important nuance. It was captured succinctly in the words of one demonstrator: 'All of them are networked.'

Economic inefficiency, abuse of public office and lack of jobs are all symptoms of a weak state built through networks that connect political, economic and ethnic elites. In my collaborative work with Dr Vesna Bojicic-Dzellilovic, we explored how networks forged in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina adapted themselves in the post-war period. They have penetrated the state, turning the government itself into a façade. What now appears as a dysfunctional state is in actual fact a very functional system that distributes the privileges, but only to the networked.

Local politicians responded instantly by blaming the 'hooligans'. But the geography of the destruction, including the number of government buildings targeted alongside offices of Bosnian Croat and Bosnian Muslim parties in the southern town of Mostar, is more than a signature of wanton violence. Rather than symbols of public service, administrative buildings are the embodiment of the misuse of public office and instruments of personal gain at the expense of the public good.

Their destruction was deplored by many peaceful protesters. Nonetheless, smouldering ruins have served as a powerful message from disempowered and humiliated ordinary men and women who have decided to say that 'enough is enough'.

The ethnic dimension

Policy makers in Bosnia and in Western capitals have no doubt been relieved to see that the protests have not turned into interethnic violence. Many analysts have stressed the 'anational' character of the social and economic discontent. Yet, to write off the ethnic dimension of protests is deeply misleading. Above all, aside from token gestures, a lack of solidarity with protesters across ethnic divides is yet another sign of deep divisions in Bosnia's state and society. The puzzling question is why the protests seem to be predominantly a Bosniak (i.e. the Bosnian Muslim) affair given that none of the three ethnic groups in Bosnia (Bosnian Serbs, Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Muslims) has been spared from the predatory practices of its own

elites.

The answer in part stems from Bosnia's unworkable constitutional arrangement. The 1995 Dayton peace settlement divided Bosnia and Herzegovina into two entities: Republika Srpska, comprising the Bosnian Serbs, and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, shared by Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats. The Federation itself was further divided into ten cantons, resulting in layer upon layer of governing structures, which has not only impeded governance, but also increased the opportunity for predation.

Another part of the answer is in the degree of support from ethnic patrons beyond Bosnia's borders. Croatia's Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic rushed to visit the Bosnian Croat leadership in Mostar, in what many would like to see as the capital of a separate Bosnian Croat entity. His choice of Mostar underwrites his country's foremost loyalty with Bosnian Croats rather than with Bosnia and Herzegovina as a state. Similarly, Serbia's Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic hastily summoned Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik, a supporter of Republika Srpska secessionism, to Belgrade. For Dodik, the protests are 'proof that Bosnia-Herzegovina cannot survive internal challenges'.

This leaves Bosnian Muslims as the only believers that the solution for their woes lies exclusively within the Bosnian state. Reactions from neighbouring Croatia and Serbia may be couched in terms of special relations sanctioned under the Dayton agreement. Nonetheless, they remain a telling sign of centrifugal forces challenging Bosnia's integrity. Socioeconomic protests are embedded in ethnic fault-lines both inside Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the region.

Not quite the 'Bosnian Spring'

The outpouring of rage at the political class has been dubbed the 'Bosnian Spring'. Events on-going in Bosnia share many features with the protests that swept North Africa and the Middle East. The involvement of youth, the role of social media, the leaderless character of protests and the rejection of the political system bring the Arab Spring to mind. But while their Arab counterparts demanded democracy, Bosnia's predicament is precisely the result of democratisation and liberalisation.

Since 1995, the international community has firmly held Bosnia's hand through post-conflict transition premised on democratic and economic reforms. However, in combination with the complex political, economic and ethnic legacy of the conflict, the liberal prescriptions have only entrenched ethnic democracy and distorted marketisation. Hence, no democratic rhetoric will galvanise Bosnia's protesters, disenchanted with the democratic experiment. Might the dream of Europe work? What is increasingly emerging is Bosnia's exceptionalism in its resistance to the transformative power of Europe.

Bosnia's position looks even starker in comparison with the EU's recent success in the region. The EU has achieved a breakthrough in the EU-sponsored Kosovo dialogue in what seemed to be intractable conflict between Serbs and Albanians. The joint effect of Europe's pull and the territories' motivation to join the EU delivered the result. Judging by the standstill in Bosnia-Herzegovina's association process with the EU, the country's elites seem impervious to the lure of a European future.

Responding to the riots, the High Representative in Bosnia-Herzegovina Valentin Incko, who represents the international community actors which have practically run Bosnia and Herzegovina since 1995, said the EU may deploy troops should the violence escalate. This is a simple answer, but it does little to address the frustration of ordinary Bosnians about putting food on the table, getting a job on merit or seeing the law work for all rather than just for the networked. The solution may not be simple, but one thing is clear. It certainly does not lie with the country's elites.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics

and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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About the author



Denisa Kostovicova – *London School of Economics and Political Science*

Denisa Kostovicova is Associate Professor in Global Politics in the Department of Government and a Research Fellow at the Civil Society and Human Security Research Unit in the Department of International Development at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her research interests include nationalism and democratisation in the global age, post-conflict reconstruction and security, civil society and human security, war crimes and transitional justice and European integration of Western Balkans.

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One Response to *Bosnia's civil disorder is a consequence of the stranglehold 'networked' elites continue to have over the country*



Rik says:

February 11, 2014 at 9:13 am

Simply not a viable country, face it.

Elites running the show this way is perfectly normal for a country in Bosnia's state of development. And so are large not in power groups not interested in working things out together but rather running their own show. The latter makes it simply impossible to create a national identity. Add a dislike between the groups and a history of violence and basically a will to use it again when deemed necessary, long memories and you get where you are now, something that is not going to work.

Same as in Northern Kosovo only there will a new split in whatever form be much easier.

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