

Babies, Parks, and Citizen Dissatisfaction Social Protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Turkey and their Long-term Effects

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Abstract

2013 was a year of social unrest in the regions of the Mediterranean and southeastern Europe. From Bulgaria to Slovenia, and from Egypt to Syria, there were new waves of citizen unrest, violent clashes, and civil-war-like escalations. This paper looks at the social protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Turkey. The protests in the two countries started because of concrete examples of public mismanagement: In the case of Bosnia because of the failure to pass a new law on identity numbers, which resulted in the inability of a baby to receive medical support abroad, and in the case of Turkey because of the decision to replace Gezi Park with a new shopping centre in Istanbul. However, both protests are also symbolic of deeper sentiments of citizen dissatisfaction. What started out as protests to save a park in Turkey, and change the law on identity numbers in Bosnia, became a wider movement to demand substantial reforms and changes to the current style of politics in both countries. This paper will look at the long-term effects of these protests. While in the short-term they have resulted in relatively few changes, it will be demonstrated that there might be long-term effects that will significantly impact the social contract in Bosnia and Turkey.

Keywords: Bosnia, Turkey, citizen dissatisfaction, social protest

1. Introduction

The summer of 2013 saw civil unrest in most countries of southeastern Europe. From Slovenia to Greece, from Croatia to Bulgaria, a pattern of protest emerged in which citizens publically demonstrated against their governments, economic mismanagement, and wider societal inequality. Protests also took place in Bosnia and Herzegovina¹ and Turkey. In both countries, the underlying issue is discontent with the system, and the struggle for basic public and common goods for all is the transparent progressive content of the protests. While various catalysts motivated people from different backgrounds to take to the streets against their government, the consequences levied by security forces saw those citizens joining forces to protest government actions. The long-term effects of these movements are yet to be determined, but whether the protests are ongoing, as in Turkey, or have faded (with questionable effect), as in Bosnia, a legacy will undoubtedly remain that solidarity, passion, and a common cause can create a movement willing to challenge existing political systems.

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¹ Henceforth, the short form 'Bosnia' will be used to indicate the country's full name.

It is these long-term consequences that we are interested in and will discuss in this paper. In doing so, we first outline the history of the recent protests and their original motivation and then explore the wider background of the social unrest in these countries. In the last section, we discuss the long-term effects on the nations' political systems.

2. The Start of Protests in Bosnia and Turkey

In Turkey, protests began in May 2013 out of peaceful demonstrations against a government-backed plan to demolish Gezi Park (a section of Taksim Square in central Istanbul) to build a shopping mall. At the time of this writing, there have been six deaths attributed to the protests, and the Turkish Medical Association has reported that more than 8,000 people have been injured at demonstrations, while thousands of civilians, lawyers, and journalists have been imprisoned.² The strong police crackdown on those demonstrations spawned widespread anger in Turkey, with hundreds of thousands of people taking to the streets on May 31. Although triggered by the Gezi Park incidents, the unrest developed into a broader protest against Prime Minister Erdoğan's autocratic authoritarianism and didactic conservatism. Turkey's constitution states that it is a secular democratic country, but Erdoğan's critics warn of his lack of concern over democracy in favour of an Islamist agenda, moving Turkey away from the West and closer to the Middle East.

Over time, the nature of the protests in Turkey has changed, with mass demonstrations being supplemented by acts of public defiance and civil disobedience. The most recent protests began following the death of Ahmet Atakan, a 22-year-old man who died at a rally opposing the construction of a road that would cause environmental damage to the grounds of Middle Eastern Technical University in Ankara.³ The official statement claims that Atakan fell from a building, but opposition sources say he died when he was struck by a police gas canister. This event sparked a fresh wave of protests nationally, lasting for days and resulting in further clashes with security forces.

In Bosnia, citizens from both entities⁴ came together to demonstrate their discontent with the political system. The country's baby revolution (*Bebolucija*) is so named because the consequence of the latest political stalemate affects babies born after February 12, 2013. These children are not being allocated their official identity number (known by its acronym, JMBG), without which, among other things, they are unable to obtain a passport.⁵ Bosnian Serb representatives demanded that the new ID numbers reflect the country's two entities: the Bosniak-Croat Federation and the Serb Republika Srpska. Bosniak and Croat representatives, however, did not agree, and both sides refused to compromise. Protests began on June 5, 2013, when the plight of a three-month-old girl who was restricted from travelling to Germany for medical treatment spread on social media.

Reacting to the story of baby Belmina, a group of citizens gathered in front of the parliament building to protest. They decided not to move until politicians found a solution

² "Report on the Assessment of Health Problems in Persons Exposed to Chemical Riot Control Agents," Turkish Medical Association (TTB), 2013, www.ttb.org.tr/kutuphane/kimyasalgosteri_en.pdf.

³ "Anti-Government Protester dies in Turkey," *AP News*, September 10 2013, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/anti-government-protester-dies-turkey>.

⁴ Bosnia is a federal country consisting of two entities (The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska (RS)) and the District of Brčko. On Bosnian federalism see: S. Keil, *Multinational Federalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2013).

⁵ "Bosnia Protests over legal void over newborn documents," *Global Post*, June 10 2013, <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/afp/130610/bosnia-protests-legal-void-over-newborn-documents>.

to the problem. Within days, 3,000 protesters had formed a human chain around Parliament, refusing to allow parliamentarians, politicians, or foreign dignitaries from leaving until a new law had been adopted, or until, as they said, politicians finally did the job they were paid to do.⁶ The protests intensified upon the news of the death of a baby who needed treatment in Serbia but was unable to cross the border to receive it.⁷ Again, it took only days for citizens to react, and protests erupted in all major cities in Bosnia. Students protested in Sarajevo and in the Republika Srpska's administrative centre (Banja Luka) against an inefficient university system and the difficult conditions of student life. Citizens also gathered in Banja Luka in support of a man who had been evicted from his property and beaten by police in an incident related to plans to destroy a public park to build a shopping mall – much like the Gezi Park situation in Turkey.

The reaction to the failure to resolve the JMBG issue has been said to reflect the ongoing frustrations of Bosnian citizens with the political elites. The lack of cooperation in parliament leads to political deadlock around most legislative issues; the Bosnian political and administrative system costs the country around two-thirds of its budget and consistently fails to deliver results.⁸ To replace the ethnic divisions set out in the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement (which ended nearly four years of war in the country) opposition parties have called for a new constitution that would reflect the rights of all citizens as equals.

The protests in Turkey and Bosnia developed through spontaneous action, without being led by one main group or organiser. Social media played a vital role in the organisation of these protests, and the coordination of the protestors. Different opposition parties and groups tried to utilize the protests to push their own agenda, but failed to do so effectively in both countries.

3. The Wider Picture of Social Unrest in Bosnia and Turkey

In Turkey, the 2013 protests have been loosely coordinated through Twitter hashtags and Facebook pages, and there has been no evidence that the movement has resulted in an increase in electoral support for certain opposition parties, who tried to use the protests for their own political agendas. Indeed, it appears that the lack of faith in any political party is one of the main reasons protesters took to the streets in the first place, along with general dissatisfaction within some elements of Turkish society (such as the secular elite who have become more and more estranged from the AKP government (*Adalet ve Kalınma Partisi*, or Justice and Development Party; JDP) and Prime Minister Erdoğan's increasingly arbitrary and autocratic style. This strong public opposition to the government has been provoked by the following factors: Turkey's involvement in the Syrian conflict – which has led to terrorist attacks in Turkey; legislative attempts to restrict freedom of behaviour – such as recent restrictions on the sale of alcohol; and liberal economic and investment policies that ignore social and environmental matters – despite a strong tradition in Turkey of leftist and 'green' movements.

⁶ Tamara Gocmanac, "Thousands are Joining Bosnia's BabyLution," *Global Voice*, June 20, 2013, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2013/06/20/babylution/>.

⁷ E. Dedovic, "Bosnia's baby revolution: is the protest movement coming of age?" *Open Democracy*, June 26, 2013, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/edin-dedovic/bosnia%E2%80%99s-baby-revolution-is-protest-movement-coming-of-age>.

⁸ On Bosnia's over-federalized and over-institutionalized system and the political consequences, see: B. Bahtic-Kunrath, "Of Veto Players and Entity-Voting: Institutional Gridlock in the Bosnian Reform Process," *Nationalities Papers* 39, no.6 (November 2011): 899-923.

In Bosnia, the demonstrations also evolved through citizen movements, and were not organised by a political party. At the beginning of the protests in June 2013, there was real potential for a social movement to emerge that could have counterbalanced the ethnic divides preserved by the institutions adopted in the Dayton Peace Agreement. Most protesters were Bosniak residents of Sarajevo, but demonstrators were not using national slogans, and groups from the Republika Srpska and Zagreb also joined the protest in Sarajevo. The possible threat to the country's nationalist parties saw the political elites adopt the familiar 'divide-and-rule' tactic – Croat and Serb MPs attempted to portray the protests as hostile actions waged by Bosniaks against their fellow citizens (Serbs and Croats), which proves the need to preserve the autonomy of the constituent peoples in the country's political system. Serbian politicians declared that the protests were "anti-Serb" in nature and manipulated by Bosniak parties, and the president of that entity talked about "the biggest hostage crisis" while the Bosniak member of the tripartite presidency called upon protesters to show their discontent at the next elections.⁹ While there was a momentum to create a stronger social movement, this has now faded, and is unlikely to happen. In November 2013 the Bosnian Parliament adopted a new law on identity numbers, which will not only contribute to further ethnic divisions, but also ignored the demands of the protesters for identity numbers that are neutral and do not identify a person's place of birth or ethnicity.¹⁰

The nationalist rhetoric used by politicians to retain support was being openly questioned and opposed by citizens willing to gather across divisions and protest against the system as a whole. The *Bebolucija* movement suffered because of its determination to remain independent from any party, according to Dennis Gratz (president of the multi-ethnic party Naša Stranka), who believes the protesters were playing a "dangerous game" by compounding all parties into one target, leaving their group detached, isolated, and powerless.¹¹ However, by preventing citizens from gaining access to the basic citizenship right of a registration number, ethno-nationalists provoked an unexpected reaction: they provided citizens with a common enemy by giving political meaning to what they strived to destroy – namely the common citizenship of all Bosnians and Herzegovinians. The chances of success for this civic movement to influence the political system, however, was always questioned by those who see the institutional system designed by the Dayton Agreement as effectively paralysing political life on ethnic grounds.

The international community, which was instrumental in designing the Dayton Agreement, also played an important role in the 2013 protests. Two days after the protest began, High Representative (HR) Valentin Inzko demanded that protesters remove the blockade on the parliament building, promising that the issue would be discussed at an urgently convened meeting of the Peace Implementation Council (PIC), an international body that oversees the country's peace process.¹² Meanwhile, concerns about the current structure in Bosnia have been raised in the European Union (EU). The inefficient political system and resulting

⁹ Igor Štiks, "We are all in this together: A Civic Awakening in Bosnia Herzegovina," *Open Democracy*, June 12, 2013, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/igor-%C5%A0tiksi/%E2%80%98we-are-all-in-this-together%E2%80%99-civic-awakening-in-bosnia-herzegovina>.

¹⁰ M. Zuvella, "Bosnia Passes ID Law, Ending Row that Cost a Baby's Life," *Reuters*, November 5, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/11/05/us-bosnia-identity-idUSBRE9A40SG20131105>.

¹¹ Rodolfo Toè, "Bebolucija: Spring Delayed," *Open Democracy*, July 16, 2013, <http://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Regions-and-countries/Bosnia-and-Herzegovina/Bebolucija-spring-delayed-138840#.UeecAMRivTE.twitter>.

¹² The High Representative is the highest civilian authority in Bosnia. The position is legitimized by the Dayton Peace Accords and has received extensive imposition and removal powers by the PIC. The PIC and the HR also regularly report to the UN.

administrative inertia, especially at the central level, has given rise to public dissatisfaction and widespread criticism. The division of the country based on ethnic criteria affects the voting system and discriminates against citizens of other ethnic backgrounds. Due to this, EU Commissioner for Enlargement Stefan Füle stated that the EU will only recognise the results of the parliamentary elections scheduled for Spring 2014 on the condition that the constitution be amended to address a vital judgement of the European Court of Human Rights in 2009.¹³

The international community has not been impressed with Erdoğan's reaction towards Turkey's protesters: the United Nations (UN), the United States (US), and other Western partners have voiced concern about the heavy-handed police action. A report published by Amnesty International accused Turkish authorities of committing human rights abuses "on a massive scale" while trying to quell the uprisings.¹⁴ The report stated that Turkish riot squads fired enormous amounts of tear gas, often at close range in confined spaces, and used other types of disproportionate force in their tactics to crush protests in Istanbul, Ankara, and other cities. The rights group cited the evidence compiled by the Turkish Medical Association regarding the more than 8,000 injuries, attributed to tear gas, rubber bullets, water cannons, beatings, and live ammunition. Erdoğan's government defended what it called the right of police to use tear gas and water cannons against protests by groups that undermine public order.¹⁵

Although Erdoğan is unlikely to sever Turkey's ties with its traditional allies in Europe or with the US, those relationships are likely to come under considerable strain. An increase in the already-rocky relations between Turkey and the EU could prove particularly problematic at a time when the negotiating process for Turkish accession has been postponed until the progress report on Turkey's EU reform credentials has been assessed. This situation could also affect Turkish-US relations regarding Syria, where NATO-member Turkey is a key regional ally for the US and has, thus far, backed it in opposing President Bashar al-Assad.

4. The Long-Term Effects of the Protests

It has become clear in recent weeks that the protests in Bosnia and Turkey have had very little short-term effect on politics in those countries. While a new law on ID numbers was passed in Bosnia, it did not take into account any of the protesters' concerns. In Turkey, the destruction of Gezi Park has begun and Prime Minister Erdoğan remains in power. Neither the short-term demands for a new, ethnically-neutral law on ID numbers in Bosnia nor the protection of Gezi Park in Istanbul has been successfully achieved, and the long-term issues of a more authoritarian conservative Erdoğan and a divided political system in Bosnia have also not been addressed.

Yet these protests, and those in neighbouring nations, have demonstrated that there is general dissatisfaction with the current state of democracy and economic organisation in these countries. The well-known Slovene Philosopher Slavoj Žižek and others have pointed to a global crisis characterised by a general apathy towards some of the side effects of free-market

¹³ D. Sito-Sucic, "Bosnia Risks Seeing EU Path "Frozen" Without Further Reform," *Reuters*, April 11, 2013, available at: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2013/04/11/us-bosnia-eu-idUSBRE93A0L220130411>.

¹⁴ Turkey: Gezi Park protests: Brutal denial of the right to peaceful assembly in Turkey," Amnesty International, October 2013, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR44/022/2013/en>.

¹⁵ R. Gladstone, "Rights Group Accuses Turkish Police of Excessive Force against Protesters," *The New York Times*, June 12, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/13/world/europe/rights-groups-accuse-turkish-police-of-excessive-force-against-protesters.html?_r=0.

capitalism.¹⁶ In this context, it is important to note that the protests in Bosnia and Turkey crossed important societal divides. While the first demonstrators in Bosnia were Bosniaks in Sarajevo, they were soon joined by Croats and Serbs from other parts of the country. In Turkey, young and leftist protesters first went to the streets to voice their opposition to the destruction of Gezi Park. They were soon joined by older protestors from all social classes, and also by those that would otherwise support the ruling AKP. These two issues – a baby and a park – were able to bridge important divides that have been key markers of these respective societies in the last decades. They managed to unite people from different class, political, and geographical backgrounds, and provide a platform on which to discuss not only the questions of ID cards and Istanbul’s green space, but also the political systems in Bosnia and Turkey. Moreover, the protests were able to cross party lines, and while opposition parties tried to participate and instrumentalise the protests in both countries, they largely failed to do so because the protestors refused to join them. While this is a remarkable development in political systems where parties dominate parliamentary representation and government selection, in the long term it remains to be seen whether the protesters’ demands will be addressed and their voiced concerns will find political representation in systems based on parties and their representatives.

In Turkey, Prime Minister Erdoğan’s response to the protests may have damaged his long-term plans. His support may have been affected by his comments that branded the hundreds of thousands who took to the streets in cities across the country as an “extremist fringe” and “a bunch of looters.”¹⁷ In stark contrast, Turkish President Abdullah Gül called for a calm reaction by government and defended protesters’ rights to hold peaceful demonstrations. Erdoğan has been seeking to push through controversial constitutional reforms that would increase the power of the presidency, a position he is seeking in the 2014 election, and which, after winning three landslide elections as prime minister, he had seemed well placed to win. However, Erdoğan’s harsh comments, the heavy response of Turkish security forces to the demonstrators, and Erdoğan’s decision to leave the country for foreign visits during the unrest, thus absolving himself of responsibility for resolving it, has seen Gül’s popularity rise. Gül will be running for president again in 2014, and what will happen in that election is anyone’s guess; even the possibility of an AKP split cannot be excluded.

Erdoğan’s recent announcement in Istanbul of his much-anticipated “democratization package” was met with a cool reception domestically and at the EU level.¹⁸ Many minority groups feel continued frustration at the lack of equal rights and representation, and Amnesty International says the package fails to address the authorities’ violations during the 2013 protests and lacks any assurances that similar incidents will not occur in the future. Although many EU leaders have been critical of the overuse of force by police against protesters, the most recent progress report of the European Commission views the democratization package and some of the reforms Turkey implemented by after the height of the protests in June 2013 as positive signs of internal democratization.¹⁹ The EU has agreed to open another chapter

¹⁶ S. Žižek, “Trouble in Paradise,” *London Review of Books* 35, no.14 (July 2013): 11-12.

¹⁷ R. Sherlock, “Turkey: Erdogan brands protesters ‘extremists’ and ‘looters,’” *The Telegraph*, June 3, 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/turkey/10096762/Turkey-Erdogan-brands-protesters-extremists-and-looters.html>.

¹⁸ “Erdoğan’s Democracy Package gets cool reception,” *Al Monitor*, September 30, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/09/Erdoğan-democracy-package-reception-cool.html#>

¹⁹ *Turkey 2013 Progress Report*, European Commission, Brussels, October 16, 2013, http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2013/package/tr_rapport_2013.pdf.

with Turkey, but the country's prospects are worse than ever. While German and French conservatives have focused on Turkey's Islamic tradition to veto its membership in the EU, they can now also point towards its lack of democratic credentials and a stronger push towards authoritarianism. In fact, it could be argued that the lack of EU engagement in and with Turkey in recent years has been partially to blame for the undoing of some important reforms that were implemented in the early 2000s, when Erdoğan first came to power. Turkish relations with the US are also at issue. While Erdoğan will not risk a break, his re-orientation and authoritarian style has alienated many in Washington. It has become clear that Turkish foreign policy is being reshaped, and the recent low in Turkey-Egypt relations²⁰ is an example of the failure of the country's zero-problems-with-neighbours policy that aimed at establishing Turkey as a regional power.

When, during the height of the protests, Erdoğan organised a counter-protest outside Istanbul in which tens of thousands of AKP and Erdoğan supporters participated, he demonstrated that he is not afraid of further conflict. This evidence has further deepened the divisions between those who support traditional Atatürk-style secularism and those who favour a more-conservative public sphere, where Islam plays a more-prominent role. And while Erdoğan is not trying to turn Turkey into a second Iran, he is attacking some of the fundamental pillars of Turkish society. He does so with the support of a large part of the population, mainly (but not exclusively) from Anatolia, the lower and middle classes, and rural areas. Those who have supported (and profited from) the long tradition of Kemalism, that is, the higher classes, societal elites, the judiciary, and most notably, the army, find themselves in a new position, and it remains to be seen whether Turkish democracy and civil society are strong enough to address these deep cleavages within a democratic framework.

In Bosnia, the domestic political scene remains dominated by ethnically exclusive parties. Their leaders focus more on their own interests than on what is best for the country. Little change can be expected in the 2014 general elections, as a system along ethnic lines favours those who radically promote the benefits of their own group. While the unrest must have scared some of these elites, its quick cool-down after June 2013 will have calmed those who saw their positions in danger. With ongoing discussions on constitutional reform, which allow for a focus on particular interests and ethnic divisions, it is unlikely that any long-term change will emerge out of the summer unrest. Yet these protests were by no means in vain. For the first time, there has been a movement of people crossing ethnic, party, and societal lines, and who voiced their opposition to their current elites and their political practices of vetoes and blockades. Public outrage about a system that favours a small minority and discriminates against the rest has become vocal; people have stopped suffering in silence. Other issues, such as a lack of progress in EU integration, further economic downturn due to Croatia's membership in the EU, or other important unresolved political issues (for example, a return to visas as a result of the incapability of Bosnian elites to establish efficient anti-corruption bodies) may spark further unrest because citizens' general consensus is that the Bosnian system has broken down (more so than in Turkey). People want change, but it remains to be seen how they will next articulate their desire for reform.

The international community, in particular the EU, would do well to support non-governmental organizations and citizen associations in Bosnia in their quest for a more-

²⁰ "Egypt Expels Turkish Ambassador," BBC News, November 23, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-25066115>.

efficient and more-open political system. However, as long as the EU keeps supporting those parties that have been opposed and blamed by the protesters for their lack of decision-making, little can be expected in terms of public support for the EU in Bosnia, and in terms of progress for the country's EU integration, which has substantially slowed down since Bosnia signed a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU in 2008. Bosnia needs a fundamental reform, and one in which citizens play a major role.

From the situations in Bosnia, Turkey, and other countries in recent years, it has become apparent that citizens are willing to take their dissatisfaction to the streets. The political systems of Turkey and Bosnia, although formally democracies, have shown themselves unable to cope with public unrest except by declaring it illegitimate. This situation demonstrates how the elites of these countries have not internalized some of the most important elements of a civic culture and an established democracy; they apparently believe that democracy happens once every few years through the election ballot. Yet citizens and their acceptance of the political system are fundamental in a democratic system. The basic definition of democracy as "rule by the people" remains of key importance. Bosnia, Turkey, and many other countries in the region (including those affected by the 'Arab Spring') demonstrate that when institutional mechanisms to voice citizen dissatisfaction fail (for example, because there are no free and fair elections, or because a government is becoming more authoritarian and less willing to compromise and find consensus), then people will take their dissatisfaction to the streets. In democratic political systems, the right to protest, as well as the right to strike and the right to free expression are fundamental values and often enshrined within wider human rights provisions. Ignoring them can lead to long-term dissatisfaction not just with certain elites or parties, but with complete systems. If there is anything that we can learn from the breakdown of communism in the 1990s and from the Arab Spring, it is that citizen dissatisfaction can lead to massive changes in the long run.²¹ Political elites in Bosnia and Turkey would do well to recognise the value of a dialogue with citizens and the value of addressing their demands. Otherwise, although the unrest may have been quelled for a time, it will likely rise again, and perhaps transform in nature, possibly including more-violent clashes, and more-widespread unrest in both countries in the near future.

²¹ A good example of such reform is the Solidarity movement in Poland, which became a driving force of change in the early 1980s, and persisted for nearly 10 years, until Communism fell and free elections occurred.

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