



Civil society in Bosnia Herzegovina

From the late '80s to nowadays: a historical perspective

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RESUMEN

La evolución de la sociedad civil en Bosnia y Hercegovina ha estado marcada por una serie de factores históricos y políticos. El régimen socialista influyó el modo en que los ciudadanos se organizaron, mientras que la intervención de los donantes y agencias internacionales al final de la guerra conllevó el florecimiento de organizaciones no gubernamentales locales. En el período más reciente, emergieron y se expandieron por el país protestas y prácticas participativas, dejando una huella indeleble en el tejido social y teniendo influencia en las prácticas de las organizaciones formales. Este artículo ofrece una perspectiva de la evolución de la sociedad civil local en el pasado reciente del país, examinando el modo en que se produjo su evolución desde el final del período socialista hasta la actualidad. El artículo comienza explorando las iniciativas de base y las protestas antibelicistas de finales de los ochenta, que constituyeron ejemplos de una sociedad civil "extraoficial" enraizada en la liberalización de un sistema que se encontraba en el umbral del colapso. A continuación, se describe la proliferación de las organizaciones de la sociedad civil tras la guerra, para luego enfocarse en las iniciativas de base de los años 2000, cuyo punto álgido llegó con las protestas de 2013-2014 y el surgimiento de las asambleas participativas conocidas como "plenums".

Palabras clave: Sociedad civil, Países en post-conflicto, movimientos sociales, Iniciativas antibelicistas, organizaciones no gubernamentales.

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RESUM

L'evolució de la societat civil a Bòsnia i Hercegovina ha estat marcada per una sèrie de factors històrics i polítics. El règim socialista va influenciar la manera en què els ciutadans es van organitzar, mentre que la intervenció dels donants i agències internacionals al final de la guerra va comportar la florida de organitzacions no governamentals locals. En el període més recent, van emergir i es van expandir pel país protestes i pràctiques participatives, deixant una empremta indeleble en el teixit social i tenint influència en les pràctiques de les organitzacions formals. Aquest article ofereix una perspectiva de l'evolució de la societat civil local en el passat recent del país, examinant la manera en què es va produir la seva evolució des del final del període socialista fins a l'actualitat. L'article comença explorant les iniciatives de base i les protestes antibel·licistes de finals dels vuitanta, que van constituir exemples d'una societat civil "extraoficial" arrelada en la liberalització d'un sistema que es trobava al llindar del col·lapse. A continuació, es descriu la proliferació de les organitzacions de la societat civil després de la guerra, per després enfocar-se en les iniciatives de base dels anys 2000, el punt àlgid va arribar amb les protestes de 2013-2014 i el sorgiment de les assemblees participatives conegudes com "plènums".

Paraules clau: Societat civil, països en post-conflicte, moviments socials, Iniciatives antibel·licistes, organitzacions no governamentals.

ABSTRACT

A set of historical and political factors has shaped the evolution of civil society in Bosnia Herzegovina over the years. The socialist rule influenced the way in which citizens organized, while in the aftermath of the war the intervention of foreign donors and agencies brought about the prospering of domestic non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In the recent period, protests and participatory practices emerged and spread throughout the country, stamping indelibly its social fabric and influencing the practices of formal organizations. This article provides an overview of the evolution of domestic civil society during the country's recent past, examining how it evolved from the end of the socialist period to nowadays. The article begins by exploring the grassroots initiatives and the anti-war protests of the late 1980s, instances of an "unofficial" civil society stemmed from the liberalization of a socialist system on the brink of collapse. Next, it describes the mushrooming of civil society organizations in the aftermath of the war, before focusing on the grassroots civic initiatives unfolded in the 2000s, peaked with the 2013-14 protests and the surge of participatory assemblies known as "plenums."

Keywords: civil society, post-conflict countries, social movements, anti-war initiatives, non-governmental organizations.

Introduction

A set of historical and political factors has shaped over time the ways in which people organize to pursue shared political objectives in Bosnia Herzegovina. The socialist rule, which lasted for forty-seven years, molded the country's society, politics, economy, and human behaviors. Similarly, the advent of international donors and agencies that brought about the blossoming of domestic non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the aftermath of the war stamped indelibly

the social fabric of the country, influencing civil society practices and discourses. In the recent period, participatory assemblies having a deliberative dimension emerged and spread throughout the country.

How did civil society evolve in Bosnia Herzegovina from the end of the socialist period to nowadays, passing through the dramatic happenings of the 1992-95 war? This article intends to provide an overview of the evolution of domestic civil society from the late '80s to nowadays, under the assumption that instances of collective action are neither independent, nor comprehensible unto themselves, but rather historically and spatially connected with other similar instances of collective action². Therefore, to comprehend contemporary civic initiatives, it is essential to dig in the historical set-up of Bosnia Herzegovina and to explore the events occurred on the country in the last several decades. To that purpose, this article begins by exploring the grassroots initiatives and the anti-war protests of the late 1980s, instances of an “unofficial” civil society stemmed from the liberalization of a socialist system already on the brink of collapse. Next, it describes the mushrooming of civil society organizations in the aftermath of the war. Following, it focuses on the grassroots civic initiatives unfolded in the 2000s, peaked with the 2013-14 protests and the surge of participatory assemblies known as “plenums”. It concludes with a reflection on the development of domestic civil society over these decades.

1. Reformist attempts in the late 1980s

Unlike other countries in the region, prior to its disintegration Yugoslavia did not witness spontaneous mass demonstrations aimed at overthrowing the ruling system. Rather, the first attempts to reform the Yugoslav federation emerged from within the system, aimed at democratizing rather than at the dissolving it.³ These civic-oriented initiatives “developed both inside and outside the existing institutional framework”⁴. After the failure of the pro-Yugoslav projects in 1989, and with the approaching war, in the years 1991-92 these initiatives strove to avert war by means of popular mobilizations.

The boost in civic initiatives can be dated to 1988⁵, after the *Agrokomerc* affair had disclosed to the wider public the deep corruption and the plundering of re-

² Koopmans (2004)

³ Anđelić (2000)

⁴ Sasso (2014): p. 28

⁵ Anđelić (2000 & 2003)

sources of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY) in August 1987⁶. A period of “power vacuum”⁷ followed the scandal, which marked a watershed in the political history of the back then Socialist Republic of Bosnia Herzegovina. As a consequence, the Bosnian Communists experienced a severe crisis of legitimacy, intra-elite resignations, as well as internal replacements⁸. In an attempt to democratize the socialist system from the inside, in 1989 the Association of Yugoslav Democratic Initiative (*Udruženje za jugoslavensku demokratsku inicijativu*, UJDI) was created at the federal level. The association gathered mainly anti-nationalist, progressive and reform-minded intellectuals who advocated for a democratic reform aimed at transforming Yugoslavia into a place of equal citizens and nations, albeit deprived of “the socialist/revolutionary/Titoist core as its *raison d’être*”⁹. At the federal level, further pressures for change derived from the cultural milieu. Small independent organizations and different grassroots groups such as artists, cultural producers, feminists, environmentalists, pacifists, and liberals¹⁰, that in socialist Yugoslavia “enjoyed significant opportunities for creating expression and engagement”¹¹, advocated for more political freedom, equality and tolerance¹².

In the meantime, the country witnessed increasing levels of unemployment which led the workers to mobilize in the late 1980s. They mostly employed strikes as a tool of contention – a form of action that had been considered illegal (Jancar-Webster 1987). As late as in 1988, some 63,000 employees participated in 239 strike actions throughout Bosnia Herzegovina, while already the previous year 9,000 persons were reported to have taken part in rallies with similar purposes¹³. According to the data provided by the Federal Union’s Council, during the first half of 1988 in the whole territory of Yugoslavia the number of strikes had increased of 5,7 per cent compared to the previous year¹⁴. Besides the workers, in September 1987 also the students of Sarajevo took to the streets. Claim-

⁶ Bougarel (1996). At the time, it was revealed that Fikret Abdić, member of the Central Committee of the League of Communists and general manager of *Agrokomerc*, a giant food-processing firm located in the town of Velika Kladuša, that provided jobs for thousands of people, had issued 17,681 promissory notes without coverage to 63 Yugoslav banks between 1984 and 1985: Anđelić 2003: p. 57. Although such a practice was common in all communist systems, this was the first time that somebody dared to go so far

⁷ Anđelić (2003): p. 149

⁸ Sasso (2014): p. 38

⁹ Spaskovska (2012): p. 38

¹⁰ Ramet (1996)

¹¹ Kurtović (2012): p. 200

¹² Ramet (1996)

¹³ Anđelić (2003): p. 50

¹⁴ Ibid: p. 83

ing their right to better food in the university canteens and more relaxed exam rules, but cautious to avoid any ideological involvement, several thousands students marched on the streets of Sarajevo (Anđelić 2003). Later in 1988, they created the first semi-independent student organization, the University Conference of the Alliance of Socialist Youth. To voice their discontent, they published a magazine, called *Valter*¹⁵. Together with another magazine founded by a youth organization¹⁶, *Naši Dani* (Our days), *Valter* voiced the growing dissatisfaction towards the ruling structure and contributed to enrich the debate over freedom and human rights. In that period, the youth press in Bosnia Herzegovina (BiH) “acted both as a vehicle of mobilization for youth social movements, and as a practice of pluralist attitude and professional accuracy”¹⁷. Nevertheless, the transformative potential of the youth was limited by a “still firm grasp of the Communist structures, which employed either soft co-optation or hard control of student activists”¹⁸.

Besides the workers and the youth, other social groups mobilized in pre-war Bosnia Herzegovina, tackling non-political issues. Organizations advocating for the respect of human rights were created between 1988 and 1989, like the Yugoslav Forum for human rights protection, the above-mentioned UJDI, whose branch in Bosnia gained “the most widespread support and largest membership body” (ibid., 53), and the Green Movement (*Pokret Zelenih*). Initiated by professors and students of the Law Faculty of the capital, the latter became “the first legal, non-Communist, organized movement” (Anđelić 2003, 89)¹⁹. However, the project “did not gain enough visibility in the public sphere, nor envisaged concrete proposals for political reforms.”²⁰ In January 1989, enraged citizens took to

¹⁵ Anđelić (2003): p. 83

¹⁶ *Naši Dani* was in fact an organ of the Alliance of the Socialist Youth of BiH (*Savez Socijalističke Omladine BiH*) (SSO BiH), the youth wing of the Communist party. At the time, SSO BiH was still an official organization, although it was striving to emancipate from the League of Communists.

¹⁷ Sasso (2014): p. 30

¹⁸ Ibid: p. 37

¹⁹ Popular mobilizations around environmental issues that occurred throughout Eastern Europe in the dying days of socialist rule were instrumental to its delegitimation: Fagan and Tickle (2002): p. 46; Pickvance (1998); Rootes (2004). The socialist systems tolerated in fact environmental associations: conservation unions were widespread in former Yugoslavia as well, where also legislation aimed at protecting the environment passed during the central planning period – although it remained practically unimplemented. In the socialist countries environmental associations became thus a tool for political dissidents to cluster opposition and to openly challenge the political autocracy by assimilating environmental claims to human rights concerns, or suffusing them “with nationalist/patriotic protests against the degradation of national patrimony”: Rootes (1997): p. 342

²⁰ Sasso (2014): p. 29.

the streets to protest the worsening air quality in Zenica, the most polluted city in Yugoslavia. They also organized meetings to demand better protection and concrete measures to prevent high pollution²¹. Nonetheless, the above-mentioned civic initiatives remained mostly small-scale and elitist in essence²², confined to intellectual and urban circles²³.

2. The anti-war mobilizations

While, on the one hand, grassroots civic initiatives increased sharply during the pre-war period, on the other hand the power vacuum that followed the *Agrokomerc* scandal left room for the rise of nationalist feelings. A controversial atmosphere characterized the period before the outbreak of the war in Bosnia Herzegovina: enthusiasm spread throughout society, since “freedom was in the air, networks of urban initiatives flourished in the field of art and music”²⁴. Meanwhile, though, nationalist feelings were gaining a foothold, and soon got the better of the consequences of liberalization. To oppose the spreading of nationalism, which the republican elites had embraced “as an alternative to state ideology”²⁵, citizen-led movements emerged all over the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY).

As the war became a real threat, anti-war civic actions started to emerge in the urban centres of Belgrade, Zagreb, and Sarajevo. Bosnia Herzegovina was the poorest and most multi-ethnic state among the six republics composing the federation, and it lagged behind the others also in terms of civic activism. Mobilizations striving to ward off the outbreak of war remained mainly limited to the capital, while in other urban centres like Banja Luka, Mostar and Zenica they never developed, or were either assimilated or repressed by local nationalisms²⁶. A series of massive protests with an anti-nationalist character took place in the capital during the month of March 1992. This month of activism was christened “the month of Valter” after the military commander, and Yugoslav partisan hero, Vladimir-Valter Perić²⁷. A series of demonstrations drew thousands of people on the

²¹ Andelić (2003): p. 87

²² Ibid: p. 58

²³ Sasso (2014)

²⁴ RI 23, spokesperson of TACSO (Technical Assistance for Civil Society Organizations), Sarajevo, January 2014

²⁵ Bunce (1999): p. 107

²⁶ Sasso (2014)

²⁷ Perić led the Yugoslav Partisans of Sarajevo during World War II, heading the liberation of the city from the German forces. He became a city-icon after being murdered in the final hours of Sarajevo's liberation, eventually happened on April 6, 1945. Valter was the nickname he adopted in order not to be identified: Donia (2006)

streets of the capital, calling for peace and the preservation of “brotherhood and unity” in the country (Mujanović 2013), supported by the daily newspaper *Oslobođenje* (Liberation), and summoned by the radio station SA3. Throughout the peace rallies, the atmosphere was peaceful, and demonstrators raised placard reading ‘We are Valter’²⁸.

On April 5, thousands of peace demonstrators poured into the streets of Sarajevo voicing their anti-war and pro-Yugoslav stands²⁹, converging in front of the Parliament building to oppose the barricades erected meanwhile by the Serb forces³⁰. That day, two snipers shot amongst the crowd, killing a young girl. The episode marked the beginning of the city's siege and the end of the civic activism period³¹. The following day around fifty thousand people took to the streets again carrying signs for peace and against the nationalist leaders³². Once again, snipers opened fire on the demonstrators, this time killing six people and wounding a dozen of them. The outbreak of the war ended abruptly the “civic spring” of Bosnia Herzegovina, and the Valter movement as well³³.

3. The post-war NGO boom

The burst of the war washed abruptly away the hope that a conflict could be avoided by virtue of grassroots popular demonstrations. The non-nationalist groups that had thrived in the run-up of the war could not find room for development. The conflict, lasting from 1992 to 1995, left on the ground a country brutally impoverished, as well as an estimated number of 100,000 casualties and an undisclosed amount of wounded. It is also estimated that during the war 1,5 million people fled their house and were displaced as refugees³⁴. In the

²⁸ Donia (2006): p. 280

²⁹ Spaskovska (2012)

³⁰ The Serbs of Bosnia Herzegovina had boycotted the referendum on the country's independence held in March 1992, afraid that the independence of the country from SFRY would constitute a threat to their security, and scared of losing their nation status and becoming a minority: Isaković (2000). The majority of Bosnian Serbs supported the option of remaining part of the Yugoslav federation. Using as a pretext the killing of a Serb taking part in a wedding procession in the center of Sarajevo on March 1 1992, the Serbs, led by the SDS, erected barricades around Sarajevo: Armakolas (2007)

³¹ Spaskovska (2012)

³² Donia (2006)

³³ The memory of the shooting on the pacific crowd resonated until recently. The same square where the 1992 demonstration occurred was occupied in the summer of 2013, amidst the surprise (and in some cases fear) of these citizens who preserved painful memories of the 1992 events

³⁴ Hromadžić (2015)

aftermath of the war, the majority of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) did not return to the homes they inhabited in the pre-war period, while other systemic transformations such as people-drain, massive displacement and reterritorialization of people after 1995 reshuffled the sense of local belonging³⁵. Thus, demographic changes that affected and reshaped the country's social fabric reinforced also segregation based on ethnic identification.

The aftermath of the conflict, and in particular the period between 1996 and 2006, is remembered as a phase of strong international intervention, as the international community involved intensively in every aspect of political and economic life in BiH, from reconstruction to peacekeeping and re-settlement of refugees³⁶. The country was endowed with a new constitutional setting: in 1995, BiH was set up as a consociational democracy and a triple power-sharing system (Bieber 2005), within the General Framework Agreement for Peace (GFAP), commonly known as Dayton Peace Agreement³⁷. With the aim of achieving governmental stability and the maintenance of democracy, the consociational system assures an equal share of power to all contending ethno-national groups on a permanent basis³⁸. One of the main settings of foreign engagement in the country concerned civil society. Since the end of the conflict, foreign agencies, international donors and humanitarian NGOs engaged dynamically in post-war reconstruction through the development of so-called civil society building programs, which brought about an inflated number of NGOs and associations active mostly for the sake of funding, often with no sound connection with the social groups in whose name they claimed to act. To grasp the range of the post-war NGO-boom in the country, as Alvarez put it³⁹, one has to consider that in 2008 a country of roughly four million inhabitants totaled around 12,000 NGOs⁴⁰. More recent studies reveal that the number has remained constant over time⁴¹.

³⁵ Bougarel, Helms and Duijzings (2007)

³⁶ Majstorović, Vučković and Pepić (2016)

³⁷ After the place in which the agreement was signed, the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, in the US state of Ohio

³⁸ Lijphart (1969); Touquet and Vermeersch (2008). According to the Constitution, Bosnia Herzegovina is a state composed of three constituent peoples, or nations: Bosnian Serbs, Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims). A system of ethnic quotas grants them proportional representation. Following from its post-war constitutional arrangement, the country is split into two semi-autonomous territorial units called entities: the Serbian Republic (*Republika Srpska*) (RS), and the Federation of Bosnia Herzegovina (FBiH), separated by the Inter-Entity Boundary Line (IELB)

³⁹ Alvarez (2014)

⁴⁰ Collantes-Celador (2013)

⁴¹ Belloni (2013). The exact number of NGOs is still unknown, owing to the lack of an official nationwide register of civil society organizations. The chief of a resource centre for NGOs suggested assessing these numbers carefully, as "the data (...) might be easily manipulated,

In their intervention, often international donors sidestepped existing grassroots associations, and established relationships of domination and dependence between donors and recipients⁴², raising the criticism of scholars and practitioners. Some noted that assistance priorities were regularly driven more by funding requirements than by any real knowledge of the domestic situation.⁴³ Others stressed that the mushrooming of NGOs concentrated in (and thus benefited) mostly the capital and brought about a sort of artificial professionalized civil society relying upon foreign financial support⁴⁴. The externally-driven attempts to engender a third sector from scratch, maintained Fagan, resulted in mostly professionalized, depoliticized, donor-driven NGOs dependent upon funders' priorities⁴⁵.

Even nowadays, the general population tends to equate civil society with NGOs⁴⁶. Similarly, the third sector enjoys only a limited degree of legitimacy⁴⁷. As an activist asserted during her interview, over the years “a gap opened between NGOs and society, [that took the form of] almost hostility and antagonism.”⁴⁸ Often NGOs are sensed to exist “more for personal benefit of staff and their leaders than members of the community”⁴⁹.

4. Civil society campaigns and grassroots activism in the 2000s

The period between 2006 and 2014 saw a dramatic decrease of international involvement in the country. The underlying reason for this change of strategy ought to be sought in the diminishing geopolitical importance of the Balkans in global relations, as well as in the end of the state of emergency in the area, which led foreign donors to drive their efforts towards other war-torn countries. This change was also grounded on the assumption that “international influence should be exercised through the more indirect EU accession process”⁵⁰ rather than through direct involvement on internal politics.

since those are not strictly NGOs, but include sport and cultural associations. Out of 12,000, maybe 2,000 of them are really active” (RI 23)

⁴² Savija-Valha 2012]: p. 247

⁴³ Gagnon jr. (2002)

⁴⁴ Sejfića 2006]: p. 133

⁴⁵ Fagan (2006)

⁴⁶ Carothers and Barndt (1999); Collantes-Celador (2013); Belloni (2013)

⁴⁷ Collantes-Celador (2013)

⁴⁸ RI 30, activist, plenum of Sarajevo. Sarajevo, April 2014

⁴⁹ TACSO (2010): p. 16

⁵⁰ Majstorović, Vučković, and Pepić (2016): p. 4

In the 2000s, the pattern changed slightly in terms of contentious action as well. In these years, virtually all the Yugoslav successor states experienced mass protests, such as anti-establishment rallies, demonstrations targeting the deteriorating social and economic conditions, or denouncing the corruption of the elites⁵¹. As far as Bosnia Herzegovina is concerned, in the 2000s episodic events of grassroots civil resistance were undertaken with the aim of addressing economic and social issues. The following sections delve into the most salient amongst them.

4.1 The *Dosta!* protest movement

As far back as 2005, an informal group of young activists met on a then-popular online forum of the locally-based website *Sarajevo-X.com*⁵². From a small Internet forum, the group rapidly grew, its members thus moving their discussions away from the virtual forum to the public space, concretely to the main square of the city. The group, which defined itself as a civic protest movement⁵³, aimed at promoting accountability, responsibility and change towards their policy-makers, adopted the name *Dosta!* (Enough!)⁵⁴. In their regular weekly meetings, *Dosta!* members talked publicly about the socio-political problems affecting the Bosnian population, “and thereby began to affirm their ‘disturbing’ presence in the political space of the town”⁵⁵. In autumn 2005, *Dosta!* supported the Bosnian farmers who protested in front of the Parliament, urging the government to protect local agriculture, while in March 2006 the group staged regular protests in front of the Parliament building to denounce the rise in the price of electricity. On that occasion, around three hundred persons showed up, mostly elderly and pensioners⁵⁶.

The logo chosen for *Dosta!* featured an open black hand with the shape of Bosnia Herzegovina on the palm, and the word *Dosta!* written underneath. Over the time, the civic group became a driving “awakening” force in the capital, managing also to establish other similar cells in the main urban centres of FBiH, and to network them in a decentralized and informal way. Moreover, *Dosta!* received the support of local alternative singers and musical groups, such as the local alternative

⁵¹ Horvat and Štiks (2015): p. 11

⁵² Wimmen (2013)

⁵³ Lombardo (2010)

⁵⁴ The name *Dosta!* recalls the slogan that protesters voiced on the streets of Serbia demanding the resignation of President Slobodan Milošević in the 1990s: Wimmen (2013). The movement bears many similarities with the Serbian *Otpor!*, the movement formed initially by students in 1998 to call for the ousting of Milošević

⁵⁵ Lombardo (2010): p. 60

⁵⁶ Touquet (2012)

band Dubioza Kolektiv that, together with the rapper Frenkie, a militant of *Dosta!*, dedicated a song to the movement that became its anthem. The modus operandi of the activists of *Dosta!* differed from the more conventional methods used thus far by NGOs or foreign-funded campaigns. *Dosta!* aimed to raise awareness among the population and to bring about social and political change by using non-violent methods to date unusual in the Bosnian Herzegovinian backdrop. As Wimmen explains, the *Dosta!* activists “engaged in provocative and sometimes entertaining tactics of ‘guerrilla communication’ that drew the attention of a bewildered public”⁵⁷. Among their initiatives, one is worth recalling for its novelty. In the occasion of the 2006 general elections, the group organized a convoy composed of five yellow cars that toured around Sarajevo “blasting the sound of bleating sheep over a mobile sound system, as a sarcastic comment on the voting behaviour expected that day”⁵⁸.

Once the election campaign was over, the *Dosta!* activists organized other initiatives to name-and-shame public figures and incumbents, and to “expose the financial and moral corruption hidden behind the façade of nationalist pretension”⁵⁹. In doing so, in 2009 their actions contributed to the resignation of the then newly-elected premier, Nedžad Branković, member of the Bosniak nationalist Party of Democratic Action (*Stranka Demokratske Akcije*) (SDA), accused of having purchased a luxury apartment in the capital for a minimal price by virtue of his position and political connections⁶⁰. The same year, *Dosta!*’s activists organized “The activism days” (*Dani aktivizma*), during which roundtables and meetings were organized to discuss civic activism, government accountability, and similar topics. The downfall of *Dosta!* can be dated to February 2011.

4.2 The 2008 spring of Sarajevo

Two years later, in 2008, other demonstrations took place in the capital Sarajevo to protest the increasing insecurity in the city neighbourhoods, following the murder of a young boy in a tram. Denis Mrnjavac, the young man, was stabbed to death on a tram in early 2008 by three teenagers⁶¹. In response, thousands of people (an exceptional figure for Bosnia Herzegovina) took to the streets in Sarajevo, demanding the resignation of the city major and of the cantonal prime minister. The protests took place on weekends, for a couple of months (February and March 2008). The events targeted “a political establishment seen as corrupt and

⁵⁷ Wimmen (2013): p. 11

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Wimmen (2013): p. 12

⁶⁰ Lombardo (2010): p. 91

⁶¹ Touquet (2012)

incapable of leading the country”⁶², as well as unable to cope with juvenile delinquency⁶³. On the rally of February 13, the city government building was pelted with rocks and eggs, and some policemen were injured. The hail provoked the reaction of the authorities that moved towards more repressive actions against the protesters. The season of protests called “the spring of Sarajevo”⁶⁴ lasted months, and for many “it represented the symbolic rise of civil society in Sarajevo”⁶⁵. However, the “spring” soon ran its course, and the protests never turned into a proper movement.

The 2008 wave of mobilization counted among its outcomes the formation of a grassroots association called *Akcija Građana* (Citizens’ Action), inspired by the widespread discontent and apparently increasing civic awareness following the 2008 protest. As Touquet noted⁶⁶, and some interviewees confirmed⁶⁷, the 2008 wave of mobilization can be considered a precursor to the 2013 one, not only for its “beyond ethnic” dimension, but also by virtue of its organizers, who were also involved in the 2008 and 2013 waves (*Dosta!* supported the demonstrations as well). Furthermore, in 2008 as in 2013 the Internet proved the appropriate space for people to gather, a sort of virtual square from which to organize and somehow coordinate the protests.

4.3 Student protests and grassroots associations

During these years, other contentious episodes occurred outside the capital. In May 2009 the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Tuzla underwent a one-day occupation, in the wake of the university occupations organized the same year throughout the former Yugoslav states, in particular Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia, to oppose the commodification of higher education in the region⁶⁸. The Tuzla students’ claims were slightly different from those of their peers in Zagreb⁶⁹. Besides equality and free education, the students urged the authorities to solve the issue of university space, and requested use of the former military barracks of the campus as university premises. Following the model of their peers in Croatia, during the occupation the students of Tuzla organized a plenary session called “plenum,” established as “the highest representative tool of the students.”

⁶² Sicurella (2008)

⁶³ Balkan Insight (2008)

⁶⁴ Sicurella (2008)

⁶⁵ Lombardo (2010): p. 77.

⁶⁶ Touquet (2015)

⁶⁷ RI 30, activist, plenum of Sarajevo. Sarajevo, April 2014

⁶⁸ Kraft (2015)

⁶⁹ Eminagić and Vujović (2013)

Although the occupation ended in one day, it brought together several activist groups that kept struggling “for the commons, new solidarities and emancipatory politics” once the action was over⁷⁰.

With the exception of Tuzla, though, a proper student movement never developed in the country. Contrasting this trend, in December 2013 a group of students organized to protest the risk of exclusion from the EU-sponsored mobility program Erasmus +, as the refusal of politicians to agree on the issue, and the absence of a unified Ministry of Education at the national level, translated into the ineligibility of BiH students to participate in the program. Under the name *(R)evolucija +* (meaning Revolution +, echoing the name of the EU program), some rallies urging a solution to the impasse were staged in five university cities, witnessing only scarce participation⁷¹.

Besides the students’ initiatives, symbolic actions were organized in other cities throughout the years. For instance, in 2012 the *Dosta!* branch of Mostar performed street actions against the impasse after the mayoral elections⁷², while other groups, connected mainly to the network “Antifascist Action Bosnia Herzegovina” (*Antifašistička Akcija BiH*) staged rallies and symbolic actions like the cleaning of the anti-fascist memorials in Mostar and in Sarajevo, both abandoned and repeatedly looted for representing the symbol of that “brotherhood and unity” among national communities that had gotten lost with the demise of socialism. In Republika Srpska, some initiatives took place in the cities of Banja Luka and Prijedor. The *Oštra Nula*⁷³ (literally, “Sharp Zero”) grassroots group was the first to stage small-scale street actions with a carnivalesque character in 2010⁷⁴. The members of *Oštra Nula*, mostly students and academics, began by publicly expressing their dissatisfaction towards the increase in electricity prices, corruption, privatization of education, deterioration of social services, and the like in the city of Banja Luka. In 2010 they also took part in an anti-government demonstration organized in the city. *Oštra Nula* members were the first to organize street actions with an anti-nationalist dimension. Owing to the novelty of the strategy and to the lack of support among the population, the turnout of their performances has always been low. No more than thirty people attended the street actions back in 2010. The magazine *Žurnal* reported a demonstrator saying that “Here even ordinary protests are considered radical”⁷⁵. *Oštra Nula* participated in

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Milan (2013b)

⁷² Touquet (2012)

⁷³ The name chosen for the association aimed at mocking the arrogance of the government that “perceived the general public as zero”: Touquet (2012): p. 159

⁷⁴ Touquet (2012)

⁷⁵ *Žurnal.info* (2010)

the wave of protests organized by *Dosta!* between 2006 and 2008, and developed many connection with grassroots groups all over BiH⁷⁶ and RS as well, such as Association of Independent Creators and Artists “Ghetto” (*Udruženje Nezavisnih Stvaralaca i Aktivista “Geto”*) (UNSA), another grassroots group active in Banja Luka since 1999. In another city of Republika Srpska, Prijedor, a march was organized in 2012 to “call for justice for all the victims of all the crimes” perpetrated during the last conflict⁷⁷. The initiative aimed at justice “from a civic perspective” in the belief that “no ideology can justify the killings”⁷⁸. The network of activists organizing the march, named *Jer me se tiče* (Because it concerns me), strove to be self-reliant and, as such, refused funds from foreign donors and NGOs. In this way, it tried to steer clear of any problem associated with the support of domestic and/or international organizations. Besides the march in the center of the city, the group organized other actions to call for the right of memory in town. To that end, and since the mayor’s denial of the massacres perpetrated against the non-Serb component of the population in the early 1990s translated into the impossibility to erect a monument or a plaque to commemorate the victims of the last war, the activists fabricated symbolic monuments and placards. They placed them in different spots of the city in order to remember what they term the “civilian victims of Prijedor,” leaving aside any ethnic connotation. For the same reason, these placards are written both in Latin and the Cyrillic alphabet.⁷⁹ So far, the march has taken place since 2012 every May on yearly basis.

⁷⁶ Lombardo (2010): p. 78

⁷⁷ RI 19, #JMBG activist, Sarajevo, November 2013. Prijedor, the second city of RS, had been under the control of the Bosnian Serb nationalists during the 1992-95 conflict, and has been harbouring twenty persons convicted of war crimes afterwards: Belloni (2005): p. 437. The city came into the limelight in the 1990s for hosting four concentration camps set up around its suburbs during the war, whose existence the Bosnian Serb authorities still fail to acknowledge: Domi (2012). Nevertheless, data collected provided evidence that torture against non-Serb population was committed in the concentration camps. The town was also the scene of the second largest massacre after the Srebrenica genocide, for which the United Nation War Crimes Commission determined that “the systemic destruction of the Bosniak community in the Prijedor area met the definition of genocide”: Human Rights Watch/Helsinki Committee (1997)

⁷⁸ RI 19, #JMBG activist, Sarajevo, November 2013

⁷⁹ Since the 1990s, the language standard, and the alphabet in use, are very sensitive issues and a matter of dispute in the political and identitarian ethno-nationalist politics. The alphabet in use is one of the distinguishing features that the RS incumbents employ to stress their diversity with Bosnia Herzegovina and their proximity with Serbia, where the Cyrillic script is in use. Although the Bosnian language uses both the Latin and Cyrillic scripts, only the latter is officially in everyday use in RS, an entity in which the constitution does not recognize any language other than Serbian

4.4 The 2013 Babylution

The spark that ignited the *bebolucija* in June 2013 was a seriously ill three-month-old baby girl, named Belmina Ibrišević. In need of urgent medical treatment outside BiH, she was prevented from leaving the country due to the inability of the Ministry of the Interior to allocate her the 13-digit Unique Master Citizens Number (*Jedinstveni matični broj građana*) (JMBG). On the base of that number, assigned to every Bosnian Herzegovinian citizen, personal documents such as ID cards, passports, and health insurance cards are issued. The deadlock originated from a six-month-long disagreement among MPs about the amendments necessary to adopt a unified state law on identification numbers. As far back as May 2011, the Constitutional Court had in fact declared unconstitutional the existing law on personal identification numbers owing to the fact that article 5, which enumerated the municipalities, did not contain the new names of some of them, changed after the war⁸⁰. The court had thus ordered the national Parliament to reach an agreement within a six-month period from the declaration of unconstitutionality of the law.

As has happened with many other issues, a technical matter turned into a pretext for a dispute over the centralization vs. decentralization of the state⁸¹. The issue MPs could not agree upon concerned the definition of registration areas, necessary for the allocation of identification numbers. While the MPs from Bosnian Serb political parties demanded the last digit, which designates these areas, to indicate the entity of belonging, the representatives of the other parties opposed the proposal. In practical terms, the recognition of the internal geographic divisions of the country according to the entity divisions would result in the citizens of RS having a different ID than the citizens of the FBiH. On the one hand, non-Serb MPs perceived the definition of registration areas conforming to entity lines as a further attempt of Bosnian Serb MPs to stress their detachment from the central state, and to push in the direction of more autonomy of the RS from the state, in line with their persistent threats to secede from Bosnia Herzegovina. On the other hand, Bosnian Serb MPs refused to collaborate in drafting a new law, as they wanted their motion to be approved. Recurring to veto rights, the latter provoked a parliamentary impasse.

Confronted with stalemate, the Constitutional Court abolished the law on February 13, 2013, thus freezing the newborns' registration. From then on, no passports and personal documents necessary to travel abroad could be released to

⁸⁰ Armakolas and Maksimović (2013): p. 4

⁸¹ Ibid.

the children born after February 2013. The problem concerned only the FBiH entity, though. Unlike their peers from the Federation, the babies in RS could access citizens' rights since the RS government unilaterally adopted an *ad hoc* ordinance allowing the new-borns of the entity to obtain personal documents. Although the adoption of a law regulating this matter stands within the exclusive jurisdiction of the BiH state, the authorities of RS justified the legitimacy of such a measure in the light of the circumstances⁸².

As a reaction to the stalemate, a group of people, among which Belmina's father, gathered their cars in the proximity of the National Parliament in June 5, 2013. Enraged by the failure of their MPs to adopt a law allowing the issuance of ID numbers to newborns, they occupied the square in front of the national Parliament building. Joined by hundreds of citizens, the demonstrators managed to remain on the square for twenty-five consecutive days, kept under surveillance by the riot police. Their protests made the headlines internationally as on the night between June 6 and 7 the protesters encircled the National Parliament building, "trapping" hundreds of MPs and foreign investors inside the premises by blocking the entrance of the Parliament building⁸³. Composed of thousands of people, amongst whom many young, the crowd pledged not to let politicians out, claiming that they would lift the blockade only once they had solve the ID law issue⁸⁴. The mobilization, initially termed "babylution" (short for "baby revolution" – *bebolucija* in local language), became rapidly known as #JMBG, owing to the blogging service Twitter. The occupation of the square in front of the Parliament lasted 25 days, with solidarity rallies organized all over the country and concerts in Sarajevo and Tuzla. Before disbanding on July 1, the protesters voiced their concerns and disappointment towards what they defined an irresponsible political class, calling for the respect of human rights.

4.5 The 2014 social uprising

The 2014 protests began in Tuzla, a former industrial hub located in the north-eastern part of Bosnia Herzegovina. The political turmoil, which from Tuzla spread almost nationwide within a couple of days, was dubbed Social Uprising, as civic discontent towards the political establishment took the form of a wide-spread and at times violent rebellion. From the 1990s onwards, following the privatization process that transferred the ownership of the state-owned assets to private entrepreneurs, many factories bankrupted. While, on the one hand, the process of mishandled privatization of state enterprises brought benefits to the

⁸² Armakolas and Maksimović (2013): p. 5

⁸³ Milan (2013a)

⁸⁴ Armakolas and Maksimović (2013): p. 5

local political elite, which took advantage of funds intended to withdraw the state from the economy, on the other hand it brought about massive layoffs⁸⁵. The protest that triggered the wider discontent was organized by disenfranchised workers of recently privatized factories of the area in response to the closure of their plants⁸⁶. The laid-off workers of Tuzla had staged several demonstrations in the past as a way to urge the reopening of the factories that once employed them, as well as to request the payment of the wage arrears and unpaid benefits the workers were entitled to but were unable to collect⁸⁷.

On February 5th, the victims of these layoffs, together with the local trade unions and the association of unemployed of Tuzla, called for a rally, informally announced also on the social platform Facebook. As many other times in the past, the enraged demonstrators gathered in front of the Tuzla canton's court, being the local government and judiciary the bodies in charge of following the lawsuits brought by the workers against the owners of their companies. Unlike previous times, though, that day police forces chased back the workers violently once they attempted to forcibly break into the premises of the government of the canton⁸⁸. The violent reaction of the police mounted the rage of protesters, and suddenly the rally spiralled out of control. In response to police crackdown, people on the streets started to hurl eggs and stones against the wall of the canton's building. Stunned by the reaction of the riot police, which dispersed the demonstrators using tactics never employed before, students and other sectors of the population rushed in to support the protestors. Two more days of unrest followed. The workers' demonstration in Tuzla acted as a catalyst for mobilization, as the repression of their protest set in motion an unprecedented wave of solidarity across the country. From the city of Tuzla, demonstrations diffused to several towns and urban centers of the country, joined by people of all ages, and took a violent turn. On 7 February, town halls, cantons' buildings and the headquarters of the nationalist parties were set ablaze and wrecked by ordinary citizens and individuals wearing masks hiding their faces in Sarajevo, Mostar, Zenica and Bihać. In Sarajevo, the crowd stormed the local government building, hurling furniture from the upper stories and throwing it from the windows⁸⁹. The same day, the crowd vandalized the town hall and the canton's building in Mostar, while a group of people set on fire the headquarters of the two leading nationalist parties. The violent riots faded around February 10.

⁸⁵ Pugh (2005)

⁸⁶ Murtagh (2016)

⁸⁷ Milan (2016)

⁸⁸ Cantons are administrative and largely autonomous units that compose the Federation of Bosnia Herzegovina. As local level of government, each canton is responsible for issues such as civil administration, education, police, environment and many others

⁸⁹ Dzidić (2014)

The popular upheaval led to a sequence of high-level resignations and was followed by a series of more conventional street marches that lasted until mid-April 2014. Besides street demonstrations, participated by people from all walks of life and national communities, citizens organized assemblies open to public participation, called “plenums.” As an action form, the plenums functioned according to a direct democratic method of decision-making. Rejecting the party system, enraged citizens looked for alternative methods of political articulation. The plenums model soon spread throughout the country, bringing together different strands of opposition movements and diverse social groups. During the plenary sessions, mainly retirees, but also workers, the unemployed, young activists and professionals articulated a broad plethora of demands, which were collected and in a later stage re-elaborated in the working groups, before being handed on to the target authorities. Citizens lamented the high level of unemployment, lack of transparency of the authorities towards their constituencies and the culture of impunity prevailing among politicians, framing the issue at stake in terms of accountability and good governance. Moreover, the demonstrators blamed the political class to hold on power by perpetuating ethnic divisions, urged to sanction the politicians for corruption and misconduct, to form technocratic governments at the local and entity level, and to abolish the benefits of elected officials and holders of executive functions in institutions and public administration⁹⁰. Other grievances of demonstrators maintained also the initial economic and social tone. Demands of materialist type, such as the revision of the factories’ privatization process, labor reforms, more effective health care, the fight against unemployment, and cuts to irresponsible expenditures, came along with post-materialist requests, such as the right to existence and to a dignified life.

After months of protests, street marches and plenum’s activity came definitively to a halt as the flood that hit the country in mid-May 2014 turned into a national emergency. Most of the territory of northwestern Bosnia was inundated, twenty-four people were left dead and around 90,000 temporarily displaced⁹¹. Although weakened by a decrease in public participation, in several towns the remaining plenum cells coordinated the volunteers who provided assistance to the victims of the flood, and promoted donations in their support.

⁹⁰ Karamehmedović (2014)

⁹¹ Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly (2014)

Conclusions

This article contextualized historically the evolution of civil society in Bosnia Herzegovina, from the spontaneous opposition to the 1992-95 conflict, passing through the externally-driven support to non-state actors in the aftermath of the war, to the rise in contentious practices from below since the 2000s. This historical trajectory helps understanding how the concept of civil society, as well as practices of citizens' participation, evolved over the years, detaching progressively from foreign support and opposing openly the ruling class. In the beginning of the chapter, I elucidated the attempts undertaken in the late socialist period to reform the country from inside, and described the bottom-up anti-war initiatives emerged to avert the 1992-95 war. Following, I delved into the consequences of the international community's intervention on the civic development of the country, which brought about a steep increase in the number of non-governmental organizations without, however, a sound connection with the social groups in whose name these non-governmental organizations claimed to act. In the remainder of the article, I detailed the practices of contentious politics surged in the 2000s, and the initiatives undertaken from below to reclaim social and economic rights, as well as to bring about political and societal change. Among these, I devoted particular attention to the protest waves that surged in 2013 and 2014, witnessed widespread participation among the Bosnian Herzegovinian population, and, in particular in 2014, the return on the public stage of the workers as challengers of the system. As explained in the article, during the 2013-2014 cycle of protests the citizens reclaimed the public space by occupying it, and prompted the emergence of citizens' assemblies in which individuals articulated their demands in a collective and participatory way. The 2014 so-called social uprising and the "plenums" marked a watershed in the history of civil society in Bosnia Herzegovina, as for the first time the protests took at a first a violent turn, to later evolve into a peaceful movement that spread almost all over the country reclaiming social and economic rights, and a concept of citizenship no more grounded in ethnicity.

Starting from an attempt to ward off the conflict, and following a period in which civic participation was understood especially in terms of enrolment in non-governmental organizations, Bosnia Herzegovina witnessed a contentious turn, which translated in the rise of a protest culture. Over the years, citizens became the main protagonists, they reclaimed the streets and squares as venues in which to exert citizenship, and resorted to contentious tools such as protests and strikes to voice their concerns. In doing so, they often positively referred to their contentious past: for instance, during the 2008 protests they recalled the parti-

san Valter as unifying icon of the country, while in the occasion of the 2014 social uprising they used the miners' Husino uprising as terms of reference for a successful labor struggle. Interestingly, each protest wave appears as connected with the previous ones, identifying a path linking diverse episodes of contention. Overall, it thus appears that street actions and marches have normalized over time, constituting nowadays one of the tolls to which citizens increasingly resort to claim their rights and provoke social change, demonstrating that a shift occurred from a professional engagement typical of the post-war period to the contemporary grassroots and participatory forms of action.

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