Rising social protests in the Balkans

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15 April 2011

Political and social unrest has increased in the Balkan region during the past weeks and months. Young people in particular have protested against the corrupt elite layers in the former Yugoslavian federal republic which, at the behest of the International Monetary Fund and the European Union, have enforced drastic austerity programs with calamitous consequences for the population.

In Croatia, protests continue against the administration of Jadranka Kosor, but currently with significantly less participation. While 10,000 demonstrated last month, the current protests involve just a few hundred.

The main reason for this development is the lack of perspective of the protests, whose only formulated goal is new elections—despite the sobering experiences with all the established political camps since Croatia's independence.

Particularly those under the age of 30 are affected by unemployment, whose official level is almost 20 per cent. A further ten percent of Croats work but do not receive any wage or receive payment only sporadically. The few remaining social benefits are so low that they do not permit a normal life, with basic prices increasing rapidly. Fuel prices alone have risen by more than 30 percent within two weeks.

Prime Minister Kosor has lost a massive amount of support since last year's election. In her party, the right-wing conservative HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union), several factions are fighting fiercely. Kosor hardly gives any press conferences and at public appearances she is often seen fighting back tears.

The social democratic opposition is unable to benefit from the government crisis. Its leader, Zoran Milanovic, is visibly cautious in criticizing Kosor and, according to polls, his SDP is hardly winning any support. Like the HDZ, the SDP is torn by political infighting and corruption scandals.

In the absence of a genuine political alternative, right-wing forces have been increasingly able to dominate the protests. Ivan Pernar, a 25-year-old nurse who helped organize the protests in the Croatian capital via Facebook, openly states his right-wing, nationalist views. He has founded the so-called "Alliance for Reforms" and hopes to enter parliament in the event of early new elections.

According to Pernar, the demand for a "new system" especially affects the "monetary sovereignty" of Croatia. In defence of the latter, Pernar not only rails against the European Union bureaucrats sitting in Brussels, but also against all those who strive for a reconciliation with the neighboring state of Serbia. At demonstrations he demands "more capitalism" together with "nationalization of banks".

Pernar was an activist for the Green Party for some time before becoming an admirer of the Dutch racist and Islamophobe Geert Wilders. With such forces leading protests, it is no surprise that ultra-right groups are trying to use the protests to their advantage.

Alongside right-wing peasant associations and violent hooligans from the Dinamo Zagreb soccer club, known as the "Bad Blue Boys", the protest movement is dominated by war veterans. These veteran associations are openly fascist organizations and consider themselves the heirs of Ustasha, the fascist movement of the 1920s and 30s.

These right-wing forces are supported by the ruling powers. The initial protests were announced through Facebook but now that participation has shrunk and is dominated by right-wing groups, all of the country's major newspapers are printing the dates and places of new planned protests.

In Montenegro several thousand people also protested every week against political corruption and social decline. They followed an appeal on the internet network Facebook, calling for a peaceful demonstration "against the mafia" in front of the parliament building in the capital city of Podgorica.

The state situated on the Adriatic Sea is stuck in a massive economic crisis. Serbia has currently halted all exports of wheat and flour in order to combat growing domestic prices and the growing protests by poorer social layers. This means that Montenegro now has to cover 90 per cent of its demand for wheat from other sources—an impossible task for the destitute country, given current market prices. This will further increase social tensions.

The Serbian government itself is confronted with growing popular unrest. In late March more than 10,000 public servants protested in the capital of Belgrade against low wages and miserable working conditions. Doctors,

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policemen and other public servants joined with protesting teachers who have been struggling to obtain pay raises since January. The teachers' protests were supported by many of their students.

The teachers are demanding the payment of unpaid wages and a change in education laws which *de facto* excludes poorer layers of rural youth from higher education. In 2011, the wage increases for the educational sector were set at three per cent, but the teachers' union is demanding 20 per cent. Education minister Obradovic has bluntly refused the union's demands, referring to the government's austerity policy.

In the wake of the financial crisis, the Serbian government of Premier Mirko Cvetkovic reduced public spending and suspended wage increases. The government and the IMF agreed to lower the budget deficit from 4.8 percent to 4 percent.

The wages of employees in the private sector are even lower than those in the public sector. Average incomes in Serbia are around 35,000 Dinar per month (app. € 350). Officially, the country has between 700,000 and one million unemployed.

Ultra-right forces in Belgrade are also seeking to exploit disillusionment and distrust of the government to their own advantage. On 5 February, the Progress Party (SNS), which is the biggest opposition party in the Serbian parliament, organized a mass demonstration attended by approximately 55,000 people.

The protests in Belgrade were directed against Cvetkovic's government. Under the slogans "Wake up, Serbia" and "Fight for change", the SNS demanded early new elections and threatened an "ongoing blockade" of Belgrade if their demands were not met. The organisation has announced another demonstration in Belgrade on 16 April.

According to new surveys, the SNS would emerge as the clear winner in a fresh election, with far more votes than Cvetkovic's EU-oriented government coalition. The SNS and their smaller partners are estimated to have the support of around 42 per cent of the electorate; the Democratic Party, the mainstay of the government coalition, has just 24 percent.

The SNS is a spin-off party from the ultranationalist Radical Party (SRS) led by Vojslav Seselj, who is charged with war crimes by the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia. The SNS was founded by Tomislav Nikolic, former vice president of the SRS. Nikolic voted for the association agreement of Serbia with the European Union, while party chairman Seselj rejected it. In response, Nikolic founded a new faction in September 2008, which combined support for entry into the EU with nationalism and hatred towards Croatia.

It comes as no surprise that all of the major parties of Serbia, including the nationalist SNS, are striving for entry into the EU. They represent a small elite which hopes to gain access to the international financial markets and enrichment through the EU while the working class foots the bill.

The powerful EU member states are observing this process with alarm. Last year, Klaus Mangold, chairman of the Eastern Europe Commission of the German Economy, said that Serbia was a mainstay for German companies in this region. By signing numerous other free-trade agreements, including with Russia and Turkey, the country would open new markets of great interest for German companies.

Germany is Serbia's most important trade partner, and the fourth largest direct investor. In 2009, Serbia's imports from Germany amounted to more than €1.3 billion. Its exports amounted to almost €600 million. While German direct investments in 2004 were just €278 million, they already amounted to €1.2 billion in 2010. Thus, they have increased fourfold within a few years.

In Serbia, just a small layer benefits from these trading relations, along with European banks and big companies. For broad masses of the population, entry into the EU will only mean price increases and massive social cuts.

After the worldwide financial crisis, in which the Serbian Dinar lost a quarter of its value, Serbia received a credit worth €3 billion from the IMF in 2009, to allow the country to refinance its debts with foreign private banks. To obtain credit from these banks, the government drastically cut spending in all areas.

For this reason the Serbian population is widely hostile to the EU. According to a survey from the start of 2011, more than 60 per cent are opposed to entry to the EU, with less than 30 percent in favour.

The policies of the European elites, which only mean poverty and social misery for the broad mass of the population, must be rejected by the workers and youth of the region, along with the nationalist positions which have driven former Yugoslavia into years of civil war. The only progressive alternative is the turn towards a socialist and international perspective, by establishing a Socialist Balkan Federation in the context of the United Socialist States of Europe.

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