

US seeks to hijack Bosnia protests

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The protests that erupted in early February in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) were an outburst of popular anger against unrelenting austerity policies and abysmal economic conditions.

Unemployment has remained at around 40 percent (60 percent among young people) for years, the average monthly wage is €420 (\$570), and the minimum wage is less than half that. Years of European Union (EU)—International Monetary Fund austerity measures have led to wholesale privatisation, massive cuts in public services and living standards, a fall in consumer spending and mushrooming public debt. At the same time an elite has become super-rich and controls the political apparatus.

The spark for the protests was the announcement on February 4 of the closure of four newly privatised factories in Tuzla, Bosnia's third largest city, throwing thousands out of a job without redundancy pay. By February 8, the protests had spread to other areas including the capital Sarajevo with many government offices set on fire. Several local governments resigned.

However, in the absence of a revolutionary perspective the spontaneous movement is falling under the domination of middle class forces, determined to channel it behind demands which dovetail with the interests of the EU and the United States.

Following the outbreak of protests, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Catherine Ashton declared, "...leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina should hear what representatives of the population say, and respond to their immediate concerns..."

A statement issued by the US Embassy in Sarajevo said politicians should listen to the protesters and that "The use of violence distracts attention from the fundamental message we see the vast majority of protesters trying to make—that reform is necessary now."

The reform the US is demanding is of the deadlocked political setup that resulted from the US-brokered 1995 Dayton Agreement, which ended the almost four-year war waged by the West under the guise of humanitarian intervention and self-determination.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US

set about dismantling Yugoslavia by recognizing the breakaway republics of the old Federation—Slovenia, Croatia, and then Bosnia—as independent sovereign states. The US was intent on exploiting the power vacuum created by the Soviet collapse to project its power eastward and gain control over the vast untapped reserves of oil and natural gas in the newly-independent Central Asian republics of the old USSR. The European powers, led by Germany, were anxious to stake their own claim. Within this new geopolitical environment, the Balkans assumed exceptional strategic importance as a vital logistical staging ground.

There was never any intention on the part of the Western powers to create an "independent" state. BiH was set up as a neo-colonial protectorate headed by a High Representative, backed up by tens of thousands of NATO troops, who had the ultimate say over two separate ethnically-based entities—the BIH Federation (FBiH), mainly inhabited by Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats, where most of the unrest took place, and Republika Srpska (RS), mostly populated by Bosnian Serbs. Each has spawned its own bloated parallel institutions stuffed with ministers and other officials controlling taxation, education, and foreign policy and able to veto state-level decisions.

Despite being the main architect of the divisions in the region, Washington has grown increasingly dissatisfied with the intransigence of local politicians and the EU's failure to resolve the quagmire. For both financial and geopolitical reasons, Washington has pressed for a more unified less costly state, faster accession to the EU and NATO, further social cuts and reducing the influence of Russia, which has made fresh inroads into the Balkans through its relationship with Serbia and RS.

A secret WikiLeaks cable from the US embassy in Sarajevo from April 2009, "What to do about a problem called Bosnia," declared, "Unfortunately, Bosnia has been heading in the wrong direction for almost three years now. There has been a sharp and dangerous rise in nationalist rhetoric, reforms have stalled (in some cases there has been backsliding), and Serbs, Bosniaks and Croats have laid out sharply different visions of Bosnia's future as a state."

In July 2013, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in

the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, Philip Reeker, declared, “I think that citizens throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina can see that their leaders are not capable of fulfilling the most basic part of their job. Recently we saw peaceful protests in that regard and I think that politicians need to listen to their citizens, and not divert attention to something else and say that someone else should do their job.”

Reeker praised a group of experts -- financially supported by the US -- which had put together 188 recommendations to restructure the FBiH. “The important thing is that these ideas come from people from BiH and now it is necessary to forward them to the Federation parliament for decision-making,” he said. “That needs to be done by local officials and the international community is willing to help.”

These words were reinforced by Victoria Nuland—notorious for her recent “Fuck the EU” statement—in her first public address after becoming US Assistant Secretary of State for Europe last October, when she warned, “It is well past time for leaders to demonstrate courage and vision... If these leaders continue to block their country’s path to the EU and to NATO membership, Bosnia’s international partners, the US included, should seriously re-evaluate our approach.”

In Bosnia as in Eastern Europe generally, the US has groomed—through various NGOs, grants, scholarships, and so on—a layer of middle class “activists,” usually younger people, often ideologically guided by identity politics and minority issues, who serve as a conduit for US influence. Speaking in Sarajevo in October 2012, then-US ambassador to Bosnia Patrick Moon revealed, “This past fiscal year, the US Embassy in Sarajevo oversaw over \$50 million in assistance programs designed to help BiH move forward... awarded with a special emphasis on empowering women and young people.”

The importance of such mechanisms was revealed in May 2013, when US Ambassador to the Permanent Council of the Organisation for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE) Ian Kelly wrote to the BiH House of Representatives, strongly denouncing its ban on the Center for Civic Initiatives (CCI) NGO from observing House sessions. The House was manifestly disturbed by the activities of CCI, Bosnia’s largest NGO, which is funded by USAID and the British Embassy. In his farewell speech in July, 2013, Moon hailed “a new generation of citizens with shared goals and a common hope: for a better country and for a better future. I believe in them. I am certain that with time these ‘change agents’ will succeed where political leaders have failed to find the way forward.”

Many of these “change agents” have surfaced in the “citizens plenums” that have emerged in Tuzla, Sarajevo,

Mostar and smaller cities. These dissatisfied layers are organically hostile to the political independence of the working class and conceive of the plenums as a means of directing the political establishment and integrate themselves into it. The first set of demands filed by the Sarajevo plenum representatives with the cantonal Sarajevo parliament on February 18 included most significantly the formation of a new administration, which is “urgently entrusted to eminent persons, experts”, along with appeals for a revision of the pay of public officials and an investigation into “dubious” privatisations, etc.

One of those closely involved in the creation of the Sarajevo plenum is Zoran Ivancic. He is a vice president of a foreign-financed NGO, Public Interest Advocacy Center, whose only source of income showing in its financial statements is the equivalent of over \$140,000 in “humanitarian income,” meaning US and EU funding. Its fees from membership etc. have a zero entry.

Boro Kontic, who moderated the first Sarajevo plenum, is an established journalist/academic who worked for Voice of America during the war and was also a journalist union president for a decade.

In Tuzla, one of the plenum leaders is Nedžad Ibrahimovic, a writer, critic, documentary filmmaker and lecturer in Tuzla University who has also worked at the Slavic department in the University of Washington. Ibrahimovic first formulated the plenum rules including “No parties, No factions”. Its declaration of “citizens and workers” also urges the creation of a “technical government, composed of expert, non-political, uncompromised members.” In order to stem “anger and rage” and ensure “the building of a productive and useful system of government,” it calls for “Maintaining public order and peace through cooperation between citizens, the police and civil protection, in order to avoid any criminalisation, politicisation, and any manipulation of the protests.”

The politics that are to be excluded are anything that challenges the real manipulation carried out by US and EU-backed “activists”, who are there to ensure that protests are directed solely at the reform of the existing political set-up in imperialism’s interests and not at its overthrow.



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