

BUSINESS INSIDER

UNREST IS SPREADING: Bosnia Hasn't Been This Chaotic Since The War



DAVID ROHDE, REUTERS
FEB. 15, 2014, 7:19 PM



REUTERS/Dado Ruvic

Police block fences in front of a government building during protests in Sarajevo February 11, 2014.

(Reuters) - Over the last 10 days, Bosnia has experienced its largest social unrest in nearly 20 years. Thousands of demonstrators have taken to the streets to assail the country's political elite.

"These are the most dramatic - and in some ways the most important - protests that have happened since the end of the war," said Larisa Kurtovic, an expert on postwar Bosnia and professor at DePaul University. "It's full of risk, lots of risk, but also possibility."

She hopes the demonstrations show that Bosnian citizens have finally turned against corrupt political parties that have ruled the country since a brutal 1992-1995 war killed 100,000 people. More broadly, the protests have reignited a debate about whether interventions by the international community are the solution in Bosnia - or part of the problem.

European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton may visit Sarajevo next week amid calls from some in the 28-nation bloc to intervene. At the same time American, European and U.N. policymakers are wrestling with how - and whether - to act in Syria, the Central African Republic, the Ukraine and other conflicts.

A 1995 American-led NATO intervention in Bosnia ended the killing but nationalist parties - Muslim, Serb and Croat alike - gained sweeping control of state-run enterprises, government jobs and the issuing of lucrative state contracts. These new political elites now function as mafia-like economic syndicates, tightly controlling companies, cash and jobs.

That has stunted the country's economy and politics. Irrespective of how voters may feel about a party's corruption or nationalist agenda, they are likely to choose the group that promises to secure them a livelihood. Kurtovic, the DePaul professor, said she hoped Bosnia's government officials would realize that citizens are now demanding both political reform and more social and economic justice.

"What needs to change is the fundamental understanding among the political elites," she said. "That the government is supposed to serve the citizens, that the citizens are not there to be milked for their taxes."

'WE ARE WATCHING'

Paddy Ashdown, a British politician who has long championed aggressive international action in Bosnia, said the international community should force Bosnia's political parties to accept long-stalled reforms to the 1995 Dayton peace accords. Ashdown fired scores of local politicians when he served as the top international official in Bosnia from 2002 to 2006.

"The international community has to act now," Ashdown said in a CNN interview Wednesday. "If they don't act now, I greatly fear that a situation where secessionism will take hold could easily become unstoppable."

But Alida Vracic, a 35-year-old Bosnian who heads a Sarajevo think tank called Populari, said Ashdown-style international activism is the problem in Bosnia. She and a younger generation of Bosnians argue that a large international role has allowed local politicians to escape accountability.

"Paddy Ashdown acted as the ultimate boss, sacking politicians from office, 80 in a day, and not using domestic institutions that the international community had set up in the first place," she said in an email. If EU officials had become gradually less assertive at the time, she said, "maybe, just maybe Bosnian politicians would finally start making hard choices and compromises themselves."

Some older Bosnians who lived through the war agreed. But they cautioned that there are times when extremists - armed with power, wealth or weapons - will ignore the will of the majority and carry out sweeping abuses. In those situations, the threat of outside military force is needed.

Hasan Nuhanovic, a 45-year-old Bosnian Muslim whose father, mother and brother were executed by Serb forces after the 1995 fall of the town of Srebrenica, said international pressure is still needed in Bosnia. Nuhanovic argued that only outside powers can stop long-running efforts by Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik and Bosnian Croat nationalists to block the emergence of a unified Bosnian state.

"I think they should send some troops back to Bosnia," Nuhanovic said in a telephone interview. "Just to send a message. We are still here. We are watching."

"SMART, SOPHISTICATED POLICIES"

The debate reflects a sea change that has occurred in the international presence in Bosnia over the last decade. After President George W. Bush pulled American peacekeepers out in 2003 and Ashdown's tenure ended in 2006, the European Union - led by Germany and France - radically scaled back the international effort.

A hands-off EU approach reduced the number of international peacekeepers to less than 1,000. EU officials say the smaller international presence forced Bosnians to finally hold their own leaders responsible for the country's anemic state.

Ashdown and others said the scaled-back international effort allowed nationalist parties and corruption to flourish. In the CNN interview, he warned that nationalists could manipulate the unrest - whatever demonstrators' original intent - and reignite ethnic divisions.

"At the moment, its citizens are complaining about poverty and lack of movement and dysfunctionality of the state and corruption amongst politicians," he said. But events "could move to something far worse very quickly."

Vracic, the younger Bosnian, argued for less international action. "The international community should have left Bosnia ages ago," she wrote, "and remained present in small doses, with smart, sophisticated policies."

Experts agree that having the international community present in "small doses" in "smart, sophisticated" ways is the right approach. But they caution that it is maddeningly difficult to achieve.

At the same time, simply ignoring instability is fraught. In an increasingly interconnected world, conflict and chaos quickly reverberate across borders and economies.

(Additional reporting by Adrian Croft in Brussels; Edited by Sara Ledwith)

This article originally appeared at [Reuters](#). Copyright 2014. Follow Reuters on [Twitter](#).