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People Had Had Enough

Now, let me tell you of the situation. It is with all this baggage that I find myself in a rare situation, one in which I am watching events as they unfold in Bosnia. Although I witnessed firsthand and photographed the celebratory frenzy that took place at Vjecná vatra following the arrest of Radovan Karadžić, I find myself watching from afar the violent demonstrations that have enveloped the country in recent days, including the burning of the presidency building with its valuable archives. This time I am relieving myself of the urge to analyze these events at length through some weighty theoretical apparatus, in a manner that closes down its meaning rather than opening it up. There will be no post-modern diatribe about resistance and criticality, the contradictions within capitalism, or parallels with the Arab Spring or the Occupy Wall Street movement. I leave that to others. What have I come up with? Well, it is not as if the socio-politico-economic climate of Bosnia has undergone a

radical overhaul since 1995. Don't get me wrong. Peace, though not by the best means possible, has endured, and some achievements have been made socially, politically, and economically. On top of that, the International Community in the guise of the Office of the High Representative and PIC has taken a slightly less hands on approach to facilitating this progress. Since 1995, however, some things have not undergone much change: unemployment remains high; corruption is rampant; Mostar continues to be as dysfunctional as ever; mines are still present; inadequate regulation still allows greedy speculators to take advantage of the privatization program; and politics continues to have a strangle hold over many appointments and decisions in far too many institutions, including the university. And so when parliamentarians were unable or unwilling to draft a new law on personal identification numbers this past summer, it appeared that the people had had enough. Transcending ethnic boundaries, thousands of people joined anti-government demonstrations, demanding that politicians begin governing like responsible elected officials. Thus, began the Babylution. But many photos that were posted on Facebook and YouTube show demonstrators with smiles, decorated faces and party balloons, with children and dogs in hand, making it appear that the protest in front of the parliament building was nothing more than a Boutique protest. Perhaps that is a bit harsh. There were serious speeches, the waving of posters, and a modicum of solidarity with its mandatory hand-holding. But what did the Babylution achieve? It failed to reset Bosnia. Fast forward to the past few days. From Babylution to Devolution, from smiley and decorated faces and speeches to rocks and burning buildings. The protest began in Tuzla, but quickly spread to Sarajevo, Mostar, Zenica, Bihac, and Banja Luka.

Yes, hundreds of people in Banja Luka! Unlike the photos of some of the other cities, those of Sarajevo remind me of the recent Ukrainian protests. But why now? Surely, those who were suffering from unemployment and witnessing their inept politicians living the good life were as disgusted last June as they are in February. So why throw stones and burn buildings now? Mr. Niksic has made mention of "hooligans." This sounds familiar. We have heard this same blame game from the mouths of leaders in the UK, Syria, Iran, and Egypt. Perhaps there was a hooligan presence. That will eventually be proven one way or another. Even if proven to be the case, hooliganism is neither the entire story nor should it be. The issues of unemployment, corruption, a dysfunctional Mostar, mines, greed, and political power remain the stuff from which future discontent will be made and objected to by those in need. What changed between the time of the Babylution and the burning of the presidency building? Slapping on one theory after another will provide a range of answers to the why question. There will be no shortage of analyses in the days and weeks to come. No doubt, Zizek has already gone viral on this, finding the Bosnian unrest to be just another instantiation of his theoretical apparatus. What's new! But I will save my theory rich explanation for another day. I simply have many questions.

A Violent Demand

I hope the current firestorm will gain the attention of those who failed to recognize the Babylution for what it was — a peaceful yet sincere request for change. Now they must contend with a violent demand for that same change and share some of the blame for its emergence. If this most recent bout of unrest doesn't bring about change, what will? I suspect we know the answer to that question — a ratcheting up of violence by both sides. I am hopeful, however, that Bosnia is far from being a fragile House of Cards.