** United Nations Office in Belgrade**

**Daily Media Highlights**

**Monday, 3 March 2014**

**STORIES FROM LOCAL PRESS**

* **Dacic: Historical accounts to be settled, but the process not to be politicized (*Beta*)**
* **Ljajic certain Serbia will not lose (*RTS*)**
* **Petrovic: Ready for Union of Serb Municipalities (*Blic*)**
* **Popovic: Kosovo’s development possible only without Brussels (*Beta*)**
* **SRS activists arrested for putting posters (*Novosti/Beta*)**
* **Kasoulides: Serbia will not have to recognize Kosovo (*Tanjug*)**
* **Austrian soldiers end activities in northern Kosovo (*Tanjug*)**
* **War of leaders but not programs (*Radio Serbia*)**

**STORIES FROM REGIONAL PRESS**

* **Oral debate begins in Croatia-Serbia dispute (*Tanjug*)**
* **Obradovic: Storm – most serious crime in war in Croatia (*Beta*)**
* **Croatian Justice Minister: Croatia can’t lose (*RTL/NovaTV*)**

**RELEVANT ARTICLES FROM INTERNATIONAL MEDIA SOURCES**

* **Serbian Parties Take Campaign to Kosovo (*BIRN*)**
* **Serbia’s Vucic Goes From Milosevic Aide to EU Cheerleader (*Bloomberg*)**
* **At UN's highest court, Croatia accuses Serbia of genocide, underscoring lingering tensions (*AP*)**
* **Turkey seeks to mend ties with Serbia (*Today’s Zaman*)**
* **Bosnia-Herzegovina: corruption protests fuel a potential political spring (*Euronews*)**

**LOCAL PRESS**

**Dacic: Historical accounts to be settled, but the process not to be politicized (*Beta*)**

Outgoing Serbian Prime Minister Ivica **Dacic** stated that that it is good to complete the trial proceedings concerning Croatia and Serbia’s mutual genocide lawsuits before the International Court of Justice in The Hague so to settle historical accounts and finish with the past. Dacic underlined that it is up to serious politicians to invest efforts so that the trial would not be politicized or relations between Serbia and Croatia complicated, adding that it could happen should the presentation of arguments be retold by media. The Prime Minister reminded that Serbia was prepared to withdraw the counter lawsuit and resolve the issue through an agreement, but that however has not happened.

**Ljajic certain Serbia will not lose (*RTS*)**

Outgoing Serbian Deputy Prime Minister Rasim **Ljajic** assessed that Serbia will not be the losing party in the trial proceedings against Croatia before the International Court of Justice that have commenced in the Hague, and added that Serbia does not want to disturb relations with Croatia. “We want the best of relations with all our neighbors,” underlined Ljajic. He reminded that Serbia wanted to settle the dispute through an agreement, that the Croatian side was prepared to accept that in principle, but after the radicalization of the situation in Vukovar, there was obvious concern of the Croatian authorities that the public would not support such a scenario.

**Petrovic: Ready for Union of Serb Municipalities (*Blic*)**

Deputy Kosovo Premier Slobodan **Petrovic** expects the Union of Serb Municipalities to be formed soon and voiced hope that this institution will become an instrument for protection and better life of the Serbs in Kosovo. He said that he signed last year the decision on appointing a preparation team for drafting the statute and other laws of the Union of Serb Municipalities.

“As far as I know, the statute is being drafted. The Union, in line with the competencies of the European Charter on local self-government and the Kosovo law, will have the right to cooperate on collective implementation of its competencies. An atmosphere has been created where the Union, whose necessity nobody had questioned, is a goal in itself but we never heard what it will deal with. The essence is important. Here I have in mind competencies, sustainability, manner of functioning, mutual relations of municipalities in this Union,” he said. He pointed out that the Union will be formed as the implementation of the agreement between the two governments in Brussels, along with the EU support and mediation and in line with the laws that are valid in Kosovo. Everything stemming from this relationship must be acceptable to everybody, said Petrovic.

**Popovic: Kosovo’s development possible only without Brussels (*Beta*)**

The Vice President of the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) Nenad **Popovic** has stated that the abolishment of Brussels agreements is of utmost importance for the economic development of Kosovo and Metohija. During his visit to Kosovska Mitrovica, Popovic said that “abolishing Brussels agreements is the prerequisite for preserving Serbia’s integrity.” “The economic prosperity of Kosovo and Metohija, especially the Serb community in Kosovo and Metohija, is impossible without a deep integration into the economy of entire Serbia,” said Popovic, adding that he expects the Constitutional Court to abolish all Brussels agreements.

**SRS activists arrested for putting posters (*Novosti/Beta*)**

The trial judge in Pristina determined 30 days of house arrest for the activists of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) Milomir **Peric** and Danilo **Kostic** for inciting religious and national hatred, said the SRS member in Pristina Radovan **Nicic**. Nicic told Beta that trial proceedings against them will continue while they are under house arrest. Peris and Kostic were arrested in Gracanica for putting election posters, the SRS stated. That party called the Serbian government to “urgently release the activists from detention and competent bodies to enable the election campaign to run smoothly under equal conditions throughout Serbia.” “This move by the so-called police service is aimed at intimidation of and pressure on patriotic forces and reflects the real nature of the Brussels agreement, whose goal is expulsion of everything Serbian from Kosovo and Metohija,” reads the SRS statement.

**Kasoulides: Serbia will not have to recognize Kosovo (*Tanjug*)**

At the end of its accession talks with the EU, Serbia will not have to recognize the independence of Kosovo, since another five EU members have not done it either, Cypriot Foreign Minister Ioannis **Kasoulides** said in an interview to ***Tanjug***. He has reminded that the international community had greeted the Brussels agreement, whose accomplishment, in his opinion, required a lot of courage and diplomatic skill. Asked to comment the new development of events in Cyprus, where the leaders of the Greeks and Turks had agreed they will aspire towards a (united) federation composed of two zones and whether one can draw a parallel between the Cyprus and Kosovo issue, Kasoulides says: “We have agreed that the future of Cyprus lies in a federation composed of two zones, but one state with one sovereignty, citizenship. However, comparisons with Kosovo cannot be made as no problem is the same. Look at how we completed the project after we became a member country, and we simultaneously had a problem with the occupation of a part of the island, and what Serbia needs now is to be well-prepared so that its candidacy is such that it cannot be refused at the moment when the decision on membership is adopted. He stated that the relations between Serbia and Cyprus are excellent having in mind the cultural, traditional and historic ties. Kasoulides said that the two countries are working together and that Cyprus will provide assistance to Serbia on its EU path. He said that they introduced joint conferences of the two governments. One conference was already held in Belgrade and a ministerial meeting should be held in Cyprus in late 2014.

**Austrian soldiers end activities in northern Kosovo (*Tanjug*)**

The long deployment of Austrian soldiers in northern Kosovo ended after the repeated mayoral elections in northern Kosovska Mitrovica. The Austrian soldiers were in a state of readiness in the Noting Hill camp in order to break the roads if necessary. After the French and Moroccan soldiers within KFOR ended their mission in Kosovo at the end of January and at the beginning of February, the created gap was filled by the Austrian Army after the decision of KFOR Commander Salvatore **Farine**, reads the statement of the Austrian Defense Ministry.

**War of leaders but not programs (*Radio Serbia*, by Petar Popovic)**

As the early parliamentary elections in Serbia are approaching, the campaign is growing fiercer every day, and the promises of political leaders are almost identical. In such circumstances, one very important subject – the forming of the Union of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo and Metohija – has been pushed to the background. As the campaigns are gaining momentum, the verbal exchanges among the party leaders are getting obviously harsher, and even the so-called “low blows” are noted. In all truth, such an occurrence is not strictly characteristic of Serbia, nor does it originate here. It is noticeable, however, that in their criticism the opposition representatives are focused more on the weaker of the coalition partners that currently hold the authority, i.e. Ivica **Dacic** and his Socialist Party, and that does stand apart from the usual practice in any parliamentary democracy. The lack of fiercer criticism addressed at the main favorites in the elections, the Progressive Party, is seen by most analysts and voters as flirting with its leader Aleksandar **Vucic**, i.e. the proposals for the participation in the future ruling structures.

The targets of the arguments are the party leaders, more so than their programs, because, with the exception of the Democratic Party of Serbia which is decidedly against the European integrations, among other actors in the national political arena there are practically no major ideological differences. In that situation, one might say that despite the pretty clear odds for success in the electoral battle, it is still rather uncertain who will be in the next government along with the Progressive Party. Some still point to the experience of Ivica Dacic and say he will leave nothing to luck and allow the “small” players to spoil his plans.

In view of the pre-election promises, they are almost identical. Prevailing are the subjects of further European integrations, investments, new working places, modern infrastructure and battle against crime and corruption. In short – better life! On the other hand, the common people are well aware it cannot happen overnight. They know from experience that after the elections many a promise will end up being just that – a promise.

In the shadows of the election campaign, another important topic has been pushed aside, and it could adversely affect the future of the Kosovo Serbs, since at issue is the forming of the Union of Serb Municipalities. The prerequisite for that, the election of the mayor of Kosovska Mitrovica, has been finally met. Namely, the adoption of the statute of the Union and its competencies are already causing disputes in Pristina, and according to certain analysts, it will mean the acceleration of calling the elections in Kosovo and Metohija, which would not be in Serbs’ favor. The situation is made additionally more difficult by the extension of the custody for one of the Serb leaders in the province – Oliver Ivanovic – and ignoring the guarantees offered by the Serbian Government. It leads imminently to the Serbs being suspicious about the degree of their protection and who might be next.

**REGIONAL PRESS**

**Oral debate begins in Croatia-Serbia dispute (*Tanjug*)**

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague met to hear oral arguments in a dispute between Croatia and Serbia on mutual genocide suits at 10 a.m. Monday. The hearing was opened by Peter **Tomka**, a Slovakian judge and current ICJ president, who today who gave the floor to the Croatian legal team, headed by Vesna **Crnic-Grotic**, professor of international law at the Faculty of Law of the University of Rijeka. Croatia is currently presenting its oral argument and Serbia’s legal team will present their on 10 March. The dispute began with Croatia filing genocide charges against Serbia in 1999, to which Serbia answered with a counter-claim 10 years later. The hearings will close on 1 April and over the year, ICJ judges should issue a judgment that will determine if Croatia and/or Serbia are guilty of a commission of genocide, incitement to commit genocide or complicity in genocide in Croatia between 1991 and 1995.
Experts believe a final judgment, from which an appeal cannot be taken, could be made public by the end of this year or in early 2015 and will be binding for both countries. The suit and the countersuit will be decided by a total of 17 judges, 15 of them regular and two ad hoc judges from Serbia and Croatia. According to expert assessments, the final ruling which cannot be appealed should be released by the end of 2014 or in early 2015 and it will be binding for both countries.

**Obradovic: Storm – most serious crime in war in Croatia (*Beta*)**

The main hearings begin today before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague in the genocide lawsuits filed by Croatia and Serbia. The International Court of Justice will hear arguments of Croatia, as well as from witnesses for both sides. Croatia’s lawsuit that alleges genocide was filed against then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SRJ) in July 1999, while Serbia’s countersuit was submitted in April 2010. Chief legal representative of Serbia in this case Sasa **Obradovic** said that the task of the Serbian legal team is to prove that crimes committed in Croatia in 1991 did not contain significant elements of a criminal act but that the crimes carried out against Serbs, primarily in Operation Storm in 1995, contained elements of genocide. “It is Serbia’s legitimate to present evidence before the ICJ about the number of victims and the fact that there remained now one-third of the Serbs who lived in Croatia before the war. He said that it was important for the Serbian side to present the facts about the Storm as an “extremely serious crime” that was not taken into consideration by a single court, including the ICTY in the process to the commander of this operation Ante **Gotovina**.

**Croatian Justice Minister: Croatia can’t lose proceeding against Serbia (*RTL/NovaTV*)**

‘We can’t lose, because we know what happened and we know who the victim and who the aggressor is. It is possible that we fail to prove a direct link, it is a question of the Court that set high criteria. Success is to do the job well and honestly,” said Croatian Justice Minister Orsat **Miljenic**. “We are primarily looking for data on the missing, but also a different climate. We are requesting the processing of perpetrators of the crimes in Croatia. It is impermissible that anyone who perpetrated a crime freely moves. We insist on rule of law and prosecution of all war crimes. If there is one issue where consensus has been reached, then it is this one,” said Miljenic. He assessed that one of the biggest failures of the ICTY was that it didn’t conduct proceedings against the leadership of the former Yugoslav army (JNA), because “all military operations of JNA in Croatia were conducted from Serbia.” He rejected the theory on equating responsibility of Croatia and Serbia in the war pointing that “nobody in Croatia ever crossed the border to wage a war in Serbia.”

**INTERNATIONAL PRESS**

**Serbian Parties Take Campaign to Kosovo (*BIRN*, 28 February 2014)**

Serbian parties are holding election rallies in Kosovo, even though the election cannot be extended there following last year's Brussels agreement.

Two weeks ahead of early parliamentary elections in Serbia, most Serbian political parties are busy drumming up support among the Serbs in Kosovo - only some of whom, ironically, can vote in the election.

Aleksandar Vucic, leader of the ruling Progressive Party, told locals in the Serb-run north of Kosovo on Thursday that his party guaranteed them security and survival.

"Serbs will survive and remain safe in any place in Kosovo and Metohija," Vucic assured a rally in the town of Leposavic.

Vucic said the EU-mediated talks with Kosovo on normalising relations had been difficult, but it remained important to realize goals in a prudent fashion for Serbs as a whole.

He was referring to the historic deal that Serbia and Kosovo signed last April on normalisation of relations - a move that most Kosovo Serbs strongly opposed.

As part of the agreement, Serbian elections cannot be officially organised in Kosovo.

Kosovo has said it will only allow centres for collecting the ballots of those who have dual citizenship, which can be taken to Serbia for counting.

The Socialist Party has also scheduled rallies in the former Serbian province, which declared independence in 2008.

The Democratic Party of Serbia told BIRN that it has scheduled several rallies for the coming days in Kosovo.

The hardline nationalist Serbian Radical Party along with its coalition partners, the right-wing Obraz and Nasi movements, started campaigning in the north Kosovo town of Mitrovica ten days ago.

"We started a campaign with the slogan 'Both Kosovo and Russia,'" said Zoran Krasic of the Radicals - who remain fiercely opposed to any moves towards the EU, or towards normalising ties with the Albanian-dominated authorities in Kosovo.

**Serbia’s Vucic Goes From Milosevic Aide to EU Cheerleader (*Bloomberg*, by Gordana Filipovic and Michael Winfrey, 2 March 2014)**

Eight years after Aleksandar Vucic rallied behind war-crimes suspects and tried to shield Serbia from western influence, he’s poised to take over the government after a March 16 election as a pro-European reformer.

The 44-year-old deputy prime minister, who said in 1995 that his country would kill 100 Muslims for every Serb who died, abandoned the path followed by his nationalist mentors into the wars that broke up Yugoslavia the 1990s. He’s now pledged to join the European Union in record time and embrace austerity measures endorsed by the International Monetary Fund.

The Balkan state achieved membership status in the 28-member EU in January, years behind former Yugoslav partners Slovenia and Croatia, which joined in 2004 and 2013. Having watched living standards in those countries soar while their own remained stagnant, Serbs have pushed Vucic and other leaders to ditch a strategy of confrontation.

“The EU agenda is still a winning ticket in elections in Serbia and Vucic must have convinced himself that he, too, believes in the EU,” said Djordje Vukadinovic, who teaches the philosophy of politics at Belgrade University, by phone on Feb. 26. “His transformation has come from a need to survive on the political scene and grab power after 20 years of opposition activity, defeats, and Pyrrhic victories.”

**Forced Election**

Vucic and his Progressive Party, the biggest force in parliament, engineered the early ballot last month, half way through the government’s four-year term under Prime Minister Ivica Dacic.

The Progressives had 45 percent support, followed by 13 percent for Dacic’s Socialist Party, according to a poll from Belgrade-based Faktor Plus poll taken on Feb 22-25 among 1,100 people. It had a margin of error of 3 percent.

A tall, bespectacled law school graduate and former journalist, Vucic has promised to overhaul the economy. With Serbia’s 1.7 million workers numbering the same as pensioners and 82 percent of young people wanting to move abroad, his plan includes streamlining the pension and health-care systems and selling or closing hundreds of state-owned companies.

“Our job is not to lie to the people, but to tell them how difficult it will be,” Vucic told Pink TV broadcaster on Feb. 12. “We are facing a tough period and lots of work, but we will see the light at the end of the tunnel.”

**Turning Around**

Investors have responded by pushing down the yield on the 2021 dollar bond to the lowest since May 28, 2013, according to data compiled by Bloomberg. Having fallen from a record-high 7.469 percent on Sept. 10, the yield was at 5.366 percent at 2:50 p.m. on Feb. 28 in Belgrade.

The EU drive is a turnaround for Vucic who, like Dacic is trying to shake off associations with his past.

Once a prominent member of the Radical Party led by Vojislav Seselj, who is now awaiting a verdict on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity in the Hague, Vucic warned the international community in 1995 from intervening in Serbia’s conflict in Bosnia.

“You kill one Serb and we will kill 100 Muslims,” he told parliament that year. “So let’s see if the international community or anyone else dares attack.”

While serving as former strongman Slobodan Milosevic’s information minister in 1998, Vucic fined and shuttered newspapers that criticized the government.

In 2006, he campaigned for Seselj, who was the best man at Vucic’s wedding and godfather to his children, as well as war crimes suspects Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic. He also condemned the EU as a group of nations after cheap labor and consumers.

**‘Mistakes’ Made**

“I really made mistakes,” Vucic told Vreme magazine in an interview published on July 11, 2013, adding he had “neither the strength nor courage” to leave Milosevic’s cabinet in 1998 before a NATO bombing campaign forced Serb troops out of the breakaway province of Kosovo.

Vucic has also bolstered his image by becoming the face of an anti-corruption drive. He presides over news conferences to announce major arrests, including that of Serbia’s richest man, Miroslav Miskovic, on charges of illegally siphoning off state funds from road contracts in December 2012.

Vucic is now pushing to renew an IMF funding deal that the Washington-based lender abandoned two years ago when Serbia failed to meet fiscal commitments. Serbia needs to cut budget spending by 400 million euros to qualify, Vucic said on Feb. 3.

He pushed for Dacic’s cabinet to hire former IMF chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn as an economic adviser and appoint ex-McKinsey & Co Inc Associate Lazar Krstic as finance minister.

**Unprofitable Assets**

He plans to end decades of failed efforts to sell state-owned companies that cost about 750 million euros a year to keep afloat. The cabinet is seeking buyers or partners for at least 153, employing with 58,000 workers, this year.

The measures may be a surprise for some voters who, after years of budgetary excess under previous governments, may not be ready for the type of austerity undertaken by EU states such as Slovenia or Romania, Marko Blagojevic, program director at the Belgrade-based Centre for Free Elections and Democracy, said by phone on Feb. 18.

“There will be job losses,” Blagojevic said by phone on Feb. 18. “But people, their voters, seem to think it will happen to someone else, not them.”

**At UN's highest court, Croatia accuses Serbia of genocide, underscoring lingering tensions (*AP*, 3 March 2014)**

THE HAGUE, Netherlands - Croatia is accusing its Balkan neighbour Serbia of genocide during fighting in the early 1990s as the former Yugoslavia shattered in spasms of ethnic violence, in a case at the United Nations' highest court that highlights lingering animosity in the region.

Croatia is asking the International Court of Justice to declare that Serbia breached the 1948 Genocide Convention when forces from the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia attempted to drive Croats out of large swaths of the country after Zagreb declared independence in 1991.

It is not the first time Serbia has faced allegations of genocide at the world court. In a landmark 2007 judgment, the court cleared Belgrade of committing genocide in the 1995 massacre of some 8,000 Muslim men in the Bosnian enclave of Srebrenica.

**Turkey seeks to mend ties with Serbia (*Today’s Zaman*, by Denyz Arslan, 2 March 2014)**

After the crisis that emerged following Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoðan's remarks about Kosovo last year, Turkey is looking for ways to mend ties with Serbia due to its need for cooperation in the Balkan region, especially with regard to the stability of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Turkish-Serbian relationship has not been in good shape following the remarks by Erdoðan on Oct. 23. in Prizren, when he said: “Do not forget, Kosovo is Turkey and Turkey is Kosovo.” Serbian President Tomislav Nikolic demanded an apology for what he called the “scandalous” remarks. Serbia does not recognize Kosovo's independence and considers Kosovo to be the cradle of Serbian culture.

Despite attempts by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoðlu to express regret over the “misinterpretation” of the comments, Serbia was not satisfied. A trilateral meeting, scheduled to take place in Belgrade last December between Turkey, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, has been postponed indefinitely by Serbia.

Davutoðlu wants to visit Belgrade, Bosnia on his agenda

According to diplomatic sources who prefer to remain anonymous, Davutoðlu recently made an urgent request to visit Serbia to discuss the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is not clear if this request will be granted by Belgrade as Serbia is busy with upcoming parliamentary elections scheduled for March 16.

There are clear signs that Turkey wants to warm up its relationship with Serbia, one diplomatic source told Sunday's Zaman. Recently, Turkish President Abdullah Gül sent a letter to President Nikolic to mark Serbia's national day on Feb. 15. Gül has also spoken to Nikolic on the phone to extend his warm wishes, pointing out that Nikolic's birthday coincides with Serbia's national day, while Gül's birthday is also Turkey's national day, which is Oct. 29.

“Turkey considers that the success of its Balkan policy is directly related to its relationship with Serbia. It is impossible to push for political reforms in Bosnia without Serbia [being involved],” the diplomatic source told Sunday's Zaman.

On Feb. 12, during a visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina following protests across the country against corruption and unemployment, Davutoðlu said a resurgence of political and religious tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina would pose a risk both for Europe and the international community.

“Everyone should stand together with Bosnia without hesitation over the country's security, stability and territorial integrity. It is gratifying that the demonstrations did not turn into an ethnic or religious clash,” Davutoðlu said.

“Turkey is and will be on the side of our Bosnian brothers at any time over its stability, peace, politics and territorial integrity,” Davutoðlu said.

Thousands of Bosnians have been rallying in several towns, demanding the resignation of a regional government, continuing protests against corruption and unemployment that have plunged the country into crisis. Nermin Niksic -- prime minister of the Bosniak-Croat Federation which, together with the Republika Srpska, makes up post-war Bosnia -- dismissed the demands made in the protests but proposed early polls. The peaceful protests had been restricted to the Muslim Bosniak-dominated parts of the country's autonomous Bosniak-Croat Federation but are slowly spreading to other parts as well.

Turkey supports Bosnia and Herzegovina's NATO and European Union membership, believing that the country being a member of such international organizations would contribute to regional stability.

According to a diplomatic source who preferred not to be named, Davutoðlu also wants to pay another visit after the parliamentary elections in Serbia to discuss bilateral relations. “Turkey wants dialogue and good relations,” the source said.

Turkish Foreign Ministry Undersecretary Feridun Sinirlioðlu is also going to Belgrade early April, Sunday's Zaman has learned. All the issues between Turkey and Serbia will be discussed, including the trilateral process.

After Erdoðan's remarks on Kosovo last October, Serbia demanded an apology and an explanation. Davutoðlu promised his Serbian counterpart, Ivan Mrkic, that he would use the first opportunity to express his regret publicly about the misinterpretation of Erdoðan's Kosovo remarks.

Four days after the remarks, Davutoðlu spoke on the phone with his Serbian counterpart and promised that he was going to patch up the relationship. In the evening of the same day, Davutoðlu appeared on Turkey's state-run TRT 1 television station, saying that Erdoðan's remarks on Kosovo were misunderstood in Serbia and adding that Turkey has the same relationship with all Balkan states.

Davutoðlu said Erdoðan's remarks on Kosovo were taken out of context by some nationalist circles in Serbia and thus misinterpreted, in what was the first official response to Serbia's reprimand.

Even though Belgrade does not seem to be satisfied by Turkish officials' explanations and considers that Turkey has yet to offer a proper apology, both sides seem to share the belief that it is in everyone's interest to maintain a positive atmosphere. For its part, Belgrade would like to see Turkish companies investing in Serbia. One diplomatic source said that “there is once again a positive climate,” and the two countries should make the most of it.

**Bosnia-Herzegovina: corruption protests fuel a potential political spring (*Euronews*, 28 February 2014)**

Tuzla in Bosnia is the epicentre of protests against corruption and bad governance. In this edition of Reporter we look at the future of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Fire has already blackened the regional government building in Tuzla. Now, the empty windows look down on yet another protest march – one of many in Bosnia-Herzegovina nowadays.

Is it a ‘political spring’? This is where it all started when middle-class families march alongside students and the unemployed. The protests against unemployment, corruption and political inertia have already toppled four out of 10 regional governments. Protest leader Damir Arsenijevic explained the problems to euronews: “Corrupt privatisation. Political parties controlling the judiciary, controlling the police, promoting terror in everyday life and that’s the worst thing: that they have actually stolen the money from the people and they have got richer.”

Emin Eminagic, an activist in Tuzla complained: “We have been lied to for 20 years. We have been oppressed for 20 years, people are hungry, people are starving. We do not have job prospects here, we will not have a future here unless we change something.”In early February, government buildings were set alight in Sarajevo, Zenica and Tuzla. It was the worst violence since the end of the war in 1995. But even after the violence, all over the country the protests continue – peacefully this time.

Tuzla is the regional capital. In the job centre they tell us that this region has 100,000 unemployed people and only 80,000 people in work. Less than four million people live in Bosnia. Depending on which statistics you use, 25-45 percent of them are without an official work contract. The “grey economy” governs all social and political relations in the country.

Aldin Siranovic is one of those who triggered the protests. In the resulting turmoil, dozens of ministers lost their jobs. He received threats but said he does not regret exposing the corruption experienced by he and his wife: “The Social Services Minister in the government toldher: ‘If you want to work in healthcare, you need to pay 25,000 Bosnian marks [approximately 13,000 euros] to the director of that institution’. I got a job in Telecom Bosnia, in the normal way. I was working over there for three months, after three months my supervisor said: ‘Hey, you didn’t pay 25,000 marks to get employed here, so if you do not pay, you will get fired and my cousin will come here to work here’.”

Bosnia looses an estimated 800 million euros a year due to manipulated public tenders. State budgets are low while public expenditure and debt are climbing ever higher.

Emir Dikic chairs the board of the Bosnian branch of the anti-corruption NGO “Transparency International”. He told euronews: “The reform of the judiciary has failed. Basically, the judiciary is still under high political pressure and we have a country that is corrupted by the six or seven most powerful persons in the country: those guys are the presidents of the leading political parties.”

There used to be several factories in Tuzla, employing around 3,000 people, including Sakib Kopic, who worked in the chemical plant for 33 years. Now he is one of the protesters and says people want to be governed by experts. Laid-off workers use the expression “mafia privatisation”. Why?

Sakib Kopic explained: “Someone comes to buy a company for almost nothing, they get one, two three bank loans, then they destroy the company, they close it down, and the privatisation-mafia put the money into their own pockets. The people who invented these privatisation schemes should be sent to prison where they should be made to crush stones with a rubber mallet.”

In Zenica, the heartland of Bosnian steel production, the people have also toppled the regional government. All over Bosnia “citizens’ assemblies” are pushing for transparency on public spending and the abolition of privileges for politicians.

Political Science student Aldin Alic and Mustafa Bisic, who is studying Economics, call themselves “change-makers” launching flash-mobs against air-pollution and taking part in citizens’ assemblies. Aldin Alic said: “The state structure is too complicated. In Bosnia-Herzegovina we have 13 regional governments, more than 130 ministries and ministers, and on the top of that we have five presidents. We have a whole bunch of leaders but they don’t lead.”

We move on to the capital, Sarajevo, where workers are repairing government buildings torched by protesters a few days ago.

Many people point the finger at the “Dayton Agreement”. The deal ended war, but by dividing power in order to stop fighting between Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats and Muslim Bosniaks it created a dysfunctional system unable to steer Bosnia through economic transition.

We asked one EU diplomat for his opinion on how to move forward. Valentin Inzko, High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, said: “I appeal to the governing decision-makers: do not be afraid of the population. Listen to the requests of the citizens. And I appeal to the public prosecutors too. Do not be afraid to do your jobs!”

Will the country join the EU one day? For the moment failure to reform the constitution has frozen Bosnia’s bid for EU accession. Nevertheless, the European Union’s Special Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Peter Sorensen, hasn’t given up hope: “What we can do and what we are doing is making sure that the offer of eventually membership is clear to everybody: The EU perspective is kept alive.”

Back in Tuzla, the Dita laundry powder factory is standing idle, having also been privatised. The workers, guarding the site, say the machines are still functional.

Fehim Avdihodzic, a Dita factory worker, said: “The factory has not worked for a year, but it could be restarted any time. We prevent the machines being removed: five shifts guard them at night, four shifts during the day.”

The workers say the factory owner did not pay social security contributions, meaning that they are no longer fully eligible for healthcare, social security or pensions.

Adnan Hamidovic is an MC & rapper who performs under the name of Frenkie. During the war, his family took refuge in Germany but today, Frenkie lives in Tuzla, and raps about the situation. He told euronews: “Politicians have been telling us the same lies over and over for the last 20 years. It’s the tactics of nationalism. Politicians use it as a weapon, and that is the main root of our problems and conflicts, even today.”

It is too early to call the protests a “Bosnian Spring”. But without change, there will be one, and possibly a violent one. The message from the EU is clear: clean up corruption and keep ethnic questions out of it. Otherwise you’re playing with fire. The Balkans are a powder keg and Bosnia is part of it.

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