

## "Bebolucija!": The #JMBG Movement in Bosnia-Herzegovina

by Jasmin Mujanovi? - Tuesday, June 11, 2013

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It may be the most important event post-war Bosnian history, to date—and it has a hashtag. Some [ten thousand individuals from all over Bosnia-Herzegovina](#) (BiH) today gathered in the streets of Sarajevo. But they gathered also in Mostar, Banja Luka, Zenica—and reports of similar manifestations are coming in from all over the country.

The issue at hand is typical of the political climate created by Bosnia's oligarchs: absurdity writ large, monitored by the international community, to the great detriment of ordinary people. In short, the problem is that newborns in BiH are not being issued ID numbers.

The newborns have fallen victim to an ongoing dispute between [Bosniak], Croat and Serb MPs of Bosnia's central parliament who for more than two years have been bickering over a draft law on the personal identification numbers.

Bosnia's constitutional court ordered a halt to the registration of newborns until the dispute is settled.

Bosniak and Croat legislators are rejecting the demand of their Serb colleagues, who want people from the Bosnian Serb part of the country to have different identification numbers than people in the rest of the country. ([Al Jazeera](#))

Without ID numbers, the parents of these children are unable to secure vital documentation, including passports. As it happens, with the general collapse of BiH's post-war social safety net, many seriously ill children and their families are forced to travel abroad for necessary treatments. However, without passports even this has become impossible. After local media reported on the case of young Belmina Ibrisevic, prevented from traveling to Germany for a life-saving surgery, events were set in motion.

Early last week, a small group of parents gathered in front of the state Parliament in Sarajevo demanding the immediate adoption of a unified state law on the issuing of ID numbers. In a country where the welfare of families, elders and children is still held up as a sacred social and individual good, the plight of Belmina and children like her tapped into a long-bubbling cauldron of discontent, all across BiH.

By Thursday, a group of a three thousand protesters had formed a human chain around the Parliament, refusing to allow any of the trapped Parliamentarians, politicians, and foreign dignitaries from leaving until a new law had been adopted. Inside, the trapped elites began feigning medical emergencies and attempting to flee through ground windows. Some attempted to force their way through the crowd with their burly entourages, some tried to paint the growing mass in the street as an "anti-Serb" mob, while others kicked off their shoes, danced and gorged themselves on food and drink. The head of the Central Bank insisted that the protesters had done irreparable harm to the image of BiH as a safe investment site.

The responses varied—but they were uniformly despicable, arrogant and illustrated perfectly the utter contempt of the BiH political class for their own people.

The weekend saw a spiral of smaller protests in Sarajevo and Banja Luka by university students, concerned about rampant corruption in the academy, but in solidarity with what had become known as the “JMBG Protests.” A barrage of Twitter and Facebook posts called on parents, students, unions and workers and the unemployed to gather on the following Tuesday in front of the Parliament. The focus remained on the implementation of a new ID law but the emerging consensus was clear: the system is broken, they’re all crooks—and all of them must go.

Even [the Western media](#) has picked up on the remarkable nature of this movement. The usual suspects attempted to play the “ethnic card”—[an institutional pillar of the Dayton constitutional order in BiH](#)—and failed. In response, [Eric Gordy](#) summarized: “The national game is up. When it worked it produced a generation of politicians who believed that firing up resentment and fear would give them a permanent hold on power. It’s ringing hollow and their permanent mark is fading. They have become objects of ridicule. They’re over.”

In May of last year, [I wrote that](#):

This political establishment has no substantive interest in meaningful reforms in BiH because they understand that a genuinely democratic and participatory society would effectively spell the end of their oligarchic reigns. In April of 1992, nearly 100,000 citizens of Sarajevo collectively and independently took to the streets, demanding a peaceful resolution to the developing crisis in the country which had already precipitated violence in Kosovo, Slovenia, Croatia and was now threatening BiH. [Nenad Pejic writes](#) that for “Bosnia’s political parties this was the greatest threat ever posed to them. An organic movement was spontaneously demanding their wholesale resignation.”

This is the narrative I want to establish in BiH today: one which recognizes the political and economic dispossession which characterizes our political system, and recognizes that only the people of BiH themselves can initiate meaningful change in response. Reconciliation between BiH’s communities will only be possible when the people themselves amputate the political classes which orchestrated and engineered the dissolution of Yugoslavia and whose heirs continue to profit from the politics of division and fear.

The people of BiH still have bridges to build between one another and they know this. These protests, as they develop and grow, however, have the potential to prove that these bridges can best (and perhaps only) be built by ordinary people themselves. Already, hot lunches are being provided, legal aid is on offer, and the brass bands are marching—organic, mutual aid is building the infrastructure for substantive change.

The transcendent, ethical imperative and focus of these protests is precisely what was necessary to definitely expose the rot within the country’s political class. There has been no shortage of causes to bring the masses out into the streets of BiH but few have so wholly polarized and crystallized things. The obvious is being chanted in the streets now: we can expect nothing from the local elites and their

international partners—not peace, not basic human dignity or democratic rights.

This movement may yet fail. A wedge may yet be driven between the masses. But two lessons have already been learnt and it is of the utmost importance that they be cemented and reiterated:

(1) Mass mobilizations are possible in BiH. They can bring people together and by instilling fear in the ruling class, they can accomplish more in days than has otherwise been accomplished in years.

(2) Democracy is only possible when the *body politic*, the civil society, the people, the *raja* are an autonomous, self-organized and mobilized force. Democracy is not something that happens in Parliaments or Central Banks. It happens in the streets, when workers and students occupy factories and universities, when ordinary people discuss and debate with one another and decide we know better, we can do better. Democracy happens when we *oppose* ourselves to Parliaments, when we replace elections with direct democracy and obedience with insurrection.

Regardless of how these heady days in BiH play out, it is difficult to imagine that they will not leave a radically remade political and social landscape in their wake. The people of BiH know their own strength now. Will they have the courage to use it to remake the country in their own image?

[Nemam više šta izgubit', idem ih rušit'!](#)