

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Godot Arrives in Sarajevo

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SARAJEVO, Bosnia and Herzegovina — A BOY, his voice heavy with embarrassment and regret, was performing Samuel Beckett in Serbo-Croatian. “Mr. Godot,” he said, “told me to tell you that he won’t come this evening, but surely tomorrow.”

It was 1993 in Sarajevo. Outside, the only sounds came from a United Nations vehicle rolling by and, in the distance, a mortar shell exploding.

The staging of the play, “Waiting for Godot,” was managed by Susan Sontag, and her choice was apt: Despite the United Nations presence, the war-torn country felt as if it was waiting for a resolution that would never arrive.

Almost 20 years later, Bosnia and Herzegovina is once more torn by strife, but this time it is different. Frustrated with corruption, political inaction, unpaid wages and youth unemployment around 60 percent, workers started a protest in the northern town of Tuzla on Feb. 4. Within days, the unrest had spread nationwide. By the time I arrived in Sarajevo a week later, scores of government buildings had been set on fire.

Around the country, protesters are not just occupying streets and public squares but organizing plenums to create alternative governments. In Sarajevo, one such assembly was taking place at the youth center, which before the wars of the 1990s was one of the most popular Western-style clubs in Yugoslavia. During the war it was hit by artillery shells and caught fire.

Now I watched as more than 1,000 people — mothers without a job, former soldiers, professors, students, desperate unpaid workers — gathered here to discuss the future of the country.

In the best tradition of direct democracy, after hours of discussion, the participants agreed to set up a completely new government, to curtail the salaries and benefits of politicians, and rein in the privatization process, which many in this country consider hopelessly corrupt.

The same day, the plenum in Tuzla forced the local government to fulfill one of its demands: eliminating the practice of paying “white bread,” or salaries of politicians after they leave office — savings of some \$700,000 a year, enough to cover about 130 average annual pensions.

Aside from these small but important victories, the people’s assemblies have succeeded in what the international community and the awkward, tripartite government it imposed failed to do over the last 20 years — namely, overcoming the rifts among the country’s Croats, Serbs and Bosnians that have haunted it since the end of the war.

During the first day of protests in Sarajevo, one young man, among 50 others, had been pushed into the river by the police. A few days later, I watched as he appeared with a broken leg in front of the plenum. “I am a Catholic, I am a Jew, I am a Muslim, I am all the citizens of this country,” he said.

Another man added: “If I am a Muslim, and he is a Serb or a Croat, if we are hungry, aren’t we brothers? We are at least brothers-in-stomach.” Then he muttered, “I am not smart, but I just wanted to say this.” From the other corner of the fully packed hall, someone replied: “If you’re here, you’re smart!”

As Andrej Nikolaidis, a Sarajevo-born writer who escaped the city while it was under siege by Serbian forces in the early 1990s, said, “The citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina are these days greater Europeans than the Europeans themselves, they are now the ones who are serious about

European ideals, while the E.U. created a museum of abandoned ideals.”

These plenums are attracting ever more people and are now part of the daily routine. During the day people protest in the streets, and afterward they gather in the assemblies. Instead of waiting for Godot — for Ms. Sontag, it was the “international community” that was supposed to stop the war; today it is the European Union, which is supposed to bring an end to economic despair — they have taken the future into their own hands.

But unlike the 1990s, when international action was the only solution, today the people are uninterested in European Union intervention. When Valentin Inzko, the union’s high representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, said the unrest might require international troops to quell it, protesters lashed out at him, too.

Of course, the cynics among us could pose the legitimate question: What happened after the Arab Spring? What happened after Occupy Wall Street? And the answer might sound disappointing for anyone hoping to see something come of these new protests: In Egypt, we had first a stronger Muslim Brotherhood, and then military rule again; in the United States we find the same financial system again. So why would Bosnia and Herzegovina be different?

But this time, protesters are up against not a military dictatorship or a financial hegemon, but an ill-conceived, poorly run government that few people, in or out of it, believe in. And it would be wrong to say that the protesters are new to this game. The people of Bosnia and Herzegovina have been struggling, in one way or another, for decades to construct a better country for themselves. In that sense, the best answer we might give, for now, also comes from Samuel Beckett: Try again, fail again, fail better.