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The Return of America

Trends seen in recent weeks will continue, and that could shake the positions of numerous corrupt politicians and bring Bosnia and Herzegovina several steps closer to the NATO alliance.

Almost three decades have passed since the appearance of new constructivism shook the traditional view of international relations as that of rivalries and fierce battles over distrustful nation-states.

The seminal paper written by Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of it", has resulted in numberless volumes that regard power not only as material resources, but also as ideas, values, identities, norms and customs.

The constructivists have demonstrated that national interest is not something that an objective observer can calculate by weighing material risk and gain, but has rather been constructed by the creator of that interest, based on the prism of ideas through which they observe the world.

This approach has also provided an answer to the question of why international relations often seem focused primarily on conflict and realpolitik, i.e.

why the realistic paradigm of an opponent is so attractive.

The more the creators are led by a realpolitik vision of the world, the more world politics will - as in a self-fulfilling prophecy - resemble the descriptions offered by realists.

Applying this constructivist approach in the case of American foreign policy, we can conclude that the former US President, Donald Trump, was just such a creator.

"AMERICA FIRST"

Trump's "America First" motto symbolizes the idea that the United States of America needs to become a "normal" state, led by a narrow definition of interest and via policies that lead to intervention only when it maximizes its power vis-à-vis other states.

There are no true friends in international relations; norms will be respected only to the extent they strengthen the position of the state; alliances are merely a temporary overlapping of interests.

"America First" gains its political meaning by comparison with the doctrines of previous Presidents against which it stands. It views Obama's liberal interventionism, Bush's neo-conservatives, and the "unavoidable nation" from Bill Clinton's era as ideological excesses that undermined American power.

That US foreign policy cannot be understood by looking only at power relations and the geopolitical map - and without understanding its content in terms of ideas - becomes quite clear in the contrast between the policy outlook of Donald Trump and that of his successor, Joe Biden.

For Biden, the USA's presence in international relations is manifested not only through its military and economic strength, but also by demonstrating the values that make up its national character.

Thus it is the natural mission of America, as the country of individual freedoms, to spread liberal democracy as the form of governance that guarantees those freedoms.

If it were just a "normal" state without a values agenda, America would betray itself.

According to this vision, it took only a few months for the new President Joe Biden to take numerous decisions that negated the foreign policy of his predecessor.

Those include the strengthening of the NATO alliance. For Biden this is not merely a case of political pragmatism - the security framework weaves together the shared values of "Western civilization".

AMERICAN POLICY CHANGE AND US

What does this policy change in Washington mean for Bosnia and Herzegovina?

If we add to the above conceptual framework the special importance President Biden attaches to American achievements in the Balkans in the 1990s, we will see his Administration's course of action.

Although the establishment of peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina serves as an example of the strength of the NATO alliance, and of the success of American

foreign policy, that peace did not bring about a state based on the matrix of ideas of its creators.

Our country still suffers from a discriminatory Constitution, a lack of democratic emancipation, self-serving elites and corruption - which is slowing down the establishment of a mature market economy.

In addition to the legacy of the war and the lack of a democratic tradition, the reason for this situation can be found in the political engineering carried out by ethnic elites - as well as in Russian influence, based on its support to autocratic local actors.

This description of the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina indicates that actions by Biden's Administration will focus on pressure to democratize the country's Constitution, strengthen the rule of law, and punish corrupt elites.

These actions are already underway - most visibly in this month's executive order which will make it easier to impose sanctions against individuals Washington has identified as obstructing the functioning of institutions, or those who are responsible for violations of human rights.

Other signs of the change in political ambiance have appeared in recent weeks, all aimed at a stronger functioning of state institutions.

For example, we finally witnessed the implementation of the decision to remove the unlawfully built church from the courtyard of Fata Orlović, the intensification of investigations in the "Memić Case", and the arrests of several public figures accused of corrupt activities.

The return of the USA to its ideological mission also implies conflict wherein there is no room for Trumpian realpolitik calculations with its ideological opponent, Vladimir Putin.

The new course means the strengthening of alliance with other liberal democracies, a direct response to Russian influence, and more energetic activity to bring Bosnia and Herzegovina closer to NATO.

In this respect, we are also seeing visible "actions on the ground".

In May, 500 soldiers - members of the Armed Forces of BiH - held a military exercise in Manjača together with 700 of their American colleagues, aimed at

demonstrating the interoperability of Bosnia and Herzegovina with the most powerful member of the NATO alliance.

Although a relatively small number of soldiers participated in this exercise, at a symbolic and political level it is still very important.

The scenes of the convoy of American soldiers passing through Banja Luka sends a message to Moscow that the US considers Bosnia and Herzegovina its own backyard, in which there is no room for two.

To the Russian protégé Milorad Dodik, the exercise demonstrated that this backyard includes the entity in which he has been ruling unchallenged for the past fifteen years.

The fact that this exercise was carried out despite Dodik's threat that "it shall not be allowed" has shown who wields the weapon of world power - and who has only an empty nationalistic rhetoric to offer as his main instrument of political survival.

On the other hand, this political course tells us little about the reach of this activity, i.e. about the borderlines that limit this ideological mission.

These lines are being established by the imperatives of a realpolitik that operates in parallel and is intertwined with a belief in the moral superiority of liberal democracy.

It is the tension between these two dimensions that causes the widespread and popular perception that the American "tale of democracy" is only a hypocritical cover for the establishment of global hegemony.

The synergy of these dimensions generates the well-known contradictions that the champion of democracy supports some autocratic regimes - such as the one in Saudi Arabia; ignores massive violations of human rights when they are committed by its allies - as in the case of the suffering of Palestinians; and refuses to strengthen the idea of human rights by participating in the work of the International Court of Justice.

Furthermore, the intensity and scope of ideological intervention varies from one case to another depending on power relations vis-à-vis other stakeholders, and it increases where it corresponds to traditional geopolitical calculations.

Therefore, to understand the intertwining of all these dimensions, i.e. the scope of current US actions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, we need to touch upon the power relations and a broader geopolitical context.

WHAT BIDEN WILL(NOT) DO?

The American unipolar moment, which in the 1990s enabled the USA to impose solutions on how to organize the state, is long gone.

Meanwhile, the US has made foreign affairs investments in other parts of the world that removed our region from the priority list of its foreign policy.

Today, furthermore, we have alternative power centers - and the one in Moscow is much more present and much more supported by local political actors who see in Russia a civilizational ally. In these constellations every attempt to unpack the existing institutional solutions would require a lot of energy and political will that cannot be found in any of the power centers.

Changes to the organization of entities, or even a return to the level of interventionism from the era of Paddy Ashdown, will not happen.

But trends seen in recent weeks will continue, and that could shake the positions of numerous corrupt politicians and bring Bosnia and Herzegovina several steps closer to the NATO alliance.

Likewise, in the forthcoming period we can expect activities on the reform of discriminatory provisions built into the Constitution of our country. With the arrival of the new High Representative, there will be stronger pressure on elected politicians to align the Election Law of BiH with the Sejdić-Finci decision.

The sum of these activities will improve the rule of law and the state of human rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which would ultimately improve the living standards of the average citizen. However, Joe Biden will not assume the responsibility that citizens themselves have for the improvement of their own society.

To clean up institutions from corrupt rulers it does not suffice to have as a weapon a great power that wants to make this state more democratic; it also requires that voters be willing to punish crime and corruption at the polling stations. This weapon is what Bosnia and Herzegovina is lacking more than anything else. ■

ANALYSIS Professor of the Faculty of Economics from Mostar writes for the Atlantic Initiative

Has Washington picked up the baton on the Europeanization of Bosnia and Herzegovina?

If so, in a relatively short period of time BiH could be freed from many of the obstacles hindering its Euro-Atlantic integration



KUKIĆ: THE IMPORTANCE OF BIDEN'S MOVES FOR THE FUTURE OF BIH

PHOTO: RADIOSARAJEVO.BA

Author: Academician Slavo Kukić

After the end of the cataclysmic Bosnian-Herzegovinian war in the mid-1990s, people in the country expected to resume living as they had for the most part of the century - alongside their neighbors, helping, respecting and understanding each other, and willing to share with them the good times and the bad. Such a future, however, was not in the plans of the ethno-nationalistic oligarchies who bear the greatest responsibility for the

Golgotha the country had experienced in the first half of the 1990s.

The centers of global power also cannot be released from their share of responsibility for what they agreed in Dayton in 1995. In the creation of the Dayton Peace Accords and the vision for building a new European Bosnia and Herzegovina, they included as partners the individuals, parties and political ideologies that were responsible for everything that the country had lived through for

almost four years: a hundred thousand killed, half the population forced to leave their homes, and the destruction and material devastation that dragged the country decades if not centuries backwards.

In spite of this, those ethno-nationalists understood that their recognition and acceptance as partners in the post-war cooling down and integration of the country represented a green light to continue working to achieve their war goals in peacetime - only this time using other instruments and methods. They have adjusted all their post-war actions to such an understanding.

WAR GOALS AS A COVER

In the first ten years after the war, the strengthened involvement of the international community did result in some positive effects and is, with everything taken into account - and with the appointment of Milorad Dodik as the Prime Minister of the Republika Srpska - the reason why Bosnia and Herzegovina stopped being the main focus of attention, particularly for the US Administration. The international community decided to leave it to domestic political protagonists to agree on disputed issues. This, however, encouraged the forces of destruction in Bosnia and Herzegovina to put their war goals back on the agenda via political means.

As time has passed the question has been increasingly posed: whether the main motive behind these destructive activities by ethno-nationalists was their desire to realize their war goals when the rest of the world was paying less attention; or whether in fact these goals have been used as a cover for everything else that had been done in the past fifteen to twenty years, the consequence of which is the ever-growing demographic emptying of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the ever-diminishing hope that the country could finally become a place in which one can live a normal life.

Many indicators suggest that the latter could be the case. For example, according to all the surveys, Bosnia and Herzegovina is at the very top of the list in Europe when it comes to the perception of corruption. The scale of crime and corruption has been described in a variety of research. While there is an almost continuous chain of criminal scandals

in which the key protagonists are high ranking government and political officials - as well as the fact that in the past fifteen years the judiciary has not existed as a separate branch of authority but rather at the service of the centers of political power - not a single judgment has been pronounced in which those individuals were found guilty for their criminal acts.

Meanwhile there has been growing external pressure on state institutions because of these issues, especially coming from the European Union (EU), and with emphasis on the 14 priorities for the opening of the accession negotiations between Bosnia and Herzegovina and the EU. The ethno-nationalists' response has been, inter alia, a diminishing interest in the process of accession as a Bosnian-Herzegovinian dream. The truth is that the ethno-nationalistic oligarchies have manifested this in different ways.

Some of them, to put it in more concrete terms, have a more openly critical attitude towards the Administration in Brussels, and even question publicly the extent to which EU accession should be the goal for Bosnia and Herzegovina, or whether we should consider other options - Euro-Asian integration in particular. Others are still trying to convince the world that joining the European family of nations is the main goal of their political activity, whereas in reality they are doing everything in their power to postpone the materialization of that goal for as long as possible.

BIDEN'S MOVES

Nevertheless, this logic of either open or hidden opposition cannot remain unanswered forever. It is true that, in all these years, no answer has come from the European direction but - irrespective of the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina is not a focus of their own interest - it has come from the US Administration.

Let us recall that corruption was the reason for the blacklisting of top-ranking figures from the political and government ranks in Bosnia and Herzegovina, such as Milorad Dodik, Nikola Špirić, Milovan Cicko Bjelica, Amir Zukić, etc.

The impression, however, is that this has not caused too much concern or alarm for the most prominent individuals among ethno-nationalistic criminal networks. However, the latest announcements by Biden's Administration may yet result in anxiety and sleeplessness for those who use the interest of Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks as cover for plunder and the promotion of a system of values in which crime and corruption are not treated as social evils.

At the beginning of June this year, the US President kept in force the Executive Order blocking assets and prohibiting from entering the US individuals whose actions contribute to the destabilization of the Western Balkans, with the explanation that such actions at the same time pose a threat to national security and as such are considered hostile acts against the USA.

Although Biden's Executive Order covers the whole Western Balkans region – with the inclusion of Albania – there is no question that its focus is primarily on the countries that were created after the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia.

This conclusion can be drawn from an additional explanation offered by the US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken. In his press statement he said, "The United States is committed to ensuring the stability and security of the Western Balkans [and] combating corruption" since it "threatens economic equity, global anti-poverty and development efforts, and democracy itself." As such it "directly damages the foreign policy, national security, and economic health of the United States."

WHO WILL BE BLACKLISTED?

The specific names of those who will be affected by this Executive Order have not been mentioned as yet. However, there has been intense speculation about certain individuals, including high-ranking political and government figures in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Without question some of this finger-pointing has been significantly influenced by input given to the Washington administration by Eric Larson, former US Prosecutor and American advisor to the Anti-Corruption Office of the Government of Sarajevo Canton.

It can be assumed that some names not necessarily directly linked to criminal and corrupt practices may be found on the blacklist as well (although such a possibility is more theoretical than politically practical) if their actions cause harm to US national interests in other ways.

We should not exclude, for example, the possibility that the US blacklist could include those whose actions are directed against the integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina into NATO – which, with the integration of Serbia, would complete the US and the EU geopolitical sphere of interest as far East as the Black Sea. Actions against NATO integration have been undertaken more and more openly in the past several years, primarily by the political establishment in the territory of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian entity, the Republika Srpska.

THE RETURN OF AMERICA

With all the aforementioned, and based on the impression that the US has definitely decided to involve itself more strongly in the Western Balkans, it seems fairly realistic to suppose that the latest announcement from the Biden Administration can be perceived as a much more serious warning than anything addressed to the ethno-nationalistic oligarchies in Bosnia and Herzegovina over the past fifteen years.

If so, Bosnia and Herzegovina could in a relatively short period of time be freed from many of the obstacles hindering its Euro-Atlantic integration, either through a radical change of behavior by current political figures for the sake of their own survival, or by exposing their crime and corruption, bringing them to court and thus eliminating them for good from the political arena.

Realistically this kind of external pressure can be expected only from the US Administration, and not at all from the Brussels institutions - from whom it is not rare to see mutually incompatible, or even opposed, particularistic interests.

Proof of this can be found in the last fifteen years of Bosnian-Herzegovinian experience. The arrival of the new President in the White House

could indeed be a prelude to a new American policy toward Bosnia and Herzegovina – and a US re-commitment to the stabilization of Bosnia and Herzegovina, both as a society and as a state, which was first made in November 1995 in Dayton, and then in Paris.

If that happens, the USA would again be the main driving force for the Europeanization of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the main reason for hope in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a country in which life is worth living. And, following the logic of Biden's Executive Order, it is serious enough that it could be in the American national interest - isn't it? ■

VIEWS Denis Romac, renowned journalist from Croatia

Consensus is crucial for BiH on the road to NATO

The Belgrade Government cooperates intensively and comprehensively with the NATO Alliance



MILITARY EXERCISE "QUICK ANSWER 21" ON MANJAČA

Author: Denis Romac
(journalist of the Večernji List daily)

In 2006, the NATO Alliance Summit was held in the beautiful Latvian capital Riga, and the author of these lines remembers very well the words of a young Latvian man who explained to him that, for Latvia, membership of NATO was more important than that of the European Union (EU). This sounded blasphemous to someone whose country wanted so much to become a member of the Union

at that moment, while perceiving NATO membership as just a step on its road to the EU.

The young Latvian man did not feel any need to explain his "sacrosanct" thesis at length, but instead pointed his finger to the East, i.e. to the Russian border.

"You never know when the Russian bear will wake up", the young Latvian interlocutor told me, while explaining how for the majority of Latvians getting into NATO meant the realization of a lifelong dream.

Latvia had joined NATO two years before the Summit, in the same year that, in a major round of enlargement, it became a member of the EU on 1 May 2004, together with nine other countries.

It was, therefore, many years before the annexation of Crimea and the intervention in the East of Ukraine that would occur eight years later when the "Russian bear" had finally woken up. What in 2006 was just a specter became a cruel reality and concrete threat in 2014.

Out of fear of the mighty and whimsical neighbor on their Eastern border, Latvians sought security in NATO - the most powerful military-political alliance in the world and the most successful military alliance in history.

CONSENSUS WITHIN BiH

Many people in Bosnia and Herzegovina know very well the feeling that the Latvians had toward NATO in those years. For Latvians at the beginning of the 2000s NATO - in guaranteeing security from their incomparably more powerful and threatening neighbor - represented the same as it does for today's Bosnia and Herzegovina: the key strategic goal that would give the country long-term security and create the preconditions for its stability.

That is why for Bosnia and Herzegovina - which has in recent years again become a stage for the confronting interests of great powers - joining NATO at this moment is an existential issue, and a strategic goal more important than its accession to the EU.

Although joining NATO is sometimes referred to only as a step on Bosnia and Herzegovina's path to EU membership - leading some to wrongly claim that no country has joined the EU before joining NATO - in the case of BiH, membership of NATO represents not only the more important, but also the more attainable goal. That is of course on the condition that within BiH the necessary political consensus exists, which is the precondition for NATO membership.

Unlike the European Union - whose further enlargement, despite proclaimed policy and promises,

at the moment is extremely questionable and uncertain - the enlargement of NATO is a realistic and attainable goal. The Union is already faced with enlargement fatigue, particularly in the case of the biggest and the most important members such as France, without whose green light there is no continuation of the expansion process.

Although we have heard European officials repeat many times that the future of the Western Balkans is in the EU and nowhere else - and that a united Europe will not be whole as long as all the countries of our region are not part of it - leading European politicians are not mentioning it any more. Or else they speak about it very rarely and unconvincingly.

Although until recently the enlargement process was considered one of the best and most successful European policies, it is obvious that (for many different reasons that we are not going to elaborate here) the enlargement process is actually suspended.

Although as early as the 2003 Thessaloniki Agenda the EU had set the formal framework for the continuation of European enlargement to include the Balkan countries - guaranteeing the European perspective on the basis of individual countries' merits - only Croatia succeeded in using that opportunity, while other Western Balkan countries remained outside of this integration process.

At the moment, only two countries are negotiating membership - Montenegro and Serbia - while two more, North Macedonia and Albania, are hoping to start their negotiations. BiH only hopes to get candidate status, and at the moment it looks like it will have to wait for quite a long time.

SECURITY AND ECONOMIC INTERESTS

Unlike the EU, NATO does not show signs of enlargement fatigue. Several years ago NATO accepted Montenegro, and more recently North Macedonia; in both cases strategically important countries in which the Russians had invested enormous energy trying to prevent their membership. For both countries, joining NATO meant leaving the Russian orbit of influence to join the Western



DENIS ROMAC

military and political camp, which always causes tectonic quakes and resistance.

With these two Western Balkan countries in NATO, Moscow has undoubtedly lost yet another strategic battle with the West in the Balkans. Disintegration, and stopping the spread of further Euro-Atlantic integration is the key – and as a matter of fact, the only – goal of Russian foreign policy in the Balkans.

Having accepted Montenegro and North Macedonia in its ranks, NATO has undoubtedly confirmed its strategic resolve, vitality and ability to absorb new members.

This does, however, provide proof indeed that a direct link no longer exists between membership of NATO and that of the EU, as it did ten or more years ago. Yet it does not mean that NATO membership is less important, particularly in the case of BiH for whom membership of the North-Atlantic Treaty Alliance is vital and precious.

Why is membership of NATO precious for BiH?

Many malevolent players now perceive Bosnia and Herzegovina as booty again. Russia and China,

for example, are shrewdly using the weakness and indecisiveness of the EU to spread their own influence. Russia is openly trying to prevent further expansion of Euro-Atlantic integration.

On the eve of Montenegro's accession to NATO in October 2016, during the decisive Parliamentary Elections, Russian citizens - together with Montenegrins - participated in planning a coup d'état and an attempt to assassinate pro-Western Montenegrin leaders, with the aim of installing a pro-Russian and pro-Serbian government in Podgorica.

After this failure pro-Serbian and pro-Russian forces have not given up, as the results of the last election in Montenegro clearly show. Following those elections, a pro-Serbian and pro-Russian coalition was finally installed in Podgorica, dominated by the advocates of Greater Serbia and clerics. Although for the time being they do not fulfill the great expectations of its sponsors in the Serb Orthodox Church, Belgrade and Moscow, which is why Belgrade is not openly calling for the current government to be overthrown.

In the last several years, Russia has intensified its intelligence, political and economic presence in the

region, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular, as it tries to shake the country's confidence in the EU and NATO. Proof of this is the recent gaffe by the Russian Embassy in BiH which stated that BiH getting closer to NATO is "an act of hostility against Russia" to which Russia will be forced to react - which represents a direct threat expressed against a sovereign country.

NATO AND SERBIA

The recently published Slovenian non-paper with the proposal "to finalize the process of disintegration of Yugoslavia" evidently confirms why membership of NATO is crucial for the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina, given that ideas of new ethnic divisions in the Balkans were revived during Donald Trump's term in office.

Of course the relevance of that document should not be overstated, since it was created most likely towards the end of Trump's term. But one should not underestimate it, particularly since the European Council also unequivocally confirmed the existence of the Slovenian non-paper - which contains an initiative to change the borders in the Western Balkans - although it refused access to the document itself, as well as refusing to make its content public. After a detailed analysis, the Council concluded that the publication of the document would, as they put it, "jeopardize international relations".

When we view the non-paper in the context of "the Serb World" policy - which Vučić's Interior Minister Aleksandar Vulin explained Serbia will not give up, just like it will not give up "its" Republika Srpska - it is clear that Serbia again sees itself in the role of the regional hegemon, despite that same policy ending in multiple defeats in the 1990s, the consequences of which Belgrade cannot reconcile with even today. Vulin proclaimed the creation of "the Serb World" as the most important project of his generation.

All of the above represents a huge challenge for Bosnia and Herzegovina, and one of the solutions for it is to get closer to and then join NATO. Advocates of the Euro-Atlantic road for BiH should not miss the current momentum, marked by the arrival of the new US Administration and the

return of the United States to the Balkans. The US is still the only super-power with any real power in the Balkans, and the only one capable of opposing those who would create new borders, those who promote ethnic divisions and corruption, those who do not respect the judgments of the international tribunals, and those who deny that genocide was committed in Srebrenica.

SECURING INTERNAL CONSENSUS

We will soon see how serious and how resolved Biden's Administration is when it comes to its announcement of sanctions, the freezing of assets, and its ban on entry into the USA for all Balkan leaders who have been contributing to the region's destabilization.

However, just as the greatest threat for Bosnia and Herzegovina does not come from the outside but from within BiH, so the solution to its problem must come from within.

Bosnia and Herzegovina itself will have to overcome its internal contradictions in order to secure internal cohesion and legal certainty, without which there is no stability. That will make it easier for the country to continue down the road to NATO membership - which is primarily a political, and only afterwards a military alliance.

The key to Bosnia and Herzegovina joining NATO is, I repeat, the achievement of internal consensus. At the moment, Bosniaks and Croats support it, while the Serb leadership faithfully follows the Serbian narrative vis à vis NATO - although at the same time the Government in Belgrade cooperates intensively and comprehensively with the Alliance. This is yet another internal paradox for which BiH must find a solution. ■

The author is a well-known Croatian journalist

Why the urgency on adoption of the Election Law?

Blackmail justified by urgency should not be used regardless of the threats that come with it. The Bosnian-Herzegovinian approach needs to be based on peace and progressive ideas, not on wars and division.



SENADA ŠELO ŠABIĆ: CROATIA WANTS TO ACHIEVE ITS STRATEGIC GOAL THROUGH THE BIH ELECTION LAW

Author: Senada Šelo Šabić, PhD

Ever since Bosnia and Herzegovina marked the 25th anniversary of the end of the war and the implementation of the Dayton Peace Accord at the end of last year, an avalanche of events began that indicate a need to change the situation in the country.

It is clear that with the present Dayton Accord setup, Bosnia and Herzegovina can hardly become a stable, functioning and progressive state. Institutional

blockades on decision-making processes, political polarization, the reduction of political interests to ethnic considerations, the rewarding of ever more extreme political party positions - these things are built into the very DNA of Dayton.

The system has to be changed but the question is how? Debates on the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina occur between two opposing viewpoints: the strengthening of ethnically defined politics (the



MILANOVIĆ I DODIK: FIRST SOAP AND ONLY THEN PERFUME.

PHOTO: URED PREDSEDNIKA RH

principle of government founded on constituent peoples as the holders of democratic legitimacy); or of civic foundations (the principle of government founded on the individual, on citizens as holders of democratic legitimacy).

The European Union (EU) states and the countries neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina are founded on the civic principle of democratic government. This is denied to Bosnia and Herzegovina on the premise that it is inhabited by different peoples and that they are, according to such views, the fundamental holders of democratic legitimacy. Citizens come next, as a civilizational and democratic upgrade of the state. Or, as stated by Croatia's President Zoran Milanović: First soap and only then perfume.¹

Needless to say we should have learned from the past how dangerous it is to advocate for cultural, racial, ethnic or any other superiority, and how such views lead to conflict and cause pain. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the moment has now come to channel politics into one or the other direction: towards the ethnic, tribal and particularistic, or towards the civic, inclusive and pluralistic model.

Right now, Bosnia and Herzegovina has indeed a weakened potential for the civic model, which is the result of the 1990s war and a quarter-century's

domination of the ethnic principle. This potential, however, does exist. It may be weak but if nurtured properly and well, it can grow. It is just a question of deciding what direction to take.

The civic principles are close to the hearts of progressive democratic countries around the world because it is a model the values of which they recognize and apply at home. Decisions by the European Court for Human Rights, the Venice Commission, as well as the 2019 European Commission's Recommendations - with their 14 priorities to be fulfilled by Bosnia and Herzegovina in order to meet the conditions for candidate status - favour the principle of equality of all BiH citizens and the elimination of discrimination against citizens who do not belong to any of the three constituent ethnic groups. In Bosnia and Herzegovina it is possible to introduce a model based on the civic principle that would take into account the country's realities and ensure the protection of collective rights in those areas to which they relate, primarily the domains of culture and identity of different ethnic groups.

CROATIA'S INTERESTS

Croatia, as Bosnia and Herzegovina's neighbouring country, shows a growing interest in internal political changes in BiH, and advocates for the principle

of constituent peoples, i.e. collective rights at the expense of civic rights.

Just like Serbia, Croatia advocates for so-called full implementation of the Dayton Peace Accord. In that respect, both countries' standpoint is that of maintaining the status quo - seeking limited changes to the existing system - because they would best secure their own interests in that way. It is in this context that the next paragraphs should be read.

"For the first time since 2000, Croatia has developed a clear and strategic policy towards Bosnia and Herzegovina, known as the 'good-neighbourly pressure policy' and promotes it, accepting all the risks involved: this is the policy of ultimatum for the change of the Election Law so that every people would elect its own representatives."²

Going by this plan, Croatia has just one goal: adoption of amendments to the Election Law as demanded by the HDZ BiH, and after that Croatia would withdraw from the stage and stop interfering with internal issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Why? Because by securing the domination of constituent peoples Croatia would achieve its strategic goal: the possibility for all Croats in BiH, as one of its constituent peoples, to gain full control over and block political processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Why is the protection of constituent people so crucial an approach for Croatia, rather than the establishment of the civic principle or the territorial partition of Bosnia and Herzegovina? Here Croatia is very clear, and one should believe it when it says that its goal is the preservation of an integral Bosnia and Herzegovina in which constituent peoples are the fundamental holders of power. Strategically, Croatia achieves the highest level of security for itself if it has the possibility of influencing the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina using the position of Croat people as one of its three constituent peoples. The civic approach would greatly reduce such a possibility.

Territorial partition of Bosnia and Herzegovina is not a good option either, indeed it is a dangerous scenario for Croatia. The possibility of integrating a part of BiH territory - which could potentially

be given to Croatia - is very problematic from the point of view of Croatian internal relations.

Hypothetically, a referendum on annexation of a part of Bosnia and Herzegovina to Croatia could easily lead to a deep internal destabilisation in Croatia, and to secession claims from Istria, for example. The principle of constituent peoples is therefore the optimum solution since it enables permanent control, hence why Croatia and Serbia - as well as the forces that support them in Bosnia and Croatia - advocate for the implementation of the so-called original Dayton. However with such a policy, even at an unconscious level, both Croatia and Serbia would become hostage to internal relations within Bosnia and Herzegovina, and it is in their interest to free up their policy towards BiH, and leave it to that country's citizens to decide what kind of a state they want to live in.

Although the civic potential in Bosnia and Herzegovina is still weak (because the mutual trust among its citizens is at a very low level), it has not been destroyed entirely, regardless of the years of neglect of its citizens. At this moment we are witnessing the intensification of activities within Bosnia and Herzegovina and beyond which aim at cementing the principle of the rule of constituent peoples, and thus further ethnic divisions.

WHAT IS THE REASON FOR SUCH URGENCY?

Why now? One reason lies in the internal situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina: 25 years of political neglect, indolence, corruption and constant insistence on "one's own" rights at the expense of shared interests has almost resulted in the breakdown of Bosnian-Herzegovinian politics. Its non-functionality has been painfully underscored by the global pandemic. Across the country there is growing anger from citizens towards irresponsible and corrupt authorities.

Outside of Bosnia and Herzegovina, non-liberal regimes in Europe have been affected by Joe Biden's US Election victory and Donald Trump's ousting from US politics. The new US Administration consists of people who know the situation in Europe and the Western Balkans well, and one may expect at least a partial interest in the strengthening of Trans-Atlantic cooperation and advocacy for partnership within the bloc of Western countries.

The rising popularity of the Green Party in Germany also creates fears of the impact their stronger presence in the German government could have, with Germany still the key country for defining the course of EU policy in the Western Balkans. Germany has already publicly expressed that changes to the Election Law need to lead to a reconciliation and cooperation, and not to further divisions.³

The EU representatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for their part, claim that this is the critical year for things to be changed because there are no elections; they want the issue of reform to the Election Law to be resolved in the next several months, at any cost.⁴ This benefits the advocates of the ethnic principle because they are in power now, and they are willing to do everything in their power to introduce changes that would enable them to keep winning future elections and maintain their rule.

We are thus at the point where, in the following months, decisions will have to be taken and amendments to the Law adopted that will decide on one or the other route ahead for Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is in this sense that one needs to read the so-called Slovenian non-paper - as a voice of non-liberal Europe - which advocates for the need to finish the process of the disintegration of Yugoslavia⁵. Similar solutions for the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina are offered in Croatia's non-paper, which is moderate and constructive in tone yet urges change to the Election Law.

Croatia justifies the urgency of such developments by referring to the migration situation - something which is a far greater problem for the EU than the political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is indicative to note which countries are supportive of Croatia's non-paper: Greece, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Slovenia. All of them are countries on the so-called Balkans migration route.⁶

AND WHAT NEXT...

It is incredible how the urgency is emphasized now, compared to the past quarter of a century. That urgency is reflected in the feeling that the US will rebuild Trans-Atlantic relations; in the uncertainty regarding the next German Chancellor; and in the belief that the pandemic will be over some day,

and will be followed by a new wave of liberalism and advocacy for freedoms as a natural reflex after several years of toughening of human rights.

Bosnian-Herzegovinian forces that advocate for the civic principle of the country's organization - with all the accompanying protection of collective rights of peoples - have no other option but to seek a partnership with the liberal Western countries where the citizen is a fundamental holder of democratic rights and responsibilities.

And to seek within itself those forces that base their political programmes and activities on the rule of law, inclusion, transparency and responsibility towards society. Blackmail justified by urgency should not be used regardless of the threats that come with it. The Bosnian-Herzegovinian approach needs to be based on peace and progressive ideas, not on wars and divisions. ■

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REGION Renowned writer and columnist Andrej Nikolaidis writes for Atlantic Initiative

Montenegrin society is boiling

Analysts say the security situation in Montenegro would be much more complex, and political processes unpredictable, were the country not a member of NATO



NIKOLAIDIS: IMPORTANT DECISION TO JOIN NATO

(PHOTO: TANJA DRAŠKIĆ SAVIĆ-SAJAM KNJIGE)

Author: Andrej Nikolaidis

When the Parliamentary Election on 30 August 2020 brought about a change after 30 years of rule by the Democratic Party of Socialists, many analysts were taken by surprise at how smoothly the transition of power was carried out.

The process was completed with such efficiency and democratic maturity it felt as if this was usual practice in Montenegro - yet it was the first time such a transition had taken place in the history of this small Balkan-Mediterranean country. All previous successions recorded in Montenegrin history had a (counter) revolutionary character: 1918, 1945, 1989 (recalling only those that occurred in the 20th century).

Obviously analysts were not well informed about the situation in Montenegro. Long-term power is not a synonym for dictatorship and Montenegro, under Democratic Party of Socialists rule, was not a dictatorship – just as it was certainly not a Westminster-type democracy.

In 2017, Montenegro became a member of NATO. Since NATO is not just a military alliance but also a community of values, analysts should have taken the claims made by the Kremlin about the "despotic regime in Montenegro" with a grain of salt. Why would NATO, as the global guardian of democratic values, accept "a criminal Balkan dictatorship" within its ranks, to cite yet another description of Montenegro by the Moscow-controlled media?



NATIONALISTIC OUTCRY IN PLJEVLJA

SECURITY SECTOR APPOINTMENTS

That "despotic regime" lost the election by a mere 1,600 votes and admitted defeat three hours after polling stations closed; this was followed by an unimpeded, routine democratic transition of power. Cohabitation between the newly elected government and President Đukanović is apparently happening with fewer altercations than in Croatia, for example.

Montenegrin society, however, is boiling. Among its citizens there is a growing fear that the new government's commitment to European integration and NATO membership is only rhetorical.

A series of appointments of new officials in the security sector gives rise to suspicion, above all that of Dejan Vukšić - the defence lawyer for the notorious "Kvački" narco-clan, the man with an impeccable pro-Russian dossier - as director of the National Security Agency.

When it was revealed that Vukšić himself submitted protected information about CIA agents and their actions against Russian agents active in Montenegro to pro-Russian parliamentary delegates, hardly anyone was surprised by this news.

A series of other appointments has left the democratic public of Montenegro in disbelief.

Milan Knežević, one of the leaders of the anti-NATO campaign - who was accused of participating in the attempt by the Kremlin to orchestrate a coup d'état in the country in 2016 - has been appointed to chair the Parliamentary Security Committee.

Meanwhile Knežević's party colleague, Jovan Vučurović - recognisable for his aggressive homophobic views, and known as the radical denier of the genocide in Srebrenica - was appointed to preside over the Parliamentary Human Rights Committee, a move viewed as brutal deriding those who advocate for a policy of facing the past and seeking reconciliation.

The same pattern occurs in the process of so-called "in-depth recruitment" - a euphemism for the ongoing unacceptable, undemocratic practice of recruiting party members across the administration: radical pro-Russian politicians were appointed to scores of responsible positions in the security sector, public administration and executive branch.

IF THIS IS NOT CHAUVINISM....

In the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a brutal purge of pro-Western diplomats has been carried out. Reliable analysts say that the Montenegrin diplomatic corps, which had been dedicated to EU and NATO integration for two decades, has now been dismantled and replaced by a network of diplomats who, while

maintaining pro-Western rhetoric, will unswervingly carry out a pro-Russian and pro-Serbian agenda.

Concern is particularly felt among minorities, who make up a third of Montenegro's population. A series of attacks against members of minorities, including the desecration of mosques, has been carried out since the Elections.

The situation has been particularly tense on several occasions in Pljevlja, a town with a significant Bosniak population. Over the course of April 2021, supporters of the ruling coalition gathered in front of the local Police station to protest against the appointment of Haris Đurđević - a Bosniak - as the local chief of police.

The crowd shouted nationalistic slogans, denigrating Bosniaks to the extent that even the Montenegro Grand Mufti Rifat Fejzić had to react, saying: "If this is not chauvinism we are seeing in Pljevlja, I don't know what is."

At the same time, ethnic tensions between Serbs and Montenegrins in Montenegro are at their highest since the 1990 war. Of great concern is the Government's refusal to take responsibility (and, of course, adequate measures to mitigate the problem) for this alarming rise in ethnic tensions. The current administration's practice of blaming the previous government for the detrimental consequences of their own policies is obviously no solution – not even a rhetorical one.

There are no signs of tensions being resolved soon; on the contrary we can expect them to intensify, potentially very soon. The Government's decision to sign a controversial and legally disputable agreement with the Serb Orthodox Church is already a cause of protest, with huge rallies planned in Montenegrin towns.

Particularly worrisome is the government's announcement that it will strip Montenegrin citizens temporarily working in European countries of their right to vote. The Bosniak Party, as well as Albanian national parties in Montenegro, have recognized in this an intent to carry out electoral ethnic engineering, since it will - almost without exception - be members of ethnic minorities in Montenegro who are deprived of the vote. Meanwhile the Government is planning

a series of measures that will increase the number of Serbs in the country's electorate. In the long run it is a dangerous and detrimental policy, on a complete collision course with the multi-ethnic, multi-religious nature of Montenegrin society and European democratic practices.

ATTACKS FROM SERBIA

To make things worse, under the new Government the leading and managerial positions have become practically unattainable for members of ethnic minorities in Montenegro. Moreover, for the first time since the regaining of independence in 2006 the parties of ethnic minorities are not part of the ruling majority. The Government is facing well-founded accusations of being practically mono-ethnic and mono-religious.

In parallel with all the aforementioned developments, Montenegro is exposed to continuous meddling by Serbia in its internal affairs. A very direct example is the brutal interference in a local election in Nikšić, which has been meticulously documented. Serbia's officials, such as the Minister of Police Aleksandar Vulin, as well as several high profile Belgrade analysts, are using national TV stations and government-controlled media to announce changes to the Montenegrin border and/or the change of its state and legal status, and its annexation by Serbia. The new Montenegrin government does not react except to minimize and relativize such announcements, which additionally alarms the Montenegrin public.

In such a situation, Montenegro's decision to join NATO seems even more important now than at the time it was taken. Numerous analysts say the security situation in Montenegro would be much more complex, and political processes unpredictable, were the country not a member of NATO.

It is beyond doubt that the current situation is untenable. Montenegro needs a democratic dialogue but the Government sends out no signals of wanting such a dialogue. Instead it persists in outvoting, in the abuse of its thin parliamentary majority (41 delegates versus 40 opposition delegates), and in imposing controversial decisions that further polarize Montenegrin society and make the security situation even more complex. ■

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