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## EDITORIAL

# The Future of Europe: The Threat of Military Aggression against Ukraine and Secessionism in Bosnia and Herzegovina

By: Edina Bećirević

Since Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014, many Western analysts have warned of parallels between Ukraine and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), but these warnings have mostly been ignored by those with the most influence over Euro-Atlantic policy towards Russia. In Europe, reactions to Russia's "active measures" have been mild, even though they amount to a dirty political war in which disinformation, sabotage, and espionage are deployed as weapons, aimed at destabilizing other countries. Unlike the US, which has responded to Russian measures with a sanctions regime and where investments were made to protect electoral processes after evidence of Russian involvement in the 2016 election was uncovered, most of the European countries impacted by Russian meddling have never officially admitted to Moscow's interference in their elections or referendums. Moreover, European powers have had relatively little to say about Russia's very open support for extremist figures and organizations in the European (and global) far-right.

As Russia has mounted a force at Ukrainian borders in recent weeks, NATO-Russia relations have predictably deteriorated, but this has also brought divisions among NATO allies to the surface, to the extent that some wonder whether this was Putin's real goal. Indeed, the experts themselves are divided. Some believe Russian forces are bluffing when it comes to invading Ukraine and argue that their build up is all part of Putin's strategy to change the position of Russia vis-à-vis the West and receive guarantees from NATO that it will not expand further east. Others predict that Putin is ready to go all the way, predicting that an invasion into Ukraine will begin in the next few weeks. No one really knows what Putin will choose; including perhaps even Putin himself. Still, whatever move Russia makes, it is clear that the European approach of "appeasement" cannot be the future of Euro-Russian relations.

Events in Ukraine have once again overshadowed the security crisis in BiH, and Western allies are once again reluctant to see similarities between the two crises. But these cases offer significant material for comparative analysis, and the Atlantic Initiative addressed this in 2014, discussing the ‘Bosnianization of Ukraine’ (or the ‘Ukrainization of Bosnia’, depending on how you look at it). Eight years later, Russia continues to be the key destabilizing factor in both countries. In this publication, Senad Pećanin, who visited Ukraine at the end of January, writes that the future of Europe will be determined by the fate of Ukraine and BiH, and concludes that “[u]nlike Great Britain, America and Europe are not up to the task.” Yet, Russia has gone too far this time, and whether Western allies wish to or not, they will have to consolidate their response.

There are a dizzying array of crises in the world these days, all requiring the attention of Euro-Atlantic allies, especially the US. But it is important to note that, in BiH and the wider region, Western governments have institutional, economic, and political tools with which they can demonstrate their superiority over Russia. Of course, crises in the region cannot be attributed only to the negligence of the liberal West and the malfeasance of Russia, and the responsibility of local political elites for systemic corruption is unquestionable. However, in the case of BiH, the structure of the Dayton Peace Agreement has incentivized opportunistic ethno-national elites to further develop mechanisms of ethnic domination that eliminate any possibility of political fair play for civic, multiethnic parties. Thus, it is impossible to move from the ethnic to the civic without active engagement by the liberal West and the active mitigation of Russian influence.

But any serious strategy must also address the malignant activities of Serbia and Croatia in BiH. For example, despite Angela Merkel’s symbolic farewell visit to Belgrade, Toby Vogel expresses hope in his text that the new German government will give up supporting autocratic stabilocracies. He proposes that Germany should adopt a more proactive course in BiH and that, as a whole, Euro-Atlantic allies should change their approach to resolving the Bosnian crisis. Vogel brings a dose of optimism, as he sees an opportunity here for BiH to adopt a “new social contract” that benefits citizens, and not ethno-national elites.

The depth and essence of the nationalist ideologies advocated by these elites, who actively work to divide BiH, often seem to be underestimated by Western negotiators and envoys. In recent months, much of their focus has been on corruption and “nationalist rhetoric” in BiH, but the way they use the term “nationalist rhetoric” implies that they fail to appreciate the degree to which nationalism goes far beyond rhetoric. In his text, Vahidin Preljević reflects the gravity of the problem of ethno-nationalism and suggests that corrupt motives should not be “viewed separately from the nationalist agenda.” He frames radical ethno-nationalisms in the Balkans, and in BiH particularly – where they have manifested in the secessionist plan of Milorad Dodik for Serbs to break away from BiH and the demands of Dragan Čović for the “legitimate representation” of Croats in a third, exclusively Croat entity – as an “ideological global war” in which the West has retreated in the face of “Russia’s aggressive onslaught against the foundations of a liberal and democratic order.”

Jasmin Mujanović analyzes the causes of the crisis that has culminated in Dodik’s secessionist efforts and Čović’s call for the establishment of a de facto third entity. Mujanović explains how a toxic combination of Serbian, Croatian, Russian, and Chinese actions have given weight to an “anti-Bosnian axis”. He offers recommendations that could be used as the basis of a platform for political forces in BiH who refer to themselves as “patriotic,” such as the need to establish a strong chain of command, security readiness, and a modern foreign policy, and to recognize that alliances should be prioritized as they can channel the rhetoric of pro-Bosnian actors “into effective political action, both locally and internationally.”

The truth is, all will be in vain if, under pressure from Europe and the US, the demands of the HDZ and Čović for “legitimate representation” are fulfilled. According to Ivo Komšić, this would mean the practical political marginalization of Croats in the region of Central Bosnia, which may encourage some to emigrate. Komšić notes that the rhetoric of the HDZ in Croatia and in BiH is meant to create distance between

Bosniaks and Croats, especially in Central Bosnia, because “hate is a political strategy of emigration.” He highlights that Central Bosnian Croats were key to the survival of the state of BiH during the war, and remain so today, as political battles continue to swirl around them. Komšić is skeptical of the intentions of Bosniak leader Bakir Izetbegović, who has shown a willingness to comply with some of Čović’s demands, warning that the strategic importance of Croats in Central Bosnia should not be forgotten or minimized.

In his text, Borut Šuklje takes a closer look at Milorad Dodik – the man who transformed the Bosnian political crisis into a security crisis. Titled “From the Washington Marriott to the written-off political basketball player,” this former ambassador from the Republic of Slovenia deconstructs Dodik’s personality and motivations with the eye of a diplomat. He follows the path Dodik has travelled, from his one-time status as a favorite of the US, hailed by the West, to his relative isolation as a close associate of Russia.

The texts in this issue of the Atlantic Initiative Newsletter take on various aspects of the political and security crisis in BiH, but they are united by the awareness of each author of Russia’s malignant influence. Following the Cold War, when Russia exited the orbit of states treated as a danger to liberal values and was no longer seen as a potential challenge to the strategic interests of the West, it was labelled by the international order as a “harmless” state; and clearly, it can be hard for governments to adapt to changing realities. This is why standard operating procedures and established response models are a shortcoming of large security systems, and are particularly pronounced in crisis situations.

In this case, it seems the West has been committed to viewing events exclusively through the prism of economic power and has thus seen China as the only serious threat to Western domination. The West turned its focus away from Russia after the Cold War; but Russia never turned its focus from the West, and never stopped aiming to harm Western countries and undermine their values. ■

An Exclusive for the Atlantic Initiative from Kiev, Ukraine

# Listening to the echo of Putin's Russia in Ukraine

The task for the US, but no less for Europe, is to convince Putin that attacking Ukraine or supporting the disintegration of Bosnia and Herzegovina only serves to diminish Russia's chances of regaining global power.



By: Senad Pećanin

The future of Europe at the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century will be determined by the destinies of Ukraine and Bosnia and Herzegovina. These two countries have for years been the victims of two opposing relational forces among the European countries: the principles established at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, and the foundations of the European interstate architecture adopted in the Final Declaration of the Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe in 1975. The Congress of Vienna had the

task of “calming the ground” in Europe following revolutionary upheaval and war, including the Napoleonic conquests. It created the ‘Holy Alliance’ of German (Prussian), Austrian and Russian powers. It was later joined by all European countries except Great Britain, and its goal was to restore and preserve the conservative, Christian identity-based order. The Congress of Vienna was a coordinated response to the “spectre” of liberal and revolutionary ideas which, as a result of the French Revolution of 1789, spread unstoppably through Europe. The First and Second World Wars were cataclysmic events that clearly demonstrated the accumulated

contradictions around the roles, importance and rights of the individual countries in the European but also global geo-political context, which was only temporarily brought into balance by the Berlin Congress of 1878.

### **PUTIN'S SUPPORTERS IN EUROPE**

The Final Act of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, signed in Helsinki on August 1st, 1975 (by all European countries except Albania, plus the United States and Canada), represents a legally accepted obligation for international *decency* in relations between countries. The preamble and first article of the Final Act state that the signatories declare their readiness to respect and implement, in their relations with other participating states - and regardless of their political, economic or social system or their size, geographical location or level of economic development - the following principles: 'Participating States will respect each other's sovereign equality and individuality, as well as all the rights inherent in and encompassed by its sovereignty, including in particular the right of every State to juridical equality, territorial integrity, and freedom and political independence. They will also respect each other's right freely to choose and develop political, social, economic and cultural systems, as well as its right to determine its laws and regulations. Within the framework of international law, all the participating States have equal rights and duties. They will respect each other's right to define and conduct as it wishes its relations with other States in accordance with international law and in the spirit of the present Declaration. They consider that their frontiers can be changed in accordance with international law, by peaceful means and by agreement. They also have the right to belong or not to belong to international organisations, to be or not to be party to bilateral or multilateral treaties, including the right to be or not to be party to treaties of alliance; they also have the right to neutrality.'

While not a single European country, including Russia, has withdrawn its signature from the Helsinki Final Act, it sounds like a humorous read today. Especially to the citizens of Ukraine, who for weeks now have feared that Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin will continue the conquests which he began in Georgia in 2008 and continued six years later with the

occupation of Ukrainian territories in Donetsk and Luhansk, the annexation of Crimea, and a training exercise in the recent military intervention by special forces in Kazakhstan. While residents of Kiev are stockpiling medical supplies and receiving information about the nearest Cold War nuclear shelters as they listen to the echoes of Russian troops on Ukraine's border with Belarus, Putin's supporters in Europe - such as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Croatian President Zoran Milanović, Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić - speak with great sympathy about Russia's right to its own security. This right is in complete contradiction to Article One of the Helsinki Final Act and represents the restoration of Brezhnev's doctrine of "limited sovereignty", which was imposed on all communist states of the former Soviet Warsaw Pact.

The European Union, although a global economic power, is once again proving to be a political and military dwarf. While it seems that the UK's withdrawal was a result of the Conservative Party's use of populism in order to retain power, the clearest justification for its strategic thinking is in its attitude towards Ukraine itself; more precisely in the difference between the UK and the most powerful European Union state, Germany. Nothing illustrates short-sighted German egoism in protecting its own economic and energy interests better than the fact that British military planes, carrying aid to Ukraine in the form of defensive armaments, were not permitted to overfly German airspace?!

### **BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA AS A PARADIGM FOR THE FUTURE OF EUROPE**

Given the power, importance and role of Germany in the EU, it is worth looking at two key sets of arguments by which Germany defends its shameful attitude towards Ukraine and, by extension, towards Putin's Russia. The first concerns an alleged sense of historical unease and guilt over Nazi aggression against Russia in World War II; the second relates to concerns about energy security and the importance of supplying Germany with Russian gas.

Both arguments are false. The first because the historical unease over Hitler's aggression and crimes does not give Germany the right to remain neutral



**A CORDIAL MEETING BETWEEN FORMER GERMAN CHANCELLOR GERHARD SCHRÖDER AND RUSSIAN PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN**

(PHOTO: TWITTER)

as long as Putin treats Ukraine in the same way; in addition, as many as 10 million Ukrainians lost their lives against the German Nazis (including during the liberation of Belgrade), and more Ukrainians than Russians died on the Eastern Front in World War II. On the other hand, although Ukraine has never (unlike Russia) exploited the fact that most of Europe is still supplied with Russian gas via a pipeline running through its territory, Germany went ahead and built the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which bypassed Ukraine and enabled Putin to shred its territory piece by piece.

Unfortunately corruption is of great importance for egoistic German state policy. More precisely, Russian corruption of local political, cultural and public figures in all the countries, from Europe to America, in which Russia considers itself to have an interest. At the same time, Putin's regime is not squeamish at all: it doesn't matter whether they are influential people from large or small nations, right or left, active or former politicians, government or opposition, intellectuals or artists, Christians or Muslims... The most striking example of purposeful, strategic investment in 'decision and opinion makers' is the incredible, incomprehensible fact that immediately after the end of his term the former German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder became, and remains today, the official public mercenary of Gazprom.

On the other hand the fate of Bosnia and Herzegovina is a paradigmatic roadmap for the future of Europe. While enjoying Russia's undisguised help Serbia - with the support of Hungary, Croatia and Slovenia - has brought Bosnia and Herzegovina to the brink of a new war. Open threats of secession by Republika Srpska, an entity founded on genocide, are met with lukewarm resistance from the European Union.

If BiH is "Yugoslavia in miniature" (as Serbian nationalists call it), then the whole Balkans is Europe in micro. If in today's constellation of relations BiH (and consequently Northern Macedonia and Montenegro) cannot survive, then today's 'Europe' (EU) cannot survive even at its current dysfunctional level. The differences between most EU members with their liberal democratic systems on the one hand, and Orbán's "illiberal" Hungary on the other, are greater than those that exist between BiH, Northern Macedonia and Montenegro on the one hand, and Serbia on the other. Serbia today is a permanent threat to the stability, territorial integrity and sovereignty of the countries bordering it. Unlike in Ukraine, endangering the right of BiH to exist has an added dimension: the fact that the majority population in this centuries-old multi-confessional country are Muslims - ethnic Bosniaks. The present rejection of demands to define Europe as a community of

peoples of exclusively Christian identity will, in the evolving fate of Bosnia and Herzegovina, reveal the true character of today's European Union. If Orbán is right when he says publicly that for the EU the problem of BiH's integration is its two million Muslims - indigenous Slavic peoples and the world's most secular Muslims - then there is no essential difference between European relations towards Russia and towards Serbia. And this relationship, according to what we have witnessed so far, is flexible enough in the belief that it can accommodate Greater Russian and Greater Serbian imperial, in essence neo-fascist, aspirations without consequences. Clearly history is often not our teacher (see under: Munich Agreement of 1938, signatories Neville Chamberlain and Edouard Daladier, Great Britain and France, Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, Third Reich and Italy).

### GEOPOLITICAL PLAY-OFF

Ukraine and Bosnia and Herzegovina face the delicate task of choosing a strategy of resistance to the aggression of militarily superior neighbours. Although it may seem cynical, these countries do not have a smarter choice than in pointing to international law and the interests of Europe as a whole. The defenders of BiH face an additional trap: despite the fact that all neo-fascists in Europe loudly or tacitly support the country's disintegration (also) because of the Muslim identity of its majority Bosniaks, the state cannot be preserved by their fighting primarily as Muslims. And the leader of the leading nationalist Bosniak party, Bakir Izetbegović, is doing exactly that: he has publicly announced his courting of Islamic countries for help in defending his country. He clearly does not understand that Islamic countries cannot protect his homeland, and that the only chance for the survival of both the country and his people is based on defending Bosniaks as authentic European people - whatever that means!

The entire world is trying to figure out whether Vladimir Putin will *really* pursue military aggression against Ukraine. A lucid answer was given by Gennady Sisoyev, Western Balkans correspondent for Russia's *Kommersant*. He reminds us that President Obama called Russia a "regional power". Given Putin's repeated professions that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geo-political tragedy of the 20th century, clearly this assessment

would have been a stab to the heart. Russia's role in the Syrian war, but also across the Middle East, gave Putin an excellent opportunity to prove that Russia remains much more than a regional power. Putin is also aware that established geopolitical orders and relations change only after major historical events (World War I - Versailles Conference; World War II - Yalta Conference in Crimea (today's Ukraine); Cold war - "The End of History"). Therefore, Sisoyev concludes, his decision to attack Ukraine will depend on whether he believes the threat itself is enough to bring about negotiations with the US - after which no American president would think of describing Russia as a "regional power" in the foreseeable future.

The task for the US, but no less for Europe, is to convince Putin that attacking Ukraine or supporting the disintegration of Bosnia and Herzegovina only serves to diminish Russia's chances of regaining global power. For now neither the US or the EU (unlike the UK) is up to this historic task. A big question is whether they will have a chance to make amends in the similar geo-political play-off they will face when China starts "cementing" its position as a global superpower by preparing aggression against Taiwan. ■

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

**Senad Pećanin** is a lawyer, publicist and journalist. He holds a master's degree in "Ethnicity as a source of legitimacy of political power" from the University of Bologna. He is the winner of several prominent Bosnian and international awards for journalism and human rights. He is a contributor to a number of well-regarded media outlets in the region and globally.

# Provincialism & Malign Interference: Overcoming Political and Institutional Barriers to Defending BiH's Constitutional Order

There are three primary objectives that pro-BiH forces must pursue at this time to ensure the immediate survival of the state and its territorial integrity and sovereignty - but also to create the conditions for a more strategically advantageous position in the years to come, assuming the current crisis is resolved or at least passes in a more or less peaceful fashion.

By: Jasmin Mujanović, PhD

## UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

The parameters of Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH) current secession crisis are well established. The intentions, and to a large extent the tactics of the regime in Banja Luka, are also well known. What has largely been absent in the public policy discourse on this situation - both within BiH and across the Atlantic community - has been a credible set of ideas about how Sarajevo and NATO should and could counter not only Milorad Dodik's activities, but also the (hybrid) campaign against BiH emanating, primarily, from Belgrade and Moscow. It has been especially alarming to see the lack of coherent counteraction on the part of the so-called pro-BiH parties in Sarajevo who, while divergent in their ideological orientation, nevertheless purport to share a singular commitment to the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The reasons for this lack of a coherent response are myriad but also familiar. First and foremost is the fact that for much of the post-war period BiH's party system has primarily served to advance narrow, partisan, and especially patrimonial interests. This has been an intrinsic part of the country's criminally-dominated post-war political economy, and it has resulted in a severe degree of disillusionment on



the part of BiH citizens and voters with the collective party establishment. That, in turn, has resulted in a compounding inability (and unwillingness) by the parties to recruit capable and principled candidates. Instead they have largely opted to promote candidates from within their own patrimonial networks, whose primary quality is their fealty to the respective

leadership cadres. As noted, the consequence of that policy has been the emergence of a political culture among pro-BiH parties that is remarkably provincial and self-serving.

Moreover, the “capture” of many key judicial and law enforcement institutions has also meant that even when criminal affairs have been discovered - as in the case of Milorad Dodik’s personal advisor Milan Tegeltija - police and prosecutors have been slow or entirely unwilling to react. Thus individuals are exposed in the media as being obviously compromised and perhaps involved in criminal dealings or organised crime - but they suffer no legal sanction or consequence. This naturally further increases feelings of disenchantment and alienation among citizens, who conclude that BiH is fatally compromised by corruption and that the avenues for institutional reform are limited if not entirely absent.

The latter point reflects, not entirely inaccurately, the structural realities of the Dayton constitutional regime. The control of key state offices by SNSD and HDZ officials - a necessary feature of the country’s ethnic power-sharing system - has allowed these malign actors to significantly undermine effective governance mechanisms. At the legislative level the House of Peoples is a veritable graveyard for reform-oriented legislation where, at least in theory, as few as 20% of the delegates (3 out of 15) can stonewall the passage of bills. Even more corrosive has been the policy of parties like the HDZ to completely obstruct government whenever they consider their interests not to have been fully prioritised. For instance the party has successfully blockaded government formation in the FBiH entity since 2018, despite winning only 9% of the national vote and just under 15% of the vote in the FBiH. After 2010, when a reform-oriented coalition led by the SDP attempted to fill ethnic Croat slots in the government with non-HDZ candidates - an entirely legal and constitutional practice - the party likewise obstructed government formation at the state level for nearly two years. The extraordinary powers afforded by BiH’s existing constitution to what would be minor political actors in most democratic parliamentary regimes has greatly undermined the possibilities for rational governance. This is further exacerbated by the fact that - as in the case of the HDZ’s obstructionist tactics - many un- or

anti-constitutional activities are allowed to persist because the institutions responsible are unable to respond to these breaches in the rule of law and democratic norms.

This structural irrationality, combined with tendencies towards provincialism and patrimonialism among the pro-BiH political class, has ultimately hollowed out large portions of the BiH state apparatus. Across nearly every segment of the country’s administration - including at ministerial level - one finds personnel who are incompetent, criminal, or opposed to basic democratic values or indeed the existence of the state. It is an extraordinary combination of factors which at times might suggest the primary analytical lens for understanding the nature of contemporary BiH politics is not as a “post-conflict” polity or “divided society”, but rather as one under a form of quasi-occupation.

This last point is contentious but needs sober consideration given that not only have the SNSD and HDZ made their respective loyalty to Belgrade and Zagreb an obvious part of their official programs (and that in the case of the SNSD the party is at present clearly pursuing an explicit secessionist agenda). But also because Belgrade and Zagreb have, in turn, taken on a foreign policy posture that is defined by a remarkable degree of interference in the domestic and sovereign affairs of BiH. At least in a political and diplomatic sense, the current situation bears more resemblance to the period of the 1990s than a region with a clearly established post-war state system and permanent conditions for peace. Nor has such malign interference been limited to BiH’s neighbours, even if it is most common and apparent in these cases. Far greater powers - above all Russia, but increasingly China too - have lent their weight to this “anti-BiH” axis. The recent decision by the government of Hungary to shield the secessionist Milorad Dodik from EU sanctions, and offer financial lifelines to his government, suggests this bloc has a still wider roster - including within the EU and NATO.

So it is an obvious point but one too often neglected: the prospects for any kind of rational governance are limited when large segments of BiH’s political establishment reject both the existence of the state and/or the idea of any kind of governance not solely

concerned with the acquisition and distribution of ministerial seats. The additional involvement of far more powerful external actors in the country's internal affairs also puts integrationist and pro-state forces at a massive disadvantage. Such an imbalance of power typically does only exist in polities occupied by hostile powers. The parallels with contemporary Ukraine, for instance, are apt. Although perhaps even more plausible would be comparison with 18th-20th century Poland, say - that is, a case of one comparatively small polity consistently sabotaged and eventually partitioned by its larger neighbours, whose own regional aspirations are decidedly expansionist or irredentist.

Tellingly however, Poland's repeated erasure from Europe's cartography never lasted. Poland regained its full and complete sovereignty by the end of the 20th century, even as Moscow remained a persistently imperial power with designs on much of Eastern Europe. How did the Polish people and their leaders accomplish this? Because throughout those decades of occupation and domination they maintained a commitment to their own identity and autonomy, and took the necessary steps to turn those commitments into institutional capacities. Thus even when the Polish nation lacked a sovereign state, it did not lack the organisational and political characteristics to eventually realise that goal.

Pro-BiH actors would do well to reflect on this history (and indeed their own recent history). After all, BiH was already victimised once in recent memory by the wholesale collapse of international engagement during the aggressive war against BiH from 1992 to 1995. And while BiH benefited subsequently from a comparative excess of international and European attention (at least between c.1995 and 2006), that period has overly determined the self-perceptions and opinions of pro-BiH leaders and policymakers. In an era of renewed Great Power competition it is simply unreasonable to expect BiH to enjoy that degree of international attention, given the shape of contemporary world affairs. The ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Syria, the humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan - each of these situations is consuming infinitely more diplomatic resources and attention than BiH. One might even venture that at times the impasse between Kosovo and Serbia is a more significant feature of Atlanticist

thinking vis-a-vis the Western Balkans than the current affairs of BiH.

Pro-BiH actors may have all manner of opinions about these issues. They may consider this lack of international attention foolish or unfair but, in the final analysis, these are the facts. The question then becomes: what can and must be done to alter these attitudes and, relatedly, what can pro-BiH actors do if a significant change in international posture is not forthcoming? In short, what can pro-BiH forces do to take their destiny into their own hands and determine, to the greatest extent possible, the shape of local politics through their own volition and actions?

There are three primary objectives that pro-BiH forces must pursue at this time to ensure the immediate survival of the state and its territorial integrity and sovereignty - but also to create the conditions for a more strategically advantageous position in the years to come, assuming the current crisis is resolved or at least passes in a more or less peaceful fashion.

#### **ESTABLISHING A FIRM CHAIN OF COMMAND AND SECURITY PREPAREDNESS**

The first and most vital priority at this time is ensuring that all security organs in BiH (including the Armed Forces but also the state police (SIPA), border police, and the police forces in the Sarajevo, Tuzla, Zenica, and Una-Sana cantons) are in a state of optimal readiness to deal with any potential security incidents in the coming months and beyond, since the separatist tendencies of Serb nationalism will not significantly abate in the years to come. These preparations should involve establishing a firm chain of command, as well as contingencies in the likely event of notable defections from within the Armed Forces if there is a credible secession attempt by the authorities in Banja Luka.

In such a scenario confusion will be the greatest adversary of integrationist actors, and it is imperative that BiH's security agencies maintain a realistic and crisis-oriented sense of their capacities. Such preparations should involve, as much as possible, a 'whole government' approach, and steps should be taken for state, entity, and cantonal security officials to have the most extensive communication



**NEW CAPACITIES FOR TRAINING MEMBERS OF THE ARMED FORCES OF BIH WERE PRESENTED AT MANJAČA IN NOVEMBER, 2021.**

(PHOTO: MINISTRY OF DEFENCE BIH)

possible. Members of the respective legislatures and assemblies should likewise demand comprehensive and regular status reports from the relevant officials - both to maintain civilian oversight but also to ensure that the respective agencies and their leaders understand that this is a genuine priority. Attempts by Serb and Croat nationalist actors to impede such activities must be anticipated, as well as their certain efforts to paint these necessary precautions as “war-mongering” or “acts of aggression” in themselves.

It is for this reason that all these activities should be pursued, wherever possible, in conjunction with NATO officials and the respective NATO capitals. At the very least the Alliance should be kept abreast of all preparatory activities by BiH security agencies so as to avoid the appearance of unilateralism by the legitimate government authorities of BiH. Any gaps or major issues in the overall state of preparedness on the part of the BiH agencies should be addressed in tandem with NATO officials, and their assistance sought in addressing these specific concerns. For instance, if there are worries about the ability of

BiH security forces to control the airspace over BiH (which is likely), or to rapidly project forces into particular “corridors” vital to maintaining the territorial integrity of the state (Sarajevo-Gorazde, Tuzla-Brcko, Jajce-Sanski Most etc.) then these should be addressed with concrete requests for better equipment, logistical support, or training from NATO.

These preparations should involve a sober assessment of the likelihood and capacities for malign foreign interference in the event of any kind of significant security crisis in BiH, both in the form of uniformed and hybrid/ clandestine/proxy forces acting on behalf of Serbia, Russia, and other relevant actors (i.e. paramilitary formations even from within the bloc of EU countries). This information should likewise be communicated clearly to NATO officials, especially those most willing and capable of providing credible assistance (e.g., the U.S. and UK, but also potentially the Netherlands). BiH officials should also be sensitive to local political sensibilities and explore the possibilities for alternative arrangements where obvious or overt security cooperation

is not possible. That is to say, where it is not possible for certain NATO governments to support the activities and preparations of local security agencies, the possibilities for intelligence sharing and support should be explored -especially because maintaining maximum situational awareness will be critical in any genuine security crisis.

In this context, BiH security officials should also deepen and broaden their interactions with the EUFOR mission in Sarajevo and explore possibilities for joint exercises and preparedness operations. While the existing EUFOR posture in BiH is sub-optimal - something that should continue to be raised with NATO partners - better coordination with EUFOR can nevertheless provide important advantages. During a fast-moving security crisis, the deployment of EUFOR to strategically vital locales within BiH may prove decisive in stabilising the overall situation. Here again, the strategically vital Tuzla-Brcko corridor is of special concern, and all efforts should be made to ensure that the Brcko District remains firmly in the control of BiH government forces. By ensuring the RS entity remains territorially separated - and specifically that the western half of the region, where the entirety of the political, administrative, and security apparatus is effectively located, remains cut off from the border with Serbia - BiH security organs will maintain an existential advantage against any secession attempt.

#### **MODERNISING BIH FOREIGN POLICY**

Beyond ensuring the immediate security and territorial integrity of the state, pro-BiH actors need to reimagine the shape and scope of the country's foreign policy apparatus. While BiH obviously has a Ministry of Foreign Affairs, its staffing and operation is subject to the usual partisan and sectarian limitations. The office should of course be made use of to the maximum degree possible; the promotion of young, professional, capable diplomats is also of the utmost importance for BiH's long-term standing in the international community. But the nature of the political system must be taken into account. By 2023 the position of Foreign Ministry will likely shift to the SNSD-aligned HDZ; that will, once again, limit possibilities for the institutional promotion of BiH's interests in the international arena for at least the next electoral cycle.

As such it is imperative that pro-BiH actors establish a permanent apparatus for the promotion of its political and democratic interests, especially in key capitals (above all Washington and London, but also Berlin, Brussels and elsewhere, resources permitting). Unfortunately Bosnians and Herzegovinians have wasted decades operating under the assumption that the degree of goodwill which the country gained during the war years would permanently shape the perspective on BiH affairs in the political West. That was always a foolish belief, but its disastrous consequences should be readily apparent when we consider the muted Western response (barring a few notable exceptions) to the current secession crisis. Quite simply, in the *actually existing* world one must expend resources to win and maintain support in key capitals. These resources are of various kinds, and they all matter.

First and foremost, money must be spent on professional representation and lobbying on both sides of the Atlantic. To date pro-BiH actors, and certainly the BiH state itself, appear to have spent zero dollars on such efforts while anti-BiH actors from within the country have spent millions. This is an extraordinary and unacceptable lapse in judgement from anyone purporting to be an advocate for the best interests of BiH. Professional lobbying services are a non-negotiable feature of contemporary world affairs, and both government and private sector actors in BiH must immediately allocate funds to establishing a permanent pro-BiH representation in those key capitals. For the relatively modest sum of 5-10 million USD (money which can be patched together from a variety of public and private sources within BiH and among the diaspora to avoid familiar obstruction tactics by anti-state actors) a competent, professional presence can be established in Washington, London and Brussels at least. This will not immediately pay dividends, but it will ensure an evolving understanding and appreciation of BiH's interests in these capitals in the years to come, so that in future crises international reactions will be more favourable to pro-state interests.

This same consortium of government and private actors should devote funds to deepening commercial and political links between the BiH diaspora and the state, especially in terms of facilitating greater political involvement by the BiH diaspora in the local affairs

of their respective home countries. Such organising is a well-established practice among certain “old” communities in the U.S. (the Armenian-American community for instance), but it is exceptionally underdeveloped among the BiH diaspora. A careful study of ‘Birthright Israel’ and similar Jewish diaspora organisations should be undertaken to evaluate best practises to adopt. Indeed, a comprehensive assessment and appreciation of Israeli state-building efforts would serve pro-BiH actors well, especially because in the long-run a Bosnian version of the ‘*aliyah*’ - the institutionalised and ritualised return to the homeland - will likely have to be part of the strategy for addressing long-term emigration trends. It is almost certainly the case that even among second and third generation Bosnian diaspora there are individuals who would be interested in returning to the country, even to regions like the RS entity, provided a modicum of institutional and political support for such processes was available. Until efforts are undertaken to promote cultural exchanges and educational programs with those communities, however, it is unlikely that such human and economic capital can be tapped into.

In short, a major reimagining of what constitutes “foreign policy” by pro-BiH actors is necessary if they want to create the conditions for winning greater support among the international community toward the objective of creating a rational, liberal-democratic polity in BiH.

## IDENTIFYING ALLIES

A final priority for pro-BiH actors in attempting to shore up the long-term interests of the state concerns identifying and maintaining close links with potential allies. This is less a case of “modernising” the country’s foreign policy as focusing on a traditional foreign policy objective - building alliances - while recognizing that BiH has traditionally fared remarkably poorly at this. For instance, while the U.S. is the architect of BiH’s constitution and doubtless the country’s most important partner, the general level of knowledge among U.S. policymakers about BiH and its interests is low. Similarly, over the course of 2021 the UK has emerged as a leading backer of pro-state forces in BiH, but that has largely been the result of an essentially private initiative on the part of a handful of individuals, the majority of whom

have no formal links to the BiH state or any political constellation therein. The fact that this has transpired then is, in essence, a matter of dumb luck rather than any meaningful engagement by the necessary actors in BiH.

That is not a sustainable strategy for defending the country’s interests, especially since - to make the point again - renewed great power competition means that isolated states are in the greatest danger of becoming either victims or at least theatres for the interests of more powerful actors. Moreover, given that membership in NATO is arguably the most pressing long-term interest of BiH foreign policy, it is imperative that Sarajevo demonstrates its value to the Atlantic community before it ever joins the bloc. That must necessarily be done in advance so that when BiH nears formal accession there will be minimal diplomatic hurdles to clear. And here the point must be, indeed, to demonstrate BiH’s value *to* the Alliance and the Allies, rather than merely asking for protection and aegis.

BiH does have a great deal to offer to NATO and to individual NATO states: it has a professional intelligence and security apparatus in a geopolitically complex region, capable of acquiring and analysing sensitive data and information; it has a populace that is decidedly pro-Western in its orientation; it has a successful and well-integrated diaspora across much of the West; and it represents an important cultural and geographic bridge between several key global regions, a position which is only likely to grow in significance in the years to come. These are all facts, or at the very least persuasive arguments, that can and must be disseminated in key capitals. By cementing such narratives and perspectives in the minds of Western policymakers, pro-BiH actors can more effectively plead for sustained engagement and assistance on the part of these same polities.

All of this is not merely a matter of responding to contemporary great power realities. BiH’s own history is illustrative of what can happen to a country when it has no genuine allies. None of the states or organisations that could previously or currently be construed as assisting BiH’s sovereignty and territorial integrity in the 1990s or during its post-war development did so without significant reservations. The U.S. may have led the charge to deliver a final

peace deal to halt the aggression against BiH between 1992 and 1995, but the Clinton administration also refused to lift the crippling arms embargo on BiH government forces, despite significant pressures to that end from the U.S. Congress. Croatia may have ultimately assisted BiH government forces in the closing months of the war, but it had previously orchestrated a de facto invasion too. Turkey, which claims close cultural and historical links with BiH, invests more in Serbia than in BiH. One could proceed in this fashion, but the point would be the same: BiH has no true-blue allies, and it must remedy that. Doing so will involve many of the steps identified in the preceding section; but establishing immutable political and security relationships with key capitals should nevertheless be recognized as a standalone objective - aside from the myriad other positive outcomes that follow from having a robust two-way diplomatic presence in the international community.

## CONCLUSIONS

In lieu of a formal conclusion, an observation in keeping with the spirit of this essay: BiH's problems are easily identified, even if they are not necessarily "well known" in the international community. The task of pro-BiH actors is not merely to explain these problems but to offer and create avenues for resolving these issues. For a small country with a difficult history, Bosnians and Herzegovinians have done a remarkably good job of telling their story to the world. What remains is to channel those stories into effective policy action, at both the local and international level. The hope is that this text can help animate those efforts. ■

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

**Jasmin Mujanović** is a political scientist (PhD, York University) specializing in the politics of post-authoritarian and post-conflict democratization. His first book *Hunger and Fury: The Crisis of Democracy in the Balkans* (Hurst Publishers & Oxford University Press, 2018) examines the persistence of authoritarian and illiberal forms of governance in the Western Balkans since the end of the Yugoslav Wars. His publications also include peer-reviewed articles in leading academic journals, chapters in numerous edited volumes, policy reports for Freedom House, the European Council on Foreign Relations, and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, as well as popular analyses in *the New York Times*, *the Washington Post*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, and a host of other media. He has a prominent social media presence and has made appearances for international television and radio programs on NPR, BBC Radio, CBC News, Voice of America, Al Jazeera, as well as numerous Balkan media outlets. Formerly an Assistant Professor of Political Science and Policy Studies at Elon University, he is presently an Advisory Board Member of the Kulin Initiative.

# Does radicalization pay off?

On the internal logic and external implications of ethnonationalist escalation in Bosnia and Herzegovina

By: Vahidin Preljević

Let me begin with an immediate answer to the question posed above: Yes, radicalization pays off. That, at least, is the lesson embraced by a significant part of the political elite in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who have followed this school of thought for at least the last decade and a half. The current crisis is only the culmination and acceleration of these processes which are now showing their destructive force to the eyes of the world. This has its effects, both internal (mobilization of voters) and external (strengthening of position towards Western powers), but at the same time its internal and external causes. It has deep roots in the political culture of this country, but also in the behavior of the so-called international community.

The rationale behind Dodik's dangerous secessionist upsurge - the attack on the constitutional order, the formation of para-institutions, and the sharpening of chauvinistic rhetoric (labeling Bosniaks "Muslims", celebrating the so-called 'Republika Srpska Day') - obviously has corrupt economics at its heart. But at the same time it coincides with the great nationalist project, of which it is undoubtedly an extremely important part - a project which for its own reasons supports the political and media elites in Serbia, Putin's Russia, Orbán's Hungary and radical right-wingers from various EU countries and the United States. Hence why, before anything else, Dodik wants to stay in power and ultimately get some concrete concessions (most likely ownership of forests, land and rivers). This in the same vein as Dragan Čović's bid for a concession in terms of an electoral blockade in the Federation of BiH via a law that would forever guarantee the HDZ control



over the BiH Presidency. Simultaneously, acting as allies and despite their rhetorical opposition to the international community (Dodik especially), both of them seek political gains with the help of that same international community - which too often grants them.

## THE FATAL CONCEPT OF APPEASEMENT

The role of corruption as a motivating factor (financial or political) should not be viewed in isolation from the nationalist agenda. These two phenomena - corruption and radical nationalism - are closely

intertwined and conditional upon one another. Power elites in all three nations, taking advantage of political structures favorable to nationalist rhetoric, have created an effective ecosystem of corruption which is sustained by invoking a discourse of threat from the 'Others', along with the threat of betrayal implicating their political opponents. Perhaps it would be most accurate to call this concept ethno-feudalism. It is based on a game by which Milorad Dodik in particular, among others, has prevented any progress and development in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the last fifteen years. The opposition in the Republika Srpska entity, which went along with these discursive frameworks, did not find the strength of will to quash this sphere of increasingly radical nationalism, but rather generated and strengthened it even more.

This is especially clear in the actions of Draško Stanivuković, the mayor of Banja Luka, who has been courting right-wing voters in his public appearances. It is hardly possible to make any internal progress until the framework that allows politicians to compete via their nationalisms is altered. Such a change would require much more persistent work on the ground by domestic and foreign actors; an efficient judiciary free of political influence to prosecute major crime; the building of a plural culture in which chauvinism (such as the glorification of war criminals) becomes socially marginalized; and ultimately such changes to the electoral law (and constitution) that would discourage political action based on ethnic mobilization. The biggest problem in all of that is the treatment of Republika Srpska as an exclusively Serbian entity and the development of the thesis of "another Serbian state in the Balkans", which is strongly supported by influential political and media circles in Serbia. It is fatal that a symbolic conquest, through joint celebrations and all-Serbian holidays, has been tolerated for years. Also in the consistent 'clericalization' of politics and society (e.g. the practice of raising awareness of secular institutions and then introducing baptismal feasts for those institutions, and political parties), and the systemic discrimination against the non-Serb population - disabling the use of the term 'Bosnian language' etc. The very name of BiH's smallest entity promotes the processes of ethnic monopolization in the service of an aggressive great-power ideology that produced war and war crimes in the 1990s,

including genocide. This was probably the biggest mistake of the domestic and international negotiators in the Dayton agreement, which is a permanent source of instability.

There are strong external reasons why domestic politicians (mostly Dodik and his SNSD, and somewhat more secretly his ally Dragan Čović) think that radicalization pays off. The international community, which in practice has so far dealt mainly with symptoms rather than causes, has given the impression that it is lenient on the political violence that ethnonationalists have been committing against the citizens of this country for decades. The international community often acts like a teacher who, rather than consistently applying clear rules, instead rewards restless and aggressive children to temporarily calm them down, at the expense of those who follow the rules. The disastrous results of such an upbringing are known to psychology; the fatal message being sent is that violence pays off. In politics, as we know, this method is called appeasement and is modeled on the lenient behavior of Western powers towards Hitler's Germany in the period before World War II, its pinnacle being the Munich Agreement and the partition of Czechoslovakia.

## EUROPE AS A NEW WEIMAR REPUBLIC

Even during this secessionist crisis - which still threatens to escalate into serious and even armed conflict - Dodik, instead of being treated as a security problem, has been helping EU emissaries "find their feet" in Banja Luka, while doing favors for his ally Čović and the HDZ by insisting on negotiations about the election law at a time when the country is in a state of emergency. Yielding to radical nationalism will hardly contribute to calming the situation at this time, let alone permanently solving the problem. It is counterproductive due to both the domestic and foreign policy implications already mentioned. But more on those further down.

As leading German foreign policy journalist Michael Thumann (*Die Zeit*) and Gerd Koennen (a great expert and author of an excellent book on the history of communism) recently argued, Russia's goal is not simply to return to the Cold War, but to step into the desired chaos of the twenty-first century "in which only military strength and national

homogenization is what counts". The precondition for that is the geopolitical division of the West. That is to say, the separation of Europe from the United States, which would make Russia's military strength more important. The struggle is not only geopolitical but also ideological. Just as the Soviet Union once spread communism, Russia now supports ethnonationalist extremism across Europe: ideas which have a strong anti-Western, anti-civilization stance and openly attack the principles of the democratic, plural and open society that develops within a liberal civil state. In the Balkans, the focal point of this ideological war is the threat to the concept of a multi-ethnic civil state in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and, in part, Macedonia.

There is no doubt that Bosnia and Herzegovina - along with Ukraine - has become the most important scene of this showdown. The West must understand that any concession to ethnonationalisms in the Balkans - even if presented as a "compromise" on the election law, and even if tactical - is in fact a retreat from Russia's aggressive onslaught on the foundations of the liberal and democratic order in the world. Europe is now, in a way, in the same state as the Weimar Republic in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The Weimar state failed and surrendered to National Socialism because it had neither the strength nor the determination to defend itself. Does today's West have enough determination and strength to defend an order of values that - for all its shortcomings - is the only one that can have universal significance? The answer to this question - which is also the answer to the question of what kind of Europe and what kind of world we want - lies, at least in part, in the approach to resolving the current crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina. ■

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

**Vahidin Preljević** is a Germanist, essayist and literary translator. Since 1999 he has been teaching at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Sarajevo. From 2009 he has been leading the Department of German Literature and Cultural Studies. He has written and edited several books and over 90 scientific studies and essays on Robert Musil, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Viennese Modernism, German Romanticism, Culture Theory, Literary history of the body, the relationship between collective narratives and cultural memory, issues of literary aesthetics. Some of the titles of his books include: *Estetika fragmenta (Aesthetics of the fragment)*, Zagreb 2007, *Književna povijest tijela (The Literary history of body)*, Zagreb 2013; *Sarajevski atentat (Sarajevo assassination)*, Zenica 2014, *Sarajevski dugi pucnji (Zenica 2015)*, *The Long Shots of Sarajevo* (Tübingen 2016); *Nakon imperije (After Empire)*, 2018), *Književnost i politička imaginacija u (post)habsburškom kulturnom prostoru (The Literature and Political Imagination in post-Habsburg cultural space)*, Zagreb 2018), *Nähe und Distanz: Eine grundlegende Dichotomie in der österreichischen Literatur der Moderne*, (Würzburg 2020), *Der Jugoslawien-Komplex in Peter Handkes Werk: Eine kritische Bestandaufnahme nach dem Nobelpreis*, (Würzburg 2022, forthcoming). He edited several Bosnian editions of works by German writers and translated works by, among others, Christa Wolf, Novalis, Leo Perutz, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Arthur Schnitzler, Georg Büchner, Frank Wedekind. He is visiting professor at the universities of Würzburg, Saarbrücken, Halle, Vienna and Konstanz. He is multiple DAAD Fellow and winner of the Werfel Scholarship of the Austrian Ministry of Science, Fellow of the Trinity Long Room Hub in Dublin. He is the holder of the Honorary Cross for Science and Art of the Republic of Austria, which was awarded to him by the decision of the President of the Republic in 2017. He is a member of the Writers' Association of BiH and P.E.N. Center of BiH.

# Central Bosnia: The Key to Survival for Bosnia and Herzegovina

Members of the HDZ in both BiH and Croatia have not given up on their dreams of a republic of Herzeg-Bosnia, which they euphemistically refer to as “the Croatian constituency” or “the third entity”.



By: Ivo Komšić

During the war, the Central Bosnia region was the key to survival for the state; and it is again today, even after the relocation of much of its population during the war and afterward. Indeed, before embarking on open aggression against BiH, Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadžić saw to it that Bosnian Serbs left Central

Bosnia in waves. By April 1992, this process of ethnic cleansing had been completed overtly, as Serbs from Zenica, Travnik, Novi Travnik, Bugojno, Vitez, and Busovača were transferred to Ilidža (near Sarajevo) by bus, truck, tractor, and anything else that could move, with the consent of local officials from the HDZ-BiH (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*, or the Croatian Democratic Union in BiH) and the HVO (*Hrvatsko vijeće obrane*, or the Croatian

Defence Council). This alliance between Serb and Croat leaders was so strong that Serbs traveled through majority-Croat Kiseljak with full confidence. When the conflict spread and increasingly became a war for territory, largely in response to international “peace negotiations”, the focus of military operations shifted to Central Bosnia. Croatian leader Franjo Tuđman and Serbia’s Slobodan Milošević had agreed to a policy of Croat emigration and “humane relocation” a year earlier, in their meeting in Karadordovo. By that time, Tuđman had already sacrificed the Croats of Posavina to provide Karadžić with a corridor to Banja Luka and Knin, and had received Serb majority territories in southwestern Bosnia (Grahovo, Glamoč, and Drvar) in return.

### THE WAR FOR CENTRAL BOSNIA

However, it would turn out that BiH could not be divided so easily by this political horse trading, as Croats from Central Bosnia had no desire to emigrate, complicating attempts to split the country into the three nationalist republics envisioned in peace talks. As the war for Central Bosnia began, Karadžić gave officials from the HDZ-BiH a May 1992 deadline to evict Croats from Sarajevo, under the threat that those who remained in the city would be harassed “like mice” along with Muslims. Though some Croats were extracted from Sarajevo in a well-organized effort that used the established Kiseljak-Stup route, most Sarajevan Croats remained in the capital. To the consternation of Tuđman, as well as Bosnian Croat leader Mate Boban, the Croats who remained included those who ran religious institutions, the diocese, the Croatian Franciscan Province, political organizations, the Croat cultural society *Napredak*, and humanitarian organizations and associations, and/or they were intellectuals. On top of this, Croats from across Central Bosnia also refused to emigrate. They simply did not want to leave their homes.

This non-compliance prompted the use of military tactics to achieve population movement. The HVO would trigger conflict, the Army of BiH would retaliate, and as the HVO withdrew, they would remove Croats from a territory. This happened in Travnik, Zenica, Kraljeva Sutjeska (Kakanj), and Vareš, where skirmishes were instigated only with the aim of triggering emigration, not to conquer

and retain territory. In fact, territorial acquisitions by the HVO were near impossible given the size of their force in this area versus that of the Army of BiH. Croat citizens displaced in this manner from Central Bosnia either remained nearby in Kiseljak, or were transferred to Herzegovina via Serb territory. Settlements were later built for them in the Neretva valley, Šuškovo, and Bobanovo Selo.

The military pressure on Central Bosnia was a direct result of the so-called peace negotiations, which all imagined a division of BiH along ethnic lines. This encouraged a war for territory, particularly in Central Bosnia – where an ethnically mixed population remained – on the premise that the army which could occupy this area could dominate the peace talks and dictate the parameters for ending the war. Tuđman, who was only interested in reaching the Drvar-Kupres-Stolac line, left the Croats of Central Bosnia stranded. Yet when they organized and defended their territories, Tuđman was burdened and constrained by their actions nonetheless, especially after crimes were committed by these forces in the villages of Ahmići (between Busovača and Vitez) and Stupni Do (near Vareš). These and other atrocities led to a loss of international support for Tuđman, and the portrayal of Croatia as an aggressor in BiH; no longer the victims in a war against Serb aggression on its soil.

Tuđman and Croatia were on the verge of sanctions; but Bosniak leader Alija Izetbegović had a problem, too. The peace plan forged for BiH in Geneva, which divided the country into three ethnic states, meant that he also had to fight for territory in Central Bosnia. Mostar was divided between Croats and Bosniaks, Bosniaks had been expelled from Posavina (along with Croats), the fate of Bosniaks in Krajina and Bihać was uncertain, Podrinje was surrounded by enclaves that fragmented the region (Srebrenica, Žepa, and Goražde), and Sarajevo was under siege. Still, under pressure from Croats in Sarajevo, Izetbegović pulled back on attacks by the Army of BiH in the country’s center to avoid losing the loyalty of Croat members of the Bosnian Presidency. The legitimacy and legality of the state were at risk, because the Presidency was the only institution functioning under the Constitution and making decisions with legal force at the time. This essentially made the



**MILORAD DODIK, BAKIR IZETBEGOVIĆ AND DRAGAN ČOVIĆ AT ONE OF THE JOINT MEETINGS WITH THE HEAD OF THE EU DELEGATION TO BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA LARS-GUNNAR WIGEMARK**

(PHOTO: TWITTER)

Presidency the guardian of Bosnian statehood, and with it, Bosnian sovereignty and territorial integrity. Moreover, if Croats departed the Central Bosnia region for western Herzegovina, changing the structure of the population, the path to dividing the country along ethnic lines would be unobstructed. This tenuous situation was salvaged by the Washington Agreement, which was adopted at the First General Assembly of Croats of BiH, in besieged Sarajevo, on 6 February 1994 (following votes in the assemblies of Croats of Posavina in Slavonski Brod, and of Central Bosnia and Krajina in Zagreb).

#### **CARING FOR CROATS IN ČOVIĆ'S WAY**

The cantonal arrangement put forth in the Agreement enabled people to remain where they lived, and called for local cantonal authorities to be elected in proportion to the structure of the population. This eliminated the underlying reason for skirmishes over territory. A decentralized government would ensure the survival of the state, and everyone would still have their “own” territory.

After the war, local authorities enabled the return of internally displaced persons, and the pre-war structure of the population of much of Central Bosnia was restored. Though, for the most part, people who were relocated to Drvar, near Stolac, remain there and did not return. To this day, Croats in Central Bosnia remain strategically important to the survival of the state, and they remain at the heart of key political battles. Members of the HDZ in both BiH and Croatia have not given up on their dreams of a republic of Herzeg-Bosnia, which they euphemistically refer to as “the Croatian constituency” or “the third entity”. Yet, again, the Croats of Central Bosnia are standing in the way of ethnic division; and for this, they are openly labeled a disruptive factor vis á vis Croatian policy towards BiH. It is almost certain that if Croats in Central Bosnia did not represent this obstruction, the way would be clear for those who seek to further fragment the state. After all, the Republika Srpska is on the path to secession, and western Herzegovina is already ethnically “pure” for Croats and needs only to be formally separated through the Election Law and an amended Bosnian Constitution. Achieving this has been the single

preoccupation of the HDZ in BiH and in Croatia over the last ten years.

The policy of the HDZ has in fact been clear and undisguised since 1991, when Tuđman presented his criminal intentions at a meeting on 27 December 1991. For that matter, the policy of Alija Izetbegović was also clear when he chose to mitigate violence in Central Bosnia rather than lose Croat support in the future. But Bakir Izetbegović, who succeeded him in the SDA (*Stranka demokratske akcije*, or the Party of Democratic Action), has not followed this lead. In Neum, during negotiations that may well decide the destiny of BiH, he accepted the proposal of HDZ leader Dragan Čović to amend the Election Law as it relates to the House of Peoples of the Federation of BiH. The House is the most crucial government institution because it elects the President and Vice Presidents of the Federation, as well as the Federal Government and the state-level House of Peoples. To ensure dominance for himself and the HDZ, Čović's plan would prevent one ethnic group from electing representatives from another group to government.

According to his formula, a Croat from a canton in which they are a minority could never be a member of the House, because even if they received sufficient votes, they would be considered an illegitimate candidates and any votes for them would be annulled. In other words, the vote of Croats from Sarajevo, Tuzla, and Zenica will be worth less than the vote of Croats from municipalities with a Croat majority. Čović frames this as equality and democracy for Croats. But such a constitutional-legal change only makes the position of Croats in Central Bosnia more difficult. On top of this, animosity towards other groups is fueled constantly by the rhetoric of officials in Croatia and from members of the HDZ-BiH. While Croats in Central Bosnia endured every hardship of the war and managed to remain, they may not tolerate aggression against their neighbors now. Instead, many may flee, which makes hate itself a political strategy of emigration.

#### **IZETBEGOVIĆ'S LEGITIMIZATION OF ČOVIĆ'S AND DODIK'S POLICIES**

Bakir Izetbegović knows this, and agreed not long ago that the state of BiH cannot survive without

the Croats of Central Bosnia. Nevertheless, he has accepted and legitimized the proposals of Čović, and has done so against a backdrop of US sanctions on Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik for overthrowing the constitutional order of BiH and violating the Dayton Agreement, at a time when European commitment to a European path for BiH is on the table. Izetbegović is throwing the American-European initiative to the wolves by legitimizing the policy goals of Čović and Dodik and presenting them as plausible solutions to a crisis produced by those very same goals, and has shifted the focus of the US and Europe from sanctions to "open and friendly" negotiations. According to Izetbegović, there is no reason for hostility among the peoples of BiH; as if the crimes of the 1990s did not occur, and as if the policy proposals of Čović and Dodik are not destructive and potentially devastating.

It seems that Bakir Izetbegović fails to appreciate, or does not want to accept, that those with whom he is negotiating, including Čović, are part of the "Serb world" and are therefore part of the "Russian world"; and its clutches cannot be evaded. Even if Izetbegović gained "Bosniak territory" through the emigration of Croats from central Bosnia, this would only lead to a tightening of the screws from Zagreb and Belgrade, to the point where they would become one. Who could survive? Central Bosnia (and other areas with Bosniak majorities) would become the Gaza of Europe, or in more familiar terms, Bosnia's own 1980s-era Kosovo. There are already demands being made publicly in Croatia for a strengthening of the border with BiH, the introduction of visa requirements for Bosniaks entering Croatia, the confiscation of Croatian passports, and so on.

Hence, the confidence displayed by Bakir Izetbegović is concerning. While Čović has admitted defeat and Dodik refuses to give up on the secession of the Republika Sprska, Izetbegović remains an optimist when it comes to the fate of BiH, claiming that considerable progress was made during negotiations in Neum and that talks can continue without mediators. One must ask, on what basis? And, on what basis was anything agreed to in Neum? According to Izetbegović, consensus was reached regarding changes to how delegates are elected to the House of Peoples of the Federation, but despite the assertions of Čović, many Bosnian Croats feel these changes

would deepen their sense of marginalization. Is this the point? Are they meant to feel that the only solution is emigration?

We must hope that the Croats of Central Bosnia are tougher and more stubborn than the architects of these policies believe they are. Having survived the war, it is conceivable that they can withstand these pressures, too. And, just as their role was once vital in preventing the division of BiH, it is vital now in enabling the country to move as one towards Europe. ■

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

**Ivo Komšić** is a sociologist and politician from Bosnia and Herzegovina. He received his doctorate in 1985 at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Sarajevo, and since 1977 he has been teaching at the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, then since 1979 at the Faculty of Philosophy. Since 1990 he has been an associate professor, and since 2000 a full professor of industrial and political sociology. In 1993 he was the founder and president of the Croatian Peasant Party of BiH, then a member of the Presidency of BiH (1993-1996), co-founder (1994) and president of the Croatian National Council of BiH (1994-2003), vice president of the Social Democratic Party of BiH (2001-2002) and president of the House of Peoples of the Federal Parliament of BiH (2000-2002). From 2013 to 2017 he was the mayor of Sarajevo. He is the author of several books, including: *Dialectics of Commodity Form* (1987) and *Automation and Humanization* (2000). His most recent book *Tuđman's Hague Profile - Joint Criminal Enterprise in BiH* was published in 2021.

Up-to-date

# From the Washington Marriott to the written-off political basketball player

Vučić is also avoiding Dodik, who is now written off politically, and internationally undesirable as a guest. It is no different with his longtime Croatian associate in various projects and businesses: Dragan Čović is literally hiding from him, there is no more birthday parties to which Dodik would have flown for by helicopter and where he was welcomed with all honours. All of a sudden, as taught, Čović has forgotten about their blood fraternities. Financial supporters will have to stop cooperating with him. Dodik is left alone to tell stories about himself to his basketball friends. At least for now he will be able to throw the ball into the basket undisturbed. But he can't know for sure when the unpleasant questions by international investigators will begin. Or, above all, when his financial partners will start asking where their money is.

By: Borut Šuklje

On that Thursday in January 2022, he knew he had been abandoned. There was just one guest he had longed to come to his big celebration - knowing that his presence would put the stamp of confirmation on all their alliances. He was also afraid that this guest wouldn't turn up at this crucial time. And he really didn't: Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić left him all alone. Sure, he sent his envoy - but regardless of her high position she was irrelevant. On that day he remembered all the things he wanted to keep quiet about and conceal. He remembered how everything leading up to that January 9th had begun much earlier, on that autumn day in 1996 when he was walking around the Marriott in Washington. There, in that prestigious hotel, everything was (for him at least) so different to his own country, scarred by wars and strewn with the dead. He was aware at the time that they had selected him because he would be able to punish and remove the culprits that caused the bloody war. And it could really be said that Milorad Dodik was their new chosen one. He came to America at the invitation of a special government agency which thought he could succeed. Dodik was just 38 when they sought out a new Bosnian Serb political leader.



## REMOVING THE CRIMINAL LEGACY

My Belgrade colleague, the British ambassador Charles Crawford, said that those years were the right time for Dodik-style politicians: uncompromising and rough types who would be able to deal with the criminal legacy. Dodik himself used to point out that he was different. Just over a year after that meeting in the Marriott, following the elections in late November 1997, Dodik became Bosnian Serb prime minister, although with only two members of parliament. He did also have the support of Bosniak politicians. Slobodan Milošević demanded that the new government include individuals directly responsible for the horrors of war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but Dodik refused. He told Milošević he would clean up the criminals of the former regime. Dodik condemned those responsible for the war, indicting Radovan Karadžić and, following the judgements of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, also demanded that President Karadžić and Bosnian Serb military commander Ratko Mladić surrender to The Hague Tribunal. At that time the President and the General were on bad terms; in fact they hated each other. Karadžić believed that Mladić would liquidate him, while Mladić was convinced that removing Karadžić was the only way to stop him opposing the will of the generals and emphasizing his political greatness. I have no doubt, Dodik repeated to the guests - German Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel and US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright - that those who are accused and in hiding must be arrested and sent to The Hague.

Not long after that Milošević marked him as a foreign mercenary, and Dodik responded that the time had come for Milošević to say goodbye to the throne. He alleged that since the first arrival of Serbs in the Balkans no Serbian emperor, prince, king or president had caused his people so much misfortune or taken so much blood, decisively separating his people from the rest of the world, as Milošević. At the time Carlos Westendorp, a charming and outstanding interlocutor who was former minister in the Spanish government of Felipe Gonzalez, was the International High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I met Gonzalez in 1994, during the visit of Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Drnovšek PhD to Madrid. Westendorp was assisted in Sarajevo by Pedro Sanchez, who is the current president

of the Spanish government. Sanchez must have been less than 30 at the time, and acted as a kind of European guardian to Dodik. Both were about the same height (approaching two meters), and they both loved to play basketball. But their conversations were primarily about the importance of the European Union and respect for the rule of law. And about the new, different Bosnia and Herzegovina.

## RUSSIAN INVESTORS AND THEIR WISHES

And then Dodik started to forget. Or rather, he began to adjust his view from the Marriott Hotel to the current circumstances. The year 2007 was probably a turning point, with two events coming to mind. A high-level American government official, Daniel Fried, came to visit Banja Luka; he left satisfied, judging that Dodik remained true to his old form. Dodik convinced Fried that he was ready to support the decision on Kosovo's independence. (Later, when the documents recording this somehow became available, Dodik claimed it was all a US lie). Also in 2007, Dodik's government sold Telekom Republika Srpska to Serbia. The financial reward was good and at the same time it sent a political signal about the possibility of investing in Banja Luka. Miroslav Mišković, the owner of Delta Holding, and Miodrag Babić, President of the Management Board of pharmaceutical giant Hemofarm, were among the first to do so. Immediately afterwards Dodik came to understand Russia's wishes regarding investments in Bosnian energy: they were able to buy the oil refinery in Bosanski Brod - when it was not completely clear who was buying it or whose money it was - and, immediately afterwards, the motor oil factory in Modriča. With the proceeds from the sale, Dodik formed a new investment and development fund for Republika Srpska. Along with political power, he also gained financial strength - which surprised him. Perhaps it wasn't ever beyond him, but he started to apply the old Milošević tactics: cause a problem and then persuade European politicians that problems can only be solved by cooperating with Dodik. He started calling referendums to decide all matters, including on the exit of Republika Srpska from the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina. At the same time, he knew all along that there would be no referendum. In particular, Dodik knew the fate of his predecessors - and here I must remind you of a story which goes back almost thirty years, and which burdened Dodik closely and constantly.



**VIKTOR ORBAN'S MEETING WITH THE SERB MEMBER OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA'S TRIPARTITE PRESIDENCY MILORAD DODIK IN BANJA LUKA**

(PHOTO: SNSD, TWITTER)

There are of course differences between the events recounted here, and we must understand them individually and separately, and not equate or compare their main characters too quickly. The first man, when he found out the news, hit his head - but such mercy, in at least providing a moment of oblivion, was not granted to the second man. Nor should we overlook the fact that in the first case our protagonist could not, when he first woke up, have anticipated the message he was to hear later that day - while our second character had several days advance warning about most of what he was subsequently told.

#### **THE ROLE OF THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH**

In the first instance the President of the Bosnian Serb Parliament, Momčilo Krajišnik, could not have known what had happened in November 1995 because he was more or less peacefully asleep when it was happening. Even in his dreams he knew that he was always completely superfluous; he had felt that way since joining the peace negotiations on ending the war in Bosnia. Whenever agreements were being made on ending the killings, he would be sent out of the room at Milošević's request. Such was the case that Monday when Warren Christopher, US

Secretary of State, wanted to talk to Serbian President Slobodan Milošević at half past two in the morning. The negotiations at Dayton, the US military base, were near completion and no one knew whether they would be successful or not. Christopher's request was for Milošević to hand over to the Bosnian negotiators the settlement of Vogošća and the hills around Sarajevo, from which Serb forces shelled the city. His reply was as short as the whole morning's meeting: OK, said Milošević, give them that too, but let it be the last thing they demand from us. Then they slept a little. In the morning, the Serbian president gave an order to his Minister of Foreign Affairs, Milan Milutinović, to inform Krajišnik about the new agreement (in Dayton, everyone lived very close by). They went to knock on the door of Krajišnik's hotel room. Standing impatiently in the hall he was told that President Milošević had separated Vogošća and the hills above Sarajevo from the territory of Republika Srpska in compliance with the American request. On hearing the unexpected news Krajišnik fainted, collapsing to the floor and hitting his head.

Four years later, on March 15 1999, the Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Drnovšek received Patriarch

Pavle, who was returning to Belgrade from a visit to Italy. The Patriarch was looking forward to a warm reception in Slovenia. During their conversation, Pavle mentioned that he had mediated in the dispute between Milošević and Radovan Karadžić and was a co-signatory of the agreement on the composition of the Dayton negotiating team, which excluded Karadžić and General Ratko Mladić from the delegation (Milošević did not want to listen to them in America). Part of the Serbian Orthodox Church leadership therefore accused the Patriarch of being an accomplice in the surrender of Vogošća and the Sarajevo hills, of betraying Republika Srpska. That obviously burdened him. On the other hand, he never appeared in public to be burdened by the fact that the Serbian Church, under his leadership, gave full support to Karadžić's forces throughout the war in Bosnia and denied the existence of concentration and rape camps and the indiscriminate killing of civilians by Serb forces. Even after the genocide in Srebrenica, the Church never acknowledged the crimes committed against non-Serb civilians, nor apologised for the role the Church played in inciting these crimes.

## US BLACKLIST AND SANCTIONS

At the end of the summer of 2021, Milorad Dodik announced that the process of secession of Republika Srpska from the united and internationally recognized state of Bosnia and Herzegovina would begin in November at the latest. That he would dismantle the Dayton Peace Agreement. He kept repeating such messages in all available social media, casting about for any who would listen - just as he was searching for political allies. First and foremost, Russian President Vladimir Putin wasn't willing to send him an encouraging message which he could present to the public. Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić likewise withdrew into the background. Dodik's third friend, Viktor Orban, paid a private visit on November 6 accompanied by the Hungarian Foreign Minister. It is difficult to understand the reasons for his sudden visit, but it should be mentioned that Orban had talked to the High Representative for Bosnia, Christian Schmidt, only two days before. Maybe he wanted to convey the warnings he had heard to Dodik. They had lunch on Saturday at the Kej restaurant by the Vrbas River - about halfway between the airport in Laktaši, where Orban's plane

landed, and Banja Luka. The whole area was closed by the police and, of course, there were no explanations about the purpose of the meeting. The next day, a Sunday evening, Dodik was already in Ljubljana having dinner with the Slovenian Prime Minister, Janez Janša. The future of Bosnia and Herzegovina lies in respecting territorial unity and the existing constitutional order, he was clearly told, as well as in membership of the European Union. So his return home was not very pleasant - and it was only a few hours before the crucial day.

On Monday November 8, 2021, the special emissary of the US representative for the Balkans, Gabriel Escobar, arrived in Sarajevo. Less than two weeks earlier Escobar had questioned whether he wanted to meet Dodik at all, given the role of corruption in his undermining of central institutions in B&H. Escobar had also described Dodik as only interested in protecting his own power and money; he warned others off buying into his rhetoric or cooperating with him, since Dodik's announcements were bringing instability to the region. In particular, Dodik had declared that by the end of November 2021 he would revoke the consent of Republika Srpska to the agreement on the armed forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and also annul the Laws on Justice and the Prosecutor's Office of BiH, the Tax Administration, the State Investigation and Protection Agency, and the BiH Intelligence and Security Agency. Escobar welcomed Dodik that Monday, who assured him that he would be very cooperative. The meeting was obviously successful; Dodik forgot about all the crucial things he announced.

Unlike Krajišnik Dodik didn't faint, collapse or hit his head at the start of the meeting. He already knew roughly what he was going to hear, so he just nodded at Escobar. Of the one hundred and forty laws the Parliament of Republika Srpska was supposed to adopt at the November session, only four decrees with no legal force remained on the agenda.

In January 2017, the US authorities put Dodik on the so-called blacklist due to the threat he posed to the peace agreement reached in Dayton. According to the *Washington Post*, Republika Srpska has become the eighth largest client of lobbying services in the US capital. Dodik first hired the offices of Picard, Kentz & Rowe, and then rejoined at Donald

Trump's presidential victory. The role of lobbyist was given to Trump's former advisers in the election campaign, primarily Jason Osborne. But four years later, Trump lost the election.

#### **BIDEN'S MESSAGE**

On May 17, 2021, the hosts of his stay at the Marriott Hotel in Washington went to visit Bosnia, to Dodik's home town of Banja Luka. Large joint military exercises of the US and Bosnian-Herzegovinian armies commenced.

American politics is returning to the Balkans with President Biden. That was the first message - while the second was that the borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina are unchanging. Dodik is a pragmatic politician and should understand such messages, but he didn't. The US administration imposed financial sanctions on both him and his son. In Republika Srpska at least, the Dodik-controlled media wanted to create the impression that, together with Vučić and with the help of Orban, they could sweep everything under the carpet. The complete opposite happened: Vučić is also avoiding Dodik, who is now written off politically, and internationally undesirable as a guest. Financial supporters will have to stop cooperating with him. Dodik is left alone to tell stories about himself to his basketball friends. At least for now he will be able to throw the ball into the basket undisturbed. But he can't know for sure when the unpleasant questions by international investigators will begin. Or, above all, when his financial partners will start asking where their money is. ■

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

**Borut Šuklje** is a Slovenian journalist, official, MP, diplomat, writer and politician. In 1990 Mr Šuklje entered the National Council of Slovenia as a member of the Socialist Party. During 1990 and 1992, he was a director of programming at RTV Slovenia. In the period from 1994 to 1996 he was the Minister of Culture for the Republic of Slovenia; 1996 -1999 Secretary General of the Slovenian Republic; 1999-2001, he was the Minister of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia and in 2001 he was appointed ambassador to the FRY. In 2004, he was diagnosed with cancer which he successfully defeated. Today he is an international advisor on Southeast Europe and the Western Balkans, and CEO of the Agency for Strategic Studies, which specializes in providing business and management consultancy services to Slovenian and foreign companies in the development and implementation of their projects in Southeastern Europe.

A view from Brussels

# The EU and USA should create the space for a new social contract

There is a general recognition even in Brussels that the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina has turned so bad that some kind of policy adjustment will be required. Hopefully this recognition can be a first step toward not just an adjustment but a full-blown course correction.



By: Toby Vogel

An extraordinary escalation has been playing out over the past several months in Bosnia and Herzegovina, culminating in the events surrounding the ‘Day of the Republika Srpska’ on 9th January. In the run-up to the holiday (which was declared unconstitutional in a 2015 ruling), widespread rioting struck fear into the

hearts of returnee communities across the RS, including in Prijedor and Foča. A paramilitary parade in Banja Luka featured a special “anti-terrorist” unit of the RS police, specially-designed combat vehicles, and chants referring to the Serbs’ Christian heritage. (The RS Constitution defines the entity as “the state of Serb people and of all its citizens” and makes no reference to God or Christianity.) The parade was attended by

Russia's ambassador to Bosnia as well as Chinese diplomats, a convicted war criminal, and two far-right French Members of the European Parliament.

## **FACING THE REALITY AND CHANGING THE COURSE**

As extraordinary as these events were, the underlying dynamics were depressingly familiar. In fact, the most remarkable thing about the latest crisis is how unremarkable it is in many ways. Its main protagonist, Milorad Dodik, has done nothing that he hadn't already done or threatened to do before, *viz.* paralyzing the country's central institutions, preparing moves toward secession, and playing up the nationalist pagantry. Nor have Dodik's domestic supporters and opponents reacted any differently than in similar earlier episodes. Likewise in keeping with past practice, the "international community" – the governments and organizations in charge of overseeing peace implementation – haven't done anything to push back against Dodik's threats and maneuvers. In fact, this crisis is very much of the West's making: its persistent failure in the past to counter threats to the Dayton order has emboldened Dodik and his allies in Dragan Čović's HDZ. Dodik and Čović are again blackmailing the United States and the European Union with a threat to disrupt elections called for October. And just as in the past, Washington and Brussels are caving in rather than risk instability.

The recent escalation follows the same playbook Dodik has used in earlier episodes. To name but one example from 2009: the EU compromised when Dodik demanded an end to the executive role of international prosecutors and judges on organized crime and corruption. Two years later, when he again challenged the power of the state-level judicial institutions with a secession threat, the EU's foreign policy chief at the time, Cathy Ashton, made an unprecedented visit to Banja Luka to offer concessions in the form of a "structured dialogue" on the judiciary - thus lending credibility to Dodik's claims about biased judges. Dodik has learned that escalation will be met by concessions, and as a result his escalations have become more extreme.

The latest crisis was triggered when Valentin Inzko, the outgoing High Representative of the international community, imposed a law banning genocide denial and the glorification of war crimes and those

who committed them – behaviors which are endemic in today's rules-free political climate, and which serve to mobilize ethnic communities against each other. Inzko's move, in his last days in office, prompted Dodik to order Bosnian Serbs to walk out of central institutions, which under the current constitutional set-up serves to paralyze decision-making at the state level. But rather than blame Dodik, the EU bought into his narrative that Inzko was responsible for this latest escalation. This was made explicit in an internal note prepared by the EU Delegation (whose authenticity has not been disputed) following a visit to the country by Olivér Várhelyi, the EU's enlargement commissioner: "Commissioner shared his frank assessment that... HR Inzko was to blame for the current political crisis in BiH as well as de-legitimation of the OHR. While the Inzko amendments could not be disputed from the point of view of law's substance, the fact it was imposed on the last day of HR Inzko's mandate had been problematic. Especially because it was an important decision, it should have been based on a thorough debate having everyone on board. The question was now how to correct this," the note reads.

Várhelyi's response to Dodik's demands (shaped by his acceptance of Dodik's point that the crisis was of Inzko's making) was to add the genocide denial law to the other issues about which negotiations would commence: continuing EU/US-led talks to "reform" the country's election laws (in ways that would ensure that the Croat seat on the three-member Presidency goes to the HDZ), and to open negotiations on the disposition of state property. Várhelyi made this linkage explicit, and public, following talks with the main ethnonationalist leaders, who seem to be the preferred interlocutors of EU officials in the country.

All of which points to a seemingly inescapable conclusion about international policy toward Bosnia and Herzegovina after some 15 years of accumulated evidence, ever since the EU took leadership of the "international community" on the ground. That international policy is shaped by an inability to learn – or, to put it crudely, by a refusal on the part of decision-makers in Washington, Berlin, London, Brussels, and Sarajevo to face reality and change course. Both the European Commission and the European External Action Service lack a culture of robust policy review. In its place we see improvisation, bureaucratic inertia, or indeed policy freelancing. Whenever a crisis emerges



**EU ENLARGEMENT COMMISSIONER VÁRHELYI MET WITH THE LEADERSHIP OF RS IN BANJA LUKA**

(PHOTO: OLIVER VÁRHELYI, TWITTER)

or is engineered by bad-faith actors á la Dodik, the EU reverts to a transactional mode that promises short-term gains by further empowering the troublemakers.

#### **RIGHT MOMENT FOR A PROPER POLICY REVIEW**

If the current moment - marked by the deepest crisis the country has seen since the end of the war a generation ago - is not the right moment for a proper policy review, it is hard to see when might be.

Any policy review will have to contend with powerful in-built biases and limitations, however. Two of these appear especially relevant when it comes to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Balkans more generally. The first is the idea that since the populace in these countries express a will to join the EU, and their leaders profess to be working toward that goal, the prospect of EU membership would automatically drive reform. But Balkan elites have learned to game the enlargement process and play with the EU. They can smell policymakers' fear of instability and see their failure to imagine alternatives, responses which have turned the EU and the US into agents of the status quo and the most powerful supporters of local

strongmen such as President Aleksandar Vučić of Serbia and Prime Minister Edi Rama of Albania. The authoritarian trajectory of Aleksandar Vučić's Serbia, and the fact that he keeps getting rewarded by the EU for his actions, is ample evidence of this dynamic.

The second powerful bias is the EU's distaste for executive powers, including its own – in other words, its avoidance of coercive measures. In 2011 the EU's foreign ministers unanimously adopted a sanctions regime against Dodik and others, without publicly naming them. The sanctions instrument was structured in such a way that adding names to the list of sanctioned persons would only require a qualified majority – in other words, no member state would have a veto. (The sanctions instrument itself, however, requires annual renewal through unanimity; this renewal is coming up in the second half of March.) However, diplomatic consultations between the member states over the last few months have shown that there is little appetite among the proponents of sanctions (a group that includes Germany and the Netherlands) to push for the use of this qualified majority voting - which would allow them to outvote Hungary and others who oppose sanctions. Seeing the US adopt new sanctions against Dodik while the

EU is busy with its internal procedures has highlighted the extent to which these bad-faith actors in the Balkans and elsewhere have little to fear from the Europeans.

The same bias is evident in the fact that the EU has allowed EUFOR, the UN-mandated peace mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, to wither into irrelevance. For a full decade now its troop strength has been below operational requirements, and as a result it no longer functions as a deterrent. A succession of force commanders have told Bosnians and the EU that the country's security situation remains unchanged. This is only true if one takes an extremely narrow view of security – i.e. people getting killed and troops amassing along borders. By any other measure, the security situation in Bosnia today is worse than at any point since the EU took over peacekeeping duties from NATO in 2004. Now would be an excellent moment to reinforce it.

The last area where the EU's ideological aversion to political power is evident is the Office of the High Representative, and the High Representative's Bonn powers. The EU has been undermining the OHR for as long as any of its remaining staff members can remember. Its very existence is a rebuttal of the idea that the prospect of EU integration would drive reform. More than ever the OHR, together with EUFOR, is needed as the last guardrail against out-of-control ethnonational mobilization.

#### **THE SPACE FOR BOSNIANS AND HERZEGOVINIANS**

However, there is hope. There is a general recognition even in Brussels that the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina has turned so bad that some kind of policy adjustment will be required. Hopefully this recognition can be a first step toward not just an adjustment but a full-blown course correction.

The first, immediate step must be for the EU and US to abandon the ill-fated negotiations on the electoral law. They have been unproductive and unnecessarily divisive, have put the negotiators on the side of the HDZ, and are now far too proximate to the October elections to be meaningful or indeed legitimate. The EU likewise has to drop the other core elements of the Várhelyi package: the talks on defanging the genocide

denial law, and on the disposition of state property. The EU and the liberal West more generally simply must not take the side of those who want to glorify war crimes and deny genocide with impunity. That this needs saying is itself astounding. State property, meanwhile, is critical because giving the entities control could build Dodik's capacity to absorb the costs of secession by selling off logging concessions for the RS's extensive forests. Clearly this runs counter to the idea of stabilizing BiH and strengthening its statehood. The EU should not facilitate any negotiations that bypass the relevant institutions - above all parliament.

More generally, the EU has to decide what kind of organization it wants to be, and what kind of diplomacy it wants to pursue. It was a disastrous decision by incoming Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to give in to Orbán's lobbying and hand the enlargement portfolio to one of his closest associates. She now needs to correct this by reigning in the Hungarian commissioner and reminding him that he works for the European Union and its future member states, not for Viktor Orbán. If von der Leyen's "geopolitical Commission" can't act in the Balkans because it has been captured by the Union's illiberal member states, it might as well give up. The same applies to the EEAS. A decade ago Anton La Guardia posed the question in *The Economist*: "If the EEAS cannot act in the Balkans, what is the point of having it?" Today the problem is that lack of interest on the part of the foreign policy chief and member states has opened the space for EEAS diplomats to pursue their own agendas. In the absence of a proper BiH policy and proper instructions, this only adds to the sense that stability is best restored by rewarding those who pose a threat – precisely what got us into the current situation.

Commissioner Várhelyi's overreach appears to have finally stirred some Commission officials. In the European Parliament, meanwhile, the reaction has been much more fierce. In the latest cross-party statement published on 24 January, MEPs from the four main political groups urged the Commission and the EEAS "to finally abandon their long standing non-conclusive appeasement strategy towards Dodik." There are increasing grumblings among MEPs of all groups about Johann Sattler, the head of the EU Delegation in Sarajevo, having dodged invitations to a hearing for a year. MEPs are keen to hear first-hand about

the ongoing negotiations, and more generally about the EU's ideas on the way ahead. As a result of the disregard shown to it by the Commission and EEAS, and under the weight of the accumulated evidence, the European Parliament has become much more active on the question of EU policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is no longer only the Greens and the occasional center-left MEP who are active on the issue; a fair number of parliamentary group members from the center-right European People's Party have joined them in questioning the EU's approach. This is significant because the EPP – until last year, the political home of Viktor Orbán's Fidesz – has in the past been reluctant to call out illiberal actors. In Parliament too there is a growing recognition of the harm that Commissioner Várhelyi does to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and to the EU's standing in the region.

Germany is a critical player, too. For years it has provided protection and respectability to Orbán and his vision of “illiberal democracy”, for example by opposing linking EU spending to the rule of law in member states, or in courting President Vučić of Serbia as a supposed factor of stability. Meanwhile the manner of Christian Schmidt's appointment as High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina alienated allies and encouraged Russia and the Bosnian Serbs to question his legitimacy. This was compounded by Schmidt's failure to properly prepare for the job. But the incoming post-Merkel government carries little of that baggage; even before its arrival in office German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas called for EU sanctions against Dodik, which his successor Annalena Baerbock reaffirmed in December.

Taken together these moves – dropping election law negotiations, reinforcing EUFOR, reigning in Várhelyi, and slapping sanctions on Dodik – could open the space for Bosnians and Herzegovinians to come together to strike a “social contract for the 21st century” in an inclusive, bottom-up process, as Baroness Helić described it to the House of Lords in December. This process would have to sideline the ethnonational power-brokers that have shaped the country's destiny over the past two generations, ruling through fear and patronage. The EU and the US must stop supporting them against the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, who deserve better. ■

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