



Weekly Briefing

Bosnia-Herzegovina External Relations briefing:
Lavrov in Banja Luka
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Lavrov in Banja Luka

Russians in Banja Luka

After consistent lobbying for the Russian high-level leaders to visit Banja Luka, ROS President Milorad Dodik finally got his way. In April, Russian House of Federation Speaker Valentina Matvienko, one of the high officials currently on the US and EU travel-ban list, arrived in Banja Luka. She was lavished with carefully prepared state reception, gave a speech in Parliament and met all three most senior officials of the entity. A month after, Dodik traveled to St Petersburg economic forum to meet Russian President Putin on the margins of the opening conference. Apparently, he was brokering to have Putin or yet another high-ranking Russian official to Banja Luka. On Aug. 6, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov accepted the invitation by his colleague, FM Crnadak to pay a short trip visit to Banja Luka in September, tentatively set as state-level visit but arranged to meet only Serb politicians. Scheduled for Sept. 17 to attend consecration ceremony of Russian-Serb orthodox temple, Lavrov's visit was in the last instance moved for Sept. 21 and included short stop in Sarajevo for a brief encounter with Members of Presidency. This change likely placated Bosnian international tutors such as the United States and the EU; they feared he would strain furtherly inter-entity relations and send a message which would be likely interpreted as political support for Dodik and his party on coming elections. During the visit, Lavrov was up to his usual level of professionalism - formally reiterating support for Daytonian BIH "but without demonization of ROS" and dismissing the claims about the interference in Bosnian elections -but his deeds did not match his words. Coming to Banja Luka only 3 weeks before Bosnian general elections is obvious enough. The visit has sent a message that Russia will still be prominent in the background to tactfully support pro-Russian parties in BIH.

Foreign media has consistently forecast since 2014 that ROS President Dodik with his explicit secessionist ambitions would try to push his entity strongly under Russian influence. In a country with foreign tutored foreign policy, separate institutions with weak consensus on a few FP goals, free-riding individuals or political parties are main actors in conducting foreign relations. ROS President has even made plans to build its own diplomatic network of representative offices in all major countries of the world. Western sanctions impeded this plan but gave him almost free hands in pursuing relations with Russia.

Reaching out Russia

Since the end of his first term in 2014, Dodik has been more open about his pro-Russian policy, and many believed he holds convincing guarantees from Moscow to push for independence should Kosovo make “substantial step” towards international recognition or if international community corners ROS to make further concessions against its own sovereignty within BIH. In fact, Dodik has been desperately trying to get more than “Belgrade proxy actor” treatment from Moscow and had his “reaching-out” semi-official diplomatic strategy synchronized with dynamic of Russian involvement in the region. Indeed, after revealing activities of Russian intelligence in the region, allegedly preventing Montenegro and Macedonia to join NATO, ROS President deliberately put “anti-NATO” label on himself. His statements about the bond between the Serbs and the Russians, gratitude for Russian help, reverence for victims of 1999 NATO bombing or allegiance to Serbian policy of neutrality usually occurred after smear campaigns against Russian destabilizing influence in the region.

During the transitional period in the US administration following the Trump`s inauguration, “active seeking” Russian involvement temporarily stopped. Dodik, as it was believed, sincerely hoped Trump will make a dramatic

change in American Balkan policy, and that the “ROS independence will occur during Trump’s second term in office”. His disruptive statements on BH, however, put him on the US “black list” and further strained his relations with the US Ambassador McCormack; who, despite Dodik’s claim, was not a part of the “Obama’s outgoing administration” and grew all but resolute in isolating Dodik and his close aides from international (Western) community.

As much as American cordon sanitaire hurts Dodik, it only encouraged him to pursue more closer relations with blacklisted colleagues in Russia. He praised Russian role in PIC (Peace Implementation Council, an international body in charge of implementation of Dayton Agreement) and Russian help in blocking initiatives arriving from a Security Council “W3” members regarding the bounding declaration on Srebrenica massacre, which could undermine sovereignty claims of the Republic of Srpska. In return, besides “anti-NATO” and “brotherly relations” rhetoric, Dodik has also went “off-stream” in criticizing European sanctions policy against Russia and without trying to conceal political underpinnings openly call for enhancement of bilateral trade relations between his entity and Russia. Indeed, ROS government has approved a few acquisitions in oil and petrochemical sector by Russian companies (Brod Oil refinery).

Moreover, in recent months his reaching-out strategy touched upon slippery field of “propaganda and intelligence” activities. Allegedly, he was complaining to Putin on British and American attempts to interfere in Bosnian elections “by financing various media and NGO organizations” and proposed that Russian media should be more present in the region. Also, Bosnian political analysts raise suspicions that the meeting with Lavrov in Banja Luka was also about some Russian citizens declared “*personae non grata*” by Sarajevo and aiding joint Serbian and Russian intelligence gathering with insider information. Indeed, it is likely that this position will let Dodik be volunteering dispenser of Russian

influence, but does it earn him a title of a “Russian man” is a question still unknown to public.

Repercussions on Bosnian inter-ethnic relations and common foreign policy

For Bosnian internal relations, the continuation of ROS’ free-riding cooperation with Russia is damaging to country’s effort to build singular foreign policy and could be perilous to inter-entity relations should ROS continue to display high propensity for maintaining its own foreign policy; which, *mutatis mutandis*, means closer relations with Russia. First, it is unclear how the current opposition of the ROS to NATO accession will reflect on country’s progress towards NATO integrations. After Brussels decreased hopes for the WB6 to join the EU soon, NATO accession became auxiliary step ahead that could give a push to country’s pro-European political forces at critical time. This is a path chosen by all of the WB6, except Serbia; which, unlike ROS, has defined neutral policy, clear nationwide support to remain militarily neutral and stable track of cooperation with NATO.

The process of accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina to NATO stumbled on the Membership Action Plan (MAP), the last step before accession. The conditions of the MAP required significant military centralization, which ROS sees as a knavish plan to decrease its autonomy, or unlawful revision of Dayton Agreement at best. From 2010, NATO prospects of Bosnia and Herzegovina remain hostage to pragmatic non-cooperation of ROS regarding transfer of power to central government, but are also impeded by normative issues, such as “fraternity” with Serbia’s attitude towards the alliance. Relationship between Dodik and Russia could complicate matters. In October 2017, in the midst of “anti-Russian hysteria”, the ROS Parliament passed a resolution opposing NATO membership for Bosnia and Herzegovina. With this, Dodik has proved to

be a loyal Russian foot soldier and cemented country's position towards NATO accession. However, should Sarajevo ever decide to troubleshoot non-binding resolution by ROS Parliament and reactivate MAP application, particular synchronization of "anti-NATO" policies of ROS and Russia could cause a great deal of internal conflicts and backfire on Bosnian commitments for European integrations, especially if it comes amid EU accession fatigue cycles that are expected to occur in the long run.

Second, Bosnia and Herzegovina needs to make significant progress in the process of European integrations, unless it wants to risk political, economic and developmental gap with the regional countries. Serious doubts remain about the country's ability to pull off singular and unanimous foreign policy to sustain all the challenges ahead. From the point of view of the ROS, "anti-NATO" policy could easily switch to "anti-EU" policy if Brussels become too normative in asking Banja Luka to renounce some of its sovereign prerogatives or deliberately opts out Dodik from negotiation table. His statements against European attempts to undermine the existence of the ROS, through support for Srebrenica massacre declaration and about subversive collaboration with Sarajevo and ROS opposition are already on the verge to cause a break up if it weren't European acquired sense of ignorance for his dramatic statements. However, ignoring the situation in the ROS could lead to long term risks in finding a reliable partner to make a fresh start with. Among the current opposition leaders in the ROS, in all honesty there is no single one that thinks in terms of radical realignment with the EU and reconfirming country's only declarative FP goal. A task to distinguish whether are there left any key players in ROS that find singular FP policy (towards the EU) more attainable than various nationalist, Eurosceptic conservatives is now cumulatively harder with pro-Russian political options in the sight.

Lastly, Dodik's "grand diplomatic opening" with Russia serves his political campaign for the elections. His ability to "make Banja Luka a destination of

world leaders” stands in contrast to that of few opposition figures who forget Banja Luka after securing a position in Sarajevo. A maverick who battled for ROS “right of existence”, Dodik made commitments to be determined for ROS cause as Serb-member of State Presidency as he was during his two terms in office as ROS President. He remains popular among Serb electorate despite ongoing protests in Banja Luka organized against a murder case allegedly covered up by his associates and there is no doubt he will continue to pose a headache to the Western stakeholders who unsuccessfully tried to either isolate or ignore him.

Since becoming ROS President his career-long project and *raison d`etre* of his political existence has been “conditional secessionism” and playing with the nuclear option - the threat of independence referendum – but, within Daytonian framework of Bosnian politics and without seriously contemplating the consequences it might have for BH and the region. This means that diplomatic initiatives towards Russia are good only as they are reduced to a form of courteous exchanges and support visits without poking too deep into relations between Sarajevo and Banja Luka. Lavrov`s visit has shown sensitivity in keeping outside of internal affairs and paying respect to both political capitals. However, a critical factor might arise if Dodik leans too much on Russian declarative support. Likely scenario is that Dodik misunderstands his expendability in the big power game, pushes too far with referendum threat and forces Sarajevo to call on his bluff. In this scenario, Russia will just find another volunteer in the ROS.