



Weekly Briefing

Bosnia-Herzegovina political briefing:
Report: Wrapping up main political developments in 2018
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Report: Wrapping up main political developments in 2018

In strict sense, post-Dayton Bosnia has no history, but only repetitiously unsuccessful enactments of this idea.
(The Bosnia Times, October 2018)

Dodik`s promotion to higher office

In a rather conventional tone, the start of this political year again featured the controversy over celebrating the independence day of the Republic of Srpska in January. Milorad Dodik, the President of the Republic of Srpska, announced the state-level celebrations in Banja Luka, amid protests from Muslim parties in Sarajevo, High Representative and international community. As one of the pinnacles of his term as the RS president he has actively worked to put the Republic of Srpska on the brink of secession, numerous times threatened with independence referendum, denigrated the unity of Bosnia and Herzegovina and fiercely attacked Sarajevo or the Western embassies for meddling in internal affairs of the Republic of Srpska. Celebrating the “Srpska Day” was a relatively cheap move that combines all the above. While media pundits were still pounding constitutionality of the “Srpska Day” and the implications on the long-standing tensions on ‘genocidal basis’ of the Republic of Srpska between the Serb and Muslim parties, Dodik had organized parade and banquet in Banja Luka, which passed without the incidents and seemingly signaled a boost to Dodik`s domestic image and confirmed his commitment to “Srpska First” electoral platform.

After the “Srpska Day” and playing with the secession, the second leg of his last year of RS Presidency was ostensible deterioration of relations with the Western partners and rapprochement with Russia. Within the first few months he was blacklisted in several Western embassies for refusing to reassure them on his basic commitment for unitary Bosnia and Herzegovina and tone down some of the remarks he had made in previous year, while his feud with US ambassador McCormack banned him to travel to the US. His meetings with Putin (two in the first half of the year) came as a logical move, but were also nuanced with Dodik`s unease to build the wall with the West and virtually isolate his regime (thus falling into trap that the West intended for him). His candidacy for Serb member of the Presidency advertised as putting Srpska first on top of the Bosnian political challenges came as a rational choice for his own survival. Despite - or maybe with the help of – Western cordon sanitaire against his regime, he ran against the coalition led by incumbent Mladen Ivanic and won smoothly.

What seems the most unusual about his presidency is the fact that some of the most pressing issues for the sustainable future of post-Dayton Bosnia and the focus of the 2018 elections, i.e. the constitutional and electoral reforms are the issues for which he shows the most constructive approach. During the electoral campaign in September and especially in the aftermath of the elections, Dodik was taking conciliatory approach to Croatian “third entity” problem, yet pragmatically kept off exacerbating inter-ethnic and inter-entity rifts in official statements. Therefore, the paradox captured in the phrase from The Bosnia Times may also be the reason for another paradox that haunts the next tripartite presidency: the solution to hurdles that prevent Bosnia to start off its political life could arrive from the least expected actor.

Reform of electoral law and “third entity” issues

According to Croat ethnic parties, the main hurdle in the post-Dayton political system is the electoral law that enables Muslims in the Federation to vote on Croat ballot and virtually elect Croat member of the Presidency. After the Constitutional Court gave a positive review on the current electoral law, Croat political parties tried to “push” the motion for amendments on electoral law in federal parliament. Despite consensus of Croat political parties and relative support from Serb parties, the motion didn’t find support of Muslim parties in the House of Peoples and was rejected in April 2018. Then, the issue became so called “Lex Ljubic”, or determining “ethnic formula” for elections to the House of Peoples. Electoral law reform has since created bottlenecks in the communication between Muslim and Croat parties and shrank the expectations for setting off the ‘gentlemen’s agreement’ for respecting ethnic ballots within multiethnic constituencies. Also, highly sensitive topics such as response to migrant crisis and the stance regarding balanced budget and reform agenda directly confronted the policies and the course of actions taken by Muslim and Croat political parties in August and September. On the other level, the construction of Peljesac bridge project, the controversial bilateral issue with Croatia has also created the uncertainties and animosities as to whether Sarajevo-based Muslim political parties would insist to directly oppose the project and without seeking consensus with Croat parties uphold confrontational stance with Croatia on the official bilateral level.

The first signal that Muslim parties are taking Peljesac bridge construction project in the maverick way was the call to stop the project before the bilateral settlement and threats to proceed with seeking arbitration on the international level. In October 2018, Zeljko Komsic, newly elected Croat Member of Presidency (MOP) announced diplomatic actions to prevent the project, and catalyzed more unison Croatian response in protection of political status of Croats in BIH. Protests and smear campaigns that followed Komsic’s “anti-Croatian” statements were followed with careful diplomatic actions. On the EU meetings in October and December, Croatian Prime Minister Plenkovic made

his reservations regarding electoral anomaly in Bosnia and Herzegovina and constitutional underrepresentation of Bosnian Croats urging the leaders of the EU to drop pre-emptive anti-meddling stance regarding the Dayton Bosnia. In parallel, Croat HDZ BIH leader, ex Croat MOP said his party will continue to demand electoral reform and considered including support for electoral amendment motion as a condition to form coalitions on federal and cantonal levels. According to high level Croat politician in charge of coalition negotiations in the federal parliament, the overall assumption on Croat side is to downsize the frictions that might arise in ongoing transitional phase after the elections, but electoral law reform won't be taken off the agenda. Moreover, there were also concerns that the declaration on Bosnian Croats given by Croatian parliament in December and protectionist rhetoric espoused by Croatia during the first two months after the elections may only decrease the ambition of Bosnian Croats for negotiation with Muslim parties and increase reliance on Zagreb in pursuing "third entity" approximations.

Inshallah coalition

The central political event in Bosnia and Herzegovina this year were general elections in October; eighth after the Dayton Agreement, and also eighth that have seen the three major ethnic parties, Croat HDZ BIH, Muslim SDA and Serb SNSD, winning the ethnic ballot and securing yet another mandate. This time, civic and pan-Bosnian SDP received enough votes to become the second party in the House of Representatives of the BH Federation, while DF candidate secured the seat in the Presidency as Croat member. Relative success of SDP and DF on general and federal elections is not surprising, knowing that their vote count depends more on particular entanglements between major ethnic parties rather than genuine support. In the last two months following the elections Bosnia and Herzegovina underwent yet another contested and obnoxious process of forming the government on federal, cantonal and local levels. The stake to maintain political stability again drag strange bedfellows into ruling coalitions, principles are traded for positions, political routine prevail over theatrical performances during the campaign. Following some cynical remarks in the media, nothing has changed, only this nothing became clearer.

In the first days of December, SDA Chairman Bakir Izetbegovic was criticized for forging yet again ethno-political coalition amid the support SDA has given in the RS parliament to Dodik in approving 4 SNSD members for Serb delegates in the central House of Peoples. He is also alleged for engaging in extra-parliamentary talks with HDZ BIH Covic and "extending hand" to SDP for a coalition in the federal parliament. His ability to keep afloat and lead a word in all awkward political combinations on state and sub-state level earned him a title of the father of "Inshallah coalition", i.e. rekindling the informal alliance of three "grand old" ethno-political parties (SDA, HDZ BIH, SNSD) on the state level and absorb all other office-seeking parties on the local level.

Taking into account the statements that followed some preliminary meetings on the “office scramble” between the leaders of Inshallah coalition in November, some main political issues would likely have the same balance of power like in the previous term, including topical foreign policy issues like NATO accession or giving a way to SNSD to veto any jumping decisions; Turkey and seeking the SDA-centered bilateral cooperation; Russia and permissive stance toward independent foreign policy of the RS (where the Sarajevo position would likely alter between the ignorance for Russian incursions in BIH via Banja Luka and paying the lip service in condemning Russian destabilizing role in the region). Due to exacerbated tensions with Croatia regarding Peljesac bridge and “third entity” issue, a common ground between SDA and HDZ BIH should not be attained very easily, yet the informal talks inside of the Inshallah coalition deterred any other political party claiming right to participate in these negotiations.

So far, thus, forming the government on three levels depends, on the one hand, the ability of Inshallah coalition leaders to maintain informal communication; on the other hand, ethno-political “firewall” or ethno-political nomenklatura within existing state institutions responsible for upholding the network of semi-institutionalized and traditional reproduction of party cadres. With unassuming backstage negotiations and executive decisions virtually taken off the official meetings and placed in informal one-on-ones, the reality of forming the government in Bosnia and Herzegovina get even more pronounced. It is their main achievement to reassure Bosnian public to admit that Dayton Bosnia with all constitutional and political flaws is not for scrap after all, that inter-ethnic political partnership must go on with or without seeking extra-ethnopolitical common platform and, moreover, no unchecked uni-ethnic or “historical” solutions to ‘prisoner’s dilemma’ of Dayton could do any good for advancement of inter-ethnic political and social life in BIH.

At the end of 2018, “firewalled” Bosnia and Herzegovina is still waiting the end of post-electoral transition that on some levels can (be expected) to last for many months to come. Any novelty in the process may only be caused by some mis-en-scene alterations, background titans will assure mythical temporality of post-Dayton Bosnia.