Bosnia-Herzegovina political briefing:

Re: Political prospects in 2019

Ivica Bakota
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Expecting Bosnian conclave

Making stable coalitions in federal and central parliament, forming cabinet of the Council of Ministers (COM), federal cabinet, proposing disputed amendments on electoral reform, adjusting taxes and implementation of the new Reform Agenda will mark Bosnian political scene in the first half of 2019. But, as for almost each of the decisions is required bicameral qualified majority, some comments predict the resolution of these issues might be prolonged for entire year. Statements issued by the main party leaders are still far from conciliatory and largely contradict each other about the names and dates when the new government should start with work.

The decision to confirm the Council of Ministers with a Serb as the new Chairman, as proposed by Dodik’s SNSD, is deliberately put on hold by stalling with the Commission for appointments that should formally propose the new cabinet names to the central parliament. So far, only SNSD nominated RS Finance Minister Zoran Tegeltija for the next COM Chairman. Other ethnic parties haven’t officially endorsed anyone yet and still hold dissonant views on most of the posts. Croat Member of Presidency (MOP) Komsic said by the end of December, he might endorse Tegeltija if he accepts NATO agenda for BIH; which, given the current disapproval for NATO among Serb political parties actually more indicates that the negotiation process is in the early probing phase, than on the real possibility of striking a deal on forming the central government. Similarly, some Croat parties asked Croat MOP Komsic to recognize Croat entity in return for their support. Therefore, according to current “balloon releasing stage”, Bosniak (and Croat) parties are in no rush and hope that tactical delays will force more precipitant Dodik on some concessions. Stalling with the Commission and buying a time for further negotiations, as it seems, will be continued in the first two months because agenda for the Commission was not passed in Parliament.

This is extraordinary, but not unusual practice. Bosnian politicians like to test already complex legal and parliamentary procedures to the extreme, put heavy allegations on the work of the Electoral Commission, review constitutionality and legality of decision or procedure they find displeasing. As a result, in the aftermath of 2010 elections, parliamentary deadlock lasted more than a year and, on average, Bosnian post-electoral crises last little over 6 months. There is no reason why the current deadlock should be expediated. There are enough legal instruments
for political parties to be resourceful in blocking formation of the government even if the Commission gets formed and the appointments pass the House of Representatives. Besides procedures, there are also issues at display. Although electoral reform is slowly receding as a hot topic in the last days, Croat political parties and leading HDZ BIH support for the establishment of government might depend on whether the House of Representatives will adopt the changes to the electoral legislation in the House of Peoples. As it needs two-thirds of the delegates, which can only be composed of three of the most numerous political caucuses that are yet to confirm political alliances. Office, post and title allocations are yet more important. Apparently, highly-prized sinecures in foreign embassies, including ambassadorial and consular positions, have already been given to the VIP party supporters and now is turn for executive positions. Croat HDZ BIH already gave a hint they will be set with two ministries, allegedly including the position of the next Minister of Foreign Affairs for Covic himself. Serb SNSD have already proposed the Chairman of the Council of Ministers and they aspire to maintain the number of high positions they held in the previous term. More fierce battle will be held for numerous deputy-level, federal, cantonal positions where the appointments are usually more contested and some unresolved pockets remain even after a big conclave in Sarajevo. In previous term, after the Constitutional Court ordered vote recount and repeated elections, Stolac municipality elected government only in 2016. Given the current objections on the work of the Central Electoral Commission, it is possible that this scenario might occur again.

Meanwhile, European Commissioner and High Representative as well as other ‘Europeans’ are expected to urge Bosnian politicians to speed up with forming state, federal and cantonal governments, appealing to party leaders to accept EU integration agenda as a yardstick in negotiating coalitions, display proactive stance and choose programmatic over “mathematic” alliances. However, critiques on the work of the European Commissioner Wigemark and the High Representative Inzko have also been raised. According to not very unbiased, but fairly critical report by IFIMES, non-transparent funding of Bosnian political actors by the EU Delegation and arbitrariness in making its own ‘black lists’ of Bosnian politicians has made their work highly accountable to be reviewed by the European Anti-Fraud Office. However, judging from the EU decision to extend the term to Commissioner, these objections might just pass unnoticed on the next regular report meetings on Bosnia in Brussels.
The end of country of one man?

Protests organized by Justice for David supporters by the end of 2018, detention of the group leader Davor Dragicevic and opposition MP Stanivukovic attracted significant media coverage. This time, protesters` pick on Dodik and his authoritarian governance were more pronounced. From a country of a few, Srpska was now depicted as a “country of one man”. For now, large-scale popular mobilization is still out of game, but the protests have already assumed anti-regime trajectory. International factor which closely monitors the events from the inception is now openly accused by Dodik as instrumentalizing the protests for sparking political upheaval and rallying opposition against the government.

As it has been covered in the previous reports, cross-ethnic and anti-establishment appeal of the protests still have a potential to yield support by thousands of people, just like it did on the New Year`s Eve on Krajina square in Banja Luka. But its connections with shifty opposition in Srpska is somewhat of liability. Not only their “revolutionary” goals are at stake, but the political struggle might be also found in danger. The government and Dodik himself can easily handle a battle with the known foes from the political arena. His recent statements indicate that the protests will be an easy prey if their leaders allow some oppositional figures to be their mouthpieces, especially if they are with dubious nationalist agenda, clientelist background and are offspring of the same regime they claim to protest against. In the following year, Dodik is expected to pay lip service in support of the cause of the protest, extend his help in seeking justice or, to some extent, allow cleansing of judicial institutions allegedly involved in cover up of David`s murder. This would be slippery path; first, because Dodik and protesters didn’t start off on friendly terms, second, as long as David`s case has no closure, the government will be the main addressee of their grievances. Therefore, Dodik might prefer bonding of protesters with the opposition, it is more safe way to cut its popular support and get rid of the international interference.

A relative fall of support for SNSD in Srpska is another potential concern for Dodik in this year. His party has scored less seats in the RS Parliament, lost big cities and had to forge more inclusive coalition on entity level. This was the reason for somewhat hasty announcement of constitutional changes in Srpska – qualified majority in parliament for passing important decisions and reorganization of the government. The first is seen as an early sign of ‘nervousness’ about decreasing support his party might face in the current term; the second involves merging certain ministries to fit new party employments and disbanding the Ministry for Refugees, which can be played in aggravating tensions with Sarajevo. Bearing international factor will be also challenging for Dodik, especially after being blacklisted by the US embassy.
His position as the Serb MOP will give him better standing in buffering the isolation from the Western powers. However, his ability to maintain proactive role in dealings with Sarajevo, avoiding overtly anti-NATO, pro-referendum rhetoric, abstaining from Dayton-revisionist moves and downsizing friendly terms with Russia will be necessary to make a step towards the Europe. Not many analysts are optimistic about this scenario, though.

**Civic option slowly taking ground?**

Largest Bosniak party experienced setbacks on cantonal and federal level. Several affairs in Sarajevo University Clinical Center, communal companies, Sarajevo University coupled with internal tensions all decreased chances for SDA to win majority in the most of the cantons. The main change happened in Sarajevo canton, “patrimonial constituency” where SDA has ruled for the last 20 years. SDP and Democratic Front aligned with several small civic parties (Our Party, People and Justice, Alliance for Better Future and the Independent Bloc) and succeeded in forming a bloc without SDA. After electing SDP Karajbic for the Speaker of the Federal HOR, coalition of minor civic parties stand chance to elect a new federal government. SDA Chairman, Bakir Izetbegovic promised unstable political year if SDA stays in opposition. Further coalition negotiations on federal level will make SDA internal calculations more clear, as well as whether minor parties allow the possibility of expanding coalition.

Since the most of the civic parties from minor coalition are new and not very experienced, their ideological consistency and gravitation to SDP-DF axis will be tested in this year. This is particularly emphasized for Our Party and People and Justice, which are for the first time joining big time negotiations on the federal level. SDP, an anchor of this prospective coalition, will have to seriously prepare to maintain the stability, which should also include some refreshments on executive positions, but also more leadership in perspective.

After electoral reform issue, Croat political parties led by HDZ BIH are characterized by unity vis-a-vis Bosniak parties, especially SDA; but lack of capacity of individual actors to overcome small differences that lead to confrontations on cantonal and local levels. There are three main political options on occasionally contradictory terms within themselves. These are the HDZ BIH, HDZ 1990 and Party of Rights. It is not realistic that in 2019 major changes will be made in this constellation.

Lastly, as the EU waits fulfillment of the Reform Agenda, Bosnia and Herzegovina might expect to get offered more defined integration path. As the enlargement process has not been
the EU's focus for some time, and Bosnia and Herzegovina has accustomed to slow pace of reforms, Bosnian politicians will face yet another year in pretending to fulfill the tasks given by the EU. The EU has sought to reform the electoral legislation and judiciary, while social cohesion and corruption is in its ongoing focus. Making substantial steps in any of these fields, from today’s perspective, unfortunately looks as an impossible mission.