



Weekly Briefing

Bosnia-Herzegovina political briefing:
Report: BH. Bloc – an anti-nationalist platform
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Report: BH. Bloc – an anti-nationalist platform

I

The BH. Bloc is a recently formed pan-Bosnian, anti-ethnopolitical platform of civic, social democratic parties. Members of the platform include Social Democratic Party of BIH (SDP BIH), the Democratic Front (DF) and Our Party (NS), three Sarajevo-based political parties with a vote sprawl in urban areas and educated middle-class of the Federation. The platform advocates anti-nationalism, (radical) opposition to the three main ethno-nationalist political parties - gathered around so called “Patriotic Bloc” : Bosniak Party of Democratic Action (SDA), Croatian Democratic Alliance of Bosnia and Herzegovina (HDZ BIH) and Serb Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) - reduction of party clientelism in the administration and public sector, gradual withering of ethno-nationalist parties and ethnic-based political elites, economic prosperity and social progress based on the European standards and values. The BH. Bloc has also been described as an anti-platform for refusal to join the government forming negotiations with ethno-nationalist parties and an opposition-building platform for its determination to make a united front against the hegemony of ethnopolitics within the Dayton-mandated rules.

In the first days of February 2019, three months after the 2018 general elections, the BH. Bloc organized a meeting to discuss common platform regarding the negotiations with the “Patriotic Bloc” on federal and national level. Predrag Kojovic, a leader of Our Party and unofficial PR of the BH. Bloc, after the meeting came out with “historical” decisions that were covered by all leading dailies in Bosnia and Herzegovina. BH. Bloc refused to enter in government-forming negotiations with ethno-nationalist parties, instead it decided to stay in the opposition and to prepare an anti-nationalist platform for the next elections. SDP Chairman, Nermin Niksic, gave a statement of the importance of unity of action, whipping possible dissent in the local branches; DF leader and Croat MOP, Zeljko Komsic, have also commented on the decision in similar tone, confessing compliance with reinstalled democratic socialism: "In order to safeguard the unity of the BH. Bloc, the position of the Democratic Front is to accept to remain in the opposition." He has also added: “As far as we are concerned, there are no halfway solutions between forming government alone and staying in the opposition”, suggesting a new normative taking place in Bosnian politics.

II

The main ideas espoused by the proponents of the BH. Bloc are not unfamiliar to the Bosnian public. They have been brewing for some time within socially influential, but politically marginal Bosnian intellectual circles and has been voiced by - very loosely defined - Bosnian Left from time to time. Given the Dayton-framed political reality, Bosnian Left rarely made any departures out of academic circles and dwelled in unprincipled alliance with SDP. As a main pre-war political party, bearing the legacy of the League of Communist of Bosnia and Herzegovina, SDP has inherited political primogeniture in criticizing ethnic nationalism of the main political parties and continuing hegemony of ethno-politics in Bosnian political life. This party had the political infrastructure, popular legitimacy and stable vote support to form the opposition to all three ethno-nationalist parties, had it not been drawn too many times to enter in partnership with nationalists. Compromising track in joining government coalitions on national and federal level decreased its vote base and virtually reduced its outreach to Bosniak-dominated urban areas, where it served as an alternative to SDA. The loss of national appeal and entrenchment in “political Sarajevo” were some of the main reasons for the split up in 2012 and formation of the Democratic Front. Komsic-led Front hit on the SDP` blind spots more decisively and secured the support that surpassed two general elections. NS, on the other hand, is a formerly local-based social-liberal and multi-ethnic political party that only recently propped to federal (and national) level. This political party claims origins in politically disgruntled, anti-nationalist intellectuals and activists seeking alternative to ethno-nationalist as well as social-democratic blocs. The party stands as ideological and political originator of the “historical no” to ethno-nationalist parties, which in some circles is appraised as commendable consistency to original goals, while is some is ascribed to relative virginity on national-level politics. The NS gradually built a local support in Sarajevo and surroundings, which it makes uneasy in leaving its cantonal ‘comfort zone’ and steering in federal and national parliaments. Joining forces with social-democratic bloc, therefore, seems a logical step, especially given the successful track of cooperation on the local level.

Before announcing national “anti-nationalist” platform, SDP, DF and NS forged alliance and locked the government forming coalition in Sarajevo Canton, eliminating Bosniak Party of Democratic Action (SDA) off the negotiation table. A contributing factor was relatively low support SDA received on the October elections. However, despite a long list of failed policies, affairs and corrupt activities of the successive SDA governments that backfired on the elections, “taking away” Sarajevo from SDA was considered as a groundbreaking success that encouraged the BH. Bloc to pave a way for federal and national platform.

III

In December 2018, Bosnia and Herzegovina entered in the period of post-electoral crisis as no party could secure a mandate to form a government. As there are no statutory limitations for post-electoral deliberations, the main ethno-nationalist parties tacitly agreed on an entrenched negotiation battle characterized with mutual accusations for the deadlock (mainly between precipitant SNSD and SDA on scheduling meetings of the Presidency), unrealistic proposals (conditioning prospective Chairman of the Council of Ministers with support for Bosnian NATO accession) and without any concessions on sight.

The first days of 2019 have seen political blackmails from the ethno-nationalist parties to potential renegades and premature deal-breakers. Also, there were two fabricated “constitutional” crises that further exacerbated current deadlock. By the end of January, SDA announced it will seek from its representatives in the parliament to submit a request to the Constitutional Court for reviewing the constitutionality of the name of the Republic of Srpska. As SDA spokesman argues, according to the Constitution, Bosnia and Herzegovina is a multi-ethnic society with three nations (ethnicities) being constitutional in the both entities, therefore, the name of one of the entities cannot be derived from the name of the (only) one ethnicity. Moreover, “the long-standing practice of the Republic of Srpska authorities also shows that its name is intensively and effectively used to discriminate against and exclude two other constitutional nations”. Serb MOP Dodik held an extraordinary press conference to explain that the name of the “Serb entity” is legitimate and warned that the initiative to rename the entity actually means “a call for Srpska to leave Bosnia and Herzegovina”. The issue stopped on verbal exchanges, but it is expected to reappear should SDA need extra bargaining chip.

The second issue was a federal government shutdown since February 1, which was caused by inability of the federal House of Peoples to approve the budget for the current year. The concerns with the budget approval have been raised in pre-electoral period, when some MPs fearing potential deadlock after the elections proposed a motion on interim financing of the government, but didn’t find support from Lidija Bradara, the HOP speaker and a member of HDZ BIH. However, since HDZ BIH and SDA, both from different angles submitted a motion for constitutional review of the current electoral law that specifies the number of delegates from cantonal units based of 2013 census, the HOP is prevented from convening constituent session and thereby approving the budget already passed by the House of Representatives in January. The issue is closely connected with the controversy over the electoral law reform and dates back in 2016 when HDZ 1990 leader Bozo Ljubic’s petition against ethnic gerrymandering in HOP constituencies found support of the Constitutional Court and suspended the current

electoral law. Meanwhile, the federal parliament failed to adopt a new electoral law mostly because of strong disagreements between Croat and Bosniak parties. Now, the Office of High Representative (OHR) “refused” to take a responsibility for interfering into political decisions and the Constitutional Court avoided to have its opinion instrumentalized in causing further delays. While this legislative conundrum threatens to paralyze the federation for a long time, more than half a million of “budgeteers”, various veteran organizations, police, farmers, public employees are left without salaries and paychecks. The first reactions came from several war vet organizations announcing protests and strikes if the shutdown lasts until February 10.

IV

The “historical” decision of the BH. Bloc, therefore, arrives in particularly fragile political times. In SDA, a party that originally proposed a partnership on federal and national level in order to “join all patriotic forces against the attacks on territorial integrity and the state sovereignty” (hence, derogatory termed “Patriotic Bloc”), the decision was taken as cowardice in assuming historical responsibility”. Inner circles of the BH. Bloc parties are also fairly divided. Some lament rejecting "Patriotic Bloc" out of concerns for “leaving the country at the mercy of three nationalist parties”, some regret government positions and privileges, while some prepare for a long and very challenging path in keeping “no partnership with nationalists” spirit in place. There is a profound division in the public between those who approach pragmatically to BH. Bloc participation in the government either for the sake of inter-ethnic stability or balancing ethnopolitical extremism, and those who would like to see BH. Bloc drawing a clear-cut line between the government and the opposition. Most staunch support the BH Bloc received from reawaken intellectual Left who readily denounced recent constitutional deadlocks as “tricks and tactics” of ethno-nationalist parties to intimidate the public and prevent the formation of a real opposition. However, all of them share opinion that it is difficult to predict whether this historical “no” will survive the moment, let alone be alive by the next elections.