



Weekly Briefing

**Bosnia-Herzegovina external relations briefing:
New Foreign Policy Strategy – a year after
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New Foreign Policy Strategy – a year after

On 13 March 2018, the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina (top decision body for BIH foreign policy) adopted a new “Foreign Policy Strategy for Bosnia and Herzegovina 2018-2023” (“Strategija vanjske politike Bosne i Hercegovine, 2018.-2023”, for full text, see: BIH Presidency: <http://www.predsjednistvobih.ba/vanj/default.aspx?id=79560&langTag=hr-HR>) This 11-page long document is the first official paper on BIH foreign policy after 15 years and one of rare pieces of official writing about Bosnian and Herzegovinian strategy in the field of foreign policy. Preceding to “Strategy”, were “General Directions and Priorities in Conducting Foreign Policy” from 2003 (Opci pravci i prioriteti u provodjenju vanjske politike Bosne i Hercegovine, for full text, see: BIH Ministry of Foreign Affairs, http://www.mvp.gov.ba/vanjska_politika_bih/osnovni_pravci_vanjske_politike_bih/?id=2), which during the course of years became virtually obsolete, but was only binding document on BIH foreign policy that far.

Despite the passive and unassuming ‘mode’ BIH diplomacy and foreign policy has acquired throughout the last 20 years, BIH has, in fact, underwent two unsuccessful attempts to draft more updated strategy on its foreign affairs. One was in 2008 along with the intensification of efforts to join UN SC (United Nations Security Council), becoming non-permanent member in 2010-11 period, another was in 2013 when BIH tried more actively to grapple its relations with the EU. Both times passing the strategic document failed due to opposition from the Serb MOP (member of Presidency). Given the time and effort consuming negotiation process within BIH Presidency, the current “Strategy” was rather quickly promulgated within short timeframe, without lengthy drafting procedures or consultations with foreign policy professionals and institutions, as a result, from its publication in 2018 this strategic document passed almost unnoticed in media and general public.

However, even those few commentaries that gave a glance to “Strategy” generally agree that the document is not bringing anything radically new in terms of revalorizing BIH foreign policy goals and priorities or even providing a substitute to the “General Directions” from 2003. The “Strategy” is more to be regarded as a continuation of the same priorities updated with new global and local perspectives BIH should start to pay attention to. The “Strategy” departs in unusually extensive analysis of the changes in global and regional situation in the last 15 years. As much as it goes beyond official paper in recognizing and assessing changes deemed crucial for a new strategy of the BIH foreign policy, circumscribing everything from a ‘third wave’ in

social democracy to rise of right-wing populism, European debt crisis to migrant crisis, Arab Spring, Maidan and annexation of Crimea, to Brexit, Croatian EU accession, Montenegrin NATO accession and so forth, as an official policy document it clearly compensates a deficit of providing a new set (or revising an old) FP guidelines with more or less comprehensive analysis of the global context. In this sense, the “Strategy” is more like “General Directions updated” or “An Outline for New Strategy”, an endeavor to help drafting some future strategy, if for one would ever be shown interest, need or consensus.

A gap between “General Directions” and “Strategy”

BIH from the “General Directions” was a country still struggling to attain permanent peace, security and stable development and only “to join” European security, political and economic integration processes. The goals were straightforward: protection of BIH independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity; full implementation of the Dayton Agreement; joining Euro-Atlantic integration processes (without mentioning any concrete goals, sic!); participation in multilateral frameworks, such as UN (goal to become non-permanent UNSC member obtained in 2010), Council of Europe (efforts discontinued following the signing of the SAA in 2015), Organization of Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE still maintains mission in Sarajevo), Organization of Islamic Cooperation (due to “non-Muslim” opposition, BIH is participating in a permanent observer status); active participation in global economic and trade cooperation frameworks, with specific goal of joining the WTO (currently still in negotiation process).

It should seem outdated to judge the success of the “General Directions” from the current perspective as it lost relevance long time ago while the sole reason why it continued to be the single binding document for the BIH foreign policy was the absence of any other paper published meanwhile. In spite of this, the “Strategy” claims continuity to the “General Directions” but gives no explanation for 15-year lacuna between the two and lacks minimum prescriptiveness in defining future goals in BIH foreign policy.

Instead of “pillars” that define directions and actions in foreign policy, it offers “dynamic trajectories” that should be given due consideration and priority. Therefore, there are, first, general concerns for ‘security and stability’ which imply more active participation in the (EU-sponsored) frameworks that aim at strengthening rule of law, engagement in security area and migration crisis, strengthening regional transportation and infrastructure links and giving support for regional integration processes, economic and social development. Second is the continuous economic prosperity, which from operational point should be sought through financial assistance programs provided by the EU, especially Pre-Accession Financial

Instruments. (Position on seeking financial assistance from other countries or intl. organizations was not mentioned). Third, legal protection of BIH citizens abroad and strengthening international legal cooperation is coterminous to expanding diplomatic network and reaching comprehensive agreements on double citizenship, prosecution and extradition of citizens with neighboring countries (Croatia and Serbia), but was not elaborated in detail. Fourth as a general activity is active promotion of Bosnian and Herzegovina in the world.

From pillars to trajectories, from prescription to assessment

Within the guidelines given in the “General Directions”, the “Strategy” foresees that BIH should actively follow the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union. The emphasis is put on the implementation of SAA agenda (Stabilization and Accession Agreement), which includes variety of commitments (respect for HR, media, minority and individual freedoms, development of good-neighborly relations, fight against corruption, organized criminal, terrorism, continuous reforms, etc.) . In order to achieve this strategic goal, it is envisaged close cooperation with all relevant actors, so to finish the first stage of SAA within planned 6 years. “Strategy`s” added value is recommendation for the Presidency and the Council of Ministers (BIH COM) to consider medium-term (five-year) and long-term (ten-year) investments in strengthening the diplomatic network, “in a perspective to establish diplomatic missions on a residential basis in all EU member states by 2028”, and vaguely putting sufficient financial resources and expertise to “negotiate, lobby and promote” BIH as a future EU member state. On the other hand, the Strategy is void of any binding strategy or recommendations if in considerably possible event BIH fails to fulfill obligations under the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) by the end of the transition period. It can be said that in a new political context, after ongoing year-long government forming crisis and virtual halt of EU integration processes, the need for additional or more coherent paper on EU integration objectives is required to fill this void.

For the relations with “non-EU” part of the world, the paper gives a sketch of ‘possible breaking points’ within international relations (and the impact it generates on BIH) and make critical evaluation of the link between the resources and forms of actions available to BIH and the goals it seeks to achieve. The political situation identified as requiring mandatory level of engagement by BIH is the situation in the Middle East, Iran, Kosovo, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine, where BIH should build capacity to actively monitor and assess the effects it might have for BIH’s external as well as internal developments.

The Strategy also requires a further assessment of BIH’s commitments in each strategic area related to NATO and WTO relations, and activities related to the UN Sustainable

Development Program by 2030. The key aspect of security and stability in BIH is recognized to be “the implementation of activities in relation to NATO”, which are said to be a priority for the institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Strategy was still not able to reflect controversy on NATO that started to snowball by the beginning of this year with the opposition from RS (written more extensively in previous reports), therefore it states that priority will be primarily focused on the activation and implementation of the MAP, but "within the constitutional system of Bosnia and Herzegovina and in accordance with the BIH Law on Defense”. The Strategy envisages the continuation of current cooperation programs with NATO “that will help to achieve the required level, equipment and interoperability, compatibility (of the BIH Armed Forces) and their ability to carry out joint and combined operations with partners."

For the rest of the document, the Strategy also mentions Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and continuing cooperation with UNDP under Agenda 2030 and related programs, more active participation in International Labor Organization, implementation of Kyoto Protocol and action plan for joining in WTO. Regional cooperation and relations with neighboring Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia are also mentioned as important but their bilateral relations with BIH were left without much elaboration.

To sum up, the Strategy is a piece of official document on BIH foreign policy that was missing for 15 years, but by avoiding to declare strict objectives, prescribed guidelines and action plans it is also a paper that more reflects the process of internal contestations which as a result produce insufficiently coherent and descriptive middle ground rather than sharp analysis and pointed guidelines. The Strategy will be around for a while, but probably only to serve as a sketch to future strategy that should depart from analysis and evaluations and state clear-cut objectives for reaching short-term and middle-term goals.