



Weekly Briefing

Bosnia-Herzegovina external relations briefing:

“Mini Schengen” – Bosnian perspective

Ivica Bakota


China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

“Mini Schengen” – Bosnian perspective

Mini Schengen

On November 10, on the meeting of Western Balkan leaders held in Ohrid (Northern Macedonia), Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama and N. Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev launched an initiative for facilitation of border traffic and expressed intent to gradually abolish checks at the common borders. This initiative, hailed instantaneously as a Balkan's 'mini Schengen' was received with different reactions. Serbian and Macedonian media remained relatively positive on the first "authentic" regional initiative, as opposed to externally initiated frameworks the WB6 was partaking so far (Berlin process, for example). Some comments emphasized importance of the initiative vis-à-vis European failure to honor the enlargement promise towards Albania and Northern Macedonia on the last EU Summit. On more critical side, the initiative was regarded as continuation of slow-paced integration attempts because follow-up measures are not announced. However, there were also concerns whether such framework is convergent with EU aspirations of these three countries and is does it represent a new Yugoslavia in making.

In the aftermath of the Ohrid meeting, leaders of Albania, Serbia and Northern Macedonia called remaining three WB partners (Kosovo, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina) to join the initiative, but their response was not as forward-looking. Whereas Montenegro's representative, Economy Minister, Dragica Sekulic unenthusiastically confirmed its support to the initiative only as long as it is entirely convergent with its EU integration goals and Kosovar President Hashim Thaci downright rejected the invitation, Bosnia and Herzegovina responded with a certain indecisiveness. BIH COM Chairman Denis Zvizdic was quoted saying that BIH government would have to think the initiative over. In his response to Bosnian media he said that "BIH do not have a consensus on this initiative or have a firm stance and will need Bosnia and Herzegovina institutions, such as the Council of Ministers or the Presidency, to be formally introduced with the content of the initiative and the expected benefits from it." Therefore, similarly to Montenegro, BIH is looking to buy a time and internal consensus, but like Kosovo is almost certain that the initiative would be rejected from a part of public.

Some of the objections to 'mini Schengen' raised in BIH public include political as well as economic concerns that can be summed up in three+ issues among which are: "new Yugoslavia", "delaying Europe" and "dominant nationalism".

New Yugoslavia

The main objection against 'mini Schengen' and any other initiative aiming at regional integration that is not imposed externally is that it conspires the creation of new Yugoslavia. Regardless of geographic extent (including non-ex-Yugoslav Albania), ethnic composition (more than 25% of non-Slavs) and cooperation goals (travel facilitation, connectivity) of the initiative, Yugoslavia still remains common denominator for any attempt to forge multilateral regional cooperation from the bottom. Following the breakup of Yugoslavia and the 1990s Balkan wars each Western Balkan country has acquired different narratives regarding the Yugoslav political and social heritage as well as its integrative potential in contemporary regional framework. As any other effective regional initiative is virtually non-existent, these narratives rarely formed country's (regional) foreign policy, but to various degrees shaped domestic politics. Yugoslavia was, depending of perspective one assumed, a powerful lever for ethnic reconciliation, cohesive cross-party platform, anti-European or Eurosceptic political force, "expended" political and social idea, etc. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, integrative capital of "Yugoslavia" is even more diversified. According to ethnic division, there are at least three main positions on Yugo-themed regional integration. One is "small Yugoslavia" espoused by the Serb political parties, aiming at closer (social) integration of ex-Yugoslav countries with significant Serb population. Serb identity and socio-cultural features are main cohesive force which can vary according to political position and party ideology, from "Svetosavlje" (dominant faction within Serbian Orthodox Church) to integral social-democracy (of pre-Yugoslav tradition) and neo-communism. On the other hand, there is strong "3- anti" policy generally espoused by political parties representing ethnic Croats which inherit strong anti-communist, anti-Yugoslav and anti-Serbianism from Tadjman's era. This is strongly anti-integrative position, where "Yugoslavia" and "Balkan" has a face value that encompasses all negative and regressive integrative tendencies. Bosniak political parties (typically represented by SDA and SBB) contend to Yugo-integration as a long-term and lasting solution, however, not before mutual compromise, ethnic reconciliation and much deeper engagement between post-conflict societies has been reached. In this regard, main objection they have is "not too much, but too little integration", surface-level political communication and lack of comprehensive political agreement that should come before "making Schengen Republic of Yugoslavia".

Delaying Europe

Among powerful arguments against the regional integration is a claim that every effort towards regional integration diminishes or delays prospects for EU integration. On diplomatic

level, this argument is to a great extent forming Montenegro's regional policy especially as an approach towards non-EU sponsored multilateral frameworks, but it is traceable in Bosnian and Kosovar foreign policies. While in the latter, usually more prone to regional-isolationism (relations with Serbia, tariff wars, etc.) equation between regional integrations and delayed European integrations is a doxa shared across political lines – illustration of which can be found in recent statements on 'mini Schengen' by Kosovo President Hashim Thaci, Vetvendosje leader Albin Kurti and LDK leader Isa Mustafa all confirming that Kosovo do not want in any circumstances to replace Euro-Atlantic perspective with any regional initiative – Bosnia and Herzegovina is more open about regional framework with likes of Visegrad Group (V4) or similar "prep-style framework". This is especially salient in trade and economic relations BIH with the WB6 and evidently necessary considering relative progress BIH has made on EU integration path so far. BIH support for regional economic integration is nothing new. The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), a framework which with moderate success pressed for integration of South-east Europe since 2008 was actively backed by Sarajevo. Complementary strategies designed to prepare Western Balkan countries for EU accession by gradually reducing economic barriers, creating common economic area, facilitating connectivity and decreasing transportation cost, as long as they are backed by the EU or European countries (Berlin process, for example) are supported by BIH. In this sense, as a country with good geographical location, being one of the largest WB6 countries, encircled by EU and with good free-trade association agreements with the EU, Russia and the neighboring countries, BIH is proponent of stronger economic integration. BIH central Foreign Trade Ministry has supported similar initiatives with goal towards custom union or single market, but only as long as it is backed or sanctioned by the EU. Without EU support, everything left to regional countries to negotiate between themselves is suspected to bring into play frameworks that can be subject to different non-EU and even anti-EU impacts. 'Mini Schengen' as much as it is advertised as pro-EU has contingencies that could indicate non-EU development trajectory. In this sense, country with little consensus for any initiative not conducive to the EU integration might also hold reservations for foreign policy idea that is a brainchild of regional countries.

Dominant nationalisms

In a framework with two dominant nationalisms, or what writer Andrej Nikolaidis called, the Kingdom of Serbs and Albanians, it is argued that Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks can only be losers. In such "mini Schengen" (also known in earlier metamorphosis as 'Balkan Union') Serbia and Albania will assume similar roles as France and Germany in the EU. Multiethnic Bosnia and Herzegovina hardly could dream to match these two or even to become a sort of

Balkan's Italy. Moreover, BIH non-Serb constitutional ethnicities will be furtherly marginalized. This viewpoint espoused indiscriminately by pro-European progressives, nationalists and leftists holds that any new Balkan community, whether it be economic cooperation framework or a union with some state prerogatives, will allow Serbs from Serbia, Montenegro, Republika Srpska and the Kosovo enclaves to pursue closer social, economic and political integration at expense of other ethnicities. The similar argumentation is applied for Albanians. "When Pristina relents to pan-Albanian appeal", there will be union of Albanians from Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia and Montenegro second only to Serbs. It is permissible to imagine Bosniaks playing cohesive role because, except in BIH, they live in Serbia and Montenegro. For the rest, Macedonians, Montenegrins and Bosnian Croats – "who, when put together, have little more citizens than Belgrade" – a framework that supports dominant and concurrent nationalisms will only furtherly exacerbate internal population loss, already rampant within these ethnicities.

Miscellaneous issues

Acting COM Chairman Denis Zvizdic said that idea of 'mini Schengen' and any other similar regional initiative is pointless as long as mutual border disputes are not solved, or at least started to be negotiated. Bosnia and Herzegovina is unique in this regard, confined entirely with "new" borders that were previously Yugoslav internal borders (also known as AVNOJ borders). Settling all disputes in current border delineation with its neighbors through bilateral agreements stems from Dayton Agreement, but also reflects unease about possible territorial claims of surrounding ethnic-states (Croatia and Serbia). BIH with Croatia shares the longest border and the process of bilateral settlement has been initiated with the start of Croatian EU accession negotiations. However, border negotiations with Serbia (on river Drina) and Montenegro are slow paced. Additional concern is that both state borders are also external borders of Republika Srpska and the speed of negotiations is significantly tempered by the Serb politicians.

Another argument points that BIH, regardless of its size and geographic position, is in fact peripheral to other Western Balkan countries. Main transportation links BIH has with outside world go through Croatia and Sarajevo-Belgrade highway construction project that would help BIH to more easily access other WB countries is just at preparation stage. In this regard, BIH believes in regional interconnection but is also aware of costs and time for building stronger transportation links with other WB countries. Finally, there is Kosovo issue, which is still unrecognized by Serbia and BIH. As much as Belgrade and Pristina relations are complex in this regard, Sarajevo and Pristina relations are entangled in Serbia-Srpska relations and

consequences Belgrade-Pristina dialogue would have on political mobilization of Bosnian Serbs. Therefore, BIH is forced to remain passive over Kosovo, while bearing the price for not recognizing the (economic) reality of its independence. As a result of this, the Kosovo government imposed tariffs on imported Serbian and BIH goods by late 2018, reminding BIH that meaningful regional integration is not yet behind the corner.