



## **Weekly Briefing**

**Bosnia-Herzegovina social briefing:  
BIH – a ticking time bomb next to the EU**  
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## **BIH – a ticking time bomb next to the EU**

In an interview for *The Economist* on November 7, French President Emmanuel Macron made several statements that raised eyebrows across the Atlantic, among which messages on the future of NATO (NATO as ‘brain dead’) and Trans-Atlantic partnership (‘Europe and USA are not sharing common projects anymore’) given only few days following his meeting with Trump will probably provoke many different commentaries in the next weeks. But, this interview will be also remembered for an unusually brisk reference to BIH. When asked about the reasons for his intransigent position regarding the EU enlargement policy that came into spotlight on the last EU summit in October (when France vetoed decision on the start of accession negotiations with Albania and Northern Macedonia), French President proceeded with the same ‘apocalyptic’ manner through which he depicted deep challenges Europe expects in maintaining cohesion and unity if it continues to pursue ‘business as usual’ enlargement policy. Then, unexpectedly, he steered off Albania and North Macedonia and went on saying that “the key country in the Western Balkans is actually Bosnia and Herzegovina”, making final pitch with words: "Bosnia and Herzegovina is a ticking time bomb next to Croatia, facing the return of jihadists."

To be frank, Macron’s statement on BIH itself is neither new nor very revealing. Since the end of the war in the 90ies and the launch of a great Dayton experiment that was about to bring a peace, stability and sustainable coexistence between three ethnic groups in BIH, many politicians, public figures and intellectuals in Bosnia and Herzegovina, European and regional envoys, representatives, political experts and specialists shared similarly apocalyptic view on the future of Dayton Bosnia. Bosnia and Herzegovina in their accounts is the country that represents everything what is resilient and unresponsive in the Western Balkans, for which should be no place in the EU before making substantial reforms. To be more precise, these narratives predate Dayton and can be traced in the origins of modern Bosnian state. From the war generation politicians to Milorad Dodik, apocalyptic imaginary on BIH’s political unsustainability, artificiality and failure were nurtured with deep-rooted myths on Bosnia as a “dark vilayet”, “Balkan’s Balkan” and orientalist perceptions on imminent chaos on a European chessboard should Bosnia be left out of foreign (European) tutorship for a while. This myth is an inseparable feature of Bosnian historiography for at least 100 years. From the 1914 Sarajevo assassination to defying resistance partisans held against Wehrmacht in the WWII and again, during the recent Bosnian war, a genocide that happened on the hour of united Europe, Bosnia

always reminded Europe how costly would be to ignore this part of Europe. Myth of Bosnia as a historical pariah, a country Europe should act upon for its own sake is in the heart of Bosnian political existence and defines its essential imperfection. In this sense, Macron`s statement on BIH as a ticking bomb is in its rudimental and unambiguous form a mere reenactment of the same myth – with not much else to add.

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Macron`s statement on Bosnia as a ticking bomb expectedly triggered an immediate response in BIH and neighboring Croatia and Serbia. Regional media reported the statement on BIH in red lines, pondering on the backdrops it might have for the continuation of French “blockade” in regard to the EU enlargement policy and the impact on accession process of their respective countries. BIH media and public were, according to the first reactions, surprised and confused with Macron`s statement, especially with his reference to BIH. Zeljko Komsic, Croat MOP (member of Presidency) asked Guillaume Rousson, the French Ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina, to come to his office on the next day in order to clarify the motives and circumstances in which the statement was made and explain “the French president`s position on Bosnia and Herzegovina.” According to some part of media, it is believed that apocalyptic words on ticking bomb on European doorsteps is not only overstatement, but employment of the pariah myth is useful for continuation of French blockade of EU enlargement policy, if not convenient excuse for the lack of plausible argument in that regard whatsoever. It is certain that ticking bomb argument, no matter how irrational, is raising concerns on possible spillover effects and thus integration prospects of other country-candidates in Bosnian entourage, because, after all, BIH is a ‘key country’ and the progress of the whole region can only be possible when the key country moves forward.

Official Sarajevo believes that the statement made by French President Emmanuel Macron on BIH as a "time bomb" due to returnees from foreign fronts was completely unfounded and did not correspond to the facts. But, how effective is damage control attempted by BIH government against the words of French president? Main difficulty in refuting claims on BIH as a ticking bomb is that the facts on Islamic fundamentalism in BIH are blurred and is hard to do reliable assessment on the number of returnees from Syrian war and their connections other militant groups. According to data compiled by BIH Security Ministry, during 2019 there were slightly less than 100 adults on the Syrian front, of which half were women, half men, with unprecise figures on the number of children. Since 2016, no departure to the Syrian front has been reported from BIH, but flexibility exists in assessing the number of people traveling to Syria indirectly (either through adjacent country such as Turkey or using “proxy” identity as

German citizens of Bosnian descent, for example). If it is to trust some of the BIH country-partners in fight against terrorism, despite asymmetrically higher number of Jihadists and Islamic fundamentalists coming from BIH and other Balkan countries (Kosovo, for example), BIH authorities have taken active measures to curb and prevent its citizens to fight in the Syrian front and since the start of the wave of returnees coming back to BIH has successfully dealt with the issue. So, according to official position there should be no reason to call BIH a timed bomb.

More crucial problem is the (mis)interpretation of a number of Islamic extremists that are believed to be scattered in pockets throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina. In some of the previous reports the issue of Islamic extremism in BIH was mainly tackled from the perspective of recent Bosnian war, during which a significant number of Islamic fundamentalists (mujahedeen groups) from Arab countries arrived in BIH to fight on Bosniak side and some number of which remained in BIH after the war. Without precise data, it is believed that these groups influenced radicalization of certain Islamic groups within BIH and were conducive to arrival of Wahhabism and other extremist ideologies. However, without exact figures they are also subject to various manipulations. In this context, statements by Croatian President Kolinda Grabar Kitarovic on immediate threat coming from Jihadist returnees and militant extremism that exists in some pockets of Bosnia brought looming tensions between (some flanks) of the BIH and Croatian leadership. This tension culminated with the Salafi Affair in March 2019, when BIH Security Minister Dragan Mektic accused Croatian intelligence officers for attempt to plant weapons in Salafi community in central Bosnia, “in order to confirm Croatian President’s allegations on militarization of Islamist extremists”. Some loose ends of this tension are also traceable in Macron’s depiction of BIH as a “next to Croatia”, which in part of Croatian media was interpreted as alignment with Croatian position and a proof that “future European actions towards Bosnia will go through Croatia”.

Bosniak MOP, Sefik Dzaferovic, was surely reminiscent to this tension when he said that the main problem that BIH has is the work of ‘retrograde’ and destructive forces which are conspiring territorial, ethnic and political divisions that in turn block the functioning of BIH institutions. These forces are, according to SDA usual parlance, feeding with the failure of BIH and can be found “in BIH and the surrounding area”.

Surprising fact is that Macron unexpectedly became their mouthpiece. This was the reason why Dzaferovic called on the French President take into account the contribution his predecessor Jacques Chirac had in solving basic, fundamental problem in BIH and to bear in mind “those retrograde forces, that in such environment, in such an image of BIH in the eyes of the international community, more easily complete and achieve their unacceptable and illicit

goals”. Finally, indicating how his message went off-side he pointed out that Serb MOP Milorad Dodik welcomed Macron's statement, reminding French president “to take care of that (consequences of his words) when making such a statement”.

Regardless of initial comments, it is expected that the public in both Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia will in the next few days furtherly discuss “ticking bomb issue” either in attempt to make it get international currency or refute it as a claim originating from part of the Croatian public. Among comments that refused apocalyptic tune is the one given by US Ambassador to BIH, Eric Nelson, who has made clear that BIH is reliable partner in the fight against extremism and terrorism. However, his statement more reflects a conflict between two opposing visions of NATO and Trans-Atlantic partnership which might come into play in the future, to which BIH has instrumental function at best, regardless of whether it would be called a bomb or a partner.