



Weekly Briefing

**Bosnia-Herzegovina political briefing:
Positive developments amidst the reemergence of the SARS-CoV-2
epidemics
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Positive developments amidst the reemergence of the SARS-CoV-2 epidemics

Contrary to the hopes of many that the warmer weather would help eliminate the SARS-CoV-2 virus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, together with all of the neighboring countries, experienced a steady increase of number of cases in June and July. Underneath the surface of the several coronavirus affairs described in previous briefings, which continue to shape the political scene of Bosnia and Herzegovina further indicating that the country itself continue to suffer from corruption, incompetence and various types of manipulations, one could in past few months detect several positive occurrences which could conditionally be understood as steps forward. The crisis connected to the ownership of the of the land and Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, covered in the January and February political briefing, was wrapped up in May. Due to the panic created by the media and politics over coronavirus, this event, together with the news of Bosnia and Herzegovina's removal from the European list of high-risk countries in terms of money laundering and terrorist financing, passed with little or no visibility. Other "positive" development include agreement to finally hold elections in the city of Mostar and Bosnia and Herzegovina's parliament adopting the budget for institutions and international obligations for the year 2020.

Currently, Bosnia and Herzegovina, similarly as all other countries of the Southeast Europe, is going through a second wave of SARS-CoV-2 epidemics. In mid-July, Bosnia and Herzegovina numbered more than 8 thousand confirmed cases, making the growth since mid-June highest ever. Although this number is also a result of a more thorough and precise testing, the number is still high enough to cause concern. When and how will the epidemics began to wane at this moment is anyone's guess. One thing that can be said is that Bosnia and Herzegovina, again similarly as its neighboring countries, is now going trough what all the Western Europe was going through in spring, making Bosnia and Herzegovina, in this manner at least, a true part of Europe.

Besides the struggle against rise in number of people with COVID-19 disease, Bosnia and Herzegovina continues march on with its own repetitive issues, which seem to be persistent and indestructible, comparable to the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus. The "Respirators Affair", revolving around the 100 unusable respirators purchased by the Federal Administration of Civil

Protection and Government of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina through a proxy fruits and vegetables processing company “Silver Raspberry” (*Srebrna Malina*), the Republika Srpska’s government purchase of 50 respirators from a Banja Luka company “Medietik d.o.o.” for a purposely inflated price, involving this entity’s most prominent leader, the Serb member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina and a leader of the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (Savez nezavisnih socijaldemokrata, SNSD) Milorad Dodik, together with political manipulations over this year’s Srebrenica Genocide Remembrance Day and many other smaller and larger scale corruption or profiteering cases, continue to constantly color Bosnia and Herzegovina’s reality daily. However, despite of all these regular issues, there were some occurrences which, if Bosnia and Herzegovina’s political circles uses them well, can be regarded as positive steps forward.

While the initial wave of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus was spreading through Bosnia and Herzegovina, one of the several crisis which deliberately designed to destabilize the country, managed to resolve itself. The tense fight between Milorad Dodik and the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which previously disapproved the the unilateral decision of the National Assembly of Republika Srpska to gain control over all of the entity’s agricultural land in the public domain to Republika Srpska, and not Bosnia and Herzegovina, was completed on 14th of May. On that day, the Constitutional and Legal Commission of the House of Representatives of the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina, created after Milorad Dodik asked for the revision of Dayton Accords rule which required foreign judges to always be a part of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Constitutional Court, ruled against Dodik’s idea that Constitutional Court judges can only be citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The voting itself, which in the end avoided dangerous precedents and preserved the integrity of the Constitutional Court set by the Dayton Accords, was close. Out of nine members of the Commission, four them voted in favor (delegates from Dodik’s SNSD and Dragan Čović’s Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina - HDZ BiH), four against (Party of Democratic Action - SDA, Social Democratic Party of Bosnia and Herzegovin - SDP BiH, and Democratic Front - DF) and one abstained (Serb Democratic Party - SDS BiH). All in all, for now at least, the crisis has been averted and the structure of the Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Constitutional Court remained intact.

Avoidance of the prolongation of the Constitutional Court crisis was definitely a positive occurrence, necessary to decrease some of the unnecessary internal pressure. Another development, which somewhat decreased pressure from the outside, also came in May. On 7th of May, the European Commission announced that Bosnia and Herzegovina, together with

Ethiopia, Guyana, Laos, Sri Lanka and Tunisia, was removed from the list of high-risk countries in terms of money laundering and terrorist financing. The removal from the mentioned list was a long awaited relief, because from now on many financial transactions between Bosnia and Herzegovina and the European Union will be considerably eased. This removal from the listing will also help Bosnia and Herzegovina export companies which often suffered from collection difficulties. The European Commission's decision became fully valid from 9th of July.

One unique positive developments regarding some of the core issues Bosnia and Herzegovina, which revolves around the upcoming elections, occurred in June. On 17th of June it was announced that the city of Mostar, visibly split between its Croats and Bosniak residents, will for the first time sine the year 2008 hold local elections. Elections were finally made possible after two political agreements have been signed between Dragan Čović (HDZ BiH) and Bakir Izetbegović (SDA) which allowed necessary changes to the election law. The long awaited agreement over Mostar was initiated by the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, which in October 2019, in the “Baralija against Bosnia and Herzegovina” case, found that then current electoral situation in Mostar violates human rights of many of the Mostar's citizens. Besides the political circles within the country and region, Mostar agreement was also well received by the High Representative of the Union Josep Borrell and European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi, both of whom noted that holding elections in Mostar, by the opinion of the European Commission, is one of the fourteen issues which need to be resolved in order to move the European Union membership application of Bosnia and Herzegovina forward.

Last of the positive steps forward made during the coronavirus crisis, which will be mentioned in this briefing, involves Bosnia and Herzegovina's Parliament approval of the state budget. On 15th of July, Members of the House of Representatives of the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina, after months of discussions, finally adopted the budget proposal for the Bosnia and Herzegovina institutions for the year 2020. The approval of the House of Peoples of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Parliamentary Assembly, which was needed for the budget to come under the effect, occurred on 27th of July, after which the depending institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina could rest easier. Although imperfect, a political solution agreement has been achieved making the country functional to a certain level. The budget also plans for funds for the implementation of this year's local elections, scheduled for 15th of November in the amount of € 2.2 million. The institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the first six months of 2020 were financed on the basis of the “Decision on Temporary Financing”, which was extended twice. This, however, was still a huge improvement when

compared with the previous year, because budget for the year 2019 was approved at the end of the same year, after most of the money has already been spent.

Conclusion

The always difficult political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina truly did not need yet another unsolvable problem, such as at the time the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus. Overall, the past months brought little beside worried mind and the further increase of fear of the uncertain future. Still, especially at the times such as this, one should look for positive developments, which are necessary to instill some kind of an idea of a better future. Although when one looks at Bosnia and Herzegovina as a whole this is hard to imagine, one can still hope that the resolution of the Constitutional Court crisis, the removal of Bosnia and Herzegovina from the unwanted list, agreements over the elections in Mostar and over the budget, won't only be exceptional occurrences, but a positive steps forward with far reaching consequences.