





Weekly Briefing

Bosnia-Herzegovina external relations briefing:
External Relations Outlook for 2021: The Basic Premise
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External Relations Outlook for 2021: The Basic Premise

The external relations of Bosnia and Herzegovina rely heavily on the developments of its domestic politics, which more often than not continue to be a source of forces which are pulling this country in uncoordinated and different directions. This has been the case since the Dayton Accords, signed in late 1995, and will continue to be so in the foreseeable future. Currently, Bosnia and Herzegovina is positioned between more active Serbian and somewhat passive Croatian regional factors, which are politically electrifying Bosnia and Herzegovina from both the inside and the outside. On a wider scale, Bosnia and Herzegovina, or better to say, its entities, are relying on support of different foreign powers which, for now, no matter of their declarative attitude, help maintain the continuous political deadlock.

The Dayton Accords

Constitutional crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina basically lasts ever since this country was patched back together in the late 1995. Effectively ending the devastating war that raged since 1992, in which 100,000 people lost their lives and over 2 million were forced to leave their homes, the “Dayton Accords” reached in Dayton, Ohio, in November, and then signed in Paris in December by the presidents of Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slobodan Milošević, Franjo Tuđman and Alija Izetbegović, respectively, created a constitutional framework needed for Bosnia and Herzegovina to function. Although this constitutional framework, which established and defined two entities (the Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina), three constituent peoples (Bosniaks, Serbis and Croatians), one district (Brčko), ten cantons, and a three-member presidency, was successful in bringing order to the level on which basic institutions can function, it completely failed, however, in eliminating the animosities between the three Bosnia and Herzegovina’s main ethnicities, which spill over literally every aspect of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s society. In short, the Dayton Accords, along with the Bosnia and Herzegovina’s constitution, as it turned out, created a status quo between the major powers within the country, which for the past two and a half decade inadvertently both helped make lines between the three largest ethnicities thicker and push the country in a continuous overall developmental standstill.

The solutions

The Dayton Accords, or better to say the failure to adequately amend the provisional constitution created in Ohio and Paris, created a situation for Bosnia and Herzegovina in which each of the three constituent peoples' leaders, ask for a different thing. Milorad Dodik, with his proposition to create a completely new state in the Western Balkans, the independent Republika Srpska, based on the right of self-determination, takes the lead. Dodik's solution for Bosnia and Herzegovina's problems not only call for the complete redefinition of the Dayton Accords, but also demand from the international community to basically condone many acts of ethnic cleansing and genocide undertaken over the Bosnian population on the territory of present day Republika Srpska. Dodik's solution also brings Serbia into play, which during the leadership of Aleksandar Vučić, although indirectly, often signaled signs of support for such or similar ideas. Further more, Serbia's ongoing discussions with Kosovo over Kosovo's independency, or better to say over the conditions of Serbia's failure to hold Kosovo, also do steer some political circles within Serbia in a certain direction of thinking that Serbia could in the near future alleviate the loss of Kosovo with acquiring the territory of Republika Srpska. Such thinking, if nothing else, make the whole idea of independent Republika Srpska, dangerous, to say the least. Following Dodik in a somewhat milder and less frequent tone, Dragan Čović, the the *de facto* representative of the Croatians, calls for redefining the Dayton Accords by adding another independent Croatian entity, similar to the other two that currently exist. This solution would force Bosnia and Herzegovina to completely redefine its political definition, making it a federation, which no doubt would in future lead to calls for further divisions, such as the one Dodik is making today. The last involved party, today represented by Bakir Izetbegović, hope to redefine the Dayton agreement in way that would return Bosnia and Herzegovina to the pre-war state, which, if other two leaders would be asked it is precisely that, a "pre-war state".

Considering the current internal situation, neither of these three internally driven solutions, in a shape currently conceived by the three involved parties, are particularly viable. The whole situation gets even more complicated because in order to make any sustainable structural changes, due to the very fragile level of peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the international factors will have to be involved. Out of the interested outside factors, Serbia and Russia take the lead when it comes to opposing any changes. Speaking in front of the TV cameras (Televizija Prva) on December 18th, Serbian President Vučić stated that the proposed changes of the Dayton Accords request "that the Republika Srpska does not have the entity powers for which the Serbian people fought for and achieved in the war conflict." Vučić's statement is further encouraged by the attitude of Russia, which was blatantly visible during the

visit of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to Republika Srpska in December 14th, when he stated that the Dayton Accords are “the foundation of the functioning of Bosnia and Herzegovina”, that “the equality of the three constituent peoples and the two entities must be respected,” as well as “that any attempt to demolish Dayton can cause the most serious risks and consequences”. Vučić and Lavrov speak the truth. Serbs did fight for Republika Srpska, and changing the Dayton Accords does bring many risks. However, the methodology of Serbian warfare on the territory of present-day Republika Srpska, which includes genocide and ethnic cleansing, together with the obvious status quo that in the long run benefits Republika Srpska and help maintain Bosnia and Herzegovina’s overall dysfunctionality, makes both of their statements, as well as the official attitudes of Serbia and Russia, lacking. When it comes to Croatia, its Prime minister Andrej Plenković (speaking in the United Nations in September and Zagreb in December) and President Zoran Milanović (speaking on the Croatian Radio-television in December), both hold the attitude that the solution for Bosnia and Herzegovina’s lies primarily in reaching an agreement within Bosnia and Herzegovina. The international community and Croatia, as Plenković stated, can be of help.

The United States, without which the Dayton Accords and the end of hostilities in Bosnia and Herzegovina would not be accomplished, is focused on further preservation of peace. However, the United States are also much aware that “peace at any price” is not possible any more, which was already confirmed by the the new United States President Joe Biden. On December 14th, he made the attempt to present the Dayton Accords’ 25th anniversary as an “opportunity for all to consider the possibility of a brighter future and decide again on the difficult but necessary steps to build a fully functional Bosnia and Herzegovina for all its citizens.” The European Union, to which Bosnia and Herzegovina declaratively aspires to enter, is for now the main and most positive factor of internal change within the country. Although, not without problems of its own. As far as the European Union is concerned, Bosnia and Herzegovina itself needs to find strength to make the necessary changes from within, so that it can become a more functional part of Europe, which circles us back to the discussion of permanent internal dysfunctionality that prevents change in the first place. In short, in order to become a more functional state and a part of Europe, Bosnia and Herzegovina itself needs to find a way to make (constitutional) solutions happen. However, in order to make these solutions, Bosnia and Herzegovina, as it seems, needs to be a part of Europe, because the country proved its inability to achieve such a feat by itself numerous times.

Conclusion

Although the Dayton Accords weren't envisioned to be the final solution for Bosnia and Herzegovina, but only a chance for peace, during which new and more adequate solutions for the overall functioning of the state could be made, these accords, along with the constitution based upon it, for the past quarter of the century ended up being the only solution. In the meantime, boiling animosity between the three constituent peoples created a situation in which any attempt to adjust the constitution in order to make something in Bosnia and Herzegovina better, is overshadowed by a high possibility of the manipulation attempts of the constitutional changes by all involved parties. The complete redefinition of the Dayton Accords, the secession of Republika Srpska or the Bosnia and Herzegovina's "ascension" to the European Union, all of which depend on both the internal and international factors, are risky ventures which in a split second can stir up the ghosts of Bosnia and Herzegovina's frozen war. Putting aside the very low probability that political actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina can reach any solutions in the near future, as well as the very high probability that some of those solutions can be reached at all, the very idea of the solutions will shape how Bosnia and Herzegovina's will act and look on the international level in the year 2021.