



Weekly Briefing

**Bosnia-Herzegovina political briefing:
The “Sebija Izetbegović Affair”
Zvonimir Stopić**


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

The “Sebija Izetbegović Affair”

Summary

A new affair erupted in Bosnia and Herzegovina, centered this time around Sebija Izetbegović. Starting at the end of May, Sebija, a renowned gynecologist and the director of the Clinical Center of the University of Sarajevo, has been questioned by the media regarding the validity of her education. Sebija’s case is interesting not only because she counts among the group of the key people responsible for leading the struggle against the COVID-19 pandemics in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also because she is a wife of Bakir Izetbegović, the president of the Party of Democratic Action, the leading political party of Bosniaks.

Introduction

During the past several weeks, the name Sebija Izetbegović has been frequently mentioned in Bosnia and Herzegovina’s media. On one side, she has been called out as being one of the people responsible for the “gross errors and omissions in the treatment of two patients who died on a respirator.” As if this was not enough, Sebija’s medical degree, has been placed under a thick question mark. As for now, details regarding her Ph.D. degree and her specialization cannot be adequately verified. In addition to pushing various organizational and corruption issues Bosnia and Herzegovina suffers from once again into the limelight, Sebija’s case also, again, revealed that such things in Bosnia and Herzegovina rarely occur without significant political connotations. Since Sebija is also a wife of Bakir Izetbegović, the leader of Bosniaks’ leading political party - the Party of Democratic Action (Stranka Demokratske Akcije; SDA), whatever happens to Sebija will reflect at the image and general standing of SDA.

Criminal charges against Clinical Center of the University of Sarajevo and Sebija Izetbegović and the re-emergence of the “Respirator Affair”

In the past several months, the Clinical Center of the University of Sarajevo (Klinički centar Univerziteta u Sarajevu; KCUS), Bosnia and Herzegovina’s largest health institution, found itself in the midst of many problems. The first group of incidents in the KCUS involve the deaths of two patients, Sead Palić and Atif Hota, both of whom passed away in unclear

circumstances in March. In both cases, the diagnosis and treatment of the patients, as well as the medical documentation which follows these cases, are unclear and apparently show signs of tampering. Families of the deceased hired a lawyer, Damir Koldžo, who in both cases, due to gross medical errors and omissions, found grounds for filing criminal charges against responsible people of the KCUS. These people include heads of involved hospital departments (signatories of documents in questions), specific doctors involved in treatment of the patients, the Federal Administration for Inspection Affairs of the Ministry of Health of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina's health inspector (KCUS' former employee), who cleared all the questionable documents, and the director of KCUS - Sebija Izetbegović.

The second problem in KCUS exploded in early April, when the Prosecutor's Office of the Sarajevo Canton opened a case related to a letter signed by 17 anesthesiologists stating that respirators imported from China in April 2020, used in that health facility, do not have the recommended settings for mechanical ventilation of COVID-19 patients. The respirators in question are the same ones that are involved in yet another affair, the so-called "Respirators Affair", which is still waiting to be completely resolved. As we described in more details in May, June and September 2020 political briefings, the "Respirators Affair" revolves around the unlawful procurement of total of 100 respirators, worth more than € 5.3 million, of questionable capacity for proper treatment of COVID-19 patients, by the Government of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (headed by SDA's Fadil Novalić) and the Federal Administration of Civil Protection through a processing and canning of fruits and vegetables company "Silver Raspberry" (*Srebrna Malina*). As it seems, many of these respirators found their way to be installed in Clinical Center of the University of Sarajevo before they were fully technically and legally cleared. This all happened while Sebija Izetbegović headed the KCUS.

The validity of Sebija's medical degree

As the problems already plaguing the KCUS weren't enough, Sebija herself brought yet another problem to her institution. To the long line of questions, created by the issues of respirators and charges of gross medical errors, the media added few new ones, which placed the validity of her medical education to the test. The question of the validity of Sebija's medical degree was raised during a talk between Senad Hadžifejzović, a journalist, news anchor, TV host and a founder of Bosnia and Herzegovina's commercial TV channel Face TV, and dr. Asim Kurjak, one of the leading gynecologists in the region, who was one of the key people at the Zagreb University School of Medicine during the time Sebija apparently studied there. During

the talk, Kurjak claimed that he does not remember Sebija ever studying at the program he was leading and that she did not further specialize or completed her Ph.D. under his mentorship at the University of Zagreb. He did, however, admitted that he might have been a mentor to Sebija in drafting the doctoral thesis she defended at the Medical Faculty in Sarajevo, but that he did not directly participate in it. His claims were attempted to be refuted by media close to SDA, which published a copy of Sebija's study index from the University of Zagreb. However, yet another former professor of Zagreb University Medical School, Sanja Kupešić, also stated for the media that she does not remember Sebija ever being a student of any Ph.D. program in Zagreb. Kupešić also added that Sebija was never part of the scientific research team in Zagreb, nor did she ever could have had access to data on patients treated in Zagreb, which she could use to write her master thesis or doctoral dissertation.

Several days after the questions about her education were raised, Sebija herself made the attempt to provide explanations to the media. She told the N1 television that her specialization in gynecology as well as her doctorate in medical sciences are related to Sarajevo, and that she only informally studied in Zagreb, while she herself was going through medical treatments. However, soon after, the media published copies of the application she sent to the Medical Faculty in war stricken Sarajevo in 1994, in which she asked the University of Sarajevo to recognize ten exams she passed at the postgraduate study of medicine in Zagreb. This latest revelation, as well as earlier publishing of her study index, undermined her explanation.

The case of validity of Sebija's medical education did not stop at mere media questioning. Senad Hadžifejzović himself became a part of the news soon after his talks with Kurjak. Following the interview, Hadžifejzović and his family were apparently directly threatened by payed internet "bots" and persons all of whom he is putting in connection to Sebija and Bakir Izetbegović. Even before recent affairs which involve Sebija, Hadžifejzović worked on stories which, among other SDA functionaries, helped "expose" Fadil Novalić in the "Respirator Affair".

Conclusion

The story of Sebija Izetbegović is interesting on many levels. First and foremost, uncertainties surrounding her medical education once more bring out the familiar issues regarding corruption in administrative systems of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Secondly, her involvement in the continuation of the "Respirator Affair" reveal once more that proper political "networking", which is in this case is made of SDA's leader, KCUS's director and Federation

of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Prime Minister, can be enough for creation of a functional paralleled system used for going around the state and entity institutions, regulations and laws. Finally, behind all of this, there might be even a larger story hidden. The recent blows SDA's has been taking, which besides mentioned affairs include losing Sarajevo in local elections, might be connected with larger challenges Bosnia and Herzegovina is facing and is about to face in not so distant future. After all, currently, SDA is the main force that wishes to preserve the current form of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which makes it in opposition with the other two forces which hope to thoroughly politically redefine Bosnia and Herzegovina: Milorad Dodik and Dragan Čović. The role of Asim Kurjak in revealing Sebija at this moment also might not be coincidental. His top notch medical expertise aside, Kurjak himself is followed by a scent of several affairs in Croatia, all of which, quite probably thanks to strong political connections and acquaintances he developed over the years, he managed to navigate through unscathed. It is not all that improbable to imagine that some of these Kurjak's Croatia's and Bosnia and Herzegovina's connections saw an opportunity to make another blow to SDA through Sebija,