



Weekly Briefing

Bosnia-Herzegovina external relations briefing:

Messages from US senators and MEPs

during their visit to BiH

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Summary

As there are conflicting views within the political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina regarding the war in Ukraine, Washington-led Western centers of power want to ensure that shaky Balkan political soil does not produce deeper rifts and new hotspots. Such ensure activities, in addition to a clear foreign policy dimension, also have their own domestic effects in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Thus, the visit of European conservatives organized by the opposition party from Herzegovina was used to send messages intended primarily for the domestic public and related to domestic political issues, but also to internationalize stances of certain domestic politicians. All this is a consequence of the multidimensional position of BiH in its relations with the European Union, where BiH is both a potential future member and a current neighbor of the EU: neighbor that bears security risks.

Introduction

In late April, two delegations visited Sarajevo and Mostar. A delegation of senators from the United States first arrived in the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Two days later, one of the largest delegations from the European Parliament, from the group of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), came to the largest city and cultural center of Herzegovina. First delegation has state dimension, and they met members of the BiH Presidency. Other one was political one, they came at the invitation of a relatively small right and nationalist Croatian political party. Both spoke about Russia and Russian influence in BiH, which they want to reduce or prevent.

US senators in Sarajevo

The arrival of the delegation of American senators was unofficially announced by the Voice of America (VOA). It was said that it was a bipartisan congressional delegation that would visit the Balkans, namely Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. The delegation was announced to be led by Jeanne Shaheen (Democrat), a Chair of the Senate Subcommittee on External Relations for Europe, Regional Security Cooperation and a senior member of the Senate Armed Services Committee. Along with her, the delegation consists of senators Chris Murphy (Democrat) and Thom Tillis (Republican). Senators Shaheen and Tillis are also co-

chairs of the NATO Senate Monitoring Group.¹

The fact that the arrival was carefully prepared is also indicated by the announcement that the delegation will meet with country officials, civil society and media representatives to discuss a number of issues, "including support for Ukraine in the midst of Russia's invasion, European security, anti-corruption efforts and freedom of media²".

According to the office of Senator Shaheen, the delegation will convey the continuation of American support for the allies in the midst of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and support for the Western Balkans in European integration.

"Our bipartisan delegation is traveling to the Balkans at a crucial moment for Europe. The confirmation of American support for our partners in the Balkans is especially important, because we are experiencing the most uncertain military situation in Europe since the Second World War", said Senator Shaheen³.

After a meeting with members of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Chairman of the Presidency Šefik Džaferović and members of the Presidency Milorad Dodik and Željko Komšić, senators held a press conference. They were accompanied by the USA Ambassador to BiH Michael Murphy, who emphasized that the visit is a clear message of support for BiH.

Senator Jeanne Shaheen stressed that the senators will convey the messages they received during their visit to BiH to the US Congress and the US administration. Senator Shaheen said they had quality meetings with members of the BiH Presidency and with a large number of people from various organizations that fight against corruption. She also stressed that she was pleased with the increased interest of citizens in joining NATO and the European Union. "It's nice to hear the growing interest of the people of BiH in joining NATO and the EU. We will support efforts in that direction", the Senator said⁴.

Senator Chris Murphy said that the United States must provide additional support to BiH at the moment. He highlighted meetings they had with young people. Murphy expressed a view "this is a crucial moment for BiH when the USA needs to join hands in partnership to ensure that BiH can build and have sustainable state institutions and strong entities"⁵.

Asked whether BiH could remain neutral when it comes to the war in Ukraine, Senator Shaheen said she disagreed with Milorad Dodik's position⁶.

¹ US senators arrive to visit BiH. <https://ba.n1info.com/vijesti/americki-senatori-stizu-u-posjetu-bih/>

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ US senators in Sarajevo: We are pleased with the increased interest in NATO and EU membership. <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/americki-senatori-u-sarajevu-raduje-nas-pojacan-interes-za-clanstvo-u-nato-i-eu/220420099>

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Milorad Dodik is seen as a pro-Russian player in the region and a politician who maintains close contacts with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Dodik recently publicly tried to prevent BiH from voting for sanctions against

"It is important to take a stand and oppose what Vladimir Putin is doing in Ukraine. I appreciate that BiH is a sovereign state and must make decisions. I am disappointed and disagree with Dodik's position on this issue, but he is one of the members of the BiH Presidency", said Shaheen⁷.

During the address to the media, there was also talk about Chinese influence in BiH. US senators expressed concern over the business of Chinese companies in the Western Balkans region. Senators said that "China does not come with projects to countries because of their development, but because of its benefits"⁸.

In addition to press conference, Senator Murphy was a guest on CNN during his stay in BiH. He said this is a time when many are worried about situation in BiH and that this message was sent to all political leaders, including Milorad Dodik.

"This is a very worrying time for BiH and I know that the world's attention is focused on Ukraine at the moment, but as Putin returns to take the corner, he will look for other places to try to achieve victories. And one of them could be BiH", Senator Murphy told CNN.

He believes that today the situation is more fragile than it was after the war.

"You have a Serbian leader, BiH Presidency member Milorad Dodik, who is threatening to step down and establish his own Serbian institutions, which could easily lead to a conflict that could escalate into violence. This region could be at war again," said Murphy⁹.

Member of the BiH Presidency, Milorad Dodik, reacted to this interview, saying that he was surprised by the statement of the Senator and accused him of disavowing the public. Dodik said Murphy's comment to CNN has almost nothing to do with the reality and the statements made during the meeting, "as if we were not at the same meeting".

"This matrix, followed by US officials and media for decades, shows that there is no justice for Serbs in the West and that we are a nation that, in their opinion, needs to be disciplined, if necessary, by completely undemocratic methods, lies and threats. I am really disappointed," Dodik said¹⁰.

Dodik said that whenever high-ranking officials, especially from the United States,

Russia at the United Nations: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/bosnias-pro-russian-serb-leader-tried-stop-countrys-un-vote-report-2022-03-03/>

⁷ US senators in Sarajevo: We are pleased with the increased interest in NATO and EU membership. <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/americki-senatori-u-sarajevu-raduje-nas-pojacan-interes-za-clanstvo-u-nato-i-eu/220420099>

⁸ US congressmen in BiH: Politicians should be held accountable. <https://ba.voanews.com/a/americki-kongresmeni-u-bih-politicare-treba-pozivati-na-odgovornost/6537425.html>

⁹ Senator Chris Murphy for CNN: BiH is worse today than it was after the war. <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/senator-chris-murphy-za-cnn-u-bih-je-danas-gore-nego-sto-je-bilo-nakon-rata/220420152>

¹⁰ Dodik: The US senator disavows the public, as if we were not at the same meeting. <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/dodik-americki-senator-dezavuisse-javnost-kao-da-nismo-bili-na-istom-sastanku/220421124>

come, he hopes that some of them will have the courage to call the events and individuals in BiH by their real names.

"Unfortunately, each meeting brought only a parrot-like repetition of the same, media-washed story that harms not only Serbs and the Republic of Srpska, but BiH as a whole," Dodik said¹¹.

EU parliamentarians in Mostar

While the US senators were continuing their journey to Brussels, a multi-member delegation of members of European Parliament (MEP) from the Club of European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) came from the EU capital to Mostar. The delegation members were Ladislav Ilčić, Member of the EU Parliament from Croatia, Hermann Tertsch from Spain, Ryszard Czarnecki and Bogdan Rzonca from Poland and Carlo Fidanza from Italy, as well as ECR Group Coordinators Dawid Nahajowski from Poland and Martin Filipov from Bulgaria. They came at the invitation of the Croatian Republican Party (*Hrvatska republikanska stranka* - HRS), party positioned on the right of the ideological spectrum and relatively significant opposition to the largest party among BiH Croats, the Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica* – HDZ).¹²

HRS organized a panel discussion on EU-Bosnia and Herzegovina relations, after which the MEP's addressed the public. The most eloquent was an MEP from Croatia, a representative of the Croatian Sovereignists (*Hrvatski suverenisti* – HS). He criticized the Government of the Republic of Croatia and Prime Minister Andrej Plenković for their policy towards BiH, which is, he said, not in favor of Croats in BiH. He linked BiH's internal issues such as upcoming electoral reform process and BiH elections to strengthening Russian influence in the region, arguing that the upcoming post-election crisis in BiH due to non-implementation of election law changes would bring a crisis in BiH that Russian President Vladimir Putin could use to focus from Ukraine moved to other parts of the world¹³.

The vice-president of the ECR Club in the European Parliament, Hermann Tertsch, spoke in a similar tone. He said that the crisis should not be allowed to spill over from Ukraine to the Western Balkans and thus to BiH.

"BiH is simply an unstable country, and without electoral reform we are approaching an

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² HRS agrees with HDZ when it comes to the national position of Croats in BiH, taking a more radical stance on some issues, and often criticizing HDZ for alleged opportunism in exercising power at the state and entity levels.

¹³ Ilčić: It is certain that the elections will take place, there will be a crisis in some parts of BiH.

<https://hms.ba/ilicic-izvjesno-da-ce-se-izbori-u-bih-odrzati-doci-ce-do-krize-u-nekim-dijeovima-bih/>

unstable situation," Tertsch said¹⁴.

Ryszard Czarnecki, a former Polish foreign minister, said the countries of the Western Balkans will wait to join the EU because "the same EU gives them false promises to join at the end of this decade", which he considers as unrealistic promise. He added that many EU countries oppose enlargement, citing corruption, political conflicts and policies against national minorities as arguments. The former head of Polish diplomacy concluded that BiH, like any other a country that is already a member deserves to be part of the EU¹⁵.

The host of the panel, HRS President Slaven Raguž agreed that "the Russian element will try to transfer the focus from Ukraine to BiH¹⁶"

In that context, but also in the context of internal political disputes in BiH, Raguž called for a more significant role for Croatia, which he believes should be more actively involved in the work of the Peace Implementation Council (PIC) in BiH¹⁷.

Conclusion

Tensions between US officials and the Bosnian Serb leader do not exist from yesterday, so even conflicting views after the meeting of US senators and Milorad Dodik is not surprising. Dodik has been on the US blacklist for a long time, and he is not hiding his position of being loyal local partner to Vladimir Putin in the region. That is not something which can bring him a positive image in Washington even before the conflict in Ukraine. This Washington delegation is obviously part of the pressure to keep the situation in the region under control, that is, to cut at the root the possible escalation of the conflict, deep in the hinterland of the current hotspot in Ukraine.

On the other hand, by organizing the visit of ECR MEP's, HRS came out into the international political arena, trying to establish itself as a (right-conservative) alternative to the existing, (also right-conservative) Croatian policy in BiH. This is partly a reflection of the situation in the Republic of Croatia, where the current HDZ-led government has significant critics in right and conservative circles, to which belongs one of the guests on the panel. Therefore, the fear expressed about the growing Russian influence sent from this panel seems to be more intended to attract the attention of the European public and support its own (national) program, than ideological positioning towards Russia.

All in all, BiH is once again showing that for both the EU and the US, even domestic

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Messages from the HRS panel: Russia wants to destabilize BiH and the region through RS.

<https://dnevni.ba/dnevni/poruke-s-panela-hrs-a-rusija-preko-rs-a-zeli-destabilizirati-bih-i-regiju/>

¹⁷ More on the Peace Implementation Council at <http://www.ohr.int/international-community-in-bih/peace-implementation-council/>

political BiH is a real issue not only of foreign but also security policy. All this is intertwined in one place, with a clear intention of domestic political entities to find strategic partners in both Washington and Brussels.