



Weekly Briefing

Bosnia-Herzegovina political briefing:
The Day of Serbian Unity, Freedom and the National Flag
Zvonimir Stopić


China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: : Feng Zhongping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

The Day of Serbian Unity, Freedom and the National Flag

Summary

On September 15th, Bosnia and Herzegovina's entity Republika Srpska and Republic of Serbia jointly celebrated the "Day of Serbian Unity, Freedom and the National Flag". The celebration of this holiday, marked for the second time, occurred in the tense political circumstances for Bosnia and Herzegovina: the political blockade and a new wave of calls for the secession of Republika Srpska, caused by the growing social and political discontent between Bosnia and Herzegovina's constitutive peoples.

Introduction

The "Day of Serbian Unity, Freedom and the National Flag" (*Дан српског јединства, слободе и националне заставе*) is a joint state holiday established by the decisions of the Governments of Serbia and Republika Srpska. Celebrated since 2020, this holiday aims to be a general Serbian holiday related to all Serbs, regardless of where they live at. Its main goal, as the leaders of Republic of Serbia and Republika Srpska explain, is to "preserve the Serbian identity". The holiday celebrates the Allied breakthrough of the Thessaloniki Front in the First World War, which occurred on September 15th, 1918, through the advancement of French and Serbian forces. This military victory in Serbia is regarded to be the first step toward final victory and restoration of Serbia in the First World War. This year, the main celebrations were held on Sava Square in Belgrade where the state leadership of Serbia and Republika Srpska, along with the Serbian patriarch Porfirije, spoke in front of the gathered crowd numbering several thousands. The "Day of Serbian Unity" was also celebrated throughout Republika Srpska, as well as within the large Serbian population in Montenegro. When it comes to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the initiatives of greater "unity" of Serbs, however, is disproportional to the growing national and political "disunity" of this country, which immediately rises many questions regarding the true reason for the introducing a holiday with such direct messages.

Republika Srpska and the Day of Serbian Unity

Republika Srpska and Republic of Serbia are the main protagonists of setting up the new all-Serbian “Day of Serbian Unity, Freedom and the National Flag” holiday. The idea for the holiday was finalized by the Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić and 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 in summer 2020, after which the holiday was quickly made official in both countries and celebrated for the first time.¹ As a reaction to its first celebration, the regional political actors, especially within Croatia, Kosovo, and the non-Serbian part of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, criticized this new event by comparing it to the new attempt of implementing the idea of “Greater Serbia”, which among other similar regional ideas (I.e. Croatian, Bulgarian, Albanian, Hungarian), was the cause of grave political and social turbulences in not so distant past. The explanations, coming from Vučić and Dodik, that the “Day of Serbian Unity” was introduced only as a peaceful means for preservation the common identity of Serbs, many of which do not live within one Serbian state, fell on deaf ears more or less everywhere except within the Serbian communities. Approximately 6 million Serbs live in the Republic of Serbia and 1.3 million ethnic Serbs live in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Kosovo.

The central part of the “Day of Serbian Unity” this year was organized in Belgrade. Alongside a parade, cavalry, helicopters carrying Serbian flags above the recently erected 23 meter high monument of Stefan Nemanja, and people dressed in Serbian First World War uniforms, the leaders of Republic of Serbia and Republika Srpska shared their thoughts regarding the Serbian patriotism and the necessity of Serbian unity. The main explanation of what the “Day of Serbian Unity” is was given by Aleksandar Vučić. As the Serbian President stated, it is a “holiday of our [Serbian] identity, one in which language, culture, tradition, religion are united, but also of the values upon which the whole society rests, the values that make a country civilized, organized, able to remember, but also to know what and why it acts”. Besides the “preservation of Serbian identity” and the “right to be what Serbian people are”, Vučić also defined the holiday as a demonstration of the “right to dignity, the right to remember, but also the right to what no one else can force us [Serbs] to do, and many are still trying, unsuccessfully - the right to decide for ourselves when and what to forget. To ourselves, and to others.” His speech was effectively finished in expected manner, once more personally pledging

¹ See the announcements of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Serbia: <<https://www.dijaspora.gov.rs/lat/dan-srpskog-jedinstva-slobode-i-nacionalne-zastave/>>; <<https://www.dijaspora.gov.rs/dan-srpskog-jedinstva-slobode-i-nacionalne-zastave/>>.

to lead “Serbia to become even stronger in order to help the Republika Srpska, without touching the rights of Bosnia and Herzegovina, help our people in Montenegro, and in every place, and to protect every Serb from persecution, so Jasenovac, Jadovno, Prebilovci, Oluja, Bljesak and the pogroms of 2004 could never happen again.”²

Speaking right after Vučić, Milorad Dodik added a few more important notions regarding the identity of Serbs living in Republika Srpska. In addition to his sentiment that he himself doesn’t like being called “Bosnian” or even “Bosnian Serb”, Dodik explained that Serbs living in Republika Srpska “are not Bosnian Serbs, as they are not Croatian Serbs in Croatia, but simply Serbs with our identity that we are building through centuries of hard struggle for our identity in which our Serbian Orthodox Church has played the most important role (...)” Unlike Vučić, who carefully distanced himself from “touching the rights of Bosnia and Herzegovina”, Dodik was much more direct, stating that that “our country is not Bosnia and Herzegovina, our country is Serbia”. Further more, Dodik also proclaimed that “this is the century of our [Serbian] unity and unification,” and that “this is how we start.”³

Bosnia and Herzegovina and the “Day of Serbian Unity”

In the background of Dodik and Vučić’s celebrations of unity and freedom of all Serbs, lies the political reality of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s growing disunity. Summer in Bosnia and Herzegovina was filled with confrontation between High Representative Valentin Inzko and Milorad Dodik over Inzko’s amendments to the Criminal Code of Bosnia-Herzegovina, aimed against all those who deny war crimes, genocide and glorify war criminals, which in the end resulted in a new demonstrative boycott of state institutions by the politicians of Republika Srpska. In addition to implementing its own laws, one on “non-application” of Inzko’s law on the territory of Republika Srpska and one on making the calling of Republika Srpska a genocidal creation a punishable act, just a few days prior to the “Day of Serbian Unity” celebrations, the National Assembly of the Republika Srpska by an urgent procedure adopted a new “Law on the Protection, Preservation and Use of the Language of the Serbian People and the Cyrillic Alphabet”. This law, which is to regulate the system of protection, preservation and manner of using the language of the Serbian people and the Cyrillic alphabet in the Republika Srpska, can be understood as yet another step of discerning Republika Srpska from the rest of

² The entire speech of Aleksandar Vučić is available at: <<https://www.predsednik.rs/lat/presentationar/vesti/obelezavanje-dana-srpskog-jedinstva-slobode-i-nacionalne-zastave>>.

³ The full speech of Milorad Dodik can be seen at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5IHUEKoqU8s>>.

Bosnia and Herzegovina and a step which is to bring Republika Srpska closer to Republic of Serbia, which itself passed the same law several days later.⁴ Another moment of deep disagreement between Republika Srpska and Bosnia and Herzegovina occurred about one week after the “Day of Serbian Unity” celebrations, when the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina proclaimed Republika Srpska’s Law on Forests, by which the forests and land on the territory of Republika Srpska were declared a property of Republika Srpska, unconstitutional. Finally, as Dodik clarified during the Belgrade “Day of Serbian Unity” celebrations, Republika Srpska is “Serbian land” that “has its own territory, has its own people, has its its own executive branch, and has according to all that qualified to be a state.” “The fact that there is no seat in the United Nations,” as Dodik stated, will hopefully one day be “overcome and that problem will be solved.”

Conclusions

Defining the traits of Serbian identity, which are to be common for all Serbs, no matter in which country they live, was the main focus of Aleksandar Vučić speech during the Belgrade “Day of Serbian Unity” celebrations. As expected, Dodik went a step further, both in emphasizing the difference between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska, and demonstrating the unity between Serbs living Republika Srpska and Republic of Serbia. Vučić and Dodik’s public demonstration of Serbian unity lies in contrast to disfunction and disunity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republika Srpska is a part of. The current political context, in which Republika Srpska stands in opposition toward practically every attempt to achieve social, economic or political cohesion of Bosnia and Herzegovina, will not change in the near future. What we can expect are only new shows of either general Serbian unity or Republika Srpska’s unwillingness to be a part of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The celebrated “Day of Serbian Unity” was a perfect demonstration of both.

⁴ National Assembly of Republika Srpska<<https://www.narodnaskupstinars.net/?q=ci/народна-скупштина/сједнице/материјали-за-сједнице/материјали-за-двадесет-прву-посебну-сједницу>>.