

HELSINKI Bulletin



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Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina: A Key to Regional Security

Regional stabilization depends on consolidation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. As the basis for Bosnia's political arrangement the Dayton Accords have proved insufficient since and need to be upgraded so that the country can function normally. The international community has been aware of that for some time now and treating the Dayton Accords as an unfinished process.

Early 2009 when the Balkans – above all Bosnia-Herzegovina – was placed high at the international agenda marks the beginning of the international community's more active engagement in the region. The initiative itself was inspired by the new American administration. However, joint efforts by the European Union and the United States to turn Bosnia into a functional state through a revision of the Dayton Accords ended in a fiasco in the first, "Butmir" round.

Two rounds of negotiations between Bosnia-Herzegovina's political leaders, Carl Bildt /EU/ and James Steinberg /US/ in the Butmir military base on October 19-20 failed even to make a symbolic progress towards a consensus by local leaders on constitutional reforms. They turned the "Butmir paper" down. Though the paper itself has never been fully publicized, it is common knowledge that it was primarily meant to strengthen the central governance by replacing the Ministerial Council with

a proper government and investing more power in the office of the President.

Sharp divides between the two entities, three national communities and the (non)functional central governance grew deeper. The Dayton Accords had enthroned two differently arranged entities. Republika Srpska is notably centralized, whereas Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina decentralized by ethnic principle, which kept obstructing its functioning as well.



Carl Bildt and James Steinberg

After the Butmir fiasco, Premier of Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik tried to convene local leaders in Banjaluka on October 30 to find a way out of crisis without international mediation. However, no local leader accepted his invitation.

The official Belgrade's role and influence on the developments in Bosnia-Herzegovina are not quite clear at this point. Highest officials – President Boris Tadic and Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic

in the first place – say with one voice that Serbia “supports the Dayton Accords” and would readily “back everything the three peoples agree on.” Such wording, particularly the later phrase, questions Serbia’s sincerity about basic disputes generating crisis in the neighboring state. It has to be recalled that on the eve of the Bosnian war Serbia was also supporting “everything three peoples of Bosnia-Herzegovina would agree on.”

Together with Croatia, Serbia (Federal Republic of Yugoslavia at the time) is a guarantor of implementation of the Dayton Accords on the grounds of which – and particularly since premiership of Vojislav Kostunica (2004-2008) – it has been developing very close, “special relations” with Republika Srpska.

Belgrade’s Position

Milorad Dodik’s threats that he will call a referendum on independence of Republika Srpska, boycott governmental bodies in Sarajevo and his criticism of UN high representatives in Bosnia-Herzegovina put Belgrade, as “Dayton guarantor,” in the position that will significantly determine its standing with the international factors and aspirations about EU membership.

Serbia’s political and intellectual elites not only see Republika Srpska as a (legitimate) booty in Bosnia-Herzegovina but also count on the possibility for regional recomposition in the long run. They are also using Republika Srpska as a key argument in the process of settlement “the national issue” of Balkan ethnic communities. Serbia hopes to get Republika Srpska as compensation for independent Kosovo (without the part north of the Ibar River). This coincides with its warring goals in the territory of ex-Yugoslavia in 1990s. Belgrade’s successful strategy for maintaining status quo in Bosnia in the past nine years raised hopes for the country’s partition. With its “special treatment” for Republika Srpska and its present leader Dodik (who seems to be in Belgrade all the time) the official Belgrade actually works on permanent instability of its neighbor on the West.

Under the pressure of financial crisis Serbia had to somewhat reset its foreign policy. Relations with the European Union were restored high among its priorities: now it tries to become a candidate for EU membership as soon as possible. And for all this Serbia has to modify its stands about Bosnia and The Hague tribunal.

True, Serbia has modified its stances but not clearly enough when it comes to Republika Srpska. “Serbia strongly and sincerely supports integrity of Bosnia-Herzegovina as in this way it defends its own integrity. Serbia is not after any destabilization of the region whatsoever, because regional destabilization would catastrophically affect economic and security situation of our country,” said President Boris Tadic. Tadic insists on the Dayton Accords as foundations for Bosnia-Herzegovina and adds, “It is important that we develop a new spirit of mutual understanding in the region of South East Europe, in ex-Yugoslav republics in the first place, to prove that we are capable of settling even disputes – that normally occur between countries – in a constructive way and to manifest that we have regional responsibility and a clear-cut goal: membership of the European Union. Only in this way we can attain our separate, national objectives.”¹

International Actors

The dysfunctional state of Bosnia-Herzegovina remains a lasting threat to stability in the Balkans. That is why major international actors – US, EU and Turkey in the first place – made comeback to the region. Though Western Balkans is not among the Barack Obama administration’s priorities, US Vice-president Joseph Biden made a tour of the Balkans in the spring of 2009. The three capitals he visited – Sarajevo, Belgrade and Prishtina – make a triangle that is crucial for regional stability.

The visit of President Abdullah Gul to Serbia testified of Turkey’s more active role in the region. Underlying the significance of Serb-Turkish summit meeting, President Tadic said the

¹ *Dnevni Avaz*, October 29, 2009.

relations between the two countries were “better than ever in history.”²

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu had visited Serbia before his president, in July 2009. The program of his visit included Sandzak where, together with his host Vuk Jeremic, he reconciled the leaders of two biggest local parties, Rasim Ljajic and Sulejman Ugljanin. In Sarajevo, Minister Davutoglu said Turkey was a “guarantor of territorial integrity of Bosnia-Herzegovina.”

Intensified engagement of Turkey, the most powerful country in the region and NATO member-state, its traditional interest in the Balkans and readiness to fund some projects (construction of roads in Sandzak and of Islamic center in Serbia) can also contribute to regional stabilization.

The circles in the opposition favoring Russia’s stronger presence in the region did not welcome the visit by President Gul.

According to the plan of the visit, President Gul was supposed to address the Serbian Parliament. This had to be cancelled since most opposition parties had threatened to boycott his speech. And the planned visit to Sandzak was replaced by the visit to Novi Sad.

In his extensive interview with *Danas* daily, President Gul said Turkey attached importance to the fact that “Bosnia-Herzegovina maintains its territorial integrity, multiculturalism and multiethnicity, and its sovereignty.”³ “No ethnic group can profit from the attempts to undermine the central governance,” he added. Like EU and US, Turkey, said President Gul, wants to see integration in Bosnia rather than fragmentation.⁴

Russia’s Position

As a member of the Contact Group Russia has been involved in the settlement of the Bosnian issue from the very beginning. Until Vladimir Putin came to power Russia’s stand did not much differ that of other

² *Politika*, October 27, 2009.

³ *Danas*, October 24-25, 2009.

⁴ *Ibid.*

member-countries in the Group. Russia’s position over past years has not been exactly clear and seems to be more in the function of its competing with US. At the same time, Russia’s revived presence in the region has been realized through economic deals. In Republika Srpska, it is focused on power supply capacities (such as Oil Refinery in Bosanski Brod) the same as it is in Serbia.

President Medvedev’s brief visit (October) was interpreted by Belgrade as Serbia’s stronger position in the upcoming negotiations on constitutional reforms in Bosnia. At the ceremony to mark the Day of Liberation of Belgrade in WWII (October 20) Premier of Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik was sitting next to President Boris Tadic. The ceremony was broadcast live – and judging by TV features, Russian President did not even shake hands with Dodik. Only *Itartas* and *Srna* news agencies reported “a brief meeting” between Medvedev and Dodik. There was no telling from other sources whether or when the meeting took place at all. “Russia advocates the concept of stronger central institutions along with strong entity institutions,” said Russian Ambassador to Bosnia-Herzegovina Bochan Harchenko.⁵

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s visit to Bosnia (November 5) confirmed Russia’s well-known stance about supporting everything the three peoples might agree on. This actually backs Belgrade’s official stand. As an active member of the Peace Implementation Council, Russia wants to see the Office of High Representative transformed into an office of EU representative cooperating with Bosnia-Herzegovina through consultation and coordination rather than imposed decisions and interference into its domestic affairs, underlined Lavrov. He also said Russia was against “Bonn authority” to dismiss elected representatives and impose legislation.

Jeremic in Action

For more than a month, Serbia’s Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic has rather concentrated his exceptional diplomatic agility on Bosnia-Herzegovina. Jeremic paid a sudden visit to Banjaluka before

⁵ *Vecernje Novosti*, November 1, 2009.

the first round of “Butmir negotiations.” According to some news sources (*Danas*), the main objective of Jeremic’s visit was to dissuade Dodik from further radicalization of his relations with the Office of High Representative. “Vuk Jeremic went there to calm down Dodik,” said the paper’s unnamed source.⁶

During the first part of Butmir negotiations (October 9) Vuk Jeremic was away in Istanbul attending the Ministerial Meeting of South East European Cooperation Process (SEECP). Agencies reported that he had separate meetings with his Turkish and Bosnian counterparts, Ahmet Davutoglu and Sven Alkalaj.⁷

On the eve of the second round of Butmir negotiations, Serbian President Boris Tadic received a delegation of representatives of seven parliamentary parties from Republika Srpska. According to news stories, he told the parliamentarians that Serbia would not interfere into negotiations between political leaders of Bosnia-Herzegovina on the one hand and US and EU representatives on the other but underlined, nevertheless, that a compromise reached through “Butmir negotiations” would be most welcome. Even more ambiguous was his following message to the parliamentarians: “Serbia is my political responsibility and you are my moral responsibility.”⁸

Though he told the press after the meeting that he had not seen the full text of the paper under discussion in Butmir, Tadic stressed that “entity vote cannot be questioned.”⁹ Maintenance of the so-called entity vote enabling entities to veto decisions by the central governance is among the staunchest positions of Republika Srpska.

After the fiasco of Butmir negotiations Vuk Jeremic paid another visit to Bosnia-Herzegovina – this time to Sarajevo. He met with his host, Foreign Minister Sven Alkalaj, and for the first time ever with Haris Silajdzic, leader of the Party for

⁶ *Danas*, October 2, 2009.

⁷ *Beta*, October 9, 2009.

⁸ *Danas*, *BETA News Agency*, October 17-18, 2009.

⁹ *Politika*, October 17, 2009.

Bosnia-Herzegovina and a member of the tripartite BiH Presidency. Over the meetings Jeremic said Bosnia-Herzegovina was “Serbia’s closest and the most important neighbor” and that Serbia was ready to “help Bosnia-Herzegovina to stabilize domestic situation so as to be able to move speedier towards EU.”¹⁰ After meeting Dodik in Banjaluka, he told the press that situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina was not ideal but also that “no conflicts whatsoever can take place anywhere in the Balkans.”¹¹

What Is Expected from Serbia Now

Many regional and international observers take Milorad Dodik most responsible for soaring tensions in Bosnia-Herzegovina. He is often in Belgrade as if to justify his statements such as “I don’t love Bosnia-Herzegovina.” He begun developing good relations with Belgrade in Milosevic’s era, made them stronger during Kostunica’s premiership and has been always in the company of Boris Tadic in the past two years.

On the other hand, a part of Serbia’s opposition and pro-Russian media (*Pecat*) accuse both Dodik and Tadic of “constructive imposition of international decisions for Bosnia-Herzegovina.” Dodik is especially held responsible for having supported BiH candidacy for NATO membership. “Bearing in mind the future, I think it is most important to continue moving towards NATO, which would give us what many would rather ignore – a guarantee for stability,” he is often quoted saying.¹²

Given its overall situation, one can hardly say for sure whether Serbia fully backs Dodik or twists his arm. Serbia itself is torn between its “national dream” of unification of all Serbs under the same roof and consciousness about the threat of bankruptcy of the state in its present, “reduced” borders. No doubt that it is also under the pressure from some international actors on the account of aggravated relations within Bosnia-Herzegovina. Washington’s discreet warning sent via Daniel Serwer of the US

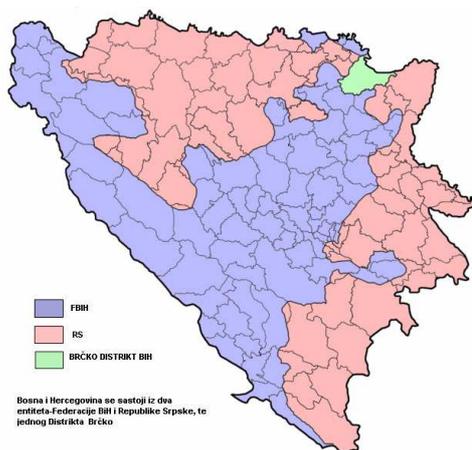
¹⁰ *Danas*, October 23, 2009.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Pecat*, October 30, 2009.

Institute of Peace is most indicative. Serbia does not undermine Bosnia's stability as much as in the past, because Belgrade is also growingly aware that instability of Bosnia-Herzegovina impairs Serbia's prospects for EU membership, notes Serwer. However, what is still not coming from Belgrade are "clear and unambiguous signals that it would not allow Republika Srpska's adventurism to jeopardize its EU membership interests," he adds.¹³

Western ambassadors to Serbia also expect Belgrade to start playing a more constructive role. Speaking on behalf of the country presiding EU, Swedish Ambassador Krister Bringeus said he hoped "Serbia would actively participate in resolution of all the problems in Bosnia-Herzegovina."¹⁴



The *Butmir* process should be resumed and result in prompt decisions on constitutional arrangements in Bosnia-Herzegovina. This is the more so necessary since consolidation of Bosnia-Herzegovina puts an end to Belgrade's aspirations and reduces Serbia's potential for "blackmailing" the region and the international community.

The package of measures to be taken should include reorganization of the entire Bosnia-Herzegovina by the principle of regional wholes meeting historical, economic and social criteria.

This opens the door to Serbia's constructive activities for regional reintegration, which can considerably lessen frustrations of its pro-European and reformist political elite. Stronger pro-European course could trigger off the region to overcome the decades-long blockade.

By eliminating ethnic criterion from processes of resolution of multiethnic conflicts, EU restores its fundamental values that guarantee a strong and stable Europe.

By ending the Balkan crisis properly, EU strengthens its position and credibility for settlement of crises. On the other hand, roles of NATO and US as guarantors of regional security become more important. With its constructive activities Turkey proves to be EU's major partner in the region, as well as relativizes the deeply rooted stereotype about Islamic countries being only factors of radicalism and disturbance at the global scene.

¹³ „Revision of Dayton Begins,“ *Politika*, October 16, 2009.

¹⁴ *Danas*, October 16, 2009.