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REFERENDUM IN REPUBLIKA SRPSKA: A TEST FOR THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The deep crisis blocking Bosnia-Herzegovina for long further escalated when the parliament of Republika Srpska /RS/ decided to call a referendum in this entity. According to announcement publicized so far the referendum is planned for June 2011. The parliament's controversial decision – on the legality and legitimacy of which RS President Milorad Dodik notably insists – tests of sorts not only the relations within Bosnia-Herzegovina proper but also the neighboring countries such as Serbia and the international community.

After seven months (since October 2010) central authorities in Bosnia-Herzegovina have not been constituted yet. This is the longest political blockade since the Dayton Agreement was signed. New “alliances” between RS leaders and their counterparts from the biggest Croatian parties from the other entity further disturbed the “balance” in the Federation, whereas the establishment of the Croatian National Assembly made the relations within it even more complex. The biggest Bosniak parties seem unprepared for coping with these new realities in a constructive manner.

The referendum called in RS is a challenge for Serbia. Many see it as a dress rehearsal of some future referendum on RS secession. Anything outside a general stance boiling down to the phrase about the support to any solutions “agreed on by three peoples and two entities” seems not to suit official Belgrade at this point. Namely, Serbia is waiting for a positive feedback on its application for EU candidacy and, therefore, tries to leave an impression of a constructive partner, particularly in the regional context. It welcomes Turkey's mediation and, for the sake of EU candidacy, pursues dialogue with Prishtina. At the same time, the ruling coalition is under strong pressure from the influential nationalistic-conservative bloc. This bloc wants it to back up Milorad Dodik (and the referendum) more resolutely, which, for it, only logically anticipates the end result: RS independence and its possible unification with Serbia.

Practically for two years (since the failure of the Butmir negotiations) the international community has not managed to contribute to Bosnia's consolidation and cohesion. The decision

on calling the referendum brought the conflict between High Representative Valentin Inzko and RS President Milorad Dodik to a breaking point. The outcome of the conflict will considerably influence the positions of other international players in Bosnia-Herzegovina, who have not managed to affirm the ideas the international community had in mind for solving the situation.

REFERENDUM: A DRESS REHEARSAL

RS President Milorad Dodik launched the idea about a referendum five years ago during his premiership. The idea was notably rekindled after Kosovo's independence declaration. Ever since it has been threatening Bosnia's stability. Finally, in April 2011 it was formally submitted to RS parliamentarians. They voted it in and the referendum was scheduled for mid-June.

The manner in which the media are referring to the referendum creates an impression about a plebiscite for RS independence. The referendum question changed as time went by: firstly about independence, then the imposed decisions by the High Representative and, finally, functioning of prosecution offices and courts at central level.¹

The referendum decision tempested the Bosnian federation, the office of the High Representative in Sarajevo, in Brussels and in Washington. The fact that citizens of one entity would have a say about central institutions was the most questionable segment of the decision. It was seen as a gross violation of the Dayton Agreement. There is no doubt, as High Representative Valentin Inzko said in his report to the UN Security Council, that

¹ Vreme, May 5, 2011.

Bosnia-Herzegovina was faced with the most serious political crisis "since the Dayton Agreement that put an end to the war."²

Referendum, as a democratic form of popular vote, has been rather discredited in the past 20 years in ex-Yugoslav territory (Milosevic's referendum on Kosovo on the eve of NATO intervention or Kostunica's referendum on the present Constitution of Serbia). In 1990s referendums were sorts of decisions on ex-Yugoslavia's future. Referendums for Serbs in Croatia and in Bosnia-Herzegovina resulted in the establishment of /Serb/ "self-governed autonomous regions" /SAO/ and eventually led to the wars in Croatia and Bosnia.

Darko Tanaskovic, a well-known Islamologist in favor of the referendum, says that the strongest opponents of the referendum are political heirs of those who "in 1991 opened the door to the wars through illegitimate and immoral plebiscites against an entire nation /Serb/."³ Though at the time Bosnia-Herzegovina was a society deeply divided along ethnic lines, "the referendum was internationally recognized as legitimate," says Tanaskovic.⁴ "Today's RS is not divided in that manner," he concludes implying the referendum's legitimacy.⁵ He avoids explaining, however, how come that Republika Srpska is no longer "an ethnically divided society."

REACTIONS BY OFFICIAL BELGRADE

Dodik's latest challenge to Belgrade is probably planned to induce Serbia's more definite support. Belgrade responded to it rather confusingly and controversially, though with more restraint than Banjaluka expected from it. True,

² Politika, May 10, 2011.

³ Vecernje Novosti, May 9, 2011.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic who visited Banjaluka immediately after the RS parliamentary vote on the referendum said there was “nothing disputable” about the decision.⁶

Serbian President Boris Tadic, however, did not cross that “red line,” as he called it. After the April 26 troika meeting in Karadjordjevo (Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Turkey) that, among other things, discussed the situation in Bosnia he said he got “different interpretations” about the upcoming referendum. He wouldn’t elaborate these interpretations, he added, so as not to “cross the red line and interfere in internal affairs of Bosnia-Herzegovina.” “By interfering in Bosnia’s internal affairs we would be repeating some past mistakes, which we surely would not want to,” said Tadic.⁷

“Serbia will never back up a referendum that could lead to Bosnia-Herzegovina’s partition or question the country’s integrity in some other way,” he added on the occasion.⁸

The announced referendum became a hit story for Serbia’s media in the meantime. As a rule, the main interviewee was Milorad Dodik. He appeared as a guest of a number of popular talk shows such as “Forefinger” /TV B92/, “Behind the News” /TV Avala/ or “Impression of the Week” /TV B92/. He was interviewed by almost all the print media. And yet, strangely enough, nothing was publicized about his meetings with Serbia’s high-ranking officials. He was himself rather reserved when commenting Belgrade’s attitude. He claimed he was satisfied with Belgrade’s principled support to any “agreement reached by three peoples and two entities.” Nevertheless, he reminded Serbia that it was a signatory of the Dayton Agreement

⁶ Vreme, May 5, 2011.

⁷ Danas, April 27, 2011.

⁸ Ibid. .

and hence duty-bound to intervene before international fora in the event of gross breaches of the rights of RS within Bosnia-Herzegovina.⁹

OFF THE RECORD: DIFFERENT TONES

With his latest moves Milorad Dodik definitely became the protector of Serb national interests “on the other bank of the Drina River” for Belgrade’s conservative circles. It should be noted that at the beginning of his political career (a premier at the time of Biljana Plavsic’s presidency) Dodik was accused of being a Western “advocate” and lately of taking Bosnia-Herzegovina, together with Republika Srpska, to NATO through “back door.”

Referring to Dodik, Djordje Vukadinovic, editor-in-chief of the New Serbian Political Thought, says that now “one name emerges as a symbol of new revival and struggle for political survival of Serbs on the other bank of the Drina River.”¹⁰ “Dodik’s resoluteness and courage have restored Serbs’ trust in RS, dispersed their fears and testified that international representatives were neither almighty nor impeccable,” writes Vukadinovic.¹¹

The conservative bloc attaches much importance to the ongoing power play between Dodik and the international community. In this context, its representatives say, “This time Dodik cannot back off and Tadic cannot move on if he disowns Dodik for the sake of Gul /Abdullah, president of Turkey/ and ‘the candidacy.’”¹²

⁹ TVB92, May 8, 2011.

¹⁰ Politika, May 10, 2011.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Politika, May 6, 2011.

These circles see Dodik's referendum gauntlet as the struggle for the legitimate right of popular vote. According to an analyst, Dodik is now "fighting for this right to be used in some future, more serious situation."¹³ For them the present escalation of Bosnian crisis is just a section in Republika Srpska's "marathon" towards independence (under more favorable international circumstances).

On the other hand, some more rational tones indicate that President Tadic is in a delicate position. According to Bosko Jaksic, columnist for the Politika daily, Serbia's interests and interests of Republika Srpska need not always coincide. "When these interests are conflicting it is on Serbia's President to protect Serbia's interests...Belgrade must clearly reiterate that Dodik may pursue any policy that suits him, which means not that Tadic will go along with him at the cost Serbia would have to pay. Belgrade must not allow itself to be drawn into a game that may harm Serbia's road towards Europe and the processes of reconciliation and normalization in the region."¹⁴

A CHALLENGE FOR THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Ever since the failure of the Butmir negotiations two years ago, the international community has not manifested readiness for a major joint action by all relevant players aimed at lessening tensions in Bosnia-Herzegovina and

the state's consolidation. Though all main players agree that the Dayton Agreement signed 16 years ago to end a war has worn out, all the search for a peaceful, constructive formula for Bosnia-Herzegovina turned futile. The international community's engagement – as of lately in particular – boiled down to the activities by the High Representative and his office in Sarajevo.

High Representative Valentin Inzko openly confronted Milorad Dodik over the decision on the referendum. He announced to annul it and insisted on sanctions against RS leaders. The Un Security debate of May 9 did not produce a unanimous stance since Russia disagreed with Inzko's demands while China was reserved.

In the meantime the International Crisis Group publicized its analysis of Bosnian crisis, recommending a more moderate approach. ICG takes that punishing Milorad Dodik would be counterproductive at this point.

As it seems Milorad Dodik's latest announcement about calling the referendum off has been found as a provisional solution. This is what he told the press after his meeting with EU Vice-President and High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton. At the meeting they agreed to together consider the problems of Bosnia-Herzegovina's judiciary. With this offer EU managed to bridge over the present blockade.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Politika, April 30, 2011.

SUMMARY

Bosnia-Herzegovina is a key to regional stabilization. All its complexity and delicacy must be taken into consideration in the consolidation process.

Any attempt at Bosnia's partition raises the question of hegemony in the Balkans and blocks the region's Europeanization.

The international community must put an end to all territorial aspirations in the region and do its best to completely legalize the existing borders and make them passable. Among other things, this preconditions speedier consolidation and economic recovery of the entire region.

Over the past period all the three peoples in Bosnia-Herzegovina were insisting on their particularistic interests and ignoring the interests of others. Such attitudes call for clear-cut criteria for keeping a balance.

Bosnia-Herzegovina's membership of NATO and a candidacy status with EU would considerably change the political context and create conditions for articulation of the interests the three peoples have in common.