



By Ioannis Karampelas*

Bosnian crisis: A foreseen death or there is still way out?

“I had come to Yugoslavia to see what history meant in flesh and blood,” Rebecca West wrote -prophetically- back in 1937 in her notable chronicle “Black Lamb and Grey Falcon” and it seems that her words come true once again nowadays. Bosnia & Herzegovina has entered into a deep double crisis which awakens memories of the bloody civil war back in 1992 – 1995 that ended in Dayton, Ohio with the homonymous peace accord. According to the newly appointed High Representative, Christian Schmidt, it is “the greatest existential threat of the postwar period” for Bosnia highlighting dramatically current situation and aiming to put the little turbulent Balkan country in the international spotlight.

For those who follow political developments in Bosnia both crises were not a surprise? it was rather the confirmation of the unavoidable foreseen events. And definitely it was not a surprise for the EU and US; the two powers which have strongly engaged in the establishment, viability and existence of the new state. In fact, Bosnia could be seen as an ambitious experiment of international community -namely the EU and US- to establish a protec-

torate in the European territory where three -hostile between them- entities could be reconciled and live together in peace and stability. Of course, the whole project was not just an innocent experimental practice since geopolitical and geostrategic goals were included. The US sought to establish their control and influence in south-eastern Europe by shrinking Serbia and creating friendly protectorates in the region, Kosovo and Bosnia. The EU engaged politically and economically in the region by offering the newly emerged republics the challenge of joining the club and by supporting them financially.

None could dispute that the Dayton peace agreement stopped a bloodshed and in this context it is considered as a successful initiative of the US (the EU was lost between words and inaction) which intervened decisively using both diplomatic and military power. However, Dayton peace accord could be considered rather as an “emergency agreement” which created a state with a complicated political system and moreover a complicated decision-making process which could block any political, economic, security and social initiative or reform. In other words, Bosnia is a state captured by the interests and goals of the constituent entities which actions are incited by their low and selfish





ethnic motives. Due to this dysfunctional political and institutional system, state bodies and institutions are blocked and are unable to work properly.

The first crisis is a constitutional and institutional one since it concerns the state's electoral law and it is

a dispute between Bosnian Croats and Muslim Bosnians (Bosniaks). In short, Bosnian electoral law should be reformed in order to harmonize with the European standards and more specifically to give all Bosnian citizens the right to run for the state's presidency and not only for the citizens of the three constituent entities. Currently, Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks constitute a single electoral district where Croats are the minority. Consequently, Bosniaks control not only the election of their Bosniak representative in the tripartite presidency, but also the Croat one since there is not an autonomous Bosnian Croat territory as it happens with the Bosnian Serbs and they do not enjoy the right -under the Dayton agreement- to elect their own presidential representative. Under these circumstances, Bosnian Croats are "hostages" of the Bosnian Muslims political interests. Bosnian Croats push for the electoral reform -which includes amendment of the Constitution- while Bosniaks refuse to agree in granting extensive electoral rights to Croats and especially to consent in the establishment of a Bosnian Croat electoral district. According to Bosnian Muslims such a scenario strengthens the undermining of the state's cohesion and increases the possibilities of Bosnian dissolution. Bosnian Serb leader and member of the tripartite presidency, Milorad Dodik took advantage

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of the Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks dispute and achieved close cooperation and coordination with the main Bosnian Croat political force, HDZ Bosnia & Herzegovina and its leader Dragan Covic. Bosnian Serbs support the Croatian demand for the electoral reform, while Bosnian Croats do not react in nationalist policy of

Dodik who openly promotes secession of Republika Srpska from Bosnia. The possibility of election boycott by the Bosnian Croats and Serbs is on the table and could strengthen political instability and Republika Srpska's secessionist policy.

The second crisis sounds more dangerous since it poses a direct threat against the Bosnian state. Dodik announced last October that he intends to boycott all the state institutions aiming to transfer their competences to Republika Srpska bodies. In this context, he announced that Bosnian Serbs are withdrawing from three key state institutions; the Armed Forces, justice institutions and tax administration. Such a decision initiates the secession process of Republika Srpska from Bosnia and definitely violates the Dayton peace agreement. Although Dodik never mentioned the word secession and rejected

the possibility of an armed conflict, he highlighted that Bosnian Serb institutions will replace the banned state bodies. The Bosniaks strongly reacted in Dodik's rhetoric and actions, while the other two members of the tripartite presidency underlined that they will defend Bosnian sovereignty by any mean. Bosnian Muslim leader, Bakir Izetbegovic did not hesitate to call NATO, the US and UK to deploy additional military force in the country claiming that the

small (600 people) EU-led military force cannot guarantee peace and stability of Bosnia and the implementation of the Dayton accord by all constituent entities.

The EU, US and UK rallied to support Bosnian integrity within the Dayton peace agreement framework rejecting any possibility of secession and dissolution of the state. The threat of sanctions against the Bosnian Serb leader is an empty one, considering that sanctions against Dodik have been activated since 2017 without any tangible results in his nationalist rhetoric and secessionist policy. Moreover, it seems that a supporting bloc of Dodik's secessionist policy has been emerged within the EU, where Hungarian Prime Minister, Victor Orban has a leading role achieving to rally around him several European political forces. Surprisingly, Orban has strengthened Hungarian relations with Republika Srpska, while he announced that he will block in the EU any potential sanctions against Dodik. Sarajevo is under the impression that the EU is actually promoting the dissolution of Bosnia, not only because it does not grant the EU candidate status for the country, but also because it promotes the electoral reform in favor of Croatia and actually does not pay special attention in resolving current situation.

Russian role in Bosnian crisis is highly disputable since there are those who strongly believe that it is Moscow which have set up all this situation aiming not only to distract international attention from Ukraine, but also to increase its role and influence in the Balkan peninsula. Besides, it is not a secret that Republika Srpska enjoys privileged relations with Russia and Dodik actually acts as the "minion" of Russians in the region. Taking into consideration that Moscow and Belgrade have established strong ties long time

ago, one could consider that the triangle Republika Srpska, Russia and Serbia act in coordination promoting Moscow's strategic plans for the region. It should be highlighted that Bosnia is extremely vulnerable to Russian influence since it remains a state out of the EU and NATO. Currently, Dodik enjoys the Russian support as a countermeasure in the US, EU and UK actions. Furthermore, China supports Bosnian instability for its own strategic interests and its ambitious plan to penetrate in Southeastern Europe through huge

trade and investment projects. In this context, Beijing and Moscow react in the presence of the Office of High Representative (OHR) in Bosnia aiming to close down the institution which enjoys extensive powers. However, it should be noted that Serbian President, Aleksandar Vucic distanced himself from Dodik and he might have offered his support to the US for an action plan of the removal of the Bosnian Serb leader from the Serbian entity and the state's politics. Vucic knows very well that he needs Brussels and Washington not only for his political future, but also for the Serbian stability and economic growth.

Is Bosnia & Herzegovina close to an armed conflict and its dissolution after all?

Not in the near future, but none could exclude it in the medium to long term under certain circumstances. In short, Bosnian Serbs promote their secessionist policy enjoying the Russian and Chinese support, but they are not ready yet for full implementation of their plan. They need time, funding and stronger support by credible powerful allies. Nationalist and secessionist rhetoric is rather attractive for the Bosnian Serb electoral body and polarization of state's politics by Dodik actually serves his political plans to remain in power as long as he can. It could be said, that by bringing instability in the country, Dodik could threaten not only his long reign in state's politics, but also his political and eco-

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conomic privileges. Furthermore, none should ignore that citizens of Bosnia, no matter of ethnicity, are rejecting the idea of war having still in mind the bloodshed of the 90's war. And last but not least, the fate of Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic is still here to remind to every "Dodik" what will be the end of anyone who will try to threaten peace and stability of Bosnia; anyone who will try to bring a new war in the European soil ignoring the interests of the US and EU.

What should be done for de-escalation and a brighter future for Bosnia? First of all, it is time an international conference and

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dialogue for the Dayton peace agreement amendment to take place. Dayton accord should be reformed in order to transform Bosnia into a functional state with a flexible decision-making system and a working political system. Secondly, electoral reform should be implemented rapidly to bring political balance in the country. None could dispute that Bosnian Croats are a constituent entity and

should enjoy the right to elect its own representatives as Bosniaks and Bosnian Serbs do. Besides, such an amendment would strongly help towards de-escalation of political tension in the country. Moreover, international community should take steps for the balanced coexistence of all ethnic entities of the country. As long as there are winners and losers, hatred and ethnic division will reign in Bosnia and political forces will take advantage of nationalist rhetoric for their own interests. For instance, abolishment of the OHR and foreign judges in top judicial bodies could be an encouraging step which transforms the country from a protectorate into an independent and sovereign state. Finally, economic growth based on a plan of effective administration, modern public service, elimination of corruption, transparency and accountability of political system under the support of the EU could accelerate the Bosnian route towards Brussels. This is responsibility not only of the EU and international stakeholders, but primarily of the citizens of Bosnia themselves. Bosnians are obliged to take their fate in their hands and international community will follow supporting the effort. In short, the European path still remains the only credible vision for Bosnia's viability. Bosnia & Herzegovina grew up as a protectorate where international actors have “responsibility to protect”, “responsibility to reconstruct”, “responsibility to fund;” it is time for Bosnians to develop “responsibility to act by themselves.”



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