

STRATEGIC BALKANS

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Croatia's contradictory policy for Bosnia Herzegovina

The Sabor, Croatia's Parliament, adopted a declaration on the status of the Croats in Bosnia Herzegovina (BiH) on December 14. The document highlights that Bosnian Croats do not own the same political rights of Bosniaks (Muslims) and Serbs, the other two "constituent peoples" of the country according to the Dayton agreement signed in 1995, which works as the BiH Constitution. Eighty-one MPs voted in favour, eleven rejected it and four abstained.

A very controversial passage of the declaration focuses on the outcome of the presidential elections in BiH, held on 7 October. It questions the legitimacy of the election of Zeljko Komsic, a leftist politician, as the Croat member of the tripartite Presidency, hinting that he defeated the outgoing Dragan Covic, a nationalist, only because many Muslim voters turned to him.

The BiH Presidency is made of three members, a Bosniak, a Serb and a Croat. The electoral code foresees that the Serb member of the Presidency is elected by voters registered in the Republika Srpska (RS), the Serbian entity of the country, while those registered in the Federation of Bosnia Hercegovina (FBiH), the other entity, made of Bosniak-Croat mixed cantons, can vote for either the Bosniak or

Croat member of the Presidency, but not for both. Zagreb calls for a reform of the electoral law to make Bosnian Croat candidates eligible only through their people's votes. It is the same change proposed by Dragan Covic, and it implies that Komsic is not the legitimate representative of this community, since his election does not rely upon Croat-Bosnian voters only.

In the competition for the Croat seat, Komsic, the leader of the progressive Democratic Front (DF), took 52%, while Covic, who heads the nationalist-conservative HDZ BiH, got 38%. Komsic had already served as the Croat member of the Presidency in 2006-2014. Covic won the seat in 2014 elections.

Many observers perceived the December 14 declaration as interference in BiH domestic affairs and a break with the "principled policy" deployed by Zagreb towards the neighbouring country after the death of former President Franjo Tudjman in 1999. Tudjman, the ultra-nationalist architect of Croatia's independence, promoted a policy of direct intervention in BiH. During the 1992-1995 war, he negotiated the BiH partition with Slobodan Milosevic, Belgrade's strongman. Stipe Mesic, Tudjman's successor, inaugurated a new policy, respectful of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of BiH and supporting its integration on the Euro-Atlantic area. Furthermore, he persuaded Bosnian Croats that they have to solve their problems in Sarajevo, not in Zagreb anymore, although Zagreb is always open to help them. Mesic's "principled policy" became since then the official State policy for BiH.

Now it seems that the trend is reversing. In Croatia, a "conservative revolution" has been underway for some years. Based on pillars like nationalism, sovereignty, Catholic traditions, nation-state and a greater influence on Bosnian Croats' destiny, it can be seen as a local expression of the global populist movement. The Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), the strongest party in the conservative field, founded by Tudjman, rode the wave of rising neo-conservative values and took the power back in 2015 general elections.

Among the Bosnian Croats, nationalism is surging as well. Feeling trapped in the cohabitation with Bosniaks in the FBiH and envying the Bosnian Serbs, whose mono-ethnic entity has quasi-state powers, Dragan Covic and his party – the HDZ sister-party in BiH – dream of a third entity for Croats. Knowing that neither international community nor Zagreb can accept this scenario, their plan is to build an "electoral entity" through the reform of the electoral system. Covic can count on the support of the Croatian HDZ, which in turn sees HDZ BiH as the tool to recover influence in BiH affairs.

Before the October 7 elections, Croatia's Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic, who belongs to HDZ, went to Mostar, the Bosnian Croat stronghold, to support Covic. After the vote, he said that the election of Komsic is not positive for BiH, stressing once again that it is the consequence of an unfair voting system.

Carl Bildt, Paddy Ashdown and Christian Schwarz-Schilling, three former High Representatives of the international community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, sent a letter to the Foreign Ministers of the European Union stating that such recrimination has no basis. “HDZ officials from Croatia, together with Dragan Covic, the leader of HDZ BiH, claim that the election of Komsic was illegitimate and unconstitutional. Yet neither the Constitution nor Bosnia’s election law say that they should be elected by members of their own ethnic group”, they argued, suggesting the foreign ministers of the EU “to send a message to Bosnia and Herzegovina’s political parties, and to those interfering from outside the country”.

The old-new Croatia’s approach to BiH is very risky. Supporting a third entity in BiH – even just an electoral entity – is a move that jeopardizes the real interests of BiH. The country must avoid further fragmentation. It needs a stronger central government to make reforms to achieve Euro-Atlantic integration.

Zagreb’s stance is contradictory because it aligns with the Bosnian Serbs’ historical strategy that is blaming the inefficiency of BiH institutions to claim more powers for their entity. For carrying such ideas, the Bosnian Serb long-time leader, Milorad Dodik, recently elected as the Serbian member of the Presidency, has been accused several times to be the main contributor to the BiH post-war stalemate.

Dodik is also a key Russian ally. His relation with Vladimir Putin is warm, and the Russian President counts on him to keep BiH divided and frustrate any attempts made by NATO and the EU to unlock BiH political stalemate. Recently, NATO has reactivated the Membership Action Plan for BiH, already offered without success few years ago. Bosnian Serbs want to resist.

Croatia advocates the integration of BiH both in NATO and the EU, but at the same time supports Dragan Covic, who wants further fragmentation for BiH, exactly as the Milorad Dodik, Putin’s man in BiH. Zagreb is ending up in a big contradiction and it could open a dangerous precedent for territorial claims dating back to the II WW by neo-nationalist governments.

The Kosovo army: a new headache for NATO and the EU in the Balkans

On 14 December, Kosovo's Parliament approved three laws to turn the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) into a regular army expected to have 5.000 active soldiers. Other 3.000 members will join the reserve. KSF is a security force tasked with territorial protection and crisis response operations. NATO and allies on a bilateral basis train it. Its 2.500 members are equipped with light weapons. Kosovo's authorities said that having an army strengthens statehood and territorial integrity.

The transformation of the KSF into a regular army, confirmed by the signature of the Kosovar President Hashim Thaci on December 28, was criticized by Serbia's authorities, who argued it represents a blatant violation of UN Security Council resolution 1244, which entrusts KFOR, the NATO-led security force, with preserving security in the former Serbian province. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation shared the same view.

NATO itself opposed Pristina's move. The Secretary General of the alliance, Jens Stoltenberg, said it is "ill-timed", goes "against the advice of many NATO allies" and "may have serious repercussions for Kosovo's future Euro-Atlantic integration". He added that NATO could re-examine the level of engagement with the KSF, should the mandate of the Kosovo Security Force evolve.

The European Union expressed doubts about the creation of a regular Kosovar army, too. Brussels is criticizing Pristina also for having imposed a 100% tariff on all goods imported from Serbia, a decision that came right after Kosovo's bid to join Interpol was rejected on the 20th of November due to Belgrade's successful lobbying campaign to convince members of the world police organization to block Kosovo's ambitions.

In terms of real impact on the ground, the Kosovar army, which will likely need some years to be build, will not be a game-changer. In accordance to Serbia's propaganda, it will try to occupy Northern Kosovo, where the Serbs represent the majority of the population and Belgrade continues to exert a strong influence, albeit less than in the past. Anyway, it is a very unlikely scenario.

The real consequence of the creation of the Kosovo army, if Pristina's authorities will not back off, has a political dimension, not a military one. It can bring to the definitive failure of the EU-brokered dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. Europe's strategy is based on offering incentives to persuade the two countries to make reciprocal concessions. Initially it worked.

Under the so-called Normalization Agreement, signed in 2013, Serbia dismantled its parallel police and justice system in Northern Kosovo and let Kosovo absorb them in its system. In exchange, EU-Serbia accession talks started. As for Kosovo, it agreed in principle to grant Serbs living in Kosovo wide self-government powers through the creation of the Association/Community of Serb majority

municipalities. The EU promised visa-free regime for Kosovo's citizens to travel in Schengen area if the border demarcation agreement with Montenegro was ratified and measurable progress in the fight against corruption was shown. The second condition is still unfulfilled.

Anyway, due to a low mutual trust, the implementation of the Normalization Agreement has been very gradual and the dialogue ended up in a stalemate. Both Serbia and Kosovo do not want to go further. Belgrade staunchly refuses to recognize Kosovo, which is the unavoidable unwritten condition for accessing the EU, while Pristina resisted during the whole past year establishing the Association/Community of Serb municipalities, perceiving it as a Belgrade's Trojan horse. After Kosovo's choice to turn the KSF into a national army, the impasse can only worsen. In such a situation, the EU soft power, already difficult to apply, results further weakened. More direct pressure to bring the parties back to the table, could be used, but it needs much more political cohesiveness in Brussels.

Finding a solution seems hard, considering that Washington is playing an ambiguous game that seems aimed at side-lining Brussels. The newly appointed US ambassador to Kosovo, Philip Kosnett, endorsed Kosovo's army, marking a clear difference with Europe's reaction and jeopardizing NATO's consensus as well. "We think that KSF's evolution is only natural for Kosovo as a sovereign country", Kosnett told. At the same time, Donald Trump recently sent a letter to the Serbian and Kosovar Heads of State inviting them to capitalize the opportunity to solve the their dispute and sign a historic peace deal. The American President did not specify what kind of deal Vucic and Thaci could strike, but it could also be a land swap (Northern Kosovo to Serbia, southern Serbia to Kosovo), an idea that has been circulating over the last months and that both the leaders like. The US administration has already signalled that it is open to accept such a compromise, reversing a long-held US policy opposed to any further border changes in the Balkans, that would open the way for further disputes.

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