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Could Bosnia and Herzegovina disintegrate?

The delicate balance established after the Bosnian War is on the brink of collapse. That's a failure of the ruling elite and its international backers

This year started – yet again – with the Balkans, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in particular, proving its image as a powder keg about to explode, or, to quote the New York Times, as a 'tinderbox'. This weekend, Serb politicians were seen lighting matches on 9 January, which marks 30 years since Bosnian Serbs declared their own state in Bosnia in 1992. The holiday had previously been declared unconstitutional by the country's highest court.

The recent threats emerging from the Serb member of the Presidency, Milorad Dodik, contribute to BiH's status as a powder keg, since they risk to upend the delicate balance achieved in the region after the war. This, together with other factors, has led BiH to be on the brink of a complete collapse of its political system after three years of gridlock. In the worst scenario, this could lead to its dissolution.

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How did it come to this? It has a lot to do with the BiH's ruling elite. For them, it is politically most profitable to talk about war and to manufacture crises to distract from the lack of results in economic development. The best 'campaign' these elites can run is to fuel conflicts and encourage intolerance. Their victories are half-hearted, as half of the voters do not want to go to the polls because they do not see a difference in the political offering. After all, when irresponsible political leaders become increasingly autocratic, the average voter feels completely powerless.

The phenomenon of 'Bigmanism'

The design of the institutions of all Balkan countries is the product of individuals, not large groups, which reflects the syndrome of the so-called 'bigmanism'. In political science, this term refers to the corrupt, autocratic, and often totalitarian rule of states by one person. It is generally associated with neo-patrimonial states, where a framework of formal law and administration exists, but the state is informally trapped by patronage networks. The distribution of public booty takes precedence over the formal functions of the state, severely limiting the ability of public servants to make policies of general interest.

In the case of BiH, the government follows in the footsteps of 'democratic' countries such as Poland, Hungary and Turkey, by reducing the independence of parliamentarians and shifting the power over institutions to the top and into the hands of party leaders: Bakir Izetbegović, Chairman of the Party of Democratic Action (Bosniac party), Milorad Dodik, Chairmain of Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (Serb party), and Dragan Čović, Chairman of Croatian Democratic Union.

Their tactics include a war against unsuitable media (those that give space to critics), ongoing efforts to control civil society, a siege of state institutions by loyal followers, and the 'excommunication' of critics. Their goal is to manufacture consent for an undisputed acceptance of the leader and his followers, who challenge the legitimacy of others often on religious, ethnic, cultural, or socio-economic grounds. Their rhetoric runs along the lines of 'we are successful, everyone envies us, and the great powers want our wealth and intelligence', the guiding principle of almost every Balkan leader's political repertoire.

The role of the Dayton Agreement

In the same spirit, unrealistic economic promises and, of course, their non-fulfilment, is easiest to 'sell' if they are accompanied by a strong ideological narrative. In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, this is the original Dayton agreement. The Dayton Accords preserved Bosnia as a single state made up of two parts, the Bosniak-Croat Federation and the Bosnian Serb Republic, with Sarajevo remaining as the undivided capital city. Dayton spawned a political system that is among the most complex in the world.

Bosnia's electoral system needs reforming to address

From then until today, some major reforms have taken place, mostly on initiative and pressure from outside, creating new institutions

several European Court of Human Rights judgements, in particular a ruling that all citizens should be eligible to run for the presidency.

at the federal level to have a more functional state. The relationship towards the agreement is different for each faction. The Serb member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina and president of the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats, Milorad Dodik, advocates for, what he calls, the original Dayton agreement; Dragan Covic, president of the Croatian Democratic Union, insists on the election law. All the while, the permanent role of the victim is reserved for the Bosniaks.

Dodik advocates for the establishment of parallel institutions under the veil of the 'original' Dayton Agreement. In effect, he is trying to dismantle the institution-building in post-war Bosnia and to bring the country back to 1995. Covic, representing the Croats, is trying to make changes to the BiH Election Law before the upcoming 2022 general elections. He says that he wants to ensure the 'legitimate representation' of the constituent peoples claiming, among other things, that Zeljko Komsic (Croat member of the Presidency) was elected by Bosniac votes and does not, in fact, represent Croats. Bosnian Croat parties claim that under current rules, Bosniaks can outvote Croats based on the sheer number of voters, and thus effectively get to elect the Croat member of the presidency.

Bosnia's electoral system needs reforming to address several European Court of Human Rights judgements, in particular a ruling that all citizens – not just members of the three constituent peoples recognised under the constitution, i.e. Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats – should be eligible to run for the presidency.

International actors in the region

Euroscepticism has established a strong connection with Balkan populism, as the European Union is seen as a suitable enemy that can be blamed with impunity. This, together with the fear of migration, is accompanied by sometimes open, and sometimes subtle and silent racism and Islamophobia, as well as criticism of various minorities. Such attitude is wholeheartedly encouraged by mentors on the international scene, whether it is Russia, as a mentor of Serbs, Turkey as a mentor of the Bosniaks, or the European Union, which will always protect its member Croatia.

Fundamentally, Balkan elites strive to retain their interests and power, while in the international arena, they aim to simulate a commitment to

integration and to maintain support and good relations with international representatives when the money runs dry. At the same time, the international community is blamed for almost everything. This is a game that has been played for decades. As a result, there has been poor management of national resources, institutions have eroded, and a culture of intolerance and victimisation has flourished.

International organisations have done little to create a functional conflict prevention regime at the country's regional level.

Unfortunately, while the rhetorical commitment to preventive diplomacy and action may still be high in international circles, international organisations have done little to create a functional conflict prevention regime at the country's regional level. That's also because the commitment to its implementation at the domestic level is very weak.

What's next?

Currently, BiH is inching closer towards a dissolution because of the three years of political gridlock. It took a year after the 2018 general elections to form a Council of Ministers (at the state level), while the entity government of the Federation of BiH is working on a technical mandate.

Yet a government has never been appointed in line with the election results. Namely, the HDZ conditioned the formation of the government with the adoption of a new election law. Dodik, as Republika Srpska's most prominent political leader and member of the BiH Presidency, subsequently has threatened that the Bosnian Serb parliament would stop abiding to most of the roughly 140 laws imposed by past high representatives and create its own army, border police, tax authority and judiciary.

Consequently, BiH's European path and reform processes have been halted, and fear of the collapse of the state and war is ubiquitous. Many people in Bosnia, their memories of the last devastating war still fresh, say they would not fight in any new conflict but rather flee the country.

The political crisis in BiH cannot be overcome just by the imposition of sanctions. Instead, the international community must show a renewed interest and develop an agenda focused on social cohesion, with short-term compromises followed by a serious long-term reform process.



Svetlana Cenić

Sarajevo

Dr. Svetlana Cenić is a business consultant, a columnist for the Sarajevo-based political weekly Dani, and an adjunct lecturer at the SHL Academy for Young Leaders. She served as Minister of Finance of Republika Srpska from 2005 to 2006.