

CROATIAN AND SERBIAN POLICY IN BOSNIA

Help or Hindrance?

Since the middle of the previous decade, Bosnia and Herzegovina's political and state institutions have degenerated

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Thus, for example, since the general elections of October 2010, the country has had fewer than four months of an elected, fully functional state-level Council of ministers, while political actors, mostly but not exclusively from the Republika Srpska increasingly question the legitimacy of the state itself. The West remains disunited over how to best apply its policy instruments to help overcome the deepening structural crisis. Yet what united them over the last couple of years was a renewed focus on the role of the neighboring countries - Serbia and Croatia. For much of the decade following their democratic breakthroughs in 2000, Croatia and Serbia were self-absorbed, unlike their predatory roles toward BiH in the 1990s. Serbia began its re-entry into BiH politics soon after Milorad Dodik took power in the RS in 2006; Croatia in 2010. But their engagement was not merely driven by the deterioration in BiH or internal political dynamics. Instead, the West hoped that Belgrade and Zagreb could be called upon to assist. At the same time, Croatian President Ivo Josipovic's initiative promoting regional reconciliation with his Serbian counterpart, Boris Tadic, was welcomed by the international community - and especially by the EU. It also made "regional cooperation" into a buzzword, despite the fact that the EU's integration process was already supposed to be promoting improved bilateral relationships in the western Balkans.

The prevailing assumption made by Western policymakers was that the influence of the neighbors would be significant, and in the main benign, to the interest of BiH's stabilization and functionality. This policy delivered few positive tangible results. Belgrade and Zagreb's engagement has generated additional complications, sometimes encouraging the retrograde policies that they were called upon to rein-in in.

Neighbors Re-Enter the Political Scene

The launch of democratic politics following the ouster of autocrat Slobodan Milosevic in October 2000 pressed Serbian authorities to focus on immediate domestic concerns and the loss of Kosovo. While supporting Bosnian Serb nationalists was not a top popular or political priority, it was never completely abandoned. Milorad Dodik, who

became Republika Srpska Prime Minister in March 2006, found a partner in Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica to reinvigorate the moribund special parallel relations between Serbia and the RS. President Boris Tadic, leader of the Democratic Party, led a super-presidency with a technocratic prime minister. His election was an avowed goal of western policymakers, who hoped that in addition to promoting a European Serbia, he would assist in restraining the increasingly strident RS Prime Minister. Instead of this,



his government maintained and deepened the relationship forged with Milorad Dodik; the two met 23 times between 2009 and 2011, compared to one official visit to Sarajevo by Tadic. President Tadic regularly repeated that Belgrade, as a "guarantor of Dayton," supported any constitutional arrangement forged by the two entities and three constituent peoples, and that he was against externally driven solutions. Yet he and his foreign minister Vuk Jeremic were demonstratively supportive of Dodik, who continued to amplify his anti-state and anti-Dayton pronouncements and activities. Tadic, Jeremic and then-Interior Minister Dacic all linked BiH territorial integrity to Serbia's at some point, with Dacic openly musing prior to elections both BiH and Kosovo could be partitioned, with parts annexed to Serbia. Throughout his term, Tadic was never warned by western powers that his support for Dodik would jeopardize his avowed EU aspirations. He was allowed to have it both ways, while still presenting himself as essential. The new Progressive-Socialist coalition government in Serbia, led by President Tomislav Nikolic and Prime Minister Ivica Dacic has no need of Dodik's aura as a tough Serb patriot "who can say no" to the West. But while the nature of the Belgrade-Banja Luka relationship has changed, it is too early to tell whether Serbia will continue, in effect, to back Dodik.

For a decade, Croatia had judiciously extricated itself from BiH. President Stjepan Mesic launched the trend explicitly by telling BiH Croats that Sarajevo, not Zagreb, was their capital. The Croatia-Federation of BiH special parallel relationship, already fading, was effectively mothballed. But the policy of focusing on Croatia's needs and aspirations was one that spanned the political divide, being pursued by both the governments of the Social Democrat Ivica Racan, and his two HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union) successors, Ivo Sanader and Jadranka Kosor. While all bilateral, post-Yugoslav disputes between Croatia and BiH remained open throughout this period, they rarely made either headlines or waves. Croatia became re-engaged in BiH beginning in early 2010, with the election of a new president, Ivo Josipovic. He and his advisors took advantage of the fact that regional reconciliation could become a presidential prerogative and program. In addition to forging an apparently close relationship with his Serbian counterpart, President Tadic, Josipovic visited BiH twice in spring 2010, including a visit to Banja Luka to meet with RS Prime Minister Milorad Dodik, during which he made no comments regarding Dodik's ever-more virulent attacks on the state and its institutions. The EU and other external actors were inclined to view Croatia's burgeoning engagement in a positive light. The aftermath of the October 2010 general elections in BiH drew Croatia deep into the country's ethno-national political swamp, with the president's office pressing the case for "legitimate Croat representatives" from the two largest Croat parties, the HDZ BiH and HDZ 1990, to be included in the Federation government. These efforts were unsuccessful, generating frictions that continue to rankle, and affecting the new SDP-led government of Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic. After the unpleasant experiences of 2011-12, he and Foreign Minister Vesna Pusic apparently wish to pursue a "principled policy" toward BiH, not aligned with any political actors or parties. But what this would mean in practice remains ethereal. Croatia's entry into the EU in July 2013 will have a major impact on BiH's economy - and its politics. Croatia's position in a number of outstanding bilateral disputes with BiH has already been bolstered by its impending EU membership; its leverage increases as its entry

draws closer. What sort of policy Croatia will pursue toward BiH - and what sort of policies it will press for within the EU - remains a known unknown even nine months after the Milanović-government has taken office. What is clear, however, is that the EU has not made Croatia's path toward membership contingent on its behavior vis-à-vis BiH.

International Community Approaches

The European Union has assumed the role of lead actor in the international community's Bosnia policy, as it has on the wider Balkan stage. The EU's window on the region is through its enlargement process. It is also the inspiration for the regional cooperation script. That ought to have made the EU the natural driver of international policies toward Serbia and Croatia. Yet looking at the EU's performance as a whole, the Union has left much of its potential leverage unused - for various reasons. The EU, both from Brussels and from its delegations in the region, has not integrated its policies toward regional actors regarding BiH. Unresolved structural and political constraints explain the mismatch between the EU's potential leverage and its actual performance. These include: lack of a coherent regional strategy for the western Balkans that integrates the main challenges (Kosovo and BiH) in a single policy; failure to devise a coherent approach toward dealing with regional and bilateral issues in the EU integration; difficulty of making the EU's post-Lisbon arrangements work, particularly the continued rivalry between the EEAS and the DG Enlargement; occasional ructions among and between the EU and Turkey; and, finally, widely divergent diagnoses and risk assessments on BiH among EU members - particularly in camps led by Germany and the UK. These constraints impede systematic coordination with other key players like the US and Turkey in dealing with BiH's neighbors. They have also prevented the EU from wielding its greatest potential leverage - the enlargement process - to resolve the bilateral disputes that hamstring regional cooperation. The discrepancy between the EU's professed insistence on the importance of regional cooperation and its actual performance manifests itself most starkly in this area. The seemingly interminable Slovenian-Croatian border dispute does not seem to have been a learning experience for decision makers in Brussels. After seven years of accession negotiations, Croatia has not resolved any of the many open bilateral issues with BiH. Unless the EU surmounts least some its struc-

tural constraints, its engagement with Bosnia's neighbors will remain stuck in improvisation. As matters stand, the EU appears to be unilaterally abandoning much of its potential leverage, leaving a vacuum no other actors can adequately fill.

US policymakers see the policies of Milorad Dodik as the prime generator of instability in BiH. They therefore hoped that President Tadic could and would intercede with Dodik to moderate his behavior, even though they were also uncertain as to how much leverage Tadic might in fact exercise. While Tadic said he couldn't control Dodik, he did benefit from the hope Washington invested in his potential to do so. In the end, American policymakers were vocal about feeling shortchanged. While crediting Tadic with high-visibility, symbolic acts aimed at assuaging wartime grievances, their view was that he never really tried to affect Dodik's policies. Like their European counterparts, American officials admit that Kosovo has absorbed most of their now-limited attention to the region, leaving BiH far from the top of the US agenda in its dealings with Belgrade. The US views Croatia's recent involvement in BiH in a more benign light than that of Serbia. But the participation of Josipovic's office in the Federation government crisis of early 2011 was widely regretted. The US also told



Zagreb that Foreign Minister Pusic's early pronouncement suggesting a five-region BiH with three ethnic-majority units was unhelpful. But Zagreb has latterly been seen as having made a number of positive gestures since, as well as withdrawing from BiH's political arena, focusing on the immediate concerns of EU entry. In Washington's discussions with the Zagreb authorities on BiH, the latter's support for "legitimate Croats" still is raised, but most time is spent on practical issues relating to trade. Most US officials interviewed appear relatively unconcerned about outstanding bilateral disputes between Croatia and BiH, though others point to the potentially massive losses that could accrue to BiH's economy if trade-access issues remain unresolved.

Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu has led a high-profile effort to employ Turkey's rising global economic and political clout to foster improved bilateral and intra-regional ties in

the western Balkans, and specifically between BiH and its larger neighbors. It has aimed to foster region-wide processes through the Southeast Europe Cooperation Process, but this has been resisted from within the region and in the EU. In 2009, Ankara launched two trilateral processes including BiH and Turkey, first with Serbia, and then with Croatia. Several bilateral issues between Serbia and BiH were addressed as a result of these efforts. But Ankara devised the process aiming to build trust, not to resolve all outstanding bilateral issues. While Turkey aims to pursue the trilateral processes with both Serbia and Croatia, they are presently stalled. Since Turkey sees Serbia as the geopolitical core of the region, its relationship with Belgrade is paramount. It does not raise the issue of Kosovo's independence, which it otherwise strongly supports, with Belgrade. Nor does it discuss problems in BiH with Serbia; it prefers to deal with these directly in BiH through the mechanisms provided to the international community by Dayton.

The Right Incentives

Despite years of international calls for regional reconciliation and cooperation among the main combatants of 1991-95, there remains no integrated Western - and specifically no EU - policy to propel these processes forward. This includes an absence of political coordination both within the EU and with the other key international players, as well as the fact that the West's Kosovo-Serbia and Bosnia policies are not coordinated or mutually reinforcing. For this reason, Croatia and Serbia both have numerous unresolved bilateral disputes with BiH, including those involving territory and property ownership. The hopes entertained by Western officials that the neighbors would help them fix the multiple ills afflicting Bosnia must by now have been dashed. Nevertheless, the neighbors could still play a constructive role if given the right incentives. This depends largely on whether the West develops a coherent joint policy to contend with BiH realities. The fact that Croatia and Serbia are now directly re-engaged in BiH makes it likely that if something goes badly wrong in Bosnia, there is a serious risk that they will become a part of it, instead of helping to contain it. The good news is that this dynamic can be remedied by reasonable policy adjustments and manifest political will on the part of the EU and other Western powers, particularly the US and Turkey. Simply put, both Zagreb and Belgrade need to be made to understand that they have much to lose by not being constructive.