



Bosnia and Herzegovina: back on an EU track?

by Eva Gross

The 23 February vote by the Bosnian Parliament in favour of the government's reform agenda has paved the way for the entry into force of an EU Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA). Placing the prospect of EU membership back on Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH) political agenda will thus – it is hoped – kick-start domestic reforms and help break the political deadlock that has all but stalled progress towards EU accession.

Political hurdles...

Two decades after the Dayton Peace Agreement, Bosnian politics remains paralysed, with political elites uninterested in cooperating or unwilling to undertake reforms which would make the central government more effective. An increasingly fragile regional security setting, economic decline and the shortage of discernible benefits for Bosnian citizens have placed the country on an unstable path. Moreover, European integration has all but disappeared from the domestic political agenda.

In recognition of the potential fresh political momentum generated by both the Dayton anniversary and the October 2014 elections, an initiative led by Germany and the UK sought to (re)gain EU leverage in BiH. The SAA would come into force (the agreement had been ratified in 2008) in exchange for a written commitment for continued support for European integration – instead of the

implementation of reforms as foreseen in the accession process. The initiative, which sought to remove an initial hurdle in order to enable future progress, was 'Europeanised' at the December 2014 European Council, where it was adopted.

The 2014 elections reinforced the impression of political deadlock. Although the election was conducted smoothly, the formation of a government was delayed until February 2015 – and with it the signing of the agreement by the Bosnian presidency and Parliament. Earlier versions of the pledge for reforms also had to be redrafted after having been rejected by Milorad Dodik, president of the Republika Srpska.

With Russian influence having become increasingly pronounced in the region, problems regarding political patronage and the divisive nature of national politics have recently taken on a distinctly regional if not geopolitical dimension. This applies in particular to the Republika Srpska, where Bosnian-Serb leader Dodik has spoken in favour of the right of Russian minorities in third countries to independence and the legality of the Russian annexation of Crimea. He also made overtures to Moscow in the run-up to the October elections. Talks over a referendum on secession and the possible merging with Serbia further suggest that processes of European integration and nation-state building can be mutually exclusive – and have prevented the emergence of a European position in BiH as a whole.

...societal enablers...

Against this background, the European approach has sought to circumvent the political leadership by appealing to broader societal forces. Stagnating growth, particularly in the aftermath of the 2014 floods, and an unemployment rate of just over 43% mean that the country's 3.8 million people are facing bleak economic prospects. Civil unrest in February 2014 crossed ethnic divides and focused on the poor socio-economic conditions, with demonstrators carrying slogans such as 'we are hungry in three languages'.

This swell of discontent indicates that investing in a bottom-up agenda involving civil society could help reverse the lack of government accountability to its citizens. Public pressure was previously applied to the government over the issue of visa liberalisation, an episode which further suggested that civil society could create a potential incentive for the Bosnian leadership to take action.

...and security concerns

The entry into force of the SAA may encourage domestic reforms, but concerns over stability remain. While there are signs of political maturity, particularly during the election campaign (though there were some exceptions), future violent clashes similar to those seen in February 2014 cannot be ruled out. Another looming anniversary this year, the massacre at Srebrenica, will be another test of the country's commitment to inter-ethnic harmony (and reconciliation).

This forms part of the argument in support of a continued security presence through EUFOR Althea, the EU's longest-running military CSDP operation. Launched in 2004, its mission strength has been progressively reduced over the past decade and it now consists of some 600 personnel. An improved security situation and a focus on local ownership, which suggested the mission could be drawn down, stand in contrast with concerns over the need to maintain a buffer in the – however unlikely – event of violence.

The signalling power of the military and the operation's executive mandate act as a deterrent – and, in operational terms, a means to protect critical infrastructure such as airports and supply routes. In addition, EUFOR Althea makes an important contribution to security by training the Bosnian armed forces and guarding ammunition and surplus weapon sites.

Fears over extremist networks extend beyond the possibility of Bosnian citizens fighting in (and then returning from) Syria. The management, destruction and guarding of surplus ammunition and weapons caches has come into focus as well: the bullets used in the Paris attack on satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* were, for example, found to be of Bosnian origin. Existing sites need to be secured, but if military forces are kept on guard duty, their availability to receive training is limited. It also restricts their ability to deploy in other theatres as a means of supporting the country's integration and meaningfully contribute to Euro-Atlantic security structures and operations.

Finally, given EUFOR Althea's UN Security Council mandate and Russia's abstention last year on a vote over the mission's 12-month extension, continuing with the operation seems to be a sensible course of action. After all, the configuration of any future follow-up mission might not meet with the approval of all members of the Security Council, particularly in light of the current strained relations.

Moving forward

While the aim of the entry into force of the SAA is designed to place the EU back on BiH's agenda, it also places Sarajevo back on that of the EU. A renewed push for enlargement (and conflict resolution) stems from two arguments: that the EU cannot allow countries in the region to stall politically given the current socio-economic and now also geopolitical climate; and that Brussels has an opportunity to capitalise on the success of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and draw the Western Balkans – even the 'hard cases' – back into its orbit.

The SAA represents an opportunity for HR/VP Mogherini and Commissioner Hahn to continue their approach of combining diplomatic, economic, and administrative instruments to bring BiH closer to eventual EU membership. Parallel member state initiatives lend additional support: the renewed efforts towards BiH, in particular, are a follow-up to the 2013 Balkans conference in Berlin that sought to keep the region on European political and economic agendas. That conference marked the beginning of a multi-annual process to support EU activities in the Western Balkans, with Austria hosting a related conference this August and the UK set to do so in 2016.

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