

Adnan Rondić *

15 years after Dayton: What will become of Bosnia and Herzegovina?

The beginning of the election year in Bosnia and Herzegovina was rather tumultuous. The events which took place on the first two days of March, the opening of the trial of Radovan Karadžić and the arrest of the member of the Bosnian wartime government Ejup Ganić in London, once again confirmed the whole range of differences in political views in B&H as well as the existence of at least four public opinions in this country. The reactions to the events vary, depending on the part of the country or the people. The events show what might happen in the following seven and a half months prior to the parliamentary elections in the country and because they occurred on Bosnian Independence Day, they provoked a feeling of uneasiness among Bosnian citizens who described them as reliving the pre-war situation 18 years ago.

So, what is going on in B&H at the moment? In short:

- B&H is probably the only country in the world whose constitution is an integral part of peace accords which ended a war;
- It is the only former Yugoslav republic (apart from Kosovo) still under the protectorate of the International Community;
- It is the only country which emerged following the break-up of former Yugoslavia whose citizens still do not enjoy the benefits of a visa-free regime for the EU;
- Of all Western Balkan countries, B&H fares worst in terms of Euro-Atlantic integration;
- After the Serbian parliament will have adopted the Resolution on Srebrenica, B&H will remain the only country in the region and one of the rare European countries where the members of the national parliament failed to reach an agreement not only on the content of a similar resolution, but, also on the whole purpose of its adoption, ignoring the official position of the European Parliament regarding this issue.

The order of the five issues mentioned does not really matter since each of them is important in its own way and paints a realistic picture of the current situation in B&H. This state of affairs has been caused by various internal and external factors:

Firstly, there is the political organisation of the country, the numerous discriminatory clauses of the constitution, the weak political structure of the state, the domination of the principle of ethnicity in the decision-making process, the burdens of the war-torn past, the war crimes and

* Adnan Rondić is a journalist at NTV HAYAT, Sarajevo.

the genocide committed in Srebrenica, the fact that society and public are divided along ethnic lines and that there is virtually no civil society.

Secondly, the International Community lacks a clearly defined strategy for B&H and, in a way, it treats the country as a laboratory, which was once more demonstrated by the failure of the political negotiations held at the Butmir military base in autumn 2009.

Thirdly, it is obvious that throughout the 15 years of its existence Bosnia lacked a uniform voice in its relationship with the International Community, but on the other hand it is also true that Brussels does not send a uniform message to Bosnia either. There is not much more than lacklustre support of some EU member states for Bosnia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

Election year

As mentioned earlier, 2010 is an election year and it is already obvious that the political campaign will once again be dominated by nationalist and populist rhetoric. It has become clear that local politicians will not be able or even show the willingness to change the constitution in accordance with the ruling by the European Court of Human Rights. This ruling was a topic of discussion only for a few days following its announcement. Some politicians, mostly those coming from Sarajevo-based parties, showed interest in the implementation of the court's ruling, which would allow the election law to be amended in due time. In the Republika Srpska, representatives of Milorad Dodik's party generally pointed out that there would be no time for creating conditions to implement the ruling before the coming elections. Therefore, the ruling is mostly discussed without proposing any concrete action aimed at its implementation. It seems that there will be no special talks on the crucial constitutional changes and how to bring them about. The majority of the ruling and opposition parties are opposed to constitutional changes. The leader of the SDA party, Sulejman Tihić, thinks that, after missed opportunities regarding the "April Package", real opportunities offered by the "Prud Agreement"¹ and great opportunities represented by the "Butmir Process", further discussions on the constitutional changes are unnecessary and that they should be the concern of the winners of the upcoming elections. Željko Komšić, a member of the Bosnian government and a high-ranking official of the opposition party SDP, also opposes adopting constitutional changes in this year because of their potential misuse during the election campaign as a means of providing incomplete solutions and as a means to gain votes. Recently, parties of the Croatian population group expressed their scepticism towards the adoption of any kind of constitutional changes in the pre-election period. Even the Spanish EU presidency's initiative aimed at organising a meeting of the ruling coalition's leaders was cautiously rejected. Milorad Dodik, the prime minister of the Republika Srpska claims that everything functions well in B&H and that these constitutional changes are unnecessary for the Republika Srpska. Even though he hasn't mentioned the referendum (on the Republika Srpska's independence from B&H) in the last few weeks, he still thinks that there is nothing wrong with using the referendum as an opportunity for the RS citizens to voice their opinion on the constitutional changes or Bosnia's accession to NATO. In the last few months the issue of the referendum regardless of whether it will actually take place shifted the focus from the key problems in the country to itself, intensified nationalist rhetoric and incited fear. It can be said that, without denying its importance, the issue of a referendum also proved useful for politicians in Sarajevo, who used it as an excuse for their lack of inventiveness and political vision.

¹ The **Prud Agreement** created by Sulejman Tihić (SDA), Dragan Čović (HDZ BiH) and Milorad Dodik (SNSD) in Prud on 8 November 2008 pertains to state property, census, constitutional changes, reconstructing the Council of Ministers and solving the legal status of the Brčko District.

Recent announcements that a visa-free regime for B&H citizens will not be introduced by the mid-year, despite the fact that all conditions for inclusion in the Schengen White List have been met, are only going to lead to greater frustration. This frustration might cause new fears among the local population, who could decide to once again vote for the politicians whose political platforms are based on fear-mongering.

Other difficulties

Besides, we should not forget the regional context and its influence on B&H. The relations between Bosnia and Serbia continue to be strained, although some improvements were made with the help of the Turkish Foreign Minister's shuttle diplomacy with - inter alia - as result an agreement on a Bosnian ambassador to Serbia after many years of deadlock. Still, the relations between the two countries continue to be plagued by issues like the current debates in the Serbian parliament on the Resolution on the Srebrenica genocide, the slow process of confronting the Serbian public with the role their country played in the Bosnian war, the flirtation with the Republika Srpska and the deliberate use of Milorad Dodik as Serbian "pawn" in the relationship between Belgrade and Sarajevo. Despite the fact that the government in Sarajevo is not free of responsibility for the poor condition of these relations, the key to their normalisation remains in the hands of the Serbian authorities.

Another difficulty is the fact that in Bosnia and Herzegovina, there are at least four public opinions: Bosniak, Serb, Croatian and the so-called "civil" public opinion, the one defining itself as "Bosnian-Herzegovinian", all of which makes the situation of the media in B&H very interesting. There are three public service broadcasters, many private-owned media, media in the service of political interests or acting as their integral part as well as media suffering political or economic pressure. Journalists have been attacked on various grounds and the relationship among journalists and the media are strained and often troubled, which further complicates the situation in the election year.

Finally, it goes without saying that the B&H's economic situation is difficult. The petty schemes surrounding the IMF standby loan are still based on hot/cold game principles. Grey market, high unemployment rate, corruption, privatisation irregularities are terms we have heard all too often in the last 15 years. Still, mass social protests are non-existent, probably due to the fact that the Bosnian Diaspora has bought social peace by "injecting" 3.2 billion KM into Bosnian bank accounts each year. Of course, Bosnia is also home to some positive developments and successful individuals: young specialists educated in B&H and abroad, successful businessmen, great film directors, Oscar and Golden Bear winners, an excellent national football team, natural resources and beauty. Also, public opinion surveys show the undivided support of B&H citizens for their country's integration into the EU and the upholding of what we define as European values. As one Sarajevo intellectual wittily put it: "We are doomed, but we shall not fail".