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Republika Srpska as the spoils of war that Serbia will not give up

Sonja Biserko

Republika Srpska is the spoils of war that Serbia will not give up easily. The survival of Republika Srpska is the priority in the security strategy of Serbia. Without solving the Bosnian issue, the stability of the Balkans will remain questionable, says Sonja Biserko.

The 25th anniversary of the Dayton Accords is a reason for one more look at the “unfinished job” in the Balkans. The Yugoslav crisis was not the crisis of the periphery but rather the announcement of trends that are now visible to the entire world. This is why it is important to learn here lessons for the future.

Although the Dayton Accords, as everyone points out, had a function in achieving the peace, it remains omnipresent in the political life of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region because it has left room for numerous doubts that directly concern the structure of the agreement itself.

The West expects Bosnians to take action on their own and bring to the fore the civic option that would, in itself, lead to change. While there were those kinds of attempts, all of them were thwarted because in such situations local elites cooperate together and prevent the constitution of a civic Bosnia.

Axis Belgrade-Banja Luka-Podgorica-Kosovska Mitrovica

Not the unpreparedness of Bosnia to move within itself, but the unpreparedness of the international community to act since 2006 within the available framework feeds the nationalisms, especially the Serbian one. Serbia has not closed the Serbian issue. The leading Serbian elite believe that it will be closed only by “Serbian liberation” and state unification, not by joining Euro-Atlantic integrations or some surrogate creation, such as the so-called “Region” or some EU-goslavia that is advocated by Timothy Les (former British diplomat who ran the office of the British Embassy in Banja Luka).

This fixation of Belgrade on the completion of, as they now say, the “Serbian world”, i.e., the axis Belgrade-Banja Luka-Podgorica-Kosovska Mitrovica, is greatly reinforced by the very fluid international context as well as the political vacuum that appeared in the Balkans. The dominant interpretation of international circumstances is Serbia

must not miss this historic opportunity that has arisen.

These expectations are reflected in its foreign policy. Belgrade is trying to play within its policy of “neutrality,” in that empty space that no one covers. President Vučić, who is the true bearer of foreign policy, is trying to move within the frames of the previously designed policy based on “four pillars” (China, Russia, USA and the EU) and to use all of their different interests.

Serbia as a destabilizing factor

The key component of Serbia’s foreign policy is hypocrisy. Even though it claims to aspire towards EU membership and closer relations with NATO, Serbia seeks to balance relations with these four foreign forces, assuming that it will benefit from each one: diplomatically, economically, and militarily. In that sense, it skillfully uses the legacy of non-alignment especially when it comes to recognition of Kosovo.

The Washington agreement on economic normalization of Serbia and Kosovo, which was signed by Vučić and Hoti in the presence of Trump, in September 2020, raised doubts in terms of Serbia’s orientation, which until recently was more oriented towards Russia and China. Serbia has gotten itself into a complicated geopolitical game. It is about the geopolitical victory of America because the “agreement,” as Trump’s mediator Richard Grenel pointed out, “distances Serbia from both Russia and China”. However, the influence of China and Russia should not be underestimated, considering that both of them are already deeply in Serbia. Russia has expressed dissatisfaction with the agreement, while China has refrained from public reactions.

This policy of Serbia has a strong influence on relations in the region, because it acts as a destabilizing factor which through Serbian communities in all neighbouring countries prevents their countries’ integration and consolidation. Belgrade assumes that it has established good “diplomatic relations with all centers of the power in the world” and thus gained a geostrategic benefit. Over the last four years Belgrade has successfully penetrated Trump’s administration, which has encouraged it to strengthen its disruptive presence, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Kosovo, to the extent that it has opened a possibility of recomposition of the Balkans.

A well-thought-out strategy that the Serbian elite is working on in all domains

That is not a new approach of Belgrade. Serbia is probably the only country in the region that has a very thoughtful strategy that the dominant Serbian elite is working on in all domains. That implies, above all, an enormous intellectual energy in the reinterpretation of the nineties, that comes down to the fact that Serbs did not “act strategically, but instinctively, driven by self-preservation.” They have now, however, succeeded in “opening the Serbian issue.”

Serbia’s state policy has not changed in relation to the region after the departure of Slobodan Milošević. Other means are now being applied, and they are strongly applied in the context of current events in the West-Islamic world, especially when it comes to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. Still, like 30 years ago, the offer to recompose the Balkans along the ethnic borders emerges from the circles of national ideologues.

RS- spoils of war that will not be easily given up

In order to understand Serbia's behavior, its geostrategic interests, as defined by Serbian elites, should be taken into account. Those interests are state-owned, and it is secondary which option is currently in power. They differ only in method, but the essence is the same. The current government has completely exposed that strategy and in a way opened everyone's eyes, both neighbors and West. The internationally fluid context has encouraged the current government to make harsher moves and engage in more rhetorical and reckless behavior, both domestically, regionally, and internationally.

That policy also includes numerous strategic government documents such as the Strategy for Preserving and Strengthening the Relations between the Mother state and the Diaspora and the Mother state and Serbs in the region (2011) and the Charter on the Serbian Cultural Space (2019). When it comes to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republika Srpska is the spoils of war that will not be easily given up. Even in the security strategy (2019), the survival of the Republika Srpska is treated as a priority. However, without resolving the Bosnian issue, the stability of the Balkans will remain questionable.

Serbia's geopolitical interest in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the preservation of Republika Srpska and its annexation to Serbia. It is geopolitically important for Serbia because of the geopolitical pressure on Montenegro and the exit to the Adriatic (which is more than obvious during the last two months), preventing the neo-Ottoman project, occupying the other bank of the Drina and moving the "civilization border" to the West, which increases Serbian influence. Achieving goals by other means in peacetime means accepting the Dayton agreement as the optimal solution in the given circumstances.

Substantial national interests of Serbia subordinated to the independence of RS from BiH

Republika Srpska is treated as a state in Serbia, as a new fact that emerged in the function of defending the constituency of the Serbian people and which is internationally verified by the Dayton agreement. The disintegration of Bosnia and Herzegovina, that is, the independence of RS is a state goal to which both EU membership and the essential national interests of Serbia itself are subordinated. Therefore, as nationalists think, Serbia's fateful attachment to European integration would tie Serbia's hands to help maintain Republika Srpska.

Such a hierarchy of priorities determines Serbia's behaviour towards Bosnia and Herzegovina. 1990s events and their interpretation of a war of liberation and, according to Dobrica Ćosić, as a "defense of freedom and truth and national rights in Republika Srpska"- remain the main obstacle in removing the essence of Bosnia and Herzegovina's state consolidation as well as normalizing relations between the two countries.

Manipulations of historical facts cemented the interpretation of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Unfortunately, manipulations of historical facts in Serbia have already cemented the interpretation of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina which is the opposite to the historical truth. And that despite the fact that the Hague Tribunal passed the most verdicts precisely on the occasion of the crimes committed against the Bosniaks.

Ignoring the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY/MKSJ) and all of the gathered and documented evidence about the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina further complicates relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially relations between Serbs and Bosniaks. That is very dangerous and harmful, not only for the consolidation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also for the democratic progress and the European future of Serbia.

Belgrade blames Western powers, primarily the USA, Germany and Great Britain for the disintegration of Yugoslavia, emphasizing their goal is the total “capitulation of Serbs”. All of the previous offers for resolving the crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which came primarily from the EU, were welcomed without enthusiasm, because Vučić and the dominant elite have never been offered, as Vučić said, “compensation,” that implies “returning all the competencies to Republika Srpska” that were taken away from it, i.e., the reaffirmation of the original Dayton principles. Because, as it is pointed out, the survival of Bosnia and Herzegovina is possible only with “as the confederation of the two entities is intended.”

Biden’s victory upset Belgrade

Joe Biden’s victory has upset Belgrade because a change of the course towards the Balkans is expected and Biden is one of the few Western politicians who has good insight into the 1990’s. He made very precise statements about that, especially about the aggression of Serbs on Bosnia, genocide, and ethnic cleaning. There are numerous indications that Biden, together with the EU, will act in a coordinated manner in the Balkans, which has significantly increased expectations in the region. The EU is already inviting the USA to form a new alliance in order to oppose the “authoritarian forces” together. Now is the right time to make that breakthrough.

In that sense, it is encouraging that in the Congress (8.12.2020) one could hear what is recommended to the new administration when it comes to the Balkans. The Serbian media reacted immediately, declaring all speakers to be Serb-haters, while president Vučić stated that he expects even more pressure on Serbia, noting as well that he would “win the Nobel prize if he signed the act of independence of Kosovo.”

In order for Bosnia to become a functional state, it is necessary, above all, to put an end to the change of the borders and to block the influence of both Serbia and Croatia. The two-century imperialism of Serbia is especially dangerous. By reaffirming the existing borders with the firm guarantee of the international community, it is possible to remove malignant influence of all claims, especially the Serbian ones, and only then can it be expected for the three peoples in Bosnia to turn to their own agenda. This implies the establishment of a state identity, because without that there is room for distintegrating trends. To begin with, EUFOR in Bosnia needs to be strengthened in order to prevent the conflicts for which there is great potential.

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