



The elasticity of the integration process: Does the European Union Delegation in BiH support revanchist nationalist tendencies blocking the EU integration path?

Reaction: EU Ambassador Sattler statement on Čović (29/4/2020)

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The Head of the EU Delegation to BiH and EU Special Representative Ambassador Johann Sattler held a meeting with Dragan Čović in Mostar, on April 29 2020. Ambassador Sattler commented to the media that Mr. Čović was “one of the champions of European integration, for which I thank him”¹. We express our deep concern over this statement, emphasizing the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina indeed has a championship in EU integration, however not a positive one. Many years of stagnation in all 14 priorities determined by the opinion of the European Commission², as well as the degradation of rights, and the disintegration of the state as such, are certainly no reasons for gratitude.

It is important to emphasize here the difference between active participation and true dedication to a successful process of EU integration in BiH. Thus far, BiH political leaders have not demonstrated substantial progress in fulfilling the integration’s requirements, nor in joint efforts of prioritizing EU integration and putting it before particular ethnic interests. In case of Mr. Čović and the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ BiH), it is necessary to keep in mind the type of EU-BiH perspective they advocate for, as well what their policies imply for BiH. Only in the course of last year (and these types of policies have been present for a long time), Čović’s political agenda was marked by: an electoral law proposal which would lead to the establishment of ethnic majority electoral units³ and further internal division of BiH into ethnic enclaves; demands for removing foreign judges from the Constitutional Court⁴ and blocking the work of state institutions;⁵ continuously calling upon the legacy of Herceg-Bosna as the cornerstone for Croats in BiH⁶.

In the meantime, the European Court of Human Rights has ruled in 2019 that BiH must amend the country’s electoral law to allow the first local election to be held in Mostar after 11 years⁷. A lack of progress in terms of implementing ECHR rulings, as well as the promotion of very restrictive ethnic principles, has led to a marginalisation of constitutional reforms. This certainly cannot be seen as a promotion of EU integration as it doesn’t contribute to the successful functioning of the state in and of itself, nor its EU path. Instead of building a state, retrograde policies condition its functioning on ethnic principles, thus institutionalizing divisions.

1 Sattler u Mostaru: Znamo da je Čović šampion evropskih integracija:

<https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/sattler-u-mostaru-znamo-da-je-covic-sampion-evropskih-integracija/200429110>.

2 Commission Opinion on Bosnia and Herzegovina’s application for membership of the European Union:

<http://europa.ba/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/20190529-bosnia-and-herzegovina-opinion.pdf>

3 HDZ’s proposal would isolate Croats living in Bosniak-majority cantons, as they would not be able to vote. The demand for a third electoral unit would be a step towards creating a third, Croat entity – not necessarily in formal terms, but this would certainly create an ethnic Croatian space.

4 According to the Constitution, which is part of the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement, the Constitutional Court is composed of nine judges – two Bosniaks, two Croats, two Serbs, and three international judges.

5 Čović stated: „Bosnia can not be considered a ‘protectorate’ if it wants to integrate into the EU”.

6 Dragan Čović: Uvezimo sve ono što nosi ime Herceg-Bosna:

<https://radiosarajevo.ba/vijesti/bosna-i-hercegovina/dragan-covic-uvezimo-sve-ono-sto-nosi-ime-herceg-bosna/331674>

7 Case BARALIJA v. BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA (Application no. 30100/18): [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{"itemid":\["001-197215"\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{)



Croatian representatives of the ruling HDZ party have joined forces with their Bosnian party colleagues in an attempt to publicly rehabilitate the para-state of Herceg-Bosna, which existed between 1992 and 1996 and has been classified as a “criminal enterprise” by the International Criminal Tribunal of the former-Yugoslavia (ICTY). Herceg-Bosna’s six top political and military officials were sentenced by the Trial Chamber of The Hague-based ICTY in 2013 to a combined 111 years for war crimes committed against Bosniak civilians. However, HDZ’s and Čović’s policies have never deviated from Herceg-Bosna – on the contrary, this para-state is being openly glorified by means of displaying its flags in all HDZ-dominated communities, while sentenced war criminals who had comprised a criminal enterprise, are presented as heroes.⁸

Apart from non-compliance with verdicts on crimes from the previous war, HDZ’s policies are also drawn from revisionist tendencies concerning World War II and fascism, in which the church also plays an active role. The most recent example is the Bleiburg commemoration⁹ announced in form of a religious service in Sarajevo. The commemoration at Bleiburg is organized by the Honorary Bleiburg Platoon, an organization which has never distanced itself from the Ustasha ideology and regime. The fact that church representatives participate in such commemorations and politically abuse religious services is cause for grave concern.

In 2018, Mostar’s restored Partisan Memorial Cemetery has been opened on Victory Day/Europe Day during a ceremony attended by state officials and the EU Special Representative, in their support to restoration of this antifascist monument. In 2020, on the anniversary of the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia, the monument was again destroyed. This act was accompanied by graffiti of swastikas and Ustasha symbols, at the very same location where the EU delegation’s recent celebration of Europe Day took place. Even on a symbolic level, the politics of HDZ shows how their attitude towards the EU is always polite narratives and what is expected to hear, in opposite to their destructive actions for BiH.

Political stances and positions of Croats in BiH are mainly supported by the Croatian HDZ party, thus actively involved in internal BiH state processes.¹⁰ This further contributes to divergent policies in BiH, also strengthening the revisionist and separatist narrative from the outside, using EU channels as well.¹¹ Revisionist policies gravely undermine the EU, and WWII and Holocaust remembrance policy. The EU should not be a bystander or supporter of this practice, considering not only the stability of the region but also the consequences of potential marginalisation of Western Balkan countries.

(Dis)integration here should not be awarded nor encouraged. HDZ and Čović’s policies represent one of the major obstacles to BiH becoming a functional state, overcoming ethnic divisions, and facing past crimes – therefore, they hamper the peace process. This state requires a strong leadership with regard to EU integrations, but one that will be based on national (state) interest, preservation of democracy, sovereignty and true acceptance of EU values.

⁸ At the Fourth Assembly of the Croatian Community of Herceg-Bosna in 2019, Čović first greeted “the founders of the Croatian Community of Herceg-Bosna, i.e. the Croatian Republic of Herceg-Bosna, generals, war commanders and priests.”

⁹ Bleiburg commemoration, which commemorates the killings of Croatian Nazi collaboration troops and civilians at the end of World War II, in recent years openly involved symbols of the WWII fascist Ustasha movement.

¹⁰ Western Balkan 6 Strategy Group – for an effective EU-enlargement policy:
https://rs.boell.org/sites/default/files/2019-12/HBS_WBS%20group_paper%20design_final_digital.pdf

¹¹ Schwarz-Schilling: Hrvatska mora prestat s nacionalističkom politikom:
<https://www.jutarnji.hr/globus/Globus-politika/schwarz-schilling-hrvatska-mora-prestat-s-nacionalistikom-politikom-takva-politika-jako-podsjeća-na-onu-s-pocetka-90-ih-godina-kada-je-zapoceo-rat/8204195/>

The “Strategy Group for a political, societal and economic European integration of the Western Balkans Six” is a group of legal, historical and political researches from all WB6 countries organized by Heinrich Böll Stiftung’s Belgrade, Sarajevo and Berlin offices. Its aim is to credibly advocate for a more effective European integration of the Balkans in European as well as Balkan capitals.

More information: <https://rs.boell.org/en/western-balkans-strategy-group>

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