

No time to wind-down in Bosnia

Sofia Sebastian

»» In May 2009 a crisis emerged in Bosnia when nationalist leader Milorad Dodik passed a resolution in the Republika Srpska parliament designed to undermine some of the key accomplishments of the state building process in place since the end of the war in 1995. Although the crisis was eventually averted, it demonstrated again the highly volatile nature of Bosnian politics and the challenges faced by an international community that has grown impatient, frustrated and increasingly unsure how to resolve the Bosnian quagmire.

The country continues to show no clear signs of reconciliation and there is a lack of commitment to the process of EU accession. Most key reforms to date have either been directly imposed by the High Representative (HR), or have been accepted only after intensive pressure from the international community. Different political actors still hold mutually incompatible ideas about what the state should look like, and have not hesitated to raise the level of nationalist rhetoric in order to shore up support within their own ethnic groups. In June 2009 the EU expressed concern at 'the unconstructive political atmosphere'.

In the midst of this instability, the international community has begun to retreat. Discussions continue regarding the closure of the Office of the High Representative (OHR). Various embassies and development agencies have discontinued operations or are making preparations to do so within the year. The EU's strategy in Bosnia continues to falter in light of the same internal divisions, indecision and resort to ad hoc quick fixes that have ensured failure in the past.

HIGHLIGHTS

- The EU remains divided and unable to design a strategy that meets Bosnia's upcoming challenges, including the imminent international withdrawal.
- The EU's strategy in the Balkans has revolved around Serbia and Kosovo, and has neglected pressing priorities in Bosnia.
- The US has intensified its presence in the region, unsatisfied with the EU's approach and lack of leadership.
- The EU needs carefully to craft a strategy that addresses three key realities: the situation on the ground; the regional picture; and the broader international community, where the US remains a key player.

»»»»» **DIVISIONS AND INDECISIVENESS**

On 31 October 2008, EU Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn and EU Foreign Policy High Representative Javier Solana sent a letter to EU foreign ministers calling for a revamped Bosnia strategy. The letter noted that the signing of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) had not prevented ‘a deterioration of the political situation’ in Bosnia, and demanded a tailor-made strategy, along with a stronger international engagement, to promote the reform process in Bosnia.

But the EU has shown no signs of developing a cohesive strategy. On the contrary, the EU’s agenda seems to be focused on dismantling the OHR and withdrawing the EUFOR mission at the earliest opportunity, irrespective of the conditions on the ground and in the absence of a detailed plan for the post-OHR era. Plans for a strengthened EU Special Representative (EUSR) presence in Bosnia were launched two years ago, when an international withdrawal was intimated. However, there has been no follow-through. Thus far, a physical transition is the only tangible step that has been taken: EUSR officials have moved to a new building in Sarajevo with Commission officials, all of whom will eventually be led by a double-hatted European diplomat with a Commission official second in command.

The strategic plan is lagging at a time when the EU’s leadership is most needed. The main point of contention is the nature and scope of the powers of a ‘strengthened EUSR’. Some European countries seem reluctant to have a EUSR with special powers, given that the EU’s insistence on closing the OHR is based upon the idea that Bosnia should negotiate on an equal basis with the EU. Other countries recognise the need for some form of ‘extraordinary powers’, to be used only in cases of urgent necessity – such as the threat of secession.

Divisiveness and lack of resolution continue to haunt Europe, further damaging its image in

Bosnia. The crisis in May and June represented a high water mark for these divisions, with schisms developing not only between member states, but also between European officials on the ground and in Brussels. The situation became serious when a rift erupted between newly appointed EU representative Valentin Inzko and Javier Solana. While Inzko was resolved to use the Bonn powers with respect to Dodik’s inflammatory resolution, Solana and most European member states lobbied forcefully against their use. This crisis was resolved when Inzko prevailed and, supported by the US and UK, brought the Bonn powers to bear. In public Solana expressed support for Inzko’s decision, but the damage had already been done. The rift became public knowledge, exposing a deeply divided European leadership. Developments of this nature are particularly damaging in a context where domestic politicians are prone to buck-passing and leveraging international fissures to avoid political accountability.

The May-June crisis also exposed the lack of an EU strategic vision. The European approach in Bosnia continues to be based on the illusion that European integration will eventually overcome group divisions and serve to stabilise the country. While politicians have expressed support for EU accession on numerous occasions, ethnic power games have served them better; especially in light of the lack of immediate and visible EU benefits. The political nature of European conditionality has also done a disservice to the potential leverage of the EU’s carrots and sticks. A bad precedent was set with the restructuring of the police force. The EU set a very ambitious agenda in 2003, but ultimately accepted a watered-down agreement five years later, in order to unblock the reform process. This example demonstrated two important lessons for Bosnian politicians; namely that conditionality can be overcome and that political obstruction may be rewarded at the end of the day. The experience also yielded a more risk-averse EU.

The result is a Bosnian population that has grown increasingly sceptical about the positive benefits of the EU. A survey conducted by

Gallup Balkan Monitor in June 2009 showed that the Bosnian populace is the most pessimistic in the region and they do not expect their country to join the EU until 2020. One out of six Bosnians think that Bosnia will never join the Union. Support for the EU accession project has drastically decreased in the last two years. While 65 percent of Bosnians thought positively about the EU in 2007, this figure has dropped to 48 percent in 2009.

The EU has failed to play its cards wisely. This is illustrated by the visa liberalisation initiative. On 15 July 2009 the European Commission

The EU's strategy in Bosnia continues to falter

recommended lifting visa requirements for Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, while Bosnia, Albania and Kosovo would have to wait until the technical requirements were fulfilled, probably requiring another year. This development had enormous repercussion in Bosnian politics. Because Serbs and Croats are entitled to Serbian and Croatian passports, in practice only Bosnian Muslims will be excluded from the visa liberalisation regime. Ultimately, the EU has been accused of ignoring the larger picture, discriminating against Muslims, and creating even greater divisions in the region.

Misplaced priorities have also undermined the EU's policy. The EU has devoted enormous resources and energy towards keeping Serbia on track - often to the detriment of other pressing concerns in the region. The EU has prioritised support for pro-EU forces in Serbia, while simultaneously moving forward with Kosovo's independence. It has subjugated other priorities in the region to the maintenance of this balance. This explains why the EU did not act more forcefully when Serbia's President, Boris Tadic, visited Republika Srpska in June and offered his support to the RS parliament in their dispute with the OHR. Understandably, there is a sense among some Bosnian politicians

that Serbia represents the only priority for the Union. This aggravates the increasingly rampant euro-scepticism in Bosnia.

THE US IS BACK

Following alarming reports of instability, and a sense of dissatisfaction with the EU's approach, the US has stepped up its presence in the area. Americans are concerned with 'unfinished business', and have made it clear that they are willing to engage further. US President Barak Obama singled out the Balkans at a US-EU summit in April, and warned that 'Europe should not forget the Western Balkans.' Deputy Assistant Secretary for European Affairs Stuart Jones also declared that the Balkans should expect 'a lot of US engagement.'

US re-engagement in the region could have both positive and negative effects in Bosnia. The US participation could bring a breath of fresh air to a stagnant reform process. It could also provide a stimulus to key actors, given that Americans are well known for taking a more forceful, hands-on approach. Furthermore, amongst many hardliners the Americans enjoy greater credibility than the Europeans in Bosnia. It is not uncommon to hear local politicians say that the US is the only actor capable of forging domestic consensus as the ultimate security guarantor.

The US engagement might not be a blessing for an unfocused EU however; or for the long-term reform process in Bosnia. There are several dangers. First, a more engaged US is likely to exacerbate divisions within the EU, with the UK especially likely to follow the US lead. Divisions within the international community are also likely to become more pervasive, given the differences in approach and divergent strategic interests in Bosnia. While the EU is pushing for the closure of the OHR at the earliest possible opportunity, the US wants to maintain the international envoy for as long as is necessary.

»»»»» Second, there may be significant temptation for the EU to take a back seat to the US. Finally, the historical US tendency to rely on exclusivist formulas involving only a few key stakeholders has proven ineffective and runs counter to the long-term stability of the country. Constitutional reform in 2006 was a prime example of this. While the failure of this process was largely the result of ethnic power games, the US-led initiative suffered a lack of democratic legitimacy and was constrained by tight deadlines. The lack of participation of key stakeholders led ultimately to an embittered political climate that resulted in a highly radicalised election campaign in 2006.

IN NEED OF A COHESIVE EU STRATEGY

The EU should stay focused on these issues and define a strategy that addresses three key realities: the situation on the ground; the regional picture; and the broader international community.

The EU's focus on OHR closure and its reluctance clearly to define the powers of an empowered EUSR stem from the basic premise that Bosnia needs to be on an equal footing with the EU. According to this line of thinking, a EUSR with 'extraordinary powers' represents a direct contradiction to local ownership. The EU needs to be realistic, however, and accept that Bosnia is a unique case. An invigorated EU presence, based upon this realisation, is urgently needed. Understanding the dangers of a polarised Bosnia is also critical. As UK shadow foreign Secretary William Hague stated recently, although an all-out war seems unlikely at the present time, 'violence is not far below the surface.'

Relying on the constellation of forces on the ground is also critical in the definition of this strategy. Ethnic power games have, in the past, jeopardised the EU's efforts to promote consensus. The current situation provides a rationale for both optimism and concern. The EU and

the US need carefully to craft a strategy that highlights the positive elements while working to de-emphasise the negative ones. On the positive side, radicalism seems to be receding, especially within the Bosniac group. Radical nationalists have lost ground to more moderate figures such as Sulejman Tihic.

The Serb camp continues to provide most reason for concern, and Serb leader Milorad Dodik maintains a strong hold. Significant opposition is emerging however, and Dodik could face some difficulties in upcoming elections. While the swell of moderate forces in RS is a positive sign, there is concern that Dodik may respond to these threats with enhanced nationalist rhetoric and political confrontation. The international community should take care to ensure that the conditions that led to the embittered and radicalised political campaign in 2006 are not replicated in 2010. They should work more effectively towards moderating the terms of the political debate.

The EU should also be mindful of regional interconnections. While securing Serbia's European path and addressing the numerous challenges in Kosovo are strategic priorities, the EU must not lose sight of the broader picture in the region. Further attention needs to be paid to secessionist forces in Bosnia and to the potential for instability in the region. Brussels must also avoid becoming a hostage of its own priorities. European incentives should be leveraged to encourage Serbia to control RS. It must be made clear that the EU will not accept Serbia's support of nationalist platforms in neighbouring RS. The Serbian economic situation is now deteriorating, providing a window of opportunity for the EU to press Serbia further in both Kosovo and Bosnia.

With respect to the broader international picture, the EU should embrace the US engagement, but continue leading the reform process. Taking a back seat at this juncture will be perceived negatively in the long-term. Without a willingness to take matters into its own hands,

the best the EU can do is to accept the existence of different international players on the ground, and make an effort to reconcile the various approaches. International divisions should and must be avoided at all costs. In reality, what Bosnia requires is a combination of the EU and US approaches, namely long-term engagement with a hands-on strategy.

As for the Bosnian authorities, they have two options: take responsibility for their actions or remain dysfunctional and unstable. Under the latter scenario, Western powers will eventually lose interest and Bosnia will disintegrate into the 'sink hole' of Europe. Both Bosnian and international authorities must act responsibly in order to straighten the European path in Bosnia

Sofia Sebastian is associate fellow at FRIDE.