



THE „BOSNIAN SPRING”: GEO-ECONOMICAL AND GEOPOLITICAL ASPECTS

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Abstract Starting from the protests which took place in Bosnia and Herzegovina at the beginning of the year 2014, we try to see in what measure these protests have an ethnic or a socio-economical reason. The analysis takes place in a tough regional context, Bosnia and Herzegovina being considered as one of the most affected Balkan states by the economical and financial crisis, having a weak-developed economy and strongly threatened by the accession of its most important commercial partner, Croatia, in the European Union.

Key words:

Geo-economics, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Geopolitics, Bosnian spring

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1. Introduction

The beginning of 2014 provoked some powerful emotions among the officials of the states from Balkans, but also among the representatives of the international community. A series of protests which started on 4th February, in the city Tuzla, from Bosnia and Herzegovina, expanded quickly in other urban centers of this country, threatening the extremely fragile stability of this state.

The causes which triggered these protests seem to be quite diverse. Among the claims most often heard from the protesters were counted:

- The high level of poverty;
- The high level of unemployment;
- The high level of corruption among the states institutions;
- The wrong approach used to privatize a series of big companies.

Taking in consideration the previous identified causes, we consider that is necessarily to analyze the particularities of so-called “Bosnian Spring”.

2. Methodology of research

From a methodological point of view, the analysis has as a main goal to treat in an objective and balanced way the geo-economical and geopolitical situation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was selected and studied a major bibliography content which was consisting on scientific books of some recognized authors of this domain, some of the them being involved directly at the top level of the international politics (counselors, former diplomats etc.), and also on scientific articles published in Romanian or foreign magazines, various debates

held at international conferences or published in various periodicals from this domain.

Along with these sources, were added information and data collected from the databases of some international institutes (Eurostat, OECD Statistics, Gallup Balkan Monitor), the census and the official reports elaborated by the national institutes of statistics, internet pages of the main press trusts from Balkans, of the non-governmental organizations preoccupied with the political, economical and social evolution of this space, official pages of the analyzed states institutions, field research (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia) or qualitative interviews with professors or researchers well-known in this field of area.

3. The „Bosnian Spring”

Nowadays, Bosnia and Herzegovina represents one of the least functional states of Europe. This aspect is proved by the fact that it is constantly nominated in the charts realized by various specialized magazines or research centers on topics which concern the level of internal stability of the states around the globe. According to *The Failed States Index*, made annually by the magazine Foreign Policy in collaboration with Fund for Peace organization, related to Balkan states, Bosnia and Herzegovina was placed constantly in the first position when it comes to vulnerability in front of geopolitical risks which can affect stability of this state. (Traub, 2010)

In 2007, when Bosnia and Herzegovina occupied the 60th place in this chart, the actual president of United States of America, Barrack Obama, stated that “the sixty countries which can’t control their borders and their territory and they can’t satisfy the basic necessities

of their nation, represent not only a moral dilemma, but also a challenge when it comes to security of the Occident". (Traub, 2010)

Even Nowadays, Bosnia and Herzegovina, is indisputable one of the most sensitive points of South-East Europe, the stability, the geo-economical and geopolitical evolution of the entire Balkan space, but also of the neighboring spaces, are depending a lot on the future of this state.

3.1. Geo-economical aspects

From an economical point of view, Bosnia and Herzegovina is facing a series of major problems. The financial and economical crisis, which appeared in the year 2008, struck powerfully the economy of this state, forcing it to request, in 2009, the help of International Monetary Fund in order to avoid a collapse of economical indicators. Subsequently, in the year 2012, the agreement with the International Monetary Fund was renewed.

In which concern the unemployment problem, the situation tends to become a dramatic one, in the context in which, according to the official statistics, no less than 44% of the population able to work, find themselves in the situation of not being hired. This extremely high percent is given by the lack of opportunities for youngsters but also by the high number of dismissed persons after the privatization of the big state companies.

Table 1. The countries of the former Yugoslavia. Unemployment rate – 2013

	Country	Unemployment rate (%)	Unemployment rate; youth ages 15-24 (%)
1	Bosnia and Herzegovina	44.1	62.8
2	Croatia	20.5	43.1
3	Kosovo	45.3	55.3
4	Macedonia	30.0	53.9
5	Montenegro	19.1	41.1
6	Serbia	27.7	51.1
7	Slovenia	12.4	20.6

Source: The World Factbook, 2013, CIA

Also, the economy of Bosnia and Herzegovina is getting slowed and undermined by the grey economy, many citizens of this country working without legal documents.

From an economical point of view, a strong rebound is expected in which concern the level of export of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This fact is caused directly by the integration of Croatia in European Union, from 1st July 2013. Croatia is the most important commercial partner of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the year 2012, 21.6% of

the import were coming from Croatia. In the same time, 16,6% of the export was making its way to the west neighbor.

Given that the products of Bosnian economy (no matter we refer to industrial or agricultural products) need to accomplish the European standards in order to enter on the Croatian market, it's foreseen a powerful decline of the commercial relations between these two states. Of course, a cause for these intense commercial exchanges was the geographical closeness between these two countries and also the number of Croatian in the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina (approximately 15%).

Table 2. Bosnia and Herzegovina. Commercial Partners – 2012

	Country	Exports (%)	Imports (%)
1	Slovenia	17.5	12.8
2	Croatia	16.6	21.9
3	Italy	13.7	9.3
4	Germany	12.9	13.0
5	Austria	12.8	6.3
6	Russia	-	7.6
7	Hungary	-	5.1

Source: The World Factbook, 2013, CIA

Another important aspect is given by the social tensions existing in Bosnia and Herzegovina and which are risking to be amplified by the recent inclusion of Croatia in European Union.

The fact that an important number of Bosnian Croats benefit from double citizenship, offers them a series of opportunities in comparison with the other citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina. They will be able to travel in the European space using the Croatian passport and, in the same time, they will have free access in the labor market from European Union.

Another dimension of the protests from Bosnia and Herzegovina from the beginning of year is given by the controversy related to the influence the ethnicity had on their apparition and development. Following the ethnical particularities which are present within this state, there is a tendency of easily labeling any event or protest movement as having ethnical causes. What can be highlighted in the case of protests from 2014 is the fact that these ones didn't have this character and the ethnic claims were almost non-existent.

Even though the most affected cities by the protests, were the ones from the Bosnia and Herzegovina Federation (territory inhabited mostly by Muslim and Croatian population), the claims were referring to socio-economical and political causes. We can say that the protests represented a popular movement against the

actual political class and its inability to work for the interests of the citizens.

3.2. Geopolitical aspects

Between 1992 and 1995, the territory of this state experienced the bloodiest civil war from Europe, after the World War II.

The harshness of the confrontations shocked a lot due to the period of time, because the fights occurred while the whole Europe was enjoying the euphoria after ending the Cold War, and optimistic theories about the future of liberal democracy and peace were promoted in all the corners of the world. Among these theories, "*The ending of history and of the last man*", launched by Francis Fukuyama, was coming with the strongest arguments for creating a future highlighted by cordial relationships between the future democracies which were rising up on the ruins of communists societies. (Fukumaya, 1992)

In contradiction with this theory, Samuel Huntington was the one who was pointing out the potential occurrence of some new types of conflicts, which will not be based on ideological reasons but ethnic and religious motives, highlighting on one of his famous maps the fact that boundaries between orthodox and catholic civilizations are crossing the territory of Yugoslavia. (Huntington, 1997)

More accurate, Bosnia and Herzegovina was split by this fracture, which was showing up its low measure of cohesion between the nationalities existing within its borders.

If we can associate Yugoslavia with a small European Union, we can also state that Bosnia and Herzegovina represented Yugoslavia in miniature. The decision of declaring the independence of Bosnia and Herzegovina (by the majorities formed from Croats and Muslims), after an referendum boycotted by Serbs, led to their withdrawal from the Parliament and to the appearance of a crisis which got worst in a short period of time, degenerating into a military confrontation.

The international community and especially the European states hesitated on trying to end it and they let it transform into a long-period war, which caused a massive loss of human lives and material damages which can still be felt nowadays.

On the referendum organized on 29th February and 1st march 1992, 64% of the citizens from the lists showed up, 98% of them manifesting their wish for Bosnia and Herzegovina to become an independent state. The Serbian population, which refused to participate at this electoral process, saw itself caught inside a state which was not recognized by them and in which they were afraid that the new formed majority of Croats and Muslims will lead discriminatory policies targeting them.

The European committee is the first one to recognize the independence of Bosnia and Herzegovina on 6th April 1992, United States of America taking the same action the following day. Even though the Occident was hoping that recognizing the independence of the new state will diminish the conflicts between the three ethnic groups from this state, things didn't go according to the plan. (Rae, 2005)

The siege of Sarajevo, the longest urban siege from the modern period, represents a concrete example of siege geography.

Sarajevo, a symbolic city of Balkans, formed in the ottoman period, represented in most of the period a good example of peaceful cohabitation between diverse ethnical and religious groups (Muslims, catholic Croats, orthodox Serbs, Hebrews, Roma, Turks etc.).

Yet, the trauma lived by the population of this city caused by Serbian artillery and snipers in the siege period are still vivid in the memory of the citizens. If before the outbreak of the conflict, the number of mixed marriages was high, today the ethnic and religious communities live in the same city but profoundly segregated from each other.

The harshness of the siege, realized through placing the artillery and snipers on the hills which are surrounding from all the directions the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, can be observed nowadays on the walls of many buildings.

Basically, the traces of the bombardments transformed the whole urban architecture, therefore becoming a part of it.

After more than 20 years since the ending of the war, its traces are still visible and the traces of the bombshells are perceived as an element of landscape resulted from the confrontations. We can also mention the large number of cemeteries which can be seen on the hills of the city.

Yet, the massive investments coming from the Occident and international institutions, but also from the Muslim states with direct interests in promoting strong relationships with the Muslim community from Bosnia and Herzegovina, are visible as well. The high number of Turkish flags proves the cultural influence of Turkey, but also the important number of Turkish companies who have branches in Sarajevo. The cultural center of Iran situated on the most important boulevard, is another example of the influence of Islamic states in the region.

The new buildings, made from glass and steel are spread everywhere, and the reconstructions of the buildings damaged by war are continuing in a constant rhythm.

The aspect of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Parliament building, which could have been seen smoking on all

the international news-channels in the period of war, shows that things are moving in a positive direction even though the pace is not as fast as many people would want.

Due to the Dayton Agreement, from 1995, which ended the confrontation between Serbians, Croatians and Muslims, Bosnia and Herzegovina was split into two political-administrative entities based on ethnical criteria and Brčko district (a district which is part of the both entities, but which is autogoverning and is under the supervision of international community). (Perish, 2010)

The two entities which were born inside the Bosnia and Herzegovina are Srpska Republic (inhabited in an overwhelming proportion by Serbians, occupies 49% of the territory of the country) and Bosnia and Herzegovina Federation (inhabited by Croatians and Muslims and which occupies 51% of the territory of the country).

Another important aspect of the Dayton Agreement consisted in the right of the refugees to return to their places where they lived before the burst of confrontations. (Sofos, 1996)

According to the appraisals of the United Nations Refugee Agency, but also from other international organisms, or non-governmental organisations, the number of refugees reached approximately 2 million inhabitants, from which less than a half got back to their places of living in the last 19 years, since the hostilities stopped.

As a consequence of the high number of political blockings and tension states which keeps continuing to burst between these three groups forming the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina, many voices are starting to wonder in what measure this state might become a functional one which will be able to auto-administrate itself, without needing a permanent supervision from international institutions.

One of the most recognized external policies analysts of the Cato Institute, Ted Galen Carpenter, addresses a series of harsh critics to the international community policies in which concern the situation from Bosnia and Herzegovina, these critics succeeding in sorting in a coherent way the majority of the opinions of those who militate for changing the Dayton Agreement and also finding solutions to create the proper premises for lowering the tension between the inter-ethnic and inter-religious relationships from Bosnia and Herzegovina. (Carpenter, 2010)

• Among the most important critics we can take into account:

- The high level of trust of the population in the parties formed on ethnical criteria and in the candidates with nationalists agenda;
- As a consequence of the secessionist desires shown by Croatians and Serbians, the incident

is stubbornly supporting a state even though its existence is not wanted by the majority of its population;

- The international aids are just undermining the economy of Bosnia and Herzegovina, this aspect being demonstrated by the high rate of unemployment (approximately 40%).

All these critics are proven to get stronger having in consideration that the international community is facing extremely serious difficulties for convincing the representatives of the three communities, to communicate and cooperate.

4. Conclusions

The lack of some parties and a new class of political leaders to promote right or left political programmes, contributes on setting apart the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, around the nationalists leaders who succeed on attracting the electorate on their side also through pointing out constantly that if one of the three ethnic groups will not use this criterion in the moment of elections, but the other two groups will do, the risk for that group to not be represented anymore in the institutions of the state and to become a victim of the other two, appears.

In other words, the whole election campaign (no matter we refer to the presidential, parliamentary or local elections) from Bosnia and Herzegovina, is developing usually around the idea of creating and highlighting the differences between "us" and "others", in which *others* are usually charged with a large range of negative attributes, the terror from the past, during the years of war, being permanently reminded.

In this context the debates related to important problems found on the agenda of the citizens (such as improving the wealthness, development of economy, returning of the refugees, the functioning of educational and health systems and the fight against the corruption phenomenon) are dropping in a second plan.

Bosnia and Herzegovina can survive as a state under certain number of conditions. First of all, the readiness of the key political figures to compromise.

This is necessary because Bosnia and Herzegovina is a country made of compromises, and in such way it can only survive, through compromises. On the other hand, another important aspect is to find the balance between the national criterions, which are very much important in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the civil society on the other side.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has recovered immensely since the end of war, although many issues remain unresolved. Now, the *Bosnian Spring* seems to become a turning point in the country's future.

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