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DRAGAN BURSAĆ DISCUSSES THE CURRENT SECURITY SITUATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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On May 3, 2022, a renowned Bosnian journalist and professor of philosophy Dragan Bursać from Banja Luka visited Prague to promote his recent books, entitled “PTSP Spomenar“ (PTSD Scrapbook, 2018) and “Čekajući Dylan Doga u Srebrenici“ (Waiting for Dylan Dog in Srebrenica, 2022), and exchange views with local experts. The book promotion and conversation with Dragan was organized under the auspices of Her Excellency Martina Mlinarević, the Ambassador of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the Czech Republic. The event was held at the gallery café Lastavica (also an association of the citizens of the former Yugoslavia in Prague). Our PSSI Western Balkans regional security team was likewise in attendance and later conducted an interview with Dragan.

Dragan Bursać has been professionally engaged in journalism since 1999. He has worked for the Radio Banja Luka and later he started working as a columnist for the BUKA portal, one of the most prominent independent media portals in Bosnia and Herzegovina and also the Al Jazeera Balkans. He received several prestigious awards including the “Srdjan Aleksić” prize for the development of socially responsible journalism, the UNICEF’s Prize for freedom of journalistic expression, and the 2018 European Press Prize Opinion Award for his story ‘[The third shooting of the boy Petar from Konjic](#)’.



Dragan Bursać
(personal photo archive).

QUESTIONS:

1. How would you evaluate the current security situation in the Western Balkans?

The situation is, as can be seen, very tense. If we just look at the pro-Russian forces in Croatia and Serbia, it is clear that they will try to destabilize the region in every possible way through Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). This is my call to the international community to preserve peace: firstly with legal barriers by pacifying Serbian and Croatian nationalists, who stand behind Milorad Dodik, Alexander Vučić, but also behind Dragan Čović and, indirectly, the Croatian leadership. They are the ones who “paint” the Balkans “gray”, with a tendency for it to be “painted black”.

2. How has the war in Ukraine affected the security situation in the region? Do you think it is possible that Russia could also claim certain areas in the WB, as some suggest?

I partially answered you in the first question. Of course, without any doubt, Russia will try to strengthen its influence in the Balkans by deepening the crisis in the region. Russians are not hiding that. Even their players in the field, like Milorad Dodik, do not hide that they will do everything to destabilize the region. Russians are also meeting with Serbian officials through Sergey Lavrov. They are the only ones to do so in Europe. They have “captured” those parts of the Balkans a long time ago. Whether this is going to become an everyday reality depends on the EU and, above all, NATO.

3. How does the war affect the situation in BiH? How do the local political elites respond to, and comment on, the war in Ukraine? What’s your opinion on the EUFOR raising the numbers of soldiers employed in the country?

As I said, Russian players in the (political) field will wait and use every possible opportunity to create some kind of crisis. I think that in this context the work of EUFOR is crucial. But their troops should be proactive and not just wait for something to happen. What do I mean? Well, I mean, first of all, the blockade of the activities of pro-Russian organizations, such as motorcycle associations, for example the Night Wolves. Along with others, they have organized paramilitary children camps in Serbia, which I wrote about. Unfortunately, there is not a great interest in these matters in the region.

4. What is your opinion on the pro-Russian official position of Republika Srpska and Serbia, which has been frequently questioned by many media in the region? You have written on the topic, for example the article titled: “Dodik submits the Intelligence reports for the Russian Aggressor” (Dodik podnosi izvještaje ruskom agresoru) on Al Jazeera Balkans.

As of this interview, there are clear indications that Milorad Dodik will meet with Lavrov along with Vučić. In fact, he is doing it and he has done it before. This man is both a businessman and a volunteer Russian intelligence officer in the region (remember the affair with Orthodox icons). Of course, he is supported by the entire Putin-loving establishment in Republika Srpska. Here, both the government and the opposition are Putin’s players. In fact, I believe that the future elections in the RS will be won by those who are the most supportive of Putin. In Banja Luka, you have a Russian center, which functions as a kind of greenhouse for the Russophiles but also as an intelligence center. So, to turn things around, nothing indicates that Dodik’s intelligence work for the Russians will decrease. On the contrary.

5. Can recently imposed British and US sanctions against Milorad Dodik promote a positive change?

As far as I can see, no. Sanctions on property or travel to the United States now mean nothing to Dodik. To be completely clear, until he is eliminated from political life, he will be a constant danger for BiH and for the entire Balkans, and it can ignite a much larger fire, which would start in the Balkans.

6. Within this current political and economic context, what do you think are the most pressing issues in the BiH?

The biggest problem is the Serbian and Croatian nationalism, which benefits from the Russian aggression against Ukraine. They will do their best to show that “BiH is a failed country, where little is possible”, and where economic decay is the job description. You have to understand, as much as it sounds implausible, there are basically political castes in BiH, which work in the government apparatus. However, they work to disintegrate the government that pays them. It sounds unbelievable, but it’s true.

7. How would you evaluate the situation in BiH within the next couple of months? Can we expect progress in the EU enlargement process?

That depends solely on the international community, more precisely the EU and NATO. They cannot be lenient towards Dodik and Čović and their mentors in Belgrade and Zagreb. I am afraid, however, that the situation is going to be exacerbated further. I do not see any signs that actions will be taken against these two individuals in the next few months. In fact, it seems to me that the pressure on them has eased in the last ten days.

8. Do you think the current High Representative for BiH Christian Schmidt will take a more proactive approach (in contrast to his predecessors) given the current political climate in the country and the war in Ukraine?

Nicely said. I believe that the obligation of the High Representative Schmidt, especially in the light of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, is to “start interfering as part of his mandate more seriously.” In my opinion, he is currently proving to be more inert even than Valentin Inzko, who was known as an inert High Representative. I’m afraid that nationalists “got a whiff” of his weakness and that they are pushing their agendas, exactly as much as they need, without provoking Schmidt’s reaction.

9. What is your opinion on the role of the Croatian President Milanović on the current election crisis and his influence on the situation in BiH?

Milanović has been behaving like a classic pro-Russian actor lately. Now, why is he doing this? Is it because of his unimportant political role in the Croatian government? Is it to take over the voters of the right-wing Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (HDZ)? Or is it his personal frustration with BiH? We do not have answers to these questions. The fact is that he is causing immeasurable damage, most importantly to civic BiH. At this point it is irrelevant whether he is doing it as a political “useful idiot” or on purpose. It is important that he stops this behavior, and as it seems, he will not do so on his own. To put it mildly, his announcements about the establishment of a third (Croat) entity, especially at this time, are adding fuel to the fire.



Dragan Bursać with Her Excellency Martina Mlinarević, the Ambassador of BiH to the Czech Republic, in Prague.