



NATO PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

ROSE-ROTH

105th ROSE-ROTH SEMINAR REPORT

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA AND THE WESTERN BALKANS IN A VOLATILE INTERNATIONAL SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina
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This Seminar Report is presented for information only and does not necessarily represent the official view of the Assembly. This report was prepared by Steffen Sachs, Director of the Science and Technology Committee.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The NATO Parliamentary Assembly (NATO PA) held its 105th Rose-Roth Seminar on “Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Western Balkans in a Volatile International Security Environment” in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, from 14 to 16 November 2023.

2. During the three-day seminar, government officials, representatives of the international community, parliamentarians, civil society actors, academics and experts addressed a wide range of security-related issues. Participants took stock of recent political developments and challenges in Bosnia and Herzegovina, including the continuing brain drain. They also discussed the path of the region towards European and Euro-Atlantic integration and assessed the influence of external actors. The prevailing security challenges in the region, including the challenge of climate change and resilience and the role of parliaments in cybersecurity governance, were also high on the agenda.

3. The general conclusion of the seminar participants was that Bosnia and Herzegovina is at a crossroads. A majority of Bosnians continue to look towards European and Euro-Atlantic institutions for a peaceful and prosperous future. Bosnia and Herzegovina faces multiple challenges on this path, including political gridlock, secessionist rhetoric and large-scale emigration. However, the country has made significant progress, and the new government has shown the willingness to implement much-needed reforms. There is a window of opportunity, and it is up to Bosnia and Herzegovina leaders to seize it, participants heard.

4. The seminar also underlined the unwavering support of European and Euro-Atlantic institutions for Bosnia and Herzegovina on its reform-oriented path. Most recently, the Allies adopted the Defence Capacity Building Package, and the European Commission recommended the opening of accession negotiations, subject to the fulfilment of further conditions. In doing so, Bosnia and Herzegovina should continue to make full use of the assistance offered by NATO and the EU, several speakers stressed.

5. The seminar was organised jointly with the NATO PA’s Defence and Security Committee (DSC) and in cooperation with the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport, and the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF).

II. BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA AT A CROSSROADS: RECENT PROGRESS AND REMAINING CHALLENGES

6. Bosnia and Herzegovina is at a crossroads. Its future prosperity depends on its European and Euro-Atlantic integration, and continued political paralysis will condemn it to further stagnation, delegates heard. The new government, which took office in early 2023, has shown a new momentum and has initiated several important reforms. Despite these positive signs, seminar participants underlined a number of remaining challenges. The Dayton Agreement brought peace, but also left the country with a legacy of constitutional challenges for effective governance. The country faces secessionist threats from Republika Srpska and efforts to reform the country’s dysfunctional electoral system remain stalled, some speakers said.

A. BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA IN A RAPIDLY EVOLVING EURO-ATLANTIC SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

7. **Alec Shelbrooke**, (United Kingdom), Chairperson of the Defence and Security Committee (DSC) of the NATO PA, opened the seminar by recalling the NATO PA's ongoing commitment to the Western Balkans, which remains of strategic importance to the Alliance. The countries in the region find themselves at the forefront of the struggle to protect the democratic ideals that bind us together. The Alliance and the NATO PA must continue to support their partners and work together with them to overcome the challenges they face. This includes helping Bosnia and Herzegovina address the challenges on its Euro-Atlantic path, including institutional gridlock, lack of reforms as well as divisive and secessionist rhetoric.

8. The Speaker of the House of Peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina, **Kemal Ademovic**, recapitulated the reforms and progress made since the first seminar in 2004 but also noted the prevailing challenges, which require continued political will, continued discussions, and the application of lessons learned. Kemal Ademovic underlined the importance of the international community's continued presence in the country but also called for an increased understanding of Bosnia and Herzegovina's domestic challenges. Despite these challenges, Bosnia and Herzegovina is holding up its end of the bargain. For example, it continues to meet its commitments under the NATO reform programme, even though there is no consensus on the membership path.

9. **Borjana Kristo**, Chairwoman of the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, gave an overview of the reforms and steps taken by the new governing coalition that came to power in early 2023. These include, amongst others, advancing the rule of law and the fight against corruption, improving economic stability as well as building an inclusive and functioning society. The Chairwoman argued that the recent recommendation by the European Commission to open accession negotiations, subject to the country demonstrating further progress in meeting EU membership criteria, confirms the new momentum and provides an impetus for further reforms. Chairwoman Kristo also underlined the need for full consensus on any political issue, noting that the roads to NATO and the EU are compatible as they share the values of freedom, democracy, and pluralism.

10. **Oana Lungescu**, Distinguished Fellow at Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), opened by reflecting on the progress the Western Balkans have made since emerging from conflict. NATO has been and remains committed to peace and stability in the region. Despite its renewed emphasis on collective defence, the Alliance, therefore, continues to be engaged in the Western Balkans. Indeed, the Russian aggression against Ukraine brought the Western Balkans back into the focus of Euro-Atlantic institutions. At the same time, the region has not come as far as many had hoped. Oana Lungescu called on leaders to seize the window of opportunity and not to underestimate the fragility of the situation and the prevailing challenges that lie ahead.

11. In the ensuing discussion, members of the NATO PA asked about common funding initiatives by the Alliance and the EU, the financing of disinformation campaigns, the Russian influence in the region, and whether the Berlin Plus Agreement is still fit for purpose. Oana Lungescu responded by elaborating upon NATO's move from de-bunking to "pre-bunking" Russian disinformation, stressing the need to heal divisions within our societies as they provide openings for external actors with malign intentions and noting that EUFOR Althea continues to work well under Berlin Plus. The discussion also focused on the situation in Kosovo, where violent protests in May 2023 left 93 KFOR troops injured and an attack in the north of Kosovo in September 2023 resulted in the death of a Kosovar policeman and three ethnically Serbian gunmen.

B. THE DAYTON PEACE AGREEMENT AND THE PERSPECTIVES FOR THE FUTURE OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

12. In his address to the seminar participants, the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, **Christian Schmidt**, stressed that countering challenges to the Dayton Agreement and safeguarding the constitutional order of Bosnia and Herzegovina are key priorities. The High Representative is committed to accelerating and broadening reforms and has launched an expert process to prepare the ground for a legal solution to the state property issue, the first objective of the 5+2 agenda. Other priorities include reconciliation and constitutional reform. The speaker also highlighted the challenge of emigration due to a lack of economic opportunities, corruption, and nepotism that stifle the ambitions of the younger generation.

13. The High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, furthermore, argued that the implementation of the Dayton Agreement and the path towards EU membership are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they are complementary and mutually reinforcing. For example, respecting and ensuring free and fair elections is a crucial aspect of the Dayton Agreement and the EU's 14 key priorities. In addition, Christian Schmidt warned participants about ongoing challenges to the independence of the judiciary, endemic corruption and the secessionist rhetoric in Republika Srpska. Addressing these issues is key to moving forward on the European and Euro-Atlantic path. In this context, the speaker acknowledged the momentum generated by the new coalition government.

14. In the ensuing discussion with Mr Schmidt, seminar participants asked about current governance challenges, the need for continued dialogue and reconciliation, the role and future of the Office of the High Representative and the prospects and implications of moving forward on the European and Euro-Atlantic path. The speaker's answers focused, inter alia, on the continuing use of Dayton provisions by political leaders to block reform processes. He also stressed the need for further reconciliation and constructive dialogue between the communities and the strengthening of the Prosecutor's Office with regard to genocide denial. The High Representative noted that EU integration and the implementation of the Dayton Agreement must go hand in hand, and that the international community must refute the allegations made by Milorad Dodik against his office. He concluded by emphasising that the international community must use sticks and carrots on Bosnia and Herzegovina's European and Euro-Atlantic path.

C. EVALUATING RECENT POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

15. **Nermin Niksic**, Prime Minister of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, briefed participants on the government's agenda to promote democracy, national cohesion and economic growth. The Prime Minister emphasised that corruption and the abuse of power must not be allowed to undermine the future of younger generations. Although Bosnia and Herzegovina recovered quickly from the pandemic, the country is struggling with inflationary pressures and a slowdown in global economic growth. The Federation is implementing a number of programmes to improve the economic situation and living standards. Nermin Niksic informed participants on several measures, such as price controls of certain goods, boosting public and encouraging private investment and digital transformation.

16. **Barisa Colak**, who had previously served as a Minister of Security and currently advises the President of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, reflected on the developments in the country since the last Rose-Roth Seminar in 2017. He recalled that he had identified 2017 as a key moment in which Bosnia and Herzegovina would move forward towards the EU and implement the necessary reforms. Unfortunately, this did not materialise and the speaker expressed his dissatisfaction with the progress made and noted that time had been lost. However, Mr Colak agreed that the new government is more willing to implement reforms. Electoral reform is an important priority and the 2024 municipal elections will be a key test.

17. **Mladen Ivanic**, a former member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2014-2018), argued that some political actors do not fully accept the Dayton Agreement. More worryingly, they are ready to challenge it openly. They are also reluctant to make the reforms which are necessary for the country's European and Euro-Atlantic path because such steps would jeopardise their positions. Moreover, the issue of NATO continues to divide the country. At the same time, Mr Ivanic also noted that the unwillingness of the EU to move forward and open accession negotiations with countries in the region can lead to pessimism and a loss of confidence.

18. The debate with the participants focused on Russia's influence in the region and recent trips to Moscow by the President of the Republika Srpska. Mr Niksic argued that Milorad Dodik may be motivated by personal gains, and Mr Ivanic stated that Milorad Dodik is trying to improve his electoral chances in the short term. This fits with the Russian approach of using links with individual political actors to sow divisions when the opportunity arises, delegates heard.

19. Representatives from the Parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina called for continued reconciliation and support for the Dayton Agreement. They stressed that the public sees its future in the European and Euro-Atlantic institutions. Mr Niksic recalled that there is a clear public majority in favour of EU membership. Mr Ivanic underlined the continuing opposition to NATO within the Republika Srpska and argued that further progress would require compromise and mutual trust.

20. Another question focused on the integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina's armed forces and border control. Mr Niksic referred to the armed forces as an example of how multi-ethnic institutions can function properly in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Mr Niksic recalled that the sharing of a Schengen border strengthens controls and that the government is trying to improve favourable conditions for those working in the border police as there has been a decline of interest among potential applicants to join the force.

D. THE BRAIN DRAIN FROM SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE REGION

21. The challenge of mass emigration was a recurring theme throughout the seminar. In the absence of rapid progress in living conditions, many Bosnians are voting with their feet and moving west themselves. The departure of younger generations is having a real and significant impact on the country across all sectors. Essential services, from the police to the health sector to the military, are struggling to recruit personnel. Across the country, the lack of new young minds is also stifling potential economic growth and dynamism. Halting and reversing this brain drain is a top priority for Bosnia and Herzegovina and the countries of the region. How to achieve this was, therefore, a recurring theme throughout the seminar.

22. **Alida Vracic**, the Executive Director and Co-Founder of "Populari", drew attention to the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina is losing the equivalent of a large town every year and that almost half of the younger generation is thinking about emigration. The emigration of highly qualified people also means that there is no direct return on the money invested in their education. The Western Balkans should begin to look beyond remittances and see their diasporas as a source of political change at home. Countries of the region should also consider that some transient migrants may consider staying and could help to offset emigration.

23. **Dzeneta Karabegovic**, University of Salzburg, echoed these sentiments, arguing that migration could help alleviate labour shortages. In addition, the speaker drew attention to the possibility of circular migration whereby emigrants eventually return home. In fact, this circular migration is already taking place, and the Western Balkan countries should engage in migration

diplomacy to formalise this practice. At the same time, the countries in the region need to show those who have not left that there are good reasons to stay.

24. NATO PA members asked about the policy changes needed to address emigration and the impact of EU membership prospects in this context. Alida Vracic and Dzeneta Karabegovic responded that authorities in the region need more accurate and reliable figures on emigration and that discussions should include local stakeholders who are not yet part of the conversation. Other ideas focused on exchange programmes to highlight the possibility of circular migration and to go beyond remittances in engaging with diasporas. The prospect of EU accession may encourage emigration, but it can also be a source of optimism that motivates people to return to the Western Balkans.

III. BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA ON THE EUROPEAN AND EURO-ATLANTIC PATH

25. Russia's invasion of Ukraine refocused the attention of the European and Euro-Atlantic community to "vulnerable" partners in its immediate neighbourhood. NATO Allies stressed the need to strengthen Bosnia and Herzegovina's resilience and the European Commission called for accession negotiations that are conditional upon further reforms. Seminar participants agreed that the country's leaders have a real window of opportunity. Progress on its European and Euro-Atlantic path would not only promote peace and prosperity, but would also counter the risk of potentially irreparable public disillusionment about the country's European and Euro-Atlantic future. Alongside NATO and the EU, Switzerland remains an important partner for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

A. BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA AND NATO

26. NATO's support for Bosnia and Herzegovina has been unwavering since the country joined the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme in 2006. A conditional invitation to the Membership Action Plan (MAP) came in 2010, with a principal hurdle being the national registration of immovable defence property, a process which remains incomplete. The Allies offered a way forward in 2018 by agreeing to accept the first Annual National Programme (ANP) under the MAP, a step that was subsequently blocked by opposition from the Republika Srpska. Instead, Sarajevo submitted a so-called Reform Programme outlining planned reforms and identifying areas for targeted Allied support. Most recently, Allies have adopted a new Defence Capacity Building package.

27. Against this background, **Slaven Galic**, Deputy Minister of Defence of Bosnia and Herzegovina, shared his reflections on the Vilnius Summit and the next steps. Mr Galic noted the importance of the Defence Capacity Building package as it provides assistance to improve critical infrastructure and procure much-needed equipment. The Vilnius Summit sent a strong signal that NATO will continue to support the countries in the Western Balkans in their aspiration for membership. Mr Galic also provided practical examples that demonstrate the country's activities in assisting Türkiye and Slovenia following natural disasters and its willingness to make specialised Explosive Ordnance Disposal units available to NATO when needed.

28. The Norwegian embassy to Bosnia and Herzegovina currently serves as the NATO Contact Point Embassy (CPE). Its Ambassador **Olav Reinertsen**, briefed seminar participants on the role of CPE in disseminating information about NATO to counter disinformation and malign influence from external actors. This is particularly important in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which faces external efforts to influence political dynamics. Public support for the Euro-Atlantic path remains strong. The continued support of a large part of the country for NATO membership

is a positive sign that should form the basis for further cooperation. Mr Reinertsen underlined the responsibility of the international community to stand by the side of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

29. Brigadier General **Pamela McGaha**, Commander of the NATO HQ in Sarajevo, briefed participants on the role and activities of the NATO HQ. The NATO HQ coordinates the support by Allies for the priorities identified by Bosnia and Herzegovina's authorities. It also offers advice on different models for reforms and legislation to ensure transparency and effective control of the security institutions. Brigadier General McGaha echoed other speakers regarding the encouraging initiatives launched by the new government. Ms McGaha, furthermore, praised the contribution by the armed forces and noted that these achievements are particularly noteworthy in view of the current shortage of funds.

30. The discussion covered a wide range of issues relating to the armed forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina and their cooperation with NATO. Participants asked about the composition of the defence budget, ongoing infrastructure reforms, recruitment challenges due to emigration and ongoing demining activities. Slaven Galic underlined the need for further reforms, including on the registration of immovable defence property, and acknowledged that the current budget is not sufficient to modernise the armed forces. NATO assistance is particularly valuable in this regard. The armed forces are suffering from emigration and the number of applicants is declining. The government, therefore, engages in outreach campaigns and plans to increase salaries. Regarding mine clearing, Mr Galic reiterated that the country is not yet mine-free and that current efforts are focused on the south around Mostar.

31. Seminar participants also exchanged views on the proportion of women in the armed forces. Mr Galic outlined several steps taken to increase the number of women, including initiatives to help reconcile family and service life. Brigadier General McGaha stressed the importance of supporting gender equality in the armed forces as well as Women, Peace and Security initiatives, and noted that the share of women in the armed forces increased in recent years. Ambassador Reinertsen acknowledged that developments are going in the right direction but noted that women are still underrepresented in the armed forces.

32. The discussion also touched upon the divisions among political leaders over Bosnia and Herzegovina's relationship with NATO. In this context, participants raised the issues of public opinion and information campaigns. Mr Galic stressed the need to better explain the benefits of NATO membership to citizens. Ambassador Reinertsen underlined that progress on the country's Euro-Atlantic path should be promoted publicly through active communication and outreach. In this regard, Brigadier General McGaha noted the ongoing outreach activities by the NATO HQ Sarajevo to engage with citizens.

B. BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA AND THE EU

33. Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU prospects are brighter than ever but participants agreed that significant challenges remain. Following the signing of a Stabilisation and Association Agreement in 2015, Bosnia and Herzegovina submitted its application for EU membership in early 2016. In December 2019, the European Council endorsed 14 priorities for its membership application identified by the European Commission. The country was granted candidate status in 2022, and the European Commission recommended the opening of accession negotiations in November 2023, following implementation of the reforms required for membership. Seminar participants agreed that the European Commission's recommendation was an important step forward, providing new momentum, but that further reform efforts are required to meet the conditions set.

34. **Adebayo Babajide**, Deputy Head of the European Union Delegation to Bosnia and Herzegovina, described the European Commission's report as a "milestone". It is sending the clear message that the country's future lies in the EU. Membership remains a key strategic goal

for all domestic actors and is rooted in public aspirations. Membership is also important in geopolitical terms, and the decision to grant candidate status was directly linked to the Russian aggression against Ukraine. EUFOR Althea remains an important deterrent and confidence-building measure. Mr Babajide acknowledged the new momentum, saying that more progress had been made in the last three months than in the previous three years. However, further reforms are needed and attacks on the constitutional order are worrying.

35. **Elmedin Konakovic**, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, recalled that the goal of full EU membership remains a consensus. The Foreign Minister told those present that the report by the European Commission was the best ever for the country but fell short of the best possible. Mr Konakovic outlined the various reforms undertaken by the new coalition government and underlined its ability to take much-needed decisions quickly. Taking decisions on reforms and pursuing regional initiatives such as the Berlin Process are a way of showing political will and determination.

36. **Srecko Latal** offered reflections on EU enlargement in the Western Balkans in general. Mr Latal noted that security and stability considerations had driven enlargement in the past as well. The Thessaloniki Summit in 2003 provided a perspective for the Western Balkans but the lack of progress and a realistic perspective opens the space for align influences by external actors. The granting of candidate status gave Bosnia and Herzegovina a positive momentum. It is now up to both the political leaders in the region and the EU to understand the urgency and seriousness of the situation and to move forward on the accession path.

37. During the discussion, participants raised questions about the efforts to tackle corruption in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the economic impact of integrating into the EU single market. Mr Konakovic noted that the fight against corruption is a top priority for the Council of Ministers, partly because it is a major cause behind emigration. On the economy, the Minister made it clear that the aim is not rapid but gradual integration into the single market that would be accompanied by support packages.

38. Other questions focused on the geopolitical environment and the impact of the Russian war against Ukraine on the Western Balkans' progress towards EU membership. Adebayo Babajide said that the EU's geopolitical assessment is unlikely to change in the future. Elmedin Konakovic noted that Ukraine can also learn from Bosnia and Herzegovina on how to organise a post-conflict society. Mr Latal argued that the accession processes of Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova are technically separated from those of the Western Balkans but acknowledged that they are practically influencing each other.

C. SWITZERLANDS' CONTRIBUTION TO SECURITY IN THE EUROPEAN AND EURO-ATLANTIC REGION AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

39. In his address to seminar participants, **Daniel Hunn**, Ambassador of Switzerland to Bosnia and Herzegovina, underlined that the seminar comes at a crucial time given the geopolitical context and the potential impact of global instability on the Western Balkans. Switzerland continues to see these seminars as highly valuable forums for dialogue, allowing for the exchange of opinions, experiences, and information among parliamentarians. He reminded participants of Switzerland's long-standing support for the Rose-Roth seminars. To support the seminars, Switzerland cooperates closely with the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF). The Rose-Roth Seminar in Sarajevo is an indication of this continued commitment.

40. The Ambassador stressed that, though it is not a member of NATO or the EU, Switzerland is part of the common European security area and shares the values of her European partners and neighbours. Accordingly, Switzerland adheres to the EU sanctions on Russia. The Western

Balkans remain a priority region for Switzerland in the context of international security, the ambassador noted, adding that Switzerland acts as the penholder within the UN Security Council for the renewal of the EUFOR Althea mandate to which it actively contributes. Moreover, Switzerland is planning to support Bosnia and Herzegovina's Defence Capacity Building within the PfP initiative. PfP remains a key mechanism for Switzerland's cooperation with NATO, Allies, and partner countries, the ambassador concluded.

IV. THE ROLE OF EXTERNAL ACTORS AND PREVAILING SECURITY CHALLENGES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

41. The Western Balkans in general, and Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular, continue to be exposed to malign external interference, participants learned. Russia's brutal aggression against Ukraine sent shockwaves through the Western Balkans, creating an environment where spoilers feel emboldened to stir up long-standing conflicts. The region also faces a wide range of security challenges. These include, among others, climate change-induced events that can act as a threat multiplier and cyber threats.

A. THE INFLUENCE OF RUSSIA, CHINA, AND OTHER EXTERNAL ACTORS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

42. **Muhamed Hasanovic**, Deputy Minister of Finance and Treasury of Bosnia and Herzegovina, stressed that Bosnia and Herzegovina needs economic stability for further development and external interventions can help to bridge gaps and unlock the country's potential. Infrastructure is a key sector where external actors can make transforming contributions. He added that the political, diplomatic, and economic roles of external actors cannot be overestimated. To be successful, such engagements should be long-term commitments, not imposing goals but empowering local people, he argued.

43. While the Russian aggression against Ukraine has no immediate security implications for the Western Balkans, it affects the stability of the region by exacerbating existing challenges, argued **Jelena Dzankic** of the European University Institute. It has the potential to undermine democratic institutions and to increase external dependencies. Russia's soft power remains a threat in this regard, she explained. There is also a risk of increased Euroscepticism due to a disillusionment with democracy and lack of progress on the European and Euro-Atlantic paths, which can cause a sense of being left behind.

44. **Othon Anastasakis**, St Antony's College, Oxford, provided further insights into the Russian footprint in the region. Mr Anastasakis argued that Russia does not have a grand strategy, but rather uses its close ties to regional actors opportunistically. It also continues to exploit prevailing anti-NATO sentiment to mobilise support. Overall, Russia seeks to maintain the status quo in the region without too much effort. The Russian influence in the region is not a given and depends on the support of local actors and elites.

45. **Jens Bastian** of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) provided an overview of the recent increase in Chinese engagement in the Western Balkans. China offers loans and financing schemes, including through its development bank, which often appear attractive at first glance, he said. However, there are concerns about debt sustainability. China is also increasing its soft power through the establishment of Confucius Institutes. The "honeymoon" period is over, he explained, as countries in the region are beginning to recognise the challenges of working with China.

46. **Nedzma Džananović Mirascija** from the University of Sarajevo argued that the international community should listen more closely to local actors on the ground in order to avoid surprises about regional developments. This would also help to understand where certain narratives come from and why people are receptive to them. Actors from the international community did, for instance, not fully grasp the Russian influence in the region shortly before the invasion of Ukraine. Such misunderstandings of local dynamics can reduce the credibility of external actors. The international community, therefore, needs to listen to actors from the region and recognise the risk emanating from Milorad Dodik and his actions in the Republika Srpska.

47. The ensuing discussion focused on the Russian and Chinese activities in the region. Ms Džankić encouraged reflecting on the impact of Chinese engagement on democracy in the Western Balkans. Differences between Western Balkan countries and both NATO and the EU create opportunities for Russia and China to extend their influence, Ms Mirascija warned. Mr Anastasakis and Mr Bastian emphasised that China takes a long-term perspective, while Russia is active in the short term to disrupt. Questions by participants also focused on the (increasing) activities of Arab countries. In this context, Mr Hasanović gave an example by elaborating on a new university library in Sarajevo funded through a grant provided by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's development fund.

B. SECURITY CHALLENGES IN SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

48. **Ivica Bosnjak**, Deputy Minister of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina, gave an overview of how the country is responding to existing and emerging security challenges. As a transit country, Bosnia and Herzegovina faces the challenge of effectively managing migration. Bosnia and Herzegovina is implementing its integrated border management strategy and is working on a renewed strategy in line with EU standards. Bosnia and Herzegovina is also working on legislation focusing on small arms and light weapons, the fight against terrorism and its financing, and money laundering. Information exchange is key in this area and the contact point with Europol became operational in June 2023.

49. **Enes Karić**, who heads the Directorate for the Coordination of Police Bodies of Bosnia and Herzegovina, reminded participants that there are several police structures at the different levels in Bosnia and Herzegovina with varying *modi operandi*. At the state level, the police employ personnel from all constitutive peoples who perform their duties professionally and represent the spirit of multi-ethnicity. The representation of women is also improving at all levels. Bosnia and Herzegovina's police forces are internationally recognised as reliable partners and participate in the exchange of information and in internationally coordinated police operations. At the same time, the police forces are understaffed and face a decline in recruitment, seminar participants learned.

50. **Ivana Korajlić**, Executive Director of Transparency International in Bosnia and Herzegovina, drew attention to continued state capture by political parties and systemic corruption in Bosnia and Herzegovina. As a result, political actors are not accountable to the citizens but to their parties and other elites. This is particularly challenging when political actors are willing to use representation along ethnic lines to sow division and increase their influence. The international community has too often accepted such practices and needs to take a stronger stance against them, the speaker suggested.

51. **Marko Prelec**, Consulting Senior Analyst from the International Crisis Group, focused on the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo and the situation in the northern municipalities. The situation stems from Kosovo's desire to exercise authority over its entire territory and to become a fully recognised member of the international community, two issues opposed by Belgrade and the Serbs in northern Kosovo. Mr Prelec argued that Kosovo is unlikely to advance its position vis-à-vis Belgrade but is likely to gain the upper hand in the north. The situation remains fragile and risky, with the possibility of further outbreaks of violence, Mr Prelec concluded.

52. The discussion following the presentations of the four speakers focused on the level of oversight in the security sector and the question of whether corruption differs between organisations. Ms Korajlic noted that oversight bodies exist but that the appointments are made along party lines, which raises accountability issues, and that corruption remains widespread, and that electoral integrity is a crucial first step towards greater transparency and accountability. Responding to a question on northern Kosovo, Mr Prelec noted that the steps forward on license plates and passports indicate progress.

C. CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: A THREAT MULTIPLIER

53. **Ivana Vojinovic**, University Donja Gorica, noted that the Western Balkans is one of the most affected and vulnerable regions in Europe when it comes to climate change, and the resulting natural disasters will continue to cause significant stress. Further efforts in mitigation, resilience building, prevention and preparedness are of paramount importance. She also argued that the transition to climate neutrality is part of the region's European and Euro-Atlantic paths. However, she noted that not all countries have the same starting points or capacities.

54. The Director of the Resource Environmental Centre (REC) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, **Lejla Suman**, reminded participants that Bosnia and Herzegovina has different climatic zones ranging from Mediterranean over mountainous to mild continental. Existing strategies to address climate challenges are at an early stage of implementation and the alignment with the EU remains limited. Bosnia and Herzegovina also lacks adequate capacities to address climate change and adapt to its negative impacts.

55. While climate change does not directly cause insecurity, it acts as a threat multiplier, explained **Goran Svilanovic**, Consultant at ABKONS. Its effects can exacerbate tensions within and between societies and provide a fertile ground for actors who promote radicalisation. The speaker underlined that many climate hotspots are located on the borders between Western Balkan countries. This should be seen as an opportunity to cooperate and to further stabilise and improve bilateral relationships in this area.

56. The ensuing discussion focused on the role of the young generation in the fight against climate change. Ms Suman noted that the young generation often participates in non-governmental projects. At the same time, there had been input by youth actors to Bosnia and Herzegovina's position paper for the COP28. Ms Suman and Ms Vojinovic said that exchanges to EU countries can sensitise youth actors to climate change and inspire their local engagement. The EU also offers funding and opportunities to become actively engaged in environmental protection. Mr Svilanovic pointed out that the young generation is often not an electoral factor for political actors in the region but that they can exert influence through other means, such as protests.

57. During the exchanges, some participants noted the important role of the armed forces in responding to climate change-related disasters. Brigadier General **Mirsad Ahmic**, Inspector General, informed attendees about the contribution of Bosnia and Herzegovina's armed forces in responding to floods and wildfires. Seminar participants exchanged experiences and contemplated possibilities how such measures could be more strongly formalised within NATO or the EU.

D. CYBERSECURITY GOVERNANCE AND THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENTS

58. **Marc Henauer**, Head of the MELANI Operation and Information Centre in Switzerland, shared experiences and lessons learned on cybersecurity initiatives. Mr Henauer noted that one cannot completely insulate oneself from risks but only prepare for attacks and mitigate their effects. Cybersecurity is a crosscutting issue that concerns senior management but responsibilities and capabilities cannot be fully centralised. Organisations should therefore empower stakeholders to protect and help themselves. Legislators should identify legal gaps arising from the digitalisation of processes and continue to ensure that adequate legal frameworks are in place.

59. The presentation by **Predrag Puharic**, Head of the Cyber Security Excellence Centre in Bosnia and Herzegovina, focused on the situation in the country. He noted that Bosnia and Herzegovina lacks important legal frameworks, for example on information security or critical infrastructure, and has no cybersecurity strategy. Such frameworks and strategies are crucial because they identify the key actors who are responsible in the event of a cyberattack. As a result, there is a lack of procedures and preparedness for emergencies. Some Members of Parliament in Bosnia and Herzegovina have responded to a recent report and initiated some measures, but these fall short of the steps needed to improve the country's cybersecurity.

60. During the discussion, NATO PA members inquired about best practices at the governmental and individual level. Both experts emphasised the need for sharing information and cooperation. Mr Puharic noted that international structures are very important for responding to incidents, but also play a crucial role in sharing information and best practices among the actors involved. The parliamentarians also exchanged experiences, best practices, and lessons learned from cyberattacks against legislatures that took place, for example, in Georgia and in Ukraine.

V. CONCLUSION

61. Speakers and participants covered a lot of ground during the three-day seminar. A clear majority in Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to look to EU and NATO membership for its future prosperity. Institutional support for NATO and the EU remains strong. NATO Allies continue to work on 'tailored assistance', most recently with the adoption of a defence capacity building package. In parallel, the European Commission recently recommended the opening of accession negotiations with Sarajevo, subject to the country demonstrating further progress in meeting EU membership criteria. Bosnia and Herzegovina has recently made progress on its European and Euro-Atlantic path, and the new state-level governing coalition is raising hopes for a new wave of important reforms. However, divisive rhetoric from the Republika Srpska and malign external interference, particularly from Russia, threaten further instability and obstruct much-needed reforms. Russia's brutal aggression against Ukraine has also sent shockwaves across the Western Balkans, creating an environment where spoilers feel emboldened to stir up long-standing conflicts and tensions along ethnic and sectarian fault lines. In the absence of rapid progress, many Bosnians are voting with their feet and moving west themselves. As large-scale emigration continues, Bosnia and Herzegovina's internal and external challenges are intensifying. The NATO PA will continue to monitor the situation in the country and the regions closely. The Rose-Roth Seminar in Sarajevo has played an important role in this.