

Foreign Press Office - Mostar

MEDIA REPORTS

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Dragan Covic, new HDZ BiH President

Vecernji list
By Zoran Kresic

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Immediately following last Saturday's win at the HDZ BiH convention, whose legitimacy the opposing candidate Dr. Bozo Ljubic attempted to deny, Dragan Covic announced from his new office that he would first conduct an inventory of the work carried out by ministers and the party at the state and federal levels. Covic's accession to the head of HDZ is marked by his indictment, as well as a tight victory at the convention, where plenty of dirty laundry was carried out and accusations thrown back and forth between the two party factions.

COVIC: I expected the support of 60 percent of the delegates. Nevertheless, my constituents were more stable. There were representatives of the extreme right and left gathered around Dr. Ljubic.

VL: Although Ljubic's support included a wide range of people, from liberals to generals, comments of the type "voting was both for and against Covic" dominated?

COVIC: You could say that. If that is the case, and if they had the infrastructure within the intelligence services, then the convention result makes sense. It is important for me that we succeeded based upon principles, and as of now there is not one person to whom we promised a new position after the convention.

VL: Is there a possibility that HDZ will break up following your election?

COVIC: I do not see the possibility for division. I will do everything in the next few months to show the unity and strength of HDZ.

VL: Will there be retribution toward Ljubic's followers?

COVIC: No. One needs to distinguish between such action and the moves we will make shortly in order to achieve essential change. We will conduct an inventory of our ministers' work in the state and federal governments.

VL: Do you agree with the assessment that the results from a lack of work by HDZ officials are visible?

COVIC: I aim to change our activities so that our officials can be more efficient. If we seek results, we will have to make sharp changes in our personnel.

VL: Are the "betting odds" true that at least five Croat ministers will end their mandate?

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COVIC: I do not wish to speculate about that. However, a significant amount of ministers should think about what they have done thus far.

VL: Will you succeed in “ironing out” your relationship with Sanader since certain messages from Zagreb indicated you do not have his support?

COVIC: Such speculations have been around ever since Mr. Sanader came into power. I can say that my relationship with Sanader in the last years has been very good, completely open and sincere.

VL: Your opposition argues differently?

COVIC: Prime Minister Sanader is a wise politician and I am confident that it is important for him to retain good relations with BiH, especially with his sister party and Croats. On the other hand, for us it is extremely important to have HDZ and the government in Zagreb as support for our future projects. I will do everything to make the relationship even better.

VL: Will your talks require “mediators” who in the last few years interpreted Zagreb’s messages too much?

COVIC: The main problem in our relationship thus far has been self-proclaimed mediators who profited from this. Regarding Mr. Sanader and HDZ Croatia, I do not need any mediators and there cannot be any. I know Sanader too well to require a mediator. We will “thank” the caretakers, generally from the previous intelligence network, who mostly lived off trying to destroy the good relations, for their help thus far.

VL: What is your view of investments, primarily from Croatia, being obstructed by Bosniaks – Ina, Croatia Osiguranje, HT?

COVIC: That is the greatest defeat for BiH. To promote market economy while planning national projects in and around Sarajevo is dangerous for the future. If the business environment is defined by whether capital comes from the Christian or Islamic world, then we are condemning ourselves to defeat. A similar thing happened with Aluminij. I will insist that HDZ’s ministers confront such negative attempts and I expect even stronger investments from Croatia.

VL: Following the removal of the Foreign Minister a new crisis is arising at the state level. What is the relationship with the other two national parties?

COVIC: First of all, we should be upset with ourselves. No one can accept us if we are not strong enough. If Ashdown can appoint anyone, why should he appoint a Croat to head the state police, even though that was our political agreement. It is the same with Bosniak and Serb parties because we are not coordinated enough amongst ourselves. Today we cannot say we have the same parliamentary majority from two years ago or a Council of Ministers that functions in its full capacity.

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VL: Is it time for early elections then?

COVIC: No, for practical reasons. If we were to decide on early elections today, they would still take place next year, only a few months before regular elections. I am much more concerned by the irresponsibility of officials in government. Thus it is better to say today which ministers are not performing so that two years down the road we do not repeat the same mistake.

VL: What will you do to stop the fall in HDZ's popularity?

COVIC: Analyses indicate that HDZ's constituency is among the most stable. However, it is true that abstention is growing among all three peoples. The same is occurring in Croatia. This points to the condition in the region – people are unsatisfied with the political scene because they are convinced nothing is changing.

VL: What is your comment on Balkan Director for the European Commission Reinhard Priebe's claim that politicians in the region compensate their lack of performance in the economic and social sense with Euroatlantic promises?

COVIC: Many of us have not asked the basic question – what does EU accession mean if we have not built the necessary infrastructure which can be a part of that project. I would rather promote acceptance of EU legal, economic and social standards, which no one has to force upon us. To speak of the EU only in terms of nice promises is politically very naïve. Even if someone were to place us into such a club next year, I think many would grasp their heads when they realize how expensive the club's membership is. Of course, that is our goal, but today it is not realistic to speak of it in that way. It is the same with NATO. No one is asking how much it will cost.

VL: Will constitutional reform occur this year, as the domestic public, besides Serbs, U.S., and EU are calling for?

COVIC: For BiH it is necessary that constitutional reform takes place before the next election. However, there is another possibility - that nothing changes, which is partly taking place now, without us. Such a possibility is fatal for Croats. The scenario where cantons are abolished and entities remain creates a country with two dominant peoples, without Croats.

VL: Will HDZ propose three entities?

COVIC: The fundamental principle is equal rights. If one people receive a republic, then the other two should also. However, I do not support such an approach because a significant amount of Croats would be left outside a, hypothetically stated, Croat entity.

VL: Do you think Serbs will agree to abolish their "republic"?

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COVIC: The united Serb position to retain Republika Srpska is a political reality, but not within the current borders.

VL: Do the Croats have their own proposal?

COVIC: I expect that in the next couple of meetings of Croat political parties we will flush out an “extreme” position and two or three variations.

VL: What is the optimal solution for the BiH enigma?

COVIC: For sure, three levels of government. The middle level is the key to the country’s restructuring. I think that should be regions. Four or five regions should have a clear ethnic majority with its own legislature and executive offices. The regions need to be economically sustainable and balanced. I think that 90 percent of Croats would support such a solution.

VL: What about the capital city?

COVIC: Sarajevo should be a district or something similar. On the other hand, Mostar and Brcko should in no way be an exception.

VL: Is it time for domestic institutions to assume the authorities of the international presence even though there is opposition on two ends?

COVIC: The mandate that currently exists must end. Several European institutions insist upon this. I am confident this will take place in the fall. However, the continued presence of the international community needs to be secured, but not in the form of imposing legislation or appointing officials. I expect that we will take over full authorities and responsibilities after the next election so that the international community does not have to do our job for us.

VL: To what extent will the indictment for corruption stifle your work in heading the party, even though your attorneys argue that the charges against you are frivolous?

COVIC: The essence of my reply is in your question. The charges in the indictment are overwhelmingly trivial. I am not burdened by the indictment because I know I am innocent. It is not by chance, however, that the indictment was confirmed two months ahead of the HDZ convention, although it served its purpose and I am no longer Member of the BiH Presidency. It is significant that the protected witness has been stripped of his privileges and that the judicial process is on hold even though I asked that all the circumstances be stated openly as soon as possible. I have nothing to do in that process because I have nothing to prove. I am concerned that

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the Prosecution is still conducting its investigation, but encouraged that certain people have told me they are willing to testify how the whole matter is arranged and who stands behind it.