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Welcome to the Workshop on Serbia's regional politics – on neighborly relationship between Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina

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Ladies and gentlemen, dear participants of this conference, I bid you all welcome. Thank you for participating in this conference.

Today's Bosnia-Herzegovina portrays the starkest example of a fragile and dysfunctional state, resulting from the international community's shortsightedness and inability to fundamentally bridge peace, democracy and development in the Western Balkans. The internationally sponsored Dayton Agreement has ended the war but at the same time it has created a dysfunctional state. The complicated state set up contributes greatly to the state paralysis, apart from continuously prevailing ethnic antagonisms eighteen years after the war.

Such a Bosnia-Herzegovina faces a divided international community. The EU has conditioned Bosnia's application for membership with the closure of the Office of the High Representative (OHR), which will close on a condition that Bosnia-Herzegovina creates strong state central institutions. This is a condition which the Republic of Srpska, supported by Serbia and Russia, rejects. The EU, in principle, wants the closure of Office of the High Representative, and is willing to compromise with the Republika Srpska, but it is faced with opposition from the United States and Turkey. With the divisions among the supervisors of Bosnia-Herzegovina the centripetal forces in the state are growing, which will contribute to Bosnia-Herzegovina remaining a weak state, functioning primarily on the will of the international community and the will of its immediate neighbors, Serbia and Croatia.

The policy study by Kurt Bassuener and Bodo Weber, upon which this conference is based, gives a detailed picture of the role Serbian politics plays in Bosnia-Herzegovina. It is mainly a picture of reinvigorating special parallel relations between Serbia and the Republic of Srpska on the one hand and of undermining the statehood of Bosnia-Herzegovina by openly musing and sometimes even demanding the partition of the country on the other. This Serbian politics started when Milorad Dodik became Prime Minister in 2006. The relations with him were led primarily by internal tactical considerations. They were used mainly to relieve pressure over the Kosovo issue in Serbia's public opinion.

Does this mean that a solution of the Kosovo issue makes it easier for Serbia to recognize and support the statehood of Bosnia-Herzegovina practically? Is there a prospect that Serbia follows the example of then Croatia's president, Stjepan Mesić, who turned away from nationalistic intervention in Bosnia-Herzegovina and proclaimed to Bosnian Croats that Sarajevo, and not Zagreb, was their capital?

Much depends on what kind of solution could be found for the Kosovo issue. The United States and some EU member states openly declare that they do not want “a new Republic of Srpska in Kosovo“ because this model did not prove as a good solution for the development of Bosnia-Herzegovina. This is a statement which can be used twofold: used for a sustainable solution of the Kosovo issue by avoiding the creation of some Serbian entity or Serbian state in the state of Kosovo and thus avoiding the creation of a dysfunctional Kosovo; and used for the dismantling of the special parallel relations to Republic of Srpska and recognizing Bosnia-Herzegovina’s statehood.

In their policy recommendations, Kurt and Bodo recommend to Serbia’s state officials to cease linking the future of the state of Bosnia-Herzegovina with the future of the Serbia-Kosovo conflict in public statements. As I see it, the Serbian government lives up to this recommendation. Is this because the Serbian government sees that Republic of Srpska is a bad model?

I believe that the international community would be well advised to always compare the Republic of Srpska and the issue of northern Kosovo. Doing so, the international community expresses her conviction that a Republic of Srpska in Kosovo should be prevented and the Republic of Srpska should finally be integrated in Bosnia-Herzegovina.