

Bosnia: Ashdown Reins In Bosnian Serbs

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Top international official in Bosnia acts to curb Banja Luka's powers.

The High Representative's move against Republika Srpska, RS, this week was aimed at bringing the disobedient entity to heel and not the beginning of process that some Bosnian Serbs fear will eventually lead to its dismantlement.

The High Representative Lord Ashdown announced on April 2 that he was removing all mention of statehood from the RS constitution and abolishing its supreme defence council, the entity's highest military authority.

Bosnian Serb parliamentarians expressed anger at the measures in an emergency session in Banja Luka on April 3, saying the move was intended to destabilise the territory and called on their government to protest.

Democratic Nationalist Party member Jovo Maksimovic said it spelt the "beginning of the end for Republika Srpska. It will be deleted."

Ashdown's move has raised political tensions in the entity which were already running high following the resignation of Mirko Sarovic from the Bosnian state's tripartite presidency on April 2, after he accepted responsibility for RS-based Orao Aviation's illegal trade with Iraq, which violated UN sanctions.

The High Representative held Sarovic accountable for the affair and an espionage scandal - which came to light last week - in which Bosnian Serb intelligence services are alleged to have spied on western organisations and federal officials, in violation of the Dayton peace accords.

Ashdown spokesman Julian Braithwaite denied that the changes were an attempt to undermine RS, insisting that they were aimed at preventing the entity from contravening Dayton and international law in future.

Braithwaite said that the High Representative was well within his rights to make the changes. He pointed out that under the Dayton accords - the country's constitution - there was no provision for Bosnia's two entities being sovereign or independent, nor for them to have separate military command structures. "It's an oxymoron to have a supreme defence council at entity level," he told IWPR.

International Crisis Group analyst Senad Slatina said Ashdown was taking advantage of the recent scandals to bring the increasingly errant RS back into line. Indeed, he expressed surprise that the High Representative hadn't exploited the affairs, in particular the espionage furore, to introduce tougher measures.

For much of his term in office, Ashdown has been keen to introduce sweeping economic and political reforms with the aim of speeding up the country's European integration - which he sees as vital to its stability and prosperity.

A key part of this process has been to strengthen the authority of the state over the two entities, especially

since RS has long viewed itself as an independent state, which may one day unite with Serbia.

Ashdown is particularly keen to establish state-level control over the armies of the two entities, as this would both significantly bolster central authority and enhance Bosnia's bid to join the European Partnership for Peace programme.

Getting rid of the Bosnian Serbs' supreme defence council would be an important step in this direction. And efforts are underway to look into how a unified command structure would work.

The High Representative's reform programme has been bitterly criticised by some hard line nationalists, but analysts say that the recent scandals show that he cannot afford to allow them to obstruct the process.

Bisera Turkovic, director of the Centre for Strategic Studies of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and former chairwoman of the working committee for security issues at the Stability Pact for South East Europe, said, " Orao has revealed the true state of affairs in Bosnia-Herzegovina; that institutions are actually slowing down rather than accelerating the reform process, and are operating contrary to the standards widely accepted in the whole of Europe.

"Instead of functional, operational state structures, we have a stagnating apparatus in place, and this is largely due to the passive and inert approach of the international community with respect to Bosnia-Herzegovina."

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