

Bosnian Serb Divisions Widen

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Republika Srpska was again plunged into political turmoil this week after a key member of the government coalition quit.

The Bosnian Serb entity is on the brink of political chaos following the withdrawal of the Socialist Party from the ruling pro-western coalition.

The move, allegedly orchestrated by the Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, has widened the growing rift between Bosnian Serb politicians and delivered a blow to the international community's efforts to promote political stability.

Republika Srpska has already been without a head of state for almost a year. Hard-line president Nikola Poplasen was dismissed last March by Bosnia's top international mediator for obstructing the peace process.

The withdrawal of the Socialist Party of Republika Srpska (SPRS) from the Sloga (Unity) coalition came after Bosnian Serb Premier Milorad Dodik sacked two senior SPRS officials from his government. The main board of the SPRS blamed Dodik for its decision to quit.

The move, a consequence of the ongoing power-struggle in the Unity coalition, left Dodik with a minority government, which can survive only with the strong support of international organisations in Bosnia.

Ever since it was set up in 1997, the Unity coalition was anything but politically united, often reflecting an old Serb saying, "two Serbs - three political parties." Its members never really shared a common political agenda. They were nationalists and political opportunists thrown together with international backing to topple Radovan Karadzic's hard-line Serbian Democratic Party (SDS).

Sloga succeeded in ousting the SDS and the Radical Party from positions of power, but a "monster" had been created, which international officials were either unable or too incompetent to control.

Through its main agency in Bosnia, the Office of the High Representative, the international community gave Sloga and its frontman, Milorad Dodik, unconditional support.

Dodik and the coalition did improve the situation in Republika Srpska somewhat, but mainly through western donations and loans. They remained opportunists, however, and continued fighting each other for power. Dodik has maintained the upper hand in the struggle thanks to western backing.

This despite Sloga being mired in corruption, never fully accepting the vision of a united Bosnia as drafted in the Dayton Peace Accord, nor properly implementing one of its key conditions - the return of refugees to the Bosnian Serb-held areas.

The international community also turned a blind eye to Dodik's personal shortcomings, allowing him to bully and replace his opponents as long as he was keeping the two nationalist parties - the SDS and the Radical Party - outside of government.

The international community also saw Dodik and his coalition as important weapons against Milosevic.

Dodik and other top Sloga officials publicly criticised Milosevic on numerous occasions and gradually severed ties between Yugoslavia and Republika Srpska, jeopardising Milosevic's self-proclaimed position as leader of all Balkan Serbs.

But the arrangement backfired many times, putting western agencies in often awkward and sometimes absurd positions.

Along the way, Dodik made few friends and many enemies. He even lost support from political parties in the other Bosnian entity, the Bosnian Federation.

At the same time, Milosevic increased his efforts to undermine Dodik and Sloga, usually acting either through the hard-line SDS and Radical parties, or through the SPRS. A part of the SPRS, apparently led by party vice-president Dragutin Ilic, remained loyal to Milosevic and close to his Socialist Party of Serbia.

As soon as SPRS announced its decision to step out of the coalition, key Sloga leaders, Dodik and Biljana Plavsic, accused Republika Srpska socialists of caving into pressure from Milosevic. They implied that some of the SPRS officials recently visited Belgrade and were taking directions from the Yugoslav president.

"I had hoped that SPRS would liberate itself from Serbia's pressure," Plavsic said, adding that the party's withdrawal from government was "irresponsible" because it showed it was following "petty personal interests" rather than those of all Bosnian Serbs and Republika Srpska.

"SPRS is not Sloga, but only a part of Sloga," Dodik said. And in an attempt to persuade the public that Republika Srpska was not facing a crisis, he insisted the coalition would continue working.

Yet despite his words, everybody - western organisations and Bosnian citizens alike - are aware the entity is entering its deepest political crisis since the pro-Karadzic hard-liners were removed from power.

International support, however, should ensure that Dodik remains in power without serious challenges. But only for as long as Republika Srpska has a vacant presidential post, as only the head of state can propose a new premier.

Meanwhile, the Bosnian Serb parliament will remain deadlocked with political factions unable to muster enough votes to push through decisions.

The most important consequence of the current chaos is that it could open the way for the re-emergence of the SDS in Bosnia's general election scheduled for October.

The SDS, which has undergone key personnel changes since Karadzic was leader, is now a solid opposition party, which sometimes behaves more democratically than Sloga.

But although the SDS now appears to be quite different from the war mongering party of old - its reappearance in the corridors of power would definitively alarm international organisations in Bosnia. But

even worse, it would immediately boost ethnic tensions sky-high throughout Bosnia.

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