

Bosnian Serb Leaders Still Talking Secession

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The idea of splitting off from the rest of Bosnia goes down well in the Serb entity, but doesn't hold out promise of instant prosperity.

When Bosnia's national football squad won a World Cup qualifier against Slovakia last month, it took the country a step closer to its first appearance at the tournament next June in Brazil.

But while football fans in Bosnia's bigger administrative entity, the Federation – populated mainly by Bosniaks and Croats – were ecstatic, those in the predominantly Serb entity, Republika Srpska (RS) were mostly indifferent. They prefer to support neighbouring Serbia's team.

Bosnian journalist Faruk Sehic says divided loyalties in Bosnia's football world tell an important wider truth.

"Ties between members of Bosnia's different ethnic groups have never been weaker. They are almost non-existent," he wrote in the Sarajevo weekly magazine Dani. "Something that anywhere else in the world is seen as the only sensible thing to do – rooting for your own national sports team – is very rare in Republika Srpska."

The Dayton Peace Agreement which ended the 1992-95 war split Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) into two "entities", the Federation and RS, which function as mini-states in some respects.

For years, RS politicians led by President Milorad Dodik have been undermining efforts to consolidate Bosnia as a unitary state. On occasion, they have openly called for RS to become independent. Others talk of annexation to Serbia.

Although the majority of RS citizens seem to share Dodik's separatist ambitions, some see it as a diversionary tactic in the face of pressing matters like the struggling economy, rising poverty, and unemployment rates of 40 per cent.

Milan Jovicic, former city council head in Mostar in the Federation, argues that secession would not solve any of the problems facing people in RS.

"I recently heard Milorad Dodik say BiH would soon disappear as a unified state," Jovicic said. "I'd respond by saying that this country is frail but will never dissolve. I am fighting against that on a daily basis. Our [Bosniak and Croat] friends and neighbours would never accept RS seceding from the rest of Bosnia, I can guarantee that."

Boris Seslija, a Serb from Mostar who now lives Germany, shares this view.

"I don't see how RS's independence from BiH could do any good for me or any other young person. Bosnia is already a very small market, and RS seceding would make it even smaller," he said. "If there was a referendum, most Serbs in RS would opt for independence, but we shouldn't forget that this would further alienate [Serbs] living in the Federation."

Some Serbs in RS certainly believe they would be better off if they were living in an independent state aligned with Serbia.

Until 1992, Nelica Boskovic lived in Capljina, a mostly Croat town in the south of what is now the Federation.

She had a house and good job there, but when war broke out, Boskovic and her family fled from Capljina and headed towards Serb-held territory further east, and now lives in Trebinje, in RS.

"BiH is no good for young people," said Boskovic, sitting in a busy café in central Trebinje.

She said the only way for Bosnia to survive intact would be if local communities were much more ethnically mixed, as they were before 1992. "But after everything that happened during the war, I don't think that's possible," she added.

Boskovic believes it is quite possible that RS will break away from Bosnia. As a next step, she says, "the most logical and normal thing would be for RS to join Serbia. I think we would become stronger, more stable and more secure."

Predrag Pujic, the director of the Youth Centre in Trebinje, said that while it was natural for members of one ethnic group to want to be united in one state, joining Serbia would not offer a magical solution for RS's problems.

"I am afraid we'd be just as distant from Belgrade as we are from Sarajevo and Banja Luka at the moment. We would only be some poor provinces in southern Serbia," he said.

Ratko Pejanovic, a Serb living in Mostar, believes that whatever RS politicians say, the international community will not agree to a further division along ethnic lines.

"I don't think the secession of RS is possible because the world would not allow it," he said. "I am sure it's still a realistic concept in the heads of some politicians, but I don't believe the international community would let that happen."

Pejanovic, too, believes that politicians in RS talk about independence as a way of distracting people's attention from more important issues.

"We have to be aware that the economy in the whole country is in very poor shape. People don't have jobs they could focus on, and they are therefore susceptible to all kinds of extreme ideas with which the politicians bombard them," he said.

Nihad Bojic, a Bosniak journalism student from Tuzla in the Federation, agrees that insisting that RS can only prosper if it separates from Bosnia is used to mask much bigger problems.

"I am not a prophet and I can't say what's going to happen tomorrow or in ten years, but we should definitely move away from this cheap distraction of people's attention," Bojic said. "That can only be achieved by starting at the top of the pyramid, where we have the completely wrong people - people whose goal is not to solve these problems, but to generate them."

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