

The Changing Face of Republika Srpska

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Bosnian Serbs have begun to set aside the hatreds and exaggerated stereotypes that fueled the war.

Into the early morning hours, the songs of Ceca, Dragana Mirkovic or any one of Serbia's multitude of turbo-folk stars resonate from Banja Luka's jam-packed nightclubs.

Since the 1992-1995 war, it is overwhelmingly Bosnian Serbs who live in this tree-lined Habsburg city, now the capital of the Bosnia's Serb entity, Republika Srpska. The Bosnian Serbs know every pop hit from Serbia proper, every player on Belgrade's Red Star soccer team and at weddings proudly brandish the red-blue-white Serb flag. Television signals, black-market trade and, not least, political influence transcend Serbia's western border.

Bosnian Serbs retain strong ties with neighboring Serbia, even though the 1995 Dayton peace agreement dashed their wartime goal to merge with the Yugoslav state. Although it may have been a consolation prize, Bosnian Serbs jealously guard the existence of Republika Srpska and its legally-defined autonomy within Bosnia.

Most of Bosnia's 1.5 million Orthodox Christian Serbs have come to accept, albeit grudgingly, that they will remain part of Bosnia for the foreseeable future. Yet the issues associated with the Serb national cause dominate political discourse here, and have ultimately hampered the implementation of the four-and-a-half year, multi-billion dollar peace process.

In election after election, Bosnian Serb voters hand victories to extreme nationalist parties whose leaders are indicted for war crimes or are regularly removed by the international peace mission's chief administrator for obstructionist tactics.

The April 8 municipal elections issued victories across Republika Srpska to the former party of wartime Serb leader Radovan Karadzic, who is wanted by the war crimes tribunal in The Hague. Despite the strongest challenges to date of moderate Serb parties, the Serb Democratic Party, SDS, received the most votes in 52 of 61 municipalities, results which are widely considered a blow to international efforts here.

"The idea of a Serbian state, of Serbhood in Bosnia Herzegovina never really died," explains Predrag Bauovic, a local media consultant. "The concept of Bosnia as one united country hasn't really ever taken hold here. Now we have a transition period in which the Serbian public in Bosnia is trying to figure out what to do."

The Serb entity's political elite has fought the international peace effort almost every step of the way. Hardline nationalists have blocked or stalled international initiatives to bring the two halves of Bosnia together through joint governing institutions, free trade and travel, and a common hard currency. But even the moderate government of Prime Minister Milorad Dodik, hand-picked by the international community, has procrastinated when it comes to pushing through substantive reforms.

"Dodik has delivered a lot less than he promised," says Jim Hooper, Balkan Coordinator for the International Crisis Group, an international watchdog organization. "The Bosnian Serb political elite has implemented only what the international community has compelled it to implement."

That said, all is not as it was five years ago in the bitter aftermath of the war. A flourishing independent

media exists, while state-run television, under close international scrutiny, has noticeably tempered its tone. Private cars, public buses and commercial lorries criss-cross former frontlines unimpeded. Basketball and soccer teams now regularly compete against opponents from the other entity. And in individual attitudes as well, Bosnian Serbs have begun to set aside the hatreds and exaggerated stereotypes that fueled the war.

Much of the original animosity toward the international peacekeepers has subsided. One explanation for this, says Hooper, is that the weakened Bosnian Serb military is increasingly comfortable using the NATO-led forces as a defensive shield. "Ironically, the Bosnian Serbs rely on the international community to provide them security," he says.

Even most hardline politicians, like those in the SDS, now endorse the peace process, including paying lip-service to Serb participation in the Bosnian state. One obvious reason for this abrupt change in attitude is international stipulations that prohibit parties that oppose the peace plan. Over the past year, the peace mission's international administrators have removed Bosnian Serb authorities from official positions and banned several political parties from participating in the local elections.

The nationalists' new co-operative tone has encouraged some critics but left others unimpressed. "They obviously haven't changed overnight," says Natasha Tesanovic, director of the independent Alternative Television. "The simple fact is that they're always under the scrutiny of the international community. One wrong step and you can be removed from the political scene.

I think they get it. "

Over the past three years, more moderate politicians have emerged to challenge the hard-line nationalists, whose reputation had been badly tarnished by corruption and black-marketeering. But while reform communist, social democratic and moderate nationalist parties have made inroads, they usually run a distant second to the hardliners.

"The parties here are all more or less nationalistic," says Bauovic. "Their main concern is Republika Srpska, the protection of the Serb national interest in Bosnia. The moderates try to emphasize that it should be done within Bosnia, that Serbia is another country. But there is a common concern, a Serbian one."

The legacy of the war remains a sensitive and emotional issue. Most Bosnian Serbs justify the "homeland war" as righteous and necessary, as an ultimately defensive measure to rescue Serbs from an Islamic state reminiscent of Ottoman Turkish rule under which Serbs languished for centuries. The Serbs inevitably see themselves as victims: of the war, of ethnic cleansing, and of international conspiracies. The world is divided into countries that are "pro-Serb," like Russia and Greece, and enemies of their nation, like the US, Germany and Turkey.

One of the stickiest issues is the return of Bosnian Muslim and Bosnian Croat refugees to their former homes, a key principle of the peace accords. So far, only a trickle of minority refugees have been repatriated. At every turn, entity officials attempt to block or delay the process and politically motivated violence against returnees is commonplace.

"During the war, people fought for their rights and for their independence without other nationalities," says Vesna Ljubicic, a 21-year old economics student. "And now they're coming back. We will have the same situation as before the war. So what were all the war victims for?"

"The same, or in most cases similar, people are in power as during the war," says Franjo Komarica, Banja Luka's Catholic Archbishop, a leading champion of human rights in the region. "It's not in the least surprising that they're resisting refugee return. Now they say what the international community wants to

hear in order to get money, but they do nothing."

International officials assert there are still strong political links between the Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic and leading Bosnian Serb politicians, particularly in the SDS. Among most Bosnian Serbs, there is no love lost for Milosevic, who they accuse of selling them out at Dayton. But Milosevic or not, Belgrade remains their point of orientation. And as long as Milosevic pulls some strings in Republika Srpska, international administrators here recognize they face an uphill struggle.

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