

Mesic Spurns Greater Croatia

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Croatia's dream of securing part of Bosnia is fading fast in the wake of Stipe Mesic presidential victory.

Stipe Mesic's election last week as Croatian head of state spells defeat for the nationalists who pressed for the country's annexation of Croat populated areas of Bosnia.

Just hours after taking office, Mesic made it clear that he plans to sever all ties with the hard-line Bosnian Croats supported by his predecessor Franjo Tudjman.

"We are not going to support a policy which failed and which worked against the interests of both Croats and Bosnian Croats," said the new president as the preliminary election results were announced last Tuesday morning.

Two days later, the Croatian leadership's new foreign minister, Tonino Picula, visited Sarajevo with assurances that any future aid sent to Bosnian Croats would be ploughed into social security, education and culture, rather than military expansion.

Mesic's tough stance marks a dramatic departure from the Tudjman regime, which refused to recognise Bosnian independence and dreamed of incorporating Bosnian Croat territory into a Greater Croatian state.

To achieve this goal, Tudjman poured an estimated \$100 million a year into equipping the Bosnian Croat militia - although much of the money is believed to have ended up in the pockets of warlords, tycoons and criminals in both states. The president also granted Bosnian Croats the right to hold a Croatian passport and to vote in Croatian elections.

Tudjman's death in December last year effectively choked off Croatian support for the hard-line nationalists in Bosnia. His Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) was promptly defeated in the parliamentary elections while the HDZ candidate, Mate Granic, failed to make the second round of the presidential race.

Bosnian Croat voters were left to choose between the remaining moderate candidates who shared a similar position on the Bosnian Croat question. More than 80 per cent voted for Drazen Budisa as "the lesser of two evils", after Budisa was quoted as saying that Croatia would only withdraw funding from Bosnian Croat troops if Bosnian Muslims refused to accept military aid from Islamic states.

In interviews prior to the elections, Mesic stated that he would outlaw secret deals signed with the Bosnian Croats, proposing that Croatia should lend its support to Bosnia as a whole and take part in reconstruction projects that would benefit both countries.

Ivo Komsic, a prominent Bosnian Croat intellectual and opposition leader, said that he believed Budisa would have made a better president for Croatia while Mesic's victory would better serve Bosnia's interests.

Most analysts believe the HDZ will be unable to survive the series of crippling blows it has suffered since Tudjman's death. One Western observer commented, "It is not a question of if, but when and how fast the HDZ will crumble."

Another Bosnian Croat opposition leader, Kresimir Zubak, commented, "There will now be serious changes within the HDZ." However, he said the changes would not take place until the party congress in April when HDZ moderates under Mate Granic are expected to form their own political faction.

Without financial support from Zagreb, it is unlikely that the Bosnian Croats will be able to maintain their state-within-a-state for more than a few months.

The Croat Deputy Defence Minister of the Bosnian Federation, Miroslav Prce, insisted last Wednesday that any Croatian government had an ethical obligation to fund Bosnian Croat units within the federal army. Prce admitted that these units would probably be disbanded if starved of money from Zagreb.

In the wake of Mesic's election victory, the HDZ sent its official congratulations to the new president through gritted teeth. Meanwhile, at a press conference in the southern town of Mostar, HDZ spokesmen expressed repeated hopes that Mesic would not turn his back on his ethnic kin.

But Mesic himself gave them little cause for optimism. The Bosnian Croat's "fatherland is Bosnia-Herzegovina and that's where they should seek a secure future," he said.

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