

Mostar Mayor Survives Extremist Challenge

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HDZ extremists in Mostar fail in bid to oust former Croat hard-liner from public office

Bosnian Croat nationalists have failed to overthrow one of their former

leaders who forsook extremism to bring unprecedented communal harmony to the war-shattered town of Mostar.

Embittered by recent defeats, the hard line Croat Democratic Union, HDZ, sought to compensate by mounting a vigorous campaign to unseat Neven Tomic from his post as Mostar's mayor. But they ran into a surprising wall of pro-Tomic support that stretched across the city's once fierce communal divide.

Mostar became a symbol of the Bosnian war, its Croat and Muslim

communities facing each other in mutual hatred from their shell-torn

homes. Under Tomic the hatreds gradually broke down to the point where

citizens can move in peace between rival sections of the town.

In his day as an HDZ leader, Tomic had embraced the same nationalist

passions as his fellow party members. But after becoming first deputy

mayor and then mayor last year he displayed unexpected moderation.

He worked hard to achieve reunification, reconciliation and rehabilitation, all of which collides with HDZ aspirations to make Mostar the capital of a separate Bosnian-Croat statelet.

What happens in Mostar has an important effect on Muslim-Croat relations throughout Bosnia.

The move to recapture the town followed the humiliating failure of HDZ to make Bosnian Croat soldiers desert the Federation army.

The HDZ believed that regaining control of Mostar would deal a heavy blow to the Federal authorities and to the international community which has made heavy financial and political efforts to rebuild the town.

In the years following the Bosnian war, Bosnian Croat officials in

the Mostar administration - in most cases elected from the most extreme wing of HDZ - managed to block any significant improvements and kept the city divided.

Tomic's first break with this policy came when he refused to support an

HDZ attempt to establish a separate Croat entity in Bosnia. Refreshingly, he was also untainted by the corruption that had characterised previous HDZ mayors.

Tomic became the first mayor to open up multi-million dollar

reconstruction projects to public tender. His HDZ predecessors simply

doled out contracts to friends, relatives or secret partners. Western

experts working in Mostar cited the case of an ex HDZ Mayor, Ivan

Prskalo, who in four years banked about seven million German marks,

bought himself an 800,000 mark yacht and handsomely solved the housing

problems of his kith and kin.

The HDZ launched its anti-Tomic drive by pushing for a no-confidence

vote against him in the 28-member town council a few weeks ago. But not all the 11 HDZ deputies supported the vote while the other, mostly Muslim, members of the council abstained.

This outcome showed HDZ hard-liners that they lack enough power even in their own party to get rid of Tomic.

The best they could manage was to oust Tomic on May 17 from his post as a party vice-president "because of repeated violations of his

obligations as a party member and his failure to carry out the party

tasks he was entrusted with". It was a small triumph that left Tomic in office unscathed.

An independent television poll carried out last week by the local Oscar

C television station in Croat-dominated western Mostar showed that around 66 per cent of Bosnian Croats in the wider Mostar region are opposed to his dismissal.

His support might have been higher but for the fact that for technical reasons most people in the Muslim sector of the town could not join in this "TV Referendum".

However, despite strong support from the general public and the

International community, Tomic is still not on completely safe ground. The HDZ is still pursuing its efforts within the town council. At the same time Tomic cannot afford to be seen as too close to the Bosnian Muslim community or to international officials.

Some Western officials and local politicians in Mostar and Sarajevo

suggested this was why Tomic last week failed to attend a ceremony

marking the start of reconstruction of Mostar's most famous historic monument, the Old Bridge, which was destroyed by Bosnian Croat tank fire during the war.

In the fevered world of Bosnian politics, attending a ceremony for such a high-profile project financed by the World Bank, UNESCO and several Western governments, could be used by HDZ to blacken Tomic's name.

Tomic's office dismissed the idea and said his absence had been caused

by previous appointments with federal and Western officials in

Sarajevo.

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