

## **Troubled Times for Bosnian Serbs**

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Republika Srpska faces an uncertain future whoever wins this weekend's election

The Serbian Democratic Party, SDS, looks set to triumph in the general election in Republika Srpska, RS, this Saturday, but there's some uncertainty over whether it will get the chance to govern if it wins.

These doubts emerged in RS political circles last week following remarks by the United States ambassador to the United Nations Richard Holbrooke and the International Crisis Group, ICG. Both called on the international community to ban the party, which governed the entity throughout the war years.

The SDS is favourite to win the parliamentary ballot. And party representative Mirko Sarovic has a convincing lead over prime minister Milorad Dodik in the presidential race.

According to a recent poll conducted by the US-based National Democratic Institute, 48 per cent of Serb voters will opt for the SDS, almost ten per cent more than voted for them in local elections in April.

The Democratic Prosperity Party, PDP, of the moderate economics professor from Banja Luka, Mladen Ivanic, contesting elections for the first time, is in second place, polling at around 20 per cent.

The Western-backed Independent Social Democratic Party, SNSD, of Milorad Dodik, is one per cent behind in third spot.

During his tour of the Balkans last week, Holbrooke branded the SDS a "criminal" organisation. He claimed that many SDS war criminals are still at large, with some even serving in local authorities - thought to be a specific reference to war crimes suspect Miroslav Deronic, an SDS leader in Bratunac, an eastern Bosnian town close to Srebrenica.

This was a signal for the ICG to publish the results of its seven-month-long field research into atrocities committed in the Bosnian conflict. The research, headed by ICG analyst James Lyons, names 75 war-time SDS officials it suspects of involvement in crimes. It claims many now occupy important positions in political and economic life, and are blocking moves to create a sustainable peace in Bosnia.

The High Representative Wolfgang Petritsch and the OSCE chief in Bosnia Robert Barry rejected the ICG/Holbrooke demand, saying it could lead to civil and political unrest in RS.

The OSCE argued that there was no reason to ban the SDS since it had not violated any electoral rules.

Moreover, there is a reason to believe that Petritsch and Barry are personally insulted by the ICG report, as the Office of the High Representative and the OSCE make a point of investigating the war-time conduct of all prospective election candidates.

It is hard to resist the impression that Holbrooke's intervention is not so much a call for the punishment of criminals than a crude attempt to bolster the electoral prospects of Milorad Dodik, whose political fortunes

have slumped in recent years.

The international community in Republika Srpska is faced with unpleasant choice of either trying to thwart the SDS or admitting that its backing for Dodik was a mistake.

Instead of supporting the development of the democratic institutions and the civic non-governmental sector, the international community rallied around the corrupt and incompetent Dodik.

Dodik's inability to get to grips with the entity's most pressing issues - such as the return of refugees, the crumbling economy and the absence of political accountability - helped to bring about the revival SDS, party facing political oblivion just three years ago.

Due to widespread institutional corruption and galloping unemployment which now stands at 40 per cent, the RS is now on the verge of social revolt.

In surveys, the electorate has expressed more concern for economy than national issues. Indeed, voters are so disillusioned with Dodik's performance here that they are prepared to elect the SDS which has no economic programme at all.

The SDS has certainly exploited voter's preoccupation with the entity's abysmal state of affairs. Instead of banging the nationalist drum, it has devoted much of its time to accusing Dodik's government of corruption and incompetence.

Its performance in the electoral campaign suggests that it has changed and makes Holbrooke's remarks seem a little dated.

And even though there are grounds to believe that the majority of those people named by the ICG are linked to crimes, with the exception of SDS officials Milan Tupajic and Milan Ninkovic, the list does not include party members who continue to exert real political influence.

Moreover, the ICG list includes members of other parties, like former minister in Dodik's government Petko Cancar; Biljana Plavsic, the leader of the pro-Dodik SNS; the powerful financier Rajko Dukic, who himself admitted that a ban on the SDS would lead to the exclusion of other parties.

In response to the OHR and OSCE demands, the SDS insisted that it had long since renounced extreme nationalist policies. Sarovic said his party was not the one Holbrooke remembers from the Bosnian conflict but one with a young leadership unburdened by war-time associations.

The key question is the authenticity of the changes the party has undergone. Some analysts suggest that the reforms have been merely cosmetic, citing the fact that the SDS has so far refused to declare its position on the key issue of co-operation with the international war crimes tribunal.

In RS, the only support for the exclusion of the SDS from Saturday's ballot comes unsurprisingly from Dodik, who would clearly benefit if his rivals were out of the way. He argues that an SDS victory will result in the international community severing economic assistance to the RS.

According to diplomatic sources in Sarajevo, Petritsch and Barry may reconsider their rejection of demands to ban the SDS, as the US ambassador in Bosnia, Thomas Miller, is lobbying hard for such a sanction.

The same sources believe that some kind of a compromise will be struck, according to which the SDS will be allowed to contest the elections but under intense international scrutiny.

Whatever the outcome the election in Republika Srpska, it is clear that Ivanic will play a critical role in forming the next government. Neither the SDS nor the SNPĐ are expected to do sufficiently well to rule on their own. Both would have to rely on Ivanic to establish a coalition government, in which the PDP leader would almost certainly be appointed prime minister.

Should Ivanic go into coalition with the SDS, he may seek to counter international criticism of the party by insisting on a government of experts, comprising specialists in various spheres.

If on the other hand, Ivanic forms an alliance with Dodik's SNSD, the prospects for stable government are not much better. The two parties would not have enough deputies to rule and would require the support of the Federation's reformist parties (Lagumdzija's Social Democrats and the New Croatian Initiative of Kresimir Zubak) - a task which will probably prove beyond them.

Forming a government will only be the beginning of Ivanic's problems. He will face pressure from Serb voters on two fronts. They will want him to improve their standard of living and to keep Republika Srpska intact - a difficult task given that the international community is taking steps to bring the two Bosnian entities closer.

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