

Zagreb Spurns Bosnian Croat Separatism

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The Croatian government distances itself from Bosnian Croat separatist ambitions

The Croatian government has heaped criticism on calls from Bosnian Croat nationalists for the creation of a third, majority Croat "entity" in Bosnia.

A controversial referendum on the issue staged by the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia-Herzegovina, HDZBiH, on general election day provoked an angry response from Zagreb.

In an interview with Sarajevo daily Dnevni Avaz, Croatian President Stipe Mesic warned, "any attempt to go for a new structure in Bosnia would mean recognising the results of ethnic cleansing. Croatia is absolutely against it."

On his return from the fifth anniversary celebrations of the Dayton Accords in the United States, Mesic called for the strengthening of central government control in Bosnia. He also proposed the formation of a united Bosnian army, which would retain three national components, but operate under a unified command and one budget.

He dismissed HDZBiH ambitions for a separate state as "delusions".

No one in Zagreb government circles can countenance another "Bosnian adventure". This year the government has pledged \$33 million in aid to the Bosnian Croat community, half the amount given annually during the reign of late Croatian President Franjo Tudjman.

Throughout his ten years in office, Tudjman, like Slobodan Milosevic in Yugoslavia, sought to incorporate areas of Bosnia into a 'Greater Croatia'. But support among the Croatian public for such a policy has dwindled markedly over the last year. Nationalist Bosnian Croat politicians are criticised for being old-fashioned or simply desperate.

Croatians are preoccupied with domestic concerns - reversing the catastrophic economic crisis, changing the constitution to bolster parliamentary powers and clipping the wings of the security services.

The public in Croatia ignored the Bosnian Croat referendum. That together with their overall indifference to the general election results in what is after all a foreign country demonstrates Croatia's political maturity.

Radical nationalists in Croatia, although a minority, are still active despite the HDZ's electoral demise. Their daily newspaper, Slobodna Dalmacija, continues to focus on Bosnia and the Bosnian Croats.

In a special supplement on Bosnia, the paper carried an interview with HDZBiH leader Ante Jelavic, who attacked Mesic for his support for an integrated Bosnia.

"We implore Mesic not to meddle in our state affairs," Jelavic said. This comment clearly illustrates the absurd situation in which the HDZBiH now finds itself. For years the party strove under Zagreb's direction

to annex areas of Bosnia to Croatia. Now the party persists in its ambitions for a separate Bosnian Croat statelet, in defiance of Croatian government policy.

The HDZBiH's has little hope of creating an ethnically homogenous Herceg-Bosna statelet. The majority of Croats believe Bosnia will evolve into a civil society. But the duration and success of this process depends largely on the skill of the international community, which has found itself under constant criticism.

Many observers had anticipated that Tudjman's death and the electoral disaster which engulfed his nationalist HDZ in the Croatian general election in January 2000, would undermine support for nationalist Bosnian Croats.

In fact the opposite has happened. Unconfirmed results from the November 11 poll indicate the HDZBiH is winning comfortably in majority Croat areas.

Croatian officials place the blame for the HDZBiH's election victory, and that of the nationalist Serbian Democratic Party in Republika Srpska, squarely at the door of the international community and its policy in Bosnia.

One example, cited by Mesic, was the decision to change the electoral rules so close to the ballot. The HDZBiH argue the new system gives an unfair advantage to the majority Muslim population. Croatian Foreign Minister Tonino Picula has called on the international administration to avoid further "rash moves".

But on November 17, Western officials barred 10 HDZBiH deputies from taking up their seats in parliament, as punishment for organising the election day referendum.

Picula's ministry has criticised the ban, warning it will create unnecessary tension with the HDZBiH and further unify Bosnian Croats behind them. The party has threatened to boycott Bosnian institutions if the ban is not reversed.

Political analyst Mirjana Kasapovic says the international community is naive in its belief that changes in former Yugoslav countries occur as a result of some sort of domino effect - that the collapse of the Tudjman regime led to the collapse of the Milosevic regime, which in turn will automatically deal a fatal blow to nationalist politics in Bosnia.

"This attitude overlooks the deep structural, social, political, cultural and psychological differences between these three countries," Kasapovic points out.

She blames the international community for studiously avoiding the crucial question - is there a consensus among Bosnia's three constituent ethnic communities which predisposes them to live in an integrated state?

Western representatives dare not raise this question. A referendum on such an issue would almost certainly bring what fragile unity there is in Bosnia crashing down, laying waste all the effort and billions of dollars invested over the past five years.

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