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[European Union](#)

[European Neighbourhood](#)

[Russia & Eurasia](#)

[The Americas](#)

[North America](#)

[Latin America](#)

[Middle East & Africa](#)

[Middle East](#)

[Africa](#)

[Asia Pacific](#)

[East Asia](#)

[South Asia](#)

[South East Asia & Australia](#)

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[Democracy & Development](#)

[Environment & Economy](#)

[Global Security & Terrorism](#)

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[Future Events](#)

- [Past Events](#)
- [Campaigns & Projects](#)
- [Affiliated Projects](#)
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The break-up of Bosnia and the break-up of Serbia ?

By Marko Attila Hoare, 30th September 2010

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

1. The secessionist drive of the Republika Srpska government under Milorad Dodik is echoed across the border in Serbia, where radical members of the Bosniak or Muslim community seek autonomy for the Sandzak region.
2. Should the international community acquiesce in RS's secession, it will strengthen radicalism among the Sandzak Muslims, whose own demands for autonomy or independence there will be no grounds for refusing.
3. The international community must take firm action against Dodik's secessionist drive, which threatens to unleash a new regional conflagration potentially encompassing Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Macedonia.

Milorad Dodik, the prime minister of Bosnia-Herzegovina's Serb entity – the Serb Republic or Republika Srpska (RS) – is openly pursuing a policy of secession. Dodik, who is currently running for president of the RS in an election due to take place on 3 October, recently **stated** that 'Bosnia is an impossible country, many of you know that better than I do. It has

no common history. It has a history of divisions' – divisions, indeed, that Dodik's regime is seeking to deepen. Parallel to this, across the border in Serbia, the Muslim/Bosniak-majority region of Sandzak is being **described** as the 'Balkans' latest hot spot.' There, the more militant elements, led by the Sandzak Mufti Muamer Zukorlic, are demanding autonomy for the region. Serbia's President Boris Tadic supports Dodik's secessionist regime and his presidential bid; he recently attended an pre-election rally in the RS town of Doboj, where he **described** Dodik's Alliance of Independent Social Democrats as 'friends who best lead the RS'. Yet if Dodik succeeds in his goal of breaking up Bosnia, which given Western complaisance and Bosniak passivity he may well do, there may be repercussions in Serbia and elsewhere that Tadic might not find so welcome.

During the wars in Croatia and Bosnia in the 1990s, supporters of the Great Serbian cause would frequently pose a specious rhetorical question: if Croatia and Bosnia (or 'the Muslims') were allowed to secede from Yugoslavia, why were the Serb populations of Croatia and Bosnia not similarly allowed to secede from them ? They would pose it as if it were a clinching argument for their case, then would be surprised by how easily it was answered: the Serb populations of Croatia and Bosnia were not equivalent to the Republics of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina; rather, it was the Republic of Serbia that was equivalent to the latter, and its right to self-determination was not contested. The Serb populations of Croatia and Bosnia were broadly equivalent to groups such as the Croat population of Bosnia, the Muslim/Bosniak and Hungarian populations of Serbia or the Albanian population of Macedonia, and none of these groups has had its right to secession recognised by the international community.

Indeed, the only such group that has been granted any degree of territorial autonomy under the existing order in the Balkans is the Bosnian Serbs, who possess their own entity, the 'Republika Srpska' or Serb Republic, enjoying most of the attributes of statehood. This contrasts with the treatment meted out to the Bosnian Croats, whose own para-state entity – the self-proclaimed 'Croat Republic of Herceg-Bosna' – was dismantled following the Washington Agreement of 1994 and the Dayton Agreement of 1995, to the intense annoyance of the Bosnian Croat nationalists. Despite the fact that Serb nationalists, alone of all the nationalists of the former Yugoslavia, have been allowed to carve out a wholly new autonomous entity on the territory of an existing state, the discourse of Serb victimhood continues to paint the Serbs as the perpetual victims of a global anti-Serb conspiracy.

Under Dodik's leadership, Bosnian Serb nationalists are not resting content with having obtained an entity of their own encompassing a disproportionately large share of Bosnian territory (49% for a Serb nationality that made up 31% of Bosnia's pre-1992 population), but are aiming at full independence. The ground for this may be prepared with a referendum, and Dodik recently **stated** that 'I am convinced a day will come for the Serbian people to decide on their status in a referendum, the status of the RS within Bosnia.' Yet Dodik is aware that a premature declaration of independence could provoke an international and Bosniak reaction that could prove his and the RS's undoing. Serb nationalists have a long history of pursuing self-defeating strategies dictated by emotion and bloody-mindedness rather than cool calculation, but Dodik appears cleverer than most. While keeping the secessionist fire burning through his bellicose rhetoric, he is going about achieving his goal in a gradual, piecemeal manner. As he **stated** recently, 'We are not adventurists; we shall move carefully.'

Thus, on 14 September, the RS parliament **passed a law** unilaterally transferring all pre-1992 Bosnian state property located on the territory of the RS to the ownership of the RS. The international community expressed only weak dissent at this act of plunder, with the Peace Implementation Council, the body charged with the overseeing of the international administration in Bosnia, merely **stating** that it would delay Bosnia's Euro-Atlantic integration – not a threat likely to impress the pro-Russian Dodik.

Then, on 17 September, Dodik's government ordered a plan to be drawn up for the demarcation of the Inter-Entity Boundary Line (IEBL) that separates the RS from Bosnia's other entity, the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. This threatens a serious violation of the Dayton Agreement, which stipulated that adjustments of the IEBL must be carried out with the agreement of both entities, under the supervision of the international military force. A unilateral assertion by the RS of its border vis-a-vis the Federation would be a significant further step toward an independent RS, as well as a potentially dangerous provocation to the Bosniaks and to neighbouring Croatia, whose previous president, Stjepan Mesic, threatened to **intervene militarily** to prevent the RS's secession.

Dodik has justified his secessionist drive with reference to Kosovo's secession from Serbia, and the ICJ's ruling in July that

the secession was not illegal. He **commented** at the time that the ICJ's opinion could serve as a 'guideline for our struggle for the status and the future' of Republika Srpska; 'For quite some time, we have not been happy to be a part of Bosnia-Herzegovina....we will not exclude the possibility of additional political struggle for status which, in line with this opinion, would not be in contradiction with international law.' Such arguments are disingenuous; the Bosnian Serb nationalists seceded from Bosnia and declared their independence already in 1992, long before the West embraced Kosovo's independence.

In fact, the Western recognition of Kosovo's independence, however Dodik may use it as a pretext, represented merely the natural culmination of the established policy of the international community, which recognised the right to self-determination of all former members of the socialist federations of the USSR, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. Kosovo was a member of the former Yugoslav federation in its own right, and though it was also part of the Socialist Republic of Serbia, it had most of the attributes of a separate republic. By contrast, the West has not recognised the right to independence of the Albanian communities of Macedonia, Montenegro or Serbia proper. If Dodik does succeed in effecting the RS's secession, this will bring the international community into uncharted waters.

This brings us back to the Sandzak, whose radical Mufti Muamer Zukorlic has **stated** that the region's autonomy from Serbia is an 'inevitable social process'. This does not represent a wise policy; Serbia is potentially a stable and prosperous state, and the Sandzak Bosniaks will be better off as an integral part of it than as some form of distinct entity. Nor will Serbia be likely to countenance Sandzak's autonomy, given the justified suspicion that this will be merely a stepping stone toward full independence. Violence and repression will be the likely Serbian response to any autonomist move on the part of the Sandzak Bosniaks, who are likely to come out worst from the confrontation. Yet if Bosnia's Serbs are permitted the right to secede, there are no possible grounds for denying a similar right to Serbia's Bosniaks. Even if the international community acquiesces in the Serbian double-standard, and denies the Sandzak Bosniaks a right that the Bosnian Serbs have acquired, this will have a radicalising effect on the Sandzak Bosniaks.

The current dividing line in Sandzak's politics is between Zukorlic's radicals, who look toward the Sarajevo and the Bosniaks of Bosnia, and the more moderate elements who favour integration in Serbia and look toward Belgrade. The break up of Bosnia would strengthen the hand of the former against the latter. Zukorlic has **warned** that the tensions in the Sandzak could erupt into violence, and there is no reason not to take him seriously. Nor would any such instability be confined to Serbia. The historical Sandzak region was partitioned at the end of World War II between Serbia and Montenegro, and a large Bosniak/Muslim population remains across the border in the Montenegrin part of Sandzak. This, too, is an area to which instability could spread. As Zukorlic has **stated**, 'The Sandzak is divided between two states, and the concept of cross-border autonomy is something that should be a platform for negotiation. Certainly all specificities must be taken into consideration – Sandzakian, Serbian and Montenegrin.'

Should the RS's secessionism trigger a counter-secessionism among the Sandzak Bosniaks, sparking a conflagration in Serbia that spreads to Montenegro, it could serve as a catalyst to a further counter-secessionist movement among the Albanian communities of south Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia, not all of whom are by any means content with the existing territorial status quo. Not to mention encourage further Serbian efforts to redraw international borders – at the expense of Kosovo, and possibly of Montenegro and Macedonia as well.

Support for the right to self-determination does not imply support for each and every irredentist claim. Had Serbia's leadership in the early 1990s, which claimed to champion the national rights of the Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia, been genuinely interested in the principle of self-determination, it would have recognised that this principle could not be practised through the redrawing of borders between the constituent Yugoslav republics. For all three of the principal states at the heart of the Yugoslav question – Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia – had multiethnic populations that could not be neatly divided along territorial lines into homogenous territories of Croats, Bosniaks and Serbs, and any attempt to do so would simply create more problems than it solved. The borders were drawn where they were between these states by the post-war Yugoslav regime for a reason, and it is a great pity that certain fools in the West were hoodwinked by the Milosevic regime's propaganda into believing that everything could be solved by certain 'border corrections' that just happened to hand over a much larger share of territory to that regime and its proxies. Today, with Dodik's dangerous secessionist game, we are paying the price for acquiescing in Bosnian Serb irredentist claims, through Dayton back in 1995. It is time that we stopped acquiescing, before we allow yet another Balkan disaster to unfold.

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