

Will the Serbian Republic in Bosnia and Herzegovina be able to make it to independence? Certain political ambitions of President Milorad Dodik

At the beginning of October 2012, the President of the Serbian Republic (*Republika Srpska*) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik, announced that his government and the Serbs will no longer finance the joint Military Forces of BH (*Oružane Snage*) created in January 2006. It was supposed to be understood as another step towards the long declared secession of this part of the country. Will another Serbian state be created and the “Dayton Accords” be deconstructed?

Despite the fact that BH is treated as a whole, in terms of international law and the external borders of 1991, it is a deeply non-consolidated country and considered to be “fallen” (however, it is difficult to compare it to Somalia, Haiti, Chad or Sudan). The BH Federation (Bosnians and Croats, 51% of the area) is completely different from the Serbian Republic (different administrative solutions, separate anthem, national symbols, judiciary, economic potential, etc.), which is not conducive to integration despite numerous efforts and attempts. BH is de facto a politically non-sovereign entity dependent on aid. The long-lasting political crisis after the parliamentary elections in October 2010, obviated as late as the beginning of 2012, was also a significant problem, not to mention the economic weakness and the “inborn” dysfunction of the country and the disputes of the “ethnic parties”.

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The Bosnian Serbs, since the creation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with its borders established during the Dayton Agreement (1995), despite the fact that they gained the status of a “constitutional nation” (separate Bosnians and Croats) and extensive autonomy, have not considered themselves to be the “citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina”, but of the Serbian Republic only. Moreover, they do not strive to become members of a homogeneous “Bosnian nation” (the so called *Bosanacs*) together with Bosnians and Croats.

Milorad Dodik (born in 1959), who was seen as a “pro-Western” politician at the beginning (he was Prime Minister in 1997-2001 and 2006 and became President in 2010), he quickly got into conflict with the High Representatives of the EU, especially with Valentin Inzko (2009-2011), who tried to abolish the Serbian Republic. Despite different financial machinations and more or less justified suspicions of corruption, he is a very popular politician among the Serbs. His position, together with a strong party powerbase and visible support in Russia, has been tying the hand of the EU and American politicians trying to dismiss him. One of Dodik’s main arguments, being a political argument and a threat at the same time, is the long-announced “referendum” which is supposed to answer the question concerning the future of the Bosnian Serbs in BH. A result positive for the Bosnian Serbs would, at the same time, constitute one of the pillars legitimizing their succession from the SR.

The West, especially the USA, is aware of the “wear and tear” or devaluation of the decisions made in Dayton, or even the necessity of “dedaytonization” and creating a new constitution. However, these intentions are hindered by some Bosnian politicians, including the Serbs and the local “interest groups”.

One of the key elements on the path of BH to the European Union, which is required by Brussels and considered a “priority”, is the gradual centralization of the country and its institutions as well as the systematic removal of the numerous flaws in the functioning of the most complicated and expensive political system in the world. However, President Dodik and his party, SNSD, as well as the majority of the Serbs are not interested in integrating the Serbian Republic and its identity into the homogeneous country ruled by Sarajevo. They consider it to be a “completely artificial entity” kept alive by the presence of the High Representative of the EU and his Office in Sarajevo, as well as by the USA and the West in general. The strategic political target of the Bosnian Serbs is to join the regions controlled by the Banja Luka government with the “motherland”, the Serbian Republic.

This merger with Serbia, more or less openly declared by Dodik and his government, would create a country with largely artificial borders. However, the potential secession of the Serbian Republic, covering 49% of the country’s surface, would restrict the



power of the government in Sarajevo solely to the area of the BH Federation (51%). Would the Croats, constituting about 17% of the population, still want to remain within the borders of the Federation with the Bosnians? This problem is a bit more complicated, because for several years the political demand of Croatian elites has been the so called “third entitet”, which would basically overlap with the area of the Herzeg-Bosnia Republic existing since 1994. It would put the Croats at a position equal to the mentioned Bosnians in a political and territorial sense. Therefore, it remains a question whether their ambitions and intentions would turn towards full integration with the Republic of Croatia, which would become more politically and economically attractive as a full member of the European Union (from July 2013).

This path seems very probable, because the advantages of the Croats and Zagreb over the Serbs are mainly their better image in the world, higher economic affluence and undeniable attractiveness to tourists. Serbia does not have any of these things and its path to the EU is, in today’s perspective, much longer and fairly uncertain because of the deep crisis troubling the EU for several years. It is possible that after the accession of Croatia, the EU and Brussels will hold the process of “EU enlargement” for years. Moreover, the image of Serbia and the Serbs in the eyes of the West is much worse than that of the Croats. This is because of the blame for the Srebrenica massacre, the image of the “Balkan butchers” and “war criminals” partially created by the media or the still present, even though not completely true, image of the “oppressors of the Albanians” from Kosovo. There is also the economic weakness of the country and the still severe aftermath of the war with NATO in 1999. Therefore, even for the Serbs from the Serbian Republic, their “homeland” and Belgrad have a primarily emotional and, to some degree, historical dimension. Incorporation is neither attractive nor realistic.

The future status of the Serbian Republic and the mutual relationship may become a true challenge and a beginning of serious difficulties also for the politicians from Belgrad and Banja Luka. It is not known today whether the secession of the Serbian Republic would result in an almost immediate political merger with Serbia or the creation of a confederacy of these two countries. This two-part nature of Serbia, enlarged in terms of territory and population, would obviously be much better for Milorad Dodik and the political elites of the Serbian Republic. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, he and his political powerbase constitute a key factor for political life. Whether it would be possible to maintain the same importance in the new relationship with Belgrad, still remains an open question. Would the ambitions of President Dodik (and his circle) be fully revealed after the potential “unification” euphoria? Would he want to maintain his important position in relation to the politicians from Belgrad and the current President, Tomislav Nikolic? Would the residents of the Serbian Republic



find themselves after some time in a situation similar to the West-Balkan “Ossis”, who consider themselves worse than their compatriots? Would the integration, or even “reintegration” of the Serbian territories take place peacefully?

These questions are very hard to answer today. Paradoxically, the issue of the potential or future integration of Serbia with the Serbian Republic is in certain aspects analogous to the integration of the Second Polish Republic, which was created out of territories with different political, legal and economic status, previously controlled by three different countries. This process was successful because despite the existing differences, the common origin, language, history and tradition of a single great country served as a uniting factor.

Conclusions:

- Despite the declarations of President Dodik concerning the secession of the Serbian Republic, it is unlikely for it to take place in the nearest future. In spite of the dramatic articles and statements in the world media concerning – “completely failed political project”, “fallen country”, “menace of dissolution”, “end of Bosnia” – the country still exists in its previous form. In 2012 it will celebrate the 20th anniversary of its creation. Apart from that, the post-election crisis lasting since October 2011 and the record longest time without the executive, the Presidium, have finally been obviated.
- Undoubtedly, the factor that may hasten the secession of the Serbian Republic from the structures of BH, apart from Dodik’s ambition, is mainly the unstable situation in the world, the possible change of direction in the policy of the USA as a superpower (the Near East, especially the increasingly difficult issues of Syria and Iran, the competition with China and India), the gradual loss of interest in Europe and, as a consequence, the loss of willingness to further enforce the “Dayton Accords” in the Balkans. The decision of Brussels to reduce aid for Bosnia, with regard to the situation in the eurozone, the severe crisis, growing unemployment and problems in Greece, Spain, Portugal, Italy, among others, may turn out to be crucial as well.
- The unprecedented successful unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo in February 2008 and the diplomatic struggle for its international recognition may serve as an example for the Bosnian Serbs. However, the support of Russia and other countries does not have as important an influence as the support of the USA and the majority of EU countries as well as many other countries in the world for the Albanians. Even if the secession of the Serbian Republic becomes reality, there still remain the questions of its



legitimacy and whether it will be a quasi-political entity, such as Transnistria, Abkhazia or South Ossetia.

- One of the crucial problems may also be the previously mentioned nature of the political relationship of M. Dodik and the Serbian Republic with T. Nikolic and Serbia - incorporation, confederation, "marked-off territory" or temporary "special". One of the most important questions, which is difficult to answer today, concerns the degree to which the ambitions of Dodik and his circle of prominent politicians and their willingness to maintain the leading position in the political scene of the Serbian Republic would be reflected in the close relationship with Serbia.
- Only a significant change in the international situation and political circumstances could be a decisive factor for the secession of the Serbs from the structures of the Bosnian country. Currently, Milorad Dodik and the politicians from Banja Luka do not have the potential (especially military), which would allow them to quickly implement their plans and declarations. The secession, even if it seems slightly irrational today, would not meet with strong opposition or action of the West. However, it could be the beginning of the end of BH - the departure of the Croats for a much more beneficial relationship with the Republic of Croatia. This would, in turn, imply the creation of a small "Republic of Bosnia" within the territory controlled by the Muslim Bosnians.

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