

Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Left and the Forgotten Partition

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On January 9, 1992, as the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia splintered, the Serbian citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) announced the independence of the Republika Srpska (RS). The precipitous announcement of Serbian autonomy could be considered the diplomatic origin of the RS quest to ethnically cleanse Bosnia, thereby making it suitable for inclusion in a Greater Serbia as was the goal of the RS's first president, Radovan Karadžić. This quest would lead to the displacement, both internal and external of 2.2 million Bosnians, the savage massacre at Srebrenica, the crimes against humanity committed at the Omarska concentration camp and a five-year siege that left the multicultural jewel of southeastern Europe, Sarajevo, devastated.

There is one stark difference between what happened in Bosnia and the atrocities perpetrated by Turkey against their Armenian population and Nazi Germany against European Jewry: thanks to modern media, these horrors took place in full view of the international community. From Right to Left, the daily images of destruction were met with staggering cynicism.

Many theories could be put forth to explain this reprehensible inaction. Perhaps some thought that the great gift of the United Kingdom's imperial foreign policy, partition, was the only recourse, and the forced removal of Bosnian Muslims which the conflict entailed was par for the course. Possibly others suffered from the ailment of religious bigotry; the implications of the blind eye turned towards the ethnic cleansing of a Muslim population by Christian Europeans cannot be ignored.

What can be said without an ounce of doubt is that both the international community at large and the international Left failed to stand with their Bosnian comrades before and during the war; there was almost total disregard of alarming news emanating from the beautiful Balkan state, and internationalists continued to fail Bosnia and Herzegovina. This, coupled with Dayton Peace Accords' (DPA) codification of religious and ethnic divisions and the successful ethnic partition of BiH as a result of the war, the dissolution of BiH is within the realm of possibility.

The Dayton Peace Accords: Division Enshrined

The Dayton Peace Accords, (DPA), signed December 14, 1995, was momentous in bringing an end to a conflict that led to the death of over 100,000 people and the rape of somewhere between 20,000 and 50,000 women. It was heralded as a great achievement of diplomacy and the international community, though truthfully, the leaders of Croatia, BiH and the then existent Federal Republic of Yugoslavia—Franjo Tudjman, Alija Izetbegović, and Slobodan Milošević—had been lured to the negotiating table by NATO's arsenal to settle the difficult question of which ethnic group would control what part of the contested country as well as the fate of a besieged Sarajevo.

The percentage of control came down to 51-49 in favor of the Bosniak-Croat Federation (FBiH). The government created in order to handle the deep ethnic divisions between the two entities is incredibly complicated. The FBiH is divided into ten cantons; five of which have a Bosniak majority, three a Bosniak-Croat majority and two are ethnically mixed. When the national government is counted, there are a total of eleven governments in one half of the nation-state. The RS, on the other hand, has a centralized government with 63 municipalities. There is only one area, the Brčko

District, which is a part of both entities.

The two entities that comprise the state of BiH are theoretically equal and both fall under the purview of the Office of the High Commissioner (OHC), the unelected representative of the international community and overseer of the implementation of the DPA. The High Commissioner (HC) was vested with considerable power; he has the ability to remove public officials from office and implement policies should there be a stalemate between the entities. BiH is essentially a representative democracy headed by an unelected official.

In the almost 18 years since the signing of the DPA, its shortcomings have steadily become more apparent with each passing year. Annex IV of the agreement serves as the constitution of BiH and has left the nation hobbled. The main point of concern, though certainly not the sole point, is its de facto ethno-religious definition of citizenship based; a “citizenship of each Entity, to be regulated by each Entity.” Annex IV was, after all, adopted by three political parties who deemed themselves the representatives of three embattled ethnicities—Croats, Bosniaks and Serbs.

This was the greatest failing of the international community. The DPA effectively constructed a nation whose halves would be constantly pitted against one another, a nation constantly in danger of renewed conflict that stands on the crutch of international diplomatic and economic intervention. As the international community’s interest in and financial support of BiH has waned, politicians have begun to employ ultra-nationalist rhetoric and alarmist tones in order to kick the crutch out from under the nation— all for the sake of votes. By far the most striking examples of this tactic come from the president of the RS, Milorad Dodik.

Dodik’s Rhetoric: Secession and Dissolution

In 2012, the international peace envoy to Bosnia-Herzegovina submitted an alarming report to the United Nations Security Council concerning the increasing threat to the nation’s territorial sovereignty. The cause? An increase in secessionist rhetoric by Bosnian-Serb officials. Valentin Inzko, the current High Representative, named President Dodik as “the most frequent, although certainly not the sole, proponent of [Bosnian] state dissolution.”

Dodik was once viewed as a moderator, a man capable of fostering a peaceful coexistence in his fiercely divided nation. Now he is seen as a scaremongering roadblock to a sustainable political future for Bosnia. With the support of Bosniak and Croat parties, as well as backing from the United States and other Western powers, Dodik rose to importance in RS shortly after the signing of the DPA in 1996 and served as president since 2006. Since then, not only has he regularly predicted the collapse of Bosnia-Herzegovina, he threatens to cause it, as was the case in 2008 when he threatened to declare independence from BiH should Kosovo declare its own independence from Serbia.

While this threat of illegal secession was contingent on another political event, the vast majority of the secession threats are arbitrary and opportunistic. The nearly one-half of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s total area that the Republik Srpska covers is a huge bargaining chip. In April 2012, Dodik told B92 News that it “is historically inevitable for Bosnia-Herzegovina to one day dissolve into its constituent parts, because not even the massive international intervention managed to secure it as a state,” before further asserting his connection to Serbia by saying that the “RS is [his] state,” that he loves “Serbia more” and sees it as his country “more than Bosnia-Herzegovina.”

Denial of Crimes of War

While the near constant threats of secession have become banal, Dodik exploits the podium of the presidency affords to frequently cast a veil over the crimes of war, an act that should never become commonplace. In 2009, he tried to clear the Army of the Republika Srpska (VRS) of several profane acts. To begin with, Dodik denied that the mortar attack of Tuzla, which killed 71 civilians, had ever taken place. This denial does more than just cleanse the hands of the VRS; it implies that the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina wrongly convicted an innocent Serb, Officer Novak Djukić, of a nonexistent war crime. In doing so, he challenges the legitimacy of the highest court of his land.

He then called into question the veracity of the internationally accepted accounts of the Markale massacres. The first of these took place on February 5, 1994. A single mortar shell claimed the lives of 68 people and wounded another 144 after falling on the crowded central market of Sarajevo. Immediately after the shelling, UN rescue workers and foreign journalists rushed to the scene, resulting in thorough documentation of the tragedy. The second came six months later, August 28, 1995. On this occasion, five shells were fired but casualties were fewer—34 dead and 78 wounded. This event would lead to NATO bombing VRS positions in the beautiful hills surrounding the Bosnian capital.

Harrowing images of both slaughters were broadcast internationally and still today can be found with great ease. Even the scars left by the mortar remain; they have been filled with blood red resin and are known as “Sarajevo roses”— sobering reminders of the abject suffering the people of Sarajevo so recently experienced.

Two men were convicted of these crimes. In 2003, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) found Stanislav Galić guilty of five counts of murder and inhumane acts, including the first bombing of the market in Sarajevo, as crimes against humanity and delivered a sentence of 20 years. In 2007, the ICTY convicted General Dragomir Milošević of a host of crimes, including the second Markale bombing. In its public judgment, the ICTY found his crimes innumerable, saying that General Milošević left “no safe place” in Sarajevo, subjecting the entire civilian population to “countless acts of violence.” He was sentenced to 33 years in prison.

Maybe his most worrisome denial took place in 2010. On a televised debate with Serbian politician Cedomir Jovanovic, Dodik denied that genocide was committed at Srebrenica. “I deem that the qualification of genocide is untenable, I believe it didn’t happen,” Dodik was quoted as saying in 2010, before continuing on to compare the future dissolution of BiH to the separation of Czechoslovakia. The ICTY ruled that the murder of somewhere between 7,000 and 8,000 (the exact number is unknown) Bosnian Muslims at the hands of VRS troops was a genocidal act and, due to widespread denials, the court conducted a campaign to dispel the myth that genocide did not take place.

His constant public denials of court decisions regarding the actions of the VRS, especially those of the ICTY, reveal Dodik as a man bent on delegitimizing intra- and international organizations, isolating the people of the RS, and leaving them under his guidance. The open placement of the press, economy, and international organizations firmly under the boot of his heel only serve to strengthen this fact.

Free Market Cronyism

Before 2012, the foundation of Dodik’s Serbian exceptionalist rhetoric was the economy. He constantly touted the western RS, dominated by Dodik’s party, the *Savez nezavisnih socijaldemokrata* or Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), as the stronger economical half, thus muting the opposition. He would then flaunt the entire RS as the stronger economical half of Bosnia-Herzegovina, usually in the interest of promoting the country’s fissure.

This is no longer the case. Since 2012, the RS economy has suffered a painful recession. An estimated 150,000 of the 1.4 million residents of the Republic are unemployed. Strikes are widespread as are accusations of corruption. Dodik privatized vast state-owned enterprises and promised widespread investments from the profits. As is often the case, the money lasted long enough to enforce pro-privatization rhetoric but not quite so long as to enact lasting change. Only one permanent investment has materialized: an impressive government compound in Banja Luka with a price tag of approximately \$140 million, though its projected cost was a mere \$14 million.



In 2008, Transparency International (TI), a leading anti-corruption institute, announced it would be closing its office in Banja Luka out of concern for the lives of its staff. Tension arose between the RS and TI after the group began investigating the dubious circumstances of the aforementioned privatizations of state-run industries.

Due to its inflated final cost, it should come as no surprise that TI accused the government of misappropriating state funds in the construction of the abovementioned government complex in Banja Luka. Moreover, the building was erected through the use of land swaps and government takeovers of private loans, a convenient pivot on the issue of privatization.

The construction of RS highways is another sordid industry. Strabag, the largest Austrian construction company, won a contract to construct a large highway bypass for the RS. The project was not advertised, thereby making competitive bidding impossible. TI raised concerns that the RS was trying to eliminate the issuance of tenders, a staple of “transparent” privatization, so that buyers could be directly chosen by the government.

Dodik himself was responsible for negotiating many of the privatization deals such as the sale of an oil refinery in Brod to the Russian company Zarubezneft, the largest purchaser of Iraqi oil under the heinously corrupt Oil-for-Food program. He is also known to award large construction contracts to companies headed by close friends from his home village, Laktasi. Such nepotism is inexcusable, and the above examples do not come close to exhausting the wealth of corruption of which Dodik and his government are suspected.

Collaborationist Media

According to Srdjan Blagovcanin, the executive director of TI in BiH, the organization was told that it would “suffer the consequences if [they] did not stop investigating privatization and business deals in Republika Srpska,” and was subsequently offered bribes in the form of “large donations” if they would investigate FBiH. After this refusal, several Bosnian Serb media sources known for their vehement support of Dodik began a smear campaign against TI. Several “protected witnesses” were reported to have proffered evidence alleging that two representatives of TI had been racketeering local businessmen. According to pro-Dodik media, the Prosecutor’s Office of BiH was investigating the allegations. The Prosecutor’s Office disagreed; they never received any information regarding these charges.

Research of Markin Communications shows that if media support of Dodik were measured in monetary value, it would equal \$87,428.38 a month in unsolicited advertising space within BiH. In spite of this, he routinely abuses the press. Dodik told Radio Free Europe that there is an international plan that funneled \$10 million in order to remove him from power and “empty the Republika Srpska.” He maintains that the money is being delivered to the opposition, nongovernmental organizations and the media. In early January he told B92 that journalists working for Radio Televizija Bijeljina, the most popular television channel in the RS, “play the decadent role of mercenaries” and act as “an information center for foreigners in the Republika Srpska.”

The president has taken steps to combat this plan. In a leaked memorandum from 2010, Dodik called for a total boycott of state-owned Federal Television News Station due to its “biased and distorted” reporting. Reporters without borders condemned the call as “absolutely outrageous” and considering “the financial importance of state advertising and the economic problems that all the media are suffering, the economic retaliation envisaged by Prime Minister Dodik constitutes a major act of blackmail.” He also forced Beta News correspondent Ljiljana Kovačević to leave a news conference after publicly berating her. This was not their first confrontation; the relationship was strained in 2009 after Kovačević released a report about misappropriation of public funds in the construction of the previously mentioned government complex.

What is the Role of the International Left?

These attacks on journalists, coupled with his discrediting of national, international, and nongovernmental organizations, have led to a civil landscape wrought by fear and exploitation. In June 2012, an underreported wave of protests against government corruption was taking place in Banja Luka. Their original intent was to demonstrate dissatisfaction with the destruction of a local park for the sake of another construction project with an inflated budget, but the protests, which were planned through social media, transformed into something larger: an outlet for popular grievances.

The people of the RS are tired of fraudulent construction ventures destroying their parks and consuming their tax dollars, the fearful political climate furthered by the collaborationist media and the divisions between themselves and their comrades in the FBiH being dug ever deeper for political gain. The protestors began to distribute fliers that boldly declared “When fear disappears, tyrants, dictators, autocrats, and false authorities start to fall.” According to eyewitness accounts, the demonstrators were professors, doctors, artists, students and labor workers. When people from such disparate social origins ban together to demonstrate in the interest of social justice, no matter the location, the Left ought to be there in presence and spirit.

Trotsky once remarked that all true internationalists could fit into one stagecoach. In the years

following the disappearance of the Spirit of '67, this was mostly true. The Internationalist movement today, however, seems to be reinvigorated. Organizations like the Internationalist Movement for a Just World and the International Solidarity Movement are fostering leftist ideals—nonviolent resistance, social justice for the oppressed, workers' rights and anti-interventionist solutions to impending conflicts—with the help of people from across the globe.

It is in the interest of the Left, after all, to spread its ideals. The proselytization of social justice not only exposes the inherent flaws of exploitative “free-market” privatization while liberating individuals suffering from oppressive policies, it wins followers. When those disillusioned with a mainstream American progressive movement that seems content to satiate itself with scraps dropped from the Republican table are able to look to those fighting for complete social and economic equality not only in the United States, but in every nation, the international movement will grow. In doing so, it is possible that a portion of the left-leaning Americans who did not vote in the last election could be mobilized and the United States could take a legitimate turn.

Albert Camus wrote that national society “can be preserved only by opening it up to a universal perspective.” Without a strong civil society, the voices of Bosnians fighting for functional, transparent democracy (and Cypriots fighting austerity, Latin Americans fighting an oligarchic financial elite, and Palestinians fighting near-total oppression) will never be heard. President Dodik has exerted himself greatly in limiting a universal, international perspective on the events taking place in the RS, and through his efforts much of the news concerning governmental malfeasance does not get the chance even to fall on deaf ears. This cannot continue. Networks of solidarity must be built and, through these networks, lines of communication can be opened. Our comrades in the Balkans are calling. Internationalists must be the ones to answer.

Footnotes