

By Alex Shone

The prime minister of the Serb Republic within the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), Milorad Dodik, campaigned in the 3rd October Presidential elections on an open platform of secession. If the republic were to secede from the FBiH it would pose a host of problems for the country and could have the potential to spark a resurgence of regional ethnic violence. There is strong pressure on the international community to intervene to prevent such an event from occurring; however, the capacity for such a response is fraught with complications.

The issue of secession in this region stems from a rhetorical question that if Bosniaks and Croats could secede from Yugoslavia then why can the Serbian populations not respectively do the same from those regions? The answer is simply because the Serb populations of Bosnia and Croatia are not equal to the populations of either of those states and therefore their right to self-determination has never been recognised. The Bosniak population of the country stands at 48% while the Serbs are 37.1% with Croats constituting just 14.3%. A direct comparison is the Albanian population of Macedonia whose right to self-determination has also never been recognised by the international community.

In this respect, the Serbian population in the FBiH is very much an exception where they have their near autonomous republic known as the Republika Srpska (RS). The land mass of the RS is disproportionate in terms of its size compared to the Serbian population of the FBiH, comprising a 49% share of the country's territory. Dodik's call for secession has not been continual; rather the RS has waited and clearly acted at what seems the opportune time. Prior to this, the RS has steadily retrenched and enhanced its position within the FBiH. Weak international protest was launched against the RS's inflammatory move this September to pass a law that transferred all property into direct RS ownership. Similarly, in the same month, the plan drawn up for the Inter-Entity Boundary Line is a serious breach of the 1995 Dayton Agreement that stipulates that all border demarcations must be in mutual agreement and conducted under the supervision of an international military force. It was this move particularly that inflamed opinion in Croatia whose president, Stjepan Mesic, threatened military intervention if secession were attempted.

Dodik's campaign for secession is based upon a precedent he claims was made by the international community when the International Court of Justice ruled that Kosovo's secession from Serbia was not illegal. International recognition of Kosovo as a nation state is not yet at hand; the secession of the RS from the FBiH would however set a precedent that would certainly destabilise the country and perhaps even the region. To once again make a contrasting example, the West has never recognised the right to self-determination of the Albanian populations of Macedonia, Montenegro or indeed Serbia itself. These could potentially be some of the wider impact points for a resulting wave of counter-secessionist sentiment.

Therein is where the threat to Balkan security lies. If secession by the RS from the FBiH were to occur, there is undoubtedly the potential to trigger a wave of counter-secessionism amidst states where political, social and economic structures are continuing to be refined and even built. If any kind of regional destabilisation were to occur, this would also have implications for the European Union's enlargement project.

Western support and recognition of Kosovo as an independent state was based on a policy of support for the controlled re-ordering of the Former Soviet Union (FSU). Undoubtedly this was in support of breaking away at the defeated Soviet Union's spheres of influence in the wake of the end of the Cold War. However, any such policy is now more complicated by other pressures weighing on Western capacity to act in the region.

South Eastern Europe and in particular the Balkan region is an immensely complex ethnic melting pot with a long legacy of conflict. International involvement in this region was conducted at a time when the US was more European-centric in its foreign policy outlook. Now however the US is embroiled in Afghanistan as well as having the pressure of present and future issues in Iran and North Korea. European involvement is similarly pressed by the same commitments as well as painfully-felt defence spending cuts. Therefore, the few states that do have an expeditionary force capacity are incredibly strained. A recurrent conflict in the Balkans is certainly a contingency that was once prepared for; but now times and priorities have drastically changed.

US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton's arrival in the country announced the US's continuing commitment to the country. The US has clearly stated that they do not support any kind of Serbian secession from the FBiH and wish to see security and peace preserved in the region.

The timing of Dodik's call for secession shows the perceived strength of their position versus that of Western powers who are perceived to be very much 'on the back foot' in the region. Inextricable to this situation is the factor of any potential for genocide and/or ethnic cleansing. This is would of course be an unacceptable development although the question surrounding its likelihood is not a simple one to answer. The fact of the matter is that the same ethnic violence undeniably remains somewhere beneath the surface of the demarcation between the different communities. Whether this situation has the potential within it to create 'another Srebrenica' is unclear though events can hardly be allowed to unfold unchecked whereby the world might find out. Though few could disagree with the international responsibility to prevent such events, we should not forget that genocide in the previous wars occurred despite an international intervention.

Ultimately, the situation that is unfolding is a challenge to the FBiH as a viable state. If Dodik's description of Bosnia as an 'impossible' country is not to be proven correct then it is a challenge that the state must smash. It is the perception amongst other ethnic minorities across several of the Balkan states that Serbians are being appeased that is a key factor of the problem. If the RS were to secede it would confirm to them that the state is not workable and would provide minority nationalist politics with a very strong platform from which to operate. In short, secession cannot be allowed to occur if the FBiH is to remain a viable state. However, we cannot simplify the problem or deny the fact that the FBiH state is in poor condition to accept this challenge. The state is crippled by the weight of its own bureaucracy and the economy is heavily stagnated. All of which exacerbates tension that allows nationalist sentiment to re-open still-raw wounds in society.

Arguably, the international community is simply not in a position to respond to this situation. In the US and Europe, all available capabilities are destined for Afghanistan with forces already committed to new states where future transnational counter-terrorism efforts are to be prosecuted. Likewise, spending cuts have focused all available contingency conflict planning on potential action over Iran, Pakistan and North Korea. The extremely shaky ground that EU enlargement already rests on as a result of recent internal challenges could very well dissuade European interest in the region. Ultimately, expeditionary capabilities are highly unlikely ventures for the time-being and this could spell tragedy for Bosnia and the region if ethnic violence were once again to flare. Belgrade and the RS clearly see the reality of the international community's position and it would seem that they are prepared to act on it.