

ANALYSIS

Divided we stand, Bosnians say

BY HARRY VAN VERSEDAAL

Will Bosnia make it? Few people place much hope in this small Balkan country these days. A national election held earlier this month has intensified pessimism about its future as it appeared to cement the political deadlock that has sabotaged Bosnia's integration with Europe.

Fifteen years after the ethnic war that cost more than 100,000 lives, the election outcome mirrored the persistent ethnic divisions inside the former Yugoslav state of 4 million people.

But there was little in the way of surprise. "The results were not unexpected given the preceding election campaign," Stefan Wolff, an international security professor at the University of Birmingham, told Athens Plus. "Ethnic divisions will not necessarily deepen further; rather, the results reflect the existing deep divisions and these will now harden as all sides see their perceptions of the respective others confirmed," he said.

The complexity of the election system is frustrating, even by the exacting standards of the Balkans. Voters picked the three members of their collective presidency – one from each ethnic group – along with deputies in the central, regional and cantonal parliaments. Additionally, Bosnian Serbs picked a new president and two vice presidents as well as delegates to their own parliament.

A US-brokered deal in 1995, known as the Dayton Peace Accord, stopped the bloodshed while splitting Bosnia into two regions – a federation of Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) and Croats and the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska (RS). The two entities are relatively autonomous but they do share a joint presidency, parliament and some state institutions all based in Sarajevo. Constitutional changes, designed to undo Bosnia's bureaucratic behemoth and unblock the country's European path by ending international guardianship, were put on ice earlier this year amid political wrangling.

Fade to black

In a sign of hope, Bakir Izetbegovic, the son of Bosnia's wartime Muslim leader and an advocate of ethnic reconciliation, ousted Haris Silajdzic, a hardliner, in the race for the Muslim presidency. However, Milorad Dodik – Silajdzic's political nemesis – strengthened his grasp on power in RS after the strong showing of his party and his own convincing election as president. Dodik, who will now choose one of his close aides to replace him as premier, is the international community's bete noire in Bosnia, as he has repeatedly called for the Serbian Republic to secede.

"Dodik – as the undisputed center of power – will ensure that the presidency of RS, which played a largely symbolic role during [Dodik predecessor] Rajko Kuzmanovic's tenure, becomes even more prominent and assertive," Ian Bancroft, executive director of TransConflict and a UN global expert, told Athens Plus.

Dodik makes no secret of his ambitions. "Bosnia is a mistake created during the disintegration of the old Yugoslavia," he recently told a Serbian daily. "Bosnia cannot be, never could be, and never will be a state. That's the only reality." Dodik, who



Something for everyone. A man walks past a wall decorated with posters of political parties and candidates for the elections in central Sarajevo. [Reuters]



'Bosnia is a mistake created during the disintegration of the old Yugoslavia. Bosnia cannot be, never could be, and never will be a state. That's the only reality'



'I do not think that the West, and in particular the EU, will abandon Bosnia. It is too important for stability in Europe and as a symbol for EU crisis management'

refuses to recognize Bosnian Serbs committed genocide in Srebrenica in 1995, predicted independence will come in the next four years. "It can be argued that the entire campaign has in a way been a referendum on RS separation," Sara Nikolic, an expert based in Sarajevo, told Athens Plus.

In addition, many Bosnian Croats – who want the creation of their own Croat entity within Bosnia – feel disenfranchised by the re-election of Zeljko Komsic as the Croat member of the tripartite presidency, apparently accomplished on the back of Muslim support due to his support for a united, multiethnic Bosnia.

There is no fast track for Bosnia, where the formation of governments usually takes four to five months. "Though optimistic estimates suggest a governing coalition could be formed by February, the persistence of such disputes and tensions will only serve to further deepen ethnic rifts as the horse trading and political bargaining gets under way in earnest," Bancroft said.

Analysts claim that lingering economic misery is making voters prone to nationalist tantrums. About half the population is unemployed, while growth is expected to hover this year at 0.8 percent. Despite the slew of modern shopping malls and restored mosques around Sarajevo, the lack of economic development means that many of the psychological and physical reminders of the 1992-95 conflict remain.

Still, many observers say the economy is not the most important factor. "The deterioration of ethnic relations, which have never been very good at any rate over the past almost two decades, also has to

do with the fact that nationalism remains a powerful mobilizer of people in all three of the main communities and thus is too tempting for politicians not to exploit in their quest for power," said Wolff.

Dodik has clearly sought to benefit from the Bosniaks' failures – a bloated bureaucracy, ineffective decision-making and poorly controlled public spending – that have left the federation on the verge of bankruptcy. "Many in RS question why they should seek closer ties with what they perceive to be a failed part of the state," Bancroft said.

Off the radar

Western powers helped stabilize Bosnia after the war but analysts warn the region is dropping off their radar, particularly as the Obama administration is devoting most of its energies to limiting damage in Iraq and Afghanistan. At the moment, Bosnia's security is the responsibility of some 2,000 European peacekeepers but some EU governments are calling for at least partial withdrawal. Christian Schwarz-Schilling, former international high representative for Bosnia, recently remarked that the EU and US "are not connecting on Bosnia."

"Bosnia is in no way ready for complete Western withdrawal," Nikolic said. Although the actual physical Western presence in Bosnia is very small, the country, which has received 15 billion dollars in foreign aid since the end of the war, is still highly dependent on economic assistance.

Wolff believes the West will not choose to ignore the troubles in its backyard. "I do not think that the West, and in par-

ticular the EU, will abandon Bosnia. It is too important for stability in Europe and as a symbol for EU crisis management," he said.

Balkan domino

Yet again, some wonder whether there is really any point in trying to keep together a state that does not wish to continue as one. Bosnia, after all, is a country where the allegiances of a majority of its population lie elsewhere. "No amount of nation-building will help foster an overarching Bosnian identity, at least not for several generations," Bancroft said.

But while Bosnia may lack a shared identity and a civic conception of the state, he added, it does have a largely shared orientation: European Union membership. "In order to progress down that road, however, Bosnia will have to cease being a protectorate, meaning that the office of the high representative (OHR) will have to close," Bancroft said, adding that much of the country's woes lie with the failure to foster local ownership of the reform process. Bosnian politicians, in other words, see little reason to take on the hard stuff when they can simply blame painful and politically costly measures on outsiders.

If the past is any guide, failure to keep the fragile country together may well create even bigger problems for the region and beyond. "Another contested secession in the Balkans, after Kosovo, would be very damaging and destabilizing, as it would intensify debates on redrawing boundaries elsewhere in the region as well," Wolff said.