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Bosnia-Herzegovina

Nationalists push the logic of the worst in Bosnia-Herzegovina

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Jean-Arnault Dérens, co-editor of the [Courier des Balkans](#), a daily bulletin of news from the Balkans, talks to Catherine Samary

Bosnia-Herzegovina seems to be on the verge of exploding again. How did it come to this?

Since the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords in 1995, Bosnia and Herzegovina has been a country divided into two “entities”, the Republika Srpska (RS) and the Bosnian-Croat Federation, which is itself divided into ten cantons, some of which are predominantly Bosnian (Muslim), others Croat. In reality, the country is being controlled by three ethno-nationalist oligarchies, which have a vested interest in playing the tension card to mobilise public opinion and divert attention from the economic and social problems that plague the country. Since the summer, Milorad Dodik, a Serb member of the country's tripartite presidency, has revived the hypothesis of a secession of the Serbian entity. On 10 December, the Republika Srpska parliament voted for laws that could lead, within six months, to the creation of separate institutions and even armed forces for the Serbian entity. Clearly, a process of secession has begun. This was the context of the 9 January parade, organised to celebrate the 30th anniversary of RS, proclaimed on 9 January 1992, a few weeks before the country fell into war.

Why did Milorad Dodik choose this moment?

On the one hand, even if he still seems to be the all-powerful “boss” of the Serbian entity, Milorad Dodik knows he is under threat: in recent years, powerful citizens' movements have challenged his authoritarian and clientelist system and his party even lost control of the mayor's office in Banja Luka, the main city of the RS, during the November 2020 municipal elections. With general elections scheduled for autumn 2022, Dodik is reviving nationalist provocations to try to stay in power. On the other hand, he knows that the divided “international community” is incapable of reacting: he counts on precious allies within the European Union, such as Hungary's Viktor Orbán.

And the Croatian nationalists are also playing their part?

Yes, they still dream of creating a “third ethnic entity”, which would be purely Croatian. They want to impose an electoral reform, which would reinforce the ethnic character of the vote. There is a total tactical convergence between the two nationalisms.

How far can this crisis go? Is a new war possible?

A war seems unlikely, because no one has an interest in it, but also because the country is being emptied of its population. Young people, whether they have a degree or not, are leaving en masse for countries such as Germany, both because of the catastrophic economic situation and because they are tired of corruption and systematic clientelism: you often have to be a member of one of the nationalist parties in order to find a job, enrol your children at university, etc. You can't fight a war in a country where all the young people have left.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is also experiencing new forms of social mobilization.

Indeed, in 2014, the plenum movement, which challenged privatization and proposed original forms of direct democracy, shook the country, going beyond 'ethnic' barriers. It was repressed and stifled, but new mobilizations are

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developing, notably for the defence of the commons, such as wild rivers, threatened by countless micro-hydro power projects, which are above all money laundering and greenwashing operations, often with the blessing of the European Commission... The right to water or the right to the city are mobilizing citizens from all backgrounds, but these movements are struggling to find a political translation, because the institutional system is completely locked down to the benefit of nationalist oligarchies.

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