Dayton Accord near collapse: the political crisis in Bosnia

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As NATO prepares to impose the so-called Dayton II model for Kosovo by military force, Dayton I--the "peace accord" for Bosnia adopted four years ago--is falling apart.

On March 5 the representative of the NATO powers, Carlos Westendorp, sacked President Nikola Poplasen of the Bosnian Serb republic. At the same time an International Commission of Arbitration made its decision on the region of Brcko, which has been disputed since the beginning of the war in Bosnia.

Brcko was declared to be a neutral zone, neither belonging to the Moslem-Croat federation nor to the Bosnian Serb republic. Without it the Serb-ruled half of Bosnia is split geographically into two separate parts, the eastern half bordering on Serbia proper and the western part surrounded by Croatia and the Moslem-Croatian federation.

In the past all leading Bosnian Serb politicians had declared that Serb possession of Brcko was a crucial issue for the republic and that their participation in the Bosnian state as a whole was dependent on this issue. While Moslem-Croat Federation politicians made statements along the same lines, the decision over the future status of Brcko was continually put off. The decision made March 5 went against the Bosnian-Serb side--at a time when its head of state has been sacked and in the middle of the talks in Rambouillet.

The result was predictable: while thousands of Bosnian Serbs demonstrated and NATO vehicles went up in flames, Poplasen and the Bosnian Serb parliament rejected both decisions and announced withdrawal from all Bosnian state institutions. In response, NATO General Secretary Solana together with the US and Great Britain threatened to impose the decisions with force if need be.

The irony is that the same parliament which has condemned these decisions as a breach of national sovereignty and the Dayton Accord was, together with Poplasen, voted into power under the rules and supervision of the same powers, who have now dismissed the latter. Bearing in mind that the entire state apparatus in Bosnia was set in place by the Great Powers following air strikes, the conclusion can be drawn that those who now declare they seek to bring peace to Kosovo have already revealed their political bankruptcy in Bosnia.

Poplasen, who has declared his readiness to oppose his dismissal with force, belongs to the ultra-right Serb Radical Party (SRP) whose chairman, Seselj, is vice president of Serbia.

Poplasen is the product of the policies of Westendorp and his predecessors in office. With the help of NATO troops, the civilian officials designated by the alliance--Westendorp himself bears the title "Supreme Representative"--have governed Bosnia like colonial lords: they regularly proceed against politicians--in particular Serbs--who stand in the way of the realisation of the Dayton Accord. In political conflicts they take the side of those forces which indicate they would co-operate with the West--the most recent example being the Serb nationalist Biljana Plavsic. They control the media, remove uncooperative local mayors and strip parliamentary deputies of their office.

They defend the existing social structure which has arisen out of the war--the restoration of capitalism and the disintegration of the Yugoslav state and economy. With the overwhelming majority of the population living in poverty, the existing structure is based on the dominance of former Stalinist bureaucrats, black market traders and war profiteers. This parasitic layer has broken up into rival cliques and factions. It thrives politically on chauvinist demagogy and plays one

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foreign power off against the other. The suppression of one of these nationalist factions inevitably benefits another faction.

Precisely this took place during the last elections in the Bosnian Serb republic. The open partisanship by the Great Powers for politicians who were prepared to work with the West worked like a boomerang--the winner was the nationalist Poplasen. He steadfastly refused to allow the moderate Prime Minister Milorad Dodik to form a government, although Dodik had a majority in parliament.

Supreme Representative Westendorp, and in particular the United States, reacted in the way a colonial lord deals with an unruly tribal leader--with Poplasen's arbitrary removal from office. Then came the decision over Brcko. The most rabid of the nationalists were able to benefit and, barely four years old, the Dayton Accord was beset by crisis.

The German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* wrote, "Three times a decision on the city of Brcko was deferred. Now a decision has been made and at the very worst time. The radical president of the republic Srpska, Nikola Poplasen apparently has a better stage sense than the international administrator in Sarajevo. He deliberately allowed his dispute with Supreme Representative Westendorp to escalate and now enjoys warm support as a deputy removed from his post. The damage extends beyond Bosnia."

The newspaper concludes that the Dayton Accord is inviable: "Nobody believes in the future of this state--apart from the civil servants who are officially obliged to do so."

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