

Bosnian Serb referendum inflames tensions in the Balkans

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On Sunday, the government of Republika Srpska (RS—Serb Republic), led by President Milorad Dodik, held a referendum on keeping January 9 as a national holiday. Some 99.8 percent voted in favour in a 56 percent turnout of the republic's 1.2 million registered voters.

The referendum went ahead despite the Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) Constitutional Court ruling it illegal, saying that January 9, a Serbian Orthodox Christian holiday and the day on which Bosnian Serbs declared independence from Bosnia in 1992, discriminated against Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) and Croats.

The referendum is inflaming ethnic tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and within the Balkans more generally, and heightening tensions between the Western imperialist powers and Russia. The controversy shows that after 21 years, nothing has been resolved by the US-brokered 1995 Dayton Accord, which divided BiH into two semi-independent entities—the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), inhabited mainly by Bosniaks and Croats, and the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska (RS). The Dayton agreement ended the four-year war provoked by the imperialist powers' policy of dismembering Yugoslavia, itself bound up with the restoration of capitalism in Eastern Europe.

Dodik was promoted as an opponent of then-RS President Radovan Karadzic. He was praised by US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke, who brokered the Dayton process, as well by as the US secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, who called him a “breath of fresh air,” and the foreign secretary of the British Labour government, Robin Cook.

Bakir Izetbegovic, the Bosniak member of the tripartite BiH presidency and leader of the Party of

Democratic Action, warned recently that the referendum was “some kind of test balloon” that could “slowly plunge [BiH] into conflicts which later you will be unable to halt.”

“Nobody is more ready to defend this country all the way to the end,” Izetbegovic added.

Sefer Halilovic, the former Bosnian army chief of staff and leader of the Bosnian Patriotic Party, which has one MP in the BiH parliament, was more outspoken, warning, “If someone wants to break Bosnia apart, that will not go [ahead] without a war.”

RS President Dodik called such reactions “hysteria,” adding, “This is not a referendum about secession as many want to portray it. ... It is not even a beginning of such a process.”

However, Dodik has worked to whip up nationalism, and his Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) has agreed to hold an independence referendum in 2018 if powers he says RS lost as a result of the Dayton process are not restored by next year.

Prior to the referendum, Western diplomats belonging to the Peace Implementation Council (PIC), created to oversee the Dayton agreement, issued a statement declaring, “We once again urge the RS authorities not to hold the referendum. ... The decision of the BiH Constitutional Court will remain fully in force and must be respected.”

The statement added, “Republika Srpska will remain an integral and essential part of the sovereign state of BiH...there will be no redrawing of the map.”

Russia, a member of the PIC, did not sign the statement. Petar Ivancov, Russia's ambassador to Bosnia, called the referendum an “act of democracy,” adding, “Our position is very clear. We believe the people of Republika Srpska have the right to declare

themselves on vital issues.”

Last Thursday, Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Dodik, after which the RS president expressed his gratitude for Russia’s “unambiguous” support—a barb directed at Serbian Prime Minister Aleksander Vucic, who opposed the referendum. Serbia is walking a tightrope between Russia, with which it is trying to maintain a long and close relationship, and the European Union (EU), with which it is conducting membership negotiations.

Behind Ivancov’s sudden concern for the democratic rights of the Bosnian Serbs is Russia’s attempt to counter a renewed offensive by the US and EU in the Balkans. Last week, the NATO Military Committee chairperson, General Petr Pavel of the Czech Republic, said the Balkans remained a potential source of military conflict, adding that NATO had to be in a position to deter adversaries and defend its members.

Russia has seen one Balkan country after another join the EU or apply for membership, including BiH, which applied last February.

Following the UK Brexit referendum vote to leave the EU in June, in an attempt to prove that the EU was not suffering from “expansion fatigue,” German Chancellor Angela Merkel met with Bosnia’s three presidents and offered to help speed up Bosnia’s accession to the EU. Merkel declared, “I personally promise that we, from the German side, will try to help entrepreneurs in BiH if they have certain disadvantages and drawbacks. If there are real problems, we will support farmers financially.”

Last week, the EU formally accepted BiH’s membership application, declaring its “unequivocal commitment to Bosnia and Herzegovina’s EU perspective as a single, united and sovereign country.” The EU commissioner responsible for enlargement, Johannes Hahn, made it clear, however, that a precondition for BiH joining the EU was acceptance of pro-market restructuring and the dismantling of state social welfare subsidies. He declared, “One of our biggest challenges in preparing the Western Balkan countries for the EU is restructuring the economic model to ensure that all countries are functioning market economies and are driven by export and investments rather than import and consumption.”

The demand for “restructuring” is what lies behind Dodik’s referendum manoeuvres. His escalation of

Serb nationalism, coming in the run-up to October 2 municipal elections that will likely benefit the opposition alliance led by the Serb Democratic Party (SDS), is aimed at distracting attention from the EU’s austerity agenda and dividing workers along ethnic and communal lines. The aim is to prevent a united movement against a corrupt ruling elite that has overseen growing social inequality and unremitting attacks on the social position of the working class.

The unemployment rate in BiH is 42 percent, forcing 80,000 young people in a country of less than 4 million to emigrate last year. The average monthly wage is 1,293 convertible marks (US\$748), and the minimum wage is 403 marks (US\$232). BiH remains one of the poorest countries in Europe. The country’s richest 85 people, however, are worth US\$9 billion.

Over the last year, as EU spokesperson Jamila Milovic Halilovic recently reported, Bosnia has made “crucial progress” towards meeting its “demanding” 2015-2018 Reform Agenda agreed with the EU. “It was a long list and, as a result, there were some delays. ... But virtually all reforms were concluded or introduced, including difficult political measures like new labour laws in both entities,” Halilovic explained.

The imposition of austerity will only get worse. In early September, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) agreed to a €553 million three-year loan that was reported as pulling BiH “back from the brink” and averting a liquidity crisis. The freezing of the bank accounts of hospitals is just one sign of the growing financial nightmare facing both Bosnian entities. The IMF could cancel the second instalment of the new loan if concrete “reforms” are not apparent within three months.



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