

**REPUBLIKA SRPSKA –
POPLASEN, BRCKO
AND KOSOVO:
Three Crises and Out?**

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REPUBLIKA SRPSKA – POPLASEN, BRCKO AND KOSOVO: Three Crises and Out?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The early part of 1999 has been turbulent for Republika Srpska. Political life has been unsettled by three separate and hardly-related crises: the decision of the High Representative to remove from office the RS President Nikola Poplasen; the decision of International Arbitrator Roberts Owen to give the municipality of Brcko neither to RS nor to the Federation but to both as a condominium; and the NATO air-strikes on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY).

Either of the first two issues alone would have been ordinary daily business in the bad-tempered world of Bosnian politics. The two together could probably have been handled. But RS reactions to NATO action in FRY, coming on top of the excitement already created by previous events, have raised tensions to very high levels. Numerous peaceful demonstrations have turned violent, and international organisations – usually the target of the demonstrations – have withdrawn most of their personnel. There are still elements in RS ready and willing to use violence to promote political objectives, and the current climate offers them fertile soil. The beleaguered authorities in Belgrade have every reason to foster a diversion in Bosnia to give the international community another problem besides Kosovo to worry about. The present moment could be the most dangerous for the Dayton Peace Agreement since it was signed in 1995.

This paper examines the background to the three crises and their effect on events in Republika Srpska from the election of Poplasen in September 1998 to the aftermath of the Kosovo crisis in April 1999. It analyses the political agenda of the main parties in RS, examines the stability of the government, and assesses the risk that extremists in RS might seek to take advantage of the tense pro-FRY atmosphere to mount campaigns of violence against the international community.

It concludes that there is a real risk that the situation could get out of control, at the deliberate instigation of the Serb Radical Party and other extremist forces. It also suggests that the governing coalition in RS may be about to split, and assesses the likely composition of a new government. It concludes with short-term recommendations:

- OHR and contact group governments need urgently to explore the intentions of the Socialist Party, and exert maximum pressure upon them to remain in the SLOGA coalition.
- If SLOGA and Dodik cannot be saved, then Mladen Ivanic should be given a chance to form a government, but advised that the SRS should be excluded and the SDS not given key posts, otherwise the prospects for international assistance will be bleak.
- SFOR needs to be aware that a concerted campaign of violence could spring up at any time, particularly in the eastern RS. Measures to forestall such a campaign could easily be counter-productive, since too obvious a show of strength excites public resentment, but

SFOR units will need to be ready to use force at the first sign of armed disturbances. The RS police cannot be relied upon to control them.

- It is unwise to offer the Serb population needless provocations. For example, the recent interdiction of the Belgrade-Bar railway line would have been better carried out by NATO aircraft bombing the Serbian stretch. Such action by SFOR blurs the distinction, which SFOR themselves have sought to make, between NATO's action in FRY and SFOR's role in Bosnia.
- SRT (the RS Radio and Television network) must be reminded that balanced reporting is part of responsible journalism. If the current bias continues, for example misleading reporting of the Kosovo refugee crisis, they should be threatened with financial penalties and closure. The people of RS have a right to know what is happening in FRY, but they also have a right to hear both sides of the story. Recent experience with the population of Serbia, and past experience from wartime Bosnia, suggest that the public simply will not believe any point of view which reflects badly on the Serbs, but at least the one-way propaganda will receive some counterpoise.
- Private broadcasters such as BNTV Bijeljina and Radio St George have exceeded acceptable bounds of prejudice and should be closed immediately.
- Withdrawal of the international community from RS was probably unavoidable in present circumstances: civil personnel should not be required to expose themselves to danger. But their absence makes intimidation look successful. Staff who genuinely wish to return should be allowed to do so, and to work as publicly and openly as their judgement allows. SFOR should be asked to ensure their security in as low-key a manner as possible.
- The impact of political or financial leverage at times of high passion is limited, and the Serbs are stubborn under pressure. But it is worthwhile and fair to remind the public that a major aid donors' conference is scheduled for May. Donors will not be impressed if violence and political tension in RS persist. The population and political parties will need to weigh their passions against their own long-term needs for development and international acceptance.

Sarajevo, 6 April 1999

REPUBLIKA SRPSKA – POPLASEN, BRCKO AND KOSOVO: Three Crises and Out?

I. INTRODUCTION

The early part of 1999 has been turbulent for Republika Srpska. Political life has been unsettled by three separate and hardly-related crises: the decision of the High Representative to remove from office the RS President Nikola Poplasen; the decision of International Arbitrator Roberts Owen to give the municipality of Brcko neither to RS nor to the Federation but to both as a condominium; and the NATO air-strikes on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY).

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In all that follows, the balance of forces in the Republika Srpska National Assembly plays a vital role, since many of the events represent a struggle between the governing SLOGA coalition and extreme nationalist interests who formed the government during the war and until 1998. The results of the general elections on 12-13 September 1998 gave votes and seats as shown in the following table (total valid votes cast: 741,761; total number of seats in the Assembly: 83):¹

	Votes	Seats
Serb Democratic Party (SDS)	160594	19 ²
Coalition for all Bosnia (SDA etc)	125546	15
Serb Radical Party RS (SRS)	97244	11 ²
Serb National Alliance RS (SNS – Biljana Plavsic)	95817	12
Socialist Party RS (SPRS)	79179	10
Independent Social Democrats (SNSD – Milorad Dodik)	54058	6
Radical Party RS	27119	3
SDP BiH	19892	2
Serb Coalition for RS (Predrag Radic)	19198	2
Others various Serb	29936	1 (Serb royalist)
Others various Croat	23222	2 (HDZ, NHI)
Others various Bosniac	6162	
Others various Yugoslav/Green	3794	
SLOGA coalition:		
SNS 12, SPRS 10, SNSD 6, supported by Coalition for BiH 15 and SDP 2 (45)		

¹ Election results from *Official Gazette of BiH*, 15 November 1998 (adapted by ICG for this report).

² SRS and SDS campaigned in alliance.

EPISODE I: THE POPLASEN CRISIS

In the general elections on 12-13 September, the contest for the Presidency of Republika Srpska was between Biljana Plavsic, the incumbent, standing on behalf of the governing SLOGA coalition, and the alliance between the Serb Democratic Party (SDS) and Serb Radical Party (SRS). Nikola Poplasen (SRS) was their candidate for President, and Mirko Sarovic (SDS) the candidate for Vice-President. Under the RS Constitution these offices are filled jointly in a single vote. International organisations in Bosnia were known to support Plavsic's candidature. They had enjoyed a good working relationship during 1998 with her and her prime minister Milorad Dodik. Most commentators agree that over-obvious international support was one reason why Plavsic lost that election. Another was the presence of a Bosniac candidate who attracted 107,036 votes – had that candidate not stood, and had enough of his votes gone to Plavsic, she would have won (the margin between her and Poplasen was 36,078 votes).

After the results were announced on 25 September, Poplasen immediately began to reverse Plavsic's policy of co-operation with the international community. His first priority was to oust Dodik from the position of prime minister. But this proved difficult because in the elections to the National Assembly the SLOGA coalition, supporting Dodik, still held a majority of seats – 45 out of 83 (see above). SDS had 19 and SRS 11, and other parties friendly to them 5. Under Article 94 of the Constitution of the RS, the new president had ten days to propose a new prime minister³: meanwhile the Dodik government remained on a caretaker basis⁴.

Poplasen first tried to find some consensus candidate, even sounding out SLOGA on the possibility of their proposing a candidate other than Dodik⁵. On November 14, not 10 but 50 days after his election, he finally nominated Dragan Kalinic, president of the SDS. The immediate reaction of the international organisations was to dismiss this nomination as 'not serious'⁶, since the SLOGA coalition held firm and, as long as it continued to do so, only Milorad Dodik could command a majority in the Assembly. Kalinic's only hope was to persuade at least one party to leave SLOGA.

As Kalinic started to negotiate to form a government, an incident occurred which showed how unlikely it was that the international community could establish a working relationship with Poplasen. He invited Vojislav Seselj to visit Banja Luka on 15 November. Seselj is the founder of the Serbian Radical Party and *de facto* godfather of Poplasen's own party. True to his track-record, speeches he made in Banja Luka were so inflammatory that the High Representative decided to expel him from the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. British SFOR troops were used to ensure that the expulsion was carried out, and despite tension between them and Poplasen's guards Seselj was persuaded to leave peacefully.

³ "The President of the Republic shall propose a candidate for the Prime Minister within 10 days from the day his resignation was accepted, no confidence voted or the mandate of the previous government expired due to the dissolution or the shortening of the mandate of the National Assembly. The new government must be elected within 40 days from the day the candidate for the new Prime Minister was nominated" – *RS Constitution, Article 94*.

⁴ "A Government...whose mandate has been revoked because of dissolution of the National Assembly, shall remain in office until a new government is elected" – *ibid*.

⁵ ONASA, 3 November 1998.

⁶ Ambassador Robert Barry, head of OSCE Bosnia mission, quoted in ONASA, 15 November 1998.

Kalinic finally acknowledged defeat at the end of December, and on 2 January Poplasen nominated Brane Miljus to form a government. Miljus had been prominent as a young communist (and, surprisingly, had been an enemy of Seselj for a time) but had not been in the public eye recently and was not even a member of the National Assembly. He was however a member of Milorad Dodik's party. Poplasen probably did not expect Miljus to be successful in forming a government, but hoped that he could damage Dodik's credibility. Dodik acted swiftly to prevent this by distancing himself from Miljus and emphasising that he did not and would not enjoy the support of SLOGA. If Miljus ever had any credibility after that, he lost it by making large promises about return of refugees and co-operation with international organisations – despite which, he retained the support of the SDS and SRS members of the National Assembly. Among the ministers he proposed were two who subsequently claimed they had never been approached, and declined to serve. Whether he was a sincere dupe or a witting booby-trap, Brane Miljus' moment in the spotlight came to an end at a special session of the RS National Assembly on 25 January, at the end of which he thanked those who had voted for him, and also those who had voted against him. A Banja Luka satirist commented that politics in RS had become a form of virtual reality⁷.

Poplasen's next move was a serious and plausible attempt to split SLOGA. He nominated Petar Djokic, the respected Speaker of the Assembly, a member of the Socialist Party. The nationalists had always believed that the Socialists were the most likely party to defect from SLOGA, and Djokic just might agree to form a government out of a sense of duty, responsive to SLOGA's own argument that the political credibility of RS was suffering from the lack of a confirmed government. Djokic's response was to submit himself to the discipline of his own party – if the party as a whole endorsed the mandate, he would accept it. In public he abstained from comment.

Meanwhile, caretaker status made no difference to Dodik's behaviour. He still flew abroad to represent RS at international meetings, attracted extensive media coverage, and continued a policy begun in 1998, of freeing the RS economy from its link with the rapidly-deteriorating FRY dinar and promoting the use of the stable Bosnian Convertible Mark. The exchange rate between the two was adjusted several times, and the Yugoslav side suspended payments transfers. This policy was demonstrably in the interest of RS, but further enraged the SRS and SDS who wanted links with FRY to remain close and brotherly.

Finally Poplasen felt he had to take decisive action to unseat Dodik. Having received a petition from 26 SDS and SRS members of the Assembly, he moved to dismiss Dodik on 3 March⁸. The High Representative now felt it necessary to take firm action in return – although Poplasen's performance had been irritating to the international community for some time, they had come to realise that, as long as Dodik remained in (caretaker) office they could still do business, while Poplasen gradually destroyed his own credibility. Poplasen's latest move threatened this bearable state of affairs.

⁷ Miodrag Zivanovic, *Novi Prelom*, 6 February 1999.

⁸ Again under Article 94 of the RS Constitution: "If he assesses that there has been a crisis in the work of the Government, the President of the Republic may, at the initiative of at least 20 Assembly representatives and after obtaining the opinion of the President of the National Assembly and the Prime Minister, demand that the Prime Minister resign. Should the Prime Minister refuse to do so, the President of the Republic may dismiss him"

So Westendorp wrote to Poplasen on 4 March disputing his right to dismiss a caretaker prime minister since the constitution made no provision for such an event. His letter told Poplasen that the only crisis in Republika Srpska was the one he himself had caused in refusing to nominate as prime minister Milorad Dodik, the only individual capable of commanding a majority in the Assembly. He asked Poplasen to write back confirming that he had withdrawn the motion to remove Dodik. Poplasen responded with a brief letter questioning Westendorp's interpretation of the RS constitution, and making no reference to revoking the motion. A day later, Westendorp used his power as High Representative to dismiss Poplasen. The SRS demonstrated in Banja Luka, and the SDS called for a special parliamentary session to discuss the new crisis.

EPISODE II: THE BRCKO DECISION

A few hours after this action of Westendorp's came news from Vienna, where the Arbitral Tribunal on Brcko had been meeting for a third year to decide what should become of the area⁹. Statements by RS politicians in the weeks before the announcement indicated that they uniformly believed that the tribunal would award Brcko to RS. They felt they had done enough, in co-operation with the international supervisor for Brcko, by introducing multi-ethnic policing and a multi-ethnic local administration, to meet standards laid down in the Tribunal's interim decisions in previous years. The Presiding Arbitrator, Roberts Owen, disagreed and delivered a creative solution by declaring Brcko a condominium: its territory would belong to both entities but it would be responsible to neither, only to the common organs of the state of BiH, and for the immediate future would remain under the control of the international supervisor established in previous interim decisions.

Westendorp knew about this decision when he moved to dismiss Poplasen, but the RS politicians did not. The wave of surprise and indignation which greeted the announcement eclipsed the day's earlier crisis. The Serb member of the BiH collective presidency, Socialist Zivko Radisic, suspended his participation in the presidency. Dodik resigned, and thus created an unprecedented status for himself as 'caretaker prime minister in resignation' (*privremeni predsjednik vlade u ostavci*). Djokic called an extraordinary session of the National Assembly to be held in two days, on Sunday 7 March.

Officials at the OHR were visibly distressed at Dodik's resignation. Not only did they believe he was the only possible RS prime minister they could work with, they believed they had an understanding with him that it was in their mutual interest for him to remain in power. The reason Dodik gave for his action, at the press conference where he announced it, was that the RS government had done everything possible in Brcko so he felt personally responsible for the decision 'against' the RS. However sincere this may have been, undoubtedly Dodik shared OHR's view that he was the only person who should be prime minister, and his decision contained a heavy tactical element. In fact it

⁹ This had been the last issue left unresolved at Dayton, and had been referred to this specially-created tribunal which was originally to have decided on the final status of Brcko in December 1996, but postponed the decision and issued only interim decisions in early 1997 and again in 1998. In March 1999 it was not clear until hours before the decision was announced that a final decision would in fact be reached, in preference to another year's delay. For extensive background see several previous ICG reports listed at the end of this paper.

strengthened his position. He was able to join in general condemnation of the Brcko decision and so minimise the damage to himself personally, while handing to the international community the job of persuading him to reconsider. He was able to contrast his acceptance of responsibility for political defeat with the behaviour of Serb leaders after previous setbacks, including military disasters during the war. And, even after tendering his resignation, he remained in office on the same terms as before, confident that as long as SLOGA held together no-one could replace him.

Peaceful demonstrations were held immediately in Brcko. But in Ugljevik a group of US soldiers (JCOs) in uniform were attacked in a restaurant and, in scuffles that followed, shot dead the local SRS chief.

The extraordinary session of the Assembly on 7 March lasted some ten hours and included as guest speakers the lawyers who had argued on the RS side at the Tribunal. With the exception of the Bosniac and Croat members, no speaker found the Tribunal decision remotely acceptable. Differences between moderates and extremists showed only in the decibel level of their speeches and the intensity of their rhetoric. The Assembly rejected the decision as inconsistent with the Dayton Peace Agreement,¹⁰ appealed to the Peace Implementation Council and the Contact Group, and formed an expert group to study how to overturn it.

Why was the reaction so negative, when after all the Arbitrator's decision offered a solution in which there would be no losers, and which would offer an opportunity in Brcko to show what could be achieved by Bosnians working together in their common interest?¹¹

Speaker after speaker claimed that the decision split RS in two, and destroyed the one narrow link between east and west.¹² No matter that freedom of movement would be guaranteed in the new district, no matter that many travellers from western RS already pass unmolested through Federation territory to reach southern parts of eastern RS, the National Assembly was fixated on the link. Occasionally a speaker such as Dodik would attempt to concentrate on policy issues and explain that the RS did not deserve to 'lose' Brcko because of all that had been achieved there, but such speakers were a minority by comparison with those who addressed only the vital 'link'. It was the feeling that RS would be split in two which horrified and revolted the majority of members.

This debate indicated some depressing conclusions about the attitude of the political class in RS. Underlying the uniform instinctive response was the need to retain separateness, a feeling that the status quo of rigid separation between the entities was better than any change which started to challenge that separation – irrespective of any benefits arising from that change. No Serb speaker in the debate suggested that the decision might have any advantages for Brcko as a whole, but nor did any speaker allege that the decision would be bad for Brcko economically: the issue was not considered relevant.

¹⁰ On the ground that it created a third entity, in addition to the Federation and the RS, a judgement which the status of condominium was designed to avoid.

¹¹ See ICG, *Brcko, a Comprehensive Solution*, 8 February 1999.

¹² The road through Brcko is the only way to get from Banja Luka to the eastern part of RS, or to FRY, without going through Federation territory.

Above all there was a strong feeling that, if the east-west road through Brcko did not belong exclusively to RS, then RS had no future. Two fears underlay this feeling. First, that relations between the eastern and western halves of RS were already so thin that the loss of the Brcko road would lead to rupture;¹³ second, that at some future time relations with the Federation would deteriorate in such a way that the Brcko road would become again a vital strategic link needing to be defended by force, as it had been during the 1992-5 war. In short, the reaction of Serb politicians to the Brcko decision was a defensive reflex caused by lack of faith in Bosnia's future, at the deepest level even by fear of future war.

EPISODE III: TWO CRISES RUN TOGETHER

The question of Poplasen's dismissal played a minor role in the Assembly debate on 7 March. Only SRS and SDS speakers treated it as an issue of comparable importance to Brcko. But the public now had two problems at once to worry about, two challenges both created by foreigners. With no voices raised in the RS media in favour of either Westendorp or Roberts Owen, troublemakers found it easy to mobilise more volatile sections of public opinion. Demonstrations began on 8 March in Zvornik, Bijeljina and Visegrad,¹⁴ with some violent incidents.

Did Westendorp deliberately create two crises instead of one? As noted, he had knowledge of the impending Brcko decision when he dismissed Poplasen. Sources in OHR indicate that the final decision on Poplasen was taken only at the last minute, so there was no predetermined plan. Still, Westendorp's action was the logical culmination of steps taken over previous days and months, and he appears to have felt that leaving his threat to Poplasen unfulfilled would do more harm than good – a Poplasen crisis might after all have diverted attention from Brcko. In the event Brcko proved to be much the more controversial issue, so if there had to be two crises it was probably better to have them simultaneously. If Westendorp had waited a few more days before dismissing Poplasen, the decision would have come just as the first excitement of the Brcko decision was dying down, and attitudes which had begun to calm down would have hardened again. The way things actually happened, the assembly devoted most of its attention to Brcko, so Westendorp's action was almost cost-free at the political level. Among the RS public, however, the ever-underlying tendency to believe in an international conspiracy against them grew stronger,¹⁵ and the SRS immediately started to organise public meetings with the intention of taking advantage of the public's ready resentment.

Poplasen continued to defy Westendorp, insisting that he was still president and criticising the work of Dodik's government. Demonstrations were held in Brcko and other towns, usually characterised by the blue flags of the SRS and not at this stage attracting numerous or enthusiastic attendance from the general public. The Assembly met again on 9 March and called for inter-party talks to form a new government.

¹³ Zivko Radisic, interviewed in *Nezavisne Novine* of 3 March, had said that a decision not to give Brcko to RS would lead "not only to a division of RS into two separate parts, but real danger for the fate of the DPA".

¹⁴ All in eastern RS, strongholds of the SRS and SDS.

¹⁵ Judging from street interviews broadcast on RS television (SRT), so some caution is needed in interpreting the information. But opinion polls carried out in RS persistently show hostility towards the international community among the RS public, and mistrust of its intentions.

Meanwhile the OHR was trying to persuade Dodik to withdraw his resignation, and already by 10 March Dodik was hinting that he might reconsider. OHR was also pressuring Vice-President Mirko Sarovic to assume duties as President in place of Poplasen – and the OHR spokesman suggested that if Sarovic refused the place it would go to Djokic (though there was no provision for such an eventuality in the RS constitution). On 11 March Dodik said he could withdraw his resignation if the decision on Brcko were modified – thus still linking his actions to the issue which had caused his original decision. And Poplasen in RS and Vojislav Seselj in FRY threatened armed resistance to international oppression of RS – a sign that they felt they were losing the political battle. As for Brcko, international officials were emphasising how much could be achieved by constructive engagement in negotiations on the annexes to the Brcko decision, which had yet to be defined and which could indeed affect how the decision was interpreted. Demonstrations continued to be held (still led by the blue flags) but the dual crisis seemed to have settled down to manageable proportions.

Biljana Plavsic came out in favour of accepting Poplasen's dismissal, and on 14 March Djokic refused Poplasen's mandate to form a government, after a meeting of the SPRS to consider the case. It looked as though the SLOGA coalition had survived, and on 15 March Dodik withdrew his resignation, becoming simply caretaker Prime Minister again.

That same day, Vice-President Sarovic, using 'powers delegated to him by the president', offered Mladen Ivanic the mandate to form a government. Ivanic, a professor of Economics at Banja Luka university, was a member of no party but a politician of long standing, having held office in the days of communism, and having stood as a candidate for Serb member of the collective BiH presidency in 1996 (he lost to Momcilo Krajsnik of the SDS). He was seen as a moderate Serb nationalist who would defend the separate identity and integrity of RS while caring for the rights of individuals of ethnic minorities. In fact, Ivanic has been a permanent 'prime minister in waiting' for some time, as a consensus candidate nobody hates. He has always been interested in the job, but has usually said that he would only take it if he felt he could form a government which would both follow his political approach and command a majority in the Assembly. He made no public response to Sarovic's invitation.

Sarovic and Poplasen were still hoping to find a way to detach the Socialists from the SLOGA coalition. Ivanic might have had the prestige to do it. But the Socialists remained firm and Dodik looked to have regained full control of the situation. Sarovic's position was further undermined by OHR insistence that he could not carry out presidential acts unless he assumed full responsibility for the role. By 22 March Sarovic was telling OHR that he would accept the job if the National Assembly supported him. A session was convened to begin on 23 March.

With Poplasen sidelined and Dodik back in control, the OHR could congratulate itself on a good job.¹⁶ Radisic was still holding out against resuming his functions in the BiH presidency but had started to issue conditions for his return, showing that he was ready to negotiate – significantly, one of his conditions was a peaceful resolution to the growing crisis in Kosovo.

¹⁶ The price to be paid in Brcko in return for Dodik's co-operation might be a heavy one for the people of Brcko, but at least familiar conditions had been restored for negotiation. And Dodik's talk of 'modifying' the decision sounded a lot better than earlier calls to reverse it.

Serb extremists, thoroughly defeated politically but determined to resist these attempts to restore normal working, turned to violence. Two bombs exploded at the OHR office in Banja Luka, and one at a US military office in Bijeljina. The SRS tried to raise tension by claiming that SFOR had plans to arrest Poplasen. Tanjug, the Belgrade government news agency, put out a story that an SFOR roadblock at Brcko had shot the tyres of Svetozar Mihajlovic, the Serb vice-president of the BiH state government – and both SFOR and Mihajlovic put out indignant denials. Public opinion was already anti-international, and was not at all alienated by the acts of the extremists. The risk now was that, as the political situation in Banja Luka improved, the security situation in eastern RS might become unmanageable. Western countries started to advise their citizens to leave RS, and international organisations started to withdraw staff.

Djokic called a special session of the Assembly on 24 March in a tense atmosphere as news from Kosovo became worse and worse. The RS defence minister, Manojlo Milanovic,¹⁷ suggested placing RS in a condition of war danger if NATO attacks went ahead. Sarovic failed to secure the support he sought for his prime ministerial candidate and so still felt unable to assume the presidency.

The RS government accused the SRS directly of interfering with freedom of movement between Bijeljina and Brcko. "In promoting these acts, the SRS and organisers of similar risky public assemblies are taking advantage of the population to achieve narrow party objectives by undemocratic and illegal means".¹⁸ Trying to calm things down, it also called for a peaceful settlement in Kosovo.

It was too late. NATO began air strikes against FRY on the night of 24/5 March.

EPISODE IV: KOSOVO

News of the strikes instantly radicalised the atmosphere in Banja Luka again. As in Serbia, the entire population was hostile to NATO action, and demonstrators took to the streets in large numbers. RS official and private media coverage was unequivocally one-sided, and fed the general excitement. Faced with the clear hostility of the public, international organisations withdrew the rest of their staff. The government attempted to pursue a moderate path, calling upon Serb members of BiH bodies to resume their duties, in order to be able to defend Serb interests at state level. They appealed to the public not to support bodies like the 'Committee for the Defence of RS', a front organisation for political extremists including the SRS.

Aid convoys were organised to FRY, partly to demonstrate to the public that the RS government sympathised with the 'brothers across the Drina', and so to forestall calls for official military assistance. When a convoy was refused at the FRY border for reasons unknown, the official RS website on 2 April recounted the case in detail and asserted that the RS had refused to use 'dubious private methods' which had been offered to assist the passage of the convoy – a broad hint that corrupt FRY officials had hindered it. The trend of policy was to show sympathy for FRY for public consumption without becoming involved in the conflict.

¹⁷ Former chief of staff of the RS army – a soldier rather than a politician.

¹⁸ RS government announcement, quote taken from RS official website.

However, the RS government and police were having difficulty controlling the actions of demonstrators. Mostly-vacant offices of international organisations were attacked, and the population was still being radicalised by extremely pro-FRY media coverage of the air strikes so that, far from opposing the actions of extremists, much of the public appeared to feel that the foreigners deserved what they were getting. The public was further fed a suggestion that Federation armed forces were mobilising, which brought a firm denial from SFOR and from Federation commander General Rasim Delic. The RS police force itself held peaceful anti-NATO demonstrations on 31 March. The RS information minister, Rajko Vasic, was quoted as saying the situation was getting out of control and warned of possible attempts by radical forces to make RS secede from BiH or join FRY.¹⁹

Meanwhile Westendorp had written to Sarovic on 25 March, noting that Sarovic had failed to gain the support of the Assembly. Although the High Representative did not accept that the Assembly had any power of veto over his decisions, he would no longer pressure Sarovic to accept the post. The presidency thus remained vacant, but he hoped Sarovic would remain as vice-president. In that capacity he had, however, no power to nominate a prime minister.

The two political blocs in the RS Assembly were now further apart than ever. Mladen Ivanic remained prudently silent, except for a few non-committal interviews. SDS president Dragan Kalinic was accusing Dodik of wishing to stay in power for ever in alliance with 'armed occupiers' of RS. Petar Djokic, at a meeting of party leaders on 30 March, tried to get agreement to a statement condemning 'abuse of peaceful demonstrations for other political aims'. The SDS and SRS representatives walked out.²⁰

Dodik's position was unexpectedly threatened by statements from both Plavsic and Radisic on 30 March that SLOGA might be prepared to propose another candidate.²¹ Since Radisic was maintaining his boycott of BiH institutions, he may have felt that Dodik was now too conciliatory towards the international community, at a time when Serb brothers were under attack. On the other hand, his Socialist party on 2 April put out an appeal to all factions and forces to keep the peace in RS in a situation which was 'very difficult and might get worse'. Radisic wrote an open letter to the international community along similar lines on 4 April, and repeated earlier appeals that the territory of BiH should not be used to launch attacks against FRY.²² The threat to Dodik grew more evident that same day when Djokic, sharing an open-air platform with Kalinic in Brcko, announced that a government of national unity would be formed within a few days.²³ He did not suggest who would head such a government, but the SDS on 5 April said it would be Ivanic. If the SPRS and SDS are really agreed on this, it means a significant realignment of forces in the Assembly, and the end of Dodik's premiership.

¹⁹ Reported in *Dnevni Avaz*, 1 April 1999.

²⁰ RS official website.

²¹ SRT news and interviews on 30 March.

²² This was after SFOR had dismantled a railway line linking Belgrade and Bar, which happened to run through Bosnia for a short distance, and had in the process shot dead a local man who challenged them. This incident followed soon after a similar case at Rudo. Both of these took place on the border between BiH and FRY.

²³ SRT news, 4 April

II. REPUBLIKA SRPSKA: WHO WANTS WHAT?

For RS the external crisis of Kosovo has raised tension far higher than the internal crises of Poplasen and Brcko, but the effect of Kosovo would probably have been less had earlier events not already created a tense atmosphere. The cumulation of all these events has obliged the various political forces at work in RS to define themselves and their objectives more clearly than usual. How many separate forces can be distinguished and what do they want?

In attempting to describe the political stance of the various parties, some caution is necessary since parties are not monolithic. A party with a strong leader (Plavsic) will follow all the ideas of the leader. A party with a strong unifying sense of purpose (SRS) will not suffer much from internal policy divisions. But a party such as the SPRS, with an experienced and respected but not over-authoritarian leader, is more likely to incorporate a range of interests. Party discipline has not, however, as a rule been a problem in RS, and cases such as Dodik's expulsion of Miljus from the SNSD have been rare. Broad party orientations can be deduced from the words and actions of their public figures.

Serb Radical Party (SRS)

The SRS campaigns openly for the integration of RS into the FRY. Here is a sample statement from Nikola Poplasen: "Some day we will become a part of the whole Serb nation...however, we want this to happen by democratic means, without aggression and without changing frontiers by force".²⁴ This statement was made at a time when Poplasen still had hopes of retaining the presidency, and is a very moderate formulation. Poplasen's patron, Vojislav Seselj, has seldom felt the need to sound so reasonable, and the SRS has never totally renounced violence as a political method.

Since the triumph of securing the election of Poplasen in September 1998, the SRS has suffered only defeat and humiliation in the mainstream political life of RS. All attempts to unseat Milorad Dodik have failed, all attempts to break up the SLOGA coalition have failed, and international organisations have refused to accept the SRS as a possible partner. Both the international community and the RS political centre seem determined to ensure that the SRS secure no hold on legitimate political power. The party feels robbed of fairly-won success as a result of the Poplasen affair.

Dodik is reviled by the SRS because he represents the building up of RS as a viable economic unit with a working relationship with the BiH Federation (more on this below). Plainly, the more independent RS becomes of FRY, the less are the chances of union in the next few years. The survival of Dodik threatens the whole rationale of SRS policy.

On the other hand, as the RS government has failed to contain the public mood in response to successive shocks, the SRS has been picking up support on the street from people feeling a need for self-assertion. The present time of high tension offers the SRS an opportunity to achieve by other means what it has failed to achieve in the National Assembly. As public opinion has become ever more hostile to the work of the international community, demonstrations, whether or not initially organised by the SRS,

²⁴ SRT news, 9 March 1999.

have shown a tendency to become more violent. Sympathetic coverage of these acts in the media, and a public perception that perpetrators are not pursued by police, give them a certain legitimacy in the eyes of the public, such that the withdrawal of international officials is perceived as a victory rather than a tragedy or grave warning sign.

There is a real danger that the SRS might feel strong enough to intensify the campaign of violence, first against international targets and even against SFOR. The Banja Luka government itself might not be immune if the population can be sufficiently radicalised, not least because it depends for its support upon Bosniac members elected by voters not resident in RS, and because it enjoys the palpable support of the same NATO members who are behind the attacks on Kosovo.

The Radicals have shown that even in Banja Luka they are strong enough to incite demonstrations and violent acts. But they are strongest, together with their allies the SDS, in Posavina and the eastern part of RS. There there is a heavy population of Serb displaced people and a Bosniac/Croat population of almost nil. This, coupled with poverty, an absence of large towns and no independent press, keeps the population dependent on the official RS TV station (SRT), Belgrade media and political parties for information. The SRS, with its connections to Seselj, already has access to weapons. At worst, the capacity might soon exist to mount an armed secessionist movement, at least for that part of RS east of Brcko, perhaps using paramilitaries so that the political instigators would not be directly implicated. The RS public, in its present baffled and enraged state, would probably not be hostile.²⁵ Such an attempt, even if it failed because of resolute action by SFOR troops, might help Seselj and Slobodan Milosevic in Belgrade by creating a diversion from events in Kosovo. Milosevic has used diversionary tactics many times before, and they always work (at least for a while) against western governments whose agendas are driven by the TV news.

If this threat is taken seriously, it presents SFOR with a difficult decision. Do they wait for it to happen and then react, or do they increase their visible presence to deter it, and risk provoking the public into further acts of defiance so contributing to the deterioration of the situation? To avoid the publicity disaster of being drawn into confrontation with civilian mobs, the former policy is better for now, but contingency plans should be ready.

Serb Democratic Party (SDS)

The SDS has been playing a junior role to its vigorous SRS partner, but has made no attempt to distance itself from its policies. The SDS agenda is different from that of the SRS only in that the party's wish to secede to FRY is less explicit. The SDS would prefer secession, but for now appear content to see RS continue as an autonomous unit with a close relationship with FRY, a much more distant relationship to the Federation of BiH, and very loose association with the BiH central institutions.

It might seem that the international community had succeeded in driving a wedge between the SDS and SRS in (almost) persuading Mirko Sarovic to agree to replace Nikola Poplasen as RS president. But there is no sign of disagreement between the two

²⁵ In opinion polls carried out in April 1998 for the US Information Agency, 46% of respondents in RS said they would like RS to become a part of Serbia. In the eastern RS there was a clear majority in favour of this option. Only in the extreme west around Banja Luka was another option (independence) more popular. A total of 3% of those polled wanted to remain part of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

parties on this issue. The alliance may simply have decided that Sarovic could continue Poplasen's policies. The question is no longer relevant since Sarovic has for now declined to assume Poplasen's responsibilities.

The SDS is not the power it was in the days before the defection of Plavsic, when Radovan Karadzic and his associates ruled all of RS as a dictatorship. It has lost members and voters to the SRS in one direction and Plavsic's SNS in the other. But it still attracts a larger vote than any other party in RS and retains some of the strength of its old organisation, particularly in the east. It is probably still easy for Milosevic in Belgrade to control SDS policy, and one would not expect the SDS to disavow violent means if the SRS chose to go down that route.

On the other hand, the SDS is one of those parties which incorporate a range of interests. It too has its (comparatively) moderate and radical wings. If the present government in Banja Luka does fall, and the only alternative is a so-called 'government of Serb unity' in which the SDS will participate, it will be important to examine the political profile of the individuals involved. Even so, in any government which hoped to attract international support, the SDS could not hold key ministerial posts like Finance or Refugees.

Milorad Dodik and the Independent Social Democrats (SNSD)

Dodik would happily have collaborated with the High Representative in the removal of Poplasen, but appeared genuinely shocked by the decision of the arbitral tribunal on Brcko. His resignation showed a sense of wounded betrayal, even if it was also a tactical move which did him no political damage. Also Dodik is well aware that it would be harmful for him to be perceived as a puppet of Western policy in RS – he is not, but the extreme and obvious international support for him risks making him appear so. Occasional demonstrations of independence can help him – especially since he knows the international community will forgive him almost anything and try to keep him in place.

Dodik likes the status he enjoys as prime minister of RS, and has a mission to make the best of RS as an autonomous unit within the state of BiH. This is not to say that he genuinely believes in the Dayton formulae as a permanent and ideal solution for Bosnia, but he has always recognised that collaboration with the international community is more likely to bring tangible rewards than is tying RS to a decaying FRY and the fading hope of a Greater Serbia. The heavy inflows of international aid in 1998 during his tenure show that he is right.

However, under Dodik the gap between eastern and western RS has grown greater. Most of the international flows have come into the west, precisely in order to encourage the 'liberals' around Banja Luka and to discourage the 'hardliners' based in Pale. But the gradient between the two is felt with increasing resentment by easterners, a feeling emphasised in reactions to the arbitral decision on Brcko.

Dodik is also vulnerable to criticism that he has not delivered results to justify the political and financial support he has received. For example, minority refugee returns to RS have been negligible, despite a declaration by Dodik early in 1998 that up to 70,000 might return that year. Dodik privately explains the disappointing result by arguing that he

cannot go too far against public opinion or he will lose votes and therefore power. And neither Plavsic nor Poplasen was a president who would have looked favourably on government initiatives to promote mass return. The international community has reluctantly accepted this argument, because Dodik has delivered one invaluable result: RS policy is no longer made in Belgrade, and the RS government is not afraid of acting against Belgrade's wishes when it considers the RS's interests to be different from FRY's. Poplasen's determined attempts to get rid of Dodik show how much this matters.

And Dodik has a further value for the implementers of the DPA. While he is there, there is at least a hope that RS will be governed in a spirit of economic self-interest which will be partially enlightened by a wish to be internationally respectable. The general view of international observers has always been that, if Dodik fell to a new coalition of SDS/SRS and SLOGA defectors, the conduct of RS affairs would be handed back to interests in Belgrade.

Dodik is a clever politician, and also a political bully of strength and resilience. His behaviour throughout the recent crises has shown clearness of purpose. He has done what he could to modify the effects of the Brcko decision – possibly out of a calculation that the issue could tear RS apart rather than the simple-minded obsession with the east-west link which dominated debate on the subject in RS. He has successfully seen off Poplasen and remained the dominant political figure in RS under a variety of descriptions – prime minister, caretaker and caretaker-in-resignation. During the crisis period the RS (i.e. BiH) currency has been revalued several times against the FRY dinar. He is now trying to calm down the RS populace in the face of strong radicalising tendencies which will last at least as long as the NATO action against FRY does. He is no liberal intellectual, of the type who champion multiculturalism in the Federation, but he is the biggest single obstacle to the domination of exclusive Serb nationalism. However if the SPRS does desert SLOGA, as indications suggest it now finally might after so many false alarms, it is hard to see how Dodik can survive.

Biljana Plavsic and the Serb National Alliance (SNS)

Plavsic is much more of a nationalist than Dodik, but shares his assessment that collaboration with the international community, as a policy not a principle, is the best way to bring prosperity and some sort of viability to RS. Plavsic left the SDS because it was corrupt and its policies were counter-productive, but she remains the same woman who helped found the SDS, helped define its political platform and helped start the war in Bosnia.

While Plavsic remains loyal to the SLOGA coalition the international community will continue to regard her as an asset, though her vision of RS remains tied to the idea of an ethnically pure Serb state. She remains a frequent guest on RS television, often together with Dodik and/or Radisic, but her influence on events has declined since her defeat by Poplasen in the presidential election. Dodik rose to power under her shadow, but her influence has declined as his has grown. The forces behind her rise – reaction to the way SDS had misgoverned the country, coupled with the same strong nationalism which underlay the SDS philosophy – no longer exist in conjunction.

Socialist Party (SPRS)

Zivko Radisic's Socialist Party, with 10 seats in the 83-strong national assembly, occupies a position as power-broker in the RS. Because of the party's historical links to Slobodan Milosevic's own socialist party, the RS socialists have always been regarded as most likely to break ranks with SLOGA and come over to the SRS/SDS/other radical alliance, whom their 10 deputies would be enough to bring to power. On a couple of occasions, they have seemed close to doing this, but have always left the SDS/SRS angry and disappointed. If the Socialists are under Belgrade's control, it is impossible to understand their actions. They have stood by Dodik through half a year of Belgrade-inspired attempts to unseat him, and have refused the post of prime minister for one of their own number.

It is much easier to understand the behaviour of the SPRS as an honest response to a difficult situation, with policies weighed and decided in the light of fast-moving events. Radisic and other socialists certainly spend time in Belgrade, but they show no sign of being puppets. Petar Djokic has a reputation as an honest and principled man, even among the Bosniac members of the Assembly, and his behaviour as Speaker of the Assembly has been, as far as one can tell from dozens of hours of observation on television, exemplary and impartial. Radisic's decision to suspend his mandate within the BiH presidency appears to have been made, not to cause trouble, but out of genuine concern at the arbitral decision on Brcko, and his statements since then have been far from inflammatory.

On the nationalist scale the SPRS occupy a mid-point between Dodik and Plavsic. They too feel the pull of brotherhood from across the Drina, but their first responsibility is to the people of RS, and for now that responsibility is best discharged by working with the international community to implement the DPA so that prosperity returns to their land. They are not by nature racists, and their relationships with Bosniacs in the Assembly are fair to good. They lack Dodik's strategic grasp, but they also lack Plavsic's narrow interpretation of Serb interests.

Are the SPRS finally going to abandon the SLOGA coalition, as Djokic's latest pronouncements seem to suggest? Why would they do this? Firstly, as earlier suggested, they may feel that the RS government has not been firm enough in its condemnation of NATO actions. Second, they may be vulnerable to arguments from the SDS and SRS that the situation is likely to deteriorate into violence (caused by the SDS and SRS) if Dodik remains in power: the SPRS may have already made the assessment that it is better to provide a moderate voice in a new government than to allow the land to suffer a campaign of violence. Third, they may have become more amenable to pressure from Belgrade since the start of NATO action against FRY. Defection, for genuinely principled reasons, seems all too possible.

Bosniac and Croat parties in RS

The SDA and its allies plus the SDP have between them 17 seats and form a basic plank underpinning the SLOGA coalition. They do not hold ministerial posts, but their vote in the Assembly is reliable, since the only alternative to SLOGA is a nationalist government which would certainly exclude them and work against their interests. But this also means

that they are prisoners of SLOGA – the Serb parties in SLOGA know that the Bosniacs have nowhere else to go, and so need to pay only minimum attention to Bosniac interests. For example, Bosniac support for SLOGA has remained generally firm despite the Dodik government's poor record on minority returns. With a political stance which is necessarily fixed, and with representatives who mostly do not live permanently in RS, the Bosniac parties play only a small role in the active political life of the entity. The Croat parties HDZ and NHI, with one member each, play an even smaller part.

III. CONCLUSION

None of the three crises in RS has yet been finally resolved. OHR has declared the RS presidency vacant, though Poplasen still considers himself president and Sarovic remains vice-president. RS politicians are still united against the Brcko decision, though before Kosovo they were at least ready to talk about it, and were gradually steeling themselves to live with it. Events in FRY exert the strongest pull of all, though they are beyond Bosnia's border and beyond the control of anybody in Bosnia.

With tempers running so high, this is a dangerous moment for RS, and a dangerous time for the Dayton Peace Agreement. The government in Banja Luka has tried to re-establish stability, but its efforts to distance RS from the Kosovo conflict have not been very successful. Dodik remains the West's choice as prime minister – he himself would not support any other candidate from SLOGA; anyone from the SDS/SRS coalition would encourage the already dangerous radicalisation of the public; and Ivanic would have to include in any government he led some representative of the SDS/SRS spectrum. But the situation may be out of control of the government.

Should the SPRS leave SLOGA, a constitutional crisis would be added to the three existing problems. The OHR would be bound to argue that, while the RS presidency remains vacant, there is no-one with authority to name a prime minister, but it would be in a weak position. Dodik would be vulnerable to a vote of no confidence in the Assembly²⁶, and under these circumstances Sarovic might well be prepared to assume the role of president, enabling him to nominate a new prime minister. Poplasen would be faced with a choice between claiming still to be president and so forcing yet another confrontation with Westendorp, or quietly withdrawing to give the new government a better chance of succeeding.

Ivanic would almost certainly be the prime ministerial nominee. Under such conditions, if and only if the break-up of SLOGA were irretrievable, the best option might be for the international community to give Ivanic a chance. His own political platform is not abhorrent. As prime minister he might be able to command a more general level of consent from the public than Dodik is now able to attract, and this would reduce the potential support for violent insurrection. Djokic and Kalinic's joint appearance on 4 April suggests that Ivanic would have to include both SPRS and SDS in his government. Although the return of SDS to any position of authority is a dangerous step backwards,

²⁶ RS Constitution, article 94: "The National Assembly may vote no confidence in the Government. The proposal for a no confidence vote may be submitted by at least 20 representatives. A decision on the dismissal of the Government...shall be considered adopted if it has been voted by the majority of the total number of deputies." BUT "A Government which has been voted no confidence...shall remain in office until a new Government is elected."

and will be seen as such by the international community and protested by the Bosniacs in the Federation, it could at least drive a wedge between the SDS/SRS alliance, as long as Ivanic is able to form a government without the SRS. He is experienced enough to realise that including the SRS would forfeit any hope of international support, and realistic enough to know that he needs that support if RS is to prosper once the present unrest is over.

Whatever the prospects for a new government, at the moment the greatest danger is outbreaks of violence. The number of people in RS actively prepared to behave violently against the international community or against the RS government is probably small. But, as 1992 showed, it does not take many determined men to commit great evil, and violent acts on the small scale so far perpetrated have met little hostility from a populace either too frightened to resist or else sympathetic to the trend of the violence. The public mood is ready to be roused to support determined violent action.

How reliable are the RS police? Anti-NATO demonstrators have targeted the International Police Task Force (IPTF) as well as other organisations. According to IPTF the RS police have said they cannot guarantee their safety and so IPTF officers are keeping a low profile.²⁷ This argues poorly for police determination to resist mob or other violence. The RS army would be a very dangerous tool to use, for its allegiance too cannot be taken for granted.

If a campaign of violence is launched, it looks as if it will be up to SFOR to defy it. And the situation will be watched closely by the Federation too: Bosniac elements in the government there would take any action to prevent the break-up of Bosnia, perhaps including military force if SFOR were unwilling or unable to control the situation. That would mean the end of the Dayton Peace Agreement.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

The policy options available to the international community in RS will remain limited as long as NATO action continues against FRY. But a number of measures can be taken and are necessary:

- OHR and contact group governments need urgently to explore the intentions of the SPRS, and exert maximum pressure upon them to remain in the SLOGA coalition.
- If SLOGA and Dodik cannot be saved, then Ivanic should be given a chance to form a government, but advised that the SRS should be excluded and the SDS not given key posts, otherwise the prospects for international assistance will be bleak.
- SFOR needs to be aware that a concerted campaign of violence could spring up at any time, particularly in the eastern RS. Measures to forestall such a campaign could easily be counter-productive, since displays of strength alienate the public, but SFOR units will need to be ready to use force at the first sign of armed disturbances. The RS police cannot be relied upon to control them.

²⁷ ONASA/Oslobodjenje, 3 April 1999

- But it is unwise to offer the Serb population needless provocations. For example, the interdiction of the Belgrade-Bar railway line would have been better carried out by NATO aircraft bombing the Serbian stretch. SFOR action blurs the distinction, which SFOR themselves have sought to make, between NATO's action in FRY and SFOR's role in Bosnia.
- SRT (the RS Radio and Television network) must be reminded that balanced reporting is part of responsible journalism. If the current bias continues, they must be threatened with financial penalties and closure. The people of RS have a right to know what is happening in FRY, but they also have a right to hear both sides of the story. Recent experience with the population of Serbia, and past experience from wartime Bosnia, suggest that the public simply will not believe any point of view which reflects badly on the Serbs, but at least the one-way propaganda will receive some counterpoise.
- Private broadcasters such as BNTV Bijeljina and Radio St George have exceeded acceptable bounds of prejudice and should be closed immediately.
- Withdrawal of the international community from RS was probably unavoidable in present circumstances: civil personnel should not be required to expose themselves to danger. But their absence makes intimidation look successful. Staff who genuinely wish to return should be allowed to do so, and to work as publicly and openly as their judgement allows. SFOR should be asked to give them protection in as low-key a manner as possible.
- The impact of political or financial leverage at times of high passion is limited, and the Serbs are stubborn under pressure. But it is worthwhile and fair to remind the public that a major aid donors' conference is scheduled for May. Donors will not be impressed if violence and political tension in RS persist. The population and political parties will need to weigh their passions against their own long-term needs for development and international acceptance.