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A Balkan crisis that some see as overblown

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BANJA LUKA, Bosnia and Herzegovina: Bosnia is facing its worst political crisis since the end of the war here 12 years ago, and its very future is in doubt. That, at least, is the conventional wisdom coursing among international officials and ethnic Serb politicians who are fighting over the way the country is governed.

As the argument rages, Bosnia's prime minister, an ethnic Serb, has resigned and Serb politicians are threatening to withdraw from the complex tangle of institutions set up to hold this state together when the Dayton agreement ended three and one-half years of war in 1995.

The current crisis is sending shudders through European capitals because it coincides with the vexed question of Kosovo and the determination of the ethnic Albanian majority there to break away from Serbia and become independent.

But reality may not be as dire as the frenzied talk, which even raises the prospect of another war. For it is clear that the main participants get some political mileage out of the doomsday tone and the points being argued. That is true of the foreign officials who administer Bosnia, the local politicians, and notably true of Serbia as it tries to stall steps by the West to recognize Kosovo.

The leaders of the Serb Republic, which makes up half of Bosnia and Herzegovina, are pitted against Miroslav Lajcak, a Slovak diplomat who is Bosnia's High Representative and the country's most senior international official, with the power to write laws and dismiss public officials.

In October, Lajcak changed the voting rules within the Bosnian Parliament and council of ministers in ways that he argued would expedite decision making and prevent the main ethnic groups - Muslims, Serbs, and Croats - from stymieing laws.

Nikola Spiric, who was the prime minister and head of the council of ministers, resigned at the beginning of November. He said that "if the international community always supports the High Representative and not the institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina, then it doesn't matter if I am the head of that state, or Bart Simpson."

Lajcak's deputy, an American named Raffi Gregorian, indulges in equally blunt terms. He appealed last week to Western governments to support reforms, especially those to Bosnia's police service, concluding that not to make changes would jeopardize the state's existence.

"Its very survival could be determined in the next few months if not the next few weeks," Gregorian told a joint committee of the Senate and House of Representatives in Washington earlier this month.

The dispute is the crescendo in a tumultuous year and half in Bosnian politics during which international officials have tried to press their reforms amid increasing hostility between Bosnia's leading Serb and Muslim politicians.

Haris Silajdzic, leader of largest Muslim party, and Milorad Dodik, prime minister of the Serb Republic, have exchanged heated threats. Silajdzic has called for the abolition of the Serb Republic, and Dodik talks of declaring it independent of Bosnia.

More worrying perhaps, Serbia tried to link Kosovo's fate to Bosnia's, in fact making them equivalent national priorities. The Serbian prime minister, Vojislav Kostunica, said on Oct. 25, that "preserving Kosovo and Republika Srpska are now the most important goals of our state and national policy."

His announcement bore echoes of remarks made by Slobodan Milosevic years ago that he would protect Serbs throughout Yugoslavia, statements that intensified frictions ahead of the wars.

Dodik has played to Belgrade's tune. In an interview here last week, he said that if the international community recognized an independent Kosovo, his part of Bosnia would notice.

"People here will say that if the international community can allow that to happen to Kosovo, then why can't we be free, too?"

With Kosovo likely to declare independence after a Dec. 10 deadline for a so-far elusive agreement between Serbs and Albanians, it might seem that Bosnia's crisis could deepen.

But for all the anxiety, many political analysts doubt things are that dire. Crucially, there is little evidence of that tension spilling out on to Bosnia's streets, where there have been few interethnic incidents in the last three years. And most independent analysts suggest that Bosnia is less on the verge of breaking apart than a few steps away from European Union membership.

In a recent paper published by the European Stability Initiative, a group based in Berlin that advocates the EU's expansion throughout the western Balkans, argues that contrary to the rhetoric by Kostunica and Gregorian, Bosnia has made enormous strides in recent years, and this current crisis is political, not interethnic.

"In security terms the transformation of the country in recent years has been truly remarkable," wrote Gerald Knaus, director of the European Stability Initiative.

"Bosnians enjoy a high degree of confidence in their environment. Crime rates have fallen to EU levels."

He also noted that compulsory military service had been abolished, the three wartime armies had been merged and policing was now multiethnic throughout Bosnia.

In the last five years Bosnia has also created a single customs service, taxation laws and federal police authority. It is also on the verge of signing a Stabilization and Association Agreement, a political and economic deal that is a first step toward EU membership.

"I don't think there is a crisis," said Tanja Topic, a political analyst based in Banja Luka, who is an ethnic Serb. "I think the situation is being used by politicians in Serbia to

strengthen its position. Likewise, Serb politicians here are doing the same to strengthen their position in Bosnia."

"I don't think there is any serious intention to declare independence," she said. "They would not be better off, whether alone or as a part of Serbia."

Knaus suggests the office of the High Representative is overstressing the current tensions to elicit more support from European capitals in a power struggle with Bosnian Serb leaders that could have been avoided through better diplomacy.

"Timing could not be worse," said Knaus, noting the dispute had climaxed as the debate over Kosovo reached its peak. All the rival groups, "for totally different reasons, have the same interests," he said. "It is really a manufactured crisis."