

The Republika Srpska: Form or Function?

British Ambassador to BiH Edward Ferguson's recent blog post, "Republika Srpska: It's Here to Stay. So Can We Move on Now?" is notable for three reasons

First, the title - and source - is interesting when one considers the September 2014 referendum on Scottish independence. While the referendum failed, with 55.3% voting no compared to 44.7% supporting Scottish independence, hopes that this would be the last of such independence talk and associated political turmoil rather quickly dissipated following the success of the Scottish National Party (SNP) in this spring's UK general elections, with the SNP openly pledging another referendum to the people of Scotland if they want one. Breaking up may be hard to do, but moving on can be difficult as well. Dodik's retort to Ferguson confirms that even such international assurances of and to the RS cannot waylay the power and appeal of the straw man referendum - which is at its core a ploy to manipulate the EU into further weakening BiH's rule of law institutions. Second, while this blog is a nice example

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of a high-ranking official using online media to communicate directly and informally with readers, it is unclear to whom it is addressed. The content of the blog seems less aimed at the people of the country and the entity, and more at a few targeted political elites (or perhaps just one). The issue of the substance of the blog leads to the third point.

The Accountability

Most troubling is the complete absence of one critical word: accountability. While Ambassador Ferguson goes to great pains to note that he believes that the RS is an immutable and untouchable Balkan "third rail," he does not stop to consider whether the RS as a governmental unit - as a building block of the broader BiH body politic -

actually delivers anything to its residents other than fear, symbolic bombast and the occasional patronage-motivated agricultural or veteran payouts.

It is understandable that when asked questions such as, "Do you think the RS should be eternal?" or "Do you think the RS should be independent?," Serb respondents in that entity will very likely respond affirmatively. To do otherwise would be stunning when one considers the nearly 25 years of consistent political propaganda pushed through both media and schools. Further, such a response hinges very much on the way such a question is worded: asking a closed-ended, binary (yes/no), position-based question nearly always guarantees an all or nothing response and subsequent analysis, rather than a more nuanced understanding of respondent interests.

It would be much more useful to ask people in the RS about their satisfaction with their health care; their higher education; the ability of the government to curb corruption; the independence of the judiciary; the freedom of media, speech and assembly; 2014 flood prevention and response; etc. If RS residents are overwhelmingly satisfied with these basic aspects of a civilized life, then one can safely assume that the government delivering such services is in fact doing a solid and accountable job, and that the political/governmental structure is working as needed.

But in fact it is clear that RS residents, like their neighbors in the Federation, are rather justifiably not satisfied. On a number of basic public service measures, residents of the RS are woefully underserved in spite of the fact that they supposedly live in the more "functional" entity. A 2014 study showed that health services in the RS are more costly than in the Federation. Pensions have been late this summer, and payouts made based on commercial loans taken by the pension fund to fill the gap will simply mortgage the future of the entity even more. While the RS has only approximately one-third of the population of the country, its debt levels are higher in



proportion to the Federation, where Sarajevo canton alone serves as a significant economic driver.

The Myth of Blind RS/Serb Residents

At least one poll that asked interest-based questions (not binary, position-based questions) revealed that there is appropriate dissatisfaction among RS respondents. 63.3% of Serb respondents in the RS responded that crime and corruption can be best fought at the state-level, with only 31.6% preferring that crime and corruption continue to be tackled at the entity level. That only 1/3 of these respondents had faith in the entity to take on this priority issue speaks volumes. Similarly, 48.8% of RS Serb respondents support agriculture as a state competency vs. 41.8% favoring an entity lead in this important sector.

There are other examples of well; I recall a discussion with around 10 rural men (all Serbs - lest there be any doubt, one was wearing a *sajkaca* - the traditional Serbian national hat) in a *mjesna zajednica* in Rudo in 2014; when I asked them about their satisfaction with their entity, their response was immediate: "What the f*** has Banja Luka done for us?" Such sentiment is common throughout the eastern RS, and nearly anywhere outside of the Banja Luka area. (They were interested in more possibility for cooperation with both Gorazde in the Federation and Priboj in Serbia; they also wanted to end multi-party democracy and noted that the only thing the EU should be doing in BiH is literally and immediately re-opening factories, but that's another story...)

So why does the myth of blind RS/Serb resident support for Banja Luka policies continue?

This can be largely explained by the political-elite filter through which international actors consistently experience life and work in BiH, and through which they push reform agendas. While there are citizen roundtables, and "talk to the Ambassador" events, and walk-in EU Info Centers, these are tangential and ancillary to the primary day-to-day relationship that RS political leaders - and in fact all political leaders - enjoy with the international community writ large. Such an arrangement is not surprising - it is the basic building block of diplomatic relations. However, in BiH it is fair to question the extent to which the elites

really do represent and convey the interests of citizens. I've argued elsewhere that elections in BiH are more about fear and patronage than a democratic relationship between the governing and the governed; this is a basic feature of a captured state.

20 Years and Billions of Dollars

Ambassador Ferguson rightly notes that when "imagined threats" to the existence of the RS predominate, "a picture is painted of an RS beset by enemies, domestic or foreign. This is the politics of insecurity, not of hope." What he doesn't mention is that this political shell game is - and has always been - directly related to the personal fears of RS leadership of being indicted for corruption and/or abuse of office. The most recent RS referendum threat is not related to an interest in more effective and independent justice, but in evading possible charges of abuse of office and various financial crimes in the RS by ensuring that there is no judicial jurisdiction above the level of that entity that might try to independently prosecute such a case. All of BiH's leaders are well aware that they have failed to deliver anything for their constituencies; the social unrest in 2014 made this even more evident. However, they have quite smartly learned that they can remain unaccountable by raising the specter of ethnic violence and political dissolution, pacifying their own citizens and distracting international actors uninterested in the root causes of BiH's dysfunction. In this manner they further ensure that even discussion of different ways to organize the state or any of its many layers is not only undesirable but impossible. It would do no good to the current leaders of the RS if the majority of residents in the entity decided that they wanted a new deal that worked better for them, perhaps involving political and structural reform that could curb corruption, strengthen local government management and increase accountability.

While there is an overwhelming impulse among the international community to ensure "stability" at any price, compelling them to assuage their political intermediaries that they have little to fear from substantial governmental or structural reform, this is the wrong conversation. The right conversation is to openly discuss why after 20 years and billions of dollars, BiH's governmental system is still so unaccountable.

Europe to Fund Balkan Transport, Energy Projects

Following the Vienna summit, the Western Balkans has been promised 200 million euro in co-financing for 10 transport and energy projects, to improve growth and energy security.

After the Western Balkans summit, which took place in Vienna on August 27, it has been announced that European institutions will grant around 200 million euro for 10 transport and energy infrastructure projects in six Western Balkans countries.

The total value of the agreed projects is around 600 million euro and they are to be conducted in Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia. The projects will be co-financed under the 2015 Instrument for Pre-Accession programme, IPA, and Western Balkans Investments Framework and by European financial institutions such as the European Investment Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, EBRD, and the German government-owned development bank, KfW.

The Western Balkans Investments Framework was developed jointly with the European Commission, the EBRD and the Council of Europe development bank, as well as by EU member states and Western Balkan countries themselves.

Among the projects to be developed with EU financial help are the Albania-Macedonia power interconnection and the grid section of Trans-Balkan Electricity Corridor in Montenegro and Serbia.

Twenty-four different other infrastructure projects were confirmed as of great importance for the region.

Completion of these projects should stimulate GDP growth by 1 per cent in each Western Balkan country and create around 200,000 new jobs in total, Serbian media reported.

Among the so-called "pre-identified" projects are the highway from Nis in Serbia to the Albanian coastal city of Durres through to the Kosovo capital of Pristina and the highway from Croatia to the Greek border via Montenegro and Albania.

The EU will also co-finance the Bosnia-Croatia road interconnection on the Mediterranean corridor as well as the rail interconnection between Serbia and Macedonia.