

## LUNCH WITH DODIK

The name of Milorad Dodik had dominated our six years in Bosnia, mentioned constantly and following in significance closely behind Radovan Karadjic and General Mladic.

The latter two represented Bosnian nationalism at its most extreme. Milorad Dodik became prime minister of the Republika Srpska several years after the war from 1998 - 2001. The international community felt it could do business with him. Suspicions of corrupt dealings hung over him. Rumour had it he had diverted funds into building up his home town of Laktashi, a few miles to the north of Banja Luka, rewarding business associates with contracts. Radovan Karadjic's party, the SDS, ousted him at the following elections. The SDS bribed voters with free bags of sugar. Milorad Dodik remained in opposition, building up his power-base and planning to win the next election.

The differences between the Serb nationalist parties were minuscule, and had more to do with personal and political rivalries. Many had been involved in the Bosnia War, some known to be involved to a lesser or greater degree in corrupt business dealings and gangster activities, mainly drugs, weapons and people trafficking. The SDS could not shake off their connections with Radovan Karadjic, despite President Dragan Cavic's attempts to distance his party from its criminal past and to bring his country into the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Graham Hand, the first British Ambassador we met there, dubbed him a 'lap-top chetnik').

So it was only a matter of time before Milorad Dodik returned to power.

The international community claimed him to be cooperative and no extreme nationalist. Nevertheless he announced during a football match between Serbia and Bosnia that he supported Serbia. This public statement gained him popular support and inspired large gangs of youths gathering after Serbia's victory to roam the streets of Banja Luka waving nationalist flags and shouting: 'Serbia! Serbia! Kill the Turks!' The police managed to stop the crowds from desecrating the site of the destroyed Ferhadija Mosque. But the

message from the Republika Srpska in 2005 was clear: ‘We want nothing to do with Bosnia, although you tell us we are part of the same country. We are Serbs and want to be part of Serbia.’

We drove through Laktashi, the main road flanked by new chrome and glass fronted clubs and cafes, and passed miles of ripening cornfields to Milorad Dodik’s residence.

Graham Day had managed to secure a lunch invitation for us with this most influential politician in the Republika Srpska. Roeland Baan from Mittal Steel’s Rotterdam Office was to be the guest of honour, but a misunderstanding between Prijedor mine headquarters and the Office of the High Representative in Banja Luka meant no car arrived to pick him up at the airport. The mine headquarters claimed to have nothing to do with this visit and Murari Mukherjee, on a mission to a mine in Liberia, insisted responsibility lay with the Office of the High Representative. They had invited the big boss, so they should arrange transport. ‘We are not a taxi service,’ retorted Graham Day.

Roeland Baan let us deal with Milorad Dodik on our own.

Approaching Milorad Dodik’s residence recalled those visits to villains in James Bond movies. We passed the lake of a fish farm owned by Dodik’s brother. Guards concealed by the fields of tall corn phoned ahead to warn of our arrival. We crossed a footbridge over a stream with a miniature water mill and saw a large swimming pool. The sight of two boys, Milorad Dodik’s son and his friend plunging in and, more importantly, clambering out again came as a relief: no sharks then! The large house behind them seemed to have been modelled on South Fork from Dallas, the 80’s American TV series.

To our surprise the mayor of Prijedor had also been invited. We were met by two pairs of blue eyes, Milorad Dodik’s being even bluer than Marko Pavic’s, and he was also taller and fitter than the mayor. Misha Stojnic our driver told us how they all used to play in a basketball team together, tall, athletic Milorad Dodik being the main goal scorer.

Milorad Dodik and Marko Pavic left Misha Stojnic to direct game plans. These players now ran the country while Misha spent long periods unemployed.

Milorad Dodik and Marko Pavic had clearly been discussing us before we arrived. Roeland Baan's absence suited them, as they could attack the project and later blame its failure on us. Milorad Dodik, good-looking in a Serb machismo way, welcomed us graciously and agreed to support us while Marko Pavic played the bad cop, making it clear in a long speech that he would not permit a memorial to dead Bosniaks.

Several other guests joined the lunch. These included the head of the main TV network in the Republika Srpska and a journalist who had lost both legs in a car bomb planted by the SDS because he had written articles about war crimes at a time when Serbs were denying them. These two vigorously supported the project, offering to give positive coverage when we decided to go public, because in order to protect those involved at this early tricky stage of mediation we were keeping the media at a distance. However, when the time came several months later, they would mention the project but in such a way as to make it seem insignificant. Words were particularly cheap in Bosnia, and the media and politicians knew how to please the international community with promises and agreeable gestures of cooperation without committing to any of them.

The lunch gave us a chance to observe these politicians operating.

The presence of the journalist injured for telling the truth and also an elderly Jewish partisan among the guests proved Milorad Dodik's tolerant liberal attitudes. We could see him defending a free press and honouring patriots regardless of ethnicity. However both Milorad Dodik and Marko Pavic paid scant attention to these guests. Milorad Dodik's eyes looked nervously everywhere, sideways, backwards, checking and alert. Occasionally they fixed on us an intent and inscrutable gaze. He sat close to Marko Pavic, school bullies ganging together, protecting each other and ruling the roost.

Timid waiters served lunch from the barbecue, where they had fearfully aimed large canisters shooting yard long flames at the meat which arrived char-broiled to leather. Both Milorad Dodik and Mayor Pavic stuck their forks into these slice-resistant slabs and devoured them. The boys helped themselves from the barbecue and tried in vain to chew some sustenance before leaping back into the pool.

We had lost our appetite on arrival, feeling then that we needed to be especially alert in the absence of Roeland Baan, but in retrospect the occasion had no significant influence on our project.

We endured again tediously familiar speeches about the war being a civil conflict and how Bosnia needed to be ethnically inclusive. We explained the project and our process.

Marko Pavic attacked these proposals and afterwards shook our hands with a friendly smile, while Milorad Dodik put his arm around our shoulders promising us support.

The only history mentioned was the Second World War. Ariel Livno, the Jewish partisan, spoke about the impossibility of Bosnia ever being a country where different groups could live together. He did not mean it as a defence of Serb nationalism, but as a grim fact. 'You will get no-where with your project,' he told us bluntly, but smiling encouragingly nonetheless. We touched history in shaking hands with this celebrated soldier and speaking with this survivor of Europe's worst conflict in centuries, a man who had fought alongside Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks against fascism in one of the bloodiest campaigns of the Second World War. Milorad Dodik and Marko Pavic were born years after that cataclysm, but the mythology distilled in the survival of this Jewish fighter, fed their beliefs and shaped the events in the former Yugoslavia and lead directly to the Bosnia War.

Graham Day considered the meeting a success. At least we had not made an enemy of Milorad Dodik. However his voting constituency prevented him from supporting the project openly.