

Bosnia-Herzegovina faces dissolution

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28 March 2001

Just five years after its creation, the state of Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) faces the prospect of dissolution. The ultra-nationalists of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) in Bosnia have declared a government of self-rule. This effectively ends the Croat-Muslim Federation and brings into question its union with the other autonomous entity within BiH, the Republika Srpska.

The catalyst for the separatist moves of the HDZ was the decision of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)—one of the many international agencies having a determining say over domestic affairs under the Dayton Agreement, which ended the civil war in Bosnia—to revise the rules determining government representation at entity level. Up until last year, the delegates to the House of Peoples (the Croat-Muslim Federation's upper house) were elected along rigid ethnic lines from ten cantonal assemblies. Canton members could only select candidates from their own ethnic group. Prior to the general elections last November, this provision was altered by the OSCE to enable canton assembly members to vote for any candidate irrespective of their ethnicity.

The main electoral casualty of these changes is the HDZ, which has sought to maintain ethnic divisions and present itself as the sole guardian of Croat interests. In the November elections they held a referendum of Croats, calling for a verdict to be delivered on Bosnia. Although this fell short of an outright demand for separation, the party's slogan during the elections was "Determination or extinction."

Following the poll, the HDZ has refused to take up its elected positions and has withdrawn from government at both entity and BiH level. On March 1, HDZ leader Ante Jelavic stated, "From today the Federation is a Bosniak [Bosnian Muslim] national entity, without Croats. These authorities in Bosnia are illegal, illegitimate. We will neither participate in them nor shall we recognise their decisions."

A subsequent session of the Croat National Assembly, set up by the HDZ along with seven other Croat parties, issued an ultimatum to the OSCE to rescind the new election laws within fifteen days, or steps towards establishing a separate Croatian entity would be taken.

The new entity proposed by the HDZ is to have its own government, legislature and judiciary. It covers five of the Federation's ten cantons and corresponds to the mini-state known as Herceg-Bosna, which existed temporarily during the Bosnian war of 1992-5 and functioned as an appendage of the Zagreb government led by the late President Franjo Tudjman. Under US pressure, the Croat and Muslim sides signed a ceasefire in 1994, and entered into an anti-Serbian alliance that became the antecedent for the Croat-Muslim Federation. However, the goal of establishing a Greater Croatia was never renounced by the HDZ or its eponymous parent organisation in Croatia proper.

The deadline cited by the separatists has now passed. So far, the only response by the Western powers has been to remove Ante Jelavic from his post on the tripartite BiH Presidency and to bar three other party officials from political activity. Economic sanctions are now being debated.

The dangers of a new military conflict in Bosnia are underscored by the recommendations made by the International Crisis Group (ICG), an international policy think-tank. Under the heading, "Take Pre-emptive Security Measures", its Balkans Report No. 106 states: "S-For [the NATO-

led "peace-keeping" force in Bosnia] should place the heavy equipment and weaponry belonging to the Croat component (HVO) of the Federation Army—including weapons donated under the 'Train and Equip' program—into containment sites until the HVO indicates willingness to participate in Federation institutions."

Initial steps have already been taken to form a Bosnian Croat army. Officers from the First Guard Corps, an exclusively Croat unit in the Federation's military forces based in Mostar, have refused to recognise the army's joint command. The force is estimated to number somewhere in the region of 7,000 to 11,000 soldiers.

The present constitutional crisis is the inevitable outcome of the unstable origins of the BiH state. Its foundations were laid in the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords, which went far beyond the remit of previous peace agreements establishing the conditions for a cessation of hostilities.

Although the former Yugoslavian republic of Bosnia was then internationally recognised as a sovereign state, the Western granted itself unprecedented powers to determine the structures of the new state and exercise overall control. This was justified on the grounds that only Western intervention would establish democracy and end ethnic conflict, but this has proved to be an illusion.

The break-up of Yugoslavia

The break-up of Yugoslavia began in June 1991, with the declaration of independence by Slovenia and Croatia. Fighting broke out immediately between separatist forces and troops belonging to the Yugoslav army stationed in the republics.

The initial response of the European powers was to attempt to halt the conflict through the Brioni Declaration. Its aim was to suspend the moves towards separation for three months, whilst negotiating greater autonomy within a federal structure. Following extensive lobbying by Germany (which had already built-up significant economic interests in the two republics) however, the way for European recognition of partition at the Maastricht summit in December 1991.

This change in European policy was a trade-off, in order to smooth the path for the creation of the European Union (EU). The recently reunified Germany agreed to commit itself to all-European institutions in return for this change in European foreign policy. This was implemented even though the status of the sizeable Serb minority inside Croatia was uncertain. Citizenship of the newly recognised Croat state was based exclusively on ethnicity. There were several indicators that the country's ethnic minority would be reduced to the level of second-class citizens. Serbs lost their jobs in government employment and had a property tax levied against them. A new identity card was introduced which marked them out. According to a report by the then UN Secretary General, Boutros-Boutros Ghali, some 250,000 Serbs were driven out of Croatia between 1991-92, with many taking refuge in neighbouring Bosnia.

The US, which had initially opposed separation for the two republics, then promoted independence for Bosnia. But this was to prove even more catastrophic, as the republic was so ethnically diverse. The Muslim population constituted a narrow majority of the three main ethnic groups—40 percent compared to 30 percent Serb and 17 percent Croat. While the three main nationalist parties reflecting this division enjoyed a

majority within the Bosnian parliament, there existed no popular mandate for independence. Bosnian President and leader of the Muslim nationalist SDA, Alija Izetbegovic, had opposed the recognition of Croatia and Slovenia fearing the resulting conflict would spread to Bosnia. Under US direction this policy changed. During February/March 1992, a referendum was called on Bosnian independence, and a majority was achieved due to the fact that the Serbian population boycotted the plebiscite. Despite an EU undertaking that the result would only be regarded as valid if all three communities participated, recognition of Bosnia's independence was granted. The new state was swiftly made a member of the United Nations and the continued presence of the Yugoslav army was regarded as an act of aggression.

The Serb population in Bosnia had legitimate concerns about being subsumed in a new state ruled over by Western powers indifferent to their constitutional rights. The Serb Democratic Party (SDS) exploited this for their own nationalist objectives, seeking to carve out Serb enclaves inside both Croatia and Bosnia, and resurrecting the demand for a "Greater Serbia" unifying all Serbs in one state. Despite the perception created by the mass media, however, they were not the only ones having expansionist aims. For its part, in July 1992 the HDZ declared a separate state that would function as part of a Greater Croatia within Bosnia. But, no action was taken against the HDZ by the Western powers.

The SDA has been presented as the most "tolerant" of the three sides, because of its support for a "multi-ethnic" Bosnia. However, the SDA had called for the Muslim population of the Sandzak area of Serbia and Montenegro to be unified with its counterparts in Bosnia. In reality, unlike the Croats and Serbs, the SDA could not seek the annexation of such enclaves into a larger Bosnian entity and was totally reliant on the US for retaining a single state through which Moslems could then exercise a narrow majority.

The actions of the Western powers proved to be a vital contributory factor in the Bosnian war that followed, in which all three sides were guilty of carrying out ethnic cleansing. Although there were some popular expressions of opposition to ethnic chauvinism, most notably in the capital Sarajevo, the general population found themselves sucked into the vortex of a bloody fratricidal conflict. By granting Bosnia UN membership, the way was paved for the West to intervene directly. The Western powers adopted an anti-Serb position in order to prevent the Milosevic government in Belgrade from retaining a centralised Yugoslav state under its control. But they differed over whether the new mini-states being carved out would be controlled by Europe or America.

The attempts by the EU to negotiate a deal with the contending sides on the basis of dividing Bosnia into ten ethnic cantons under international supervision was scuppered by America, which worked to reinforce a Muslim-Croat axis in the region. In 1994, a US brokered ceasefire was then established between the two sides. With the agreement of President Tudjman, a Croat-Muslim alliance was formed, laying down a federal Bosnia with the Croat entity having confederate status with Croatia itself. Later in the year, a joint Croatian and Muslim military command was established under US direction, and evidence exists showing that America provided military equipment and training to the alliance. The US air force also bombarded Serb positions in Croatia and Bosnia during 1994-5, allowing Croat and Muslim forces to overrun them on the ground in the Krajina and northwest Bosnia. The Krajina offensive involved the single largest case of ethnic cleansing in the Balkans conflict, creating half a million Serb refugees.

The Bosnian Serbs were thus forced to the negotiating table. While the US had previously been disinclined to accept the European peace initiative, on the grounds that it rewarded ethnic cleansing, the final agreement drawn up by the US in Dayton involved an even greater displacement of people. The ordinary people of Bosnia had no say over the new ethnic partition of the country, drawn up by the US negotiating

team and the contending nationalist representatives, and carried out with technical assistance provided by the US Wright-Patterson air force base. Computer software that had been used to simulate the terrain of Bosnia in order to aid US bombing missions was now utilised to plan its carve-up.

Yugoslavian President Slobodan Milosevic was brought in to negotiate for the Serb side and promised that agreement would bring an end to Western sanctions. Tudjman's agreement was secured because the West had enabled him to secure his goal of an ethnically homogenous Croatia. Moreover, Zagreb regarded the Croat-Muslim Federation as providing a stepping-stone towards the annexation of the Bosnian Croat enclave. For Izetbegovic, the agreement was confirmation that he would play the role of the main US proxy within the new BiH entity.

While Bosnia-Herzegovina was nominally a unitary state made up of two autonomous parts, the war and the further displacement of ethnic groups according to the new boundaries only served to entrench support for nationalist politics.

"Multi-ethnic" Bosnia

Under the guise of maintaining a "multi-ethnic" Bosnia, the US and European powers had gained unprecedented control over a nominally sovereign state. This went far beyond the military occupation of the NATO-dominated S-For. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund had control over its economy, whilst the creation of the Office of the High Representative (OHR) ensured a Western veto over the entire political process. The OHR was empowered to remove elected representatives from any of the new government bodies if it was deemed necessary. While ensuring Europe's cooperation in implementing the agreement, America had preserved its own leading role. As US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright later commented: "to a great extent the Dayton Accords and the peace process they built were made in America."

The general elections held last November were the third since the end of the war. Alongside the BiH state elections, there were also elections to the parliaments at entity level and in the Croat-Muslim Federation's cantons. The results revealed the influence the hardline nationalists continue to wield. To this day, the number of minority returns—i.e. those returning to their original homes in places where they constitute an ethnic minority—was as low as ten percent. The nationalist politicians have obstructed the return of displaced peoples in order to shore up their control in the areas where they enjoy a majority. They then use the resulting atmosphere of mutual distrust to present themselves as the defenders of their respective ethnic communities.

In a society where approximately 50 percent of the adult population is unemployed, patronage plays a big part. The contending nationalists use the misappropriation of international aid, proceeds from smuggling and their niches in public companies to buy loyalty. However, there are indications that broader social considerations are beginning to come to the fore. Over the last ten years, the hardline nationalists' vote has declined by ten to twenty percent. Republika Srpska has been hit by a wave of strikes by public sector workers over non-payment of wages, and in last year's local elections, the vote for the SDA and HDZ experienced a sharp dip.

The actions taken by the Western powers to reduce support for the nationalists in the run-up to the November elections appeared to have had some success. The vote for the HDZ was down from 1998 by some 20,000, although they won the majority vote among Bosnian Croats. The party responded by presenting the change in the voting system for the Federation's Upper House as a diminution of the rights of Bosnian Croats and used this to galvanise support for separation. This in turn bolstered support for the SDA, which urged Bosnian Muslims to vote along ethnic lines with the slogan, "Each has selected his own: What about you?"

The same was true for the Republika Srpska. Two weeks before the elections, Richard Holbrooke, US Ambassador to the UN and leading architect of the Dayton Agreement, travelled to Bosnia and called upon the OHR to ban the SDS, but this only served to reinforce its support. The

SDS picked up the vote of the other main Serb nationalist party, the SRS that had been banned in 1999 by the OHR.

Although none of the nationalists won a large enough majority to form a government at entity level without entering into coalition, they had managed to bolster their support. At BiH state level, the multi-ethnic SDP won a slim majority. On February 22, Bozidar Matic of the Social Democrat Party (SDP) was manoeuvred into the post of Bosnian Prime Minister. Matic, who is endorsed by the Western powers, is a director of the engineering conglomerate Energoinvest, and a devotee of the free market. He stresses the need to establish a self-sustaining economy, increase exports and attract inward investment. His government is an uneasy coalition of ten parties, going under the title “Alliance for Change”.

Continued opposition to the return of displaced peoples and ending of parallel forms of government is undermining the credibility of the Dayton Agreement, which was supposed to usher in a new era of peace within the Balkans and which served as a vital justification for NATO's military involvement.

The Western powers also do not feel that they have been able to reap the necessary financial rewards for their efforts. BiH is referred to as a “donor dependent” state, where \$5 billion has been poured in over the last five years. The corruption endemic within the contending nationalist cliques and their control over the public sector is viewed as a major obstacle to the privatisation programme, with less than three per cent of state enterprises having been privatised. International aid is being used to subsidise smuggling operations, with an estimated 40 percent of all goods sold on the Bosnian market going untaxed. The division of such a small territory of just 4.3 million people into ethnic enclaves also disrupts natural trade patterns and the threat of future conflicts is a powerful deterrent to attracting long-term inward investment.

US disengagement in the Balkans

This situation is leading the US, the main patron of the state, to rethink its continued engagement in Bosnia.

On one side, there is the view that the West should show less restraint in imposing its dictates. An ICG Balkans Report entitled “Bosnia's November Elections: Dayton Stumbles”, commented: “The main objection to banning the SDS in the November elections was that to do so would disenfranchise a majority of voters. This ignored the fact that Bosnia is already a semi-protectorate, in which voters are already subject to multiple constraints: the international community has set a precedent for banning parties, removing elected officials, imposing laws, confiscating evidence and arresting war criminals. It is time for the international community to stop making a sacrificial lamb out of the occasional individual official or party, admit that Bosnia is a quasi-protectorate and set clear performance benchmarks for all local political parties and officials. Having acknowledged that Bosnia is indeed a protectorate, the point will be to use the opportunity that that offers in order to build a functioning, sustainable institutional framework.”

The other body of opinion is one that sees the present crisis as inherent within the existing structures of Bosnia and seeks a redivision of the territory.

US President Bush has made it clear that he wants to see American disengagement from Bosnia. During the election campaign he called for a withdrawal of US troops from the Balkans, but faced with criticism from Europe he qualified this by saying that any scaling down of the American military presence would be arrived at through consultation with Washington's allies in collective security agreements.

Nevertheless, there are unmistakable signs that a shift is being prepared. At a recent symposium on the future American presence in the region, General Dayton, a deputy director of the Politico-Military Affairs for Europe/Africa at the Joint Chief of Staff, stated that the US would start to pull out its troops in 2003. He added that a radical reduction of the US

contribution to S-For would be considered during the next US review of S-For, due in May. General Dayton explained that S-For commander Lieutenant General Michael Dobson had instigated the discussion on policy changes in Bosnia. Participants were asked to discuss the future of Bosnia, the viability of multi-ethnic states and the Dayton accord. It would appear a consensus was reached amongst the military officers present on the need to redraw the current boundaries in the Balkans to create “smaller, more stable mono-ethnic states.”

Moreover, US columnist Thomas L Friedman wrote two articles in the *New York Times* calling for Bosnia to be annexed by the two neighbouring states of Croatia and Serbia. The articles, which appeared in January, stated that the continued existence of Bosnia-Herzegovina was incompatible with democracy, and for this reason it should be “softly” partitioned by the neighbouring countries. Friedman cited as the precondition for this, the existence of new governments in Zagreb and Belgrade—under Stipe Mesic and Vojislav Kostunica—that are regarded as being more favourable to the West.

It is clear that the Bosnian Croat separatists are seeking to utilise the present ambiguity in American foreign policy. After announcing the plans to establish self-rule, HDZ leader in BiH Ante Jelavic wrote to Bush personally seeking his endorsement. So far, however, Washington has stood by the actions of the OHR.

See Also:

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[16 March 2001]



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