

Bosnia faces collapse

Paul Mitchell
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A number of reports have pointed to the increasing threat of Bosnia and Herzegovina collapsing. Some have talked about the possibility of war breaking out.

In October 2008, former Bosnian High Representative Paddy Ashdown and Richard Holbrooke, now US Special Envoy to Pakistan and Afghanistan, warned that Bosnia was a “powder keg” and “in real danger of collapse.”

In February 2009, US Director of Intelligence Dennis Blair told the US Congress that Bosnia’s survival as a multi-ethnic state was “seriously in doubt.” The Dayton Agreement that ended the Bosnian war in 1995, Blair continued, had “created a decentralized political system that has entrenched rather than eradicated ethnic prejudices and insecurities.”

The following month the International Crisis Group, which numbers former presidents, ministers and businessmen amongst its members, warned that the Dayton agreement “is arguably under the greatest threat since the war ended in 1995.”

In May, the US Congress passed a resolution on Bosnia calling for the appointment of a new US special envoy to the Balkans region and for the post of High Representative—created by the Dayton agreement as a pro-consular official with ultimate authority in Bosnia—to continue. It called on the European Union to reconsider its plans to pull out the European peacekeeping force, EUFOR, which replaced the NATO-led one in December 2004. Also in May US Vice President Joseph Biden visited the Balkans and warned the Bosnian parliament not to fall back into “old patterns and ancient animosities.”

Last month, professors Patrice McMahon and Jon Western warned in *Foreign Affairs* magazine that 14 years after the agreement was signed, Bosnia “now stands on the brink of collapse.” More ominously, they say that Bosnians “are once again talking about the potential for war.”

In their article “The Death of Dayton: How to Stop Bosnia From Falling Apart,” McMahon and Western

explain that Bosnia was once touted as “the poster child for international reconstruction” and received financial and logistical support that made the post-World War II rebuilding of Germany and Japan “look modest” in comparison.

By the end of 1996, they say, the country was occupied by 60,000 troops and the focus of reconstruction efforts by 17 different foreign governments, 18 United Nations agencies, 27 intergovernmental organizations, and about 200 nongovernmental organizations. Since then the country has received over \$14 billion in foreign aid, equivalent to \$300 per person per year, which compares to \$65 per person in Afghanistan. Much of that aid has vanished into thin air. One investigation revealed that more than \$1 billion in aid—nearly one-fifth of the total handed out between 1996 and 1999—had disappeared.

Despite all this assistance, McMahon and Western complain, Bosnia’s economy is stalled and there is huge unemployment and poverty. The country remains divided into the two semi-independent entities created by the Dayton agreement: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, inhabited mainly by Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats, and the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska, each with its own government controlling taxation, educational policy, and even foreign policy. A single Bosnian army has been created, but each brigade is comprised of ethnically based battalions.

According to McMahon and Western, Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik is actively pursuing secession for Republika Srpska and Bosnian Croat politicians are demanding more autonomy within the Federation. Haris Silajdzic, the Bosnian Muslim representative in the collective presidency, has called for a more centralized state (there are already 160 government ministers) and the dissolution of Republika Srpska.

Dodik has attempted to downplay warnings of collapse and war. In a letter to the *New York Times* (September 21, 2009) he asserted that “there is absolutely no threat of a return to violence” and for those making “alarmist cries” to stop. But in the next breath he boasts that his Republika

Srpska has survived the financial storm better than the Federation and that “We do not support the centralized model that some in the international community have sought to impose on Bosnia and Herzegovina.”

At the same time Dodik was writing, Rajko Vasic, general secretary of the largest Serb party, the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats, reacted to statements by the Bosnian Muslim Party of Democratic Action that the “patriots of Bosnia” would prevent the country’s dissolution as itself “a direct threat of war.”

Nowhere is ethnic division more defined than in the Federation capital of Mostar. The Croat majority now live mainly in the western part of the city, and the Bosnian Muslims in the east. Of the 24,000 Serbs that lived in Mostar before the war, only a handful remain. Many Croats have taken advantage of their right to Croatian citizenship to emigrate to Croatia, with a recent report suggesting that their number has dropped from about 820,000 before the war to 466,000 today.

The administration of Mostar is collapsing largely as a result of attempts by Croat politicians to impose a Croat identity on the city. They argue that Sarajevo is “Muslim” and Banja Luka is “Serb,” but the Croats have no capital of their own. As a result, there has been no mayor, budget or functioning city council since elections in October 2008. City workers have not been paid for months. Councillors have failed on 14 separate occasions to elect a mayor or create any common institutions. Even a basic utility such as the Mostar water company operates as two parallel structures, with a Croat director and staff overseeing supply to the Croat west bank, while a Bosnian Muslim director looks after the supply to the eastern side of the city.

The situation in Bosnia is a foreign policy disaster for the US and EU and a tragedy for the Balkan peoples. The Balkans region was meant to be the arena in which the US established the ground rules and the EU would take over, flexing its muscles for the first time following the launch of the Common Security and Defence Policy a decade ago. The EU’s main strategy in the region has been to offer the prospect of EU membership, but several EU member states are now opposed to further enlargement of the bloc until fundamental “reforms” are carried out.

Increasing numbers of people in the Balkans region are questioning the advantages of EU membership in a period of global recession. Bosnia has been forced to take out a \$1.6 billion emergency loan from the International Monetary Fund. As a result, “structural adjustment” is to be speeded up involving more privatizations, wage cuts

and reductions in social and war-related benefits—entailing what the IMF describes as “extreme public discomfort” and a threat to “social stability.” This takes place in a country in which the population already suffers 27 percent unemployment and 25 percent poverty rates.

The Western powers are largely responsible for the region’s division into ethnically based regimes dominated by nationalists. The US and Germany in particular deliberately engineered Yugoslavia’s break-up along ethnic lines, with a complete indifference to the inevitable tragic consequences of their intervention. It was inevitable, given the history and politics of Yugoslavia, that the piecemeal break-up of the federation would lead to civil war and create new ethnically based states incapable of providing a progressive solution to the problems facing the Balkan people—entrenched poverty, unemployment, crime and corruption.

The situation brought about by the Western powers and the nationalist politicians in Bosnia has led to a collapse in support for the country’s political institutions. A recent poll showed Bosnia “outperforms all other [World Values Survey] transformation countries” in showing “no interest at all” in politics. Most young people are “outside the political process,” and nearly 80 percent of all Bosnians feel that none of the political parties represent their interest.

The inability of the EU, the US and various ethnically based governments to solve the social disaster in the Balkans can only be resolved by the building of an internationalist party based on the perspective of the United Socialist States of the Balkans.



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