

Seeking Unity in Bosnia

Political obstinance stalls progress in EU membership

By per Concordiam Staff



More than 16 years after the Bosnian war ended with the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords, Bosnia and Herzegovina remains a fragile and restless entity, threatened by political instability and lingering ethnic mistrust. Disunity among the region's Serb, Muslim and Croat population carries the potential for conflict that could spread across the entire region, High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina Valentin Inzko told the United Nations Security Council in May 2011.



Leaders of Bosnia-Herzegovina's main political parties agreed to form a new government in December 2011, ending a 14-month standoff between ethnic Croat, Serb and Bosniak politicians.

The most recent crisis occurred in April 2011, when Bosnian Serb leaders proposed a referendum to reject the authority of the multiethnic Bosnian state court and other federal institutions and laws. Suddenly, the future of Bosnia's relationship with the rest of Europe was clouded with uncertainty. *European Voice* called the referendum request "the deepest crisis since the Dayton peace agreement." Diplomatic pressure by the European Union persuaded Republika Srpska (RS) President Milorad Dodik to cancel the referendum, but the incident highlighted the deteriorating political situation in a country that had slipped from the radar of many Europeans.

Crisis averted, not resolved

While an immediate crisis was averted, the political future of Bosnia remains ambiguous. Squabbling political parties still hadn't formed a government more than eight months after elections in October 2010, and some Bosnian Croats were again agitating for the creation of a third ethnic enclave akin to the largely autonomous, Serb-controlled RS.

The International Crisis Group (ICG), a nongovernmental organization focused on conflict prevention and resolution, lamented in a 2011 report: "There is no broadly respected authority in the country, only regional or partisan champions." Official corruption and organized crime are endemic, and the same nationalist parties that led Bosnia into war in 1992 remain powerful and popular with their ethnic constituencies, diplomats say.

The situation had deteriorated to the point that the *Financial Times* could say in 2011 that "Mr. Dodik's calls for breaking up [Bosnia], along with Bosniak (Bosnian Muslims) calls to stamp out Serb autonomy, have started to appear routine."

Further muddying the waters – and feeding fears of Serb and Croat nationalists – are indications of increasing religious radicalization in the traditionally moderate and secular Bosnian Muslim community. In June 2010, six Bosnian Muslims planted a bomb in a police station in the town of Bugojno, killing one officer. According to the Bosnian news site ISA Intel, the attacks were the work of a new sect that follows the radical Takfiri ideology and openly advocates violent jihad. "There are strong indications that the Bosnian Wahhabi movement has been taken over by more radical forces," the article said. In an ironic kinship with Serb leader Dodik, the Wahhabi terrorists refused to recognize the authority of Bosnia's state court.

Dissatisfying status quo

As the world has focused increasingly on international terrorism, Afghanistan, Iraq and the Arab Spring, memories of the bloody ethnic wars in the Balkans

have receded. Although Bosnia has been relatively quiet, problems still fester. Despite hopes that the promise of EU membership would promote reconciliation and reform, the political system struggles to function properly and remains under the supervision of the Office of the High Representative (OHR).

Neighboring Croatia, which also lapsed into interethnic warfare with the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, will join the EU in 2013. And now that Serbia, following the May 2011 arrest of Bosnian Serb war crimes suspect Ratko Mladić, could soon win candidate status, Bosnia remains the only former Yugoslav republic without a path to EU membership. "Progress on much-needed economic reforms, or towards European Union membership, has ground to a halt," *The Economist* wrote.

The Dayton Accords ended bloodshed in Bosnia but created an unwieldy and inefficient system of government. According to David Chandler, writing in the *International Journal of Peace Studies*, the multiple and overlapping layers of Bosnian government create embedded inefficiencies. The reliance on "external institutions" has decreased the accountability of elected leaders. The constitution established by Dayton created a weak federal government and two generally autonomous entities, the mainly ethnic Serb RS and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), forged from the on-again-off-again wartime alliance between Muslims and Croats.

The OHR, the primary "external institution" in question, was established by the international community after Dayton to guide political reconciliation and build democratic institutions in Bosnia. The OHR was vested with the power to cancel laws and remove elected political leaders deemed corrupt or obstructionist. The proposed Bosnian Serb referendum at the center of the recent crisis was in reaction to laws and institutions established under OHR authority. The original plan was to close the OHR in 2008, but its mission has been extended until at least 2012.

Dayton's goal was to end the war while providing the basic structure on which to build a unified, multiethnic

state. But the treaty has inadvertently cemented ethnic and political separations formed by the war. Though provisions granting wide autonomy were necessary to gain buy-in from the warring parties, framers hoped that time would lead to reconciliation, integration and interethnic trust necessary to establish a functioning and sovereign central government free. Many hoped that the promise of EU membership would restrain petty nationalist rivalries, but it hasn't been enough.

Further complicating the situation is a parallel crisis in the FBiH. Bosniak-Croat ethnic riots in Herzegovina and violent demonstrations in Sarajevo followed a heated football match in April 2010. After the 2010 FBiH elections,

Croat nationalist parties refused to form a government with the Social Democratic Party (the only nominally multiethnic party), which won the most votes. In addition, the FBiH is broke and badly in need of structural reforms. According to the ICG, reforms have been neglected "because of belief that statewide constitutional reform would solve most of its problems." Bosnian Croat leader Martin Raguz told *The Economist* that the Dayton constitution "has hit a brick wall," and he called for new elections.

Different visions

Bosnia's three ethnic constituencies have divergent views on the type of state they want, including differing interpretations of Dayton and which powers it grants to the entities versus the central government.

There are also conflicting and sometimes inaccurate

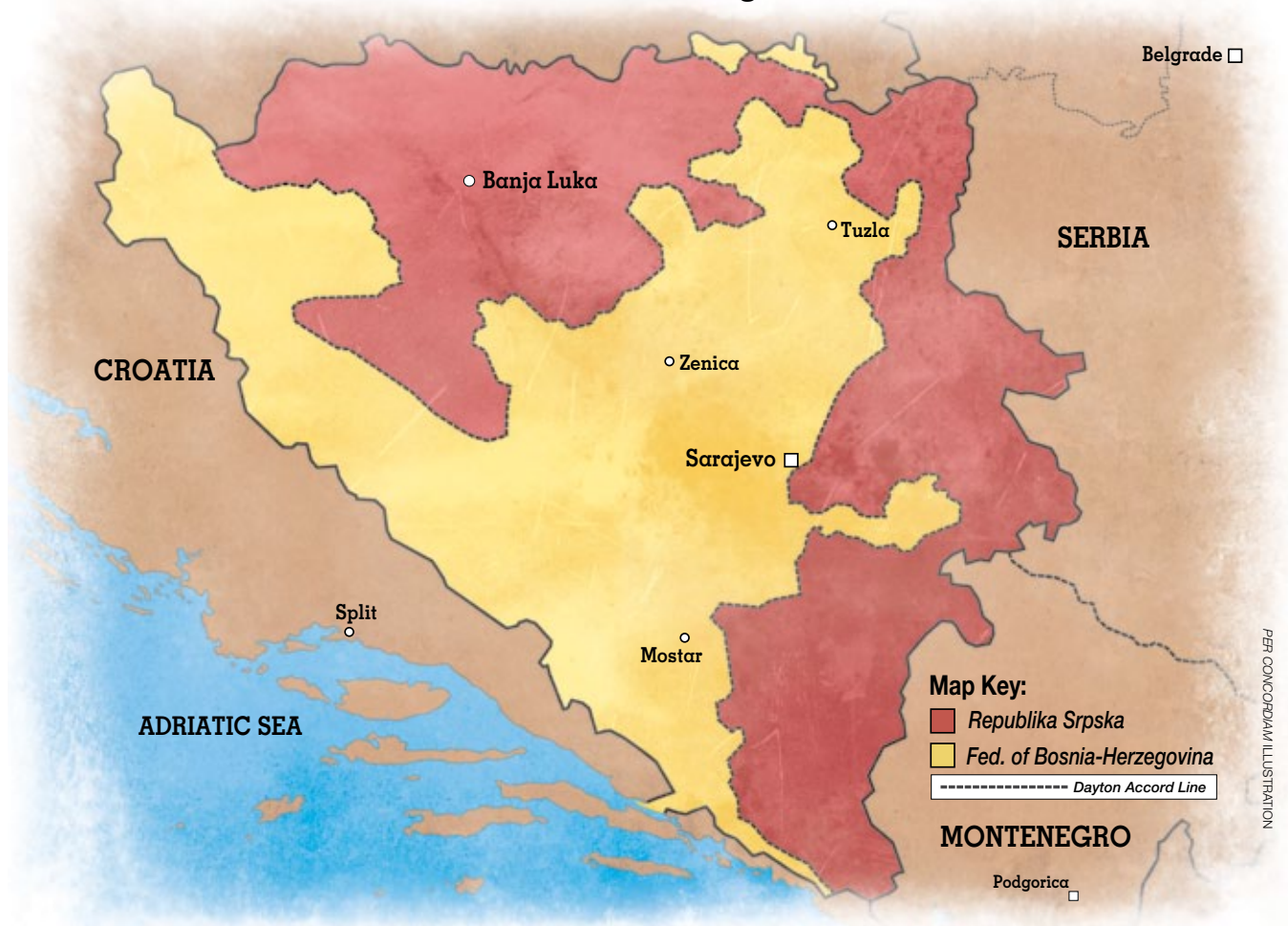
perceptions of the motives and ambitions of the other groups, perceptions formed by history, war, fear and prejudice and exploited by nationalist politicians. According to the ICG, "wartime political loyalties still largely apply. Most Bosniaks supported the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina as the sole legitimate and multi-ethnic authority," but most Croats and Serbs "viewed it as a Bosniak entity that did not represent them."

Bosniaks, the largest ethnic group though not a majority, favor a multiethnic republic with a strong central government within Bosnia's



Before and after photos of the old city in Mostar chart progress made in rehabilitating the war-torn Bosnian town between 1994 and 2011.

Bosnia and Herzegovina



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current borders. Bosniak nationalists led the drive for Bosnian independence from Yugoslavia and represented Bosnia at the Dayton peace talks.

Bosnian Serbs make up about 25 percent of the population, and the RS comprises 49 percent of the territory. Most Bosnian Serbs opposed Bosnian independence from Serb-dominated Yugoslavia. Serb nationalists, led by war-crimes suspects Radovan Karadžić and Mladić, used military force and ethnic cleansing to break “historically Serbian territory” away from Bosnia and remain part of Yugoslavia. While the Serbs were more or less coerced into signing the Dayton Accords, they now view it as a guarantor of their autonomy from Bosniak rule.

Nationalist Bosnian Croat leaders supported Bosnia’s independence from Yugoslavia, but mostly because they felt that prying territory away from a weak Bosnian state was preferable to grappling with a stronger Yugoslavia. The Croats broke their alliance with the Bosniaks a few months into the war but later reconciled with Muslims, under Western pressure, to fight Serbs. Most Bosnian Croats support separating from the FBiH and forming their own autonomous region along the lines of the RS.

There have been several attempts at the substantive reform necessary to move Bosnia toward its place in the European family of nations, but most have largely failed, including a Western brokered package of constitutional reform in 2006.

Question of reform

Those who wish Bosnia and Herzegovina to succeed as an integrated, multiethnic state realize the country needs a new constitution, preferably one that reflects the common democratic principles of its people, rather than the wishes of international negotiators. Without some kind of ethnic consensus, the economic and political reforms necessary to join the EU are difficult to achieve.

As former Slovenian President Milan Kučan told the ICG: “The war itself never really ended; it was only interrupted by the Dayton peace agreement.” European integration may help resolve Bosnia’s interethnic disputes and rivalries, but the level of cooperation needed to achieve European standards of government, rule of law and human rights required to enter the EU have yet to be reached by Bosnia’s fractious political leadership. □