
Slow Dawn: Beyond the Attempted Ethnic Partition of Bosnia-Herzegovina

ERIC HERRING

Lecturer in International Politics
University of Bristol

✦ In one of my seminars on the wars in former Yugoslavia, a student from Croatia stated that the ethnic cleansing of Serbs from Croatia was much less brutal than the ethnic cleansing that had been carried out elsewhere by Serbs. She claimed that Serbs were sometimes treated better as they transited Croatia than when they arrived in Serbia. She said she was contemptuous of Serbian nationalist claims to Kosovo because those same Serbs had little intention of ever visiting Kosovo and even less of living there. The words of a stereotypical Croat nationalist, you might think. It turns out that Tajana Zoric was one of those Serbs who had been driven out of the Krajina region of Croatia and dumped in Kosovo by the Serbian authorities and who, if pressed, still prefers to call herself a Yugoslav rather than a Croat or a Serb. After the war, she returned to Croatia via Bosnia-Herzegovina (hereafter referred to as Bosnia) and the United States. She thinks that the Serbs in Croatia suffered a terrible tragedy, and she objects to the fact that so little interest has been shown in that tragedy. Nevertheless, her views cannot be accommodated within any simple ethnic category. Zoric's story illustrates in microcosm the point that dividing up territories and then moving people either violently or through negotiated population transfer, so that nation and state appear to become congruent, is not a recognition of reality, but an attempt to create something that cannot be achieved. I argue that peace and security in Bosnia will come not from endorsing the impossible project of ethnic partition, but from working with those who are resisting it.¹ Indeed, I argue that there are signs of a shift towards this position—a slow dawn.

Eric Herring

The article proceeds in a number of steps: First, it explains briefly why the war aimed at the ethnic partition of Bosnia ended; Second, it outlines the potential in the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) of November 21, 1995, for the reversal of the ethnic partition of Bosnia that was attempted during the war; Third, it shows that to a great extent the DPA has not been implemented and attempts to extend ethnic partition have continued; Fourth, it argues that elements of the DPA itself and the attitudes toward identity among international agencies,² indicated by those DPA elements, have also been parts of the problem; Finally, it outlines and urges support for the emergent reassertion of non-ethnic, non-partitionist politics within and beyond Bosnia.

The War and the Peace Deal

To understand why the peace in Bosnia has worked out in the way it has, one must understand how that peace came about in 1995. The Bosnian Serb nationalists preferred peace to outright defeat by a sweeping Croatian offensive supported by Bosnian government forces and the air offensive of NATO. Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic³ had harbored a desire for a Greater Serbia, which would incorporate Bosnian Serb dominated areas. He decided that the Bosnian Serb nationalists were too much of a liability in relations with the West and began to distance himself from them. Croatian President Franjo Tudjman was only interested in retaking Bosnian Croat dominated areas (with hopes of their incorporation into Croatia). Whatever limited differences existed with the Croatian government, the Bosnian Croat nationalists were utterly reliant on Croatia politically, militarily, and economically. For its part, NATO was intent on a settlement based on a deal between the three sides rather than the victory of two of them. While the Bosnian government would have liked to continue the offensive, its forces were not strong enough to continue the war on their own and it dared not excessively antagonize Croatia and NATO.

The political challenge then became one of producing a formal peace deal that the various parties with their diverse views and goals could accept. The result was the DPA. It held out the very ambiguous prospect of a new Bosnia as a single state but one which would be made up of two entities—the Serb Republic and the Bosniak⁴-Croat Federation. The DPA's 11 annexes provided for the expulsion of foreign combatants; military stabilization through arms control and confidence- and security-building measures; agreement on borders and the arbitration of territorial disputes; free and fair elections; a constitution for effective government at all levels; guarantees of human rights; the right of return for all displaced persons (DPs); the preservation of national monuments; the establishment of public corporations for the provision of such things as electricity and transportation; the creation of the Office of the High Representative (OHR) with sweeping author-

ity to require the implementation of the DPA; and an International Police Task Force (IPTF) to assist in the establishment of legitimate and non-discriminatory policing. Underpinning it all was to be economic and social reconstruction aid from a variety of bodies such as the World Bank; the trial by the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY) of those suspected of war crimes; and a military enforcement capability in the form of the Implementation Force (IFOR, later renamed the Stabilization Force, SFOR) to provide physical security for international agencies and the civilian population (including displaced persons returning to areas from which they had been expelled). In many ways this was an admirable vision. Crucially, the right of return for displaced persons had the potential to damage prospects for the ethnic partition of Bosnia, because it would involve ethnic reintegration. However, in practice, ethnic partitionist politics have continued.

Dayton and the Continuation of Ethnic Partitionist Politics

Bosnia is divided into three armed camps, which reflects the fact that Bosnia has no meaningful central government.⁵ Mujahideen organizations, foreign forces backed by Croatia and Serbia, and domestic paramilitary organizations are all working to prevent DP returns to areas from which they were ethnically cleansed. SFOR usually fails to take action against those armed forces, pays rent to hard-line nationalists (doing so outside official budgetary procedures), and often allows those indicted by the ICTY for war crimes to remain at large (especially in the French and U.S. sectors). The OSCE has developed an extensive program of information exchange and training, but has been unable to attain any level of cooperation between the armed forces of the three sides. Moreover, both the Serbian and Bosniak ruling parties have declared their intention to increase military spending should resources permit. The command structure of the Federation army is not a professional one in which competence is the primary criterion within a single command structure. Instead, there are parallel command structures, with commanders selected according to their degree of loyalty, not merely to an ethnic group but also to the ruling parties within the Federation—the Party of Democratic Action (SDA) and the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ). The Bosniak army is funded by the United States and various Islamic countries, the Bosnian Croat army by Croatia, and the Bosnian Serb army by Serbia. There has been compliance with the limits on weapons holdings by all three parties, but no progress has been made on proposed negotiations on the military balance in and around former Yugoslavia.

The required DPA conditions for free and fair elections have never been met. Voter registration has been rigged, the opposition (as much within as across ethnic groups) intimidated, and free access to the media and freedom of move-

Eric Herring

ment have been denied, especially in Bosnian Croat and Bosnian Serb nationalist-dominated areas.⁶ Yet international agencies went ahead with elections in 1996 and 1997 anyway, with the exception of municipal elections because the degree of fraud and intimidation made them completely impractical. The nationalist ruling parties—the SDA, HDZ, and in the Serb Republic, the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS)⁷—were able to legitimize their hold on power. Furthermore, little was done about the open advocacy by the HDZ and SDS of the partition of Bosnia as a prelude to the creation of a Greater Croatia and Greater Serbia, leaving a rump state for Bosniaks and those who rejected ethnic nationalism. Voting fraud produced a turnout figure of 105 percent in the September 1996 presidential election, while some 200,000 people had been disenfranchised by failures in the voter-registration process. Nevertheless, the OSCE refused a recount, declared the election valid, and rushed to destroy the ballot papers within one week of that declaration.

Under the DPA, as a general rule people were expected to vote in their pre-war municipality, either in person or by absentee ballot. In 1996, many were pressured by the ruling parties into voting in their new location to consolidate

It is misleading to characterize the situation in Bosnia as being one in which international agencies want ethnic reintegration, whereas the people want ethnic partition and the ruling parties merely reflect that preference.

their hold on power. The OSCE changed the Dayton rules for the 1997 municipal elections to make it easier to vote in a person's new place of residence, thus, in effect, consolidating the results of ethnic cleansing. Once again electoral fraud was widespread and the OSCE did little to stop it. The OSCE also

failed to enforce its own rule that minority parties be given a share of local government executive posts. In the 1998 general elections, non-nationalist parties made some headway, but international agencies did little to consolidate those gains. In most cases where posts in administrations have been given to ethnic minorities, those posts have no real power and the people who hold them are the target of intimidation campaigns and sometimes assassination attempts. Even worse, the OSCE rewarded violence and election boycotts by Bosnian Serb nationalists in Srebrenica and Bosnian Croat nationalists in Zepce by giving them half the municipal posts when they would have received at most a minority vote in a free and fair election. Election by absentee ballot of representatives from what are now minority groups—who have been expelled from their regions—is important in keeping alive, at least symbolically, the aim of their return to whatever is

left of their homes. Of 2.2 million Bosnians displaced by the war, 600,000 have returned to their homes. In 1998 and 1999, only 40,000 DPs per year returned to areas where they are now in the minority.⁸

It is highly misleading to characterize the situation in Bosnia as being one in which international agencies want ethnic reintegration, whereas the people want ethnic partition and the ruling parties merely reflect that preference. This perspective helps to feed fatalistic dismissal of the continuing resistance to ethnic partition within significant sectors of Bosnian society and distracts attention from the ways in which the policies and assumptions of international agencies are also part of the problem. As the International Crisis Group (ICG) argues, the DPA itself and the practices of international agencies are sometimes imbued with ethnic partitionist notions.⁹ Bosnia is declared in the DPA to have three constituent nations—Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats. The DPA stipulates that candidates for the presidency are exclusively one Bosniak, one Serb, and one Croat and Bosnia's House of Peoples is to have only five Bosniaks, five Serbs, and five Croats. Before the war, according to the 1991 census, only 53 percent of the population of the Serb Republic declared themselves to be Serbs. Yet, according to the DPA, voters in the Serb Republic can only elect a Serb to the Bosnian presidency and Serbs to the Bosnian House of Peoples, while Serbs in the Federation can only have a choice of Croat or Bosniak candidates. Furthermore, although the DPA mentions "others" (who were about 8 percent of Bosnia's population in 1991—346,000 people), they only have a marginal position in the constitution. They have no opportunity to vote for non-Bosniaks, non-Serbs, or non-Croats for the Bosnian presidency or House of Peoples. Also problematic—considering the fact that power is currently concentrated at the ethnic level—is the point that only Serbs are designated as constituent peoples of the Serb Republic and only Bosniaks and Croats are designated as constituent peoples of the Federation.

Factors other than the inclination of international agencies to operate in ethnically partitionist terms also play a part in the unwillingness of the leading states—the United States, Britain, and France—within those agencies to stand up to the local ethnic partitionists. Fear of body bags is one. Electoral politics is another: for prime ministers and presidents it will be someone else's problem in just a few years. Bosnia is not a high priority for them. The renaming of IFOR as SFOR was symbolic of down scaling the original objective of implementing the DPA to merely stabilizing the situation. Stabilization seems to be defined in terms of the minimal, but undoubtedly important, goal of "no war." Nevertheless, the DPA is only in part an idealistic plan frustrated by ethnic mobilization. It is also a plan confounded by the embodiment in key provisions of the outlook of ethnic cleansers. To put it differently, the problem of Bosnia is not merely the non-implementation of the DPA, but in certain respects the DPA itself. The weaknesses of the DPA and the problems with its interpretation by international agen-

Eric Herring

cies were epitomized by the fact that the OSCE provided election funding of 180,000 U.S. dollars to the Party of Serb Unity (SSJ). Such funding was provided despite the fact that the SSJ sought the establishment of a Greater Serbia, including parts of Bosnia, and that it was led by paramilitary leader Zeljko Raznjatovic,¹⁰ whose forces played an important role in the ethnic cleansing of eastern Slavonia in Croatia and the Bosnian towns of Bijeljina and Vukovar.

The First Rays of a Slow Dawn

In spite of the continuing efforts to impose ethnic partition in Bosnia, the non-nationalist and re-integrationist political forces are starting to rally. Srebrenica was one of the “safe areas” declared by the United Nations that was over-run by Bosnian Serb nationalist forces in July 1995. Around 6,000 men and boys were taken away and massacred, and after the war the town was packed with Serbs in an attempt to make it a Serb town. Absentee votes by former residents have forced the establishment of a multiethnic municipal administration. And even while obdurate local politicians are trying to undermine that electoral outcome, common humanity is in turn fighting back. In an important symbolic act, a busload of children, who were expelled from Srebrenica just before their male relatives and friends were massacred, returned to the town on November 20, 1999, for a football match. According to a journalist: “as the bus drew into (sic) the playground, the 160 Serb children greeted their guests with frantic applause and within minutes football games were underway on the seven little pitches.”¹¹ This kind of event is reflected in the bigger electoral picture. In the 1998 general election, non-nationalist parties still managed to secure about 17.5 percent of the vote. Considering the very hostile environment in which they had to work, this was very impressive and gives considerable hope for Bosnia’s April 2000 municipal and November 2000 presidential elections. In opinion polls, the SDA is losing ground to moderate non-nationalist parties, especially the Party for Bosnia-Herzegovina (SBiH), led by Bosnian Co-Premier Haris Silajdzic, but also to the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the Liberal-Civic Union coalition.¹²

Bosnia’s future will also be heavily influenced by regional dynamics. Milosevic still dominates politics in Serbia, at least for the moment, in the wake of the hammering that Serbia took during NATO’s military campaign to make him sign a deal over Kosovo on NATO’s terms. Bosnia’s economy, already in a dire state, will be hit hard by the regional knock-on effects of the NATO bombing. War between Serbia and Montenegro over the latter’s bid for independence would be bad for Bosnia, as it would generate new economic and DP burdens. Such a war, it should be noted, would be a war principally between Serbs.¹³ Macedonia has managed to maintain a coalition government uniting more moderate elements among ethnic Macedonians and Albanians, although the

radicalization of some ethnic Albanians by the war in Kosovo may become a problem. The trends in Croatia, following the death of President Franjo Tudjman in December 1999, are particularly encouraging. Tudjman was popular for winning Croatia's independence and, to a lesser extent, for his advocacy of the ethnic partition of Bosnia. Economic problems combined with the HDZ's old-style Communist authoritarianism meant that conditions were ripe for a change in government. Croatia's economic problems also meant that there has been less money for hard-line Bosnian Croat nationalists.¹⁴ The coalition of Social Democrats and Social Liberals and other smaller center-left parties, which won Croatia's general election of January 3, 2000, has proposed democratic and economic reforms aimed at improving Croatia's relations with the European Union (EU) and other international agencies. Serbian Croats are represented in the Croatian parliament and are slowly returning.¹⁵ Croatia's new centrist president, Stipe Mesic, was president of Yugoslavia for a short time as it disintegrated, resigned from the HDZ due to Tudjman's involvement in Bosnia, has testified for the prosecution at the ICTY, favors handing over all those indicted for war crimes, and has a Serb wife.¹⁶ Even Mate Granic, the outgoing HDZ foreign minister, sought to downplay his links with Tudjman by running as an independent. The cases of Mesic and Granic in de-emphasizing the Croatian ethnic-nationalist cause should give us pause for thought. Professions of ethnic nationalism should not be taken at face value and assumed unshakable. They can be the adoption of a language of convenience, which gives access to political power. Such language and politics may simply be abandoned should the balance of political incentives change.

International agencies in Bosnia are beginning to take the view that they need to challenge the advocates of ethnic nationalism, even if the overall pattern at the moment is still one of giving in to them.¹⁷ On November 29, 1999, High Representative Wolfgang Petritsch dismissed nine Serb, seven Bosniak, and six Croat local politicians for trying to prevent DPs from returning to their homes.¹⁸ He aims to use such dismissals in a much more systematic way than his predecessor, Carlos Westendorp, who sacked a mere six such politicians in his two years in office. On December 28, 1999, the OSCE announced that it intended to disbar up to 15 members of the SDA from the party's list for the April 2000 municipal elections because of the forgery of thousands of voter-registration forms.¹⁹ The OSCE has also threatened to ban the HDZ from the April 2000 municipal elections if it does not ensure that five HDZ mayors, who were dismissed by Petritsch, step down.²⁰ Unfortunately, there is little sign that the flaws in the DPA itself, in terms of its built-in ethnic discrimination outlined earlier, are being addressed. The kind of proposals developed by the ICG could offer a way to create incentives for multiethnic and non-ethnic coalition building, even within a system dominated by ethnic registration of voters. The ICG suggests that, instead of each person having only one vote within their own ethnic group, they could be

Eric Herring

given three votes: one in each ethnic group. Such a system would mean that candidates would have a large incentive to appeal to voters in other ethnic groups in order to get elected. Equally, a person in one ethnic group has a large incentive to vote for moderate candidates from other ethnic groups.²¹ Eventually, a non-ethnic or mixed ethnic/non-ethnic voting system could be introduced. However, electorally undermining the ethnic partitionists is only half the battle. The other half is the return of DPs to areas currently dominated by other ethnic groups so that multiethnic and non-ethnic politics can be revived at the grassroots level.

Conclusion

Whatever the injustices of the peace, most are thankful that Bosnia is not at war and the presence of IFOR/SFOR has helped. Nevertheless, the problems of the peace need to be addressed. Thus far, many of Bosnia's problems have stemmed from the failure of international agencies to enforce key provisions of the DPA. Elections were held in conditions that were not free and fair, and those elections allowed many of the nationalists responsible for the war to gain electoral legitimacy. Most importantly, DPs have generally not been able to go home across the new ethnic lines and so, to a great extent, there is a de facto partition of Bosnia. Trying to persuade nationalists to implement non-nationalist principles, such as the return of refugees from other ethnic groups, will not work. The other part of the problem is that some of the provisions of the DPA encourage mobilization on exclusively ethnic lines. Those provisions need to be changed. The idea of ethnic partition is predicated on the claims that ethnic identity is more or less fixed, that non-ethnic elements of identity are unimportant, and that conflict will be reduced when people are gathered into territories of homogeneous ethnic groups. However, many people in and around Bosnia do not see themselves that way. They see their identity as much more fluid, complex, and ambiguous, they value highly the non-ethnic elements of their identity, and they see a society that values heterogeneity as a surer route to the avoidance of conflict. The question for international agencies is who to back. Opportunities are developing for them to challenge the ethnic partitionists. To do so they will not only have to commit will and resources, but also rethink some of their own views. 

Notes

I would like to thank Doug Stokes for providing me with much valuable information.

1. For an excellent critique of Western proposals for the partition of Bosnia as a means of conflict prevention, see David Campbell, *National Deconstruction: Violence, Identity, and Justice in Bosnia* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) 115–23, 128, 135, 145–48, and 159–61.

Slow Dawn: Beyond the Attempted Ethnic Partition of Bosnia-Herzegovina

2. I prefer the phrase “international agencies” to the more commonly used phrase “the international community.” Use of “the” implies that there is only one international community when in fact there are many and the one that is usually referred to tends to be a very Western, particularly U.S.-dominated, one. Use of the word “community” has positive connotations that are not necessarily deserved.

3. Serbia and Montenegro are the two remaining republics comprising the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The leaders of Montenegro are seeking independence and Yugoslavia is effectively defunct. Nevertheless, Milosevic, formerly president of Serbia, is now officially president of Yugoslavia.

4. The label “Bosniak” is now the most common term for Bosnian Muslims and has been promoted principally by some Bosnian Muslims themselves. This has served the function of removing the obvious religious connotations of “Muslim,” emphasising the secular outlook of most Bosnian Muslims and suggesting that Bosniaks are, like Serbs and Croats, a “real” nation. Unfortunately, it can also lead to the assumption that Bosniak and Bosnian are synonymous, thus implying that non-Bosniaks/Muslims are somehow not “really” Bosnian.

5. This paragraph draws on the International Crisis Group (ICG)’s extensive report *Is Dayton Failing? Bosnia Four Years After the Peace Agreement*, October 28, 1999, <www.intl-crisis-group.org/projects/bosnia/reports/bh51repa.htm> sections I–IV.

6. This paragraph and the next two draw on the ICG’s *Is Dayton Failing?* section V, and my own experience with the ICG as an OSCE election monitor in Bosnia in September 1996.

7. The SDS has lost ground in the last couple of years to other Bosnian Serb political parties, which are nationalist to varying degrees.

8. Robert Wright and David Buchan, “Daunting Barriers to a Durable Peace,” *Financial Times*, December 14, 1999, <www.ft.com/ftsurveys/>. See also ICG, *Preventing Minority Return in Bosnia & Herzegovina: The Anatomy of Hate and Fear*, August 10, 1999, <www.intl-crisisgroup.org/projects/bosnia/reports/bh50rep.htm>.

9. See the various reports at <www.intl-crisis-group.org/projects/bosnia/reports/>.

10. He was more commonly known as Arkan and was assassinated in Serbia in January 2000.

11. Othon Zimmerman, “Mixed Reaction to Srebrenica Report,” *Balkan Crisis Report*, no. 95 (November 23, 1999) Institute of War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) <www.iwpr.net>.

12. Janez Kovac, “The Ruling Bosnian Muslim Coalition Falls Apart,” *Balkan Crisis Report*, no. 97 (November 26, 1999) IWPR.

13. Wars do not actually occur between ethnic groups as such. Ethnic groups are heterogeneous and wars only appear to be between ethnic groups because ethnic groups can become dominated and indeed defined by particular political groups within them. A substantial amount of the violence in “ethnic” wars is directed at repressing and denying internal ethnic heterogeneity. See Campbell, *National Deconstruction* and Eric Herring, “From Rambouillet to the Kosovo Accords: NATO’s War Against Serbia and its Aftermath,” *International Journal of Human Rights* 4, nos. 1 and 2 (March 2000).

14. Chris Bird and Nick Thorpe, “Tudjman’s Death Brings Glimmer of Hope to Balkans,” *The Guardian*, December 13, 1999.

15. Nick Thorpe, “High Turnout in Croatia’s First Post-Tudjman Poll,” *The Guardian*, January 4, 2000.

16. Nick Thorpe, “Rivals for Croat Leadership Spurn Tudjman Legacy,” *The Guardian*, January 25, 2000.

17. The approach of international agencies to Kosovo is much more worrying, with an almost totally supine response to the persecution of non-Albanian Kosovars and moderate Albanian Kosovars, mostly by Albanian Kosovar nationalists. Many hundreds have been killed and disappeared and around 200,000 more driven out of Kosovo since the arrival of the NATO-dominated Kosovo Force (KFOR) in June 1999. See Herring, “From Rambouillet to the Kosovo Accords.”

Eric Herring

18. Wright and Buchan, "Daunting Barriers."
19. Balkan Action Council, *Balkans Watch* 2, no. 3 (January 6, 2000).
20. Balkan Action Council, *Balkans Watch* 2, no. 3 (January 19, 2000).
21. See ICG, *Changing the Logic of Bosnian Politics*, March 10, 1998, www.intl-crisisgroup.org/projects/bosnia/reports/.

