Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Future

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There is reason to be concerned about the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Eleven years ago, in 1995, the Dayton Peace Accords brought an end to the 1992-1995 war that claimed tens of thousands of lives. The three ethnic communities have a long history of relations that have not been free of alienation.

The Bosnian, Serb and Croat communities constitute the overwhelming number of people in the country. I met with the leaders of all three communities in my December 2005 and July 2006 visits to the country. The leaders of Republica Srpska (Serbian Republic, which constitutes almost 50 percent of the country), while pleased with their success in keeping together the Serbian people in one autonomous state, are not content to be subject to the federal authority of the Bosnian capital, Sarajevo.

The Croatian leaders, on the other hand, are not pleased with the Croatian community status within the Muslim-Croatian Federation. Why, I was asked, has the Croatian community lost 50 percent of its population since the Dayton Peace Accords of 1995?

There is now a central federal government with three presidents, each representing the Muslim, Serb and Croat

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communities. There is a two house legislature with limited authority. Within this federal government structure, two sub-autonomous states—each with its own head of government and parliament—exist.

The Dayton Accords provided for a High Representative, who has had significant power, including the authority to dismiss public officials and to declare new laws. Until the arrival of the new High Representative, Mr. Christian Schwartz-Schilling of Germany, the power was exercised. Mr. Schwartz-Schilling, however, has decided not to exercise, in most cases, that power. Furthermore, he has stated publicly that the office of the High Representative should be eliminated at the end of his term in 2007.

Officials of the United States (US) and some European governments have been calling for a strong central government with one head of government for the state.

Based on my 2005 and 2006 visits to the country and my conversations with the leaders, I believe that there are options that have worked very well for similar situations in other countries. But before we look at possible solutions, let us review the facts.

Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Facts

All facts for this country must be examined in terms of the destruction in the country caused by the ethnic conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s. When the hostilities ceased, at least 160,000 people from the three communities were killed and another 175,000 injured. Over one to two million people were forced to flee their homes. Currently, Bosnia and Herzegovina hosts 19,213 Croatian refugees and 309,200 internally displaced Bosnian Croats, Serbs and Muslims from the 1992-1995 war.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, a country slightly smaller than West Virginia, is located in Southeastern Europe and borders the Adriatic Sea, Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro. The land consists of mountains and valleys, leaving little arable land for cultivation. Although the country produces wheat, corn, fruits and vegetables, and raises livestock, Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a population just shy of 4.5 million, must import much of its food.

However, Bosnia and Herzegovina does possess some important natural resources: coal, iron ore, bauxite, copper, lead, zinc, chromite, cobalt, manganese, nickel, clay, gypsum, salt, sand and forests. The country also utilizes hydropower. Industries in Bosnia and Herzegovina include: steel, coal, iron ore, lead, zinc, manganese, bauxite, vehicle assembly, textiles, tobacco products, wooden furniture, tank and aircraft assembly, domestic appliances and oil refining. During the 1992-1995 war, production plummeted by 80 percent, and unemployment soared.

Bosnia and Herzegovina’s relations with its neighbors, Croatia and Serbia, have been fairly stable since the signing of the Dayton Accords in 1995. The chart on the following page summarizes the import-export relationships between Bosnia and Herzegovina and several trading partners.
Bosnia and Herzegovina: Trading Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trading Partner</th>
<th>Percent of Imports</th>
<th>Percent of Exports</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>19.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>14.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After leading the diplomatic and military effort to secure the Dayton Accords, the United States has continued to play a key role in ensuring its implementation. US troops participate in the Bosnia peacekeeping force, known as SFOR, and the United States has donated hundreds of millions of dollars for reconstruction, humanitarian assistance, economic development and military reconstruction. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) has played a large role in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, supporting programs in economic development and reform, democratic reform (media, elections), infrastructure development and training programs for Bosnian professionals, among others. Additionally, there are many nongovernmental organizations that have likewise played significant roles in the reconstruction.1

The Economy

The poor state of the economy in Bosnia and Herzegovina aggravates the current complex situation. In addition to the devastation from the recent war, the remnants of Yugoslavia’s old socialist system still plague the country. The country remains one of the poorest in Europe. Agriculture, while remaining in private hands, does not produce enough food for all of the people. Consequently, the country remains a net importer of food.

The unemployment rate is around 45 percent, although when the gray economy is considered, the rate more realistically is around 30 percent.

A basic reason for the lack of improvement in the country’s economy is the socio-economic instability caused by the current political system.

Other Approaches: The United States and Switzerland

The Founding Fathers of the United States when they met in Philadelphia in the 1770s and 1780s were faced with 13 colonies—about to become states—each with citizens of different cultural backgrounds. Having won the War of Independence from the colonial power, England, the leaders of that important initial period in US history realized that the foundation of a nation state, while sovereign, allowed for local rule and offered understanding when it came to the different cultures.

1 For further information, see The World Fact Book, which is available online at http://www.cia.gov.
For example, Connecticut, influenced by the pilgrim culture, allowed the Congregational Church to remain the “state” Church while Maryland, settled by large numbers of Catholics, granted total freedom to the Roman Catholic Church. On the other hand, in the early decades of Connecticut it was forbidden for a Catholic priest to say Mass.

Catholicism was reflected in the laws of Maryland while the culture of the pilgrim—congregational communities was clearly evident in Connecticut and in several other New England states. The Quaker influence in Pennsylvania and the vestiges of Dutch influence in New York were evident in the early years of the new Republic.

The Founding Fathers understood this and did not push for a strong centralized government. This resulted in individual states having significant police powers. These were “states’ rights” that included education. They were consequently concessions to the local cultures which were protected by states’ rights.

Switzerland

In 1291, the leaders of the Cantons of Switzerland founded the Swiss Confederation. The Constitution was revised in 1874. The official languages are German, French and Italian; Romansh remains a national language. Given these differences in language and culture, there was, in the early days of the Swiss Republic, a certain pessimism that the confederation would break-up.

Allied with the languages was culture. The language areas had well-defined cultural and religious traditions. For example, some of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation lived in the cantons where German was the predominant language. Neighboring Italians in the Lugano area remained Catholic.

The police and security responsibilities remained centered in the cantons and cities; by comparison, Bern, the national capital, had limited authority.

Both the United States and Switzerland are examples of two states which, at their founding, faced significant differences in culture in their respective communities. They did not seek a strong, centralized government with strong police, educational and cultural authority. The granting of significant authority to the local authorities resulted first of all, in both states being able to maintain reasonably harmonious internal relations in the all-important early decades of their existence.

The special situation of race, which Bosnia and Herzegovina does not have, was a cause of a major civil disorder in the United States. Now, both the United States and Switzerland are, in comparison to many parts of the world, flourishing. And both countries have maintained their respective internal cultures. In this regard, both countries are cultural mosaics—or melting pots—within sovereign states.

Can the American and Swiss models be considered for Bosnia and Herzegovina?
My Experience in Burundi

My experience in Burundi may be instructive. I served as the United States Ambassador to Burundi in the early 1970s and, at the end of my tour, witnessed the brutal bloodbath between the Hutu and Tutsi communities. The two communities were united by language. However, through my assignment in Burundi, I detected significant differences in the cultures of the two communities.

Fearful of another bloodbath because of the strong factors of alienation, I urged, upon my return to Washington, the adoption of a plan whereby the two communities would be autonomous, united in a federation. This would mean that the Hutu leadership and the Tutsi leadership would be the local governments in their respective communities.

My proposal was turned down because the authorities believed that a strong central authority was the way to unite the people. This remains the policy. It has not been successful, and the insistence on a powerful central authority, subsequent to my tenure as Ambassador, has resulted in continuing strife and bloodshed.²

Have the advocates of strong central government for states which have communities with significant cultural differences learned from this? Advocates of a strong central government imposed on a state where there are significant cultural differences have overlooked the examples throughout the world. Strong governments in such cases only survive when the communities accept them. Loyalty and respect for a central government must start with the ordinary people. The alternative is to maintain a strong military force to support the central government.

The Three Communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina

While there are officially three languages in Bosnia and Herzegovina; Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian, there is sufficient similarity in all three that a person speaking one can understand the other.

The Bosnian Muslim community makes up 48 percent of the country’s population. The Bosniaks are followed by the Serbs who constitute 37 percent; the Croats now number 14 percent which is around half their pre-war number and a cause of concern among the Croats. These divisions closely follow religious lines.

My conversations with leaders of the Bosniak community indicated their support for a highly centralized government which would include authority over educational and police-security responsibilities.

While it was a brief conversation, Sulejman Tihic, President of Bosnia and Herzegovina, was not able to hide his dislike for the Cardinal of Sarajevo who had raised several questions related to full religious freedom in the country.

The Catholic Archdiocese of Sarajevo had sought a permit to construct a new church in Sarajevo for decades. My own inquiries indicated that there was no valid reason for not granting the building permit. One has to conclude that the permit was denied for ideological reasons as it would have been during the time of Communist control.

One reason for the significant reduction of Croats is that the return of refugees as envisaged by the Dayton Accords has not materialized for the Croats. This is also aggravated by the high taxes on construction materials, therefore making it prohibitively expensive to build new homes for the returning refugees.

There is no question that the Croat leadership, both civic and religious, believes that their minority status in the current political structure results in their being ignored—in some cases abused—by the current Sarajevo government.

While the Serb and Croat communities are, when taken individually, minorities (37 and 14 percent respectively), the Cardinal spoke on behalf of all Catholics and Orthodox Christians when he criticized the activity of a public high school that published a blasphemous poem about Jesus Christ. It came up in my conversations with leaders in Sarajevo, and it was condemned by many for the total lack of sensitivity and respect for the religious feelings of many.

Ivo Miro Jovic, rotating Croatian President, when speaking in Washington several months previously in 2005 was strong in discussing the disadvantages that the Croat community was under in the present political system. He, like other Croat leaders, is distressed about the decreasing size of the Croatian community. The young people, in particular, are attracted to other countries.

In summation the Croat community wants a political system that will promote the rule of law and thus guarantee personal and community rights. They do not see any hope in the present system nor are they receptive to proposals for a highly centralized government.

The Serb Community

The Serb community, as already stated, represents 37 percent of the population. The Dayton Accords, after recognizing the federal government of Bosnia and Herzegovina with its responsibilities for conducting foreign, domestic and fiscal policy, approved a second tier of government: two entities, the Bosniak-Croat Federation and the Republika Srpska. Both entities are almost equal in size. Bosnian Serbs have de facto control of Republika Srpska.

In July 2006, I visited Banja Luka, capital of the Republic, and discussed the matter with Dragan Cavic, the President. He articulated a strong message of interest in reforming the current system and giving more authority to the local governments. He naturally did not indicate that Bosnian Serbs would favor any diminishing of the authority of the Republic.
The Dayton Peace Accords of 1995, in a way, did favor the Serb community. The Republica of Srpska constitutes one-half of Bosnia and Herzegovina. While representing 37 percent of the population, the Serb community received almost half the territory. This also has been a cause of unhappiness in the Croat community.

The US and Swiss Models

The advocates of a strong central government, which to the Serb and Croat communities would mean Bosniak control, overlook the failure of multi-ethnic projects. In Europe, both Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union were the big failures. Czechoslovakia has broken into two republics, and they both are now flourishing.

Even casual visitors to Bosnia and Herzegovina can notice that the ethnic-religious differences and alienations of the past are still present. A decentralized government, like that of Switzerland, would give significant political, religious, and cultural authority to the cantons and local communities.

The record of forcing highly centralized governments on minority ethnic communities is not a successful one. I propose that serious consideration be given to the models of Switzerland and the United States. Every opportunity should be given to the local communities of Bosnia and Herzegovina to develop their own traditions. They can grow into a beautiful mosaic. Once this occurs, with renewed confidence in their own values there will be a mature basis for dialogue and harmony among the several communities.

The present policy of the US and European governments which urges a strong central government, in my opinion, will only exacerbate the alienation that currently exists.