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An end to the lies and self-deception: Scenarios for the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Abstract

This article takes a provocative look at the future of the state of Bosnia i Herzegovina. The author, who is a friend to Bosnia i Herzegovina, describes the sclerosis inhibiting the country's decision-making structures and the problems this has created for a country which desperately needs fresh policy ideas. His starting point is to imagine the outcome of the secession of Republika Srpska that he expects and the implications that this will mean for rump BiH. Two scenarios are investigated: firstly, the establishment of a formal federation with EU member state Croatia, inspired by the likely reaction to any RS secession in western Herzegovina; and secondly an independent Bosnia populated by a Bosniak majority going it alone. Despite the evident problems, including an inept political elite, the author believes that an independent Bosnia would provide the opportunity for Bosniaks to address the current economic, political and social agony as well as to define an Islam of European shape in the course of developing a new discourse on Bosniak identity.

Keywords: secession, national identity, Dayton Agreement, EU accession, political elites, Islam

The breaking away of Republika Srpska

Formerly, we thought national hatred and the political agony of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) would be overcome when the power of the nationalist parties SDS, HDZ and SDA was broken and when they had lost the majority of the votes of Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks ('Bosnian Muslims') in BiH. This happened long ago – but now we know how much we under-estimated the depth of the problems. Today, everything is worse than before. The attempt by Bosniaks to canvass their former war enemies about living together within a multi-ethnic state was both undignified and ultimately pointless. Most of the political parties which today represent Serbs and Croats are also obstructing any joint progress. BiH remains in political-economic-social sclerosis and – although many do not want to admit it – everybody feels that things cannot stay as they are.

Nobody seriously doubts that a referendum in Republika Srpska (RS) on secession from BiH would gain the vast majority of Serbian votes. The question is not *if* such a secession will happen, but only *when*. It is not important whether or not we like this fact and its consequences for the remainder of the Bosnian rump state: for realists, it

can only be the question of what must be done under such circumstances. And what has to be done now.¹

Let us look first at the secession of RS from a secondary perspective. Do the citizens of, let's say, Quebec or Catalonia or the Basque country or Scotland or Kosovo have the principal right to self-determination, i.e. to choose if they want to be subordinated to a government that they perceive as extraneous or whether they prefer their 'own' government, their 'own' state? Even if we agree that, when the question is 'freedom', the answer can only seldom be 'a new state' – one cannot, for fundamental democratic considerations, deny those citizens their own decision.

'Stop!' most Bosniaks will cry out: 'The case of RS is completely different. Unlike these other examples, the Serbs usurped the land, which they now want to break away, by murder, rape and ethnic cleansing. The land, the villages and the towns to which they lay claim for themselves were, until twenty years ago, largely populated by ourselves and we insist on our rights. If they want to belong to Serbia, they are welcome to go – but without land that is not theirs.'

It is correct that RS, as it exists today (covering 49% of the territory of BiH), is the result of wrongdoing and war – injustices that the so-called 'international community' actually sanctioned with the Dayton Agreement. But should a question of a referendum on the secession of RS be defeated by the history of the creation of RS in war and wrongdoing?

In the 19th century, the USA incorporated almost half the territory of Mexico (which the Spanish conquerors had previously wrested from the native inhabitants) by force. In the same century, Prussia and Austria took today's Schleswig-Holstein from Denmark. Alsace and Lorraine changed 'possession' more than once between France and Germany, always by war. In 1945, about one-third of Germany was added to Poland and the Soviet Union, while the German population was expelled (after the Order of Teutonic Knights had, 800 years before, cruelly wrested this territory from its Slavic population). Even until today, Israel is expropriating Palestinian land and ousting its inhabitants. The list can be extended on and on, over many times and places.

Does this justify injustice, violence and the countless sufferings of so many people? No – absolutely not. Here, however, another fact should attract our interest: at some point, sooner or later, stolen land has become a homeland for others, for the descendants of the conquerors. Children and grandchildren were born, what had been destroyed was built anew, and shelter, food sources and society were established. Today, visitors to the formerly completely destroyed city of Gdansk cannot deny that the Poles (who were largely forcibly resettled by Stalin from Ukraine) have acquired their land, which was once German land. Who does not want endless suffering and new wars must one day recognise – however painful it may be for those forcibly chased off their land – that previous injustice has been turned into a legitimate home for other people. Otherwise, one would have to accept the Ultra-Orthodox in Israel saying: 'We are the chosen people of God; 2 000 years ago, our ancestors were here, now 'we' are back and you Palestinians had better disappear.'

1 Those who bear the main guilt for the Bosnian war will like these remarks. Others will be outraged and shout 'traitor!'. But political realities do not care for opinions and emotions.

The development of a legitimate homeland that is rooted in injustice is a process which will also proceed in RS; indeed, it is already in progress. A part of those who live there are – as in every other such case – people who have themselves previously lost everything, while today, in their former homeland, other people are now living.

Only dreamers could argue that it would be illegitimate for all time for Serbs in Republika Srpska to hold a referendum on independence and execute the result. At best, the question could be put as to how long it might take for an unlawfully-conquered country to transform itself into the legitimate homeland of the successor population. In the first generation after the conquerors, the second, the third? After fifty years, after one hundred, after one thousand? No holy book and no international law answers this question; it is answered in different ways and often by itself, depending on the historical and political situation.

Milorad Dodik, President of Republika Srpska and Chair of the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats,² already answered this question, together with his followers, shortly after the war and has done so again and again since then. He has, no doubt, been repeatedly elected in RS because, and not despite, of his nationalist rabble-rousing propaganda against the common state of BiH. He rejects it, and he filibusters, sabotages and blocks any progress in the country, even when his Serbian compatriots in RS urgently need improvements to their predominantly low-quality lives: improvements which are illusory without functioning and democratic structures. Dodik loves purposefully calling Sarajevo ‘Tehran’. He and the government of RS have repeatedly crossed red lines and broken the rules that the ‘international community’ has imposed on BiH. In the past, the OHR³ drew consequences in such cases, and imposed sanctions and dismissed politicians. This obviously is the past; today, he is apparently granted the liberty to act as he chooses.

Independent political observers draw a conclusion from this that does not sound absurd: they think RS must have received unofficial signals that the crucial foreign powers no longer stand in the way of a path aimed at the end of BiH as it exists today. This assumption may be supported with the disappointment of many western politicians who have engaged (with all their faults, for which they must bear responsibility) in the Balkans since 1992. Western politicians may have lost, and for some time already, the hope that substantial progress was achievable with the political class in BiH and the population that follows it. For over twenty years, huge amounts of money have flowed directly or indirectly into the country. However, the economy is still on its knees, the state does not function, its structures exist only rudimentarily, and corruption and mismanagement are rampant. Nationalist self and mutual definitions characterise most Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks still more than the desire of the citizens for a future and for a good life for themselves and their children.

2 By the way, his party Savez Nezavisnih Socijaldemokrata (SNSD) was, until August 2012, a member of the Socialist International(!).

3 Office of the High Representative. It was created in 1995 by the UN Security Council and reports to the Peace Implementation Council, consisting of fifty states. The OHR monitors compliance with the rules aiming at a functioning BiH and is entitled to dismiss politicians and enact laws.

The European Union, which is barely managing to cope with its self-created financial and currency crisis, which lacks the resources to help its ailing Mediterranean member countries out of trouble, and which is financially and politically overwhelmed by the problems of its neighbouring countries to the east and south, no longer seems to be willing to continue its former engagement in the Balkans.

And, ultimately, who is still interested in BiH? The forces that determine its fate have, for a long time, already had more important things to do: the wars in Ukraine and Palestine, and in Libya, Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan; the disintegrating nuclear power Pakistan; the tensions with Russia; the nuclear talks with Iran; the rise of the BRICS countries; the power shifts in Asia in the context of the new self-security of China; Islamist terrorism in Africa, the middle east and elsewhere; financial crises and global warming... And one cannot rule out that the west could possibly consider concessions in the Serbian question to Russia, the co-operation of which they may need in the Ukraine, in Syria and elsewhere.

In summary: it is impossible that the current state of affairs in BiH – sunken in poverty and with ongoing tensions and dysfunctionality – can continue indefinitely. A democratic awakening, let alone within a multi-ethnic co-operation, is nowhere in sight. The separation of RS is the first step that will cut the Balkan knot.

This does not mean that the separation of RS will proceed smoothly and without flashpoints. For many Bosniaks, it will be more than difficult to leave Srebrenica to the Serbs, and the graves of their relatives who were murdered by Serbs. The geographical shape of RS is inconvenient and may lead to demands for territorial exchange; while the vague construction of the District of Brčko, which divides RS in two parts, implies tension when it comes to any redesign of the map. There will be quarrels as regards the division of debts and government property. Nevertheless, problems of such kind never stopped separatists.

Two subsequent scenarios

After the secession of RS, a rump state will initially remain, consisting of 51% of today's BiH and mainly populated by Bosniaks in Bosnia and Croats in west Herzegovina.

The attitude of most politicians representing Croats in BiH gave, and still gives, not much more reason for optimism than that of Milorad Dodik when it comes to a common and democratic future for BiH with an equal status for all citizens. After the separation of RS, one can assume that Croats will also take to themselves the right to separate from the Bosniaks, who allegedly seek to dominate them.⁴ There is sufficient evidence of Bosnian Croat irredentism.

Quite a few people in Bosnia and the western Balkans dream of a solution to the long-lasting problems in one fell swoop: accession to the European Union. The German Green Party has already proposed this once, during the Bosnian war itself. At that time, however, there was no willingness among EU countries to end the war by offering EU enlargement, thus bringing unforeseeable problems and conflicts into the EU's do-

⁴ The disintegration of Yugoslavia was accompanied from the beginning by the question: 'Why should we be the minority among you, when you can also be the minority among us?'

mestic politics. Then and still, the perspective of jointly accommodating the ex-Yugoslav states that remain after the inclusion of Slovenia and Croatia – as a kind of emergency measure to resolve problems and to encourage pacification – would be entirely illusory for reasons to do with the EU's internal political situation, as well as for financial ones.

But might it be at least conceivable for the west to consider the possibility of a 'small solution' in order to address the risk of new tensions in the Bosniak-Croat rump state via the formation of a federation or confederation with EU member state Croatia? This solution would have the advantage that Bosnian Croats would finally be 'at home'; it would satisfy the ambition of some politicians in Croatia to enlarge their ego in proportion to the territory of the state; and it would offer Bosniaks the possibility of becoming members of the EU without any contribution from themselves and of seeking to resolve their poor living conditions via EU subsidies. Croatian secession from rump BiH would become an obsolete question, the possible concern of western politicians about a Muslim state in Europe would have been dealt with and this 'small solution' would only relate to a manageable area with a manageable number of people.

However, among Bosniaks there would also be resistance to such a solution. Despite all the war experiences, they feel closer to the mentality of Serbs than to that of Croats. Actually, they place little trust in Croats; an especially difficult problem when Croats would inevitably play the leading role in such a new federated state. From the Croatian point of view, however, such a solution would probably incur more problems than benefits, including ones of an economic, administrative and political nature. Absorbing a territory into the construction of a new state that is economically and infrastructurally under-developed, and with a population with which, due to the past war, unstressful coexistence cannot be expected, would require not least a lot of money, money that Croatia does not have – and neither does the EU.

In these circumstances, there is realistically more against than in favour of this scenario. It is more likely that, after the separation of RS, one cannot or will not oppose a Bosnian Croat one as well. The result of such a chain reaction is – and this is the more likely scenario – the emergence of a small Bosnian state that will be inhabited by a large majority of Bosniaks who define themselves, in either a religious or cultural sense, as Muslims. Given that the attempt to organise a functioning multi-ethnic state of three, formerly warring nationalities has proved to fail, this solution is not only inevitable – it is not even necessarily a bad one. There are other small countries without direct access to the sea – it depends on what one makes of it, more precisely: what Bosniaks make of it.

This scenario, the most likely and realistic under these circumstances, requires serious and timely preparation and efforts from Bosniak politicians and the intellectual elite, as well as by the general population. However, one does not get the impression that anybody is seriously facing up to this challenge. Bosniaks are drinking coffee, their political leaders are filling their pockets and all are displacing reality, staring like a rabbit at a snake, even though the time of lies and self-deception is necessarily drawing to a close; indeed, it must draw to a close.

The future state of Bosnia will face major internal challenges. Whether in this situation help comes from outside – and from which source – will depend on how Bosniaks themselves deal with these challenges.

The most obvious challenges are the disastrous economic situation, marginal industrial production, high unemployment, poor infrastructure and empty public coffers. This situation is due not least to a largely incompetent, corrupt and selfish political class. This problem is crucial and the population needs urgently to care about it. This requires a cultural or mentality change that aims towards acting in a more self-organised way and no longer by looking to the leaders to whom people passively and fatalistically leave their decision-making. The political self-servers are well-organised, as are the criminal gangs – the many intelligent, energetic and well-meaning citizens who have not yet emigrated are not.

The social unrest in early 2014 which was, interestingly, focused mainly on areas with a Bosniak majority, gave much cause for hope in this regard. For the first time since the war, citizens stood up in large numbers against politicians who offered them nothing but unemployment, poverty and hopelessness. The official trade unions stayed passive and withdrawn, while the frustration of the citizens was expressed not only in the burning of government buildings, but also in public meetings at which they discussed alternatives to the current political situation. These events demonstrate the potential for change although, unfortunately, it seems that they have not yet led to sustainable changes that have mobilised and involved the majority of people in a long-lasting way.

Another type of challenge will also require attention. Muslims in Bosnia are not a homogeneous group. Many are Sunni Muslims rather in a cultural than in a strict religious sense; culturally and historically they identify themselves as Europeans. However, in the aftermath of the war, alongside foreign support, communities of radical Muslims came together who actively stand for a political Islam, people who identify with Wahhabism and Salafism.

Already, over a long period, their political-ideological mentors from Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, etc. have had a foot in the door of Bosnia, whether by wise foresight or by lucky coincidence. Many of the mosques that have been built over the last almost twenty years in every village and on every corner have been financed by them, as well as associated schools and social meeting places. The impressive buildings, which adorn the investments which have been made mainly in the tertiary sector, conspicuously demonstrate to the citizens that their financial resources are unlimited. If the new state and its politicians need money – and they will do so – they may be ready to invest more and provide loans. But: whoever pays the piper calls the tune.

In Bosnian villages, poverty is often not on a lower level than in many developing countries on other continents. Distributing food, clothing and medicine there will undoubtedly create sympathy and support for the donors. Today, Bosniaks already tell of poor families of their acquaintance and from their neighbourhood who are receiving financial support from ‘the religious ones’ and who bear in response to that ‘a lifestyle appropriate to believers’ that is externally visible, especially as regards the clothing of women. In the cities, it will not be difficult to remind workers in enterprises with capital

from strict religious countries that their job security is tied to their adoption of a certain lifestyle.

On the other hand, both during and after the war, clashes already took place between Bosniaks and the so-called mujahideen who, at that time, were still foreign war volunteers. This happened, for instance, when the latter threatened couples in love who were walking hand-in-hand in public, or when strict believers tried to expel Bosniak imams from mosques. One must certainly assume that the development described above would result in serious conflicts between those who follow an interpretation of the Koran imported from Arabia and Bosniaks maintaining a European lifestyle and who want to follow a faith they consider more appropriate to them. Who would emerge as the winner in such a conflict will depend on several factors: the economic and social situation of the country – as I said above, the financial means of Arab donors are unlimited – the politicians who rule the country; the global world situation that determines the behaviour of the foreign powers; and the preparation of Bosniaks themselves.

The latter must, above all, finally face up to the reality that the constant wooing of a coexistence with Serbs and Croats in a single governmental unit, for which they were often willing to provide prior concessions, is useless. They need to say goodbye to the paralysing state of waiting: waiting for something to happen, for someone to do something, for someone to care about their problems. Ultimately, Bosniaks will have to realise that those who do not turn to politics in time will be attacked by politics from behind. The self-deception must come to an end so as to give space to a public discourse, a discourse in which the intellectual elite and the people define who they are and what interests they have as a nationality.⁵ Only on this basis can they enter into a fair interaction with other nationalities. Such a discourse will necessarily lead to questions such as: How do we want to live? What should the state look like in which we are going to live? What do we expect in terms of behaviour of the politicians who want to lead us?

The question of Muslim culture and Muslim faith, and the relationship to those of other faiths or none, no doubt gains central importance when Bosniaks define their identify themselves. It would be a great asset to Bosniaks, to Europe and to Islam if a theological concept for the shape and character of a European Islam were to spread outwards from Bosnia. Such a variant of faith had already had a chance to develop in the middle ages, for instance via early thinkers such as Ibn Rushd (Averroes). A decidedly European type of faith would not contradict Islam which, historically and currently, has developed different forms of faith; on the contrary, it would be a historically important enrichment of its diversity. It might be an Islam that, potentially, referred to the European history of ideas about the relationship between reason and faith, and stood for equal rights of men and women; an Islam that offered other answers to the challenges of a globalised economy, to societies with a high division of labour and a widespread mentality of consumerism, and to modern technology and to the coexistence of many cultures: answers other than stoning and the cutting off of hands and heads; an Islam that promoted tolerance instead of violence in its coexistence with those

⁵ For many years in Tito's Yugoslavia, Bosniaks' own identity was denied. Many cannot clearly define such to this day and some became only vaguely aware of their own identity in the last war when they were threatened with death just for being Bosniak.

of other faiths. Such a form of faith and life would be anything but strange to such European citizens as Bosniaks. In order to put this into a theological interpretation of the Koran, an interpretation that breathes freedom and not fear and distress, it is intellectuals, and especially Bosniak imams, that need to take the initiative.

Such a contribution to European culture would be a major gain for all peoples of the continent who want to live peacefully together as Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, agnostics and atheists of all colours. The timely discourse about who Bosniaks are, and how they want to be and to live, would be the main protection against foreign ideologies that some could try to impose on them.

A future Bosnia which is, and wants to be, an integral part of Europe, will have good opportunities to count in its development on the support of peaceful neighbours. But as my grandmother said: 'God helps those who help themselves.' This is also true of forms of help between people.

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