

A Federalism for Bosnia

14 January 2004, Transitions Online (www.tol.cz)

The European Stability Initiative offers a thoughtful, though not radical, solution for reorganizing Bosnia. But can it work?

by [Valery Perry](#)

SARAJEVO, Bosnia and Herzegovina--The recent proposal from the European Stability Initiative (ESI) may not be as radical as its enticing title suggests, but it does deserve considered thought for its strengths and potential challenges to implementation.

In "[Making Federalism Work--A Radical Proposal for Practical Reform](#)" (8 January 2004), ESI's writers suggest that BiH be administratively organized in 12 cantons: the 10 cantons that currently comprise the largely Bosniak and Croat Federation entity, plus the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska entity and Brcko District. This would result in a more typical structure of governance based on three layers of government: the central government, 12 cantons, and their municipalities.

This proposal, while useful for its straightforward nature, is not however, an entirely new concept, for its essence is based on the removal of the level of *entity* governance--in the Federation by dissolving the Federation structures entirely, and in the RS by establishing the current territory of the entity as one large canton that is equal in autonomy, rights and responsibilities as the other 11 proposed cantons.

The two entity-levels of bureaucracy and expense have always been the problem in developing streamlined and logical governmental structures in BiH. They are also the unit of government with no parallel in other developed democracies. Calls for the disappearance of the entity structure of governance have come in various forms in the past: The Party for BiH's (SBiH) 2000 campaign slogan "For a BiH without Entities" was perhaps the most blatant.

In addition, calls for a "third entity" by the nationalist Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) would have also in its own way dissolved the essence of the entity system, as a Croat entity would have eventually eliminated the redundant Federation structures as well as the need for the ten Bosniak and Croat cantons; the resulting three entities would have emerged as the functional equivalent of three large and generally mono-ethnic administrative units.

CITY-CENTERED SOLUTIONS

Organizing BiH primarily according to regional cantonal components is also similar to an idea suggested by the International Crisis Group (ICG) in its November 2003 report on Mostar, in which it advocated that Mostar be reformed by increasing the influence of cities in BiH in general ("Building Bridges in Mostar," 20 November 2003). Each of ESI's proposed new cantons would likely have its administrative and financial center in its urban capital, strengthening the competencies of these cities. This has historic logic, as the ICG report points out: In 1947, 13 towns held the status of city in BiH, a number quite close to ESI's proposed 12-canton structure and the 12 cantonal capitals that would evolve to administer the organs of federalism. Cantonal administrative organizations and their leading urban centers would create the *de facto* structure of local self-government suggested by ICG.

ESI contends that the approach could be implemented relatively easily, that there would be significant cost savings in eliminating the ineffective level of Federation government, and that such a federal system would be better able to oversee the distribution of resources across the country. It is true that a more logically structured federal system would be more efficient and effective than the status quo, and is therefore worthy of serious consideration. ESI has done BiH a service by outlining these practical benefits so clearly.

However, the authors of the report fail to note even in passing some of the practical challenges that would need to be overcome. Most notably, the treatment of the Federation armed forces is not mentioned, though the abolishment of the Federation's structures and the implementation of planned defense reforms in the absence of a two-entity structure would necessitate attention. Current defense reform plans call for a state-level command and control, with administrative control to be held by the entity armed forces. Would it be acceptable for a Republika Srpska canton to have its own military apparatus, and how would the other 11 cantons share/divide similar security responsibilities? Lessons to be learned from other federal structures, such as the Swiss model cited by ESI, will be necessary to shape any ongoing reform debate.

Second, ESI does little to assuage the likely fears of Bosnia's non-Serbs of a Republika Srpska "super canton," particularly since such a large canton would arise from a process in which the Serb entity (Canton Srpska?) remained intact while the Federation was broken apart. With more than 1 million people and 49 percent of BiH's territory, the large, boomerang-shaped canton will probably be seen as overwhelming by the other smaller cantons, even if processes are put in place to ensure that the cantons large and small--Gorazde, for example, has a population of only 35,258--really enjoy equal status.

Similarly, it is not clear that Republika Srpska politicians themselves will be willing to trade its status as one of two entities to become one of 12 equals. ESI's suggestion that Republika Srpska would stand to benefit from such reform by being the biggest of the federal units may be suspicious to the other 11 cantons seeking full equality among the 12. Republika Srpska support would be vital for the success of such reform: The trick would be to persuade Republika Srpska that they would gain while reassuring the other 11 potential cantons that the gain would not come at their expense.

ESI optimistically notes that this proposal could be implemented immediately, with the current Federation cantons and Federation government working together to determine which functions are redundant or not required and can be abolished. But there are few countries in which politicians willingly vote themselves out of a job. It would be useful for ESI--or even better, for the local leaders with whom they developed this plan--to prepare more concrete implementation plans to detail for the public how this idea, strong in theory, can be implemented in practice. ESI calls for this open debate, and such a discourse will be vital.

A REFORM DEBATE REQUIRED

These challenges should not detract from the potential benefits of needed structural reform. Instead, they should serve to illustrate the work ahead in developing reform and implementation plans. ESI's report offers a starting point for a serious reform discussion.

It will be interesting to see if the leading politicians and public figures with whom ESI consulted in developing this proposal will step up to the plate in 2004 to support such administrative reform or if there will be a continued reluctance by BiH's leaders to lead. There has been relatively little in the media on this topic in the first days since publication of the report, but ideally a balanced and serious debate will emerge in the days ahead. It would be refreshing for a locally driven solution to be proposed, discussed, adopted, and implemented without the usual arm-twisting by the international community. Such local action would symbolize BiH's leaders' coming of age and responsibility and would be fitting at a time in which BiH is increasingly interested in participating in structures such as NATO's Partnership for Peace or the European Union.

However, with municipal elections planned for autumn 2004 and talk of possible early general elections, the political parties that have continued to stall progress could be up to their old games--oriented more toward victory at the ballot box than victory in democratic self-governance. Those who manage to rise above the rhetoric by campaigning on real and substantive reform plans should be the ones who gain the respect and vote of their citizens, rather than those who simply continue to preach the politics of "us vs. them" while offering no vision of the future. The challenge ultimately lies with the leaders of Bosnia's parties to take the responsibility for initiating a debate, raising awareness among BiH's citizens of the issues, assessing the various options, and developing a plan for moving ahead.

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