

Dayton brought peace. It's time for justice

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Bosnia

VIENNA It has been over eight years now since the signing of the Dayton peace agreement that established the future model for Bosnia and Herzegovina and ended almost four years of war.

Some of us who worked during the war in Sarajevo were perplexed when we read the agreement. Without going into the details - the Dayton agreement is available on the Internet - it was clear from the start that the peace part of the deal would probably work, but the post-conflict development and constitutional model looked doomed.

What was the problem? Fundamentally, Dayton tried to equate two things that couldn't be equated: civility and barbarity. It set a precedent that still sends shivers down my spine - and not only mine - by legitimizing ethnic hatred. The Bosnian Serbs, after waging a vicious war against their neighbors, were awarded their own state, Republika Srpska, even if it was called an "entity."

A policy of extermination of thousands of innocent civilians in concentration camps led to international recognition and acceptance. No matter how hard the politicians in Srpska try to look the part, graciously welcoming foreign delegations, the history of this entity-state cannot and should not be ignored.

The Bosnian Serb entity has failed the "German test." No program similar to the de-Nazification of Germany after World War II was ever introduced in Srpska. Nor does it seem likely that one is being contemplated. Racist views in line with those of former Srpska president, Biljana Plavsic - sentenced to a pathetically short prison term by the War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague - are still considered respectful, even if not advocated too openly.

If the Radical Party continues to do well in neighboring Serbia (during the December 2003 elections they received just under 28 percent of the votes), their kinfolk across the border might start getting some wrong ideas.

Under these circumstances, even when taking into account the many positive developments over the past years in Bosnia, one has to ask whether it is not time to revisit the Dayton agreement. Let's not forget that three signatories are either dead or in custody. The main question that should be addressed is this unbalanceable balance between civility and barbarity.

An international nongovernmental organization, the European Stability Initiative, has proposed the abolition of Bosnia's two entities, the Bosniak-Croat Federation and Republika Srpska, in favor of a federal state along the lines of Switzerland.

According to the London-based Institute for War and Peace Reporting, the reactions of local politicians were familiar: Bosniak-Croat Federation representatives were open to the constitutional changes, but "Republika Srpska authorities were unwilling to consider any alterations." Now, there's a news flash: The Bosnian Serbs are against changing Dayton, an agreement that saluted (if grudgingly) their barbarity.

Any future arrangement for Bosnia has to take into account its history, and not from B.C. It has to be morally defensible and politically feasible, not just the latter. It has to establish a viable state structure, replacing the current amorphous and unworkable one. This has to be a structure encompassing one state, without any entities getting in the way.

The European Stability Initiative plan may be a good start, but only if the governing bodies at the federal level are functional, and not window dressing. Republika Srpska also has to go. It can not be incorporated into any agreement as a separate entity, canton, whatever. It should be divided into several parts that report to the state. Wartime barbarity should be punished by both political and constitutional means.

There is, of course, room here for some blackmail. If Republika Srpska surrenders all those individuals who have been indicted by the War Crimes Tribunal, some leeway might be possible. But only after the likes of Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic are enjoying the hospitality of the detention facility in The Hague (no excuses along the lines of "we do not know where they are" should be tolerated). Republika Srpska should also institute a de-Nazification program that would start exorcising the population of the demons of hatred still howling in the minds of many.

The only honorable leader in Bosnia and Herzegovina was the country's first president, Alija Izetbegovic, who tragically died last year. He personified the civility of the defenders of Sarajevo, the tragedy of the hundreds of thousands of ethnically cleansed, the memory of those who were killed in Srebrenica and in the many other plains, hills and mountains of Bosnia. His sad eyes during the Dayton talks said more than the upbeat press statements issued by its powerful organizers. It was the civility of thousands of Bosnian citizens that saved the country's honor. However, in Dayton barbarity took the upper hand.

It is now time to revisit Dayton and change that.

The writer, a former Russian journalist, was the United Nations spokesman in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1994 to 1998.

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