

From Dayton To Brussels

Tim Judah World Today
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When the Dayton peace accords ended the Bosnian war exactly ten years ago, it was of course good news, and the world's media caravan rolled on elsewhere. Ever since, Bosnia has only ever merited the occasional story about the Srebrenica massacre or Radovan Karadzic and General Ratko Mladic, the wartime Bosnian Serb leaders wanted for war crimes, or possibly as part of wider reports about organised crime or people trafficking. The result is that most well informed people could be forgiven for thinking that not much has changed in the last ten years. They would be totally wrong.

AT THE TIME OF THE DAYTON ACCORDS, when sixty thousand NATO-led troops flooded into the country to enforce the deal, it was widely assumed that once they left, it would soon relapse into a state of perpetual ethnic warfare. So, it comes as a surprise for many to find that Bosnia is unrecognisable from the way it was ten years ago.

Today the NATO force has been replaced by a European Union (EU) one of just over six thousand troops. Freedom of movement is universal. The old frontlines are often difficult to identify, except by people who remember where they were. Bosnia has one currency, one passport, and an increasing number of common organisations.

Most significantly, of 2.2 million refugees, almost half of the pre-war population, perhaps only 250,000 are still waiting to go home. More than ninety per cent of property claims relating to the war of 1992-95 have been settled.

The success of the Dayton peace accords is undeniable. However, in the early years after the deal was struck at a US airbase in Dayton, Ohio, on November 21 1995, such success was not guaranteed.

Indeed the process looked reversible, at least until December 1997 when a new arrangement for running the country was agreed and the international proconsul in Bosnia, the so-called High Representative, was given the far greater Bonn Powers - with which he could fire even the most senior elected politicians.

Today the debate about Bosnia, by Bosnians and foreigners, concerns whether it is time to jettison the Bonn Powers, but before examining this, it is worth reminding ourselves of what Dayton created.

Dayton was a compromise. For most of the war Bosnian Serb forces held seventy percent of the country, which, sooner or later they were determined to unite with Serbia. The territory they controlled they called the Republika Srpska. On the other side of the lines, and in the wake of a war within the war and following US pressure, Bosnia's Muslims - now called Bosniaks - and Croats were forced in 1994 to unite in what became known as the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Following a successful Federation offensive and NATO bombardments in the summer of 1995 Serb-held territory shrunk to just under fifty percent. The essence of the Dayton compromise was that the Serbs were forced to

give up their aim of uniting with Serbia, in exchange for a loose federal state with the Croats and Bosniaks.

The Bosnia born in Dayton was highly complex. On one side was the Republika Srpska and on the other the Federation. The latter was composed of ten relatively autonomous cantons. An autonomous district of Brcko, under international supervision, was also created later. Power was highly devolved, leaving a very weak central authority in Sarajevo.

While it is clear that Dayton ended the war, it is also clear that the original threat to the country has receded, if not vanished. At key moments of the last century or more, Bosnia's fate has been determined to a great extent by the will of the governments of Serbia and Croatia. Bosnia prospered when Serbs and Croats pulled in the same direction. With nationalist regimes in power in both countries during the 1990s, Bosnia was ripped apart.

Now, by contrast, Serbia and Croatia both have the same aim - joining the EU. Thus Bosnia has ceased to be an apple of discord between them, and so its statehood and territory are no longer contested. As post-war reconstruction continued, with billions being poured into the country in aid, and as both, first Croatia and then Serbia, began to cut their ties to nationalist leaders in Bosnia, it slowly began to move out of the initial post-war phase.

The constitution was far too complicated and unwieldy for such a small country, which was left without an effective central government. Thus, increasingly the Bosnian question has come to be one of how to reform Dayton - and how to revive a still flat economy.

REFUGEE RETURNS

At the same time, changes on the ground, especially since the late 1990s have far exceeded expectations. Large numbers of refugees have even returned to areas in which they are minorities. Kozarac, for example within the Republika Srpska, which was completely ethnically cleansed by Serbs in 1991, is again an overwhelmingly Bosniak majority town.

Likewise Drvar, which was 98 percent Serb until taken by the Croats, who tried but failed to settle Croats there, is again a Serb majority town inside the Federation.

It is also true however that many areas, such as Srebrenica, Jajce and other towns have not recovered from the war and what are called 'minority returns' have oc-

curred generally only in places where minorities can form local majorities. Sarajevo, for example, is now overwhelmingly Bosniak and Banja Luka, the capital of the Republika Srpska, overwhelmingly Serb.

POWERFUL PROCONSUL

Despite these caveats, Bosnia's recovery has been far greater than sceptics could have expected in 1995. In recent years much of this success has been thanks to the powerful personality of British former Liberal Democrat party leader Lord Ashdown who became High Representative in May 2002.

Unlike any other High Representative, Ashdown has used the Bonn Powers to push through reforms and help create a far stronger central authority. Much of the success of the most recent reforms has also come thanks to the pull factor of the EU - for whom Ashdown is also special representative in Bosnia. Thus, with two hats, he has played an absolutely central role in shaping policy within and about Bosnia.

In November 2003 an EU Feasibility Study decided the country needed to fulfil sixteen conditions before it could begin talks on a Stabilisation and Association Agreement, the first step towards Union membership. Earlier this year fifteen had been completed. But at the last hurdle, disaster struck. Bosnia found itself politically blocked.

In the wake of the French referendum last May rejecting the new EU constitution, the Republika Srpska parliament turned down a proposal to streamline Bosnia's sixteen police forces as demanded by the EU. Perhaps seeing the prospect of membership receding, Bosnian Serb politicians decided that the trade-off of eventual membership for giving up their power, the 'nexus' according to Ashdown of 'politics, crime and the police', was simply not worth it.

Then, after massive pressure, they reversed their decision on October 5, only days after both Croatia and Serbia got green lights to continue their bids to join the EU. Back in 2003 Ashdown argued that Bosnia suffered from 'a dysfunctional political system, weak institutions and the enduring threat of crime and corruption'. His aim was to bring the country from Dayton to Brussels, and so to bow

out at the end of this year with Bosnia beginning talks with the EU on the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. On October 5 it looked as if he had snatched victory from the jaws of defeat. But his success only served to underline the great dilemma now facing Bosnia.

IMPERIAL VOICE

In general terms, opinion polls have shown that most Bosnians believe that their own politicians are third rate and corrupt and indeed the system means that all Bosnian politicians prefer the High Representative to take tough decisions for them, rather than risk making them themselves and losing votes.

According to the influential Berlin based think-tank, the European Stability Initiative: 'The protectorate role of the High Representative reinforces the worst tendencies of the old Yugoslav political culture: the fondness for the *cvrsta ruka*, the "strong hand" that acts as a *deus ex machina* outside the political process. This highly personalised style of politics, where ultimate power rests in the hands of one charismatic individual, is exactly what democratisation efforts are supposed to overcome.'

It is possible to extend this argument by noting that Bosnians are happy with this system not just because it is what they were used to during the Yugoslav period but also because the High Representative now plays precisely the same role for a distant imperial capital, in this case Brussels, as did his predecessors despatched from Vienna after 1878, and from Istanbul after the Ottoman conquest of 1463.

Increasingly however voices are being heard in Bosnia and outside arguing that it is high time that Bosnians began to take responsibility for themselves, including taking tough decisions on the economy and constitutional reform, even if this does mean facing angry electorates. In other words, ten years after Dayton, Bosnia should begin to become just like any other country in Europe.

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