

Bosnia Cannot Disintegrate Without Violence

Those who maintain that the country can fall apart without serious interethnic conflict are peddling dangerous ideas

Matthew Parish's comment piece for Balkan Insight ("Croat Crisis Pushed Bosnia Toward Endgame,") argues that Bosnia and Herzegovina's structural and political dysfunction has entered a terminal phase due to "irreversible" international inattention, among other contributing factors. His advice is that "the Serbs and Croats should be left to go their own ways," leaving an "autonomous Bosniak territory" as a rump state.

The international role would shift from peace implementation and state preservation - "striving to keep alive a discredited vision," as Parish stated - to manage "the ugly side effects" of the country's dissolution, particularly regarding Brcko District, which would be appended to Republika Srpska, and the still contested city of Mostar.

Parish's chilling diagnosis of the situation is accurate, in that the determining factor has been effective disengagement of the international community in Bosnia since 2006. Yet Parish's prescription - the internationally managed dissolution of the state - would be a disastrous failure, as well as demanding far deeper and more risky international engagement than it would be required to prevent state dissolution.

There is no way that the country could be divided in a consensual, nonviolent fashion. A deceptively simplistic solution, it would create more problems than it would solve, further destabilize the region, and fuel nationalist politics in neighboring Serbia and Croatia.

Out of Control

The processes unleashed by separatist politicians in BiH for political gain show signs of creating dynamics beyond their ability to control. Wittingly or not, Parish's argumentation parallels that according to Republika Srpska President, Milorad Dodik: Bosnia has no future and should be allowed peacefully to dissolve. Of course, he is in the ideal position to ensure that the state cannot function, as Parish recognizes. Dodik's apparent assessment that the international community lacks the collective will to resist his ongoing effort to hollow-out the state

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has consistently proven prescient; the latest Peace Implementation Council, PIC, communiqué shows no consensus on even identifying that effort as a distinct problem.

Like Parish, Dodik seems to believe that there would be no significant resistance to state dissolution from within BiH and that those inclined to do so are too divided to pose much of an impediment. But this is an incredibly high-stakes gamble, and one that would put the survival of the Republika Srpska at stake.



Parish correctly identifies the partnership between Dodik and the leader of the Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ, Dragan Covic, in undercutting the state; a dysfunctional Federation entity both draws attention away from Dodik's own campaign to gut the state and bolsters his argument, which is threadbare, that Republika Srpska is "the better part" of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Covic also engaged in a high-stakes gamble over the composition of the Federation government last month, upped the ante instead of pocketing a sizeable pot of senior-level positions, and lost. The HDZ rejects the legitimacy of the Federation government as formed by the coalition of the Social Democrats, SDP, the [Bosniak] Party of Democratic Action, SDA, Radom za Boljitak and the Croatian Party of Right, HSP, but then withdrew its case from the Federation

Constitutional Court, apparently fearing that it would lose.

The level of interethnic tension in the Federation between Croats and Bosniaks is now higher than at any point since the stifled attempt to create a third entity in 2001. But the concept of a third entity is fraught for the HDZ and its ally, HDZ 1990, since its putative borders would be far from clear, and unacceptable to the Bosniak majority in the Federation.

The Croat population is separated into at least three distinct areas; concentrating on Herzegovina and western Bosnia would mean leaving Croats in central Bosnia outside such an entity. This was a problem during the war, and remains one for the very idea of a "Herceg-Bosna."

When one looks at the map, it becomes evident that Brcko and Mostar are not the only potential flashpoints. Despite Parish's contention that Bosniaks and Serbs "are no longer mixed together," sizeable returnee communities of Bosniaks exist in the Republika Srpska in Srebrenica, Prijedor, and Bijeljina (Janja).

Aside from returnees, there are other localized concentrations of constituent peoples. Serbs have majorities in four Federation municipalities: Drvar, Glamoc, Grahovo and Petrovac. And what of the Bosniak-majority area in the Una-Sana Canton? Dividing the country into "mono-ethnic Bantustans," to use the term Parish employed, would not be a simple process, despite the success of ethnic cleansing during the war in changing the demographics. When he advocates international management of state dissolution, he effectively means that the international community should finish or supervise the incomplete project of ethnic cleansing during the war. Hence his critique of US-supported Bosniak refugee returns to Brcko as "problematic": it gets in the way of connecting the two halves of Republika Srpska.

At least the former US ambassador William Montgomery, now a lobbyist for the Serbian nationalist Serbian Progressive Party, SNS, led by Tomislav Nikolic, was up-front about that detail when he advocated it two years ago. This policy would carry direct risks for those tasked with implementing it: it is probable that many

would violently resist an international community shifting from a mission of providing a "safe and secure environment" to facilitate being re-cleansed.

Parish draws a parallel with Kosovo; Bosniaks will accept the bitter loss of the Republika Srpska, just as Serbs accepted the loss of the province of Kosovo, because "the increasing political autonomy of Serb and Croat parts of Bosnia makes no practical difference to them." Again, looking at the map, there is at least one major practical issue, even if the risky contention that "they will not fight" were true: this would separate the Bosniak-dominated area from the West and completely surround it. This alone ought to make one question the likelihood of resisting the state's division.

As I've heard many in the international community do, Parish cites the lack of popular enthusiasm for renewed conflict to support his contention that "widespread violence seems unlikely." While it is indeed remarkable that there has been so little interethnic violence in such a traumatized and heavily armed society - I have never heard of a "revenge killing," for example - it is dangerous to assume this portends a lack of threat.

It was not up to average citizens in 1992 when war was unleashed; most Bosnians who became combatants fought because they felt those who had initiated the conflict had left them with no options. It was not that their being mixed together created "incentives to murder their neighbors," as Parish stated. Instigators touched off mutual fear that made conflict seem inevitable.

There Is No Shortcut

The greatest danger of Parish's argument is that the international community, particularly an internally preoccupied European Union, will see his prescription as a convenient shortcut, and as part of a wider regional accommodation that includes Kosovo. The Republika Srpska will be allowed to leave as "compensation" for the independence of Kosovo. International frustration with the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is evident; such off-the-shelf solutions like those proffered by Parish may well have an appeal in Brussels and EU capitals. They surely reflect Russia's desired policies. The aura of inevitable state failure

works for those who advocate the country's partition.

But leaving aside the manifold moral issues involved in acting as midwife to the complete ethnic and territorial division of the country, there are massive practical hurdles. Letting things fall apart without any real resistance, which has been the policy to date, holds risks of violence that even Parish acknowledges. Aside from abandoning 15 years of attempts to reintegrate the region in line with "European values" and bolstering warlord politics at the expense of citizens, the ethnic disintegration of Bosnia would set in motion a regional process that could not be controlled, with every unfulfilled agenda pursued without restraint. How about Sandzak or Macedonia?

Dividing the state under international tutelage would require a far greater investment of political capital, military resources, and money than restoring a credible deterrent and keeping the lid on - a policy for which there is apparently no appetite among the majority of EU countries. The default policy is a bureaucratic autopilot: sticking with the enlargement checklist, recognizing no threat (a Stabilization and Association Agreement must surely confer stability), and calling for dialogue. The fact that this policy is self-evidently failing has not dented its appeal.

New Approach Needed

While the situation in Bosnia is increasingly volatile, its detonation is not inevitable; it can easily be prevented. Maintaining international executive capacities for the foreseeable future in both the civilian [High Representative] and military [EUFOR] realms is essential. Reconfiguration and reinvigoration of both is required to meet the challenges posed by the current situation.

In EUFOR's case, this would mean returning to a deterrent posture and fielding operational deployments of company strength in both the potential flashpoints that Parish noted, Brcko and Mostar. This would require augmenting the ever-shrinking EUFOR. However, doing so would require at least an implicit acknowledgement that the current policy has failed, and there has been no appetite in Brussels and most EU capitals to do so. Nor has the United States led the grow-

ing camp of skeptics in the Peace Implementation Council with an alternative approach. The default policy is to resist outright capitulation, but constantly retreat, watching the EU fail from the sidelines.

So, the slide toward the precipice continues. The bureaucrats who have designed the current failed policy are loath to accept the need to rethink and shift policy, as that would admit failure to the narrow but growing audience of their peers and question the EU's abilities to handle a still nebulous transition.

But continuing the current course will ultimately force their political masters to accept responsibility for an impossible-to-ignore catastrophic failure before their electorates. They will rightly ask "Bosnia? That's so '90s! We thought you'd solved that. How did you blow it again?"

A failure in Bosnia would be a Western failure, with a negative impact on all the Western members of the Peace Implementation Council.

The EU would take the most devastating hit; it would find itself in loco parentis indefinitely over what would amount to a three-way Cyprus on the European continent. Dayton Bosnia is seen as a "made in America" product, so while the US is further outside the blast radius, it would not emerge unscathed. Turkey would draw its own dark conclusions about the reasons the country was allowed to fall apart and the credibility of its Western partners, and would formulate its policies - in Bosnia and beyond - accordingly.

Progress is possible in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but only once the existential fears of insecurity are eliminated. The perennial top priority for citizens is economic and social security; their unaccountable political elites continue to not deliver due to their ability to leverage patronage and fear. Politicians' patronage capability is reduced by fiscal crisis, but fear has been allowed to become more salient due to irresponsible international policy.

Only the US can catalyze the necessary policy shift in the PIC. With one of the main actors responsible for the current US policy, Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg, leaving his post for academia, now is the time to devise a new approach.