

# **Politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina**

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## **Historical Background of the Country's Politics**

In terms of territory, the inaccessibility and impenetrability of its mountain ranges defined Bosnia as a separate geopolitical entity from an early age. Partially due to such rugged terrain, Bosnia for centuries provided sanctuary to different peoples and refugees fleeing persecution in neighboring regions. However, ethnic divisions and strife in Bosnia are only recent phenomena. The history of medieval Bosnia contains no records of deep-seated ethnic or religious conflict. During the time of the medieval Bosnian Kingdom (1180-1463), a peculiar Christian teaching described by contemporary Catholic authorities as heretical, established itself as the official Bosnian Church, becoming the cornerstone in forming the distinct Bosnian identity. In fact, very little is known about the doctrine and practices of this Church, and what studies were written about it in the modern time cannot be relied upon as their findings were typically determined by the narrow nationalist agenda of the day (Malcolm, 1996: 14-23, 27-42). What is clear however, is that Bosnia at this time was inhabited by a very complex mixture of people upon which Slavs exercised defining linguistic, racial and cultural influence. Since this early period, and despite the existence and the varying degree of influence of the Catholic and Orthodox churches, which much later, from the mid-19th century onwards, became an inseparable part of the Croat and Serb

national identity, people of all confessions in Bosnia traditionally referred to themselves as 'Dobri Bošnjani', literally 'Good Bosniaks'. Despite all the efforts by the modern nationalists to prove the contrary, 'Croat' and 'Serb' ethnicities are tribal and territorial denominations that came to use as the ethno-linguistic and religious-national determinants several centuries later and could not apply to the people who inhabited Bosnia in medieval times (Malcolm, 1996: 12; Donia and Antwerp Fine, 1994: 71).

The history of Bosnia as an independent state came to an abrupt end with completion of the Ottoman conquest in 1463. Again, contrary to the popular myth, the Ottomans in Bosnia did not engage much in converting the local population to Islam, nor did the people embrace Islam *en masse*, as many historians later suggested (Hadžijahić, 1990: 60). Bosnia was essentially ruled as a military province and no serious thought was ever given by its new rulers to the idea of establishing an Islamic state in the area. Gradually, however, Bosnians did embrace Islam, partially because of the benefits enjoyed by the adherents to the official religion of the empire, and partially due to the influence of various *sufi tariqats* (*dervish orders*) (Friedman, 1996: 18-20). The spread of Islam in Bosnia was made easier by the weak organization of the existing churches and by the relative leniency (compared to the situation before the conquest) with which the new Ottoman feudal masters treated their subjects. Nevertheless, Muslims did not become the majority of population in Bosnia until the late 16th or early 17th century.<sup>1</sup> By this time, the increasing power of the local military and merchant elite, coupled with the strong influence that Bosnians exercised in the Sublime Porte in Istanbul, led to the establishment of a separate Bosnian *eyalet* (province), the highest territorial division in the Ottoman Empire, in 1580 (Imamović, 1997: 179). Hitherto, the whole of Balkan Peninsula constituted one single province,

i.e., the *eyalet* of Rumelia. Bosnia was to remain an increasingly distinct province until the end of the Ottoman rule in the year 1878.

During more than four centuries of the Ottoman rule, the ethnic composition of Bosnia and Herzegovina remained fairly simple. Long-ago Slavicized racially, linguistically and culturally, the people continued to identify themselves primarily as members of the distinct Bosnian territorial and regional identity. Religion did not yet start playing the role as potentially divisive social force by being identified with 'nationality', as Muslims, Catholic and Orthodox Christians referred to themselves simply as 'Muslims' and 'Christians' (*Kršćani/Hrišćani*), with 'Bosniaks' used to designate them collectively in territorial terms.<sup>2</sup> Originally the numerically smallest segment of the Bosnian society, the Orthodox numbers were bolstered by migration from Serbia encouraged by the Ottomans to produce a counterweight to the Catholics, who were perceived as potential threat given the fact that they shared the faith of the enemy of the day, the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Malcolm, 1996: 72; Handžić, 1994, 13-18).

Barring isolated incidents, the high level of inter-communal harmony remained undisturbed until close to the end of the Ottoman rule in Bosnia. But then, at the beginning of the 19th century things started to change because of the emergence of a separate Serbian political entity to the east, and the corresponding interest that the Austro-Hungarians took in the political developments in this northernmost region of the Ottoman Empire.

The Sultan granted the sweeping autonomy to the Serbs in Belgrade *sanjak* in 1815 following a series of uprisings starting in 1804. The new state, independent in all but the name, set upon mobilizing the support of their Orthodox brethren in the fashion of that nation-building era. In

1844 the Serbian minister of the interior at the time, Ilija Garašanin, wrote his famous *Načertanije* (project) in which he spelled out necessary steps for the ‘national awakening’ of the Bosnian Orthodox, meaning their identification with Serbs and adopting Serbia as their homeland (Jelavich, 1983: 244-245, 331, 333). During the 1860s, Orthodox priests in Bosnia were mobilized to instruct their parishioners to start calling themselves ‘Serbs’ instead of ‘Christians’ (Friedman, 1996: 38). Such expansionist designs were also drawn up among the Croats, who by this time had definitely emerged as distinct and self-conscious subjects of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Donia and Antwerp Fine, 1994: 63-65). In response, the Muslim elite in Bosnia, most notably the big landowners who stood to lose the most from these potential developments, became increasingly radicalized. Nevertheless, no serious incidents of inter-religious (ethnic identity still occupied the background) strife emerged until the peasant uprisings in the Herzegovina region during 1870s (Pinson, 1996: 78-80). However, the fateful event occurred when, for the first time during these uprisings (initially motivated by the bad harvest and excessive taxation policies) peasants of Orthodox and Catholic faith discovered that they could count on the cross-border sympathizers and sponsors for the support of their cause (Donia and Antwerp Fine, 1994: 90-92). First Serbs and then Croats sent financial help to the rebels and volunteers to proselytize. The result was open declaration of Orthodox peasants’ loyalty to Serbia in mid-1870s. When Serbia and Montenegro seized the opportunity presented by these internal disturbances in Bosnia to declare war on the Ottoman Empire, the Austro-Hungarians, fearful of potential westward expansion by the Serbs, decided that they had to act urgently and in 1878 sent their army to conquer Bosnia, having previously secured the mandate to do so given by the Congress of Berlin (Jelavich, 1983: 360-361).

The local population, mostly Muslim, but including some Serbs as well, offered stiff resistance, but were obviously no match for one of the mightiest armies of the day. Austro-Hungary immediately set upon rebuilding the Bosnian economy and government institutions. Forty years of its rule eventually came to be generally regarded as a golden era in Bosnia's modern history. Nationalist-induced uprisings were soon crushed and all citizens were affirmed their equal rights under the law, although naturally the strength and importance of the Croat (Catholic) community increased significantly (Pinson, 1996: 133-135). The government even subsidized schools and religious institutions of all three confessions in the hope of avoiding any possible confrontations in the future. The administrator in charge of Bosnia between 1882 and 1903, minister of finance Benjamin Kallay, set upon creating a distinct Bosnian nation, *Bosniaks*, that would comprise people from all three confessional groups which would thus insulate them from nationalist stirrings from neighboring states (Donia and Antwerp Fine, 1994: 97). His project was unfortunately doomed to fail as a consequence of wider developments leading to the outbreak of the World War One.

In the period leading to and during the First World War, a strong movement for the unification of the territories populated by the 'South Slavs' started among Croat, Serb, Slovenian and partially Muslims intellectual elites (Friedman, 1996: 79; Glenny, 1999: 365-377). This political movement ultimately led to the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later the Kingdom of Yugoslavia) in 1918, under the rule of the Serbian royal dynasty. The new state was from the very beginning dominated by Serb politicians acting either alone, or occasionally in concert with their Croat counterparts. Muslims managed to carve some niche in the Yugoslav political system, but their influence was declining steadily. The migration of Muslims to Turkey, which started in the early years of the Austro-Hungarian rule and never ceased, turned into a full-

scale exodus by 1920s (Friedman, 1996: 93). The Muslim percentage of the population declined to an all-time low of only 30% of the total population in Bosnia and Herzegovina by 1921 (Friedman, 1996: 96; Imamović, 1997: 492).<sup>3</sup> Additional contributing to Muslim emigration was land reform of 1919, which destroyed their traditional material base, large land holdings. The outline of traditional Bosnian territory, which was preserved under the first constitution of 1921, disappeared under the new territorial division of 1929, for the first time in almost half of millennium. The newly-named Kingdom of Yugoslavia was divided into nine *banovinas*, provinces, in each of which Muslims were minority confessional group (Friedman, 1996: 101; Donia and Antwerp Fine, 1994: 129). Besides the economic and political disenfranchisement, Muslims were sometimes subjects to open hostilities among more radical Serb nationalists, which sometimes even resulted in pogroms.<sup>4</sup>

The Second World War began in a moment when Muslims were at the lowest level of social, political and economic advancement and organization since their appearance in Bosnia in the mid 15th century. It is no wonder then that they were utterly lacking any kind of national strategy in the struggle that ensued. World War Two in Yugoslavia took the shape of an undeclared civil war. Disaffected Croats fought for an enlarged Croatia. Serbs seized the opportunity to try to eliminate everyone else in their drive for the Greater Serbia. The battlefield where the clash of their interests took place was the contended territory of Bosnia. As a consequence, Bosnian Muslims, possessing no effective political and military organization of their own, were alternatively attacked and wooed by all sides.

Very early into the war, Muslims started to join the Communist Partisans due to their promises of equal rights for everyone and protection of Muslim identity and integrity of Bosnian territory

(Friedman, 1996: 127-132). Increasing numbers flocked to the Partisans' side following the waves of massacres of civilian population in East Bosnia carried by Serb *Chetniks* during 1942 and 1943. However, Muslims paid a high price for their lack of leadership and organization. A total of 8.1 percent of the prewar population of Muslims in Yugoslavia were killed between 1941 and 1945, the highest percentage among all ethnic groups, save for the Jews (Malcolm, 1996: 192; Imamović, 1997: 549; Glenny, 1999: 494-495).

The creation of the new Yugoslavia under the Communists brought a certain respite from ethnic pogroms, although Muslims still suffered immensely in the first decade after the war. They were the educated townsfolk, and they compensated to a certain extent for the loss of their land holdings after the WWI by joining merchant and business class. As such they were naturally viewed by the Communists as a 'bourgeoisie' class and the enemy of proletariat. Their businesses were nationalized and remaining land seized under yet another agrarian reform and their other immovable possessions 'redistributed' (Friedman, 1996: 144). Contrary to the promises given during the war by the Partisans' leadership, Muslims were not recognized as a nation and although Bosnia and Herzegovina became a separate federal republic within Yugoslavia, the majority of political institutions were still controlled by the Serbs (Donia and Antwerp Fine, 1994: 160-162). Freedom of religion was guaranteed in the constitution, but in practice all *madrasahs* were closed, mosques were regularly being razed to make place for the modern developments, and the veiling of women was prohibited. Muslims were literally pauperized overnight. Another great wave of emigration to Turkey started soon after the war as a direct consequence of government policies which adversely affected the Muslim community.

The situation finally started to improve in the late 1960s, culminating in the recognition of Muslims as a distinct nation in the 1971 Yugoslav Census (Imamović, 1997: 565). The Muslim population gradually recovered numerically and the new sense of pride in being a nation on its own, living on its own piece of territory, started to turn things around in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The flow of emigrants almost completely ceased and restrictions on religious practice were somehow eased. Most importantly, Muslims started to recover economically. The near-total dominance of administration, army, police and state-owned industry by the Serbs forced Bosnian Muslims to look for other venues of activity. They became increasingly educated, ventured into small businesses and became professionals. At some time during the 1970s they again became the relative majority of the population in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Friedman, 1996: 155). This was partially a result of a higher birth rate following their economic recovery, but also partially due to continuing outflow of Croats and Serbs who tended to gravitate towards their national homelands across the border.

Unfortunately, the increasing self-awareness and prosperity of Bosnian Muslims sounded the alarm in nationalist circles in Serbia and Croatia which never ceased dreaming of enlarging their respective states on the expense of the 'artificial creations' i.e. the Bosnian state and Bosnian Muslims. The undisputed ruler of Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito, at whose instigation Muslims eventually regained their nationhood, suppressed such nationalistic rabble-rousing in a series of police and political actions during the early 1970s. Serb and Croat nationalist leaders were sent to jails or into social isolation and anonymity. Things slowly returned to normal and during the following fifteen or so years, no serious ethnic or religious strife took place in Yugoslavia, with the exception of unrelated unrest in Kosovo province.

## **Setting the Framework for the Country's Politics**

As the Communist Party's hold of power in Yugoslavia weakened in the period following President Tito's death in 1980, nationalist passions were again awakening after being suppressed for the long time. Serbian nationalists felt that the time had come to reestablish Serb traditional dominance in Yugoslav affairs, which was subdued by Tito's policy of even-handed treatment of the country's various ethnic groups. The Serbian Orthodox Church assumed a prominent unifying role in attempts for national renaissance among all Serbs living in different Yugoslav republics. The unification agenda often assumed the shape of reacting to supposed attempts at weakening of Serbian 'nation' outside Serbia, by the way of cultural and linguistic assimilation by others. This was particularly the case in Kosovo, which Serbian nationalists perceive as the cradle of their statehood and civilization. However, as the Serbian nationalist movement grew stronger, its leading exponents set their eyes westward towards Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia in which sizeable Serb minorities lived.<sup>5</sup> Since Muslims were relative majority in Bosnia, it was relatively easy for Serb media to fuel irrational fears of Islamic 'conspiracy' bent on subduing local Serb population.<sup>6</sup> Among the early victims of anti-Muslim hysteria were thirteen 'fundamentalists' who were sentenced to long prison terms in a rigged trial in Sarajevo in 1983, after being accused of motley crimes, including "advocating western-style democracy" and "plotting to establish an Islamic state in Bosnia" (Friedman, 1996: 192-198; Silber and Little, 1996: 233) The main defendant on the trial was Alija Izetbegović, who was later to become the first President of independent Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Serbian nationalism got its official sanction and modern program document in the now-infamous 'Memorandum,' prepared by the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1986 (Pinson, 1996: 146). The basic argument of the Memorandum was that non-Serb nations in Yugoslavia (notably Croats, Bosnian Muslims, Montenegrins, Albanians and Macedonians) were either of recent origin or artificially created by Communists in order to act as a counterweight to Serbs. Serbs, on the other side, 'historically' possessed most rights to statehood in areas now covered by the state called Yugoslavia. Serbs' national rights consequentially preceded the rights of any other nation in the country. In a chilling proclamation, Memorandum stated that "the question of the integrity of the Serb people and its culture in the whole of Yugoslavia poses itself as a crucial question for that people's survival and development (Malcolm, 1996: 207)."

Sliding from crisis to crisis, economically, politically and socially, by the end of the 1980s it became painfully obvious that Yugoslavia, although relatively free and moderate when compared to the other regimes in Eastern Europe, had to reform its ultimately inflexible political system. The need for reform was made more urgent by the fact that, unlike most other Eastern European countries, Yugoslavia was an inherently unstable amalgamate of several ethnic groups, most of which possessed significant historic records of independence and statehood. Also, contrary to the claims of Serbian radical nationalist advocates, Serbs actually dominated most aspects of life in Yugoslav society, much to the chagrin of other recently awakened ethnic groups. However, repeated attempts at redefining the relationships between federal republics that formed Yugoslavia failed. This was primarily due to the uncompromising stance of Serbian hard line nationalist empowered by the rise of Slobodan Milošević, who became leader of the Serbian Communist Party in 1987, followed by his election to the post of the President of Serbia in 1989. Fearing the loss of privileges stemming from their preponderant position in Yugoslavia, Serbs

continually rejected decentralization of power in favor of individual republics, which eventually led to the strengthening of pro-independence forces throughout the country.

Against such tense backdrop, two westernmost Yugoslav republics, Slovenia and Croatia, held the first-ever multiparty elections in 1990, in which the triumph of pro-independence parties was virtually guaranteed. Later in the same year, Bosnia and Herzegovina conducted its own elections, in which three national(ist) parties together won more than 75 percent of the parliamentary seats (Arnautović, 1996: 108). Since elections in these three republics reduced Yugoslav Communist Party to insignificance, Milošević was forced to abandon his initial plan to ensure continuing domination of the country by controlling the Communist Party. Instead he espoused the old idea of creating the state of Greater Serbia by carving out the Serb-populated areas in neighboring republics and adjoining them to Serbia proper.

To accomplish this ambitious goal, Milošević needed to politically mobilize Serb population in all areas where they lived in significant numbers. To this goal he employed Serbian media, which was purged of his opponents at the early stages of his 'anti-bureaucratic' campaign to gain control of important institutions of power in Serbia (including the provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina, which he abolished), and Montenegro (Donia and Antwerp Fine, 1994: 204-206). TV and newspapers controlled by Milošević's regime began relentlessly bombarding their audience with carefully orchestrated propaganda, designed to make them believe that in the event of the collapse of a common state, Serbs living outside Serbia proper will be subjected to genocide and virtual annihilation (Thompson, 1994). Slovenia was left out of the loop early, due to almost non-existent Serbian population to support the nationalist cause, but in Croatia Milošević actively sponsored rebellion in the Serb-dominated Krajina region. The same recipe of instigating

rebellions by local Serbian population, allegedly fearing reprisals if separated from mainland Serbia, was repeated in Bosnia a few months later (Donia and Antwerp Fine, 1994: 215-217).

The situation in Bosnia was much more complex than in any other republic in former Yugoslavia. Except in a handful of villages, no ethnic group in Bosnia and Herzegovina occupied continuous ethnically dominant area. Indeed, this central republic had the most ethnically mixed population in former Yugoslavia. (Donia and Antwerp Fine, 1994: 186; Burg and Shoup, 1999: 44). Bosnian government was conscious of the delicate position that this republic had in relation to other Yugoslav federal republics and tried hard to negotiate some sort of confederate solution for Yugoslavia, which would allow it to avoid contemplating independence that was guaranteed to arouse Serb passions. However, after the European Community recognized Slovenia and Croatia as independent states in January 1992, Bosnian position in what was left of Yugoslavia became untenable. The decision was thus made by the parliament to hold the referendum for independence in March 1992. Altogether, 64 percent of the registered voters participated, of whom 98 percent voted for the independence (Begić, 1997: 71-79; Donia and Antwerp Fine, 1994: 230-238).

Following the declaration of independence and formal recognition by the key powers of the day, the Serbs staged an open rebellion against the central government, following the same scenario already applied in Croatia. The government in Sarajevo lacked means to effectively counter this well organized rebellion. It did not have an army and when the sporadic clashes soon turned into full-scale war, the government could count on support by little more than a variety of neighborhood-based volunteer defense groups, as well as Muslim elements in the (previously disarmed) police force. Their combined strength was probably in the range of 5,000 – 8,000,

equipped only with small arms individually purchased on the black market. They were confronted by federal army troops already garrisoned in the country, reinforced by volunteer units sent in from Serbia, totaling approximately 80,000 troops in 1992 (United Nations Commission of Experts, 1994). As Bosnia and Herzegovina became an internationally recognized independent state, presidents of Serbia and Bosnian Serb Republic, Slobodan Milošević and Radovan Karadžić, officially announced the departure of federal army troops from BiH, with the provision that any personnel wishing to remain there and continue fighting will become part of newly formed Army of Serbian Republic. This official separation of two armies was of course a mere public relations exercise, designed to absolve Milošević of responsibility for the aggression against neighboring state, and to support claims that the conflict in Bosnia represents not an aggression but merely civil war between different ethnic groups. The sad part of the story is that the international community, unwilling to get involved in the developing conflict, bought into this lie. Illustration of this can be found in the official report issued by UN Secretary General Boutros Ghali in June 1992, which stated unequivocally that Serb forces in Bosnia were “independent and had nothing to do with Belgrade” (Malcolm, 1996: 242).

Rationale for perpetuation of such a shameful stance, seeking to uphold the fantasy of the civil war for which all sides are equally to be blamed, is clear from the words of EC chief negotiator Lord Carrington in early 1992: “everybody is to blame for what is happening in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and as soon as we get the ceasefire there will be no need to blame anybody” (Malcolm, 1996: 242). The most poignant policy, however, of the international community in relation to the war in Bosnia remained its constant refusal to lift the arms embargo on Bosnian government to allow it to equip its forces and defend the country against aggression. Various arguments had been put forward to justify denying Bosnians their natural right to defend their

lives and property, most common of which was that allowing government to arm its forces would only serve to 'prolong the fighting.' As Francine Friedman brilliantly observed later on, "the international community thus obviously preferred the peacefulness of graveyard to 'messy' job of helping the cause of justice" (Friedman, 1996: 223).

To appease their critics and pacify the public opinion, disturbed by nightly TV spectacle of an entire nation being ethnically 'cleansed,' (newspeak for 'butchered') international community moved to extend the mandate of the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) from Serb-held areas in Croatia to all of Bosnia and Herzegovina in September 1992. UNPROFOR, however, was tasked solely with facilitating the provision of humanitarian aid in the region by protecting aid convoys run by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Instead of genuinely intervening to help the nation in distress, UNPROFOR served to create media-friendly show of international community hard at work to provide assistance to those in need.

Seeking an early end to the conflict, but without trying to address the complicated issues that led to it in the first place, the UN and European Community chief negotiators Cyrus Vance and Lord Owen, produced the first comprehensive attempt for a political and military solution to the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the 'Vance-Owen peace plan', which was made public at peace talks in Geneva in January 1993. It envisioned division of Bosnia into a set of nine ethnically defined provinces plus a capital district for Sarajevo (Campbell, 1999; Kurtćehajić and Ibrahimagić, 2007: 136-142). Ethnic labeling of territories caused the outbreak, for the first time, of the actual civil war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with all three sides competing for control of territory prior to envisioned partitioning. In Noel Malcolm's words, it was also "after the arms embargo, ... the second most important contribution of the West to the destruction of Bosnia" (Malcolm, 1996:

248).

Due to the obvious impossibility of its realization, the international community eventually quietly dropped Vance-Owen's proposals and moved on to draw a new plan for division of Bosnia into three ethnic republics, put forward in September 1993. Thus the shift from assisting the nation, a victim of an aggression, to downgrading the problem to something akin to modern-day tribal conflict was completed. Ever since David Owen publicly ridiculed as "unrealistic" the Bosnian government's official stance that "any federal arrangement should be based on equality for all citizens and equal rights for the constituent nations, and that the federal units could not be divided exclusively along ethnic lines," nothing better than another ethnic division of Bosnian territory by the international community could be expected (Campbell, 1999).

Starting position of the new plan, known as 'Owen-Stoltenberg Plan' (former Norwegian Foreign Minister Thorvald Stoltenberg replaced Cyrus Vance) was a division of Bosnia and Herzegovina into a Serb republic (Republika Srpska) with 53%, a Muslim entity (Muslim Republic) with at least 30% and a Croat unit (Herceg Bosna) with 17% of territory (Kurtćehajić and Ibrahimagić, 2007: 143-148). The proposal ultimately failed, but what the EU negotiators did achieve was to agree on percentage of Bosnian territory that will be allocated to each side under the terms of eventual peace agreement. Bosnian Muslims were 'awarded' 33.3 percent of territory, Croats got 17.5 percent (together controlling 51 percent of Bosnia), while Serbs got 49 percent (Holbrooke, 1999: 296).

Faced with irrefutable evidence of Serbian atrocities, tired of media pressure at home, and fed up with Europeans' demonstrable inability to put an end to the conflict in BiH, the American

administration eventually moved in force to resolve the conflict. First result of increasing American involvement was reconciliation between former allies, Bosnian Muslims and Croats, who were coalesced to sign the Washington Agreement in March 1994 (Kurtćehajić and Ibrahimagić, 2007: 149-157). Eventually, riding on the wave of international outrage over Serb atrocities, the American-led NATO force intervened by using air strikes against Bosnian Serb positions on 30 September 1995. Faced with the prospect of military ruin at the hands of Bosniak-Croat alliance supported by NATO, Serbs were forced to accept American-led negotiations to bring the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina to an end.

International community, i.e. the West, clearly played a pivotal role from the onset of the crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This was partly due to the weakness of the country's central government, which had had no time to establish itself in the short period between the declaration of independence and the beginning of Serbian aggression. The history of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina is also a depressing reading of the international community's truly mind-boggling incompetence and indiscriminate application of double standards in dealing with aggressors and victims of the conflict. It comes as no surprise then that the peace agreement that ultimately succeeded in ending the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina did not turn out to be an ambitious project to restore the law and order in an internationally recognized country. Rather it turned out to be less-than inspiring attempt to reconcile all warring parties by promising them any concession necessary to guarantee their goodwill.

With American-led air strikes providing compelling argument for the Serbs to sit at the negotiating table, a peace conference was convened on 1 November 1995 in Dayton, Ohio. It brought together all three sides in Bosnian conflict, presidents of Serbia and Croatia, as well as

representatives of the European Union and Russia. However, it was obvious from the very beginning that the American delegation would play a key role in negotiations, with the European and Russian representatives relegated to the sidelines. The 21-day conference entered diplomatic history as a synonym for the “Big Bang approach to negotiations” (Holbrooke, 1999: 232).

The Dayton Agreement consists of series of provisions designed to achieve lasting peace in BiH. It also outlines, in annexes, the political framework for the redesigned post-war country. The most important annex of the Dayton Agreement is Annex 4, which contains the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This Annex spells out the essence of the political reforms of the Agreement. Under the terms of the new constitution the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina continues its legal existence under the name ‘Bosnia and Herzegovina.’ Article I-3 radically reforms the political framework of the country which shall consist of the two ‘Entities,’ the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska. The *de facto* partitioning of the state into the Croat-Bosniak Federation and the Serb Republic represents a radical departure from the certain amount of respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina that the international community maintained since 1992 (Kurtćehajić and Ibrahimagić, 2007: 167-214).

Although *de jure* maintaining the semblance of the state, the Dayton Constitution makes the Entities responsible for exercising most aspects of political power. Article III-1 limits the responsibilities of the institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina to foreign policy, foreign trade, customs, monetary policy and a few other, less important matters, such as air traffic control. Paragraphs 2, 3, 4 and 5 of the same Article, however, grant sweeping political powers to the Entities. The Entities are thus made responsible for law enforcement and defense affairs (the

latter, however, eventually became the responsibility of central authorities under intense pressure from international community, motivated by security concerns).

The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is further subdivided into ten Cantons, which provide for the further decentralization of power along ethnic (Croat-Bosniak) lines. Indeed many authors argued that the division of the Federation into Cantons was only a camouflage for the establishment of the factually independent Bosniak and Croat entities. The proponents of this theory point out that the Cantons themselves have elected parliaments and cabinets headed by prime ministers which exercise substantial political powers in key areas of government, such as some forms of taxation, education, law enforcement on the local level, and so on.

As if this extreme form of decentralization was not enough to satisfy the centrifugal forces in BiH politics, members of each constituent nation in Bosnia and Herzegovina were given ample possibilities to effectively paralyze the functioning of the state parliament. The ethnic balancing of the proceedings and decision making in the Parliamentary Assembly was instituted with the aim of having the three communities cooperate with each other, so that no party feels excluded from the decision making process. The experience of post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina however, shows that parties mainly took advantage of these rules in order to veto any decision perceived as being in conflict with their interests. The practical result of the institution of these rules in the constitution has been the effective paralysis of the decision making process in the government.

Most of the critics of the Dayton Agreement point at the destructive consequences of the insistence on “ethnic qualifications for membership in key institutions and ethnicized processes

of decision making within them”\_(Burg and Shoup, 1999: 371). By stressing ethnic parity, creators of the Dayton Agreement sought to prevent the one ethnic group from being dominated and overruled by others. The rules of ethnic balancing, they reckoned, will represent the powerful incentive for all three parties to engage in cooperative and compromise-seeking politics. Instead, it is now clear that the ability of each of the parties within Bosnia and Herzegovina to exercise veto in decision making process, coupled with the intense mistrust of the other parties’ intentions, led to the total paralysis of the political process in the country. The only way to break the impasse is to have the High Representative (institution introduced in the Dayton and subsequently strengthened) issue the executive decree. This has led Bosnia and Herzegovina to the state of being the *de facto* protectorate of the international community.

The expressed desire of the international community to end the domination of ethnic political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina is countered by its rigidly imposed rules of ethnic partition of the territory and the decision making process within the country. The stalemate on the ground in Bosnia and Herzegovina led even the chief architect of the Dayton Agreement, US diplomat Richard Holbrooke, to admit that the Agreement contained several fundamental flaws. According to Holbrooke, the most serious deficiency of the Dayton Agreement was to allow the existence of two—therefore opposing—armies in one country, one for the Serbs and one for the Bosniak-Croat Federation (Holbrooke, 1999: 361).

The second problem, Holbrooke said, was “our agreement to allow Serb portion of Bosnia to retain the name Republika Srpska... , to permit the Karadzic to keep the name he invented was more a concession than we realized” (Holbrooke, 1999: 361).

The guiding principles behind the imposition of the Dayton Agreement and the subsequent role of the international community in Bosnia and Herzegovina have been criticized from often opposing points of view. David Chandler identifies the critics of what he terms the “external dynamic of democratization,” as belonging to the two main camps—the Liberal and the Conservative (Chandler, 1999: 164-192). The essence of the Liberal critique is that the international community has not gone far enough in its post-war political reconstruction of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In liberals’ view the international community was not ready to confront the nationalist forces that were responsible for the war, preferring instead to strike a compromise deal with them by empowering them through the threefold division of the country. In their view, “there is plenty of evidence to suggest that the problems of the Balkans are seen as culturally determined and historically recurring and therefore beyond capable solution” (Chandler, 1999: 164).

Completely opposite approach is employed by the critics of the Dayton Agreement belonging to the Conservative camp. The core substance of the critique advanced in the writings of conservative thinkers such as Henry Kissinger, Charles Krauthammer and some political analysts at the Cato institute, is that the international community has overlooked the fundamental truth on the ground, which is that there are, there have always been, and there will most likely remain three separate ethnic-based components in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Conservative political theorists even view the war in Bosnia itself as a direct result of an ill-conceived and rushed recognition of Bosnian independence in 1992. The Dayton Agreement and subsequent developments served only to artificially extend the life of an impossible state creation. Kissinger argued that the “same flaw that attended the birth of the Bosnian state lies at the heart of the dilemmas of the Dayton accords... Its military provisions separating the parties substantially

along the lines of the ethnic enclaves that emerged as hostilities ceased. But the political provisions do the opposite: They seek to unite these enclaves under the banner of a multiethnic state that caused the explosion in the first place” (quoted in Chandler, 1999: 171).

### **Main Challenges Facing Bosnia and Herzegovina Today**

Bosnia and Herzegovina today, fifteen years after the Dayton Agreement was signed, suffers from the same degree of paralysis which at the time necessitated introduction of the Office of the High Representative (OHR). However, given the reluctance of the international community to continue being involved in resolving the country’s continuing crisis, High Representatives no longer use their powers to break the political impasse. Strengthening of the Serb nationalists in their para-state of Republika Srpska means that the country has once again reached political deadlock. Period since the last elections (2006-2010) is generally considered among the impartial observers of Bosnian politics as the period of lost opportunities and general stagnation, political and otherwise. The European Union, which has emerged as the most relevant arbiter of Bosnian politics, illustrates such prevailing opinion by issuing series of warnings to Bosnian politicians, as well as unflattering reports on the state of reforms in the country. The latest such report, the 2009 Progress Report reads as damning indictment of incompetent and corrupt political elites, consumed by mutual bickering and oblivious to the real problems of the people (Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, 2009):

Bosnia and Herzegovina has made very limited progress in addressing political criteria.

The domestic political climate has deteriorated, and challenges to the proper

functioning of the institutions and inflammatory rhetoric have continued. Reform implementation has been slow, due to a lack of consensus and political will, and to the complex institutional framework. A shared vision by the political leaders on the direction of the country and on key EU-related reforms remains essential for further progress towards the European Union. (...) The European Union would not be able to consider an application for EU membership until the OHR has been closed. The reform of Bosnia and Herzegovina's constitutional framework (...) is necessary before the Commission can recommend the granting of candidate status (...) Regarding democracy and the rule of law, there has been little progress towards creating more functional and efficient state structures (...) The functioning of the state-level executive and legislative bodies has been deficient. (...) The government institutions, at all levels, continued to be affected by internal political tensions and fragmented and uncoordinated policy-making. The authorities have often proven unable to quickly appoint high-level officials. (...) Some progress has been made in the area of public administration, but continued efforts are needed. (...) the fragmentation of the judicial system and the absence of a single budget continue to be major obstacles to reform in this area. Political interference remains frequent. (...) The authorities of Republika Srpska have increasingly questioned the legality, jurisdiction and competences of the state-level police and judicial agencies to operate in their territory. (...) Bosnia and Herzegovina has achieved little progress in the fight against corruption (...) There has been limited progress regarding human rights and protection of minorities.

It transpires from this brief analysis of the situation in BiH political system that it is plagued by a large number of systemic deficiencies and problems that could be classified into the following

broad categories: 1) constitutional or structural problems related to a flawed constitutional framework; 2) problems in the functioning of the government related to the said unresolved constitutional and structural issues (unlimited ethnic-based veto power, multiple levels of government, huge administration presenting unbearable burden for the weak economy, etc.); 3) the lack of unified vision of the future of the country; 4) lack of resources for normal functioning of the state. Although significant advances have been made since the Dayton Agreement came into effect, the reform process has been stalled in the period since the last general elections. As a result, the country is now mired in its gravest political, economic and social crisis since the war.

Regardless of the gravity of the situation, the international community (now for all practical purposes embodied by the European Union) adopts a decisively sit-and-wait attitude to resolution of the country's problems. This is to a certain extent caused by the general intervention fatigue in the international community, but also by the feeling that fifteen years after Dayton the country has matured enough to take care of its own business. Such an attitude further compounds the belief that the sole cause of the country's problems is corruption among the nationalist elites, who willingly protract the crisis in order to continue their sway over the politics. Such view is true to a certain extent, but chiefly on the micro-scale of day-to-day politics. However, such a simplistic view fails to take into account the fundamental flaw of the Dayton Constitutions: the ability of each of the three sides to block any process they find detrimental to their interests. In addition, any moves towards making the government more efficient and able to run the country are detrimental to the interests of nationalist option ruling Republika Srpska today. Continuing to stoke Serbs' fears of being dominated by other ethnic groups in the best tradition of Milošević's propaganda from the 1990s, a small elite has successfully maintained its iron grip over Republika Srpska. Today, this entity is ruled as virtual feudal fiefdom, where dissent is considered treason

and a betrayal of 'national interests'. By controlling the political process on the central level through frequent use of unlimited veto power given to them by the Dayton, Serb politicians are able to portray Bosnia as an impossible state and artificial creation where nothing will ever work and no agreement is possible. This, of course, is juxtaposed against Republika Srpska, where government rules by fiat and which government-controlled media is then able to portray as 'the better part of BiH'.

It is clear from the preceding brief expose of the issues affecting the country's politics that the country is not equipped with the necessary legal and political instruments to break the impasse in a situation when one of the constitutional ethnic groups is blocking the political process. No matter how reluctant international community might be, breaking this deadlock will eventually necessitate another decisive involvement of the EU and the United States working in concert to amend the country's faulty constitution. The only alternative to this is for the three sides to reach amicable accord whereby the country's central institutions will be empowered at the expense of the entities (an option which the Serbs are unlikely ever to agree with). The final alternative, one nobody wants to contemplate, is for the three sides to go their separate ways and complete the dissolution of the country, which is an option that would likely lead to yet another war for control of ethnically-defined territories.

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Article 19

<sup>1</sup> For precise data see Donia and Antwerp Fine (1994: 37-45). Ottoman census of 1604 put Muslims at 71% of the total population, as opposed to 29% of Christians (of both denominations) (Handžić, 1994: 31-32; Imamović, 1997: 177-180). The slow pace of Islamization was also partially due to the fact that there were practically no Muslim immigrants from other parts of the Empire settling in Bosnia. Bosnian Muslims were called 'Turks' by the Western visitors to the region as a way of emphasizing their adherence to the Muslim faith, or by modern-day Serb or Croat nationalists in order to undermine their claims to the indigenous status.

<sup>2</sup> This was, of course, primarily due to early introduction in the Ottoman Empire of the *Millet* system, which was rather revolutionary development for its time. For discussion of implication of Millet on latter political developments in Bosnia see Burg and Shoup (1999: 19-20); also Mazower (2002: 44-69).

<sup>3</sup> Even though Ottomans never especially encouraged conversion of local population to Islam, increasing number of Bosnians converted over the centuries, either out of conviction (some say that Sufi orders played key role in attracting people to Islam), or due to the fact that as Muslims they were absolved from paying taxes and enjoyed different other privileges. First Austro-Hungarian census carried out in 1879 (after the first of many migrations to Ottoman Empire already happened) put the number of Muslims in Bosnia at 38.77% of the total. Due to successive waves of emigrations and influx of non-Muslims from the region, the number of Muslims gradually decreased over the years. In 1885 they numbered 36.88%, in 1895 34.99%, and in 1910 32.25% of the total population of BiH. (Imamović, 1997: 371)

<sup>4</sup> Such as in 1924 slaughter of thousands of Muslims in Sanjak (old Turkish province of Novi Pazar) – for details concerning the inter-war crimes against the Muslim civilian population see Imamović (1996: 489-493)

<sup>5</sup> According to the 1991 Yugoslav census data, Serbs formed 31% of population in Bosnia and 12% in Croatia. Source: Bosnian Congress web site at <http://www.hdmagazine.com/bosnia/census/cens-sum.html>

<sup>6</sup> It has to be noted however, that Bosnian Muslim is an unfortunate ethnic, and not religious, determinant, given to them by Yugoslav communists in 1971 instead of historical term 'Bosniak.' Most Bosnian Muslims were thoroughly secularized after nearly half a century of communist rule and possessed only remote intellectual and cultural connection with the rest of the Islamic world, as witnessed by some sociological surveys that put the number of practicing Muslims in Bosnia in 1985 at mere 17% of their total number (Burg and Shoup, 1999: 42). To speak of the rising Islamization and radicalization of Bosnian Muslims at that time therefore represents a gross exaggeration, if not outright falsification of the true situation.