

Mostar: Make or Break for the Federation?

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Introduction

The two pillars of the theoretically reunited Bosnian state which emerged from the Dayton accords were the Republika Srpska and the predominantly Croatian and Muslim Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (Figure 1). The Federation itself was originally created, under intense pressure from Washington, to put an end to the bitter Croat-Muslim conflict in central Bosnia in 1993. The internecine strife between the two parties to the Federation has left a legacy of deep and mutual distrust and suspicion between them. Moves towards deepening cooperation and integration between the Croat and Muslim components of the Federation have therefore largely foundered.

A key factor in this failure is that many of the local leaders and commanders from the 1993 conflict remain in power or in positions of considerable influence. It can be convincingly argued that the intertwined criminal, political and economic interests of these local warlords run counter to those of an integrated Croat-Muslim Federation and thus undermine the whole Dayton constructed edifice.

The apparently fragile nature of the Federation has given rise to fears that if it were to disintegrate the whole Dayton structure would unravel resulting in an eventual partition of much of Bosnia between greater Croatian and Serb states. Such a disastrous scenario would leave a well-armed, heavily populated and deeply embittered Muslim statelet sandwiched between the Croats and Serbs – raising the spectre of a renewed Bosnian conflict.

Mostar and Dayton

The most ominous and widely reported, but by no means only, signs for the prospects of the Federation have emanated from the divided city of Mostar where the Muslim population of east Mostar, swelled by refugees, is packed into a small pocket of territory between the Serbs to the east and the old confrontation line with the Croats to the west and south. Firefights, reports of shelling,

mutual recriminations and intransigence have characterised Croat-Muslim relations in Mostar in early 1996. Mostar has therefore raised as the central issue which could make or break the Federation and with it the Dayton agreements. Mostar is, however, only the tip of the iceberg of Croat-Muslim tensions, notably in central Bosnia and Sarajevo.

Before the overall agreement was reached at Dayton, several preliminary agreements were signed including one on 10 November 1995 for the reorganisation and reintegration of Mostar. The two sides agreed that Mostar would be a united city with a single administration consisting of six communes, three with Croat and three with Muslim majorities. Elections for the city council were scheduled for no later than the end of May 1996.

The portents were, however, not promising. Since June 1994 Mostar came under European Union administration headed by ex-mayor of Bremen, Hanns Koschnik. The EU concentrated its attention and investments on the city in the hope that Mostar would become a focal point for the future of Bosnia. Unfortunately, Mostar was the scene of some of the bitterest fighting of the Croat-Muslim conflict of 1993, thus, despite considerable efforts, the EU administration's attempts at promoting confidence building measures between the two communities with a view to reuniting the city met with little success and Mostar at the time of the Dayton agreement remained divided along the 1994 ceasefire lines.

In light of this failure, despite almost two years of the EU presence in the city, it is difficult to be optimistic about the prospects for progress in other areas of the country which will clearly lack the sort of international assistance which has been lavished on Mostar. Mostar has also been viewed as a key test for the government of the Republic of Croatia, which has frequently declared its backing for the EU administration but has been repeatedly criticised for failing to influence and restrain the hard-line local Croat leadership.

Figure 1



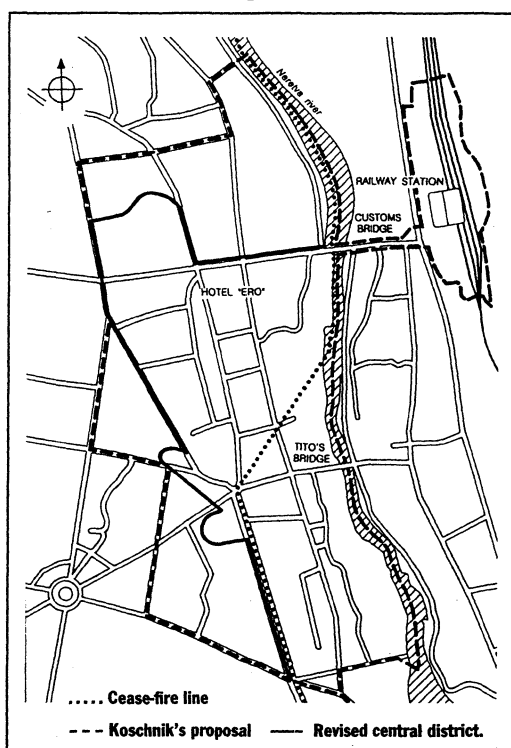
Dividing Mostar

The Croat-Muslim agreement in late 1995 concerning Mostar was clear enough on the type of reorganisation envisaged but did not specify the precise limits of the proposed communes. Indeed, the argument over the limits of the internal division of Mostar reflected that over the division of Bosnia itself and reemphasises the inextricable link between people and territory. The initial Croatian proposal for the internal division of Mostar was essentially to respect the *de facto* line of separation and create three communes on each side. In contrast the Muslims favoured a totally united city which, because of the large number of displaced Muslims in east Mostar, would give their community an overall majority in the city. A compromise formula was reached whereby both sides agreed to the creation of a seventh unit consisting of a jointly controlled central district. Unsurprisingly the two

sides differed on their interpretation of this proposal with the Croats envisaging a small central district and the Muslims one encompassing almost the entire central urban area to which the western (Croat) side would contribute more area than the eastern (Muslim) side. Both sides did, however, agree to accept the EU administrator's arbitration and it should be noted that initially the Croatian side was particularly enthusiastic about Koschnik's mediation.

When Koschnik finally announced his proposal on 7 February, however, it turned out to be nearer to Muslim rather than Croatian expectations (Figure 2). The proposed central district comprised the entire central area of Mostar and considerably more of the *de facto* Croat-controlled than Muslim-controlled parts of the city. The Croat leadership and community reacted angrily and violent demonstrations took place outside the EU

Figure 2



administration's headquarters at the Hotel *Ero* during which Koschnik's car was attacked and he finally had to be escorted away in an armoured vehicle. Some observers suggested that the protests against the EU administration were less than spontaneous and had been organised as an unobvious attempt to intimidate Koschnik and his colleagues in order to force a revision in their ruling.

Kresimir Zubak, a Croat and President of the Federation stated on 8 February that he couldn't accept the decision and that "*Koschnik's arbitration decision is flagrantly against the Dayton agreements, confirmed by the Constitutional Parliament of the Federation, because it introduced a seventh commune which is not regulated by any previous document.*" (Vjesnik, 9/2/96). The Croat mayor of west Mostar similarly rejected the plan and suspended his cooperation with the EU administration. For their part the Muslim side expressed satisfaction with Koschnik's proposals.

Implications of the Mostar Crisis

The crisis over the internal division of Mostar raised the critical question of whether the international community and the West and US in particular in the shape of IFOR, would prove capable of sustaining the authority of the EU administration or allow one of the parties to the

dispute circumvent supposedly binding arbitration. The key issue at stake, therefore, is that of ensuring compliance with the Dayton agreement (OMRI, 13/2/96).

The military provisions of the Dayton agreement, containing a clear timetable and backed up by IFOR, have largely been complied with by all parties. Exceptions to this rule generally include tasks such as mine clearance where the scale of the problem rather than resistance on the part of the Dayton signatories is to blame for the delay. Other aspects of the agreement, however, are contradictory, ambiguous and have been open to sabotage and manipulation by extremists wishing to disrupt the peace process. Indeed, the Dayton agreements have been described as, "*a Swiss Cheese full of openings for everyone determined to use them to undermine the entire structure*" (OMRI, 11/6/96).

International Responses

Initial signals from the international community were, perhaps surprisingly, positive. In the course of a visit to Mostar on 12 February, the NATO secretary-general, Javier Solana, made the promising statement that NATO would not tolerate threats to Koschnik because he enjoyed the backing of the EU and the international community in general. As a result of his visit the mayor of the Croat part of the city agreed to reestablish contacts with the EU administration.

Furthermore, as a result of the tensions in Mostar, the Croatian government in Zagreb, which had offered support for the Croat position in Mostar, was put under intense international diplomatic pressure to help persuade the Bosnia-Herzegovinian Croats to acquiesce to the reunification of the city. The German foreign minister, Klaus Kinkel, for instance, reportedly informed his Croatian opposite number, Mate Granic, that Germany's support for Croatia was not unconditional and that Zagreb should offer its assistance on the Mostar issue (OMRI, 14/2/96). Soon thereafter Croatia fulfilled one of its Dayton pledges and deployed 101 police officers to Mostar (having promised at least 100) to assist in keeping the peace there. However, US assistant secretary of state Richard Holbrooke, in Zagreb on 13 February for consultations with the Croatian president on moves to bolster the Federation, dramatically warned that: "*we need to*

make the Federation work or else there is going to be a disaster in Bosnia" (OMRI, 14/2/96).

Eventually, a summit meeting was organised in Rome on 17-18 February in an attempt to overcome the host of post-Dayton problems which Holbrooke characterised as no more than "*bumps in the road*" (OMRI, 26/3/96). Mostar was high on the agenda for this summit which included representatives from all the parties to the Dayton accords. As a result, an additional Croatian-Muslim agreement was reached which resulted in a revision of Koschnik's proposal reducing the size of the central district in response to Croatian demands but conceding to the Muslim's main request – the immediate establishment of freedom of movement in the city for all people.

This compromise arrangement led to the mayor of the Muslim part of the city resigning in protest along with other senior Muslim officials. In the days following the 18 February agreement the situation on the ground approached normalisation but continued tensions were also reported along with allegations from the Muslim side that full freedom of movement had not been established. The complex situation in Mostar is confused still further by the presence of no less than seven different police forces with inevitably overlapping aims and jurisdictions.

The presence of these disparate security forces did little to prevent a renewed upsurge in Croat-Muslim tensions in early June. In one incident, following the arrest of three Muslims by Croat police, other Muslims blocked the main street along the dividing line between the two communities, dragged two passing Croat motorists from their cars and held them hostage. Finally EU police intervened and both the detained Muslims and Croats were released.

The two sides also quarrelled over the issue of local elections in the city, originally scheduled for 31 May. The Muslim side called for a postponement until September, refusing to nominate candidates or participate in the elections until its concerns were addressed. This stance met with significant resistance from the international community, worried that any delay could set a precedent for the date of the main elections in Bosnia, set for mid-September, to slip. This represented a particularly significant factor for the US government – anxious that the Bosnian elections be completed before the US Presidential race in November.

The issue was resolved through a compromise agreement signed on 25 May following talks between the Bosnian and Croatian Presidents. The Mostar elections were rescheduled to 30 June but the agreement also provided that people listed as residents of Mostar in the 1991 census who had left the city involuntarily could still vote with special voting sites being set up in Germany, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland where the majority of Mostar's refugees now reside. This addressed the main Muslim concern, in light of the fact that a large proportion of the Muslim community of Mostar had fled in the course of the war. The agreement also contained guarantees concerning freedom of movement and security for those intent on voting and a guarantee from Croatia for free passage across its territory for those seeking to go to Mostar to vote.

As expected the Muslim-dominated List of Citizens for a United Mostar and the Croatian Democratic Community (HDZ) each gained control of the three districts on their respective sides of the divided city. The HDZ narrowly won the ballot in Mostar itself, polling almost 26,000 votes against the List's 22,300. The latter, however, gained about 6,000 votes from the foreign returns against 744 for the HDZ, giving the List an edge in the city council with at least 19 of the 37 seats. The HDZ called for a rerun of the vote in Bonn where there were 26 more votes than voters but the EU administration declared the elections valid on 7 July. EU officials stated that the results indicated that the deep divisions between the factions in Bosnia were likely to remain after the autumn elections for the whole of Bosnia (OMRI, 3/7/96, 8/7/96).

Events Elsewhere in Bosnia

Events elsewhere in Bosnia reflect the tensions between the two nominal partners in the Federation demonstrated so clearly in Mostar. Indeed, Bosnian Federal President Zubak warned on 5 March that unless current difficulties were overcome there was a real chance of the Federation disintegrating and a new conflict emerging.

Perhaps the most ominous signs for the future of the Federation outside Mostar were indications of rising tensions in the valleys of central Bosnia, where the two sides 1993 conflict started and was largely fought. As a result, both Muslim and Croat refugees have been prevented from returning to their homes and both sides have reportedly reestablished checkpoints and roadblocks in

largely fought. As a result, both Muslim and Croat refugees have been prevented from returning to their homes and both sides have reportedly reestablished checkpoints and roadblocks in defiance of the Dayton accords. The US secretary of state for defense, William Perry, subsequently sought to counteract this backward step by announcing that IFOR would take “*vigorous action*” to ensure freedom of movement (OMRI, 1/4/96).

Despite this apparent threat no serious attempts to enforce freedom of movement have been undertaken with fixed checkpoints simply being replaced with mobile ones. This led the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Sadako Ogata, to comment on 13 May that freedom of movement remains “*severely restricted*” in Bosnia, citing Mostar as an example (OMRI, 13/5/96).

In Sarajevo meanwhile, the Muslim dominated city council went ahead with a plan to set up a transitional assembly for Sarajevo Canton despite the opposition of Croat councilmen who protested that prior consultations at the Federal level were required before such a move.

In addition, despite Dayton’s provisions concerning freedom of movement and the right of refugees to return to their homes, the Bosnian government has reportedly raised severe legal obstacles to the return of some of the 60,000 Sarajevo Serbs pressured into leaving by their own leadership in early 1996. Indeed, the Bosnian government has been accused of resettling approximately 8,000 Muslim refugees from the Serb-held town of Dobojo in formerly Serb suburbs of Sarajevo, something the Sarajevo authorities have termed a ‘temporary’ measure.

Prospects

The relationship between the factions in Bosnia deteriorated to such an extent that a mere month after the Rome summit, the US called yet another meeting on the peace process in Geneva on 18 March which resulted in the Dayton parties recommitting themselves to the Rome agreements, particularly concerning the reunification of Mostar, freedom of movement and the return of refugees.

This agreement was swiftly followed on 30 March by a further 20-point Croat-Muslim deal designed to prop-up the Federation. The US Ambassador to Zagreb, Peter Galbraith optimistically termed this

“*very significant*” since it signified “*converting a piece of paper into the real thing*” (OMRI, 1/4/96)

Since then a prolonged series of summits have been held and agreements reached aimed at shoring up the Federation and bolstering the Dayton agreements. These have included a 14 May Croat-Muslim agreement to unite their armed forces under a common defence ministry within three years and a 14 June disarmament agreement between the Federation, Republika Srpska, Croatia and Serbia and Montenegro (Yugoslavia).

Many of these agreements amount to little more than a repetition of old and swiftly broken promises. There seems little reason to believe, for example, that the recently signed disarmament agreements will prove any more water tight than the international ban on export of weapons to former Yugoslavia which finally lapsed on 18 June.

That these frequent meetings, pronouncements of good faith and fresh agreements are deemed necessary speaks volumes about the tenuous nature of the Croatian-Muslim partnership. With one of the key pillars of the Dayton agreements so clearly flawed, the prospects for lasting peace in Bosnia, particularly in the aftermath of IFOR’s pullout, must be viewed as grim.

References

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