

Bosnia: A Cultural Mosaic of Great Potential

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Bosnia is a cultural mosaic of well-established Serb Orthodox, Catholic Croat and Bosnian Muslim communities. This nation can become, like Switzerland, an example of people with diverse cultures living in peace and harmony as neighbors.

In order to achieve this vision and avoid another outbreak of ethnic-religious violence that characterized the period of 1992-1995, a fresh look at the current situation in Bosnia is needed. Deep-rooted fears, which are resurfacing, must be assuaged. Past mistakes and misguided policy assumptions must be acknowledged.

In my opinion, the three communities in Bosnia should be allowed to develop their own traditions and laws in accordance with the general guidelines of a decentralized state that will provide for national defense and a national fiscal system and represent the country in foreign affairs. The German, French, Italian and Old Swiss communities have flourished within the confederation of Switzerland. In fact, the cases of Switzerland and Canada clearly demonstrate how creative thinking can be applied to produce a civil society where cultural traditions enrich and strengthen the state.

Regrettably, for almost a century, some members of the international community have imposed their concepts of governance on the Bosnian people. President Woodrow Wilson, a courageous leader of the American people in World War I, actively supported the break up of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, and, at the 1919 Versailles Peace conference, promoted the establishment of one state which, he believed, would unite the cultural communities. Originally this state was designated as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes since, at this point, the Muslim community had not emerged as a significant cultural force.



Source: The World Factbook, 2009.

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President Wilson reportedly remarked that the Slovenians, Serbs and Croats who had immigrated to the United States were able to live in peace and harmony. He believed that peace between the three communities was also possible in Europe if Slovenians, Serbs and Croats could be brought together in one country. This country, which later became known as Yugoslavia, did see a time that was relatively free from ethnic violence. This period coincided with the rule of Marshall Tito, whose iron fist ensured that the communities refrained from ethnic violence. With Tito's passing in 1980, this absence of violence could not be sustained. The situation continued to deteriorate, culminating in the Bosnian War of 1992-1995.

The Czech and Slovak Experience

While serving as the US ambassador to the Vatican in 1992, I received instructions to call on Pope John Paul II and discuss with him the reasons why the United States believed that maintaining the Slovak and Czech communities united in one state was in the best interest of all concerned. In general, there seemed to be little sensitivity to the different cultures. This meeting with the Pope never took place because the day before the appointed time, the Czech and Slovak communities formally separated. They are now doing well as separate sovereign states preserving and enhancing their cultures.

Why is there a persistent desire to impose the view that only a highly centralized government will serve the best interests of its culturally diverse communities? I raise this question not only because of the collapse of Yugoslavia but because there have been other similar cases. It would be instructive to review the record of several states with centralized governments and culturally-diverse communities.

The Record of Several Centralized Governments

Some scholars and policy practitioners have promoted the concept of a centralized government for states with diverse cultural communities. In Belgium, for example, advocates of centralized government continue their lobbying despite a palpable fear among many observers that the country will collapse and devolve into two communities—one that is predominantly Flemish-speaking and the other that is French-speaking.

Another example is Burundi, where I served as the US ambassador from 1969-1972. Two cultural communities, the Tutsis and the Hutus, were brought together in a strong central government dominated by the Tutsis. The inevitable conflict erupted, and the bloodbath that occurred at the end of my assignment in May 1972 left an indelible impression. I urged in both my official capacity and also later in private life that the two communities be allowed self governance in a highly decentralized state. However, this did not occur. And Burundi, for decades, remained an ethnic-cultural area of confrontation.

A similar situation occurred in neighboring Rwanda, where the Hutus were the dominant culture. The Rwandan experience was as tragic as Burundi's: The worst genocide since World War II took place in Rwanda in the mid-1990s.

More than three decades earlier, in 1960, with the strong support of France, the countries of Senegal and French Sudan (modern-day Mali) were united under a centralized government to form the Mali Federation. Within several months, the Federation collapsed. Dr. Leopold Senghor, President of the Federal Assembly and later the first President of Senegal, told me that the union was premature because of the cultural differences between the Senegalese and the French Sudanese.

Turning to Asia, Malaysia offers yet another example of the failure of federation. In 1963, the British government guided Malaysia to independence as a sovereign state. The various cultural communities in the area were thus placed into one state. Two years later, Singapore left the Malaysian Federation because of communal violence and race riots.

The United States presents an interesting case. The Founding Fathers were very aware of the many different cultures found in the 13 former colonies in 1776. The Puritans of New England would not mix well with the Roman Catholics living in Maryland. Neither of these communities had much in common with the Quakers of Philadelphia. Although the formation of the United States of America united these diverse cultures under one nation, the early American version of decentralization through the doctrine of states' rights gave the decisive authority on questions of marriage, family, education, police and related matters to the individual states. Most US specialists believe that the absence of central control over essentially cultural matters allowed the new Republic to grow and flourish.

The Case of Bosnia

Having reviewed other countries' experiences with centralized governments and diverse cultures represented by its citizenry, it is now appropriate to examine the case of Bosnia in further detail.

While there has not been a census since 1991, the ethnic breakdown of Bosnia can be estimated reliably as follows: Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) represent 48 percent of the population, the Serbs 37.1 percent, the Croats 14.3 percent and all others 0.6 percent. The total estimated population is 4,613,414, according to the Central Intelligence Agency's *World Factbook* (2009).

The Dayton Peace Accords of 1995 divided Bosnia into two autonomous zones, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska. US President Bill Clinton strongly advocated federation for Bosnian Muslims. The late Croatian President Franjo Tudjman told me that his acceptance of federation as a solution removed one of the last obstacles to the agreement, even though he knew that Croatian leaders in Croatia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina would not be pleased with the action. In reflecting on the Dayton Accords today, the United States should remember the prescient comments of Croatia's President Franjo Tudjman.

Since the United States played a key role in the writing of the Dayton Accords 14 years ago, our nation must take the lead in developing the successor to the agreement. The

Croatian leadership in Bosnia is not pleased with the results of Dayton. This is partially indicated by the declining numbers of Croats actually present in Bosnia. While 14.3 percent is the official figure, it does not take into account those younger Croats who have left Bosnia for study and/or employment in neighboring Croatia, Canada, Australia and the United States.

Fresh eyes and new ideas should be applied to these old problems. It is still a source of irritation and regret that Banja Luka has lost most of its Croatian inhabitants. Pope John Paul II visited Banja Luka in 2003. Although Franjo Komarica, the Roman Catholic Bishop, still leads Banja Luka's Catholic community today, he has a smaller flock now than he did even six years ago. Only a few of the older Croats are actually returning to the area. The majority of the former Croatian residents have left to establish life elsewhere.

As times change, decisions made in one period of time should be reexamined. In 1995 at the Dayton meeting, the concept of an Office of the High Representative was included but its fundamental purpose was not clear. More recently, it appears that the Office of the High Representative was interpreted to mean that it could intervene in the country's internal matters. Whatever the merits were then, an office with the power to intervene and rewrite decisions made by the local authorities should be reviewed. It is difficult in today's world to justify such intervention by a power outside the sovereign state.

The displacement of Croats is one of the inequities that should be addressed in the re-writing of the Dayton agreement. Resettlement of ethnic communities is never easy. This was true of the several million Germans who, at the end of World War II, were forced to flee their ancestral homes in the former Prussia and lands now in West Poland and the Czech Republic. But the reality was that returning was not politically possible. And so with international assistance and significant funding from Germany itself many have established their new homes in the Germany of today or elsewhere. The same inequity is true for Serbs who were forced to resettle as a result of disturbances in the West Balkans. Recognition must be given to the fact that residents in the West Balkans who were forced to relocate will most likely not be able to return to their original homes. The United States and the European Union should take the lead in resettlement funding to assist Croats, Serbs and Bosnians affected by the developments in the West Balkans.

Pessimistic Words

Some of the old problems of ethnic-religious-cultural divisions that caused the war less than two decades ago are reappearing. Now, there is the opportunity for the leadership of the neighboring states of related ethnic backgrounds (Croatia and Serbia) to step in and play a leadership role in transforming the mosaic of ethnic-cultural differences into a plus for society.

Both Croatia and Serbia have seen the tragedy of ethnic-religious conflict. They have witnessed in the defunct Yugoslavia the failure of the imposition of a centralized government where one cultural group is dominant. The United States and other leaders of

the international community should step forward and avoid the imposition of another failed experiment with centralized government and promote the Swiss model of decentralization as the standard.

The United States has a key leadership responsibility to bring this vision into a reality. Fourteen years ago the US leadership was a pivotal factor in ending the three and half years of ethnic-religious war in Bosnia. All visitors are aware of the beauty of the diverse cultural traditions in the Balkans. With fresh eyes and a commitment to ethnic peace and tranquility, the Dayton Accords can be extended to create a model for communities of different ethnic, cultural and religious traditions living as next door neighbors. The case of Montenegro shows that this ideal can be achieved. The commitment of Montenegro's local leaders and the support of the international community guided the country to independence overcoming fears of ethnic-religious conflict.

Success in Bosnia will require the leaders of the three communities, Serb, Croatian and Bosnian, to cooperate. This positive wind of fresh ideas will encourage the United States and the European Union to join in assisting the decentralized state of Bosnia where the three communities are preserving and enhancing their cultural traditions. The rich traditions of the Orthodox, Catholic and Muslim cultures, with the assistance of the major powers, can converge to move Bosnia to the next level of peace and harmony.