

Comment: Parting Thoughts on Bosnia's Paralysis

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Outgoing OSCE mission head calls on Bosnians to build a greater sense of ownership over the political process.

Departing ambassadors are naturally inclined to offer their reflections on the state of affairs in the country in which they have served. In fact, they used to be expected to do so.

In the days when despatches were carried across oceans and continents by diplomatic couriers travelling in closed staterooms or locked railway compartments, an ambassador reaching the end of his - and it was always "his" - tour of duty would feel duty bound to pen a magisterial tour d'horizon for his foreign minister. This would sum up the country's invariably complicated politics, its delicate foreign relations, its economic prospects, and its potential for making trouble for the ambassador's home country. There might also be some observations about the mores of the local inhabitants and the tedium - or otherwise - of life in the capital.

Such final reports were not, of course, meant for public consumption. But they were intended to have a wide circulation in the ambassador's home government, to shape the making of future policy, and to help the ambassador's own future prospects.

We live now in a different age. Ten-thousand-word despatches and lengthy telegrams are things of the past. Ambassadors have no time to write them and foreign ministers no time to read them. Analysis takes place in real time, and policy-making is nearly as rapid. Emails and phone calls replace carefully crafted messages.

Ambassadors, meanwhile, are trained to be as much at home in television studios or on factory floors as in the corridors of power. They seek to influence not just the host administration and the governments of their diplomatic colleagues, but domestic public opinion as well. The press release is the new *démarche*. And it is by definition public.

As head of a large multinational mission in a country still struggling to find its bearings and still subject to intrusive foreign supervision, I have found myself in this new role. It is also the reason why I am writing this article, rather than the exhaustive and private report that would have been the responsibility of my diplomatic forbears.

I will, however, respect the tradition of candour that attaches to the parting word.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a multinational state. It is not surprising that it has political parties whose names contain a national prefix. It will always need to strike a balance between collective (national) rights and the rights of individual citizens. But after three years as the OSCE Head of Mission - and eight years of deep engagement in Balkan affairs - I cannot help but be concerned by the continuing absence of alternative poles of attraction or organising principles in Bosnia and Herzegovina's political life. That is because in a functioning multinational state, national identity alone is not enough.

Nationalists in Bosnia and Herzegovina often point to Belgium and Switzerland as models for their country. Most of the comparisons they draw are unserious, uninformed and self-serving. Perhaps the only serious comparison between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Belgium or Switzerland is that while those countries work, the former does not - yet.

It can work, but not by following the path of nationalism to the exclusion of virtually every other concern. Neither Belgium nor Switzerland does that.

Public opinion polls tell us that support for and confidence in the nationalist parties now in power are very low. Not surprisingly, overall interest in the political process, particularly among younger voters, is also low.

Why, then, do the Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ, Party of Democratic Action, SDA, and the Serb Democratic Party, SDS, still dominate the political discourse? Why do people continue to vote for parties in which they lack confidence? Why is it that the only party currently enjoying a surge in support - the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats, SNSD - also feels compelled to mouth tired platitudes about defending Republika Srpska?

And why are we foreigners more disturbed by Bosnia and Herzegovina's failure to gain admission to NATO's Partnership for Peace, and by the likely consequences of that, than the country's citizens seem to be?

One answer to all these questions is that the habit of reliance on outsiders is so deeply ingrained after more than half a millenium that overwhelmingly, citizens and politicians alike feel very little responsibility for charting their own destinies. People can watch Euro 2004 and politicians can feather their own nests, confident that the High Representative will take care of the rest.

As a merchant in the old town area of Bascarsija told me yesterday with absolute certitude, Lord Ashdown simply has to handle things because he must know that none of the local politicians can. According to this logic, Paddy Ashdown is the new Comrade Tito, but with the advantage that grumbling about his rule carries no hazard.

Another answer is that the trauma of war and privation remain so pervasive that it is easy for ill-intentioned mafioso politicians to get people to define themselves solely in terms of how much their particular nationality is under threat. The so-called "nationalist leaders" shamelessly abuse people's fears and misery so as to preserve and reinforce their own economic interests. For these "leaders" waving "nationalist" banners, domination, control and power matter more than a common, lawful and functional state in which all citizens would prosper and which would one day assume its proper place in Europe.

Where, then, is leadership going to come from? The politics of inat (a quintessentially Balkan mixture of obstinacy and spite) leave no space for the politics of hope. Those not consumed by fear, envy, pain and poverty fall victim to despair and cynicism.

We saw this baleful logic in full flower in Sarajevo not long ago. The founding conference of the "Movement for Change" was greeted with a collective yawn. The initiators were widely described as a collection of eccentrics and has-beens. The movement's slogan, "nema nam druge" - "there is no other way" - evoked more condescending smirks than nods of agreement and expressions of support.

A good Marxist would have a remedy at hand. So would a religious zealot. The first would attack the means of production. The second would blame the failure of the state's moral foundations. But just as in the rest of the world, neither Marxism nor religious zealotry has provided the answer in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

It is certainly worth paying greater attention to economic and spiritual development. But what this country needs most, it seems to me, is respect for itself.

In English usage, there is a profound difference between the affirmative connotations of the word “patriotism” and the negative implications of the word “nationalism”. Bosnia and Herzegovina urgently needs more patriotism and less nationalism if its peoples and citizens are to escape their current and crippling malaise. For that to happen, its citizens will have to step forward, make their expectations known, and take the initiative.

Repeatedly, I have heard people in this beautiful country ask rhetorically, “But what can we do?” The answer is not a shrug of the shoulders and a weary glance at the heavens. The answer is: you can do plenty.

This country has so much potential. There are many talented and capable people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who should be encouraged to take the country into their own hands.

I would encourage you, the citizens of this lovely land, to have the faith, energy and enthusiasm to make positive changes, not only for yourselves, but for the generations to come.

The international community offers its support and assistance in achieving those changes, but we ask you, the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina, to take the necessary actions and assume the responsibilities which accompany those actions.

There is every reason why the result should be a state that you can truly be proud of.

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