

## **'Hands off' Pledge over Bosnia**

**Author:** [Senad Slatina](#)

Belgrade and Zagreb recognise territorial integrity of Bosnia but shy away from other important issues at Balkan summit

The heads of state of Yugoslavia and Croatia pledged at a summit meeting in Sarajevo this week to refrain from any further efforts to gobble up chunks of Bosnian land.

The pledge, though, was one of the few significant points to come out of the July 15 meeting between Yugoslav president Vojislav Kostunica, his Croatian counterpart Stjepan Mesic and the Bosnian tripartite presidency, Beriz Belkic, Zivko Radisic and Jozo Krizanovic.

Thornier problems were all swept under the rug. The talks had been billed as historic because they were the first of their kind since the signing of the Dayton peace accord, which ended the Bosnian war in November 1995. Moreover, the event was organised without any help from the international community.

The leaders produced plenty of lofty commitments to peace and stability but failed to address concretely any of the important issues that still impede their relations. The pledge to respect the territorial integrity of Bosnia was nonetheless viewed as an important breakthrough.

Over the past decade, both Croatia and the now-truncated Yugoslavia have tried to carve up the country between them. In Sarajevo, however, Belgrade and Zagreb leaders clearly recognised Bosnia's statehood. Kostrunica and Mesic promised to honour the inviolability of its borders.

The latter put it most forcefully, saying, "All those who believed a Greater Serbia or a Greater Croatia could be created at the expense of Bosnia and Herzegovina should forget their illusions."

The meeting ended with a very bland seven-point statement, which "called for", "underlined", "confirmed" and "encouraged" development of good relations.

The heads of state stressed their determination to implement the principles of the Dayton peace accord, urged regional cooperation and the return of refugees and condemned all forms of

terrorism, regardless of the motives or the identity of the perpetrators.

But the leaders shied away from the serious problems that still hamper good relationships. There was no mention of compensation for war damages, arrest of war criminals, property issues, or genocide charges filed by Sarajevo against Yugoslavia at The Hague.

Bosnia's aspiration to use the Croatian harbor of Ploce as its main port went unheeded. There was also no word about Prevlaka, a disputed territory on the border between Yugoslavia and Croatia.

Participants even avoided the issue that had promised to be a matter of high contention at the meeting - an apology from Kostunica for the war in Bosnia.

Various Bosnian politicians stressed before the talks that relations between Belgrade and Sarajevo would not significantly improve until Kostunica and his colleagues apologise for the role Serbia and Yugoslavia played in the conflict.

Throughout the war, Serbia had openly supported Bosnian Serb forces and directly participated in their military operations. Just a couple of days before the summit, the Muslim Brotherhood youth group distributed posters across Sarajevo showing Kostunica with a Kalashnikov assault rifle and citing excerpts from a speech in which he glorified the traditions of the Serbian hard line Chetnik movement.

A few days before the meeting, the Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) chairman of the Sarajevo presidency, Berzi Belkic, told the media that Kostunica should, if not apologise, than at least express regrets over the conflict.

But once Belgrade explicitly signaled that the Yugoslav president had no intention of accepting these suggestions, Belkic toned down his position. A day before the summit, he told local media he did not want this issue to disrupt the event.

Kostunica made clear that his perception of the recent past differed widely from that held in Sarajevo. He brushed aside a journalist's question on whether he would use the talks to urge the region's principal war crimes suspect - wartime Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic - to surrender to The Hague. "I don't see why I should deal with that," the Yugoslav head of state replied coldly. "There are many other things that occupy my attention."

Because of widespread hostile feelings towards Kostunica and other Belgrade officials attending the meeting intensive security was imposed. Some local media speculated that Muslim hardliners might try to assassinate Kostunica but neither NATO nor local police could confirm that such a move was expected.

Over the weekend, NATO-led peace forces, SFOR, practically sealed off Sarajevo with roadblocks, searching vehicles driving into the city. Lines of cars sometimes waited for over

three hours to enter the capital.

Senad Slatina is a reporter with the Sarajevo weekly Slobodna Bosna

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