

## **Putting Right Past Mistakes**

**Author:** IWPR

Hard lessons learned in Bosnia must influence future international policy in the region

With Bosnians going to the polls this weekend in the country's third post-Dayton national elections many Balkan experts and observers are asking just how much progress has been made in the past five years.

While some critics of Bosnian policy, especially in the United States, are urging the international community to exit the nascent post-conflict state, many agree that improvements have been made and it is no time to leave.

Refugees are beginning to return home, many spontaneously, and while several improvements in the political process have been imposed through directives from the international administration, Bosnia-Herzegovina has begun to stabilise.

During his recent visit to the region, US Ambassador to the United Nations Richard Holbrooke called for the banning of the Serb Democratic Party, SDS, now led by Mirko Sarovic, the likely winner in Republika Srpska's presidential race.

A few days later, on November 3, the International Crisis Group, ICG, issued a report alleging at least 75 current SDS officials, including police officers and legislators, had committed war crimes.

The ICG called for the SDS to be excluded from the November 11 elections and urged international officials to take legal action to remove these alleged war criminals from positions of public authority.

The issue of SDS' legitimacy remains one of the most consistent criticisms of every election since 1996. And herein lies one of the biggest lessons of all for the peace process - elections should not have been held in September 1996.

Conditions did not exist at that time for the conduct of a free and fair election. The policy was driven by United States interests, which sought a pretext for an "early exit" from the war-torn country.

The 1996 elections legitimised wartime nationalists and elevated them into positions of political power - Momcilo Krajisnik, for example, the former president of Republika Srpska, is now on trial at the Hague for war crimes.

Not until the Peace Implementation Council met in Bonn in 1997 was the highest civilian authority in Bosnia - the Office of the High Representative, OHR - empowered to deal effectively with the formidable political, legal and civil landscape.

The OHR should have been in a position to take aggressive steps to vet, reform and clean up the police, judiciary and prosecutors in both entities back in 1996. Early action should also have been taken to reform the media. Real progress on such things as restructuring the broadcast media and establishing a code of press ethics only really got underway in mid-1999.

Democracy does not occur in a vacuum, and given the rampantly corrupt and pervasively ethnocentric political environment in Bosnia, these steps would have created a more positive environment earlier for elections and the return of refugees and displaced persons.

This more deliberate approach would have also given the OSCE more time to work out technical election processes, especially voter registration. The absence of a legitimate voter registration system in the 1996 elections undermined the credibility of the elections and the OSCE. Only the aggressive leadership of retired US Ambassador Robert Barry, who took over the OSCE Bosnian mission in January 1998, rescued the situation.

Meanwhile, Milorad Dodik, Republika Srpska's caretaker prime minister, has hung around the international community's neck like an albatross. Dodik came to power after High Representative Carlos Westendorp removed former RS President and Serb Radical Party leader Nikola Poplasen from office in March 1999.

Dodik, leader of the Party of Independent Social Democrats, SNSD, has bumbled from one political mishap to another. His SLOGA coalition, formed with Biljana Plavsic's Serb National Party and Zivko Radisic's Socialist Party of the RS, fell apart in mid-2000. Dodik assured international officials he still enjoyed enough support in the RS parliament to govern, but invariably fell short.

Corruption and conflict of interest - an inheritance from communist Yugoslavia - are integral to the Bosnian political and economic system. Some concrete counter-measures have been put in place. In August, the OHR anti-corruption unit contributed to the arrest of Alija Delimustafic, a key Bosnian tycoon.

New rules introduced by the OSCE in February banning elected officials from privatisation agencies and the boards of public enterprises, where the state owns more than a 25 per cent stake, have also had a positive impact.

But once again these measures are late. This year the OHR and OSCE have initiated public information campaigns to focus voter attention on corruption issues ahead of the election. But for years corrupt officials have enjoyed leeway to buy up depreciated state property at bargain prices, undermining the credibility of the whole privatisation process.

Despite slow progress, some positive developments have emerged in the last several months. The multi-ethnic Social Democratic Party, SDP, won notable victories in the April local elections and appears on course to build on this success at the national level, especially in the Bosniak dominated areas.

The Bosniak nationalist Democratic Party for Action, SDA, continues to reel from the October resignation of founder and wartime leader Alija Izetbegovic from the Bosnia tripartite presidency. Internal power struggles and corruption charges have further undermined the SDA's electoral standing.

The sweeping victory by progressive forces in Zagreb has forced Bosnian Croat hardliners to focus more on Bosnia-Herzegovina. The nationalist Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ, recently called for a referendum, to be held on election day, on the foundation of a separate Bosnian Croat entity.

Many observers think this could be the HDZ's last gasp before it finally splinters and loses power. But Croat-dominated areas still present the international community with one of its most intractable problems. The HDZ continues to enjoy majority support.

After November 11, High Representative Wolfgang Petrisch and the OSCE need to take steps to root out all HDZ obstructionists from political life, perhaps starting with Ante Jelevic, the Croat member of the

Presidency and head of the HDZ party.

Strong action should be taken against the party for calling the illegal referendum, which is in flagrant breach of Dayton and OSCE rules.

In RS, meanwhile, the SDS has meticulously played by the election rules. This level of political maturity is in large part due to the removal of many of the party's former leaders - people now either in the Hague or in hiding.

According to a UN Development Program poll, the SDS is expected to win across the board this weekend in Serb dominated areas. But the emergence of Mladen Ivanic's Progressive Democratic Party, PDP, in the April polls indicates the RS political spectrum is finally broadening.

The November 11 results will be closely monitored for signs of democratic progress. With the US presidency perhaps about to switch to Republican George W. Bush in January 2001, US policy on Bosnia is likely to change. During the campaign Bush called for the withdrawal of US troops from the Balkans.

Europeans strongly criticised Bush's announcement and although the Republican candidate indicated he would certainly consult with the NATO allies before making any decisions regarding collective security agreements, his policy position remained unchanged.

Meanwhile, there is much speculation his Democrat rival Al Gore, should he make it to the White House, would appoint Holbrooke - one of Dayton's architects - Secretary of State. Gore would remain engaged in Bosnia and throughout the Balkans. With Holbrooke at his side a Gore administration would probably offer the best opportunity to steer through changes to the Dayton Peace Accords many feel are overdue.

The international community's work in Bosnia is far from done. Let's hope the country's voters lend a hand on November 11.

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