

PEACE BUILDING IN THE BALKANS: THE NEED TO STAY THE COURSE¹

The ideas I want to share focus on Bosnia. They are based on the need to preserve the Dayton Peace Accords and on the ties between their provisions and today's conflict resolution doctrine and practices. They postulate that the DPA were designed to make multi-ethnic coexistence possible. And so, one cannot go without the other in the Balkans.

The need for this position arose from the recent troubles in the Balkans, and from the mounting criticism over the peace process from those whom I would call “abdicators” and “revisionists”. This article represents the “romantic” point of view.

Thomas Friedman, writing for the New York Times, represents the abdicators insofar as he believes that democracy is impossible in a multiethnic Bosnia, whereas it is taking root in “homogeneous” (sic) Croatia and Serbia. Therefore, the DPA should be abandoned. Immediately we can point to the fact that Serbia, for one, is not homogeneous. It counts Montenegrins as a distinct minority and, in law as well as in fact, Kosovo, where ethnic Albanians are in the majority, is still integral to Serbia.

The revisionists, mostly semi-official commentators from international organisations and NGOs, complain about the intolerable delays of the peace process and the perceived shortcomings of the Dayton Accords. Therefore, the DPA should be redrafted.

There are in fact three positions where the revisionists separate the abdicators and those faithful to the DPA and the idea of a lively multiethnic Bosnia. The abdicators advocate a general pull-out. The revisionists advocate amendments. The “romantics” advocate pressuring the individuals resistant to change. Meanwhile, all three agree that there have been flare-ups of violence in Bosnia and in the region as a whole.

In response to these flare-ups, the international community has begun to be more assertive and more insistent in the implementation of the Dayton Accords. It has removed numerous obstructionist officials, it has unilaterally amended election rules to avoid extremists monopolising the political domain, it has also physically denied the means of chauvinistic propaganda to certain groups. This, it has started doing only in the last 18 months.

The evidence shows that some elements of the respective communities in Bosnia are responsible for the troubles. The Bosnian Croat HDZ's bid for separation of the Mostar enclave finds little resonance past the goons of the extremist leader Ante Jelacic. Lately, SFOR has tried to deny it the financial means to propagate his message of the hate, but met with fierce resistance from an organised crowd.

Similarly, a few hundred Serbs have turned up in Banja Luka to violently protest the erection of one of the mosques destroyed in the war.

This action was prophesied by the UN High Representative Wolfgang Petritsch, who argued on the BBC's “Simpson's World” of May 4th that extremism had to be resisted with all the international community's might, lest it gives a model for action for other disgruntled groups. So far, the troubles have been confined to these two incidents, being the gravest. The recent troubles are as much responsible for the desire to withdraw as for that to press on and possibly have the international community “over reach”.

¹ This is a shorter version of an as yet unpublished paper entitled: “Peacebuilding in the Balkans: The Need to Stay the Course?” that was written in support of a presentation given at the Crisis Management in South East Europe working group of the PfP Consortium, in Reichenau, Austria, 18 May 2001.

The international community has taken the path of the romantics and seems determined to press on with the Dayton agenda, despite its faults. It is not surprising that the DPA are victim of criticism, or that they are indeed faulty. After all, these are terms that were predefined by the US mediators, on parties who had no desire to come to terms. The presence of idiosyncratic mechanisms, such as the right to vote in your former area of residence is extremely strange, as is the concept of a rotating troika presidency where there are in fact two legal entities, one being bi-national. Despite all this, the DPA have not failed. The fact that the international community is husbanding the process is not a sign of failure. As will be demonstrated later, it is part of the normal peace-building process.

The Dayton Accords should be kept as they are, and the peace process supported with renewed might. There are several positive, negative and neutral reasons for this, all indicative of the situation on the ground.

Positively speaking, while staying the DPA course, 2000 has seen record numbers of refugee returns. It would be interesting to see if there is a relation between the new returnees and the outbreak of violence in Bosnia, because this would hypothetically mean that the initiators of violence would have been the ones denied the 5 year return to normality afforded to the non-displaced persons. Unfortunately, such a tempting analysis cannot be made here in the space provided.

Another reason to give the DPA a second chance is the fact that Bosnia is now enjoying its first non-nationalist government. Granted, it necessitated significant OSCE election-rule tweaking, but the challenge now is to make this government function correctly and give a practical demonstration to the electorate that democracy brings results.

Despite slow progress, there is now a police force worthy of some trust. This is a significant development which goes in line with peace-building theory. As a conflict enters a period of mediated truce, the military element provided by the international community is reduced and replaced by a competent police force. This, the DPA made clear as a priority. Nowhere in the DPA was it said how to achieve these results. The planning had to be made by various international organisations acting in concert. The DPA is a set of general guidelines to provide a framework for a self-sustaining multi-ethnic democracy. That the number of SFOR troops has dwindled in response to the increase in IPTF-trained local officers is therefore part of the plan.

Arbitration over Brcko is holding. To some, this is one of the relevant successes of the international mission, but it is clear that if this area now enjoys peace, it is because the local population has accepted an international ruling over the area. That they have done so while a few individuals are aware of the potential riches imbedded in the soil is telling. It furthers the point that communities have little desire to fight each other, while corrupt and self-serving individuals, most often associates of criminal elements, have a definite stake in the region. This prospect was defused by international arbitration over Brcko.

To those who would say that Bosnia is ripe to have its fate dictated by the international community, I would say that this would smack of condescendence. It would negate the fact that many communities have to learn to live in a country in the creation of which they had no say, and which, as a result, would have little legitimacy in their eyes. It would be possible in such a scenario to see a resumption of the violent conflict 50 years from now. What the DPA do is to give the tools to the former belligerent to find a way to live and operate together. It so happens that for areas of the DPA like Brcko (and, had it not been otherwise, Kosovo as well) which have found no legal resolution at the negotiation table are settled so that the overall process does not suffer not suffers.

The implementation of the border police works as intended. This is an important area which was implemented with only 6 months of delay. It is important because implicit in the need to have

a competent border police is the understanding that it is criminal gangs with their propaganda and weapons smuggling that re-ignite passions in Bosnia.

War criminals are being brought to The Hague, because without justice there can be no trust, and trust is paramount to the reconciliation of all the parties. Also implicit in the need to bring criminals to justice is the need to provide an effective deterrent against atrocities in the future. But this argument also supports the fact that those very few elements are the guilty parties, and not the entire communities. The dynamics of coercion in the context of ethnic conflict would necessitate a separate paper altogether, but it suffices to say that the pursuit of war criminals gives life to a common ground where all parties can acknowledge that their fighters had a part in war crimes, but also that it does not ascribe a war criminal mentality to the whole of the other nationalities. More than a simple matter of immediate justice, it is a matter of long-lasting reconciliation.

It is true to say that with the historic changes in Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia, the environment is ripe to isolate resistant elements. Indeed, this is likely to marginalise and also radicalise the extremes of all political persuasions that do not believe in centrist democracy. Now is the time to vocally and tangibly support the forces that tend to learn towards reconciliation and multi-ethnic coexistence.

Most importantly, there is evidence that multi-ethnic coexistence is feasible because flare-ups are highly localised and find no resonance in the population. Mihailo Crnobrnja wrote in 1995 that it took a lot of time and a lot of concentrated effort to initiate a policy of ethnic cleansing. Those who believe incorrectly that the Yugoslav civil wars are the fruit of ancient hatreds and who could not reconcile the fact that ethnic cleansing took place more than ten years after Tito's death have the answer. Concentrated efforts at spreading hate messages, false rumours, and manipulating history. Yugoslavs have lived together under the yoke of communism, a dehumanising ideology. They can certainly live together in harmony in a context of their choice. The DPA is the only tool they have for them to make an informed choice. If they choose to live apart, it must be so after a reasoned, measured and informed political debate. At the same time, the decision to leave must be mutual and the new state created thereby must find acceptance (that is, recognition) by the international community. Doing anything less would inevitably send Shockwaves for the nation-state, as countless "disgruntled" communities would find a precedent for separation.

But, if the DPA are abandoned, this means an abandonment of the only plan to create self-sustaining peace for all communities. The efforts of civilian peace workers and the sacrifices of military peacekeepers will have been in vain and it will send the signal that the Balkans are simply not worth the time nor the money, as if you could put a price on freedom and peace. This will be the signal to NGO's, who have acquired a new status as legitimate international actors that they have failed, and all other peace endeavours which can only be supported by NGO's will suffer as a result. The dream of an international civic society, where even the smallest of individuals can make a difference in world affairs will crumble. The NGO's failure will confirm donor fatigue, and the outpour of generosity from private and public sources that we have seen in the post-Cold War era will come to an end.

The "neutral" reason would be that peace work thinkers and practitioners see these delays as normal, expected, foreseeable occurrences. When a truce occurs during a conflict, this is the ideal time, provided the truce is well-founded, to insert a peacekeeping/enforcing mission. The task of the military is, first of all, to separate belligerents, in essence keep the peace as a heavily armed police contingent would (in the case of peace enforcement) and help the international organisations and NGO's do their work. As this happens, the warring parties will react in a variety of different ways, but in the case of civil wars, populations unaccustomed to violence will revert back to peace quite quickly. The obstacles come from the perpetrators of violence who find no more audience for their anger. The result is a polarisation of communities because of the belligerent discourse of the war mongers, which can be erased only after time and after institutions have been put in place to equalise positions. Institutions such as an independent judiciary and

regular elections equalise the chances of all communities and prepare the way for a self-sustaining multi-ethnic democracy where the war mongers and extremists would have no place to exist since their renown is based on the hatred of the other as a “political” programme. As soon as communities gain trust in the institutions, they will learn to trust each other.

For all these reasons, the DPA must not be touched. It is bad policy to change strategy in mid-course. Abdicators believe that 5 years and \$5 billion an too long and too expensive. As if you could put a price on freedom and peace. Thomas Friedman, echoing the correct notion that no two countries who have McDonald’s restaurants have ever gone to war, said it was not surprising that McDonald’s did not have any restaurants in the Balkans.

Peace and freedom do not come as quickly and as cheaply as a burger and fries. But with regards to multi-ethnic coexistence, well... What is a Big Mac without the secret sauce?

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