

## **Foreign policy flashpoints: Bosnia**

Susan Woodward

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### Abstract:

A multinational intervention led by the US to bring peace to Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1996 has resulted in Bosnia's division into three ministates and had brought an end to the war. However, the peace process enters a difficult phase in 1997 as peacebuilding and nationbuilding become the top agenda for the region. The region also faces other issues, including reversing ethnic cleansing, refugee return and municipal elections. These issues will also be considered by the US as it formulates its foreign policy for 1997 toward Bosnia. Pres Clinton also has to contend with requests for supplemental funding for the Stabilization Force deployment as well as similar requests for the withdrawal of US troops from Bosnia.

### Full Text:

American-led multinational intervention to bring peace to Bosnia and Herzegovina was a resounding success in 1996. Although Bosnia is more divided now into three ethnically homogeneous ministates than it was a year ago, the war has stopped. Elections in September legitimated the parties of war, but the brutality of ethnic cleansing, the siege of Sarajevo, and the atrocities are gone from nightly television. NATO has regained its credibility, acquired a new lease on life, and committed a new deployment of 31,000 troops, called SFOR (for Stabilization Force), for another 18 months to stabilize the gains of its predecessor, IFOR. Quarrels within the alliance over lagging civilian implementation have subsided in a new commitment to improve coordination and attention to the tasks of building common political institutions and economic reconstruction.

Nevertheless, this success could all unravel. This will be the decisive year for Bosnia. The peace process has entered the difficult phase - the civilian tasks of peacebuilding and nation-building that can take place only after a separation of forces and cantonment of weapons succeeds. For the three warring (newly elected) parties, the General Framework Agreement for Peace (GFAP) signed at Dayton and Paris is only a cease-fire. They do not accept the accord as definitive politically, seeing it only as an insecure stepping-stone. Each is still fighting the war for statehood; only their means of securing territory and national survival have changed.

The international agenda for 1997 is being driven by the primary countries of asylum, above all Germany, who insist that Bosnian refugees now go home. Hundreds of thousands of refugees must be resettled, their right and that of displaced persons in Bosnia to return to their prewar homes assured, and the municipal elections postponed last September held. But for the three Bosnian parties, where people live decides who wins elections and therefore who controls a territory - the issue that remains insecure in the agreement. The combination of refugee return, reversing ethnic cleansing, and elections is explosive, for the parties intend it to decide the real political fate of Bosnia.

COULD SUCCESS UNRAVEL?

Could the success of 1996 become failure in 1997? The year will be critical for U.S. foreign policy and its new makers. As civilian tasks take center stage, an American military unused to peacekeeping roles and vehement about remaining operationally autonomous will be put in an unfamiliar servicing role. Conflict between military and civilian authorities will be difficult to avoid when the military are asked to get more involved in tasks that could cause casualties. The constant dilemma of peace operations between diplomatic commitments made in the peace process and domestic commitments to voters to protect the troops - the ever present issue of bodybags - will rebound onto politicians, however. Will they fulfill their commitments to the parties made at Dayton and respond to demands from domestic constituents that justice be done, or will they protect the soldiers and risk growing disappointment with the troops and a new round of threats to NATO's credibility? The rhetoric - "what are 31,000 soldiers of the most sophisticated military machine in the world worth if they are not willing to arrest indicted war criminals, guarantee freedom of movement, or ensure the right of people to return to their prewar homes?" - cares little about the technicalities of mandates and the legalities of international intervention.

While ways around this conflict are being sought, such as a special constabulary to arrest indictees, it will be hard to avoid the larger issue of 1997. The political contradictions in the Dayton accord will become an obstacle to further progress and force the United States to make difficult choices on the future of Bosnia which it would prefer to avoid. This will also revive disagreements with its European allies about political outcome and peace strategy at the same time as they are being told to assume full military responsibility for Bosnia after June 1998.

The conditions for facing these new tasks and conflicts will not be favorable. Governments seconded their best people for the first year of implementing the Dayton accord. Their contracts have run out, they will inevitably be replaced by a B-team, and a major transition in the Office of the High Representative responsible for coordinating all efforts will occur in March or April. The number of troops has been almost halved, and six-month rotations will be allowed. All these transitions in personnel will cause delays.

In addition, the region is far more unstable. President Tudjman of Croatia, one of the three signatories of the GFAP, has contracted inoperable stomach cancer. He has already moved toward a more intransigent nationalism with an eye, apparently, to his final legacy, while the right wing in his party has become more assertive in the succession struggle. The consequences for Bosnian Croat cooperation in their federation with Bosnian Muslims (Bosniacs) are not auspicious. In Serbia, mass demonstrations since mid-November have weakened seriously the government of the second GFAP signatory, President Slobodan Milosevic. Milosevic will be even more focused on his domestic troubles, and the instability could spread to the Kosovo region, where ethnic Albanians remain intent on independence. An important element of the opposition to Milosevic, in addition, is sympathy for the Bosnian Serbs and their leaders in Pale.

## THE YEAR AHEAD

The flashpoints for U.S. foreign policy toward Bosnia in 1997 are many. In February, requests for supplemental funding for the SFOR deployment will provide an opening for critics in Congress, led by Representative Kasich (R-Ohio), who feel betrayed by President Clinton's initial promise to withdraw U.S. troops by last December. Directing their discontent at the new deployment, they will open a difficult discussion on the absence of an exit

strategy from Bosnia and could impose conditions of total withdrawal earlier than the currently planned June of next year. In July, a NATO summit is scheduled in Madrid to address three fundamental issues: enlargement, relations with Russia, and command and control arrangements for out-of-area deployments like Bosnia (the Combined Joint Task Force [CJTF] without U.S. participation). The last two NATO summits have nearly been hijacked by the Bosnian conflict. The intimate links between the Madrid agenda and Bosnia - participation of NATO aspirants in IFOR and SFOR, possible hand-over to a European CJTF after SFOR, and growing instability in NATO's southern flank - make it impossible to separate the two in 1997. And as the end of the year approaches and the North Atlantic Council and the Pentagon look to reduce their deployment in Bosnia to a Deterrence Force (DFOR) one-third the size, the difficult political accounting of where Bosnia is going will have to be made.

Finally, in Bosnia itself, the flashpoints begin with decisions in February. The status of Brcko, a town in northeast Bosnia whose strategic location is so decisive for the fate of Bosnia that Dayton negotiators could not resolve it, was to be decided by international arbitration on February 15. Already delayed from December 15, American arbitrator Robert Owen chose to delay it again. Flooded with Serbs displaced by the transfer of Sarajevo suburbs from Serb to federal control and troops mobilized in preparation for war, Brcko is a *casus belli* for Serbs. Without it, the two halves of their republic are separated, and hundreds of thousands of Serbs flee the western half. But President Izetbegovic has also made Bosniac control of Brcko a test of American commitment to them. He triggered the new delay and Owen's decision to place the area under special administration for a year with an American head, by threatening to resign if it was not awarded to the federation. The intensified fight in 1997 for control over Brcko, with settlers, troops, voters, and returning refugees, will severely strain the much reduced SFOR troops in the area (in the American division). The first election of an election season, on April 13, will make this worse. Municipal elections in neighboring Croatia are expected to be the trigger for Serbs in the area currently under United Nations Transitional Administration for Eastern Slavonia to flood southward to Brcko before UN troops leave on July 15 and an exodus of displacement of Bosnian Croats and Muslims.

## THE COMING REFUGEE CRISIS

This flood of refugees could inaugurate a long hot spring and summer. The German pressure to send more than 300,000 refugees home, let alone pressure on the more than 500,000 scattered elsewhere, has been resisted until now. Fewer returned in 1996 than were newly displaced. German state governments burdened by the costs and political backlash cannot be resisted any longer. German troops are now participating in SFOR, in combat roles for the first time, overturning 50 years of post-Nazi restrictions, and in high positions in the SFOR command structure where national pressure can be applied. The Bosniac leadership will insist more emphatically on the right of displaced persons and especially returning refugees to return to the homes from which they were expelled - villages and towns where they are still not welcome. In Republika Srpska, particularly, Serbs fear losing control of territory if Muslims return in large numbers, but Bosnian Muslims are no more welcome in Croat-majority towns, despite their federation alliance.

In addition to pressing their demand for justice, the Sarajevo leadership will intensify the use of refugee and displaced person returns, as they began in summer 1996, as military operations aimed at retaking territory in strategic parts of the Serb Republic. The ultimate goal is to extend Bosniac control up to the northern and eastern borders of the country in

place of Serbs. These military operations have already created enormous headaches for IFOR and will create more trouble for a smaller SFOR. At the same time, the military's insistence that conflicts over resettlement are an internal security matter - a task for local and international police that is not in IFOR/SFOR's mandate - provokes criticism while it does little to prevent them from being drawn in when local confrontations become armed hostilities in the zone of separation or between long-arm-bearing police. All three communities - Bosniacs, Croats, and Serbs - will resist the return to their local communities of people who are not their "own," thereby delaying over and over by local crises the goal of building common institutions, multiethnic cooperation, and reintegration so that the international forces can depart. The idea of one Bosnia will be continually tested.

The political significance and explosive potential of refugee returns, however, will be magnified by the other event of the coming summer: municipal elections. Elections are the means by which the parties are now waging the war. Electoral victories for the three nationalist parties is their way to retain control over territory, consolidate control over the territory and people they were handed at Dayton, and for the Bosniac community to recapture (they would say "liberate") territory from the Serbs. Municipal elections were postponed last September because of undue irregularities in the voting lists and challenges to the use of the registration form allowing Bosnians to vote where they intend to live. This form of personalized gerrymandering, a favorite of the Pale Serbs but used by all three parties, places a premium on choice of residence; its disavowal will not eliminate the efforts of Bosnian Croats to do literal gerrymandering of communities - redrawing municipal borders to create separate communities where Croats and Muslims are currently mixed. The nightmare for SFOR, however, lies in the regional context of these local elections: their possible conjunction with refugees expelled from northern Europe about the time of Bosnian elections, between July and September, from a Croatia preparing also for presidential elections before September, and from a Serbia in the throes of political crisis and obliged to hold presidential elections before December. A major goal of the Dayton accord was to separate the fate of Bosnia from its neighbors - former republics of the disintegrating Yugoslavia and a Balkan peninsula still held at a distance by western European powers. Elections scheduled in 1997 in Croatia, Serbia, and Albania, joined by early elections in Bulgaria and growing militant activity in Kosovo, suggest that goal is fleeting, too.

Many other issues face the peace process in Bosnia during 1997. Under the "train and equip" program for a federation army, new weapons and ammunition are flowing into the country, with unknown consequences for the process of refugee return. Disagreements between the United States and some of its allies over U.S. commitment to the Bosniac leadership of Alija Izetbegovic and continuing discrimination against Republika Srpska in economic, military, and political matters are coming to a head. On the grounds that a year of grace to the Sarajevo leadership was sufficient and that these policies are dividing Bosnia more, the allies now insist it is time to enforce the peace accord equally on all three parties. Pressure will increase all around to arrest indicted war criminals and do more to support The Hague tribunal now that national elections have been held.

#### ANOTHER MISSED OPPORTUNITY?

Failure to act on the lessons learned from the peace implementation process in 1996 and on the choices needed in 1997 would be another in a long series of tragic missed opportunities in Bosnia. This one could not be blamed on Europeans. Policy toward Bosnia and the Balkans has not changed since 1991, but events in Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia, as

elsewhere in the region, do not permit more of the same. A comprehensive strategy that includes all areas of the former country, their place in Europe, and greater coherence in the positions of the transatlantic allies will have to emerge if the crisis and an international presence are to end. As for Bosnia, the international rhetoric of cooperation but the reality of treating Bosnian parties as if they are hostile and reinforcing elements of their past hostility must also change toward a policy that is based on and reinforces realistic possibilities for cooperation.

Success in Bosnia in 1996 is not yet self-sustaining. U.S. foreign policy choices in Bosnia cannot be isolated from the major issues of national interest. Great power relations will be tested. The use of military power will be challenged. Relations with the Middle East may even be negatively affected if the Bosniac cause looks grim. And in all three aspects, President Clinton will have a lot of explaining to do to the American people.

Susan Woodward is a senior fellow in the Brookings Foreign Policy Studies program. She is the author of *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution after the Cold War* (Brookings, 1995).

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