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DAYTON REVISITED: BOSNIA'S PEACE DEAL 20 YEARS ON

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SUMMARY

- Two decades after the end of the Bosnian war, Carl Bildt, who co-chaired the Dayton peace conference, considers its successes and failures, and the lessons for Europe.
- Hopes that Bosnia would move closer to Europe have been disappointed, while politics is still split along ethnic lines and the central powers remain weak.
- However, the peace agreement has had significant achievements. Large numbers of refugees have returned to the country, property disputes have been swiftly resolved, and the line dividing Bosnia's different entities does not have border controls.
- Critics have attacked the agreement for enshrining national and ethnic divisions in the constitution, but this was the only viable option and prevented the division of the country.
- A more forward-looking approach from the EU on enlargement and integration in the years after the conflict could have helped Bosnia achieve political and economic stability.
- Europe ignores the Balkans at its peril, and its policies there must be pro-active and pre-emptive to prevent history repeating itself, especially given the strains placed on the region by the refugee crisis.

It was 20 years ago this month that the most painful war on European soil since the Second World War came to an end, and negotiations began on one of the most ambitious peace agreements ever made.

The peace agreement for Bosnia was initialled at the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base outside Dayton, Ohio, after a gruelling three-week marathon of negotiations. A few weeks later, with much ceremony, it was signed in Paris by the leaders of the day.

The story of the search for peace in Bosnia is hardly a glorious one. The so-called international community stumbled and fumbled for years, until it found no other alternative than to come together on the only deal that was possible.

It all started, of course, with what at the time was called the European Community. Its initial efforts – “the hour of Europe has come” – have been much maligned, but under the Portuguese presidency in March 1992, a tentative outline of a peace deal for Bosnia was agreed.

The basic structure of the Carrington-Cutileiro plan was actually fairly similar to the deal that emerged in Dayton nearly four years later, after two million people had been displaced and more than 100,000 had died.

If you were to ask the first EC negotiator, Lord Carrington, he would say with conviction that it was the United States that encouraged the Bosnian Muslim leader, President Alija Izetbegovic, to walk away from that deal. But of course, there is no way of knowing whether that deal would have

worked at that time. Throughout the region, the forces of disintegration were gaining strength by the day.

A false start

As the war engulfed Bosnia, a common United Nations-European Union structure for the region's peace efforts was set up in the summer of 1992. The International Conference for Former Yugoslavia (ICFY), with its base in Geneva, was co-chaired by former US Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and former United Kingdom Foreign Secretary David Owen. By any standards, it was a formidable team.

But by the time they were ready to get round the negotiating table in 1993 with their ambitious peace plan – the VOPP, short for the Vance-Owen Peace Plan – the winds had changed in Washington, and the administration of George H.W. Bush had been replaced by the government of Bill Clinton.

The story of how the VOPP failed is still the subject of some controversy. David Owen makes no secret of his view that the new administration in Washington undercut and abandoned the effort. In his book, *Balkan Odyssey*, he writes: “if President Bush had won re-election in November 1992 there would have been a settlement in Bosnia-Herzegovina in February 1993.”¹ He adds that “from the spring of 1993 to the summer of 1995, in my judgement, the effect of US policy, despite it being called ‘containment’, was to prolong the war of the Bosnian Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina.” These are strong words, and the files of Cyrus Vance, who obviously felt abandoned by Washington, will remain closed for many years yet.

What followed after the failure of the VOPP were some clumsy attempts by a newly created Contact Group – made up of the US, the UK, France, Germany, and Russia – to move things forward. But what they finally managed to put on the table in the summer of 1994 was no more than a map. Even they themselves did not agree on the crucial political and constitutional issues.

Accordingly, the talks went nowhere. What then emerged in 1995 has been told in books by Richard Holbrooke from a US perspective and by myself from a European perspective, having replaced David Owen as the EU representative in late spring of that year.²

It was a desperate year. Everyone understood that a further winter of war would be even more horrible than the previous ones. The largely European UN force, UNPROFOR, was trying to help in the middle of the fighting, but it was increasingly helpless. The key governments behind it felt that they were being scapegoated for a policy that did not exist. Withdrawing the force was becoming a serious option.

¹ David Owen, *Balkan Odyssey* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1995).

² Richard Holbrooke, *To End A War* (New York: Random House, 1998); Carl Bildt, *Peace Journey: The Struggle for Peace in Bosnia* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998).

US policy had been guided by the country's determination not to get involved on the ground in Bosnia. The humiliating US retreat from Mogadishu had contributed to this stance. But as part of the deals that had been made, Washington also promised that it would deploy US troops to extract the UN forces if the nations contributing their forces wanted out.

This was the situation I walked into, and which Richard Holbrooke also had to take over from his predecessor. The European nations did not really want to pull out, but feared that they might have to. The US, on the other hand, did not want to get involved, but it feared that it might have to.

Then, in July 1995, the massacres at Srebrenica took place, and the minds of everyone involved were focused further on reaching a solution.

Negotiations gain traction

The key diplomatic breakthrough came at a meeting in Geneva in early September 1995. Based on texts that had already been negotiated to a large extent in the preceding months, Richard Holbrooke managed to get all the foreign ministers of the conflict around the table to solemnly agree to a single Bosnia, within its formerly recognised borders, but consisting of two entities, one of which would be Republika Srpska.

This agreement essentially brought us back to the Carrington-Cutileiro plan just before the war. The main difference was that Bosnia would now be made up of two instead of three entities.

One of the myths later created was that the Serbs came to the table because of resolute US bombing. In reality, it was the other way around. The bombing that took place – which was of dubious military value – made it possible for Richard Holbrooke to persuade President Izetbegovic to accept the Republika Srpska, something that up until then he had refused to do. All of this happened at a crucial session in Ankara, just before the Geneva talks.

But if the principles were agreed in Geneva in September, it remained for the Dayton talks to settle the details. And if there have ever been weeks confirming the age-old saying that the devil is in the details, it was these. The talks were close to collapsing on more than one occasion.

The mapping exercise aimed at demarcating the legitimate borders of the Bosnian state agitated the US delegation, as well as, needless to say, the warring parties, who were deeply invested in the territorial divisions of Bosnia.

We Europeans in Dayton – Pauline Neville-Jones from London, Jacque Bloh from Paris, Wolfgang Ischinger from Bonn, as well as myself leading the team – wanted to focus more on the constitutional structures that might one day bring Bosnia back together again. Russia's vice

foreign minister, Igor Ivanov, was also a constructive and important force in these efforts.

The result of the talks in Dayton was the General Framework Agreement. The agreement is fairly short and straightforward, but its ten different annexes (the last one on civilian implementation) reflected the priorities of the day, which were sometimes extremely ambitious.

The impact of Dayton

The proposed constitutional structure was complex, and was made even more so by the Yugoslav traditions that guided the thinking of the warring parties. We would have preferred a president and a government, but ended up with a collective presidium and something that was not allowed to call itself government.

Things were made even more complex by the fact that, while Republika Srpska was one of the entities, the other had to be the so-called Federation, which had been forged in Washington in early 1993 as a way of shutting down the fighting between Muslims and Croats. The Federation's elaborate structure, with its numerous self-governed “cantons”, was, in effect, a solution left over from the VOPP effort, and was not addressed in any substantial way by Dayton.

Critics in later years have often attacked the fact that the constitutional settlement was based on ethnic and national groupings rather than on individuals and their rights. A unitary state, they claim, would have been both better and more democratic.

Such a solution sounds fine in theory, but the reality is that in states like these, the situation is rather different, and such solutions are easier talked about than achieved.

The constitutional settlement for Bosnia, agreed in Dayton, ended up somewhere between Belgium, with its complicated structure of Flemish, Walloon, and even some German “entities”, and Cyprus, only now coming close to overcoming the total breakdown of its constitutional order in 1966, with UN forces patrolling the “green line” dividing Nicosia ever since.

Those who question Dayton for enshrining ethnic and national identities might be advised to try their hand at getting the Scots to accept total integration with England, or the Catalans or the Basques to merge with the rest of Spain. They might even try with Bavaria.

Politics in countries like these tend to be based on national identities, and voting patterns in Bosnia in the decades since Dayton have unfortunately confirmed this.

Our hope, however, was that the post-war politics of Bosnia, in combination with the process of European integration, would gradually move the constitution of

Bosnia further from the Cypriot end of the scale and closer to the Belgian one. Perhaps one far-off day, we thought, it might even move beyond it. With these hopes in mind, we included provisions in the constitution that would allow for a gradual strengthening of the central powers without any revisions to the constitution itself.

But Bosnia has not moved closer to Europe, and nor have its central powers strengthened significantly. The politics of the country during the post-Dayton decades have, far too often, been little more than ethnic trench warfare. For too many, peace has been the continuation of war by other means.

Whether international efforts have helped or hindered Bosnia on these issues in the decades since Dayton is also the subject of some debate. Some still believe that an even stronger, protectorate-like approach would have helped, while others see that efforts along these lines would have encouraged the tendency in Bosnia to rely on international actors rather than pushing Bosnian politicians to sit down and take responsibility for the country themselves. I belong firmly to the latter school.

Despite the problems associated with the Dayton agreement, there have been significant successes. Large numbers of refugees and displaced people have returned to Bosnia, especially among the Bosnian Muslim community, where expectations for return were high. However, many have chosen not to return. Many young men and women from distant dark valleys got used to the bright lights of Sarajevo or Stockholm, and more often than not chose to stay.

Instead, a number of émigrés have sold their properties, taken the money, and started a new life. In contrast to nearly every other conflict, the property issues and disputes – and there were literally millions – were all sorted out after the Bosnia war. This remains a remarkable achievement.

It should also be noted that while we failed to reverse the ethnic division of the country – Sarajevo is more solidly Muslim than ever, Banja Luka is more solidly Serb than ever, and Mostar is as deeply divided as ever – we did prevent the physical division of the country.

Today, you pass the Inter-Entity Boundary Line and hardly notice where it is. This is the result of our fierce battle in the years immediately after the peace agreement against the “culture of check-points” that had taken hold all over the country during the wartime years.

Along with this comes the hope that the citizens of Bosnia will little by little be able to bring the country together more quickly than politicians have so far been willing or able to do. One day, however, the country will have to come together to make a new constitutional settlement.

Could things have been done differently?

In the years leading up to Dayton – certainly.

The delayed peace was caused as much by divisions in the international community as by the divisions of the country itself. And these divisions were primarily trans-Atlantic.

By the time it came to Dayton itself – hardly.

The basic principles of the deal had been settled in Geneva, and were not significantly different from those negotiated much earlier. The details could well have been different, but no fundamentally different deal was possible – and prolonging the war was neither politically nor morally defensible.

In Bosnia in the years since Dayton – yes, by the Bosnians themselves.

Some of them certainly tried to enlist international support for different types of interventions, and for a period, the high representative took a fairly assertive line against what in neo-Orwellian language was called “anti-Dayton” actions and actors. But essentially, only the different Bosnian actors could make the compromises necessary to take the country forward. And, far too often, they failed to do so.

In the region during these years – yes.

The international community should have moved forward aggressively on the Kosovo issue immediately after Dayton. Instead, it waited until things were sliding out of control, and then ended up in a situation that remains messy to this day. Would an earlier deal on Kosovo have been possible? Perhaps not – but the effort to arrive at one was not even made.

A more forward-looking approach by the EU on reintegration and enlargement could also have helped to take Bosnia forward. But for a long time EU enlargement procedures manifested in a country-specific rather than region-focused effort, and this undoubtedly delayed the economic reintegration and political reconciliation that could have helped Bosnia.

Once upon a time, I belonged to a group of people who aimed at having all the countries of the region as members of the EU by 2014 – a century after the fateful year of 1914. Eventually, this was revised into the hope that all of the countries in the region would have entered accession negotiations by then. But we are still not there.

For a prolonged period, the forces of disintegration were dominant all across the region, and it took too long for the EU and other international actors to focus sufficiently on the need to promote the forces of integration.

Twenty years after Dayton, things are certainly far better throughout the region, but they are not as good as they should be. The strain from the present refugee crisis demonstrates how tensions in the region can flare up again, and the temptation remains among politicians to play “the fear card” whenever an election is approaching. Old habits die hard.

There are lessons to be learnt. One is that our EU policies must be pro-active and pre-emptive on the different fissures that persist in Bosnia and the region as a whole. This does not mean relieving local politicians of their responsibilities, but it means ensuring they fulfil them when it comes to conflict and crisis prevention.

Another is the need for a united European and international approach to the tensions in the region. Disagreements within the EU, and even more so across the Atlantic, severely hampered attempts to prevent the war and then to end it, all the way up to the critical summer of 1995. This lesson must never be forgotten.

The EU will and must take the lead in Bosnia and the surrounding areas, since its instrument of enlargement is by far the most powerful in the region, but other actors of importance, notably the US, should also act on the same lines.

The final lesson is that we ignore the Balkans at our own peril. The tension and conflict here dominated both the first and the last decade of the last century, and severely tested the politics of all of Europe in both periods, with more devastating results in the first than in the second.

History has not come to an end. Our task is to prevent it from repeating itself.

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