TITLE: A MULTIETHNIC STATE IN BOSNIA-HERZEGOVIA: A POSSIBILITY OR AN ILLUSION?

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THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR SOVIET AND EAST EUROPEAN RESEARCH

TITLE VIII PROGRAM

1755 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036
PROJECT INFORMATION:

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COUNCIL CONTRACT NUMBER: 807-05

DATE: May 17, 1996

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1 The work leading to this report was supported in part by contract funds provided by the National Council for Soviet and East European Research, made available by the U. S. Department of State under Title VIII (the Soviet-Eastern European Research and Training Act of 1983, as amended). The analysis and interpretations contained in the report are those of the author(s).
A MULTIETHNIC STATE IN BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA:
A POSSIBILITY OR AN ILLUSION?

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SUMMARY

For the near future, Bosnia-Herzegovina will remain a region of great political instability. It seems that the ethnic cleansing that took place in the country (as well as in Croatia) is irreversible, and that the partition of the country into three ethnic states (or quasi-states) is final. The territorial and ethnic disputes were not settled by the Dayton agreement, and the future of the Muslim-Croat Federation in Bosnia-Herzegovina raises many doubts.

In April 1996, I was in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina by invitation of the Croatian Helsinki Committee and the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This provided me with an opportunity to visit the areas of recent fighting, to talk with the local population, as well as with the victims of ethnic cleansing, and to discuss the current situation in Croatia and Bosnia with some of their politicians and public figures. Following, are the observations and conclusions which resulted from my visit.

Kraina. Before the break-up of Yugoslavia, it was a region of Croatia where the Serbs constituted the majority of the population. After 1991, it came under Serbian control, and the local Croats were expelled from Kraina. Then, in August 1995, the Croatian Army launched a successful counter-offensive and regained this region. The Serbs left Kraina or were forced to leave it by the Croatian Army and, especially, the police. As everywhere in the former Yugoslavia in such cases, ethnic cleansing was accompanied by looting, murdering, and other atrocities. After these events, the Croats who had been expelled from Kraina in 1991-1995 began to return home; in addition some Croat refugees from Central Bosnia were settled in the region.

Still, Kraina remains underpopulated and its population nowadays constitutes only a small portion of the prewar population that numbered about 200,000 people. Tourism in Kraina is ruined. Even in the Jezera National Park, which, in the recent past, was an attraction to many thousands of people, all hotels are empty. My informants claim that Croatia lacks economic and human resources to rebuild and repopulate Kraina. Nevertheless, it is obvious that the Croatian government does not want to reverse the current situation. Everywhere in Kraina I saw Serbian houses looted, burned, or demolished. Despite the Dayton agreement, this practice is continuing. On the night of April 22, on my way from Sarajevo to Zagreb through Kraina, I
saw many burning houses, especially in the area between Bibroca, Bročanac, and Nikšić.
These were houses that had been owned by the expelled Serbs and had been deliberately set on fire that night. There was very little traffic on the road, and one could hardly expect that witnesses like me and Croatian human rights activists would happen to be there. However, I noticed police cars near all the places where the houses were on fire, and members of the Croatian Helsinki Committee told me that it was the police who usually conducted such actions. A telephone call to the police headquarters in Zagreb resulted in a characteristic reply, "It is the first time that we are told about arson or spontaneous fires in the area. In accordance with our information, everything is calm and orderly there. There is no reason to worry about it. Tomorrow, we will check up on your claims."

It seems that with the exception of some human rights activists and other liberal-minded Croats who, at present, are in a minority, both the Croatian government and the Croatian population in the areas of recent ethnic cleansing are adamant in their intention to prevent the return of Serbian refugees. As one member of the liberal opposition to president Tudjiman bitterly remarked in conversation with me, "People may be dissatisfied with the government, but they still welcome the ethnic cleansing that took place in Kraina."

The Croatian part of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Most of the areas in this territory, especially the region adjacent to Dalmatia, in Croatia, are at present populated only by Croats. The Serbs and the Muslims had been expelled, and so far none of them have managed to return home. I was in many of their abandoned and war-ravaged villages and settlements where nobody lives at the moment.

Officially, this territory is a part of the Muslim-Croat Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, but de facto it constitutes the self-proclaimed Croatian Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia, and in many practical aspects, it is already incorporated into Croatia. Croatian kunas are the only legal currency there. Many local Croats hold Croatian citizenship and cross border checkpoints without difficulties, while the police create many problems for the Muslims who travel in the part of the Federation which is under Croatian control. On several Croatian houses in Bosnia, I noticed large slogans. "This [territory] was and will remain Croatian", or "This [territory] is also Croatia."

The existing situation may be well illustrated by an example of the municipality of Stolac where I spent several days. In 1991, it was populated by 18,545 inhabitants: 8,093 Muslims, 6,113 Croats, 3,912 Serbs, and 417 others. It had been one of the important centers of multiethnic Bosnian culture. An abundance of cultural monuments was the reason why the urban complex of Stolac was proposed for inclusion in the UNESCO list of the World's important heritage. In the autumn of 1991, a corps from the Yugoslav army moved from
Montenegro towards the municipality, but their offensive was stopped near Stolac by the joint forces of local Muslims and Croats. As the result of this fighting, the Serbs were expelled from those parts of the municipality that remained under Muslim-Croat control. During the second half of 1993, when the fighting between the Muslims and the Croats began in Central Bosnia, troops of Bosnian Croats, supported by the army of the Republic of Croatia, occupied a part of the Stolac municipality and divided its territory with the Serbian army. Almost all male Muslims were imprisoned in detention camps where some of them were tortured and killed, and the remaining Muslim population of the municipality was expelled from their houses and farms. Their houses and mosques were destroyed, and their cemeteries were desecrated. This process is still continuing. Since the signing of the Dayton peace-accord more than 250 unoccupied houses, that in the recent past had been owned by Muslims, have been destroyed.

On February 4, 1996, the UN High Commissioner for refugees in Bosnia, the mayor of Stolac who represented the Croatian side, and the Muslim representatives in Mostar signed an agreement which allowed 100 Muslim families to return to Stolac. It was considered a pilot project, the beginning of the return of all refugees to their homes. So far however, nobody has been allowed to return.

The mayor of Stolac, Mr. Andjelko Markovic (who, simultaneously, is a member of the Croatian parliament in Zagreb and a member of the ruling party of Mr. Tudjiman in Croatia) explains this delay by a lack of financial support, but this is only a pretext. In our conversation Mr. Markovic quite frankly stated that the Muslims now had their own state in the territory of former Bosnia-Herzegovina; therefore, there is no reason for their return. He also claimed that a division of Bosnia-Herzegovina into the three ethnic states was final, and that the Croatian state in Bosnia should remain ethnically homogeneous. The only concession he was reluctantly ready to make was to allow an insignificant number of Muslims to return in the future. In his opinion, these people should constitute an ethnic minority in the Croatian Republic of Herzegovina-Bosnia, protected and supported by international organisations.

The Muslim controlled parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina. In some respects, the situation there is reminiscent of the situation in the part of the country that is controlled by the Croats. I visited several destroyed villages where the Serbs and the Croats were expelled by the Muslims.

Actually, President Izetbekovich and many other influential Muslim politicians are paying only lip-service to a vision of Bosnia-Herzegovina as a multi-ethnic state. Just like their Croatian counterparts in Bosnia, they consider the Muslim-Croat Federation of Bosnia-
Herzegovina as a temporary marriage imposed by outside powers. What most of the Muslim leaders in Bosnia really want is to enlarge the territory of the Muslim state, if necessary, by force.

There is a great deal of visible proof that the observance of Islam and the influence of such states as Iran and Saudi Arabia is growing. Their various charitable and other organisations are very active in Sarajevo, Mostar, and several other places. Secularly dressed women still predominate on the streets of Sarajevo, but a significant number of them wear traditional Muslim dress. This is something unthinkable only a few years ago. People who belong to the opposition to the Bosnian Muslim leadership claim that President Izetbekovich wants to create not only an ethnic but also a religious Muslim state.

However, the Muslim-controlled parts of Bosnia are ruined by the war more than any others. The economic viability of the Muslim mini-state in Bosnia, which is surrounded by unfriendly neighbours and cut off from the sea, leaves many doubts. In any case, its reconstruction is impossible without huge financial support. Apparently, those who provide this support will have influence on the political and other developments of the Muslim state in Bosnia.

I spoke with some American, French, Ukrainian and other soldiers and officers from the NATO-led International Forces. At the moment, their reputation amongst the Muslims in Bosnia is rather high, contrary to OSCE, who the Muslims say are people running away just when serious problems emerge that demand their presence. All my informants from the International Forces are sure that only their presence prevents the fighting from being resumed. On the other hand, they also claim that they do not have enough military power and political authority to enforce the return of the refugees to their homes.

Amongst all three ethnic communities in Bosnia-Herzegovina, there are public figures and ordinary people who still want to rebuild their country as a secular, multiethnic and multicultural state. But, at present, they are in the minority and are not influential enough to change the current trend in the political development of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Conclusions

It would be unrealistic to expect that most of the refugees will be able to return to their original places of settlement without huge financial investments, strong political pressure, and even the involvement of military force. It seems that the ethnic cleansing that took place in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia are irreversible and that the partition of Bosnia is a fait accompli. The future of the Muslim-Croat Federation in Bosnia-Herzegovina as a viable political unity also leaves many doubts.
At present, Bosnia as a single state and a single country exists only on paper. One of the most plausible though undesirable scenarios for the country's future is a kind of political and economic association of those parts that are currently under the Serbian and Croatian control correspondingly with Serbia and Croatia. This may result in resumed territorial disputes and fighting between all three warring ethnic communities, especially between the Muslims and the Croats. In any case, those parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina that at present are under the Muslims' control and for all practical matters constitute their mini-state, have little chance to become a stable economic and political body. A growth of Islamic fundamentalism and the danger of terrorist activities with all their negative consequences may soon become a very real problem. In all, the near future of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and even of former Yugoslavia in general (with the exception of Slovenia) seems grim.