

# Aid Dependency in Bosnian Politics and Civil Society: Failures and Successes of Post-war Peacebuilding in Bosnia-Herzegovina

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*More than seven years of international presence in post-war Bosnia have still not brought lasting stability to the country. Surveys suggest that a substantial share of the population continue to oppose Bosnia in its current form, further evidenced by the continuing electoral success of nationalist parties. These difficulties solicit an evaluation of some of the inherent difficulties of international intervention in a post-conflict setting such as Bosnia. This article will thus examine the symptoms of dependency resulting from international intervention on the political scene and civil society. The key argument forwarded herein is that the overly interventionist approach might have led to a host of decisions and laws which might be commendable for the country, but that this intervention simultaneously disempowered Bosnian actors.*

**Key words:** Bosnia and Herzegovina, peacebuilding, politics, civil society, Dayton Peace Accords

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## 1. Introduction

The more than seven years of post-war peace building in Bosnia provides observers with rich material in different approaches to conflict management and development aid. The degree of international involvement, both in terms of political involvement and in terms of financial investment, has made Bosnia a laboratory of Western experimentation in post-conflict reconstruction of deeply divided societies. Throughout the post-war years, a number of differ-

ent approaches have been chosen. In fact, over time the degree of intervention on behalf of international agencies increased, while the overall amount of international financial support for Bosnia decreased.

The lessons of Bosnia are not only applicable to other post-conflict settings in former Yugoslavia, such as Kosovo and Macedonia, but have also relevance for an increasing number of cases of internationally administered/assisted territories and countries around the world, emerging from severe internal conflict, ranging from East Timor to Afghanistan.

In this article, we will examine the development of post-war international intervention, followed by an analysis of the factors of aid dependency in

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the political sphere and in civil society. Aid dependency here shall not be limited to mere financial dependency, as the term originally suggests, but rather the dependency resulting from political intervention. This type of intervention can be conceived as a form of 'aid', if not financially, it is aimed at stabilizing the country and building an effective, democratic and pluralist state and society.

## 2. Dayton as Ceasefire

While the General Framework for Peace, concluded in November 1995 in Dayton (Ohio) and signed the following month in Paris, extended beyond peace agreement in its scope by prescribing the post-war constitutional order of the agreement, its early implementation record did not reflect the breadth of the agreement. The effectiveness of the substantial international involvement in terms of military presence and investment in the initial phase was watered-down by the reluctance to intervene against the nationalist agitation of the dominant three nationalist parties and their stranglehold on the economic resources through corruption and nepotism. This reluctance was informed by two assumptions:

a) Confronting nationalist parties is dangerous and might jeopardize peacekeepers. If Western peacekeepers are under threat, support in the West for the mission might disappear, leading to a hasty withdrawal.

b) The population has been manipulated by the nationalist elites and will choose more moderate political leaders in elections, as long as these are free and fair.

Both assumptions emerged as being flawed. Despite a number of smaller incidents, the nationalist parties did not threaten the international presence, even later as it became more assertive as it started arresting indicted war criminals. On the other hand, the first elections held only 9 months after the coming into force of the peace accords in September 1996, consolidated and thus legitimized the rule of the three nationalist parties. While the result can be explained in part by the absence of free and fair conditions during and before the elections, the causes lie with the fact that a majority of the population actually did support the nationalist parties. The prevalence of nationalist sentiment continued to shape electoral choices of the population.

During this first phase, lasting from December 1995 until December 1997, when the Office of the High Representative (OHR), the international organization charged with overseeing the civilian aspects of the implementations, the implementation of the peace accord restricted itself to Annex I A,

i.e. the establishment of a cease-fire. The reluctance of IFOR/SFOR to act in areas outside the narrow military implementation process and the lack of power given to the civilian agencies meant that joint institutions existed only pro forma, freedom of movement across the inter-entity boundary was strictly limited and the parallel power-structures of the three nationalist parties remained largely undisturbed.

## 3. Governance without Participation

While the first phase of the implementation of the Dayton Peace Accords could be described as a ceasefire, the approach of the international community became more interventionist in 1997/1998 when it became visible that nationalist parties are not voted out of office. The re-integration of the state was considered unattainable as long as (a) war criminals were not arrested and (b) any decision to strengthen institutions of the state was blocked or vetoed by one or more of the three dominant nationalist parties.

This new approach was exemplified by the so-called Bonn powers wherein the weak competences of the High Representative were substantially augmented; allowing the OHR to pass laws and decisions and to dismiss elected and appointed officials. Since this increase in power of the High Representative, the office has passed over 100 laws and decisions—ranging from the state symbols and license plates to pension funds—and dismissed over 60 public officials from office, including a president of the *Republika Srpska* and the Croat representative of the Bosnian Presidency. Resulting from this development, Bosnia has gained some attributes of a protectorate since 1997. This followed suggestions of a number of Bosnian intellectuals and international policy centers, such as the International Crisis Group, who advocated increased international intervention and a protectorate to reduce the role of the nationalist parties. The most tangible success of the High Representative's increased role has been the passing of significant legislation that would have either been postponed indefinitely or been watered down. The dismissal of public officials could also be interpreted as a success. The case has been made, however, that the successful outcomes notwithstanding, the process in fact hurt the development of democracy in Bosnia. As Marcus Cox details, the High Representative's decisions relieve the participants in the power-sharing structures from negotiations and compromises, effectively reducing their responsibilities and allowing nationalist politicians to advocate uncompromising positions without the fear of being blamed if no



compromise is found. As a result, "nationalist politicians have often welcomed the High Representative's interventions, which relieve them of the responsibility for difficult political positions." The institutions in Bosnia, in addition to their original weaknesses, have been further weakened by the strengthening of international organizations in the country. It is nevertheless important to note that the representatives of the three nationalist parties demonstrated little willingness to engage in serious negotiations even before the enhancement of the HR's role.

Within the different layers of governance, international representation is also interlinked with Bosnian state institutions themselves. The Constitutional Court, the Human Rights Chamber and the Central Bank incorporate significant international participation. The international judges and Governor of the Central Bank are not representatives of international organizations, but merely appointed by them (the European Court of Human Rights, the Council of Europe and the IMF respectively). As such, they become "Bosnian" actors, with the primary advantage of not being a member of the three national groups and thus resembling a neutral arbiter and mediator within these institutions. The inclusion of international members into domestic institutions brings the advantage of not having to bypass domestic institutions to take decisions. In addition, the process of inter-ethnic negotiations is only slightly impaired.

In May 2000 non-nationalist parties for the first time since the introduction of multi-party democracy in Bosnia could make significant gains at the expense of the three nationalist parties. Although the November 2000 elections did not bring about a significant shift of public opinion away from the nationalist parties, with the exception of Bosniak dominated part of the country, it provided an election result which enabled a fragile coalition of multinational and moderately nationalist parties to take over from the 'big three' in the Federation and the state institutions. While the record of the new government has been mixed, it provided the international community with a local interlocutor in the implementation process. The emergence of local partner coincided with a shift of the international communities' policy, which recognized the need to strengthen the state institutions. A number of individual events, such as key Constitution Court decision, the change of regime in Croatia and Yugoslavia, as well as the isolation of Croat extremists with the HDZ due to the proclamation of Croat self-government in March 2001, furthered the demise of parallel power structures.

The role of the international community as 'governors' of Bosnia remains significant nevertheless. This was evidenced in April 2002 as the High Representative decreed constitutional changes in both entities to bring them in line with the Constitutional Court decision of July 2000. The decree was deemed necessary, as the proposals agreed upon by the moderate parties did not muster sufficient support in the parliaments of both entities. The previous High Representative Wolfgang Petritsch justified these amendments as being based at least partly on the consent of the parties: "This is not an outright imposition as used to be the case in old times. This is clearly a new approach, I would say — this is a partnership." Petritsch's comment highlights the difficulty of the Western community with imposing fundamental laws in a country where it seeks to simultaneously further democracy. Whereas international actors, including Wolfgang Petritsch are aware of this dependency trap, it has proven hard to escape the dynamics of benign Western intervention.

#### 4. Foreign Civil Society and Foreign Aid

Another type of dependency is best exemplified when examining the non-governmental sector in Bosnia, which has received substantial western aid over the post-war year in an attempt to strengthen 'civil society' and subsequently non-nationalist alternatives to the dominant political parties. Despite considerable efforts, the position of the non-governmental sector in Bosnia remains very weak even six years after the end of the war. While some of the weaknesses can be attributed to region-wide phenomena, such as a lack of tradition of volunteerism and economic hardships, some are Bosnia-specific. The war and its effect on the social structure and Bosnia as a whole has rendered the development of the NGO sector more difficult. The ethnic divisions in the country, as well as its territorial expression through the creation of the two entities, have presented itself as a further hurdle for non-governmental organizations.

Finally, the case can be made that international intervention into all political spheres and the large international presence effectively reduced the potential of local grass roots NGOs. There are two main reasons for this phenomena: (1) The international organizations with their need to staff their organizations hired many citizens who would have otherwise become active in the Civil Society, especially those with higher education and language skills. (2) There has been a dependency trap, which created numerous initiatives based on the assessments of Western



donors and less on local needs. Frequent changes in Western priorities in the country, the 'discovery' of new topics of interest which push previous ones in the background, has had a negative impact on the long-term development of local capacities and structures.

The funding, mostly originating from governmental sources in North America and Western Europe, as well as also from some private sources, most importantly from George Soros through the local Open Society Foundation, has been significant and yet frequently uncoordinated and directed towards short-term projects. Frequently, NGOs are de-facto 'commissioned' to carry out the Western donors policy priorities and have little room to develop their own priorities, being largely reduced to 'service provision.' The reduction of international funding in Bosnia might further weaken NGOs.

The outcome of most support for civil society in Bosnia by the international donor community has been largely dismal. Despite considerable resources invested, the long-term impact is likely to be limited. Not only do the priorities of the donors change too frequently, but also there are also insufficient quality controls of the work of the local NGOs and few attempts have been made to establish a link of accountability between NGOs and the citizens of Bosnia. As a result many citizens see NGOs either as irrelevant for their lives or merely as a possible job opportunity. In addition, a large number of NGOs suffer from a credibility gap, as NGOs are bound by the need to direct their attention more at international donors and less at their local constituencies.

## 5. Conclusions

As detailed above, the political sphere and civil society—as a mediator between the political sphere and society—have been dominated by the international community. While this intervention has been motivated by an attempt to undermine the nationalist groups that were responsible for the war, it actually reinforced some key phenomena, which can be identified as root causes of the conflict:

- *Lack of responsibility and accountability of the political elite.* The political elite is accountable to the international actors, but less to domestic audiences. The fact that decisions are taken irrespective of the political elites rhetoric by the international community short-circuits classical accountability. In addition, the international actors themselves are accountable to international organizations, but not to the Bosnian population.

- *Complexity of the decision making process - the dispersion of power.* The decision making process

in Bosnia is nontransparent and complex that even most observers cannot easily identify the location of power. This is in part the result of the complex structure of the countries institutions and partly resulting from the existence of parallel power structures. In combination, these mirror the complexity of the socialist system of self-governance which facilitated the rise of nationalist parties on the premises of reducing complexity by relating directly to their respective ethnic groups.

- *Over-institutionalizing Ethnicity.* The international organizations have, while opposing extremist parties, continued to emphasize ethnicity in both the institutions and informal arrangements. Reminiscent of the communist rule, when the 'ethnic key' was of paramount importance, ethnicity permeates all institutions and spheres of governance. The emphasis on ethnicity tends to render the emergence of more integrative concepts difficult to take hold.

- *Creating Dependencies.* In civil society and in politics, as well as in the economic development of Bosnia, dependencies on the international actors have been created which limit the development of a democratic culture and render a transfer to complete self-rule more difficult.

While most observers of the peace process would agree that there has been some degree of improvement in terms of implementation and 'normalization' in recent years, most structural problems remain. The acceptance of the state by two of its constituent nations, namely Croats and Serbs remains very low. In December 2000, shortly after the elections, which for the first time gave a (slight) majority to non-nationalist and moderate parties in Bosnia, a majority of Croats and Serbs opposed Bosnian statehood. Among those surveyed in *Republika Srpska* 60.8 percent supported either the entity as an independent state or its accession to the Federal Republic Yugoslavia. In majority Croat areas of the Federation, the support for joining Croatia stood at 4.4 percent, while 37.6 percent favored the creation of a separate territorial unit within or outside Bosnia.

On the side of social and economic indicators, the situation is similarly bleak in both entities of Bosnia. Unemployment in both entities stands above 40 percent with those who are working in the Federation gaining an average income of approx. 430 DM and approx. 300 DM in the *Republika Srpska*. As has been noted by the ICG, 46 percent of the Federation population and 75 percent of the RS population cannot afford the basic basket of goods and foods, considered to be the minimum for a family of four.

The consequence of the lack of progress in interethnic confidence, distrust in institutions and



economic and social decline has been the emigration (or the wish to do so) by a significant share of the population. After the end of the war in December 1995 over 100,000 Bosnians left the country by the end of 2000 according to official numbers (approx. 2.6 percent of the population), with over 60 percent of the Bosnian youth wishing to leave the country.

While these figures do not represent an exception in the region where both social and economic indicators and the desire of citizens to leave their country are comparably high, Bosnia represents a country, which has been considerable Western investment and involvement in the past six years.

The experience of Bosnia in the past seven

years demonstrates that there is no recipe for international agencies, which would guarantee success in reconstruction of society and re-building of trust. It would be thus flawed to identify one 'solution' to the dilemmas herein. Instead, a more effective policy will have to address a number of the issues here. Most importantly, intervention has to be limited and careful as to not foster political and social dependency on intervention. In an attempt to undermine extreme nationalism, it also has to take into account the structural reasons, which lead to their rise, rather than identifying nationalism as a self-standing phenomenon. In Bosnia, fear has been reduced, but trust is yet to be built between its citizens.

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