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Bosnia's Bubbling Tensions

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| May 16, 2011

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Nation-building bureaucrats continue their quixotic quest to transform Bosnia-Herzegovina into a viable country. That effort truly symbolizes the triumph of hope over experience. It has been more than 15 years since NATO imposed the Dayton Accords on the three fractious ethnic groups and ended the civil war that had claimed 102,000 lives. Yet Bosnia is not significantly closer to economic and political viability now ^[3] than it was when the accords were signed. Indeed, recent signs suggest that the situation may be deteriorating rather than improving.

The chief colonial official is certainly worried. Austrian diplomat Valentin Inzko, the latest in a series of UN-authorized "high representatives" in Bosnia, presented an alarming report to the Security Council on May 9. Inzko was especially agitated because the parliament of the Bosnian Serb Republic (one of the two subnational entities that make up the cobbled together Bosnian state) had authorized a June referendum to challenge the legitimacy of the national court as well as Inzko's authority to overturn laws and fire appointed and elected officials.

The virtually dictatorial power that Inzko and his predecessors have exercised has been a source of anger, especially among Serbs, since Dayton, and it makes a farce of Western claims ^[4] to be promoting democracy ^[5]. Showing how much he respected this latest attempt at democratic impertinence, Inzko stated ^[6] that if the Bosnian Serb parliament did not drop the referendum plan, "I will have no choice but to repeal the referendum decision."

But according to Inzko, the referendum was merely the tip of a very large and dangerous political iceberg. He told the Council that the international community faced "the most serious and most direct challenges to (Dayton) since it was signed." The Serb Republic, especially its president Milorad Dodik, the high representative fumed, has "continued openly to question the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Bosnia." As a result, Bosnia's bid to join the European Union and NATO had "come to a complete halt."

A skeptic might ask why any rational NATO or EU official would want to invite a bitterly divided state that is nothing more than an international political and economic ward to become a member of their organizations. Inzko conceded that there was no sign that the ethnic divisions

were going to ease. Seven months after general elections, formation of a central government had become “almost impossible.” The ethnic-based political parties “have continued to play zero-sum politics,” he lamented.

Given such a depressing report, one might think that Western officials would be ready to toss in the towel and admit the obvious—that Bosnia is an inherently dysfunctional, artificial state. The reality is that absent NATO's intervention—and ongoing military occupation—Bosnia would have fragmented more than a decade ago. Two of the country's three ethnic groups, the Serbs and the Croats, want no part of membership in the Western-designed Frankenstein's monster. Since they make up over half of the country's population, prospects for Bosnia's viability are, and will remain, dismal.

The West should give up its stubborn, futile nation-building project. Instead, the objective should be to facilitate a peaceful partition [7] of this pretend country. But don't hold your breath waiting for some rational thought to penetrate NATO policy circles. Western officials said they would back Inzko in any action he decided to take. More ominously, U.S. envoy Rosemary DiCarlo stated that Washington “was in the process of considering our own measures in support of Dayton and Bosnian state institutions.” The United States and its allies seem to be flirting with the notion of wading even deeper into the bubbling Bosnian bog.

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