

Reasons for Instability in Bosnia

CPT ROBERT PEREZ-ALEMANY

In May 2015, I received the opportunity to travel to Bosnia as a cadre member with the U.S. Army Cadet Command's Cultural Understanding and Language Proficiency (CULP) Program. My mission was simple: be a team leader for eight cadets and help them immerse themselves in Bosnia's customs, culture, language, and community. The primary goal of the program was to teach future U.S. leaders to gain a better appreciation and understanding of other cultures in order to avoid the types of cultural biases and misunderstandings that continue to spur regional conflicts even today.

At the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the lack of understanding U.S. forces had for Iraqi culture and history meant leaders were unable to focus on key issues that could build stability in that region. When I arrived in country, I soon learned that Bosnia was not an exception to this concept since its history — just as Iraq's — is very much intertwined with its own current situation. There are certainly instability issues inherent within Bosnia — conflicts that have been hundreds of years in the making — that hinder the country's progress.

While in Bosnia, the cadets and I could see firsthand various issues we had only read about during our research. Bosnian society is divided between ethnic groups, and the political system is often bogged down in a stalemate. It is an unfair system, but in truth, what we see on the surface is only the consequence of actions rooted in the distant past. I am focusing this article on these underlying issues and possible solutions that could help bring resolution — or at least a measure of stability — to these areas.

If we are to have any positive impact in Bosnia, future U.S. leaders need to understand there are two important factors that hinder stability in the country: one social and one political. There are social factors that have roots seated in the well-known ethnic, economic, religious, and cultural considerations that divide its diverse population; and the political factors have arisen due to the unreasonably complex government structure laid down by the terms of the Dayton Accords. With these two variables in mind, leaders will have a better sense of how to help stabilize the country and hence bring hope to its people.

Bosnia's social issues are rooted in the past and stem from conflict between different empires and cultures. Its history is very complicated and a sensitive point to Bosnians, and it requires a brief overview to make its social issues more apparent. The Romans, Byzantines, and Ottomans have influenced the country at different periods over the past 2,000 years. Today, the remnants of these empires still live together.¹ Today's Bosnian wants to live peacefully with his neighbors, but the intentions of those individuals are immediately marred by long-standing ethnic tensions existing throughout society.

To better understand those tensions, let us consider the three main ethnic cultures in Bosnia:

- The Bosnian Muslims (known as the Bosniaks) make up half the country's population and can trace their lineage back to the Turkish rule of the Ottoman Empire;
- The Croatians, who are mostly Catholic, have migrated southward into Bosnia over generations and centuries; and
- The Serbians, who were influenced greatly by the Byzantine Empire and are mostly Christian Orthodox.²

Today, some Bosnians still identify themselves first as Croatians or Serbians, even if their families have lived in Bosnia for generations. They tend to ally themselves more with the needs of their own motherland (i.e., their ancestors' homeland) than with those of the country they live in. Consequently, this causes tensions with the other ethnic groups. For example, Bosnia has received the attention of its neighbors throughout the years due to its wealth of natural resources. Croatia and Serbia, especially, have each wanted the country for themselves. At one point, at the beginning of the Yugoslavian War, the factions considered dividing the country in half. Indeed, Croatia and Serbia's desire to split Bosnia brought conflict within its borders.³ While Bosnian Serbs wanted the country to align with Serbia, many Bosnian Croats preferred that it align with Croatia, while the Bosniak Muslims wanted the country simply because they had no other country to turn to.

The longest peace known in Bosnia came after World War II when Croatian military leader Josip Broz Tito became Yugoslavian head of state for a conglomerate of nations which included Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Slovenia, and Kosovo. Yugoslavia was already established in 1929, but some of the countries had a hard



time supporting mutual goals without taking Bosnia off the map. It was only after World War II when all members of this alliance were relatively weak that Tito took advantage and established social norms and maintained a relative peace that was to last until his death in 1980. Tito did not align with Soviet Russia's version of communism and allowed religious practice in the privacy of people's homes, but he also used execution and imprisonment to quell nationalistic fervor.⁴ Those actions, though certainly expedient, came to haunt Tito's legacy soon after his death. Nevertheless, during Tito's tenure people had jobs and an efficient public health care system. Bosnia's economy was doing better than ever. To this day, one thing many Bosnians have in common is their love for Tito, which was evident when I spoke with many of the citizens still longing for the old communist regime. Unfortunately for them, Tito's death in 1980 marked the rise of nationalistic fervor, something Tito had sought to control since the early days of his office in 1945.

Rising Serb politicians began scaring constituents into believing Croats and Bosnian Muslims were plotting a coup to take over Yugoslavia. Serb politicians then presented a vision of uniting all Yugoslavian countries, taking away their borders and turning it into just one nation. This vision later became known by the infamous term "Greater Serbia," which evolved into an "either them or us" mentality.⁵ In response to this vision and since the capital of Yugoslavia was in Belgrade, which was in Serbia and hence Serb-controlled, the nations of Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia began seceding in the hopes of avoiding nasty entanglements and regaining their sovereignty. However, Bosnia's secession backfired. The country did suffer (and still suffers) from an identity crisis. Consequently, when war broke out among the Yugoslavian nations in 1991, Bosnian Serbs, believing in their politicians' rhetoric, also began a local war with their neighbors.⁶

Almost instantly, the war in Bosnia took a turn for the worse. Neighbors forced each other out of their homes; commanders and soldiers from different sides conducted genocide which was to cost thousands of lives; and

massive destruction rained on villages and cities. The fight between states changed to its most rudimentary form: a people's fight to protect their homes. A new and chilling course of action — ethnic cleansing — reared its head and evoked memories of German armies' excesses in the Balkans during World War II. It was not until 1995 when the United Nations finally intervened that the war finally stopped, but the damage had already been done and the trust Tito had sought to build between all ethnic groups had been destroyed. Because of the consequences of that war, Bosnia's ethnic divisions and intra-state mistrust are more pronounced today than ever before.⁷

The Dayton Accords, the UN treaty that stopped the war, did little to dispense ethnic divisions. Twenty years have passed since its implementation, and Bosnians still find the accords a sore subject because it is part of their social problems.⁸ The creators of the accords created two separate states inside Bosnia's borders: the Federation of Bosnians and Croats and the Republic of Srpska.⁹ As the title implies, most Bosniaks and Croatians live in the former while most Bosnian Serbs live in the latter. Bosnia's biggest social issue is an identity crisis, and dividing them between states only points out the issue further. Each state has its own separate flag, identity symbol, language, vocabulary, and even holidays.¹⁰ The differences are so stark that when I was there with my team, we traveled between the two states and felt as if we were in two completely separate countries. Bosnia's education system does little to support social stability and also divides children in their respective ethnic groups and teaches them according to that group's perspective. For example, if a child is of Croatian descent, he will receive an education based on Croatians' perspective of Bosnia's history. The child will only see one perspective of history and grow biased against others.¹¹ This biased perspective is one of the reasons the war started in the first place. Bosnia's social problems have come full circle, and these problems have marred every level of its government as well.

Bosnia's politics is a byproduct of its social issues, and the Dayton Accords set the stage for a government currently in disarray. For more than 40 years, a communist regime ran Yugoslavia, but then the war abruptly stopped it from functioning. The architects of the Dayton Accords established an immediate removal of the old political system.¹² Unlike the Soviet Union, where the nation made a peaceful transition towards democracy, Bosnia had a rapid overhaul of its political system. There was no period of transition, not even to let its people adjust. Bosnia literally went from communism to democracy in a matter of days. To make matters worse, the architects of the accord split the powers of the government between all ethnic groups. That meant that although Bosniaks made up more than half of the country's population, they can only control as much of the government as the Bosnian Serbians and Croatians. The decision at the time made sense. Each ethnic group was afraid of the other, and no group wanted the other to have an advantage. The problem is that today we see as a consequence a decentralized government that does very little for its people because each ethnic group is only looking after its own interests.

Let us look at the executive branch of government as an example of the complications Bosnia suffers in its political system. To begin with, there are usually three presidents in charge of Bosnia, with equal power and representing either Bosniaks, Croatians, or Serbians, but there has to be one from each of the major ethnic groups. The concept trickles down to all levels of the national government. Everything is attempted to be split in three, and each group attempts to hamper the others' progress. They have different visions when it comes to state building. For Bosniak politicians, their goal is to move away from a more decentralized government. A centralized government would mean the executive power will focus only on one president, and it will be harder for government officials to block decisions. It is no surprise then that the other ethnic groups mistrust this idea. Bosniaks make up more than half the population and could potentially take over the whole government. Bosnian Serbian politicians, unlike the Bosniaks, favor a decentralized government. Since they are a minority, it helps them maintain sovereignty over their state, the Republic of Srpska, and keep the other ethnic groups from having a stronger influence in the government. Croatian politicians mostly fight to have a separate entity from the federation. They only find it fair since the Bosniaks have most control over the federation's government and the Serbians have their own state. All of their goals are not aligning and with no president willing to step back to make progress, a political stalemate results.¹³

As a whole, Bosnia's politics are much more problematic at the state level. The Dayton Accords created an ethnic quota policy, very similar to affirmative action, with various faults and loopholes. In the Republic of Srpska, local government positions are occupied by more Bosnian Serbs than any other ethnic group. In the federation, Bosniaks are the ones taking the majority of the positions. Ethnic groups do not make decisions in a consensus. Rather, each state favors the dominant ethnic group in the region, thus creating friction instead of unity. The key element for the policy is to ensure that no group has advantage over the others, but where it fails is in its implementation.

Instead of making a government organization where there are an equal amount of positions for all ethnic groups yet still working together, the accord's architects decided instead to not only have ethnic quotas but to also separate the groups. The result is a complete division of culture, one that we can see clearly between the republic and the federation.¹⁴ When the cadets and I traveled from Sarajevo (federation) to Banja Luka (republic), we felt as if we had traveled to a completely different country. The attitudes were different. The alphabets were different; Banja Luka used the Cyrillic alphabet, while Sarajevo used the Latin alphabet. Even the language, which is supposed to be the same around the region, has its differences. It is like listening to differences between people from England and the United States. The ethnic quota policies just hamper the possibilities for change. The divisions are there, unfortunately, and they are more visible because of the issues we see today in the political system.

The social and political instability in Bosnia no doubt grows overwhelming for many of its citizens. The issues are more extensive and convoluted than what meets the eye. Bosnians either keep reminiscing about Tito's regime or they will not let go of the horrific memories from the Yugoslavian War. Though recent wounds may hold this current generation of Bosnians from moving forward, youth leaders still hope to positively influence future generations. Throughout our trip to Bosnia, my team and I visited two youth education centers, one in Travnik and the other in Orasje. What we saw was a definite spark of hope: young teenagers, all from different backgrounds, helping each other and their communities. They all acted like best friends, enjoying life and singing American pop songs. We were definitely surprised and humbled by the experience.

One of the youth leaders in Travnik, Amela Mrakic, expressed the importance of having these young citizens be active participants in their communities. From helping remodel children's playgrounds to organizing projects for teaching children how to cross streets, the values these teenagers develop will help them be better servants for their communities and aspire to make positive change in their society. I did notice, however, that these centers have rarely interacted with Americans before. Yet, we were already heavily invested to their cause within a few days of being there. In Orasje, we helped build a new playground open for anyone or everyone. In Travnik, we helped



**Cadets participating in the CULP program help build a playground in Orasje, Bosnia.
(Photo courtesy of author)**

remodel three playgrounds that were also open to everyone. Which begs the question: Why don't we do this more often? The U.S. Embassy does not have to wait for U.S. cadets to visit every summer to support these youth centers. It can potentially create a program to bring college students from the U.S. and help support the local youth centers in their various endeavors. It can also bring various secondary outcomes. It may slowly repair any U.S. and Bosnian misperceptions at the individual level, and most importantly, these students can share values of equality, peace, and the importance of tolerance — values that make democratic nations great. The embassy may also open the opportunity for Bosnian students to travel to the U.S. as interns. The possibilities are limitless. As allies of Bosnia, the U.S. through its embassy should give more support to these youth centers since we, as Americans, can also have a positive influence in children and slowly build a deeper relationship not necessarily with the government, but where it matters most — with its people.

Bosnia's social and political stability issues are important for U.S. leaders to understand. The ethnic divisions in this country are very much real and have become part of Bosnia's culture. As we learned from recent conflicts, it will be very hard to refocus people away from that mentality. It does not help that there is political instability, due in part to the Dayton Accords which do little to improve unity. The accords could potentially go away one day, but unless all ethnic groups start working together with each other, they will not. Moving beyond the Dayton Accords is something only Bosnians can achieve. The Bosnians of this generation may be mired in their old ways, but these teenagers my team and I met gave me hope.

Notes

¹ Nicolas Moll, "Fragmented Memories in a Fragmented Country: Memory Competition and Political Identity-Building in Today's Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Nationalities Papers* 41, no.6 (November 2013), 917-922, Sociological Collection, EBSCOhost (accessed 6 August 2015).

² *Ibid*, 917-930.

³ Jasmin Mujanović, "Reclaiming the Political in Bosnia: A Critique of the Legal-Rational Nightmare of Contemporary Bosnian Statehood," *Theory in Action* 6, no.2 (April 2013), 118, Social Sciences Full Text (H.W. Wilson), EBSCOhost (accessed 6 August 2015).

⁴ Anto Knezevic, "Childhood Traumas and Wars: The Case of Bosnia," *Journal of Psychohistory* 36, no.3 (Winter 2009), 265, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed 14 September 2015).

⁵ Mujanović, "Reclaiming the Political in Bosnia," 125.

⁶ Alex N. Dragnich, "Dayton Accords: Symbol of Great-Power Failings," *Mediterranean Quarterly* no.2 (2006), 51, Project MUSE, EBSCOhost (accessed 13 September 2015).

⁷ Zoltan Barany, "Building National Armies after Civil War: Lessons From Bosnia, El Salvador, and Lebanon," *Political Science Quarterly* (Wiley-Blackwell) 129, no. 2 (June 2014), 211-238, MasterFILE, Elite, EBSCOhost (accessed 6 August 2015).

⁸ Outi Keranen, "International Statebuilding as Contentious Politics: The Case of Post Conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Nationalities Papers* 41, no.3 (May 2013), 358, Sociological Collection, EBSCOhost (accessed 6 August 2015).

⁹ *Ibid*, 356.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 365.

¹¹ Mujanović, "Reclaiming the Political in Bosnia," 126.

¹² William Hunt, Ferida Duraković, and Zvonimir Radeljković, "Bosnia Today: Despair, Hope, and History," *Dissent* no. 3 (2013): 23, Project MUSE, EBSCOhost (accessed 6 August 2015).

¹³ Keranen, "International Statebuilding as Contentious Politics," 356.

¹⁴ Moll, "Fragmented Memories in a Fragmented Country," 917-930.

CPT Robert Perez-Aleman is currently a student in the Aerospace Engineering Program at the Naval Postgraduate School. He previously served as the Maneuver Captain's Career Course (B Company, 3rd Battalion, 81st Armor Regiment, 199th Infantry Brigade) company commander from June 2016 to March 2018. His other previous assignments include serving as the Engineer branch chief for the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation as well as a rear detachment S3 and a combat engineer platoon leader in the 3rd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division. He graduated from the U.S. Army Military Academy at West Point, NY, in 2010 with a bachelor's degree in mathematics and has also earned a master's in public administration from Columbus State University.