

The Fake State of Bosnia-Herzegovina

Is it conceivable to accept a partial and incomplete democracy to avoid war? Yes, absolutely. But let's take the notion a step further. To preserve peace is it possible to pull out a band-aid called fake democracy and apply it to a wounded state that's really a fiction, one that exists in name alone amid unresolved and probably insoluble problems? Yes again. Welcome then to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the strangest republic – counterfeit to the core – to emerge from the former Yugoslav federation.

Bosnia and Herzegovina was born out of the 1995 Dayton Accords, an national invention intended to help forestall further carnage in the European heartland less than an hour's flight from Rome and not far from the Adriatic seacoast, where millions of Italians go on vacation. If the slaughter of tens of thousands of Muslims in Srebrenica shocked the civilized conscience (a shock that came late), the siege of beautiful Sarajevo did the rest. For two years, Serbian snipers positioned in hills the shot at anything that moved through city streets, killing thousands and jarring the conscience of anyone who believed in basic human rights.

But if you haven't visited the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina you can't fully appreciate the depth of the infamy and of human obtuseness. The result is that that Sarajevo, the Austro-Hungarian jewel-city that directly witnessed the plunge into World War I as a result of the 1914 assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, a city which tested and then built the empire's first tram structure,

is now lived in by an ethnic population completely different from the one it possessed before the start of the 1990s fighting. The city once known as the Jerusalem of Europe oversaw a miracle of sorts, with its churches, mosques and synagogues representing the reality of Catholics, Orthodox, Muslims and Jews living together peacefully, side-by-side, as good brothers. Today, in the wake of the siege and the Diaspora that followed, most residents of Sarajevo are Muslim. A Muslim population that once stood at 47 percent now numbers more than 80 percent.

But it's European-styled Islam. The popular and respected foreign leader in the city is Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. No one here has forgotten Sarajevo past role as a shining star in the Ottoman orbit.

On Oct. 7, Bosnia and Herzegovina held what in reality were useless elections, because the underlying reality is unavailable to fundamental change. In the so-called Republika Srpska, where power resides with Bosnian Serbs, the winners, not surprisingly, were the Serbs won. There was one novelty, however: ultra-nationalist extremists, the brethren of Radovan Karadzic, didn't win the day. Instead, moderates came out on top. Truth be told, moderate is relative term. Maybe it's best to say the moderates among the ultranationalist extremists.

As for the heart of the country, namely the Confederation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (in essence, the Muslim-Croat

entity), Muslims won, once again no surprise at all. There was one novelty that differed starkly from the results in Srpska: Moderate hardliners won in Sarajevo. Hardest hit were Catholics, members of the Croatian minority, many of who have left or are leaving the country. It's a massive and constant exodus, one that risks endangering fragile balance that guarantee local peace.

The institutional fiction that is Bosnia and Herzegovina is made clear by the fact that it has three national presidents, Serb Vladimir Radmanovic, Muslim Haris Silajdzic, and Croate Zeljko Komsic. They count for little. More important are Zivko Budimir, president of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Milorad Dodik, who heads the Republika Srpska. With three official but ceremonial presidents formal, two substantial ones, two governments, and an infinite number of available veto powers, it's not hard to understand the country's ongoing problems.

In September, Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti was in Sarajevo to attend the opening of an annual inter-religious meeting organized by the Community of Sant'Egidio. After an opening speech, he spent most of the next morning meeting with all the leaders of what amounts to a hobbled and disconnected national puzzle.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, which counts fewer than four million inhabitants, has long dreamed a place in the European Union, a vision the ongoing



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Refurbished city hall in Sarajevo.

economic crisis hasn't diminished. But its ambition, at least for now, is tied to impossible goal; impossible because of the previously mentioned fiction and the institutional chaos it can't do without. Not only that. There are "red lines," essentially impassable obstacles. For example, in public discourse the existence of a Serbian-Croatian language (which everyone knows) is never mentioned. Nor is the Bosnian language. Instead,

all speak very generally of a "local language." The Siege of Sarajevo, which is a historical fact, is unmentionable as such. The city was instead "barred" or "blocked." The contradictions and hypocrisy don't end there. Though the capital is secular and respectful to all faith, the city's new luxury hotel, the Bristol, was built with Saudi and Kuwaiti capital and doesn't serve alcohol. Even local currency is at the mercy of ethnic

caprice. In use is the so-called Bosnian mark, which equals to about half a euro.

What happened behind the scenes of the painstakingly arranged Sant'Egidio encounter is instructive. The Orthodox patriarch attended the meeting, as did many Serbian officials from Belgrade. But no one from Banja Luka, the capital of the Republika Srpska, bothered showing up. Ecumenism and institutional sharing are impossible in a country in which the location of the true center of gravity remains elusive.

At least there's football, which seems to transcend scandals, economic crisis, and ethnic disagreements and endure as the citizenry's only compellingly shared passion. The Bosnian national football team, which so far has performed ably in World Cup qualifying matches, is compact and strong. The team is backed as enthusiastically in Sarajevo as it is Banja Luka.

While it's certainly cheering this unexpected unifier, there's the matter of the nation anthem. It exists, yes, but just the tune. It has words but you can't sing them. Or if you do, you do so at your own peril.

That, in a nutshell, is Bosnia and Herzegovina. ●