

Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2001

Osman Topcagic

**Osman Topcagic is the Ambassador of
Bosnia-Herzegovina in London.**

Since the Dayton agreements of 1995 three elections have been held in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the two constituent entities, in 1996, 1998 and 2000. All featured a kaleidoscopic variety of parties, largely based on particular ethnic communities and representing a range of views on a spectrum from moderate to extreme. None had a majority and coalitions were necessary in all three cases. The international community has a natural preference for dealing with more moderate parties with a multiethnic composition.

The Constitutional Court ruled in 2000 that all three nationalities - Croat, Serb and Bosniak (i.e. Bosnian Muslim) - are constituent nationalities in the whole of the country. Previously Serbs had had that status in Republika Srpska, Croats and Bosniaks in the Federation. From now on there will be an increasingly diverse ethnic representation in both parts of the Republic.

The central Bosnian government has only a limited range of functions, but these are gradually being developed. The number of key ministries at the state level has been increased from three to six.

Substantial aid, totalling some \$14 billion, has been pledged from the World Bank, the European Union and other international sources. This has mostly been spent on rebuilding the infrastructure - by October 2000 3.8 billion German marks - and the rest up to a total of 5.5 billion marks on ongoing projects. The aim is to attain a self-sustaining economy; this has not yet been achieved, but the economy is slowly growing, albeit at a decreasing rate, and inflation is practically zero. One worrying aspect of the economic situation is unemployment, at 40 per cent in the Federation, and even higher in the Republika Srpska. Imports are about four times higher than exports. One problem is that comparatively little money has been spent on industry. More investment is needed, but this cannot be expected to happen until there is stability in the region as a whole.

Integration of the different ethnic communities will clearly be a long and difficult process. However, progress is being made. The wish for revenge has largely disappeared. Hatred has been replaced by a general wish for justice to be done, and people are looking to the Hague War Crimes Tribunal, where an increasing number of cases of grave abuses are being considered.

The number of NATO troops in Bosnia-Herzegovina is slowly going down, from 60,000 in 1995 to 22,000 today.

Bosnia-Herzegovina has enthusiastically applied for membership of the Council of Europe, which would help it towards further integration into the European family of nations. There are three main conditions for membership: the effective functioning of the state institutions; the adoption of an election law incorporating the concept of the equality of the three nationalities; and serious attention to securing human rights, including the return of refugees. More than five years after Dayton there are still a million refugees who have not been able to return to their homes. Often the problem is that their villages have been destroyed. In other cases the problem is that the refugees' houses are now occupied by other refugees, who will have to be moved first.

The EU is a major donor for reconstruction in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In 1998 a special relationship with the EU was established, including a task force with EU and Bosnian members to draw up a 'road map' towards association with the EU. Again the same three conditions must be met.

Relations with neighbouring countries are improving. Companies in Slovenia are showing an increasing interest in cooperation. The change of government in Croatia is positive, and it seems that the new administration is now prepared to recognise Bosnia-Herzegovina as an independent state. Recently an agreement was concluded with Croatia on the free reciprocal import/export of goods. There have also been discussions with Yugoslavia aiming to achieve the same level of relations as with Croatia. In 1999 a summit of world leaders to discuss a stability pact for this part of the world was held in Sarajevo. Bosnia-Herzegovina is a key to this process.

Looking to the future, education is of critical importance, in order to raise the morale of young people with better prospects and opportunities in their own country. Sixty per cent of young people want to leave Bosnia-Herzegovina, the same figure as in Yugoslavia. Conditions have to be created such that they want to stay. Help to this end from the international community, both governments and NGOs, would be greatly welcomed.

Bosnia-Herzegovina is where East and West meet. It is not surprising that a specific society was formed there; multiethnic, multicultural, multireligious. Muslims, Christians and Jews used to live there in mutual respect and harmony. This legacy means that Bosnia-Herzegovina has the potential to be a centre for stability in the region. It is dismaying that some commentators are still writing of the need to partition Bosnia-Herzegovina. The argument is that if Serbia were to lose Kosovo it should be compensated with the Serb areas of Bosnia-Herzegovina. This is clearly unacceptable. On whose authority can territory be removed from a sovereign country?

International investment in Bosnia-Herzegovina is still needed, but in the end it will turn out to have been money well spent.