

The Washington Post

In Bosnia, An 'Entry Strategy'

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Tuesday, July 2, 2002; Page A15

As more and more "failed" states are rushed into the international emergency room, the debate over whether to plunge in and start pumping their chests misses an essential point: If you're going to go in, you must stay in. Commitment to such states is far more open-ended than the neat plots of "ER."

After three years as high representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina -- the highfalutin name for the international envoy in charge of implementing the 1995 Dayton peace accords -- I believe I can present a case history that shows how intervention can work.

When I arrived in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1999, it was a divided country and site of the worst war crimes committed on European soil since World War II. Hopes of restoring the country's pre-war multiethnic and tolerant character looked slim.

But I had the benefit of a robust mandate and a clear strategy that focused on core tasks and took the specifics of the country into account. This strategy required maximum coordination among the international actors and the clear prospect of the country's returning to the international fold.

I had three priorities: acceleration of the return of refugees to establish the rule of law; institution-building to turn the country into a functioning state; and economic reform to enable this state to be self-sufficient, at least in the medium term.

With powers that would have made a 19th-century viceroy envious, I did not hesitate to use my authority to impose legislation and dismiss domestic officials -- Serb, Croat and Bosniac -- who attempted to maintain bankrupt nationalist islands, the detritus of a horrifying war. Democracy it wasn't, but then the nationalists weren't using democracy either but rather threats, fear, grenades lobbed in gardens and envelopes of corrupt cash to keep down a traumatized and impoverished population.

Early on in my mandate, the rate of minority returns -- that is, refugees returning to their homes in areas where they are now a minority -- was so slow it would have taken decades to finish it. Closing loopholes in property legislation and firing foot-dragging officials (I removed 22 in one day alone) boosted the rate of minority returns to 67,000 in 2000 and to 92,000 the following year, according to figures from the U.N. refugee agency.

At this rate, all refugees could be home in under four years -- a real victory over the architects of "ethnic cleansing." This victory was not epic and dramatic but was won through coordination, endless meetings to make sure everyone was pursuing the same goal and grinding away at it, even when we

felt we were being pushed backward.

Every legal and economic byway had to be trodden to buttress Bosnia and Herzegovina's future as a functioning state that protects the rights of all its citizens. Communist-era monopolies expropriated by the nationalists were dismantled, taking away their war chests and integrating the country's financial system.

There was carrot as well as stick: An honest chance of joining the EU and gaining the Union's hard-won security and prosperity is something almost all Bosnian citizens want, regardless of their ethnicity.

But I knew intervention, if it were extended over the long term, would fail. It would undermine the whole reason for international engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina, namely, to have the country stand on its own two feet. And it would only earn growing enmity from the country's citizens themselves. Thus I demanded that Bosnians take "ownership" of the process: that citizens and their elected leaders accept the reality that Bosnia and Herzegovina was their country -- and ultimately their problem to solve.

The breakthrough came in the elections of 2000, when nationalist parties at the state level and in the Muslim-Croat federation -- one of the two autonomous entities that make up Bosnia and Herzegovina after Dayton -- were replaced by the Alliance for Change coalition. In Republika Srpska, the other entity, Serb nationalists remained strong, but the parties that formed the new government agreed, under international pressure, to give the premiership to a reform-minded economist.

The Alliance put serious economic reform on its agenda; it actively participated in the global fight against terrorism in the wake of 9/11, proving that the country was not willing to harbor terrorists. Most important, the main parties from both entities -- representing Bosniacs, Serbs, Croats and others -- recently agreed on constitutional changes under which all peoples will be represented at every level of government and public administration and be included in the decision-making process.

I did not impose this. Bosnia and Herzegovina's political leaders themselves abandoned the loathsome wartime framework that had turned the country into so many isolated ghettos. In doing this they accomplished what was not possible at Dayton in 1995. Much older democracies have failed to solve similar constitutional puzzles.

Today Bosnia and Herzegovina is a functioning state with a clear European perspective. The government and its citizens have ditched the "failed state" label, correctly believing they have a real chance of taking their rightful place in Europe.

All this has been achieved through the painstaking adoption of political and administrative measures in the context of a coherent long-term strategy. Rather than simply being an exit strategy, our approach has been to develop an entry strategy: Bosnia and Herzegovina's entry into Europe.

The writer was the high representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina for three years, ending his term in May.