



On the Record: Returning Refugees to Bosnia

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From the AP Editorial Desk

Introduction

Until it was recognized by the United Nations on April 6, 1992, the territory covered by Bosnia last knew independence in 1463, when it was invaded by the Ottoman Turks. It was then absorbed into a series of political arrangements. The last of these was the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), set up after the Second World War.

Yugoslavia was a careful balance of geography and ethnicity. Geographically, the country was divided into six territorial republics and two autonomous regions. Ethnically, the population comprised six ethnic nationalities, or "constituent nations" (narodi), and a series of lesser minorities (narodnosti). The principal unifying forces were Tito and the Communist party.

This system began to unravel after Tito died in 1980. Several factors were responsible: growing economic differences between the republics; the rise of nationalism, particularly in Serbia; and a corresponding fear of Serbian hegemony in other republics, notably Croatia. Bosnia was particularly vulnerable, because of its ethnic composition: 41% of the population were Muslim, 37% Serb, and 17% Croat. As Bosnia itself began to feel the strain, nationalist Croats and Serbs looked outwards towards Croatia and Serbia, rather than joining together to build a new nation in Bosnia itself.

Bosnian Serbs began preparing for war in late 1991, and in early 1992 they linked up with the Serbian army (at that point still called the Yugoslav National Army) and Serbian paramilitary forces to attack non-Serbs in a broad arc across northern and eastern Bosnia. A second front opened in the war in the spring of 1993, when Croats and Muslims began fighting in Central

Bosnia.

After the initial shock of invasion and mass expulsion, the war turned into a myriad of local conflicts. This gave the conflict an intensely local feel -- which in turn dictated the exodus of refugees and their attempts to return home as described in the series that follows. In some towns, the "front" passed along streets, and even (as in Gornji Vakuf) through individual buildings. In others (Goražde, Vitez, Bugojno, and Novi Travnik) it was fought out over individual arms factories. In still others, small groups were surrounded and besieged. One dramatic example occurred in the Muslim sector of Vitez, where 1200 Muslims spent the war surrounded by a larger pocket of Croats. Nor were community battles necessarily "interethnic." Some of the worst fighting in Bihać pitted the Muslims of Velika Kladuša against their Muslim neighbors in Bihać town.

The Bosnia that emerged from this war resembled a mosaic of tiny city-states more than a modern country. Some of the ethnic fault lines still exist in the mind, if not on the ground. Many are not identifiable from the Dayton map, and many have been subtly reinforced by new municipal boundaries. (For example, the Muslims of Stari Vitez have been included in a Muslim municipality to which they are not physically connected.) This fragmentation poses a formidable obstacle to rebuilding Bosnia as a unitary state, and explains the obsession with creating centralized institutions.

On a more positive note, the war also produced an extraordinary devotion to community and a great sense of self-reliance that helped Bosnians to break with their Communist past. Much of this came from being subjected to a merciless siege. The women of Bihać gave four tons of blood to emergency field hospitals in the Bihać pocket. Then there was the makeshift radio in east Mostar that started transmitting off a 12-watt battery and was forced to change frequencies every few minutes to avoid being jammed by the other side. (The radio performed such a valuable public service in passing messages to families that were split by the fighting that it has been given an extended exemption on its building, which is leased from the post office.) In besieged communities like Bihać, Sarajevo, and east Mostar, preschool classes met in basements while the shells were falling. In Tuzla, the Citizens Forum accepted written messages from family members and then sent them across the frontline through email.

Until 1994, the international community responded to the crisis with humanitarian aid instead of intervening to stop the fighting. In early 1994, the United States brokered a cease-fire between Croats and Muslims (under the so-called Washington Agreement), which then resulted in the creation of the Muslim-Croat Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. In 1995, the Croatian army recaptured most of the territory that had been seized by Croatian Serbs in 1991, and advanced into Bosnia with the largely Muslim Bosnian army. This, combined with NATO bombing, forced the Serbs to the negotiating table, and the historic agreement that was signed at Dayton, on the Wright-Patterson US Air Force base, November 21, 1995.

The Dayton accords created two "entities" in Bosnia -- separated by a demilitarized zone and an "inter-entity boundary line" that was patrolled by NATO. One of the entities, the Serb Republic, covered most of the territory held by Serbs at the war's end and amounted to 49% of the total area of Bosnia; the remaining area, comprising the Muslim-Croat Federation, was based on the

1994 Washington agreement. National elections were held on September 14, 1996 and resulted in sweeping gains for the three main political parties, each of which has a strong ethnic base. Municipal elections were held a year later, and produced a similar result. Ironically, in its attempt to bring democracy to Bosnia, the international community had strengthened the hand of the same nationalist parties that had taken Bosnia into war in 1991, and were adamantly opposed to the return of refugees. This, more than anything, has blunted efforts to promote the return of refugees to their pre-war homes.

Refugees in Limbo

From the diaries:

October 27, 1998. I sat at the kitchen table with Emin and their neighbor, Alma. He told me, "I hate Serbs. That's my personal feeling. I'm sorry, but that's the way I feel. They did so much evil to me. And the way they killed my best friends and relatives, I won't even tell you. Of course, I have to go home and live with them." Emin talked about a good friend of his, a Serb who now lives in Belgrade. He says this man was one of his best friends, but he told Emin, "All the ethnicities were guilty." Emin couldn't abide this. He wanted the friend to say that he felt sorry "for what my people have done to yours."

I ventured that maybe the friend's opinions had been affected by the lack of alternative sources of information in his area, but Emin rejected that possibility. Emin also talked about going back to Kozarac to work on cleaning up their wrecked house. He was working alongside a couple of young Serbs who were from Kozarac. He asked them what years they had been in school, and did they know a colleague of his, a teacher at that school. They said they did. Emin said that that teacher had been killed at Mt. Vlašić, where 174 Bosniaks were taken and slaughtered.

The two young men who were working with Emin didn't know this story, and they asked who had been on the other side, Croats or Muslims. Emin replied, "This was in 1992, right at the beginning. There was no fighting. The Serbs killed them." The young men said, "Oh, I see." And that was the end of the conversation.

During the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia, more than two million Bosnians -- over half the total population -- became refugees abroad or displaced persons within their own country.

The war destroyed one of Europe's most ethnically mixed societies. Before the war, when Bosnia was a republic of the Yugoslav federation, there were villages that were predominantly Muslim, Serb, or Croat. But all of the cities and regions of the country were multi-ethnic.

Now only one or two localities, principally Sarajevo and Tuzla, remain ethnically mixed -- and not at all to the degree they once had been. Of Bosnia's two new "entities," the Republika Srpska (RS) is almost 100% Serb-populated. The Federation contains Croats and Muslims, but only a very small percentage of Serbs.

The country's new ethnic composition reflects the massive dislocation that has occurred. Serbs from Sarajevo now live in Brčko, Srebrenica, and Bijeljina; Serbs from Croatia live in Prijedor

and Banja Luka; Croats from central Bosnia now live in western Herzegovina and Croatia; and Muslims who were displaced from Herzegovina and all of what is now the RS, live in Sarajevo and east Mostar.

If this sounds complicated, it is. Looking at a map does not make it much simpler to understand, for every locality has its own particular story, and the return of displaced persons needs to take place in practically every direction.

Since the end of the war, a half million Bosnians have returned, but fewer than 10% went back to pre-war homes where they would now be part of an ethnic minority: 150,000 have returned under pressure from Germany. (There are still approximately 100,000 refugees in Germany, and tens of thousands more throughout Western Europe, where their residency status is only temporary.)

Why persevere with repatriation? Why not accept the ethnic partition of Bosnia? Because Bosnia will only truly be a united country when its two entities cease to be ethnically homogenous territories. As long as Bosnia's Muslims, Croats, and Serbs are geographically separated, politics will be based on ethnic representation and fear, rather than on democratic principles. This is one reason to encourage return.

Another important reason is simply that displaced people are living in collective centers and relatives' homes, as well as in the apartments and houses abandoned by others under duress. These people are disenfranchised, unemployed, and miserable. Many of them want to return home, regardless of what they have experienced in the war. They want to live at home, support themselves, and not spend the next couple of generations as a new Bosnian underclass.

Why can they not return? Over the past few months, I have tried to answer that question from the perspective of those most affected -- refugees and displaced persons and the independent, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are trying to help them return to their pre-war homes. These are people who have experienced the obstruction of the politicians, and the shortcomings of the international community. They have continued to press for their right to return, rather than giving up.

The last few months have given me an intimate, close-up portrait of these remarkable people. I have spoken to Croats, Serbs, and Muslims in different communities. They express the same concerns and direct the same comments at the Bosnian regimes and the international community. They say that it is not enough to repair houses -- important though that is. Returning refugees also need security, employment, and education for their children. Why are these so difficult to guarantee?

Continuous Obstruction

The answer starts with one word: obstruction. The nationalist political infrastructures that were created before and during the war prosecuted the war with the goal of ethnic homogenization. These nationalist structures are still in power, and have no reason to reverse the changes that they themselves created.

Today, all areas of Bosnia, except for the municipality of Tuzla, are controlled by one nationalist party or another, with largely the same goal. These parties remain in power by obstructing return in every direction, because a restored multi-ethnic voter base would, in a democratic process, soon compel the formation of multi-ethnic administrative bodies.

Obstruction to return is continuous, and it takes many different forms, of which violence is one. Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) have been attempting to return to the west Herzegovina town of Stolac, now controlled by Croats. Over one hundred of their houses have been torched or mined during the process of reconstruction or, even worse, after being re-inhabited.

Serbs returning to the northwestern town of Drvar were met by a mob of Croats in the spring of 1998, forcing them to return to the RS. Croats visiting their hometown of Derвента in the RS around the same time were likewise intimidated. And approximately ten Croats have been murdered in the Muslim-controlled central Bosnian town of Travnik. People returning to areas where they are in the minority are subject to an ongoing, low-level terrorism that effectively sends the message, "Go back where you came from." The consistent comment from activists is that not only are multi-ethnic police forces needed, but also multi-ethnic municipal administrations and court systems.

Employment is a problem for everyone except for politicians and profiteers in Bosnia -- a country where the economy is working at around 10% to 20% of its pre-war level. It is particularly difficult for displaced persons, who have less access to support than others. If they cannot find work in their pre-war residence, they cannot return.

Another deterrent to return comes from school curriculum. Local regimes have established ethnic-oriented curricula, including their own "languages," their own "history," and even their own "geography." A Croat parent will not be inclined to send children to study a Bosniak-designed curriculum. Some parents who have returned home continue to send their children to a school controlled by their own ethnicity, but this is not really practical.

Returnees are also discouraged on all fronts by labyrinthine bureaucratic procedures. Bosnia's laws are increasingly coming into harmony with standards set by the international community, but their enforcement is not. Returnees are required to travel to submit requests for resolution of their ownership status or tenancy rights in person. They are often required to pay prohibitive sums for acquisition of a confounding number of forms. It is very discouraging for displaced people, without income or security, to try and make their way through these Kafka-esque procedures.

The municipal elections throughout Bosnia in September of 1997 were supposed to be a significant step towards the reestablishment of multi-ethnic administrations. This has happened in a few cases, but more often it has been vigorously resisted. By voting in absentia, Bosniaks managed to win a majority of seats on the council of Srebrenica, scene of the notorious massacre in 1995. But when some tried to return to assess the situation, they were met with violence. In many other municipalities, the councils have been ignored by parallel, nationalist power structures, and in some cases two separate de facto municipal councils have been set up.

The tens of thousands of Serbs who once lived in Croatia add another element to the complications of return. Many of these people now live in homes that formerly belonged to Bosniaks or Croats. There is as much obstruction to return to Croatia as there is in Bosnia, with less attention from the international community. This presents an additional serious brake on the entire return process.

All of these problems are mentioned by the local return activists with whom I have spoken. They unanimously call for greater pressure from the international community on the local governments. And the international community has generally responded, sometimes even removing a recalcitrant police chief or mayor from his position -- but the obstruction continues. The observation of many activists is that, although this obstruction manifests itself locally, "at the counter" (where property claim forms are dispensed), it is generated from the top of the nationalist party structures.

The International Effort

The international community is committed to a multi-ethnic Bosnia, and to repatriation. Annex 7 of the Dayton agreement calls for freedom of movement for all Bosnians, for the right to return to their homes, and for compensation if their property is no longer available. The Annex further requires the local governments to ensure the returnees' freedom from discrimination and harassment. Through its "High Representative" in Bosnia, the international community can apply considerable pressure on governing bodies in Bosnia at all levels. Most compelling is its ability to withhold financial assistance for reconstruction. It is also empowered to remove local politicians and police officials from their positions. The Office of the High Representative (OHR) has set up a "Reconstruction and Return Task Force" (RRTF) to coordinate the repatriation work of agencies.

The RRTF oversees the return process, creates strategy for return, and coordinates the relevant efforts of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Commission for Real Property Claims (CRPC), the NATO Stabilization Force (SFOR), the UN International Police Task Force (IPTF), and numerous international refugee-oriented NGOs.

The efforts of these organizations have been impressive. In a country where nearly every city, town, and village has its share of roofless houses, reconstruction projects are taking place by the hundreds, financed by governments and NGOs from nearly all Western countries and many others as well. Ruined roads, bridges, schools, mosques, and churches are being rehabilitated.

The OSCE has contributed invaluable assistance in transporting displaced persons for assessment visits and in support for multi-ethnic community education centers, and nation-wide training for informational seminars on return. And early on, the UNHCR instituted an "Open Cities" program, whereby cities that fulfilled certain criteria conducive to minority return would receive additional financial assistance from the international community. This program now includes more than 15 cities.

The most recent meeting of the Dayton Peace Implementation Council (Madrid, December of 1998) called for more assertive support for return on the part of the international community. The international community has poured millions of dollars into the return effort, and has focused massive resources and intelligence on the problem.

A conference on return was held in Sarajevo last year, entitled "Sarajevo Returns." The objective was to outline a plan to make Bosnia's capital an exemplary place of return, to restore its status as a model multi-ethnic city. Sarajevo's population was once half a million. Around 50% were Muslim, the rest mixed Serbs, Croats, and "others." Today the city holds 350,000, almost 90% of whom are Muslim, including many displaced persons. At that, Sarajevo is still one of the most multi-ethnic cities in Bosnia. The Sarajevo Declaration called for the return of 20,000 non-Muslims in 1998.

In this and other ways, the international community proclaimed 1998 the "Year of Return." It was a great disappointment. With over a million refugees and displaced persons waiting to go home, even optimists call it the "year of preparation for return." The Open Cities are not attracting many returns -- in some cases, cities that are not part of this program have experienced greater return. And according to Human Rights Watch, only around 2,500 minorities returned to Sarajevo last year. The Coalition for Return says that at the present rate, it will take 44 years for everyone to return to Sarajevo.

One of the great hopes of early 1998 was the election of Milorad Dodik as prime minister of the RS. President of the Independent Social Democratic Party of the RS, Dodik had joined a coalition with then-President of the RS Biljana Plavšić to oppose the hard-line Serb nationalists of the Serb Democratic Party (SDS) (Karadžić's party) and the Serb Radical Party (SRS). Among Dodik's many promises to the international community upon his election was that he would encourage the return of 70,000 refugees to the RS that year; yet only around 10,000 returned.

Why is "relocation," and not return, the main dynamic of this period? I will let the words of return activists with whom I have been speaking provide most of the explanation. But the power of the international community has to this date proved no match for the nationalist regimes' determination to obstruct return. The relevant leaders of the international community tend to know what is going on in Bosnia, and are aware of the nature of the problems. Even Bill Clinton has heard of Stolac. But as intelligent as these leaders are, for various reasons they have not been able succeed in making significant minority return take place.

The Grassroots Effort

"There is no tradition of NGO activity in this area. We have woken up late. We thought about doing this earlier, but we didn't know how to make it happen. However, we are determined to go home. I will struggle for the rest of my life to get back what's rightfully mine." - an activist for return.

Many an activist has expressed to me this determination in the face of great odds. But many have also experienced the obstruction described above, and witnessed the inability of the international community to help them return home faster. Some, with an inclination for democratic action,

have taken it upon themselves to build a grassroots force for return. They have refused to be defeated by the odds, and are finding ways to bypass the obstacles.

One of the best examples of a grassroots return organization, one that has had relative success in pressing for return, is the women's group "Srcem do Mira" (Through Heart to Peace).

In 1998 Srcem do Mira began collaborating with displaced Serbs on the other side of the inter-entity borderline (IEBL). Prijedor is full of Serbs who were displaced from Sanski Most, as well as from nearby Croatia. Contrary to Republika Srpska government statements, many of these people want to go home. The NGO community in the RS is considerably less developed than that in the Federation. But the cooperation of displaced citizens groups of different ethnicities is a way to bypass the obstruction on all sides, to promote the development of democratic, civil society structures, and to get home.

As a result of this work, people are starting to move back to Kozarac. The problems of sustainability are still great, and there have even been a couple of bombings of renewed houses. But the effort continues. The will of displaced people to return home in the face of abuse and neglect is impressive.

On a larger scale, the Bosnia-wide independent organization Coalition for Return coordinates and supports the efforts of many local associations of displaced persons. This organization was founded soon after the signing of Dayton, with the assistance of the OHR. Activists in this organization, which has centers in six Bosnian towns, call it a movement. The Coalition provides free legal advice, assistance in house repair, and publishes a monthly newsletter for the displaced.

The hundreds of thousands of Bosnians who were forced to leave their homes during the war have been waiting in limbo now for six to seven years. Desperation and resignation are setting in, as people feel powerless to help themselves. Refugees are returning to Bosnia, but people are also leaving permanently as opportunity allows -- especially young people, and even activists. Last year 18,000 went to the United States.

The international community must become more assertive in supporting return. This must include direct support of the grassroots organizations that best understand the needs and problems of displaced people, and are best able to forge a strategy for their own return.

To this point, altogether too much respect (and money) has been paid to the very same elements that created the ethnic homogenization of Bosnia. The international community cannot help to put Bosnia back together by legitimizing or tolerating those who tore it apart. It is time to work directly with the people who have organized themselves to return home. You will meet some of them in the weeks ahead.

From the diaries:

February 4, 1998. The Bosnian government has been under pressure to choose a new flag with non-nationalist symbols. A commission proposed three designs. I saw them in the newspaper,

and they look geometric, soul-less, and computer-generated. Partly that is the result of having to remove all of the symbols that are meaningful to each ethnicity. The problem is that those symbols mean murder to each of the other ethnicities.

Yesterday the Parliament rejected the flag proposals, and today Westendorp himself chose one. (Carlos) Westendorp is the "High Representative of the international community to Bosnia," who has all kinds of authority to decide such things these days, if the Bosnians don't take care of their own business. This seems to me to be a usurpation of Bosnian sovereignty, but Bosnia is really a de facto protectorate at this point -- in other words, it doesn't have sovereignty. Therefore such a violation of sovereignty, in my mind, is only objectionable inasmuch as the decisions are bad ones.

Mostly they have been good. As far as the flag is concerned, the decision is too bad because the design is more like a commercial logo than a flag. My suggestion would be one with a picture of a sidewalk with weeds growing up between the cracks (my symbol of the impulse for life against all odds).

The Serbian Factor

The war in Bosnia divided the population, with few exceptions, into ethnically homogenized communities. In some respects, the Dayton peace agreement consolidated this by creating two "entities" - the Serb Republic (Republika Srpska -- RS) and the Muslim-Croat Federation. One, the Serb Republic, was ethnically homogenous.

The RS contains 49% of the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is divided into two geographical sections that are connected by a narrow corridor at the northeast town of Brčko. The western section contains parts of the Bosnian Krajina, central Bosnia, and Posavina, as well as the capital, Banja Luka. The eastern section contains Podrinje (the area along the Drina river), eastern Herzegovina, and the former capital Pale, as well as some Serb-controlled suburbs of Sarajevo.

Refugees and the RS: Before the war, the area that is now the RS had a population of just under 1,600,000. Of that number, 369,000 became displaced persons in the Federation, and another 449,000 became refugees in neighboring countries and abroad. Around 120,000 people were killed or went missing. This means that more than half of the original population of the area was displaced. At the same time, over 400,000 displaced Serbs from the Federation are now located in the RS, along with as many as 80,000 Serbs from Croatia. Estimates of the present RS population vary between 1 million and 1.3 million.

According to Rasim Kadić, Federation minister of Labor, Social Policy, and Refugees, 60% of refugees who returned to the Federation from abroad in 1998 were originally from the RS. The largest number came from Germany, where there was strong pressure for them to leave.

Since Dayton, total minority return to the RS has been approximately 12,000. However, at least 5,000 Bosniaks have also left. Organization of advocacy for refugee return got underway much more slowly in the RS than in the Federation, as did the non-governmental sector in general. But

1998 saw some significant progress, with local associations for return forming in many parts of the entity, usually in spite of obstruction from the RS government.

The September 1997 Bosnia-wide municipal elections gave a boost to some local refugee organizations, in cases where displaced persons elected municipal council members in their place of origin. One such case was Drvar, in Croat-controlled western Bosnia. This city was 97% Serb before the war, and Serbs voting in absentia in the RS won control of the Drvar municipal council.

The Drvar victory was significant because it was made possible by a grassroots organization of displaced Serbs, led by Mile Marčeta. Marčeta was elected mayor of Drvar municipality. In early 1998, hundreds of Serbs started returning from the Republika Srpska to Drvar and the surrounding Villages. However, the returning Serbs met with great resistance from displaced Croats living in the town, as well as from the Croat nationalist political infrastructure that held sway there. Sadly, there was a double murder of Serb returnees and a riot against Serbs and representatives of the international community in April of 1998. Many returnees went back to the RS. To date the Serb population of Drvar has grown again, but the movement for return has not regained its former momentum. The Croat opposition to return is still fierce.

At the same time, some of the most violent opposition to return of displaced persons has been in the RS. During 1996 and 1997, return was negligible. Assessment visits were often met by violent mobs. In April 1998, a group of Croats visiting their ruined church in Derventa, with the intention of celebrating St. George's Day mass there, was surrounded and violently attacked.

Politics in the Serb Republic: Serbs in the RS are now divided into two blocs: those who accept at least some elements of Dayton and wish to cooperate with the West, and those (led by politicians who were deeply involved in prosecution of the war) who want weaker ties with the Federation and wish see the RS annexed to Yugoslavia.

The latter group suffered a reverse with the election of Milorad Dodik as Republika Srpska prime minister in early 1998. Freedom of movement was significantly increased, at least in the western half of the entity. Displaced persons from the Federation began making assessment visits to their homes in the RS, and there was a tentative beginning of return, albeit only amounting to a few thousand. In late 1998 and early 1999, there were even some assessment visits and a few returns to the hitherto forbidden eastern part of the entity. The atmosphere in the RS was much calmer after one year of Dodik's term than anyone could have predicted.

However, Nikola Poplašen, member of the extreme nationalist SRS, was elected president of the RS in September 1998, giving the separatists another chance to block progress towards the implementation of Dayton. It was Poplašen's duty to nominate a new prime minister, and he proceeded to nominate a series of candidates who had no chance of being accepted by "Sloga," (Accord) the dominant coalition in the RS Parliament. This stalling process became a primary means of obstruction and an increasing source of tension in the entity over the next six months, as Dodik remained at his post as caretaker prime minister.

Brčko: Another source of tension in the Bosnian Serb republic has come from the arbitration

process over the strategic town of Brčko. Brčko is located in the narrow corridor that connects the two halves of the RS. The decision as to which entity should control it was delayed under the Dayton agreement, and the city has since then been supervised by an international official. Final arbitration, delayed several times, was scheduled for March of 1999.

Serb politicians consider it essential that the RS retain exclusive control of Brčko city. Their claim is that anything less would split the entity in two. The implication is that the RS must remain a territorially contiguous unit, in order to preserve the option of eventual secession from Bosnia and annexation to Serbia.

On March 5th of this year, the international arbitrator decided that Brčko should become a special "District," to be controlled by both entities with free movement for all. This was met by shocked reactions from all politicians of the RS, moderates and hard-liners. Prime Minister Dodik immediately submitted his resignation, and Živko Radišić, chairman of the three-man multi-ethnic presidency of Bosnia, "froze" his participation in that body.

To make matters more complicated, on the same day High Representative of the international community Carlos Westendorp removed Poplašen from his position as president of the RS. This was in reaction to Poplašen's long-term obstruction and, specifically, to a recent attempt to unseat Dodik as prime minister. The international community has attached itself to Dodik as the only politician acceptable for that post, so that when he was threatened by Poplašen, Westendorp put an end to Poplašen's work.

Reaction around the RS was swift and angry. Protest demonstrations, primarily led by the SRS, broke out in many cities. Scattered but ongoing incidents of violence also took place as people attacked offices and vehicles belonging to UN and other international organizations. As a result, most international organizations withdrew to Bihać, Tuzla, and other nearby centers in the Federation.

The NATO Intervention in Yugoslavia

NATO's bombardment of Yugoslavia took place in the middle of this explosive atmosphere. The response was disorder on the streets of the RS, and deepened the chaos in its government. President Radišić and other politicians in Bosnia's joint institutions maintained their boycott. Schoolchildren have been sent to public rallies to chant nationalist slogans. More international targets in Bijeljina, Zvornik, Banja Luka, and Višegrad were attacked. Cooperation between the RS and the international community, as well as with the Federation, came to a standstill.

This does not mean that the warring political factions of the RS are finally unified. Poplašen's dismissal naturally worked in Dodik's favor. Dodik and his Sloga coalition are also aware that they must cooperate with the international community to ensure the survival of their entity. This rational attitude contrasts with the feverish nationalism of the Radicals and their allies, the SDS, who are willing to make enemies of the entire world in the pursuit of their goals. So while the RS Serbs are united around their rejection of their Brčko decision, they remain very much at odds about the functioning of their government.

Poplašen, who still occupies the president's office in Banja Luka, has continuously made inflammatory statements hinting at rebellion. On the other hand, Dodik has returned to his office, and he and his ministers have called for a resumption of Serb participation in the joint Bosnian institutions. Thus the two blocs are still at loggerheads.

The Kosovo crisis could tip the balance either way. Of course, it has infuriated the Serbs of Bosnia, and made them less willing to cooperate with the international community. But it also gives them some solid incentives to keep the door open. The destruction and chaos taking place in Yugoslavia can sink the already ailing economy of the Serb entity, which sends four-fifths of its exports to Yugoslavia. This trade will now be disrupted for a long time to come. Firms that were closely involved in trade with Yugoslavia are now closing down. Substitute markets will have to be sought with the Federation and abroad. An international donor conference is to be held in May, but donors will be hard put to offer assistance to an entity in chaos whose leaders, in spite of desperate need, so obviously oppose Dayton.

Another reason to cooperate is refugees. As of mid-May, the RS is host to around 10,000 refugees or returnees from Yugoslavia, and this number will now increase. They include draft evaders, returning displaced Serbs who had left the Bosnia during the war here, RS citizens studying or working in Yugoslavia, and Serbian families escaping the bombing. All are seeking refuge in the Bosnian Serb entity. With all international organizations except SFOR having left the Serb entity, the Serb Red Cross is sorely pressed to supply even the most minimum assistance to these people.

Meanwhile, the RS's relationship with the Federation has sunk to a new low. The SFOR bombing of a section of rail line in eastern Bosnia, to prevent Yugoslav military transport trains from running between Serbia and Montenegro, prompted Poplašen to declare that the Federation was "participating in the aggression against Yugoslavia," and thereby in direct violation of the Dayton agreement. After the Bosnian Prime Minister Haris Silajdžić spoke out in support of the NATO intervention, the RS government called for his resignation.

As of mid-May, the political situation in the RS has stabilized to a degree. While most of the extreme nationalist politicians are still boycotting the joint Bosnian Parliament, the Sloga coalition is advocating renewed cooperation with the international community. Economic pressure for this cooperation, as described above, is simply too strong to resist. Živko Radišić has partially resumed his involvement in joint government affairs.

Still, the extreme separatist elements have been given a new life by the crisis in Kosovo, and it would be dangerous to predict their eclipse at this point. It will take the emergence of relatively moderate Serb politicians to calm the situation and return to dialogue. They may be hard to find, but the alternative is more chaos, possibly even renewed war in Bosnia. In any event, the outcome of the present standoff is tied to the outcome of the intervention in Yugoslavia.