

Balkan Progress Is Real, So Don't Walk Away Now

Wolfgang Petritsch

SARAJEVO, Bosnia-Herzegovina Just as international engagement in the Balkans has been showing positive results, after 10 hard years and a difficult start, there are growing calls on both sides of the Atlantic to cut that engagement short. Now, with heightened fears of being drawn in between a hazy group of ethnic Albanian guerrillas and Macedonian security forces, many look to a definitive ethnic carving of the former Yugoslavia. Such a solution would be a disaster for both the region and the world.

It was Otto von Bismarck who said that the Balkans were "not worth the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier." His sentiments were echoed this month by Lord Owen, a negotiator during the Bosnia war and a former British foreign secretary, who wrote, "What is needed today is a Balkans-wide solution, through a present-day equivalent of the 1878 Congress of Berlin, with pre-agreed boundary changes endorsed by the major powers." Similarly, speakers at a Columbia University symposium in early March agreed that Balkan borders should be redrawn to create "smaller, more stable monoethnic states."

That monoethnic states don't exist anywhere else - except perhaps Iceland - appears not to have worried the symposium participants. The appeal of ethnically homogeneous states is evidently that strong. The recipe, at least, is simple: gather together the Great Powers - now called the "international community" - and ask them to pore over maps and fix a solution with a red pen, drowning out the cries of competing nationalist leaders with dry sherry. Then get out.

The 1878 Congress of Berlin, presided over by Bismarck, did not achieve peace by dividing the region into such interesting entities as Eastern Rumelia and North Bulgaria. Representatives of the Great Powers refused to listen to the people whose fate they were deciding. The refugee crises, forced population movements and violence of the time barely figured.

Over a century of missed opportunities, bloodshed and suspicion cannot be swept, now, under a carpet in a conference room. To pull out of the Balkans would risk another horrific round of ethnic cleansing. I say this with particular urgency because I am in charge of implementing the civilian side of the Dayton peace accords in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Dayton accords, to this day, satisfy none of the noisy ultranationalists that claim to represent Bosnia's Muslims, Serbs and Croats. But they do win the support of the multiethnic majority in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as indicated by the landmark election last November that brought to power the country's first non-nationalist government. And implementation of the accords may serve as a model for fractured societies like Macedonia.

This month, with the full agreement of the international community, I removed Ante Jelavic as a member of Bosnia's joint presidency and as a leader of the nationalist Croat Democratic Union. He had openly supported two war criminals convicted by the Hague tribunal for crimes against humanity. His party had carried out banned campaigning on election day last November. The final straw was a declaration of "Croat self-rule," which would effectively have torn up the Dayton peace accords and the country's delicate constitution.

All this, proponents of a new Congress of Berlin would argue, only shows the wisdom of dividing everything up and going home. But to do so would be a gross injustice to the millions of ordinary citizens, not only in Bosnia but across southeastern Europe, who want nothing to do with a nationalism that leaves them poor, frightened and isolated.

The victory of Dayton and international engagement has been a lasting peace, a slow but perceptible lessening of fear in Bosnia and Herzegovina and an increasing focus among ordinary citizens on issues that really matter: jobs, a decent education for one's kids, a state that can do business with the outside world.

Our work in Bosnia and elsewhere in southeastern Europe is slow and painstaking. But the progress is real. Careful international engagement is allowing people to forge their own futures, and gives moderates confidence to rebuild their country in the face of extremist and criminal threats.

To walk away now would be to throw away billions of dollars and years of effort. It would vindicate only the proponents of ethnic cleansing. It would lead to territories of ever decreasing and more absurd proportions - and to continuing instability in Europe.

The writer, who heads the international administration of Bosnia-Herzegovina, contributed this comment to The New York Times.