

BiH and Croatian Relations and NFCACF's Commitment to Issues in the Region

By Mark Plavetic

For over 20 years the Croatian community has respected and supported Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH) path to independence and stability. Croatia and BiH are both strategically, geopolitically, historically, territorially, and prospectively oriented toward each other. As trading partners, they share a common aspiration toward European integration into the European Union.

The inner structure of BiH and leadership are controlled by ethnocentric nationalists that seek to divide and are not united under the terms of the Dayton Agreement. Segregation among Croats and Bosniaks are too common in public schools and educates its children to demonize each other based on their religious and cultural difference. Foreign influences in the region from Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey are the leading causes of the economic instabilities that lead to high unemployment rates and a lack of opportunities for privately owned businesses.

The National Federation for Croatian Americans Cultural Foundation (NFCACF) dedicates its work to BiH in finding solutions to help repair the structural and constitutional issues by cooperating with political and constitutional experts and former ambassadors to the Western Balkans. Hosting webinars is a great start to initiate dialogue about these issues and raise awareness to the public. It is also imperative that we remind and educate everyone about the United States' important role in Croatia in the 1992- 1995 war in BiH. We need to share important information on American and Croatian military operations like Operation Storm that helped liberate BiH from Mladic's invading forces. Getting involved in international and regional cooperation with our allies is imperative for Croatian Americans. We also need to help shape the narrative for our allies to understand the sacrifices and struggles that Croats faced seeking independence and willingness to preserve a peaceful and democratic future.

Dayton Peace Accord

The 1992-1995 war in BiH, which claimed at least 100,000 lives, ended on December 14, 1995, with the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords (DPA). Bosnian President Alija Izetbegović, Serbian President Slobodan Milošević, Croatian President Franjo Tuđman, and representatives from the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, and the European Union (EU) met at the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base on the outskirts of Dayton, Ohio. The peace treaty was intended to broker a path toward a peaceful coexistence among the three ethnic groups and avoid further bloodshed. President Clinton stated during the signing, "no-one outside can guarantee that Muslims, Croats, and Serbs in Bosnia can come together and stay together as free citizens in a united country sharing a common destiny."

The conditions of the treaty provided the preservation of Bosnia as a single state comprised of two different ethnic entities, the Bosniak-Croat Federation (FBiH) and the Bosnian Serb Republic (Republika Srpska), with Sarajevo remaining as the undivided capital city. Although the DPA stopped the war and ceased Serbian ambitions to conquer the entire region, the treaty left out many underlining issues leaving the country structurally and socially divided. The treaty allowed a federation for Bosniaks sharing an entity with Bosnian Croats but leaves Bosniak autonomy to suppress Croats by restricting constitutional representation and limiting opportunities such as voting for local leaders and representatives. As of today, Croat-

Herzegovina is not recognized as a third entity in BiH and prevents Bosnian Croatian autonomy. These issues cause them vulnerability to discrimination by ethnocratic Bosniak leaders in FBiH and leave them submitted into an unstable entity, compared to the more stable Republika Srpska, which the dire situation in the nation compels their leaders to break away. The DPA leaves out many pieces to fill and will need cooperation with experts who helped orchestrate the peace treaty to orchestrate prudent solutions that will meet the interests of all ethnic groups. Some of the solutions mentioned were the modernization of the DPA or the creation of a new one that recognizes all three entities under a restructured federalized constitution.

Constitutional issues

The main fabric of the DPA is to guarantee all constituent peoples of BiH – the Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats – to elect its representatives, and their constitutions shall not infringe the rights of their citizens. However, according to the BiH Constitutional court ruling in 2016, the “Ljubic” decision warrants that elements of the country’s electoral legislation, which the constitution guaranteed, were undermined. In response to these issues, the court ordered BiH’s parliament to amend the election law, but parliament has currently failed to act, provoking the court to abolish the election code.

Without functioning institutions BiH would be vulnerable to complete institutional paralysis and disintegration, leaving other entities like Republika Srpska (RS) to create a prominent if not threatening presents in the region. RS, where Russia has dominant influence, would be the only BiH entity left with a stable functioning government, giving it every opportunity for its leaders to pursue their long-held goal of separating from the rest of the country. Not only would RS have a prominent presence in the region, but it would also serve Russia’s strategic goals to stop European integration if the West decides to ignore and assert action.

In 2018, Croatian political parties, independent think tanks, and the Central Election Commission had all offered solutions to fix the electoral code. However, Bosniak political leaders have rejected all these proposals without offering any rebuttals or compromises of their own. This scenario of inaction by the FBiH Parliament caused by the unwillingness of Bosniak politicians to implement the changes in the court ruling will see the BiH political system collapse from within, leaving a vacuum for Russian influence.

Mostar Election

One of the most important constitutional issues that the FBiH faces is voter representation among Bosnian Croats. For the upcoming local elections in Mostar, the FBiH has imposed political representatives on the Croat opposition level in the next election by setting Zeljko Komsic. Although the BiH HDZ party leader Dragon Covic has the support of Croatian voters across the region, the ruling party of FBiH could place their political officials and encourage Bosniak voter turnout to place elected representatives to suppress the will of Croatian voters. Many Croatian officials have called this action a “coup d’état” and “Bosniak aggression” against Croats by taking full control over the parliamentary seats.

This year marks 25 years of the DPA, and annex IV (BiH Constitution) Precisely identifies the position of the three members of the Presidency, the Croat and Bosniak and Serb

peoples, and the clubs of nations when it comes to the House of Peoples. Placing political representatives to fill in seats is against the values and rights agreed upon in the DPA. These actions threaten Bosnian Croats to have third-entity representation in the region. By removing the constitution to prevent Croatian representation, Bosniak party majorities, including the SDA, could abolish the legitimate representation mechanisms to dissolve political power among their oppositions.

There have been many concerns of the Bosniak community bringing in people to Mostar, Travnik, and other towns in Herzegovina (which most of the population is 90% Croat) to vote in the local elections to tip the balance of the voter turnout and numbers that would favor the Bosniak opposition. The Mostar projected election date was set to December 20, 2020, which has left Croats disappointed by the date so close to the Christmas holiday. Experts say the "FBiH's ambition is to suppress the morale of Croat voter representation where most voters will not turn out due to the holiday season." The Coronavirus pandemic has also been a factor in the fears of voter turnout, which would cause further spread of the virus, which is currently a national issue in BiH.

Due to the failure of reforming the election codes, officials have stated that "some other solutions," or territorial reorganization of the state are possible if there is no agreement on changes to the electoral law, which includes adding Croat-Herzegovina as a third entity. The majority of the Bosniak party leaders would not agree to any election laws concerning how representatives are elected since they only favor balanced ethnic and civic representation. In terms of a territorial reorganization, including the talks of federalizing BiH the state, the FBiH will not concede any such discussion that would support a three entity in Croat-Herzegovina.

The NFCACF's commitment is for all Croatians to have constitutional and electoral rights to vote for their local representatives and leaders. BiH is a democratic nation, and that all three entities must respect the constitutional and human rights of all constituents. The Mostar election is imperative for all Croats to understand. Without having Croat representatives in Mostar willing to help voice the Croatian people and if we allow ethnocentric Bosniak leaders to make decisions for us, we lose the academic, symbolic, and cultural significance of the fifth-largest city in BiH. The local BiH elections need proper media coverage as they should. The NFCACF is dedicated in its cooperation with political leaders and experts in the region to find solutions to international news outlets like Radio Free Europe to cover these stories. It is imperative to remind everyone of the FBiH's intentions to dissolve representation from Croats and violate the statutes promised in the Dayton Accords.

Resources

[Jutarnji list - 'Bakir Izetbegović prijeti i zagovara državni udar i agresiju na Hrvate'](#)

[Jutarnji list - Čović o pregovorima s Izetbegovićem o promjeni izbornog zakona: SDA bi razgovore bez dogovora](#)

[Jutarnji list - Šef HDZ-a BiH Čović za izmjene izbornog zakona, Izetbegović za 'odmjeren' pristup](#)

[Bosnia and Herzegovina is on the brink of a constitutional and political crisis. Simply put: If it happens, Russia wins and the United States and Europe lose. - Foreign Policy Blogs](#)

[Parliament speaker: Bosnia and Croatia logically rely on each other | N1 HR \(n1info.com\)](#)

[The Balkans on film, 25 years since the Dayton Agreement - BBC News](#)