ISSUE ALERT

Bosnia 1914-2014: what lessons?

by Florian Trauner

The story is well-known: on 28 June 1914 – exactly 100 years ago – a young Bosnian Serb nationalist, Gavrilo Princip, assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian empire, during an official visit to Sarajevo. Princip's goal was to liberate Austria-Hungary's South Slav provinces from Habsburg rule and to unite Bosnia and Herzegovina with Serbia. Following the assassination, Austria-Hungary (backed by its German ally) issued an ultimatum to Serbia accompanied by far-reaching conditions, including the right for the Austrian police to investigate the crime on Serbian territory. Serbia did not accept all of them, which led Austria-Hungary to declare war.

What initially seemed to be a local issue soon ignited a conflict that was to engulf the whole of Europe. Short-sighted political considerations, inflexible alliances, militaristic mindsets and ethnic stereotypes contributed to escalating and widening the conflict – Europe (and with it the world) 'sleep-walked' into all-out war. True, between 1908 and 1913, European powers had doubled their military spending. And yet, even after the Archduke's assassination, few predicted the outbreak of war – and even fewer, if any, anticipated the scale and magnitude of the conflict.

Right after the end of World War I, the League of Nations was founded in an attempt to mediate among competing interests in the international community: this ultimately unsuccessful initiative was to be replaced by the United Nations in the aftermath of World War II. The first ever protocol limiting the use of chemical weapons was agreed already in 1925, notably following the horrific experiences of the Great War when mustard gas was first used – and the gathering of the EU Heads of State and Government in Ypres (Belgium) this week has been an appropriate symbolic reminder of those events.

Even at the peak of the Cold War, Soviet and US-led talks led to a series of arms control agreements limiting the testing, deployment and possession of nuclear weapons. These agreements were accompanied by verification mechanisms and confidence-building measures. The International Atomic Energy Agency, in particular, was created to prevent the proliferation of nuclear technologies for military purposes. While these arrangements helped address the dangers of the nuclear age, they did not stop another Balkan crisis from escalating into a war in the 1990s, at the (other) end of what Eric Hobsbawm famously called the 'short twentieth century'.

The 'sick man' of the Balkans?

The 1992-1995 (civil) war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was the most violent conflict in Europe since the end of World War II, causing the death of around 100,000 people and contributng to the emergence of the term 'ethnic cleansing'. The conflict ended with the signature of the Dayton Peace Accords on 14 December 1995. The agreement put a stop to the

war but, alas, contributed to institutionalising dysfunctional state structures that have paralysed the new Bosnia up until today. The state is radically decentralised and divided into two entities with substantial political autonomy, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH, comprising ten cantons) and the Republika Srpska. And the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, an international multi-hatted official charged with implementing the civilian aspects of the Dayton accords, is still an active political figure in Sarajevo – almost twenty years after the end of the conflict.

Bosnia has remained mired in a political gridlock that frustrates most of its citizens. The country has failed to develop a shared political culture and a common identity. Political leaders from all constituent communities – but especially from Republika Srpska – still engage in inflammatory nationalist rhetoric and challenge the very constitutional order of the state in which they live. And the Dayton arrangement provides too many political actors with the power to block one another.

While Bosnia's neighbours move on towards integration with the EU – Croatia joined one year ago, Montenegro started EU accession negotiations two years ago, and Serbia in January 2014 – Bosnia's application is stuck. The risk of a return to armed conflict seems very low, due also to the peace-building operations that the EU and NATO have conducted over the past two decades. Nevertheless, Bosnia seems to have no tangible prospect of either joining the EU or, worse still, building a viable state.

Bosnia has not always had such a bad name. In the heyday of the former Yugoslavia, for instance, Bosnia's ethnic and cultural richness conveyed the image of a cosmopolitan and sophisticated 'melting pot' (rather than a 'powder keg'). Ivo Andric's novel, *The Bridge on the Drina* (1945), paints a fascinating historical portrait of the region and its people(s). Some of Tito's closest aides – the Marshal was himself a soldier in the Austro-Hungarian army during the Great War – came from there, too, and contributed to shaping a successful narrative for the whole federation, which later culminated with the 1984 Winter Olympics in Sarajevo. Yet the ensuing 'wars of Yugoslav succession' wiped out all that, including Mostar's Old Bridge – later rebuilt with European, American and Turkish donations.

From Bosnia to Ukraine

Metaphorically, 'Bosnia' can thus be understood today as a warning of how *not* to act (or react) in critical contingencies, and possibly of how *not* to build a state worthy of the name. This is also why the spectre of Bosnia and war has been evoked again, recently, in relation to the Ukrainian crisis – in at least three senses.

According to this analogy, a first Bosnian scenario occurs if the key international players underestimate the dynamic triggered by a seemingly local conflict and slide into a new (Cold) war. Trapped in their own rhetoric, if opponents cross a pre-defined 'red line' they may find themselves unable to stop the ensuing chain reaction. In this case, a conflict so far confined to a few regions in Eastern Ukraine would spread and escalate.

In a second scenario, the crisis develops into a civil war by proxy, in which contested issues of Ukrainian and Russian identity are used and manipulated to fuel internal conflict. As a result, local militias increasingly assume control and push for ethnically or linguistically 'homogenous' regions. Violence then spills over, no longer just targeting a limited number of militants but innocent civilians. Reconciliation and 'nation-building' thus become ever more difficult even as long-term goals.

Finally, in the last scenario, the current crisis is terminated through a political agreement that ends the violence but does not tackle the most contentious issues and does not lay the foundations for a shared future. To stop the fighting, Ukraine is thus radically 'federalised', with far-reaching competences for the constituent regions – making it difficult to govern the country and preserve it as a single and functioning state. Massive external economic support would thus have to kick in and for the long haul – which, considering Ukraine's size and population, would in turn represent a tall order for all potential donors.

Hopefully, the Ukrainian crisis will be resolved without any such 'Bosnia-isation'. Still, the intrinsic value of historical memory and political analogy lies precisely in raising awareness of possible risks and highlighting the need for skilful crisis management – on all sides.

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