

Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

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Dear President Obama

Midhat Ridžanović

I am Midhat Ridžanović, professor emeritus of English and linguistics at the University of Sarajevo.

I am now writing as an ordinary citizen of Bosnia-Herzegovina to inform you about the current catastrophic situation in my country.

In the 1992-95 war all major industrial facilities were destroyed and none have since been reconstructed. A large number of smaller industrial and commercial establishments were bought for next to nothing by high-ranking politicians and their „allies“ from the mafia. With very small investments they were able to create profitable businesses, which now bring them large profits.

All statistical indicators speak of a disastrous economic situation; here are some of them:

1. According to the CIA Factbook, Bosnia-Herzegovina (BH) placed 17th on the list of the 20 most miserable countries in the world; in BH every night every sixth person goes to bed hungry.
2. 47% of able-bodied people in BH are unemployed. In 2012 58,200 people lost their jobs.
3. Government spending – mostly on the politicians' salaries – consumes 56% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and the next among countries with the highest level of government spending consumes only 36% of GDP for the purpose.
4. Every fifth inhabitant of BH lives on \$2 a day. About 20,000 survive only thanks to one daily meal in a soup kitchen.
5. The average monthly wage in BH is \$570. The average pension is \$230 per month, with about half of pensioners receiving only about \$200.
6. Gross Domestic Product of BH is \$17,380,950,750; the GDP per capita is \$4,618, which is considerably lower than any other country in the territory of former Yugoslavia (Macedonia \$5,016, Serbia \$6,018, Montenegro \$7,317, Croatia \$14,457, Slovenia \$24,533).
7. Total debt of the entire population of BH is \$5,078,577,257, while companies owe \$5,833,500,903 to their creditors.
8. In 2012 the foreign trade deficit of BH was \$4,995,312,617.

9. During the first nine months of 2011 foreign investments amounted to \$389,060,195, and during the same period of 2012 they were worth only \$38,912,882, which means that they fell by 81%.
10. After the 1992-95 war BH received \$3,489,875,938 from countries all over the world in donations through official channels. It is believed that some \$3,489,875,000 arrived in Bosnia after the war through unofficial channels; most of the latter sum ended up in private hands.
11. In the latter part of 2012 the number of employed people was about 680,000, while the number of pensioners was 628,000.
12. Banks from Austria and Italy control 90% of the entire banking sector in BH.

We need to add to these statistics the information that the number of suicides per capita is among the highest in Europe. Thus far, four veterans of the 92-95 war have set themselves on fire (one died) in protest against debilitating living conditions in which they live.

The huge amounts of money donated to Bosnia after the war by the international community and by individual countries mostly ended up in the pockets of power-wielders. The government does not have a single serious program for the reconstruction of the economy. Farmers were on strike for over a year, living and freezing in tents outside the government building, but achieved nothing. Other protests didn't produce any results either. The government is mostly occupied with the division of ministerial posts according to the „ethnic quota system“ so that all three „nations“ may be justly represented in the management of the country. The quotation marks around „nations“ are meant to tell you that Bosnia does not have three nations but one – we are all Bosnians. Bosnian Serbs were „made“ from Bosnians of Orthodox religion and Croats from Bosnian Catholics; with Orthodox people the process started towards the end of the 18th century and with Catholics in the eighteen thirties. You can read about this in books written by American historians; I would recommend a small book by John Fine and Robert Donia, entitled *Bosnia and Hercegovina, A Tradition Betrayed* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1994).

Peace in Bosnia was restored by the Dayton Peace Agreement signed in November 1995. The country was divided into two political entities: the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska; the Federation was in turn divided into ten cantons. Each of these twelve polities has its own government. If we add the politically autonomous Brčko District and the superordinate state of entire Bosnia-Herzegovina, we obtain 14 quasi states in a country of about 3,800,000 inhabitants. Political administration of these 14 polities consumes huge amounts of public money, which can be considered wasted because our many governments haven't done anything that would raise the living standards of the people, which are even declining every year. If the two entities must be maintained because of the animosities created by the war, there is no reason for the existence of the cantons, and a huge majority of Bosnians believe that they should be abolished.

Mr. President, you enjoy genuine respect of my fellow-Bosnians because you have achieved results, already in your first term, which are of enormous significance to the American people and, indirectly, to the rest of the world too. I and a large number of my compatriots call the current Bosnian crisis „silent genocide“ because many of its consequences do indeed resemble genocide. It is well known that a critical economic situation is often a precursor of armed conflict, especially in regions like the Balkans with its „rich“ history of warfare.

There are a number of measures that could be implemented – with your support – to improve the

political and economic situation in Bosnia. But they must all start with radical changes of the Dayton Constitution, which was drawn up hastily just to end the fighting, and which even its creators found unsatisfactory (I discovered this in a conversation with Richard Holbrooke, the main architect of the Agreement because I was an interpreter at the negotiations and had the chance to meet him.) A minimal change would be a ban on national parties. Those parties were the main culprits for the outbreak of the war in 1992 and they now constitute the main obstacle to the development of the country in the post-war period, since most of their „activities“ are nothing but struggle for power. Just as the Nazi Party was banned in Germany after World War 2, so too Bosnian national parties should be banned, especially since, in reality, there is only one nation in Bosnia. At the very least, the 14 Bosnian „states“ make this country unmanageable and thereby impossible to improve in any way. Some serious economic analysts even believe that the abolishing of the cantons and the entities would not lead to economic recovery of Bosnia and that the only remedy would be some kind of international protectorate.

Thank you for your time.

Respectfully yours,

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