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Michael Potter

Peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Mostar and Brčko

1 Introduction

This Briefing Note supplements the Briefing Paper *Peace Building Initiatives: Examples Outside Northern Ireland*, 4 April 2014, prepared for the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in the context of scrutinising community relations policy in Northern Ireland.

The Note briefly summarises approaches to post-conflict peacebuilding in two towns in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Mostar in the South-West and Brčko in the North-East. The two towns have been compared due to the different approaches to peacebuilding within one country in the transition from conflict.

2 Context: A Brief Summary of the Post-Conflict Arrangements in Bosnia and Herzegovina

During the process of the break-up of Yugoslavia, the war commenced in Bosnia and Herzegovina, one of the constituent republics in the federation, following a declaration of independence in 1992. In broad terms, the conflict was generally depicted as one between the three main ethnic communities in the republic: Serbs, Croats and Muslims (later to be referred to as 'Bosniaks'), although the actual conflict processes were more

complex than this. The Washington Agreement in 1994 united Croat and Bosniak forces against the Serbs and the Dayton Agreement in 1995 resulted in a cessation of hostilities, with a framework for new political arrangements for the country.

Bosnia and Herzegovina comprises a complex consociational system, existing at four levels:

- A power-sharing national structure comprising the Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina
- The power-sharing Bosniak-Croat Federation¹ and the Republika Srpska² entities
- Cantons within the Federation
- Municipalities in both entities

There is a significant amount of power devolved from the national government to the Federation and to the Republika Srpska.

Mostar is the main city in the Herzegovina region and a municipality with a power-sharing arrangement between the primarily Bosniak and Croat populations. Historically, Bosnian Croats have regarded Mostar as the capital of the short-lived Herceg-Bosna, a self-declared Bosnian Croat entity during the conflict, but denied the status given to the Republika Srpska at the Dayton Agreement.

Brčko is a town and district in northern Bosnia. It was given separate status within Bosnia and Herzegovina as an autonomous region, primarily due to its strategic location in the narrow strip of land (known as the Posavina Corridor) between the two parts of Republika Srpska (see the map at Appendix 1).

Both places suffered severely during the conflict.

3 Models of Peacebuilding in Mostar and Brčko

Mostar and Brčko have been compared due to their differing approaches to peacebuilding following the conflict and Brčko has drawn particular attention due to its special status within Bosnia and Herzegovina. In general terms, Brčko has been hailed a relative success for peacebuilding, while Mostar has been compared as a relative failure³.

A range of factors have been suggested to account for the two different trajectories for areas which have had similar experiences during the conflict. Some of these can be summarised as follows:

¹ Vlada Federacije Bosne i Hercegovine website: <http://www.fbihvlada.gov.ba/bosanski/index.php>.

² Vlada Republike Srpske website: <http://www.vladars.net/sr-SP-Cyrl/Pages/Default.aspx>.

³ For example, Florian Bieber (2005), 'Local Institutional Engineering: A Tale of Two Cities, Mostar and Brčko', *International Peacekeeping* 12(3), 420-433.

- Institutional structures As with the country as a whole, Mostar has ‘rigid consociationalism with territorial decentralisation’, whereas Brčko has a form of ‘flexible power-sharing’⁴. Briefly put, the arrangements in Mostar institutionalise ethnic difference in political engagement and the allocation of space, whereas power-sharing Brčko is less formal with a lack of parallel structures along ethnic lines.
- Sequencing of transformation The international community encouraged early elections and economic liberalisation in Mostar, whereas these were delayed in Brčko. The impact of this was that conflict elites were in the best position to organise for elections and to have the resources to exploit privatisation in Mostar, leading to political and economic domination along ethnic lines, but the delay in Brčko gave other forces time to develop⁵.
- International supervision The international community has used a ‘soft’ protectorate role in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a whole, whereas in Brčko, there has been a ‘hard’ protectorate approach⁶. This has had the effect that, while contradictory in democratic terms, the international community has had more of an opportunity to design and develop systems in Brčko with less interference from ethno-national interests.
- Shared space The strategic importance of Brčko led to it not being allocated to either the Republika Srpska or to the Federation, creating a geopolitical ‘third space’⁷. This has the effect that, while ethno-national interests are still pursued in the District to a certain extent, the two entities do not have direct control over political development in Brčko.
- Integrated education Most education in Bosnia and Herzegovina is through separate schools for the three main ethnic groups in the country. In some areas of significant refugee return, various degrees of ‘two schools under one roof’ systems have developed, but children are still educated separately within the same building. An integrated system was introduced in Brčko in 2001-2, where now 80 percent of classroom time is mixed⁸.

It should be stressed, however, that these are suggested factors for comparative progress in terms of peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Brčko is by no means in an ideal position. There have also been significant critiques of developments in Brčko. Some of these are summarised below:

⁴ Florian Bieber (2006), ‘Local Institutional Engineering: A Tale of Two Cities. Mostar and Brčko’ in David Chandler (ed.), *Peace Without Politics? Ten Years of International State-Building in Bosnia*, London: Routledge, p.115.

⁵ Adam Moore (2013), *Peacebuilding in Practice: Local Experience in Two Bosnian Towns*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p.4.

⁶ Valery Perry (2009), ‘At Cross Purposes? Democratisation and Peace Implementation Strategies in Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Frozen Conflict’ in *Human Rights Review* 10, 35-54.

⁷ Carl Dahlman and Gearóid Ó Tuathail (2006), ‘Bosnia’s Third Space? Nationalist Separatism and International Supervision in Bosnia’ Brčko District’ in *Geopolitics* 11, 651-675.

⁸ Janine Clark (2010), ‘Education in Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Case for Root-and-Branch Reform’ in *Journal of Human Rights* 9, 344-362.

- The situation in Brčko has been created through international supervision and there are questions as to the sustainability of the systems there in the longer term⁹.
- Rather than acting as spheres of alternative political action or communal participation, NGOs have forged close links with international organisations or nationalist political parties to secure funding and legitimacy¹⁰.
- The political arrangements do not seem to have significantly altered how communities regard one another: Survey data suggest that people in Brčko are no more likely to spend time with people from other ethnic identities or even to trust them than anywhere else in Bosnia and Herzegovina¹¹.

⁹ Alex Jeffrey (2006), 'Building State Capacity in Post-Conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Case of Brčko District', *Political Geography* 25(2), 203-227.

¹⁰ Alex Jeffrey (2007), 'Geopolitical Framing of Localised Struggles: NGOs in Bosnia and Herzegovina', *Development and Change* 38(2), 251-274.

¹¹ United Nations Development Programme (2009), *The Ties that Bind: Social Capital in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Sarajevo: UNDP, pp.38, 42.

Appendix 1: Map of Bosnia and Herzegovina

