

Article by Julian Braithwaite: “Don’t miss the train to Europe.”

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That was the answer I gave when someone recently asked me what my one piece of advice was on leaving Bosnia and Herzegovina .

Despite the country’s self-evident weaknesses, I believe Bosnia and Herzegovina has every chance of becoming a viable European state. But only if it joins NATO and the European Union.

The process of joining these two institutions will immeasurably enhance the country’s security, economy and democracy, and complete its transformation into a functional and fully sovereign state. But more than that, membership of an enlarged EU and NATO offers the best chance of resolving the existential question that still plagues BiH: will the Bosnian Serb and Croat communities ever truly accept it as their state?

The best guarantee of that, and therefore of BiH’s long-term viability, lies in membership of a wider political community that includes Croatia and Serbia . An enlarged EU and NATO offers such a community. A community where borders would no longer be a barrier. Where the threat of renewed conflict is no longer a possibility. Where Croats from Siroki Brijeg and Zagreb would be part of a single culture, recognized and supported by the EU. And where Serbs from Banja Luka and Belgrade would share the same citizenship – the common citizenship of Europe . The pressures to define and protect

separate identities within BiH would lessen; support for effective common state institutions would grow; and talk of changing borders would become irrelevant.

In the last two years Bosnia and Herzegovina has in effect begun the process of joining the European Union and NATO. The EU has set out, in a Feasibility Study, the steps BiH needs to take to ready itself for serious negotiations with the EU. NATO has set out clearly the defence reforms and other prerequisites necessary for BiH to join Partnership for Peace, the antechamber to full membership. Bosnia and Herzegovina is at last seriously engaged in the process of European integration.

But whether and when BiH eventually joins the EU and NATO depends on BiH. This future is not assured. The EU and NATO will not lower their standards for BiH. Nor will membership of the EU or NATO always be open to BiH. At some time in the future, enlargement will come to an end. BiH needs to ensure it is inside when that happens.

Let me be blunt. BiH will have to reform much faster, and much more effectively, if it is to stand any chance of joining the EU and probably NATO. The pace of legislative reform has stepped up significantly since the Feasibility Study was published. But it is still not fast enough. And more seriously, there is very little implementation in practice.

Many argue that the real obstacles to joining the EU or NATO are Dayton and the nationalists. Dayton, it is argued, makes effective decision-making impossible, particularly when it comes to difficult and unpopular reforms. And accordingly to this analysis, the nationalists are too wedded to separatist agendas and organized crime to embrace reforms that would strengthen state and civic institutions, and in particular the rule of law.

It is a powerful argument, powerfully put by an influential

minority in BiH politics. But their conclusion – that Dayton needs to be rewritten and the nationalists excluded from power with the active involvement of the international community – has led BiH down a blind alley.

BiH's constitution is indeed complex and in need of reform. But it is highly complicated not least because BiH is highly complicated. A simpler constitution would not have been agreed at Dayton or implemented thereafter. It is unlikely that the Serbs – who make up nearly 40% of BiH's population – will agree to discarding Dayton outright. And it is an illusion to think that the international community will impose changes to the constitution, or that such a course of action is desirable. At best, a constitution that does not have the consent of its people will not work. At worst, it could lead to renewed conflict.

That does not mean Dayton should not be reformed or that the international community cannot help. But if constitutional reform is to be successful, it needs to be on a case-by-case basis, using the provisions set out in the constitution itself, and by consensus. In effect, this process has already begun with the defence reforms initiated last year.

It is true that the nationalist parties have not yet found a third way between separatism and domination. Founded on group rights and ethnic interests, they are ill-equipped to support the development of a civic state in which all are equal before the law. Transformed by the dirty war of 1992-5, they are also still connected to people linked to organized crime, and in some cases to indicted war criminals; people whose very future is threatened by the establishment of a modern police and judiciary.

But is it also true that free and fair democratic elections have repeatedly confirmed the nationalist parties as the most popular political parties in the country. Together, the largest get over 50% of the vote. Ban these existing

nationalist parties from running in elections, and the voters will vote for new nationalist parties (and become even more alienated from and cynical about "European standards"). Intervene to keep the nationalists out of power, and the result will be at best a weak and compromised coalition of non-nationalists with no real mandate.

It is therefore unlikely that the international community will heed the call to impose changes to Dayton or to exclude the nationalists from power, for the very good reason that it would probably make matters worse.

So BiH is at an impasse. The civic parties face a dilemma: they want European integration, but for it to succeed now would undermine their central argument that with this constitution, and with these parties in power, reform is impossible. For their part, the nationalists are divided between those who accept the need for reform, and those whose criminal or separatist interests are threatened by such reforms.

Yet if BiH has to wait until Dayton is rewritten and the nationalists are removed from power before embarking on serious European reform, the historic opportunity of long-term peace and prosperity could well be lost.

BiH needs a new politics. One in which all the political parties genuinely accept that European integration is their most urgent political priority, and identify ways of advancing this process in today's Bosnia and Herzegovina, and not in the Bosnia and Herzegovina of their dreams.

For unless they do, BiH will indeed miss the train to Europe
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