



Op-ed by PDHR Tamir Waser: Tale of three cities

Over three years in BiH working at both the U.S. Embassy and OHR three cities have occupied my attention – Srebrenica, Brcko, and Mostar. All three were sites of intense fighting and awful crimes during the war. Since then, they have gone in three different directions and each symbolizes the challenges that BiH faces more than 19 years after the end of the war.

Srebrenica was the site of the worst war crime in Europe since the end of World War II; a genocide in July 1995 when over 8,000 individuals, mostly men and boys, were systematically and brutally exterminated. Since then, it has struggled in attracting returns and promoting reconciliation. For most in BiH, Srebrenica captures their attention only for a few days in July but the people who live there struggle with life on a daily basis. Mayor Camil Durakovic has identified economic growth as key to the municipality's future but investment has been slow to come in. This is partly because of the town's remote location and lack of reconstructed infrastructure but Banja Luka has not helped, especially when it comes to Guber Spa and other development projects. Despite repeated requests, the RS Prime Minister has refused to meet with the city leadership. Durakovic selected a Serb as Deputy Mayor, a welcome step in promoting reconciliation, but most people in Srebrenica live in parallel worlds with completely different understandings of history. While people in both communities share the same goal – jobs, security, and a better future for their children – like in so many other places in BiH, there has been little understanding that these are shared dreams which can best be realized by working together for the future.

Brcko's status at Dayton was left to arbitration because it could not be settled in the peace talks. The Final Award created a District, under the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina whose territory is held in condominium by both entities simultaneously. Brcko has been in many ways a success – education is multi-ethnic, people displaced in the war have returned, and people from all ethnic groups have worked together in government. But the District faces real challenges, especially with corruption. The District's small size and vast authority make it ripe for corruption. As elsewhere in BiH, corruption undermines citizens' confidence in institutions, prevents the provision of better services, and slows the growth of the economy as money is siphoned off to pay political favors. If BiH is to prosper, it must undertake much more serious efforts to deter, investigate, and punish corruption.

Mostar is an example of how the BiH political class actively undermines progress in BiH. Placed under international administration after the war, Mostar developed as two politically distinct areas – Bosniak and Croat dominated – with the wartime lines remaining as boundaries. In 2004, following an extensive international effort to create a functional and united City of Mostar, the unwillingness of the parties involved in the Mostar Commission to reach a consensus on certain issues forced the then-High Representative to enact a solution. From the start, local parties, led by SDA and HDZ BiH, blamed the statute for Mostar's problems while failing to implement it fully. They never gave it a chance to work properly. And if they didn't like it, they could change it. The City Council has always had the authority to amend the statute if it had a better idea on how to organize the city. But rather than work to improve things for all, political leaders blamed the international community for the city's troubles while taking very good care of themselves.

While citizens of Mostar have struggled to rebuild from the devastation of the war, political leaders in both communities their friends and families have done quite well.

For nearly two years, the city has been without a functional city council. This has resulted in reduced services for citizens, difficulty in attracting investment, and prevented the creation of new jobs. This was a completely avoidable situation. In 2010, the BiH Constitutional Court ruled that certain provisions in the system for electing the city council were unconstitutional. But no political party took any action to address this. After complaining for more than six years that OHR erred in imposing the statute, they were demanding that OHR solve the problem instead of putting forward their own ideas.

My predecessor at OHR began a process of facilitation to find a solution to the problem. At the start, all parties agreed to certain principles, most importantly that Mostar would remain a single city with a certain level of control below that of the city. But SDA and HDZ BiH from the start refused to engage seriously in the process. Eventually, six parties worked with OHR to develop a framework document that could serve as a basis for further talks. It provided for multi-ethnic, cross-river election districts with enhanced responsibilities for city areas. It was a good start and the local officials who helped negotiate it took great personal risks; several were threatened for working on the plan. But that didn't suit SDA and HDZ BiH. They wanted more for themselves.

For over a year, both have refused to negotiate seriously. They have proposed unworkable ideas, ideas not in line with the Federation constitution, and ideas unable to attract sufficient support in parliament. Neither party has set forward a vision for Mostar, beneficial to all, of how the city can grow and prosper and serve as an engine of growth. They have only focused on what model would ensure that they control the largest sources of patronage, rather than how to build a better Mostar for future generations.

The CEC has stated that elections in Mostar can still be held this year, at the same time as general elections, if a legal framework is in place by August 12. There is still time for parliament to act. Given the short timeline, the best option would be for the parliamentary assembly of BiH to adopt one-time amendments to the election law to hold elections this year for a council to serve until 2016. Such a council should have its main task adopting required changes to the statute and developing a workable framework for the governance of Mostar. This is not that hard if the parties engage seriously and set aside their maximalist positions.

Srebrenica, Brcko, and Mostar symbolize what is needed for this country to grow and prosper. Reconciling with the legacy of the past, promoting economic growth, fighting corruption, and putting the needs of citizens ahead of the financial interests of politicians. None of these are easy but I have met citizens of this country of all ethnic groups who are willing to do it. But if these bright, forward looking, creative citizens don't take a more active role in shaping the future direction of this country, they should not expect someone else to do it for them.