Article by the High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch “Don’t Abandon the Balkans”

SARAJEVO, Bosnia-Herzegovina – Just as international engagement in the Balkans has been showing positive results – after 10 hard years and a difficult start – there are growing calls on both sides of the Atlantic to cut that engagement short. Now, with heightened fears of being drawn in between a hazy group of ethnic Albanian guerrillas and Macedonian security forces, many look to a definitive ethnic carving of the former Yugoslavia. Such a solution would be a disaster for both the region and the world.

It was the German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck who said that the Balkans were “not worth the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier.” Bismarck’s sentiments were echoed earlier this month by Lord Owen, a negotiator during the Bosnia war and a former British foreign secretary. Owen wrote, “What is needed today is a Balkans-wide solution, through a present-day equivalent of the 1878 Congress of Berlin, with pre- agreed boundary changes endorsed by the major powers.” Similarly, speakers at a Columbia University symposium in early March agreed, according to a report by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, that Balkan borders should be redrawn to create “smaller, more stable mono- ethnic states.”

That mono-ethnic states don’t exist anywhere else – except perhaps Iceland – appears not to have worried the symposium participants. The appeal of ethnically homogeneous states is evidently that strong. The recipe, at least, is simple: gather together the Great Powers – now called the “international

community" – and ask them to pore over maps and fix a solution with a red pen, drowning out the cries of competing nationalist leaders with dry sherry. Then get out.

The 1878 Congress of Berlin, presided over by Bismarck, did not achieve peace by dividing the region into such interesting entities as Eastern Rumelia and North Bulgaria. Representatives of the Great Powers refused to listen to the people whose fate they were deciding – or they simply slept through the presentations. The refugee crises, forced population movements and violence of the time barely figured.

Over a century of missed opportunities, bloodshed and suspicion cannot be swept, now, under a carpet in a conference room. To pull out of the Balkans would risk another horrific round of ethnic cleansing. I say this with particular urgency because I'm in charge of implementing the civilian side of the Dayton peace accords in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Dayton accords, to this day, satisfy none of the noisy ultranationalists that claim to represent Bosnia's Muslims, Serbs and Croats. But they do win the support of the multiethnic majority in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as indicated by the landmark election last November that brought to power the country's first non-nationalist government. And implementation of the accords may serve as a model for fractured societies like Macedonia.

Earlier this month, with the full agreement of the international community, I removed Ante Jelavic as a member of Bosnia's joint presidency and as a leader of the nationalist Croat Democratic Union. He had openly supported two war criminals convicted by the Hague tribunal for crimes against humanity. His party had carried out banned campaigning – passed off as a "referendum" – on Election Day last November. The final straw was a declaration of "Croat self-rule," which would effectively have torn up the Dayton accords and the country's delicate constitution.

All this, proponents of a new Congress of Berlin would argue, only shows the wisdom of dividing everything up and going home. But to do so would be a gross injustice to the millions of ordinary citizens, not only in Bosnia but across southeastern Europe, who want nothing to do with a nationalism that leaves them poor, frightened and isolated.

The victory of Dayton and international engagement has been a lasting peace, a slow but perceptible lessening of fear in Bosnia and Herzegovina and an increasing focus among ordinary citizens on issues that really matter: jobs, a decent education for one's kids, a state that can do business with the outside world.

Bosnian citizens are returning to their homes in increasing numbers, thanks to the imposition of strict property laws. Last year, more than 67,000 refugees and displaced people were registered as returning to their homes in areas where they belonged to minorities, nearly double the 1999 figure. The upward trend continues this year: the United Nations refugee agency recorded more than 4,000 such returns in January 2001, compared to fewer than 1,700 in the same month last year.

Economic reforms are also starting to take hold. In December last year, the Communist-era "payment bureaus," which held a monopoly on all financial transactions and were commandeered by nationalist parties during and after the war, were closed down. With competitive banking across Bosnia, the annual cost of borrowing has come down from 30 percent to 10 percent.

Officials from both the mainly Serb entity (Republika Srpska) and the Muslim-Croat Federation are meeting to harmonize the country's tax regime. The prime ministers from both these entities are planning to meet twice a month to hammer out policy, something unthinkable even a year ago.

Market reforms and the rule of law are making inroads into the shady economic fiefdoms under the nationalists' control and

are putting Bosnians' rights as citizens on a firm, legal footing. Last Monday, Mr. Jelavic tried to give his illegal proclamation of Croat self-rule some credibility by calling on 100,000 Croats to turn up to a "prayer meeting" in Bosnia's southern city of Mostar. Only 3,000 of the devout Catholic population showed up.

Our work in Bosnia and elsewhere in southeastern Europe is slow and painstaking. But the progress is real. Careful international engagement is allowing people to forge their own futures, and gives moderates confidence to rebuild their country in the face of extremist and criminal threats.

To walk away now would be to throw away billions of dollars and years of effort. It would vindicate only the proponents of ethnic cleansing. It would lead to territories of ever decreasing and more absurd proportions – and to continuing instability in Europe.

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