

**THE PREMIERE OF THE POST-COLD WAR CRISIS IN BALKANS:  
CIA DOCUMENTS ON THE DISINTEGRATION  
OF FORMER YUGOSLAVIA (1989-1992)\***

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**Abstract.** *As the Cold War came to an end, many revisionist powers predicted the disintegration of Yugoslavia, an uneasy alliance of seven nations that had been held together only by Josip Broz Tito's iron fist. Chief amongst the interested parties was the United States, hegemon of the new unipolar world order. For years, American intelligence agencies warned of the dangers threatening the Bosnian Muslims, a secessionist ethno-religious minority in the center of the former Yugoslavian borders; and yet, the United States did not act to protect the Bosnian Muslims. Tensions in the region boiled over into civil war, and the world was shocked as the Bosnian Muslims were the target of attempted genocide, most notably at Srebrenica.*

*This paper will focus on the CIA estimate reports written by field officers on the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the US foreign policy towards the probable crisis in the region. The ethnic cleansing efforts targeting Bosnian Muslims, the awareness of US field officers of this process, and whether there were any pre-emptive measures to stop such brutal acts against humanity will also be analyzed during this paper.*

**Keywords:** *Post-Cold War, Balkans, CIA, Yugoslavia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Alija Izetbegović, Srebrenica, Muslims*

**Rezumat. Premiera crizelor post-Război Rece în Balcani: documente CIA despre dezintegrarea fostei Iugoslavii (1989-1992).** *În perioada de sfârșit a Războiului Rece, multe puteri revizioniste prevedeau dezintegrarea Iugoslaviei, o alianță dificilă a șapte națiuni ce au fost ținute laolaltă numai de pumnul de fier a lui Josip Broz Tito. Lider al părților interesate de dezmembrarea Iugoslaviei erau Statele Unite, hegemon al ordinii noii lumi unipolare. De ani*

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de zile, serviciile de spionaj americane avertizau asupra pericolelor ce-i amenințau pe bosniacii musulmani, o minoritate etno-religioasă secesionistă din centrul granițelor fostei Iugoslavii. Și totuși, Statele Unite nu au acționat pentru a-i proteja pe bosniacii musulmani. Tensiunile din regiune au expandat într-un război civil, iar lumea a fost șocată de faptul că bosniacii musulmani au fost ținta unei încercări de genocid, mai ales la Srebrenița.

Această lucrare se va focaliza pe rapoartele estimative ale CIA, scrise de ofițerii din teren, despre dezintegrarea Iugoslaviei și despre politica externă a Statelor Unite față de criza probabilă din regiune. Eforturile de epurare etnică ce-i vizau pe bosniacii musulmani, conștientizarea acestui proces de către ofițerii din teren ai Statelor Unite și chestiunea dacă ar fi existat măsuri preventive pentru oprirea unor acte brutale împotriva umanității vor fi, de asemenea, analizate în lucrare.

**Résumé : La première de la crise d'après la Guerre Froide dans les Balkans : documents CIA sur la désintégration de l'ancienne Yougoslavie (1989-1992).** Dans la période de fin de la Guerre Froide, plusieurs puissances révisionnistes ont prévu la désintégration de la Yougoslavie, une alliance difficile de sept nations qui ont été tenues ensemble seulement par la poignée de fer de Iosip Broz Tito. Le leader des parties intéressées par la destruction de la Yougoslavie était les Etats Unis, hégémon de l'ordre du nouvel monde unipolaire. Depuis plusieurs années, les services d'espionnage américains ont averti sur les dangers qui avertissaient les Bosniaques musulmans, une minorité ethno-religieuse sécessionniste du centre des frontières de l'ancienne Yougoslavie. Et pourtant, les Etats Unis n'ont pas agi pour protéger les Bosniaques musulmans. Les tensions de la région ont évolué vers une guerre civile et le monde a été choqué par le fait que les Bosniaques musulmans ont représenté le but d'un essai de génocide, surtout à Srebrenica.

L'ouvrage ci-joint se focalisera sur les rapports estimatifs de CIA, écrits par les officiers de terrain, sur la désintégration de la Yougoslavie et sur la politique externe des Etats Unis vis-à-vis la crise probable de la région. Les efforts d'épuration ethnique qui auraient visé les Bosniaques musulmans, le fait que les officiers de terrain des Etats Unis ont réalisé cela et la question s'il y avait été des mesures préventives pour stopper des actes brutaux contre l'humanité seront, aussi, analysés dans l'ouvrage ci-joint.

## INTRODUCTION

The Balkans, a bridge and a barrier on the border between Asia and Europe, take their name from the Turkish word *Balkanlar* – meaning “mountainous, marshy lands”. For much of recorded history, this region served as a buffer zone between the polities of Central Europe and the Turkish lands. This gave the region a unique character, with numerous religions, languages, and ethnicities were packed into a relatively small territory. While efforts were made to ensure

peaceful coexistence, such diversity almost invariably leads to sectarian tensions. The Balkans are such a perfect example of this rule that they have become almost synonymous, with the word *balkanized* referring to a region divided into mutually hostile groups. During this period, one of the most important components of Balkan nationalism was its close connection with the national churches.<sup>1</sup>

This division is both a cause and a consequence of the region's history -from Antiquity onwards, the Balkans have continuously been occupied by foreigners, its internal tensions stoked by competing empires. The Roman and Byzantine Empires both ruled over the region before the Ottoman Turks conquered it. After approximately four hundred years of Ottoman rule, the Balkan countries were beginning to break away from a collapsing empire.<sup>2</sup> The 19<sup>th</sup> century in Balkans was the age of nationalism. The traditional Ottoman *millet system* in which Christian or Jewish religious communities/nations could be existed inside Ottoman State structure. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards Balkan Wars (1912-1913), Ottoman rule was replaced step by step by newly independent national states. Greece, Serbia, Romania, Montenegro and Bulgaria emerged during this period. The 19<sup>th</sup> century disintegration of the Ottoman Empire promised to be a messy affair, and indeed it saw the flare-up of border disputes, ethnic conflicts, and numerous other problems.

Because of widespread nationalist ideas and external interventions, the Balkans were largely in turmoil at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One year after the dramatic battle of 1877-78 against Tsarist Russia, Ottomans almost loosing major parts of its lands in Balkans, provisionally left Bosnia-Herzegovina to Austria in 1879. It was not an easy decision for Sublime Porte (*Bâbiâli*) because the population of Bosnia was overwhelmingly Muslim when annexed by Austria. About three decades passed after Austrian annexation, in 1908 Vienna benefitting from the disorder in Istanbul, declared that Bosnia-Herzegovina is an inseparable part of Austria. One year after, in the year of 1909 the occupation was accepted by Ottomans. After WWI, by the Treaty of St. Germaine (1919), Austria had to left some lands to newly established Serbian-Croatian-Slovene Kingdom, Bosnia-Herzegovina also was included this new Kingdom. In 1921 the new state was named as Yugoslavia. After Nazi occupation during WWII in 1941, the multi-ethnic state of Yugoslavia was re-formed in 1945 by Joseph Tito.

By the beginning of the Cold War, the Balkans had been divided between the

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<sup>1</sup> Lora Gerd, *Russian Policy in the Orthodox East. The Patriarchate of Constantinople (1878-1914)*, Warzaw-Berlin, De Gruyter Publication, 2014, p. 70-72.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69-70.

Capitalist and the Marxist Blocs. Yugoslavia was a microcosm the Balkans, consisting of seven major and two minor ethnic groups. This country could only be surviving as a united entity under an iron fist, and perhaps even then only under Cold War conditions. And survive it did, with Joseph Tito keeping Yugoslavia united until the 1980s. Yugoslavia, as mentioned previously, contained many different ethnic groups. Below is a table indicating their relative shares of the population and their absolute numbers in the 1990s, when the country imploded.

**Table 1. Population of Yugoslavia in 1990, broken down by ethnic group<sup>3</sup>**

No	Ethnic Group	Number of Individuals (millions)	Percentage of Yugoslav Population
1	<b>Serb</b>	<b>8.6</b>	<b>36.3</b>
2	<b>Croat</b>	<b>4.7</b>	<b>19.7</b>
3	<i>Bosnian Muslim</i>	<i>2.1</i>	<i>8.9</i>
4	<b>Slovene</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>7.8</b>
5	<b>Albanian</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>7.7</b>
6	<b>Macedonian</b>	<b>1.4</b>	<b>5.9</b>
7	<b>Montenegrin</b>	<b>0.6</b>	<b>2.5</b>
8	<b>Albanian</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>7.7</b>
9	<b>Hungarian</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>1.9</b>
10	Other	0.4	1.6
<b>Total population</b>		<b>27.70</b>	<b>100</b>

Each of the seven main ethnic groups ruled under autonomous republics, which formed the central Yugoslav Government. Thus when the Cold War came to an end, Yugoslavia was like a seven-pieced mosaic-it had never managed to build a nation-state, and remained so fragile that the slightest blow to it threatened disintegration.

The blow came in the form of the death of Tito. The iron fist rule of Tito had forced reluctant groups to submit, but society remained dangerously fragmented. Thus, when Tito died a decade before the end of the Cold War, the artificial unity disappeared. In the resulting turmoil, the risk of the Balkans collapsing into an ethno-religious civil war and possibly drawing in neighbouring countries was as high as it had been in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The United States had such influence at the beginning of the crisis that a peaceful solution could be reached only with their contribution. Case reports of

<sup>3</sup> CIA Documents, *National Intelligence Estimate 15-90: Yugoslavia Transformed, 18 October 1990* (hereinafter – *Yugoslavia Transformed*), p. 13-14, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/1990-10-01.pdf> (Accessed on 12.09.2017).

the era mostly prepared by the CIA field agents deserve close attention because US foreign policy regarding former Yugoslavia during the crisis years was based on such reports.

The United States, the leader of the Capitalist camp, had paid close attention to the Balkans since the beginning of the Cold War for three basic reasons: 1) Balkans were the most vulnerable side of the western democracies. At the beginning of the Cold War, possible Soviet penetration towards the Western democracies could only be blocked in the Balkans. Otherwise, Soviet-supported Communist ideology would have a chance to spread over Europe. 2) The Balkans had immense military value, serving as a flank to the Eastern Mediterranean, Aegean and Black Seas. The immensely-important Turkish Straits could also be threatened by the Soviets through the Balkans. 3) The Balkans have long been one of the world's most sensitive regions, where a quarrel could easily break out and threaten world peace.

Bearing those factors in mind, US field officers during the Cold War had been preparing estimate reports analyzing Yugoslavia. Because the crisis took place approximately 25 years ago, the relevant official documents belonging to other nations are mostly unavailable. Fortunately, some select CIA documents on Yugoslavia during the crisis years were published recently.

### **THE DISINTEGRATION OF YUGOSLAVIA AND THE VULNERABILITY OF BOSNIA HERZEGOVINA**

Rarely-cited documents raise serious doubts that the Nationalist Socialist Serbian aggression towards Bosnian Muslims and the disorder in Balkans could have been prevented before the terrible events. Estimate reports prepared by CIA field agents in 1989 informed Washington that Yugoslavia would cease to function as a federal state in 1990, if not earlier. If that happened, the Serbian reaction would most likely be to oppose the secession of the Bosnian, Slovene, and Croat ethno-states.

The Yugoslav National Army (JNA) was a Communist Party-led military organization and, while Yugoslavia was a federation, the army was an essentially Serbian institution, with almost all officers were ethnic Serbs. If Serbs, seeking to block any independence attempt, used the JNA, such an act would not have tolerated by the newly enfranchised and nationalistic electorates of the breakaway republics of Croatia and Slovenia. Another problem for Yugoslavia was the Serbian repression in Kosovo and probable armed uprising of the Albanian population.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Yugoslavia Transformed*, p. V.

The report, claiming that "...within a year the federal system will no longer exist; within two years Yugoslavia will probably have dissolved as a state"<sup>5</sup>, clearly predicted that, within one year, the Balkans would be in turmoil. Almost each European country, especially former rulers Russia and Turkey, had ties towards one or another of the ethnic groups of Yugoslavia (for example, US intelligence reports predicted that Russia and Germany would discretely support the disintegration of Yugoslavia), and the turmoil could easily inflame the region one more time. Nevertheless, the Bosnian Crisis was one of the first extended and complex crises that US foreign policymakers had to deal with at the threshold of post-Soviet World policy.<sup>6</sup>

As it is seen in the population break-down, Serbs were the dominant ethnic group of Yugoslavia. In addition, the JNA was under their control. In case of disintegration, it was clear that racist Serbians such as Chief of Staff Ratko Mladić and President of the Republic Slobodan Milošević would use all kind of weaponry, including heavy artillery, against other ethnic groups to preserve the union. In that case, a civil war, or ethnic cleansing, would be inevitable.

The US, due to field reports written the previous year, was very aware of coming catastrophic events. To prevent mass killings and oppression, they called for urgent pre-emptive measures to be put into place. For instance, in 1989, they urged the creation of safe havens to protect unarmed civilians of targeted ethnic groups from any possible ethnic cleansing or ill-treatment. Unfortunately, the focus of the 1990s was the collapse of the Communist Bloc, and Bosnian Muslims, after almost a half-century under Communism, were trying to re-emerge as a new entity. Aliya Izetbegovic, the wise man of the era, was the leader of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, had foreseen the looming civil war. He sought to keep Bosnians out of any kind of ethnic clash, working with the Yugoslav Parliament to avoid any kind of Serbian aggression. Those efforts would be fruitless.

Interestingly, the reports argue that the United States – the hegemonic power of the post-Cold War era – had little to no capacity to preserve Yugoslav unity. The reports proposed that the consequences of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina dissolving would be unforeseeable and could easily spiral out of control, much as had happened during the First and Second World Wars. As it is very well known both of the world wars had started in the Balkans. Because the

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<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Yehudith Auerbach, Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, *Media Framing and Foreign Policy: The Elite Press vis-à-vis US Policy in Bosnia, 1992-95*, in "Journal of Peace Research", Vol. 42, No. 1 (Jan., 2005), p. 84-85.

Republic had a majority-minority population, its disintegration would could dramatically escalate ethnic tensions in the rest of Yugoslavia, notably between Serbs and Croats. Bosnian Muslims made up more than 40% of the population, though there were significant Serb (32%) and Croat (18%) minorities. This mixture had always been potentially dangerous.<sup>7</sup> The risk of large-scale communal violence was as high as it had been during the Great War.

Field agents' assessments of the situation were important because, until the eruption of the Bosnian Crisis in March 1992, their reports did not spend much time on the Bosnian Muslims, largely ignoring them despite the possibility that they would be the victims of ethnic cleansing. Instead, agents focused on the likelihood that the Serbians and the Croatians would intervene to steer the results of the general election to be held in Bosnia in November 1990.

Estimate reports in the year of 1989 minced no words in saying that Yugoslavia was a powder keg ready to explode. In these reports, field officers successfully predicted what would happen in one or two years, as well as where the first clash would take place. Despite this, the Bush Administration, the only power strong enough to intervene, took no measures to prevent the rapes, ethnic cleansing, and other brutal acts. Because CIA estimate reports had spent the past years warning of the coming humanitarian crisis, the Bush Administration should have taken measures between the years of 1989-1991 to protect civilians, regardless their religion or their ethnic identity.

The collapse of Yugoslavia was all but taken for granted in 1989, three years before the emergence of the widespread conflict. There was a kind identity crisis in Yugoslavia escalated by Nationalist Serbs.<sup>8</sup> Although the field reports were very detailed and well-prepared documents, the officers preferred to turn a blind eye to the Bosnian Muslims who, in case of a civil war, would be the most vulnerable group. This allowed for the terrible crime of genocide to be committed against this people three years after. It is dramatic that such detailed reports ignored Bosnian Muslims and, worse that no measures were taken to prevent such brutal Serbian aggression. Yugoslavia consisted of seven federal republics and, given its command of JNA forces, it was obvious that Serbia had a military advantage over the other the six republics. In total, Serbia and its close ally Montenegro controlled almost 110 000 men in 1991. The armies of the Slovenian and Croatian Republics, though they had begun building up viable military forces equipped with small

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<sup>7</sup> *Yugoslavia Transformed*, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> David Campbell, *National Deconstruction: Violence, Identity, and Justice in Bosnia*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1998, p. 25-28.

arms, light anti-armour and air defense systems,<sup>9</sup> were no match for the JNA, a conventional force consisting of naval, ground, and air branches. Furthermore, the hardliner attitudes of ex-communist Serbian leaders, including Chief of Staff Ratko Mladić, were a very well-known fact.

In world politics, everything is intertwined. To understand the Balkans policy of the United States and other powers requires careful consideration. The conflicts in Yugoslavia overlapped with flashier and more attention-grabbing issues in the international arena, for example the tearing down of the Berlin Wall or the slow dismantlement of the Soviet system. The US was the only hegemonic power of the period, meaning that any intervention to prevent genocides or mass killings needed to be spearheaded by a US-led coalition. Despite clear evidence that such horrors were impeding, neither measures taken nor were safe havens for innocent civilians established. George H. W. Bush held the American presidency and fellow Republicans held Congress, and they focused their attention on the Saddam Hussein's seizure of Kuwait's rich oil fields and the resulting threat to the international petro-economy.

Serbian leaders benefitted from these international 'distractions', which kept the world spotlight off their attempts to keep the union together at any expense. Serbian leaders were acutely aware of the fact that allowing one republic to secede would set off a chain effect leaving Yugoslavia only a shadow of its current self. For that reason, no matter whether localized in Slovenia and Croatia or nationwide, a civil war in Yugoslavia would be bloody, desperate, and protracted. Any conflict would be an ethnic quarrel and could inflame nationalist tensions in neighbouring republics, quickly transforming it into an existential threat to Yugoslavia requiring a firm response.<sup>10</sup>

By early 1991, deep ethnic tensions, a faltering economy, political paralysis, and Serbian leaders' clear scepticism towards democratization defined Yugoslavia's political landscape.<sup>11</sup> Given the potential for the conflict to be exported to neighbouring countries, a Yugoslav civil war would rapidly become a security concern for all nearby nations.<sup>12</sup> Serbia, the Republic dominating and

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<sup>9</sup> CIA Documents, *CIA Directorate of Intelligence Memorandum: Yugoslavia Military Dynamics of a Potential Civil War, 01 March 1991* (hereinafter - Yugoslavia Military Dynamics), p. 2, in <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/1991-03-01.pdf> (Accessed on 14.09.2017).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. III.

<sup>12</sup> David P. Auerswald, *Disarmed Democracies. Domestic Institutions and Use of Force,*

leading the Yugoslav Federation, had decided to prevent any kind of separatist movement by force, and so had ensured the Yugoslavian infantry troops were trained in guerilla warfare. The better-armed national forces would unsurprisingly enjoy pronounced military advantages against the Republics of Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. It is important to note that, barring the Bosnian Muslims, almost all parties had long been preparing for a civil war, arming themselves with foreign weaponry that had been entering the Yugoslav republics since mid-1990s.

Despite the accelerating militarization of the six other republics, Bosnia-Herzegovina did not expect the outbreak of war. Interestingly, CIA field officers had determined that, in case of Serbian Army aggression against the Bosnian Muslims, the JNA as a whole would not follow a policy to defend the victims.<sup>13</sup> If ethnic warfare had already broken out, however, the Federal Army would splinter across ethnic lines, sapping morale and destroying unit cohesion. This assessment clearly shows that Bosnian Muslims were deliberately excluded from the JNA, leaving no armed power to protect Bosnian Muslims against eventual Nationalist Socialist Serbian aggression.

As mentioned previously, the Croatian and Slovenian Republics had begun arming themselves in the 1990s. Both countries organized new army units and acquired substantial numbers of weapons. Despite a lack of overt support from European countries, some countries discretely armed their preferred republics. For instance, CIA reports show that Germany was supplying Croatia with arms.<sup>14</sup> From the early 1990s onward, American field agents in Yugoslavia started sending continuous warnings to Washington that, in case of unrest or a civil war, the Serbian-controlled JNA would commit a brutal ethnic cleansing. Surprisingly, the Bush 41 Administration in the White House chose to ignore towards this moral imperative. The power balance between JNA and the Republics was so asymmetrical that the Bosnian Muslims facing off against the JNA can be compared to a Biblical story, an almost defenceless David waving a stone at a towering Goliath armed to the teeth.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to the Gulf War, the crisis in Bosnia overlapped with the collapse of Communism and efforts to establish a new world order in which the United States would be the undisputable hegemonic power. This crisis was the premier test of the new international system. It has also been a sample of structural nation-

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University of Michigan Press, 2000. p. 67.

<sup>13</sup> *Yugoslavia Military Dynamics*, p. 2-3.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Old Testament*, Samuel, 17:41-47.

building theories and a demonstration of Washington's post-Cold War neo-realistic priorities. New opportunities and new anxieties were propelling the new American hegemon to explore new interests. These developments proved that the new world order was more realist and Machiavellian. It also showed that the post-WWII period had undermined confidence between nations, and that offensive neo-realism had exposed weaknesses in international institutions. All of this meant that no neutral actor could be found to act as mediators in case of a crisis. Moreover, the conflicting interests of big powers made the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) ineffective in determining whether or not international law had been violated, in this case by the use of force. This paralysis allowed the systematic killing of thousands of innocent defenceless people in Yugoslavia to continue unsanctioned. After these mass killings, rapes, ethnic cleansing, and torture had gone on for far too long, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the August of 1995 voted to disregard its lack of UNSC mandate and stop the brutal Serbian war crimes.

As it was mentioned in previous pages, the Bosnian leader, Aliya Izetbegovic, had initially tried to keep the Bosnians out of armed conflict. But when Izetbegovic noticed that the Serbian Nationalist Socialists' attitudes towards Bosnia made it almost impossible to prevent a confrontation, he began following Croatia and Slovenia's example and started to seek possibilities to arm his population. It was, however, too late, and the largest Bosnian cities had already been occupied by Serbia.<sup>16</sup>

While this was not a goal of Aliya Izetbegovic's, some believed that a confrontation between Bosnians and Serbs would lead to Sandjak, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Macedonia also leaving the Yugoslav Federation.<sup>17</sup> No doubt, such a breakup was a serious risk, but if the Bosnian Muslims did not defend themselves, they would systematically be assimilated or expelled from their native lands. Meanwhile, Serbian paramilitary gangs armed by the JNA were prepared to obey any orders given to them by Ratko Mladić.<sup>18</sup> Bosnian leaders, most probably including Aliya Izetbegovic, were initially unaware that the JNA was arming

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<sup>16</sup> CIA Documents, *CIA Directorate of Intelligence Memorandum: Bosnia-Herzegovina on the Edge of the Abyss 19 December 1991* (hereinafter – Bosnia-Herzegovina on the Edge of the Abyss), p. 3-4, in <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/1991-12-19.pdf> (Accessed on 14.09.2017).

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> R. Craig Nation, *War in the Balkans, 1991-2002*, Published by Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2003, p. 157.

Serbian militias. Because of this, when armed conflict broke out, Bosnian Muslims and their cities were mostly defenceless.

At the end of 1991, Bosnia-Herzegovina remained in dire straits. Bosnia, both militarily and economically, was the most vulnerable republic, and thus was likely to fall under the sway of either Serbia or Croatia. One possibility was for the fledgling country to seek economic and military support from Muslim countries outside the Balkans, with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, or Libya being likely candidates. Turkey, the uniquely secular and democratic Muslim state of the region, was a particularly appealing ally, given its historical ties with the Balkans and the fact that it would not take advantage of Bosnian weakness to export radicalism and fundamentalism. The other Muslim countries would likely have helped Bosnia, but the cost would have been widespread radical Wahhabi or Shia ideas among Bosnian Muslims.

The rise of religious radicalism was a natural result of the 'Green Belt' policies employed by the United States in the early 1980s to limit the influence of the fiercely atheistic Soviet Union. So-called political Islam, funded by Gulf dollars, and Salafi or Wahhabi fanaticism had an accelerated development among desperate crowds. Post-Cold War Balkan Muslims were an ideal target for such radical groups, and there was a high risk of such penetration into Bosnia. Both Croatian and Serbian leaders deliberately exaggerated this danger to justify seizing more land from Bosnia and to legitimize the brutality and inhuman acts they committed against Bosnian Muslims. Field reports show that there were worries in Washington about the rise of radicalism.<sup>19</sup>

Actually in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the exaggerated threat of terrorism was not exclusively linked with any radical, extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda or with terrorist organizations so-called having "Islamic background". If such kind of logic is followed by which nation building efforts is attached to certain groups that commit terrorist violence, same logic naturally could also be used to claim that violence was committed by Christian Serbs in the aggression against Bosnian Muslims.<sup>20</sup> Actually, the situation was a kind of nation building effort in disintegrating Yugoslavia, both Christianity and Islam had been put in use. Therefore, the Serbian Orthodox Church Bosnia-Herzegovina had been providing overt support for the extreme Serb

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<sup>19</sup> *Bosnia-Herzegovina on the Edge of the Abyss*, p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> Edine Bećirević, *The Bosnian Approach to the Fight against Terrorism*, in Iztok Prezeli (ed.), *The Fight against Terrorism and Crisis Management in the Western Balkans*, Proceedings of the NATO Advanced Research Workshop on Crisis Management and Counter-Terrorism in the Western Balkans, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 20-21 April 2007, Amsterdam – Washington, DC, IOS Press, 2008, p. 78-79.

nationalist leader Radovan Karadžić, while Bosnian Muslim clergy had been backing Muslims and Izetbegovic was using Islam both as the vehicle of popular mobilization and the key component of the newly emerging Bosnian national identity.<sup>21</sup> Despite grave contradiction with the realities of the actual situation, the success of the propaganda confirms that some success had been achieved by Islamophobic fear-mongering, even a decade before the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The civil war in Yugoslavia quickly engulfed the entire nation, with European-sponsored peace talks during April and May bearing no result. The UN peacekeeping operation in Croatia proved ineffective. International efforts, whether by the UN or by European nations, failed to resolve the nearly irreconcilable territorial claims and growing animosities in the country. Although the Bosnian crisis was escalating a widespread conflict, the American government remained reluctant to take another step forward to facilitate a peaceful solution. One should keep in mind that even the US was incapable of solving the problem entirely, and it was the only country which had the necessary capacities to save civilians. Field officers had continuously been reporting the need for an American intervention – given that UN forces would not be sufficient to prevent clashes, a decisive stance by the US was vital.<sup>22</sup>

Special attention here must be paid to the Bosnian Muslims. Despite the fact that there were different Christian sects in Yugoslavia, Bosnians were the only different faith group of the country. Because there is a strong correlation between nation-building and religion in the Balkans, the outlier religion of Bosnian Muslims meant they were particularly vulnerable to Serbian aggression. Serbian nationalists depicted Bosnians as apostatized Slavs and had decided to force them to “re-convert” back to into the mainstream Christianity of Yugoslavia. Thus it was clear that, when widespread armed conflict broke out, Bosnians would face the most dangerous threat. In 1991, during the Bush Presidency, there were clear warning signs for a Yugoslavian civil war, even for genocide in Bosnia. Unfortunately, the pleas for help from Bosnian Muslims were ignored in that chaotic atmosphere, the American focus instead on petrol and hegemony.

As it had long been expected, civil war broke out in Yugoslavia and, by the

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<sup>21</sup> Vjekoslav Perica, *Balkan Idols. Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 141-142.

<sup>22</sup> CIA Documents, *National Intelligence Estimate 29/15-92: A Broadening Balkan Crisis: Can It Be Managed? 1 April 1992* (hereinafter - A Broadening Balkan Crisis), p. III, in <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/1992-04-01.pdf> (Accessed on 20.09.2017).

end of the 1991, the clashes between Croat groups and the JNA reached Bosnia-Herzegovina's doorstep.<sup>23</sup> The declaration of independence by Croatia and Slovenia on June 1991 had brought about a chain of hostility acts in Balkans. The independence declaration by Bosnia in March 1992 triggered the crisis for US foreign policy making process in post-Soviet Balkans.<sup>24</sup> Worried since 1989 by the very real possibility of a civil war, Bosnian President Aliya Izetbegovic had worked to maintain Bosnia's neutrality. If Bosnia too descended into violence, the large number of factions (when compared to neighbouring Croatia) would make it harder to negotiate peace. Bosnia-Herzegovina was a small Yugoslav Republic where Muslims (43%), Serbs (31%), and Croats (17%) were living together. The Republic's Government was a coalition of those three ethnic groups. In October 1991, Serb representatives withdrew from the Republic's Assembly, leaving only the two other groups in government.<sup>25</sup>

Serb paramilitary groups armed by the JNA soon afterwards started to terrorize Bosnia-Herzegovina. The situation was tense: travel at night was impossible, roadblocks were established at night, and night time shootings were regular occurrences in Croat and Bosnian Muslim villages and neighbourhoods. Ignoring Bosnian Muslims' right to self-determination, both Croatia and Serbia intended to annex Bosnia-Herzegovina.<sup>26</sup> That policy closely mirrored the 1908-1913 period when, as Turkish influence in the region weakened, Bosnia-Herzegovina had become the target of an expansionist Serbia and of Croatian nationalists in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The latter group's annexation of Bosnia in 1908, taking advantage of Ottoman disarray after the Young Turk Revolution, sparked Serbian nationalist terrorism and led to the Great War.<sup>27</sup> 83 years later, Serbian Nationalist Socialists were one more time raring to annex Bosnia, and they were ready to use all means of destruction to achieve their aims.

### SERBIAN AGGRESSION AND THE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN BOSNIA

At the end of the Cold War, the developments in Yugoslavia closely mirrored the well-known pre-WWI period. The Balkans, throughout history, have hosted an

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<sup>23</sup> Tom Gallagher, *The Balkans After the Cold War. From Tyranny to Tragedy*, London – New York, Routledge, 2003. p. 54-56.

<sup>24</sup> Yehudith Auerbach, Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

<sup>25</sup> *Bosnia-Herzegovina on the Edge of the Abyss*, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> *A Broadening Balkan Crisis*, p. 8.

incredible variety of ethnic groups, cultures, religions, languages, and ideologies. Nevertheless, this cultural, ethnic, and religious richness was not always an advantage. During the Cold War, Tito's dictatorship had established a relative yet unsustainable stability in the area. When the iron fist and the security threats disappeared, the stability came under serious strain. The crisis in Yugoslavia, in which Bosnia-Herzegovina was the most vulnerable party, broke out under these conditions –and, as it had been predicted by CIA field reports in 1989, less than two years after the conflict broke out, Yugoslavia was no more.

The disintegration of Yugoslavia also caused widespread domino effects as it had during WWI and WWII. Long-standing US allies, including Turkey, Germany, Greece and other European countries were entangled in the crisis, and such disputes amongst its allies began hampering US efforts to create consensus in NATO's post-Cold War security approach. In early 1992, the European Commission (EC) recognized Slovenia and Croatia as newly independent republics, *de facto* endorsing the demise of Yugoslavia. However, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia were not recognized by the EC, and so this recognition did not change the situation much. Still watching the situation but not acting, the US was hesitant to recognize the newly-independent republics. Field officers argued against such a move, because it would seriously damage ties between Washington and Belgrade, already weakened by American complaints on human rights violations by Serbians and accusations against specific members of the leadership. This loss of influence would also harm the UN peace initiative spearheaded by Washington<sup>28</sup>. Not recognizing the new republics also had downsides, though – since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of the security threat it had posed, Germany and France had grown suspicious that the United States was withdrawing from Europe.

Nationalist Socialist Serbians began to wage an ethnic war against Bosnian Muslims. Sarajevo, Mostar, Tuzla, and Gorazde were the principal cities in which Serbians committed ethnic cleansing. By the middle of 1992, the official number of displaced Bosnians was 1.3 million, and 9000 dead. The actual death numbers were much higher, and could have doubled had the Serbians not been stopped. Later, some 60 000 people who had been declared missing were found in mass graves, executed by Serb forces. At least 80% of the casualties or displaced

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<sup>28</sup> CIA Documents, *CIA Assessment: Implications of US Posture on Recognition of Former Yugoslav Republics 15 January 1992* (hereinafter – Implications of US Posture on Recognition), p. 2, in <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/1992-01-15.pdf> (Accessed 13.09.2017).

persons were Bosnian Muslims. The situation was worsening in Bosnia, with medical supplies and food in besieged cities reaching life-threateningly low levels and critical infrastructure either destroyed or blocked by Serbians.<sup>29</sup> While these crimes were not immediately labelled such, the International Criminal Court (ICC) would later refer to the Serbian mass killings as “genocide” and the inhumane crimes as “ethnic cleansing”.

As previously mentioned, when Bosnia-Herzegovina decided to rearm its population, Turkey was the most convenient natural ally. Turkey had indeed been covertly supplying Bosnian Muslim forces with arms and advisers since the beginning of the crisis, but providing more direct assistance was not possible due to the lack of a common border with Bosnia or Macedonia.

Another important aspect of the 1990s is the replacement of ideologies by faiths and the rise of religious terrorism. At the beginning of the conflict, radical sectarian ideologies supported largely by Iran and the Gulf Countries had an opportunity to penetrate the Balkans. Both Miladić and Milošević, deliberately exaggerated the threat of Islamic fundamentalism to legitimize their brutal assaults to a wide audience. An unexpected consequence of this new slogan was the role it played as a rally point for extremists. Serbian nationalists who sought to discredit the Bosnian struggle and even to justify their inhumane policies in Bosnia used propaganda alleging Bosnians were radical terrorist supporters. Mass graves were a genocide attack on Bosnians physically, but Serbian propaganda was a new kind of genocide, targeting the faith and reputation of that desperate people.

Piercing through the Serbian leadership’s attempts at propaganda, the April intelligence reports offer two interesting insights:

1) Turkey’s historical role in Balkans and peace-facilitating status had drawn field officers’ attention.

2) The estimate reports showed that, without decisive action to protect them, the violent partition of Bosnia would inevitably radicalize a largely secular Slavic Muslim community. Islamist states such as Libya and Iran would be able to strengthen their influence on Bosnian Muslims – and indeed, there were already some signs that this was happening.<sup>30</sup> Turkey, as a mediator and the only secular Muslim country in the region, could assist Bosnia in reversing course.

By the August of 1992, as it had been predicted in CIA reports for the past two

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<sup>29</sup> CIA Documents, *BTF Assessment: The Humanitarian Situation in Bosnia: Problems and Outlook*, 19 August 1992, pp. 1, 7, in <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/1992-08-19.pdf> (Accessed 26.09.2017).

<sup>30</sup> *A Broadening Balkan Crisis*, p. 4.

years, the disintegration of Yugoslavia was inevitable. Serbs had been committing an unnamed genocide against Bosnian Muslims. At the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there was a humanitarian crisis unravelling steps from Middle Europe, and public pressure on European nations and the US to act was rising day by day.<sup>31</sup>

Major European powers such as Britain and Germany remained reluctant to use force. France, due to the region's mountainous topography, feared that Bosnia would be a second Vietnam. Italy also was not in favour of the use of force.<sup>32</sup> Here, some words ought to be said about the German position, given that Germany had been supporting Croatia from the first day of the crisis. At the beginning of 1992, Serbian aggression had focused on Bosnians and, for that reason, Germany was not in favour of the use of force. In contrast with the major European countries, Turkey was in favour of the use of force to stop Serbian brutality, to the point where there was a domestic pressure on Ankara for intervention. Turkey was also prepared to contribute to the UN Peace Force as necessary.<sup>33</sup>

Croatia had been supporting Bosnian Muslims in order to further its own goal of tying down Bosnian Serb forces in the Bosnian territories. According to CIA reports, in 1992, the Bosnian Army relied almost exclusively on Croatia and Bosnian Croats for arms and supplies. Some of the major problems with which the Bosnian Army had to cope were the short falls of its training, its insufficiently-trained officers, and its lack of logistical support. In addition, Bosnian soldiers were for the most part incapable of effectively using armour and heavy artillery.<sup>34</sup> But Croatia had not been willing to sponsor such training and, worse, the major European countries contributing to UN peacekeeping efforts were reluctant to provide such obvious support to the Muslims.<sup>35</sup> The implications of this estimate report are dramatic because, were Bosnian Muslims not trained how to use heavy arms, Serbians would occupy the whole of Bosnia and, most probably, they would not leave any Bosnian man alive or any woman unmolested. Nonetheless,

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<sup>31</sup> CIA Documents, *BTF Assessment: European Views on the use of Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 10 August 1992* (hereinafter – European Views on the use of Force), in <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/1992-08-10.pdf> (Accessed on 25.09.2017).

<sup>32</sup> CIA Documents, *CIA Responses to Clinton Transition Team Questions on the Balkans, 28 December 1992* (hereinafter – CIA Responses to Clinton Transition Team Questions), p. 34, in <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/1992-12-28.pdf> (Accessed on 26.09.2017).

<sup>33</sup> *European Views on the use of Force*.

<sup>34</sup> *CIA Responses to Clinton Transition Team Questions*, p. 14.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

*Realpolitik* took precedence over humanitarian priorities.

From the very beginning of 1989 until 1992, the disintegration of Yugoslavia turned into a Bosnian humanitarian crisis, with – worse – a genocide being committed mostly against Bosnian Muslims. Balkan and European countries, as well as the US, ended up intervening in the crisis, while former rulers Turkey and Russia were in favour of a peaceful settlement. Especially the hegemonic power of post-Cold War era, the US was under public pressure for humanitarian aid to Balkans and protecting UN peacekeepers in former Yugoslavia. About 49% of Americans were thinking that intervention in Bosnia, like Gulf War, would be a convenient means to overcome with Vietnam Syndrome.<sup>36</sup> In addition, a number of European countries were looking for an opportunity to demonstrate their capability of operating of a common foreign policy.<sup>37</sup> However, Russia's historical ties with Serbs and pan-Slavic policies made this country a natural ally to Milošević, while Turkey's historical ties to Bosnia made it a natural ally to Aliya Izetbegovic. The crisis was the first foreign policy challenge for the post-Soviet Russia. It was not easy for newly formed Russian leadership to establish their foreign policy toward the crisis.<sup>38</sup>

Estimate reports show that Turkey wanted to avoid a Balkan war, but military and civilian leaders saw it as inevitable. Turkey supported the use of military force against the Serbians from the very beginning, fearing that the violence would spread to Kosovo and Macedonia with time. The US attaché to Turkey reported that the Turkish Army would support Macedonia if it were attacked by Greece and Serbia. This calling-in of allies would create a chain reaction, a kind of butterfly effect similar to the one responsible for the First World War.<sup>39</sup>

Interestingly, published CIA esteem reports do not include comprehensive analysis about Russia's position. In those years, Russia was faced with transition problems and administrative disorder. In Russia's Chechen territories, there was an ongoing civil war, and it could argue that Moscow's level of attention to the Balkans was at its lowest level since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Russia had long feared that a war in Kosovo would spark a Balkan-wide conflagration, and because its capabilities for an active intervention were limited, Russia was in

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<sup>36</sup> Richard Sobel, *Trends: United States Intervention in Bosnia*, in "The Public Opinion Quarterly", Vol. 62, 1998, No. 2, p. 251-252.

<sup>37</sup> Tom Gallagher, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

<sup>38</sup> John Scott Masker, *Signs of a Democratized Foreign Policy? Russian Politics, Public Opinion, and the Bosnia Crisis*, "World Affairs", Vol. 160, 1998, No. 4, p. 179-180.

<sup>39</sup> CIA Responses to Clinton Transition Team Questions, p. 33-35.

favour of a peaceful settlement acceptable to Serbians.<sup>40</sup> Another challenge for post-Soviet Russian foreign policy in Bosnia Crisis was that it has been collided with extreme nationalism, right of ethnic minorities and Russia's new role in Balkans and international arena after its loss of hegemonic policy making status.<sup>41</sup>

Any possible use of force necessitated the destruction of airfields in Batajnica, Nis, and Pristina. The Serbian air forces consisted solely of MiG-21 and MiG-29 fighter aircraft, numbering about 400. Serbian air superiority was a crippling disadvantage for Bosnians and Croats. The December estimate report shows that the most important targets in Serbia were the principal military airfields and a few power plants. Attacks on airfields would paralyze the Serbian army, and attacks on power plants would weaken the Serbian economy. Interestingly, the estimate reports at the end of 1992 show that, despite European countries' reluctance, the United States had intended to use force to stop, or at least slow down, Serbian brutality. However, Serbian infantry units were mostly located in downtown urban areas.<sup>42</sup> Thus, any air strike against land forces would cause heavy civilian casualties. Reports show that there were 144 suspected prisoner camps, with the total number of captives in these camps being at least 30 000, with other estimates reaching as high as 70000. The camps were similar to Hitler's concentration camps, with life conditions almost as dreadful as those in Nazi camps.<sup>43</sup>

The prisoners in the camps were mostly Bosnian Muslims. CIA reports clarify that the camp conditions were uniformly bad, with many prisoners denied access to even rudimentary medical and sanitary facilities. Human rights abuses in the smaller camps were also routine. There were no guidelines for running these camps, allowing Serbian guards to abuse prisoners. Muslim cultural elite, political and economic leaders, and prominent civil servants were picked out from lists and were imprisoned and tortured, and later systematically executed in the camps. According to reports, some Serb officials viewed rape as a tool of ethnic cleansing. There were numerous accounts of rape and other sexual abuses from refugees and former detainees. Captured Serbian soldiers confessed that rape was accepted and encouraged by high commanders. For instance, in the Trnopolje camp, rape was a regular occurrence. There were also numerous reports that Bosnian Muslim women were abused at the Brčko "Port" prison. In addition, there were credible allegations that abuses at the Galil and Westfalia hotels in Brčko

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35-36.

<sup>41</sup> John Scott Masker, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

were a daily routine. Reports show that the Serbian high command and leaders were quietly encouraging such abuses and were unwilling to stop such inhumanely brutal behaviour.<sup>44</sup> These dramatic events, unacceptable acts, abuses, ill-treatments, and inhumanity were committed at the doorstep of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, before the eyes of the modern world. The ghosts of the terrible events invoked by Serbian aggression during that years would be one of the main obstacles in Balkans during coming years.<sup>45</sup>

The scope of this paper was to analyse the Bosnian crisis between the years of 1989 and 1992, in light of the CIA declassified documents. The result of the crisis was, according to official reports, two million displaced persons, over 50 000 rape victims, and thousands of cases of abuse and murder. On July 11, 1995, in Srebrenica – a safe haven declared by the UN on the borders of Europe – more than 8000 unarmed and innocent Bosnian men and boys were executed by Serbs. The international community did not intervene to stop the crisis until the August of 1995, when Bill Clinton, President of the United States, at last decided to stop Serbian brutality. With that sea change, a NATO intervention against the Serbians was quickly approved. By the end of 1995, the Dayton Agreement came into force and a fragile peace was established in Bosnia.

## CONCLUSIONS

As CIA field reports show, Bosnia-Herzegovina was the most vulnerable republic during the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Bosnian Muslims and, to some extent, Croatian Christians who were living together with Serbians were murdered, raped, and tortured by their neighbours. Today, that unfortunate people must forget what happened in the past and live together with their ex-rapists. If a case study on nation-building or mediation is needed, Bosnian women are the perfect candidate. They lost their children and their husbands, were subjected to systematic rapes, ill-treatment, and abuse, but they agreed to forget and even forgive what happened in the name of peace.

After my presentation of this paper during the Aliya Symposium in Bosnia, the audience told me that; they prefer not to remember or talk about the rapes, torture, and abuse they endured. This confused me. However, I later understood a simple truth of the Balkans: people cannot live together without forgiveness in

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<sup>44</sup> *CIA Responses to Clinton Transition Team Questions*, p. 31.

<sup>45</sup> Kenneth Morrison, *Bosnia: The Crisis Averted*, in "The World Today", Vol. 67, 2011, No. 6, p. 29-30.

this region. Because Bosnians have to live together with their ex-aggressors, they do not want to remember the bad days. Generally, when nation-building must overcome historical hatreds, disagreements are escalated and publicly resolved. In Bosnia, though, the nation is built on forgiveness and the forgetting of the past. This is a unique characteristic deriving from the geography and demographic structure of the Balkans.

This paper does not intend to blame the Serb people as a whole. While some were the aggressors, others were generous people. Wars are chaotic situations, however, and there is a limit to what generosity can do in such times. Also, the aim of my presentation was not to revive the memories of what happened between the years of 1989 and 1992. The basic aim was to determine whether or not the genocide in Bosnia could have been prevented. As CIA estimate reports clearly show, by early 1989, US Government was very much aware of the coming events. Despite this, President Bush prioritized wars over oil. Luckily, President Clinton had much more humanist feelings and did not hesitate to use force to stop an ongoing genocide.

There are some who say that efforts to resolve ethnic conflicts are meaningless. According to this view, the Serbs, Croats, Bosnians, Slovenes of the formerly Yugoslav Balkans could never coexist peacefully. The current situation, as fragile as it may be, disproves this claim. Former Yugoslavia, because of its multi-nation structure became the first failed state of the post-Cold War era.

Including Serbs, all ethnic groups had a dramatic experience and noticed that at what scale an ethnic clash could be harmful for all sides. Bosnia and Serbia, as a two independent states could survive in a peacefully manner. If Serbia put its imperialistic attitudes aside and the process of integration into EU democracies could be achieved peace may come into Balkans. In this case because democracies prefer not to fight a long-lasting peaceful structures could be established in the Balkans without iron fist. Such an experience if could be achieved, Bosnia-Herzegovina could have a chance to exist as an independent state.

Democratization, rule of law, human rights, freedom of speech and economic developments are the antidotes effectively could be used towards aggression and extremist nationalism. This formula could be put in use in Bosnia and a developed, democratized Serbia would be less aggressive. Thus, peace making process and salvation of ethnic problems could have a chance between Bosnia and Serbia.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my condolences to the innocent and unprotected people of former Yugoslavia, regardless to their ethnic origin or identity, who lost their lives at the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and on the doorstep of Europe, birthplace and home of humanist ideals.