A BALKAN LANDMINE IN THE HEART OF EUROPE   
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Some optimistic observers of developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina had hoped that the recent general elections would be the start of a reconciliation process that would allow vital constitutional reforms to be implemented that would render the nation viable.

The current Bosnian Constitution, which is an annex of the Dayton Peace Agreement, is considered to be the world's most complex political system. It is based around labyrinthine decision-making procedures that generally require the agreement of all three constitutionally recognised nationalities: the Bosnian-Muslims, Bosnian-Croats, and Bosnian-Serbs.

There is no doubt that, should the present constitutional structure, imposed to stop the bloodshed of the 1992–1995 civil war, remains in place, the country will not be in a position to press on with its economic and social development, let alone aspire to a European future. The international community, the US and the European Union have invested a great deal of effort plus vast financial and human resources in helping to consolidate the peace. The Dayton Peace Treaty contains a provision allowing for a High Representative of the international community to be given substantial powers, including the power to impose or repeal laws and even to remove elected political representatives from their positions, if he or she feels that peace is under threat.

In the almost 30 years since the end of the war, crucial steps have been taken to bring to justice and convict the perpetrators of war crimes on all sides. Seeing justice done is a necessary condition for peace. Unfortunately, the international community has not been as effective at the second, equally important aspect of peace-building: reconciliation. It may be that the quasi-colonial powers of the High Representative were a necessary safeguard in the early post-conflict years. But it is highly problematic that these ultimately undemocratic powers continue to exist so many decades after the end of the war, and that they should be exercised by the High Representative in a provocative and counter-productive manner. Responsibility for this failure to achieve reconciliation falls primarily on the political representatives of the three ethnicities, who never miss an opportunity to exploit the nationalist reflexes of their constituents. But there are also political responsibilities, for the way, too, in which the current High Representative and some of his predecessors have conducted themselves. The European Union and the European Commission have made systematic efforts to bring about conditions in which the Office of the High Representative can be abolished and full sovereignty restored to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Today, in the wake of the elections, Bosnia's Gordian knot seems more intractable than ever. The situation in Bosnia is so complex that many people prefer to simply ignore the problem. Unfortunately for us, for Europe and for Greece, just as the Gordian knot once bound the cart of King Gordias, father to Midas, so it now tethers stability and peace in Europe to the situation in Bosnia. And the outbreak of a new armed conflict in our own backyard would have unforeseen consequences, especially in today's volatile international environment.

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