Bosnia-Herzegovina has been a relatively peaceful nation. However, the road that has produced relative stability has come with a price. Under Dayton, not only have the warring sides been separated, but international involvement has reached a new level in the form of peace-building activities ranging from top-down international regulation of elections, economic management, and institutional development to bottom-up development of political culture through civil society-building. With the extension of international regulatory mechanisms over the past few years, the Bosnian political leadership have had a limited role in developing and implementing policy. Bosnia is a sovereign state, but policy is, in large measure, determined by international policy-making bodies, such as the Office of the High Representative. It has led to a “culture of dependency” and has given the people of Bosnia little economic prosperity and a superficial democracy. Yet this dependency is needed, for it allows democratisation to take hold in the face of the anti-modern and anti-democratic forces of ethnic nationalism. Such a populist ideology, whether it be Croatian, Serbian, or Bosniak (Moslem), is obstructionist to a genuine democracy. Granted, the economy is in a shambles and land mines clutter the cities and countryside. With unemployment at 50% and an estimated 1 million land mines in the country, each of these is a formidable problem, but the xenophobia and ethnic chauvinism that is generated by ethnic nationalism is an insidious problem that equally threatens the country’s stability.

Nationalism, the Croatian author Dubravka Ugresic once wrote, means that “one’s national origin is the essential fact: it is the measure of all things, it determines perspective.” It separates people and places them into ethnic categories, thereby weakening ties of community and solidarity. It is the old “us versus them” mentality, but with nationalism power and force become tools used by mono-ethnic political parties, like the SDS (Serb), SDA (Bosniak), and HDZ (Croat) in Bosnia. The problem is compounded because Bosnia is composed of the Croat-Bosniak Federation and the Republika Srpska, an arrangement that has helped to sustain the power of ethnic parties. Some Bosnians believe that an improved economy is the key, and that once people have a job and a liveable wage, they will soon forget who is who. Perhaps they are correct, but a person’s identity may be more deeply seated and less related to a pay check. In the meantime, others are working at a more fundamental level of Bosnian society, the level of personal identity and interaction. The Nansen Dialogue Centre and the Open Society Fund Bosnia and Herzegovina are two NGOs in Sarajevo that have had success at this level. These groups are attempting to build a civil society that is composed of autonomous and respectful individuals and based on the notion of “unified pluralism.” Institution building is needed to provide the conditions suitable for the virtues of individual and collective autonomy and critical thinking, an acceptable moral framework, and the expressions of solidarity, friendship, and citizenship to peoples different from ourselves. At the same time, however, there must be efforts to help people realize that autonomy and a unified pluralism are achievable goals. One method that these NGOs use, and that has been gaining ground in the United States, is “intercultural education,” which allows persons to reach a critical distance from received opinion, whereby making it possible to incorporate the perspective of the other as equally deserving of respect. It promotes the shared “humanness” of the “other.” Although promoting dialogue and understanding among the citizenry is not as glamorous as the rebuilding of cities, it plays an important role in allowing diversity with unity, a key ingredient in civil society-building. Given the global society that we live in, efforts such as these, whether in the Balkans or the United States, should be applauded and continued.

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