
Interview: Kemal Kurspahic

Even now, Bosnia could be saved, asserts Sarajevo editor

Kemal Kurspahic is the editor in chief of the independent daily newspaper Oslobodenje in Sarajevo. The high-rise office building where it is published has been bombed out and the 70 journalists and personnel are struggling on inside the bomb shelter in the cellar 50 meters from the front line. Five journalists have been killed, 12 are missing and probably dead, and around 30 have been wounded, including Kurspahic.

"With us, Croats, Muslims, and Serbs work together, as they did before the war. They struggle every day to get out the newspaper that has become a symbol for the resistance of Sarajevo. The whole population in our besieged city identifies with Oslobodenje," he wrote. He was interviewed by Ulf Sandmark in Stockholm on Sept. 9, where he received the joint "Freedom Prize" of the Swedish newspaper Dagens Nyheter and the Danish newspaper Politiken. Oslobodenje has also received some of most prominent journalism prizes in Spain, the United States, France, and the United Kingdom. On Sept. 14, editors from over 50 newspapers internationally celebrated in Sarajevo the 50th anniversary of the paper, founded in the Underground during World War II.

EIR: Have there been any demands from the Bosnian side to sack European Community negotiator David Owen and close down the negotiations in Geneva?

Kurspahic: Not officially, but there are a few parliamentary parties complaining strongly about Lord Owen's behavior. From my point of view, after the Vance-Owen plan was rejected by the Serbian side, to act morally he should resign. He should give up his so-called peace attempts, because the Vance-Owen plan was partly inspired by the ethnic division formula which will bring us more terror and violence.

What Owen did not understand from the beginning is that the proposed division is more a source of than a solution to the Bosnian tragedy. The divisions were first introduced in the so-called peace process in Lisbon in March last year, before the war. They were introduced by the EC negotiators, a Portuguese diplomat and Lord Carrington. Just two weeks after they developed the maps for the division of Bosnia, Radovan Karadzic [leader of the "Bosnian Serbs"] started to cleanse his parts of the map. So we started to suffer genocide along the Drina River. He was cleansing town after town —

Foca, Zvornic, Visegrad. Then it spread all over the country, but it was along the lines drawn up at the peace conference. And therefore division is not the answer for Bosnia.

After the Serbian side rejected the Vance-Owen plan, it was not very tasteful for Lord Owen to propose another plan which made even greater concessions to the aggressor, and which brings victims of the aggressor under more intense pressure. I think he should resign.

EIR: How would the peace plan lead to continued war?

Kurspahic: From the beginning, I did not believe in the division as a solution for Bosnia. Before the war started, we did not have any territory in Bosnia which one could call exclusively Serbian, from which to create a so-called Serbian republic in Bosnia. One had to do what they did — ethnic cleansing, mass killings, mass rapes, concentration camps, and genocide.

We also don't have any territory that might be claimed for Muslims or Croats exclusively. In all those territories, people still live in mixed neighborhoods, mixed relations, and mixed towns. If you want to create a Croat republic in Bosnia, for example, in all the major towns of that supposedly Croat territory, you had more Muslims than Croats living there. According to the census of 1991, for example, Mostar, which is supposed to become the Croat capital in Bosnia, still had probably some 50,000 Muslims on the left bank of the Neretva River living in humiliating conditions, in some kind of ghetto, and that's how the division formula works. If you want to have exclusively ethnic towns, then you have to do something with the people who don't belong to the majority. If the international community acts to impose a division on Bosnia, we will have another decade of ethnic tensions and ethnic cleansing. I am afraid that the Geneva proposal, based as it is on division, might be the easiest, quickest solution, but it might prove the worst.

EIR: Where will the war continue if the peace plan is accepted?

Kurspahic: If Serbia's aggression succeeds in Bosnia, then it sets short-term and long-term precedents in the Balkans and in Europe. If they get away with conquering territory by force, without being punished, then it will inspire new waves of expansionism. The next move might be in Kosova and

Makedonija, with the possible involvement of Albania and Turkey on one side, and Greece on the other. If you allow borders in Europe to be changed by force, such as in Bosnia, if you allow the creation of an explosive atmosphere, then Bosnia will not be the last to pay the price for that kind of lawlessness.

EIR: Is the Bosnian standpoint to try to stop these Geneva negotiations and find another way for negotiating?

Kurspahic: Unfortunately, in Geneva, Bosnia is under blackmail. Bosnia has not had the means to defend itself. It faced an army which was hundreds of times better armed. Bosnia was attacked on the first day of its international recognition, so we did not have any arms. We relied on the army which we had helped to develop and to fund, as did the other people in former Yugoslavia, and they just turned their guns against defenseless towns, defenseless civilians, massacring the country and those who did not have the means to defend themselves.

The Bosnian Army was developed under the siege, under the terror, and unfortunately with their hands tied, because the arms embargo prevented us from exercising our legitimate right to self-defense. The world did not act to save Bosnia, and it also kept our hands tied by the embargo. So we faced a bloodbath, because we did not have the means to stage even a war of defense, and the world has not come to help us. Having been abandoned, I believe that [Bosnian President Alija] Izetbegovic and the Bosnian official representatives in Geneva really do not have a choice. If they refuse, given what is proposed to be imposed on them, they face the possibility of extermination of what is left of Bosnia, and the Muslim population there especially. If they accept, they will also be blamed for selling out other people's homes and towns, because division will reward aggression. It will legalize the crimes committed, because in ethnically pure states, no one will try those who committed genocide, and those who were expelled from their homes and towns will never be able to come back.

Accepting division in Geneva places dual responsibility on you: First, for what has already happened, because you legalize crimes; but also for what is going to happen, because by creating another two ethnic states, you will also stage another two waves of ethnic cleansing. That is why I do not believe in that. I don't see how Izetbegovic can avoid what is on the table. He really has to care about saving what is left of the Bosnian population, and unfortunately he does not have a choice. He does not have the military means to act. In that sense we are under immoral and illegal blackmail.

EIR: Some of the U.N. troops have been declared *persona non grata*. Have there been any other demands from the Bosnian side to get rid of the U.N. troops?

Kurspahic: There was not a request to get rid of the U.N. That is, in my opinion, too strong, because there are certain

humanitarian activities that they help with. The problem is not with the troops on the ground, but with their mission, which has been a failure from the beginning. They made many promising resolutions, but if any of them were really implemented, we would possibly be living in some safer environment now. There was, for example, the resolution on control of heavy weaponry. But the U.N. observers are just waiters, they just count how many rounds have been fired into a town and how many are shot back. That is all. They do not control that weaponry in any way. So their mission, at least in military terms, is a failure. It is designed as a peacekeeping mission, but there is no peace to keep. There first has to be a peace established. That is why I do not blame the soldiers there. They are also victimized; they suffer from the lack of means to fulfill their mission.

More importantly, when there are threats to intervene to save Bosnia, people like Lord Owen and some others complain that that could endanger humanitarian operations and U.N. troops on the ground. That's an argument which I cannot accept, because for us, the U.N. troops are supposed to be a part of the solution, not part of the problem. For us, being under constant sniping, shelling, terror, killings, it does not matter if we are going to be killed or die of hunger from lack of food. So if we receive humanitarian aid and still are unprotected against the killing, then I would favor some means for us to be defended. If the U.N. soldiers are an obstacle to that, if that's the excuse not to act, if we have to worry about their fate in case of an intervention, then I would prefer them to go, because we have our children to take care of and we cannot take good care of those U.N. kids.

EIR: What would a solution look like?

Kurspahic: I believe that a combination of measures might save Bosnia even now, even if many opportunities are lost. The only way out would be:

1) A military intervention, even if it is limited, or even symbolic, with air strikes against specific military targets around Bosnian towns, like the artillery positions around Sarajavo.

2) Lifting the arms embargo to give Bosnia a fair chance to defend itself. With the combination of those two measures the international community would not need a huge presence of ground troops for very long. There are enough Bosnians who want to defend themselves.

3) Application of sanctions against Serbia. This combination could make even Serbia enthusiastic about peace. Remember how they behaved last April and the first week of May, when there was hope for more decisive measures and even military intervention. Even [Serbian President Slobodan] Milosevic came to apply sanctions against the Serbians themselves. This lasted for two weeks, when there was a credible threat. As soon as it disappeared, they refused again.

4) Political will not only to propose, but to enforce a political solution in Bosnia.