

A mediator's perspective on the Western Balkans

From the 24th of February to the 2nd of March, Wille Valve, Head of the Åland Mediation Office, participated in the EU-sponsored seminar "Youth breaks the barriers! Mediation & reconciliation tools in European youth work activities" in Kljuc, Bosnia-Herzegovina. This is a mediator's perspective on a volatile region, where borders matter more than ever.

One of the first things that strikes a northern European visitor at the Balkans is its apparent volatility of borders. Most citizens of the EU are accustomed to viewing their borders as something permanent, fixed, usually drawn straight and in a logical manner. Not as something ambiguous that could be rerouted like a Siberian river.

Croatian-Slovenian border dispute

When embarking on the plane from Vienna to Zagreb, I get a copy of the Croatian daily Jutarnji, with the ongoing Croatian-Slovenian border dispute as its main story. A central part of the dispute is about the division of the tiny bay of Piran and Slovenia's ambition to get direct access to international waters. Croatia's small neighbour Slovenia has suddenly found itself in the strongest possible negotiation position with respect to its eastern neighbour: as a member of the EU since 2004, Slovenia has a wide array of formal and non-formal means to complicate and prolong any Croatian negotiations on EU membership, including vetoing of Croatian membership. The Slovenians have recently accepted an EU initiative on mediation with Noble prize winner Martti Ahtisaari, whereas the Croatian side still views the dispute as a primarily juridical problem, to be solved by the International Court of Justice. To put it mildly, this conflict will require a great measure of sensitivity from the EU in any possible mediation. The very fact that Slovenia is a member of the EU and that the mediator is from another member of the EU could serve as a pretext for questioning the impartiality of any EU-appointed mediator. Lately, the border conflict has also, according to the BBC, sparked what some call the 'Facebook wars', with over 40,000 Croats joining a group on the social networking

site calling for a boycott of Slovenian products – and thousands joining a Slovenian group called "Red Light to Croatia". The issue also seems to be 'alive' among ordinary Slovenes and Croats – or as one Bosnian Croat I met during the seminar put it There is a sense that the Slovenians are now watching at the rest of us 'from the above'.

More on the issue here:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7896040.stm>

Bosnia: Hopes and fears

According to the Lonely Planet guide on Croatia, Croats tend to point out that their culture is different than the other ethnicities of the Western Balkans – they listen to other music, they have different social codes and so forth. Partly, they seem to be right. When crossing the Croatian-Bosnian border, the bus driver suddenly switches the radio frequency from European-style croatian pop to Bosnian pop, with clearly distinguishable influences from the Middle East. Most people we meet are open, friendly and forward-looking, as far as their own lives are concerned. The joie de vivre is conspicuous. Driving along bosnian roads, however, you can still spot quite a few ruined houses with bullet-holes, but there is an equal amount of freshly-renovated buildings, owing to its diligent inhabitants and unselfish family-members working in Germany or Austria. Walking in the forests is still not recommended by local authorities, due to large quantities of undetected mines. When a forest fire was raging near the town Kljuc, the locals could hear several explosions from the forest, believed to come from undetonated mines.

Playing the 'ethnic card'

As far as the internal political landscape is concerned, the atmosphere is anything but happy. Interestingly, people of all ethnicities in Bosnia seem to be

To put it mildly, this conflict will require a great measure of sensitivity from the EU in any possible mediation.

utterly tired of their own politicians, which all too often play the easy 'ethnic card' instead of solving urgent issues of common interest, such as unemployment or poverty. Bosnia, as established by the Dayton agreement in 1995, consists of two entities: the Serbian Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to some locals, the leaders of these entities and the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) basically never agree on anything, which has strengthened the role of the High Representative, which in some situations can overrule all three presidents. Quite understandably, some Bosnians dislike their 'foreign' High Representative, whereas other ones view him as the only one who actually can get something done in the republic.

Foreign territory

The entities consist of several separate territories and enclaves which are not necessarily linked and in some cases barely connected with a 'bottle neck'. A quite shaky basis for separate statehood, that is. According to one bosniak, there was recently a summit on how to arrange a more 'EU-friendly' federal structure in Bosnia, where the county borders would be based on other criteria than ethnicity. This meeting ended with the president of Republika Srpska leaving and stating that "as far as the Federation is concerned, it is foreign territory for me". This statement was often referred to during my visit – and it has evidently stirred up a lot of negative emotions among the inhabitants of the Federation.

Ethnic tensions? Nema problema!

As a part of the Seminar, we got to visit the Sarajevo-based NGO Grozd (Gradansko organizovanje za demokratiju). In short, Grozd is a civil platform created before the elections in 2006 with the purpose of lifting up common challenges

It is clear that the wounds from before 1995 are still there. You can talk about them, but you can't touch them

- such as unemployment, the educational system, a dignified living standard – on the Bosnian political agenda. An impressive 500.000 citizens of BiH signed the Grozd petition with the list of key issues, which the citizens henceforth wanted their politicians to focus on. When we asked the representatives of Grozd what the NGOs in BiH do to promote reconciliation, the answers became a bit avoiding. It is clear that the wounds from before 1995 are still there. You can talk about them, but you can't touch them. The representatives of Grozd gave quite a contradictory picture – on one hand, there are no ethnic tensions in Bosnia today, on the other hand it is a part of every-day life. I believe the answers of Grozd in fact reflect the complicated reality the Bosnians live in, combined with a strong wish to forget about past injustices (since they only lead to more injustices) and instead focus on building a better future.

Time for co-operation

Bosnia and Herzegovina, with its 4 million inhabitants, has some major transitional challenges to cope with, before the country can enter the EU. The most evident challenge is the almost non-existent co-operation of Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. One might add, that anyone attempting to mediate this conflict should be very careful not to side with the Federation, since this would only strengthen the impression that only Serbia understands the demands of Republika Srpska – and then we would have a new powder-keg at the Balkans. Hopefully, though, the time is ripe for all citizens of Bosnia to start co-operating across ethnic borders to overcome the most pressing, every-day challenges of the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

**Wille Valve,
Head of the Åland Islands Mediation Office**