

Dave Chandler reports from Sarajevo on the reality behind all the West's talk of 'empowerment' and 'democratisation' around September's local polls in divided Bosnia

MORE DEMOCRATISERS, LESS DEMOCRACY

The political parties are a new thing. People do not know how to cope and neither do the leaders—they have no political programme—people just follow the flock. It's the same with the independent parties. People vote for them just because they are the alternative.'

Jasna is the Senior Co-ordinator for Democratisation at the newly established Democratisation Branch of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Sarajevo. Jasna does not seem to think much of the three major nationalist parties in Bosnia—the Muslim SDA, the Serbian SDS and the Croatian HDZ. Nor does she seem to think much of the people (the 'flock') who support these

the OSCE Mission in Bosnia, led by US Ambassador Robert Frowick, has been charged with the task of bringing democracy to the region. Throughout this process, 'democracy' has been narrowly defined as support for the unitary Bosnian state imposed by the USA at Dayton. In order to uphold that fictional entity, the OSCE's democratisation programme has had to try to stop the divided peoples of Bosnia expressing their democratic choice by voting for the three nationalist parties. It has vetted political parties and their aims, disqualified candidates, monitored elections and coerced elected representatives into obeisance before the political framework laid out by the international

The OSCE has more recently become aware of the tensions involved in imposing its version of democracy by diktat. As one Senior Democratisation Officer told me, 'the OSCE can't afford to look like a straightforward colonial organisation, saying "we don't like your leaders, we're going to do this, like it or not"'. So the Democratisation Branch is this year trying out a new approach, which it claims can build support for Dayton from the bottom of Bosnian society upwards, using the institutions of civil society.

Representatives of the Democratisation Branch told me that



parties. But then disdain for the elected and the electorate has underpinned the entire OSCE-run process of 'democratisation' in Bosnia. The new 'bottom-upwards' empowerment strategy now being tested by Jasna's democratisation team is no exception.

Since the signing of the Dayton Accord in November 1995,

community. Given the artificial nature of the Bosnian state, in which the leaders of the Muslims, Serbs and Croats could not even agree on the appointment of an ambassador to Washington (until made to under threat of Western sanctions), forcing the parties into line while making the process appear democratic has been no easy task for the OSCE.

they are now focusing their work at the grass-roots level. In no sense, however, is the focus on civil society proposed as an alternative to the existing top-downwards methods of OSCE control over Bosnia, but as a corollary to them. The consequence of both policies is to further restrict the ability of all the peoples of Bosnia to make free democratic choices.

The way the OSCE organised the municipal elections being held across Bosnia and Herzegovina on 13-14 September has brought the complementary nature of these two approaches into sharp relief. In the run-up to the elections the OSCE flexed its muscles: enforcing draconian censorship laws which prevent any media coverage seen ►

◀ as 'partisan, untrustworthy or possibly inflammatory'; forcing the media to publish OSCE material; and barring voters, candidates, registration officers and political parties on the basis of allegations ranging from infringing election regulations to abusing international monitors. Candidates of all three main nationalist parties have been struck off the lists due to allegations of electoral fraud and manipulation.

This heavy-handed approach to election monitoring follows the pattern set by previous internationally monitored elections in Bosnia, and shows that the OSCE has lost none of its commitment to dictating this process by force. But it was only when I spoke to the governance team at the Democratisation Branch that I became aware of the OSCE's own plans for election manipulation, orchestrated through the institutions of the 'grass roots'.

Come begging

The OSCE fully expects the three main nationalist parties to renew their clear mandate of support regardless of international attempts to 'level the playing field'. Recognising that it can do nothing about this, the

at the national level, will have some influence at the local level'.

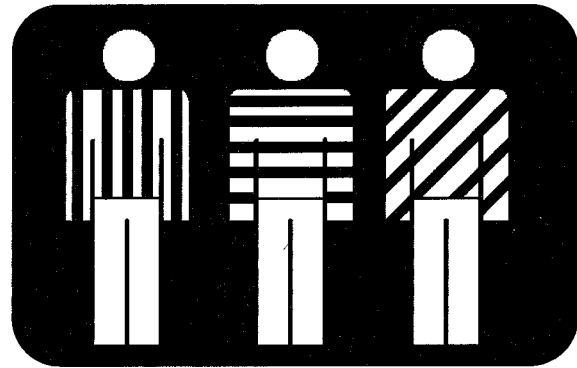
Darko informed me that new electoral rules were being developed by the OSCE to make the newly-elected local councils toe the line, and financial penalties will be imposed if the elected representatives fail to co-operate with each other and with Dayton. 'The Office of the High Representative can then use the weapon of funding to force co-operation. When people see money going into neighbouring areas for reconstruction they will have to come begging', he said, arguing that 'money is the only weapon we can use, although it is a tough weapon'.

Darko calls this strategy 'sustainable multi-ethnic development', and presents it as more organic and people-friendly than central diktat: 'The idea is that you are not really using just top-down force which would produce conflict, but encouraging people at a local level to support pilot projects of return.' The reality, however, is another form of

rule by blackmail and bribery. The Western powers have long used the carrot and stick approach of economic incentives and penalties to run Bosnia. As recently as August, Britain and the USA told the

powers. More importantly, by beefing up the importance of these local groups, the OSCE can further discredit the nationalist parties and justify its own role as 'democratiser' in the region.

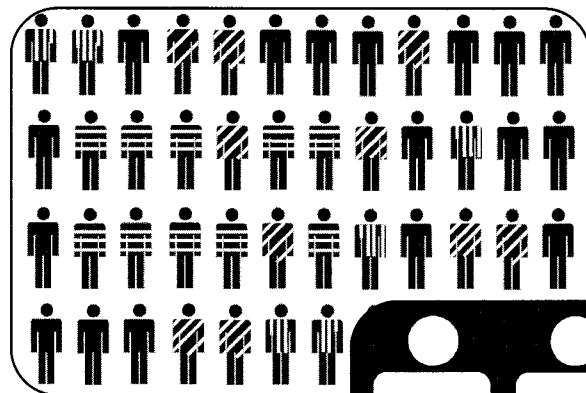
The OSCE's Democratisation Branch puts particular emphasis on encouraging women and young people to be more active in citizen politics, which sounds progressive enough.



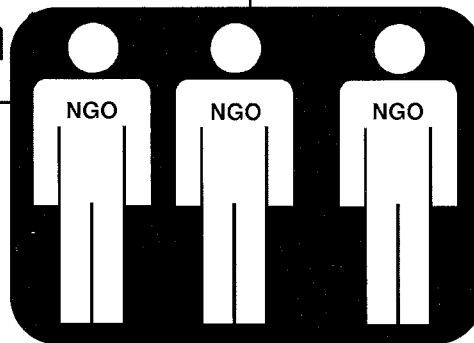
However this only gives a radical gloss to what is an essentially elitist approach; an elitism reflected in the negative attitude of the Democratisation Officers towards what they call 'majorities', otherwise known as the people who elect political parties.

Jasna, the Senior Co-ordinator for Democratisation, made clear to me her belief that NGOs are a superior alternative to political parties, precisely because they do not represent majority opinion. 'Political parties deal with majorities. It is important to address issues without thinking about minorities and majorities', she said, adding that the importance of NGOs is their ability to 'mobilise moral opinion, which can influence governments because they have to be sensitive to it, domestically and internationally'. In other words, the views of a few enlightened, unelected, unaccountable NGOs who appoint themselves as guardians of the moral high ground should carry more weight than the opinions of the majority in society. The OSCE's efforts to build up such a civil society include giving training and support to a variety of small citizen group NGOs—Circle 99, the Tuzla Citizens Forum, the Citizens Alternative Parliament and the Coalition for Return.

However popular these forums are in the Western press, they have major difficulties involving people in Bosnia. Sabine, the reporting officer of the Democratisation Branch told me that the central problem is 'how to encourage participation'. Zoran, the Co-ordinator for Dialogue and Reconciliation, explained that 'these groups are all run by intellectuals but they have very little influence. During the war they stayed aside



Democratisation Branch has turned its attention towards encouraging opposition to the main parties at the local level. Hoping for the success of opposition councillors voted in by displaced refugees, the governance team co-ordinated by Jim and Darko is planning to use the new layer of local politicians to take the enforcement of Dayton further. The OSCE Democratisation Officers have supported and trained displaced person groups that may be able to elect candidates across the Inter-Entity Boundary Line. As Darko explained, 'it is the local governments that are more likely to promote inter-entity links as they have infrastructure and economic needs to be met. With displaced people voting, opposition parties, with no chance



Bosnian Serb entity of Republika Srpska that it would get no reconstruction aid unless all Bosnian Serbs accused of war crimes were handed over to the International Tribunal at The Hague.

By intervening at a local level, the OSCE hopes to gain an additional foothold in the politics of Bosnia. Opposition councillors voted in by displaced refugees may not have the same clout or support as the nationalist parties, but they can play a useful role as patsies for the major international

and withdrew from politics. They are a minority, but the cream of intellectual society, they have good relations with their colleagues across the inter-entity boundary line'. Nonetheless, 'people doubt they are good patriots'.

The first monthly report of the Democratisation Branch, published in February, outlined the 1997 strategy. It explains the tensions in the region arising as a result of the mentality of the peoples of Bosnia, and argues that 'the

passive acceptance of prejudices must be overcome for real and psychological barriers to inter-ethnic reconciliation to be dismantled'. To the OSCE democratisers, it seems, the

being established in areas where the OSCE has been able to find individuals or small groups open to influence. What all of this misses is that there are rational reasons why the different groups of people in Bosnia support nationalist parties that promise them some protection in the uncertain climate created by the collapse of the state, the war and international supervision. For the Bosnian Croats, receiving welfare and economic subsidies from Croatia and dual-citizenship rights, the idea of greater autonomy and closer links to the Western focused Croatian state makes a great deal of sense. For the Bosnian Serbs in Republika Srpska,

people who vote for the nationalist parties are deluded as a result of irrational fears of 'the other', war trauma,

an ignorance of alternatives, or, even worse, the poisoned political climate of 'ethnic cleansing'.

Every project of the OSCE Democratisation Branch is informed by the assumption that the people, like children, cannot yet determine right from wrong. Psycho-social counselling groups have been established to deal with trauma as a barrier to reconciliation, media monitors explain the voting habits as a result of manipulative propaganda, cross-community fronts are set up to demonstrate that it must

only be ignorance that prevented people from doing these things without the OSCE there as a facilitator. A whole 'democratisation' industry is

isolated by hostility from the international community and fearful of being discriminated against by a Muslim-Croat alliance, greater

autonomy and closer links to Serbia equally seems a rational option. Bosnian Muslims, on the other hand, emboldened by the diplomatic, economic and military support of the major powers seek to extend the geographic sphere of their control and secure more power over state institutions.

To me, it is Dayton and the international regulation necessitated by it that has failed the test of democracy, not the Bosnian peoples themselves. The OSCE may not like the nationalist parties, but it is the Dayton framework it enforces which has institutionalised inter-communal tensions and insecurities and so guaranteed that politics remain polarised along Muslim-Croat-Serb lines. The mentality and culture of the peoples of Bosnia cannot be blamed for the failure of democracy. The problem lies right at the heart of those organisations attempting to 'democratise' them whether they like it or not.

THE NEW NGOS

'are basically all the same 20 people'

The Political Party Development Officer, Adrian, confirmed that the nationalist parties have much deeper roots than the new NGOs: 'The Citizens Alternative Parliament, the Shadow Government and the Coalition for Return are basically the same 20 people when you scratch the surface. The nationalist parties are much closer to the average person than the elitist Sarajevans. The overqualified Yugoslavs are seen as elitist whereas the HDZ, SDS and SDA have members and supporters on the ground facing the same problems as you.'

Despite this, Adrian was positive about his attempts to get the OSCE's chosen groups to abandon electoral competition after the local polls and become NGOs instead. 'They have no chance as political parties', he said. 'Displaced persons groups would have much more influence as NGOs and lobby groups than as political parties with 0.001 per cent of the vote.'

As a piece of tactical advice to wannabe opposition parties wanting to curry favour with the international community, Adrian's point may well be right. But how can you have a strategy for 'democratisation' that depends upon building small, elitist groups of non-elected people into an opposition against parties supported by majorities with distinct political aims?

Psychological barriers

What underlies the civil society approach to democratisation in Bosnia is neither a critique of top-down coercion by foreign powers, or a political alternative to the nationalist parties. The impetus for this approach comes from a disdain for democracy itself. Those who vote for the nationalist parties are deemed by the OSCE to be making the wrong choices: because they are not seen to be capable of making choices at all.

