



*U.S. Agency for International Development
Office of Transition Initiatives*

**REPORT ON FOCUS GROUPS
CONDUCTED IN
BANJA LUKA
BOSNIA HERCEGOVINA**

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REPORT ON FOCUS GROUPS CONDUCTED IN BANJA LUKA

I. Executive Summary

I. Background

USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) has implemented political development programs throughout Bosnia Hercegovina since December 1994. The objectives of OTI's current program are: to build Bosnian shareholders in the peace agreement; to build and maintain political stability that fosters positive implementation of the peace agreement; and to expand access to the political arena and change the nature of the political dialogue.

Elections are scheduled for September 14, 1996. OTI understands that the basic attitudes and beliefs of the citizens of Bosnia will have to begin to change if peace is to survive the departure of the IFOR military units. To understand current Bosnian attitudes and to seek opportunities for supporting changes in those attitudes, OTI commissioned a series of focus groups in April 1996. A second set of focus groups in Republic Srpska are necessary to understand the range of attitudes and opinions on the issues pursued during the first round of focus groups.

Focus groups are qualitative research. While not precise measures of public opinion, like a quantitative survey, focus groups provide insight into public attitudes and attitude formation, as well as a tool for testing reactions to specific messages and information. The purpose of a focus group is to isolate peoples' attitudes about a set of issues and to analyze the intensity of those feelings and attitudes.

II. Methodology

On July 29 and 30, two focus groups were conducted in Banja Luka. The groups were conducted for USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives to determine attitudes about the Dayton Peace Agreement and Accords (Agreement), the prospects for the formalization of the Federation and the possible outcomes of the elections in September.

The groups included women, demobilized soldiers and students. These participants were all of Serb ethnicity, and no attempt was made to include multi-ethnic participation within these groups. In order to ensure participation, true random selection of participants was not attempted. Working through USAID Foreign Service National (FSN) staff, a cross section of participants was recruited through personal contacts. Participants were not paid for their participation and the groups were held at the OTI offices.

III. Strategic Considerations

Two focus groups are not sufficient input to generalize to the overall population of Republic Srpska. Nevertheless, these findings indicate interesting parallels and discrepancies from the initial research conducted in April.

- * The impact of the war was evident on all of the participants in the groups. Fear, insecurity, and a sense of not being understood by the international community, and having been wronged were expressed in each of the groups. Among the young people there was a strong sense of having lost a significant portion of their lives to the war.
- * Unlike the participants in the groups conducted in the Muslim-Croat Federation, these participants were not well informed about the Dayton Agreement. Although there was some recognition that the Agreement had brought the peace, there was a strong feeling that the international community was trying to dictate outcomes in the resolution of the war that were not consistent with the will of the people of Bosnia Hercegovina.
- * The participants were not well informed about the war or the peace negotiations. The lack of regular electric power, the infrequency of broadcast news and a lack of trust for the information broadcast out of Pale each contributed to participants feeling uninformed about current events and the larger, international perspective of their situation.
- * Although the participants credited the agreement with clarifying the boundary between the Serb entity and the Croat-Muslim portion of Bosnia Hercegovina, they also expressed skepticism that the Dayton Agreement will be the final agreement. They expect further fighting and an eventual split between the Croats and the Muslims.
- * These participants are concerned about the economic stability of Srpska Republic and want to establish economic relationships to start rebuilding their community--these links are desired with international entities and with their former opponents from the war.
- * Although some believe it is too soon for the elections, they believe that the elections will confirm the separation of the two entities and release some of the post-war tension and allow people to get on with their lives. They expect the nationalist parties to win the elections.
- * There is a strong distrust of the motives of the international community, but a stated belief that the troops must stay after the elections to preserve the peace.

IV. Media and Message Campaign

Based on this research, a public education campaign is being developed to expand the "Make Peace Your Future" public service announcements into the Republic Srpska. It will carry the USAID logo and be adapted to reflect the interests and concerns reflected by these groups and input from the FSN staff in Banja Luka. It will also follow the formula for gathering community input in the design, production, distribution and evaluation that has been characteristic of this program in the Croat-Muslim entity.

II. Background

USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) has implemented political development programs throughout Bosnia since December 1994. The objectives of OTI's current programs are: to build Bosnian shareholders in the peace agreement; to build and maintain political stability that fosters positive implementation of the peace agreement; and to expand access to the political arena and change the nature of the political dialogue.

Since the formal signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in Paris, efforts to implement the provisions of the agreement continue; a key hallmark of success resting with the national elections scheduled for September 14. OTI understands that the basic attitudes and beliefs of the citizens of Bosnia will have to begin to change if peace is to survive the departure of the IFOR military units. To understand current Bosnian attitudes and to seek opportunities for supporting changes in those attitudes, OTI commissioned a series of focus groups in April 1996. The first set of focus groups addressed attitudes in the Croat-Muslim federation of Bosnia Hercegovina. A second set of focus groups in Republic Srpska are necessary to expand understanding of the range of attitudes and opinions on the issues pursued during the first round of focus groups.

Focus groups are qualitative research. While not precise measures of public opinion, like a quantitative survey, focus groups provide insight into public attitudes and attitude formation, as well as tool for testing reactions to specific messages and information. The purpose of a focus group is to isolate peoples' attitudes about a set of issues and to analyze the intensity of those feelings and attitudes.

A focus group is a semi-structured discussion, usually involving 8-12 participants who have been recruited based on specific criteria. While the actual recruitment process should be conducted in a random fashion, the specific respondents are selected because they meet very specific recruiting criteria such as race, gender, age, religion, socio-economic status, geography, or some type of attitudinal distinction.

A focus group discussion usually lasts 90-120 minutes. The discussion is led by a trained moderator who guides the group through a series of predetermined discussion topics. The moderator's function is to facilitate the discussion, to put the respondents at ease and to go from a general to a narrow focus, to cover each topic in complete detail. The moderator uses a Moderator's guide which includes mostly open-ended questions. This type of questioning and discussion permits in-depth exploration of complex topics and allows for a textured understanding of attitudes and opinions that cannot be taken from a quantitative survey. Focus group research is subjective and the results cannot be assumed to be projectable to the population as a whole.

III. Methodology

On July 29 and 30, two focus groups were conducted in Banja Luka in the Republic Srpska of Bosnia Hercegovina. The groups were conducted for USAID Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) to determine attitudes about the Dayton Peace Agreement and Accords (the Agreement), the prospects for the formalization of the Federation and the possible outcomes of the elections scheduled for September 14.

Targeted groups included women, demobilized soldiers and students. No attempt was made to include multi-ethnic groups in this project, unlike the earlier phase of the research conducted in the Muslim-Croat Federation. But efforts were made to recruit displaced persons as well as those who resided in Banja Luka throughout the war. Working through the contacts of the Foreign Service National (FSN) staff of OTI, a cross section of participants was recruited. No incentive was paid for their participation and the sessions were held in the offices of OTI.

Two interpreters were present in both groups to assist with translation and to ensure accurate compilation of the responses and impressions from the two groups. In addition, with the permission of the participants, the sessions were audio-taped. In the student group, students raised concerns about the content of the group and insisted that they had been invited to discuss concerns of students, not politics. The theme of the groups was restated and participants were given the opportunity to leave. All participants stayed and actively participated in the focus group discussion.

The groups were composed as follows:

- | | |
|----------|--|
| Women | Four women ranging in age from 27 to late 50s; one refugee, two professional women and one homemaker; |
| Students | Seven students including four men who served in the military during the war; three women; with the exception of one student from the Faculty for Mechanical Engineering, the students were from the Faculty for Economics and were familiar with each other. |

A total of 11 participants were interviewed for this phase of the research project. This report is a reflection of their responses to the interview guide included in Appendix A.

IV. Strategic Considerations

- * The impact of the war was evident on all of the participants in the groups. Fear, insecurity, and a sense of having been wronged were expressed in each of the groups. Among the young people there was a strong sense of having lost a significant portion of their lives to the war.
- * The participants were not well informed about the war or the peace negotiations. The lack of regular electric power, the infrequency of broadcast news and a lack of trust for the information broadcast out of Pale each contributed to participants feeling uninformed about current events and the larger, international perspective of their situation.
- * Unlike the participants in the groups conducted in the Muslim-Croat Federation, these participants were not well informed about the Dayton Agreement. Although there was some recognition that the Agreement had brought the peace, there was a strong feeling that the international community was trying to dictate outcomes in the resolution of the war that were not consistent with the will of the people of Bosnia Hercegovina.
- * Although the participants credited the agreement with clarifying the boundary between the Serb entity and the Croat-Muslim portion of Bosnia Hercegovina, they also expressed skepticism that the Dayton Agreement will be the final agreement. They expect further fighting and an eventual split between the Croats and the Muslims.
- * These participants are concerned about the economic stability of Srpska Republic and want to establish economic relationships to start rebuilding their community--these links are desired with international entities and with their former opponents from the war.
- * Although some believe it is too soon for the elections, they believe that the elections will confirm the separation of the two entities and release some of the post-war tension and allow people to get on with their lives. They expect the nationalist parties to win the elections.
- * There is a strong distrust of the motives of the international community, but a stated belief that the troops must stay after the elections to preserve the peace.

V. Key Findings

A. The Dayton Agreement.

These participants were not well informed about the Dayton Agreement. None of them had personally seen the document; and they claimed to have read or heard very little about the specifics of the Agreement. The participants had some limited anecdotal information about the Agreement, but were most likely to present it as a document designed by international forces to pressure the people of Bosnia Hercegovina to commit to an agreement that was not their own. Unlike the participants in the Croat-Muslim Federation, these participants gave little credit to the Agreement for bringing peace or a cessation of fighting. To them, its greatest accomplishment was creating a new boundary between the two entities.

It's very hard to say what's in the Agreement because we didn't do anything for it, we haven't seen it and we didn't participate in it. The most important thing that it brings us is that finally we know where the border is between us and the other entity. We would like that border to stay, so that we will know forever where we are and where they are.

(Male, 27)

The Dayton Agreement stopped the war but it is not fair to Republic Srpska.
(Woman, mid 30's)

I read something about it and I believe that all three sides got something. If all three sides want to live together then everyone must get something but I believe that the Serbs got less than the other two sides. Serbs got less because the other two sides were protected by someone, but there was no one to protect the Serb side. There was less objectivity to the Serbs.

(Woman, late 20's)

Heard about Dayton on radio and state TV, did not read about it. There is something about Dayton that we must accept, that we cannot change. According to it, there are two entities---it separates these two entities. Ordinary people didn't start the war;....ordinary people would never have wanted what happened here. There must have been a way for the separation to happen without the war.

(Woman, late 50's)

Although the participants credited the agreement with clarifying the boundary between the Serb entity and the Croat-Muslim portion of Bosnia Hercegovina, they also expressed doubts that the Dayton Agreement will be the final agreement. Their skepticism is a reflection of their belief that the Croats and Muslims cannot live together in a multi-ethnic way; that the international community still has not finally decided what it wants to occur

within the country; and concern that weapons have been provided to the Croats and the Muslims. All of these factors contribute to continued political unrest and potential upheaval in the region.

I do not think that the Dayton Agreement is the final agreement. I have heard that the Croats and the Muslims have been given military equipment, so maybe there will be fighting again and Dayton will not be final. This is the opposite of what the international community usually does. Normally when they want peace, they demilitarize a country, but here there is something different. Here they stop the war but they give military equipment to one side. In Balkan history, whenever there is military equipment, it is in use. There will be war again.

(Woman refugee, 20's)

B. Prospects for Peace.

The participants in both groups, women, demobilized soldiers and students, are grateful for the peace. They are hopeful that the peace will continue and they are ready to get on with stabilizing their lives and moving forward. There are many unresolved issues but they believe that the war determined that it was no longer possible for the three ethnic groups to live in a multi-ethnic union.

Former Bosnia Hercegovina was Yugoslavia in the small. So if they didn't want to live united in Yugoslavia, how can they now want to live in a united Bosnia Hercegovina. It's a Muslim and Croat farce. They don't want a united country. Its obvious now that they don't want it, so I doubt that the Muslims and Croats can stay together. It will split--they are two different religions--- Catholic and Muslim.

(Woman, 19)

A multi-ethnic community cannot exist anymore. There are too many dead people on all sides. The pain is very fresh. It is too soon. All people with mixed marriages have left the country, they are not here. No one will vote for a multi-ethnic country. It is not possible.

(Male, 23)

It was nice to live together before the war but this war destroyed that possibility. It is very stupid to fight in the 21st century about religion. We lived for 50 years after World War II as neighbors. No one cared about the religion of the other person. Only now is that the issue.

(Female, 30's)

There is a realization among these partners that rebuilding the economy of Republic Srpska will require them to trade and interact with Croats and Muslims. Participants in both

groups underscored their commitment to "being good neighbors". This sentence was always linked with the concept of being trading partners and economically linked.

We can't live together. But we can be good neighbors. We can trade together. The economic situation makes cooperation possible. The war started because of the very bad economic situation in Yugoslavia. They (the political leaders) couldn't find a way to move from communism to something else---so they started the war. Now we have to rebuild.

(Woman, economics major 19)

Good trade can create good neighbors. But if somebody wants war, the economy cannot stop that. The economy is not in the hands of ordinary people. War profiteers and politicians control the economy and they do not want this peace.

(Woman, 50's)

C. The Elections.

The participants in these two focus groups were ambivalent about these elections. They believe that the elections are important to clarify the permanence of the division between the two entities within Bosnia Hercegovina. They generally believe that the nationalist parties will be reelected and that this will further confirm that the division is a permanent division of the ethnic groups. They volunteered that before the war they were Yugoslavians, but now they are Serbs.

1. Timing of the elections.

Older women seemed to feel that it was too soon to hold the elections because people are still carrying their feelings of remorse and anguish about the war. They expressed that people will vote based on their emotions about the war, and that they will support those political parties and candidates that stood by them during the war. Younger people were more likely to express the sentiment that these elections will confirm the separation between the two entities and provide a new foundation for going forward. They expressed optimism that once the results of the war had been confirmed by the electorate, things could begin to move forward again.

Elections are too soon. There are lots of dead people, lots of wounded people, lots of refugees. It is too soon because the mother's haven't had time to cry yet.

(Woman, 50's)

It's not too soon---we need to know where we are and where they are. Unfortunately, we have to live separately. The elections will confirm that this is so.

(Male, 27)

These elections will show that the Serbs are united on this side and the Croats and Muslims are united on that side. After that it will be easier.

(Male, 24)

2. Political candidates and political parties.

A common sentiment among these participants was support for the national party and for those candidates that supported the Serbs during the war. Nevertheless in each group, there was at least one participant who questioned the ability of leaders who had fought the war to be able to lead effectively in the post-war government.

I can't understand how the leaders who had the chance to stop the war but didn't stop the war, how can they now be the ones to talk about the peace. There are victims on all sides. The middle class has disappeared.

(Woman, 30's)

This election reminds me of the elections of 1991--the same people are running on both sides. Its well known that the (1991) elections were not about the people who want to solve the problems and have peace. So, if they couldn't solve the problem four years ago, how can they solve the problem now?

(Male, 24)

In these elections the current powers should step aside. But if people who are abroad vote in these elections, I fear that the same people will be elected.

(Female, 19)

People will be different in these elections. The election is about the separation of the country. The success of the national parties will confirm the separation. It will confirm the separation of the peace.

(Female, 22)

3. Access to information.

People reported that the lack of electricity and transmission capability has limited their ability to get information from television. But they did not express concern about getting information about the candidates or the political parties. Most participants seemed fairly confident about whom they were planning to support.

Campaign has started. We hear the candidates when we have electricity but these elections are too soon. The social conditions (economic stability) are not right. Elections will make Republic Srpska a separate country; and then in the future elections there will be less stress.

(Woman, 50's)

Lack of electricity means that we lack information.

We only get news from Serbia. The NATO bombs destroyed our transmitters so we cannot get news from other stations. We only get information from Belgrade and TV Zagreb. Serb TV controls the information we get. Every station has some illogic but it is different illogic. Only if we hear all sides can we find the logic (truth). Each side has its own political marketing through the media and they all try to manipulate us by what they tell us.

4. Outcome of the elections.

Within these two groups, there was a sense of expectation about the upcoming elections. Participants reported that things will change with the elections, but they acknowledged that the same political leaders are likely to be elected to power. When pressed, they suggest that the election will confirm the separation of the three entities and that that will enable things to move forward and thereby relieve some of the tension and stress.

All people are talking that after the elections things will be changed. We don't know how they will be changed but we know that something will be changed. The most important thing is that we will have peace after the elections---we will have our homes, we will have Republic Srpska, we will have no influence from the international community.

(Woman, 50's)

I am afraid that the people who won before the war will win again--because we are still under the influence of the war.

(Woman, 23)

D. Attitudes toward the United States and the International Community.

There is a much stronger negative attitude toward the international community and especially the Americans among the Banja Luka participants. The participants talked about friends and colleagues who were killed by American bombings, and of the predisposition of the Americans to support the Muslims and the Croats over the Serbs. They express confusion and distrust of the motives of the international community, and are openly skeptical of the international community's willingness to let the people of Bosnia Hercegovina solve their own problems. Nevertheless, they express no anger toward the foreign soldiers and openly express their belief that the troops will not leave after the

elections. In fact, they believe the troops need to stay as a signal that the Dayton Agreement supports the current political division of the country.

The international community needs to push for peace--not bring in guns and sell weapons. The foreign influence--Mr. Holbrook and his pressure to remove Karadzic--I think this U.S. pressure to remove our President is just one step--we wait to see what the next step will be by the international community.

(Woman, 50's)

Foreign soldiers came here because they were told to come here. We were soldiers and we know about orders. We don't think ill of them. We have coffee with them. We don't want them to leave because we are safer now that they are here. They are a warning that we cannot start the war again.

(Male, 23)

E. Role for women and students.

These women believe that they share a common bond, their children, with the women who are Croatian and Muslim. Nevertheless, they do not envision taking an active role in building the peace because it is too soon and they need to rebuild their lives. They also seem satisfied with resuming their traditional roles, rather than expanding their role in the community.

People have not asked women to take a role. I believe that mothers can reach out to mothers because we all want the same thing---for our children to be safe. But it's too soon. Women are still revolted by what happened.

(Woman, 50s)

Too early to talk about a new life.

(Woman, 19)

The students also spoke of a desire to resume their lives and complete their studies without fear of war. While they expressed a desire to share information with students from other countries, and to exchange recent information in their fields of study, they did not talk about taking an active role in their communities. Specific concerns that they raised had to do with the need to improve student housing and other basic student services.

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