The Ceasefire in Croatia

As we have seen, concurrently with its attempt to negotiate a comprehensive settlement the EC also tried to broker a ceasefire in Croatia. In October 1991 the mediation effort was joined by the UN. Finally, in February 1992, with the UN playing the principal mediatory role, the negotiations produced an agreement and the ceasefire took effect.

The mediation effort that led to the ceasefire can be regarded as both a failure and a success. It was a failure because it took six months to bring about the ceasefire, and in the fighting that went on in the meantime many thousands of people lost their lives and over half a million were displaced from their homes. It was a success in that a ceasefire was eventually achieved. It is impossible to tell what would have happened had there been no ceasefire in February 1992. But it seems plausible that despite the numerous violations that occurred between 1992 and 1995, and the subsequent war in 1995, fewer people were killed than would have been killed had there been no ceasefire agreement.

The mixed outcome prompts several questions. First, why did it take six months for the mediators to arrange a ceasefire? Second, how can the ultimate accomplishment of a ceasefire be explained? Fourteen ceasefire agreements were concluded during the six months of negotiations, but the first 13 were not implemented. Why was the fourteenth successful, and why did it take three months for it finally to take effect? Third, what were the effects of the mediators being international organisations? Initially the mediator was the EC, but in October the UN joined in the negotiations and assumed the principal
mediatory role. What difference did the UN make? In what ways did the shift from the EC to the UN affect the outcome?

In trying to answer these questions this chapter will first briefly review the background of the negotiations – the issues in dispute and the war that erupted. This will be followed by a description of the negotiation process. Drawing on this description, the final section will offer some answers to the questions posed.

The issue

Unlike Slovenia, which was able to sever its ties with Yugoslavia with relatively few complications, Croatia’s secession brought to the fore the complex issue of the status of its Serb population. There were approximately 582,000 Serbs in Croatia, constituting some 12.2 per cent of its population. While the majority of them lived throughout Croatia, close to 26 per cent were concentrated in areas adjacent to Serbia or to Bosnia-Herzegovina, the krajina, where they constituted an absolute majority in eleven communes (69 per cent of the population compared with 22 per cent of Croats) and a sizable minority in other areas.1

As already mentioned, Croatia’s secession provoked fear and insecurity among the Serbs, accompanied by a major surge in nationalist sentiments. The fire of nationalism had been flickering for a long time, but was fanned into flames by Milošević and his associates by means of rhetoric and political manipulation. The fears and the nationalism were caused not so much by the centuries-old tension between the Serb and Croat peoples, as by the more recent experience of genocide against the Serbs by the Ustasha-led Independent Croat State, established by Nazi Germany during the Second World War. Many Serbs had personal memories of that period, and the younger generation had heard about the massacres from their parents and grandparents. The fears stemming from these memories were exacerbated by the policies pursued by the Croat nationalists following the victory of their political party, the HDZ (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica – Croatian Democratic Union) in the first free elections, held in May 1990. The new legislature adopted a constitution that diminished the Serbs’ legal status in Croatia from one of equality with the Croats to a national minority. This constitutional change was followed by legislation that abolished the use of the Serbian