Series: Elections

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Interviewee: Mauro De Lorenzo

Interviewer: Jennifer Widner

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WIDNER: **Mauro De Lorenzo has joined up today to talk about refugee voting in Bosnia. Welcome and thank you very much for speaking with Innovations for Successful Societies. I wonder if you would tell us about the position you held when you first became involved in introducing refugee voting in Bosnia, and perhaps, talk also about what brought you to this job.**

DE LORENZO: I was brought to the job by an internship at something which still exists in Vienna, Austria called the International Center for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) which was founded by a former high-ranking Swedish immigration official and refugee policy official named Jonas Widgren, who has since died. ICMPD was designed to coordinate, harmonize migration policies between new member states of the EU (European Union) and the existing ones. By a long series of coincidences, which are not so important here, the offices of ICMPD became the Secretariat for the refugee elections component of the first Bosnian elections in 1996. I was around the office and as the crisis multiplied in the effort to implement the refugee-voting mandate, I made myself more and more useful and by the end was a member of the steering group, very improbably. It started in earnest around May 1996. It had always been foreseen that refugees would be able to participate in the elections. The elections were not run by the UN because there just wasn't very much confidence in the UN in general in that region at the time so the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) was given the mandate. I don’t know that they had organized elections before. They had technical help from IFES (International Foundation for Electoral Systems) and Elections Canada, but naturally everyone's focus, attention and priority was on the voting process within Bosnia. The staff was in Sarajevo; there were no flights to Sarajevo. There was one sort of Swiss plane that went back and forth, but it was difficult to get there. The phones didn’t work and so there was a woman, I think her name was Judy who, one of her duties but it had sort of fallen by the wayside, until around June—. The elections were, I think, in October? September? See what the dates were, that is an important one. We didn’t have much time to find all these people, to register them and so forth. So a bit of panic set in.

What happened was the Swiss government was serving as the chairman of the OSCE that year—the chairmanship of the OSCE rotates around Europe every year to a different foreign minister. So Switzerland was in the chair that year, which was fortunate because they have extra cash at their disposal. And when this problem was brought to light the Swiss recruited a Swiss general named Peter Arbenz who had headed the Swiss refugee agency and had been the inspector general of IFOR (International Fellowship of Reconciliation) forces in Bosnia when the war was still going on. He was one of Switzerland’s first deployments of a soldier in a combat situation since the Middle Ages or something. So he was asked to create a task force under OSCE auspices, but separate from the OSCE structure because it was too overburdened—just to do what he could with the time remaining to enable refugees to vote.

We were given two million dollars in a numbered bank account in Austria with which to do this. We were in the ICMPD office because it was the summer. Jonas went on vacation and said, “You guys can just stay and you can have Mauro to help you, he speaks German, he speaks French, he’s good with computers and so forth.” So I was just part of the furniture. It got started. Arbenz recruited some Swiss diplomat types to go and make arrangements with the other European host countries. But the smartest thing they did was to make a partnership with IOM, the International Organization for Migration, to sort of second a senior officer to run this. The guy who really ran it under Arbenz’s authority, his name
was Bill Hyde, who you should interview as well. He was the coordinator for emergency situations at IOM for many years. He didn’t have elections experience but he had a lot of experience like running big complicated things with migrants in disordered places on a tight timeframe. He is American. We formed a bond.

I guess it really started when—now we get into some of the operational details, which made this challenging. I maybe skipped over some other things during this but there were details of how we got there: remind me to go back to them. The electoral law that was agreed for the election was based on the last Yugoslav census, which I believe had been done in ’89 or ’90, right before the war started. That seemed to be good because it was not tainted by the politics of the war per se. It had been done relatively recently so it probably captured most of the people you would want to vote. And it had been done at a time when there was some computerization, so it existed on microfilm or something, and Sarajevo had managed to put it onto computers. When we came onto the radar of the elections people in Sarajevo they said, “OK, we’ll send you one of these computers or a bunch of them.”

We recruited a bunch of agents to be based in European capitals to run the offices and to find and register people. We brought them to Vienna to give them their laptop with this very valuable database and so Bill said, “Can you just sort of make sure the computers work and figure out how you search for people so you can show them tomorrow?” So I said, “Sure.” I turned on the computers and they were kind of old and slow and so it was taking a long time to search for anyone. But the real fatal flaw was that there was a bunch of nice, I think, American IT people sitting in Sarajevo who had designed it and they had neglected to include a way to search for names that had diacritical marks on them—and 98% of Bosnian names have a hachek or something on top of them. So you could only search for people who didn’t have that, which rendered it almost useless.

I played with it all night and I found there was a way through using these wildcard things to sort of search but you would have to replace—you would have to know what you were looking for to be able to find it and in many cases you wouldn’t. There was no way we were going to be able to register 500 people by the deadline much less the millions of Bosnians outside the country. We were really run as a startup. We were physically separate from the rest of the OSCE; we weren’t part of their decision-making structures. If we thought it made sense to do something, we had the money and we just did it.

I went and found some computer guy who claimed he could reformat it in a way that was searchable. He did it. It took about a week of time we didn’t have and he brought us back something, which was still clunky, but you could actually search for people. So that made me a little bit—showed that I could be a little bit useful so they just asked me to hang around and I eventually became Bill’s sort of main assistant or deputy in Vienna. What happened, as we’ll get to, is that once we sort of unilaterally removed some of the chief obstacles to refugees being able to register, the flood began on a scale that none of us ever imagined. Hundreds of thousands of people registered to vote, which then presented the related problem—which we eventually got to—of how to print enough ballots, get them to them and get them back by the deadline.

I’ll take you through later some of the logistics we had to deal with and some of the crises that came up. So that was the structure of it and that’s one reason why the efforts of this unit have never been part of the main story of what happened during those elections because it was done—. The decision makers in Sarajevo
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knew about it but it just wasn’t part of what they were doing. The whole point was that they didn’t want to have to worry about it because they were so concerned about the integrity and peacefulness of the vote inside Bosnia. They wanted to be able to say, “We made an effort to enable refugees to vote.” They didn’t care, they weren’t pressuring us to—“You have to get 200,000 or 50,000.” They didn’t care. They needed to be able to say they’d done it.

In fact, I think our success was in many ways inconvenient because it hadn’t been planned for. For example the counting mechanisms, which we’ll get to. They hadn’t taken into account that there would be tons and tons of paper ballots coming from abroad. That was their problem, not our problem.

Here’s the quirk in the Bosnian election law which caused us a lot of trouble, and everyone a lot of trouble: Because when I say it was inconvenient for them it was—I can give you the punch line of the story. As a result of what happened in the refugee voting process, because of the loopholes in the electoral law that had been negotiated, I guess as part of Dayton or shortly afterwards, a situation arose that caused the head of the OSCE just a week before the elections—it must have been October of ‘96—to cancel the local and municipal elections. They only allowed the presidential elections to go forward. I’ll explain why.

I think for everyone it was just like a box to be checked. It ended up having that consequence, which freaked the United States out like you can’t believe because—think back to ‘96. There was a US presidential election the next month. There was a lot of uncertainty about whether American forces should be in Bosnia and it was very important to say, “No, they’re just there for this defined mission, success is happening, they’re going to be home soon.” When you have very publicly two-thirds of the election being called off at the last minute it was an unwelcome development.

But more to the point, this is why I think including refugees in elections is so important, it changed the outcome because—and this is what you fine in every refugee situation—refugees are not a representative sample of the country they fled from. They’re not victims of an earthquake. They’re people who were targeted for one reason or another and either pushed out or induced to flee. In the case of Bosnia the majority of refugees were Muslim. There was a big concentration of Bosnian Serb refugees in Serbia. We could never tell how many of those were actually Bosnian Serbs, how many were Serb Serbs who Serbia got to register, which is part of the problem we’ll get to later on. But, you know, if you fail to include refugees in this first post-conflict vote, you’re entrenching. You could entrench ethnic cleansing; you could create a situation that makes it undesirable or even impossible for them to even consider returning home. The election, in a cruel way, can seal the victory of the people who were the most aggressive during the conflict.

This is why I’m surprised even today that it is not seen as an essential, non-negotiable piece of any post-conflict election strategy. What happened was that most of the Bosnian voters voted for Izetbegovic, Alija Izetbegovic, not for the Serb or the Croatian candidate. And that margin is what enabled Izetbegovic to cross the threshold to be the chairman of the tripartite presidency. It is contrafactual history but I remember it was generally felt, there was relief at that, because it was hard to see how this could hold if he wasn’t—. I mean, I don’t know that it gave him much more power, it was designed as a pretty diffuse structure, but if he hadn’t emerged from that, would the implementation of the
Dayton Accords have been as relatively smooth as it has been since then? I don’t know.

So the problem with the electoral law was that it enabled you to vote where you currently lived which seems normal. Bosnia is divided up into sixty or seventy sort of counties, they’re called opština—it is like a little local government unit. Underneath that there are cities and towns and above that are the cantons and then the national government. But the real unit for electoral purposes is this opština. The ballot for the opština can be very different so the logistics of printing seventy or eighty versions of the ballot were overwhelming because each option had its own negotiated relationship either with the Federation of Bosnia Herzegovina or certainly—it was very, very complicated. Mostar had its own ballots and all these contested places.

You could register to vote where you currently lived. You could register to vote where you lived before the war, again as an effort to give people a way to reverse through the ballot box ethnic cleansing, or at least prevent it from being legitimized through an election. And the third option, which is the one that I think has never been seen before or since in comparative electoral law, was that you could vote where you intended to live in the future.

So there was some vague language that you should document this somehow but it wasn’t clear that we had a right to refuse it. If there was a signed declaration stating this intent we kind of had to accept that as evidence of their intention to live there in the future. So a Bosnian refugee in Germany who before the war had lived in Mostar could say when I go home I intend to live in Sarajevo and he would receive a ballot for Sarajevo and vote there.

Now you know this was, I don’t know the details of why this became part of the compromise, but it was a giant loophole through which the Serbian government especially tried to drive a big truck. I’ll explain that at the end.

There was another complication, which we faced. We actually faced that before this one. It was purely of logistics, about paper and things. The electoral law said that each registration had to be on a numbered form. So there were these forms in duplicate or triplicate and they had a serial number on them. For reasons, I don’t know, stimulation of the local economy, it had been decreed that those forms should be printed in Sarajevo with these serial numbers. Despite I can’t remember how many hours on the phone, faxes, I could not get—there was only one plane. I could not get anyone to send me—and I would get, like 500 forms. "What am I supposed to do with 500 forms? I need 100,000 forms."

"Ah yes, maybe in two months." "What do you mean two months? The election is going to be over?" But their focus, they were—the printing press had a capacity, and all they cared about was having enough forms for Bosnians because that’s where the cameras were going to be. If the poor Bosnians in Norway didn’t get forms, not quite as crucial. So we had to make a decision at some point. I don’t remember if it was in June or July, but what is more important, what’s more crucial, is it that people be enfranchised and have their right to vote if they can prove that they are otherwise entitled, they are on the census, they have other ID documents and so forth? Or is it more important to—is it better to deny people that right if we don’t have enough individually-numbered forms with which to register them and we decided that it was more important that people be able to participate in the first election. Frankly we decided that on our own without asking
the OSCE, we didn’t ask any lawyers, we just did it. So we photocopied the forms. We accepted forms by fax. We accepted forms by—we didn’t care about the serial number any more, we just cared about—we knew we had a way to keep track of whether that name had already been registered from the census. You couldn’t register three times or—at least through us. That’s what opened the floodgate.

We had, I don’t think anyone had any idea of the demand there was amongst Bosnians to participate in this. We didn’t have the time to do any advertising. We didn’t, you know. It was just like craziness from beginning to end because this got started so late and that’s why our estimates were so—. We took a pool, like a betting pool a few weeks after we started, how many did you think we could register by the deadline. I think I guessed 25,000. Bill, I think, guessed 35 or 40 and Gerta, who was this Austrian woman who was the third key person, the deputy to Bill, she was more conservative. She guessed 15,000.

We were looking at the rules we had to do, the time available—no way. The end result was 685,000 people in 74 or 75 countries and jurisdictions. I woke up, I was in the office one day early, there was a knock on the door, a guy with a gun and this giant bag. I’m like, “Can I help you?” He comes in. He is the Bosnian ambassador to Libya and he has come from Tripoli with three potato sacks full of completed ballots by Bosnians living in Libya. I didn’t know there were any Bosnians living in Libya. I mean, I think we knew but we had given up. There was no way, IOM didn’t even have representative there. Kiss them good-bye, they can’t vote. How are we going to get the Bosnians in Libya to vote?

But he heard about it, he got his copy of the form and then he organized at their mission and they all came and they filled it out correctly and I remember almost all of those ballots checked out and they were able to vote. So community leaders did it, it happened on its own without us having—because people needed to participate in ways that none of us had realized or imagined.

I got ballots from French Polynesia, places where, you know, who knew there were Bosnians there? All over Latin America and so forth. So we registered these. By that time we had created a more sophisticated IT infrastructure, again totally separate and independent of the OSCE because I had to replicate this database in all of the countries where we had field missions. Then we had to set up a central one in Vienna in rooms next to us and we just recruited dozens of Austrian college students to check—we had a process to check the things. So we handled all of these other countries and jurisdictions that came to Vienna and so our fax machine was just running all day, all day, all weekend.

We felt we had a duty. If people had gone to that trouble we had to just work nonstop until there was literally no more time. The time unfortunately cuts off—and there were a lot of people who didn’t get to vote. There may have been an official deadline but the real deadline was related to the printing press. I started to spend a lot of time with the Austrian state printer. Thank God Sarajevo realized that this little printer there couldn’t handle the ballots, so they contracted with the Austrian state printer to actually print the ballots. It was so mathematically complex and so forth because there were 87 counties, etcetera.

So I had to get in there to—because they don’t know we exist. “Who are you? Refugee ballots? I’m dealing with Sarajevo. No, no these are top secret, I can’t give you these ballots.” I’m like, “No, no really, I need 600,000 of them.”
“No, no impossible, there is no more paper that is red. There is no way.” So you just be persistent and sweet, but not go away because after all of this, now I’m going to say, “Sorry you can’t vote because there’s not enough ballots to send you?” Through many forms of pressure we got them to ramp up production and have enough for us. We then were faced with the challenge of how do you get them to people?

We had our offices in European countries. We could send a bulk there and people, some people could come to the office. So we decided, again on our own, without asking headquarters and without worrying too much about it because we were just focused on the deadlines, that we would accept that the ballots could be—we could mail them to people and we would accept their ballots back by mail. This was the thing where it wasn’t expressly forbidden by the electoral law but not clearly permitted either. Then would they send them to our address? It would fill our entire office from floor to ceiling.

We basically called DHL and asked them and said, “We have this problem.” DHL were very good, a reminder of why it is sometimes best to work with private companies who know how to do—for whom this was not that big a task in the grand scheme of things. So they designed a system where we would send people a ballot with a pre-paid DHL envelope with the address to send back to us. We knew if you asked people to figure out what address to send it to and then write it out and then go to the DHL office you would lose half of them.

We paid for it. The Swiss had given us this money and it was to be used to help people vote, so we decided to pay for the return and DHL’s thing. DHL then created this address and as the ballots came back they were put in a warehouse at the Vienna airport and we asked the Austrian interior ministry to put men with machine guns around it. No one knew, or cared, but we made sure that there was that kind of security from beginning to end once it had entered DHL’s custody.

DHL, despite its—they could even send it to Libya, that’s what really sold me, that they could deliver the Libyan ballots. They could not however deliver even a postcard to Sarajevo. I’ll never forget this day: The three of us went out basically when everything was back to see—it’s like you work and work and work and there are papers and faxes and conversations and it all feels kind of ethereal, you know, is anything really happening. So they took us to the place and it was like—you know those things where they have salt for the roads in winter, those little silos by the turnpike? It was that big. You couldn't climb to the top of it. Just ballots, ballots, ballots, from top—people actually doing something they wouldn't have been able to do unless we broke the rules, or invented the rules as we went. If we didn’t worry too much about—because if we had even started the conversation, by the time they had even thought about it, the election would have happened and they wouldn't have cared. They wouldn't have cared because the success was going to be judged by what happened in Bosnia even if the election in Bosnia couldn't actually be fully successful unless the refugees voted in significant numbers.

It was like 18-hour days and minute after minute, innumerable little problems like—it was decided at one point that the refugee voting should also be observed; there should also be observers of refugee voting. So I had debates with them. “What do you want to observe? People receiving an envelope in the mail? You can go house to house and observe them? What do you mean observe them?” There were some places where there were high enough concentrations of people
where we ran our own polling stations. It wasn’t all by mail, in Croatia, in Turkey strangely, Slovakia, and Serbia too. So there were things for observers to observe and eventually we got to the point where we said, “OK,” we would have observers. They said, “OK, you have this list of names of forty people from OSCE central. These have been assigned to you.” Here I am—I will tell you at the end how old I was—so I got these lists, these were all experienced people, eager, and I have to decide where they go. For the first group, all Italians go to Serbia because they didn’t need visas for Serbia and I was tired of going to the Serbian embassy to negotiate for visas. So all Italians go to Serbia. I then just parcel the others up randomly in little teams. Then they came to Vienna. We talked to them a little bit.

I was like, “You know, it may not be quite as dramatic as other places but there are still important issues which could arise and keep your eyes open and so forth.” Everything was—I had to go get the visas for them and explain. And all of it as I said at the beginning, it is impossible to conceive it now, but we did it all without e-mail or cell phones. From my own account—which I could use Telmet to get to—remember Telmet? I would write home and to friends and stuff but never once did I use it for actually speeding up or coordinating anything related to the election. It was entirely done by telephone and fax.

It was maybe one of the last large-scale operations to be done in Europe without using e-mail at all. You know what, it worked fine in a way because since I was on the phone talking to everyone every day, and since people actually answered their phones, and since when they answered their phones and you had already talked three times that day, you didn’t have to say, “Oh, how are you?” and waste time. It was very efficient. We didn’t even have speed dial, you just had to memorize everyone’s number and it worked well enough.

When I had to go to the airport with a printer, no one could find me until I happened to come back. Often there were questions that only I knew the answer to and others that only Gerta knew the answer to and so forth. Amongst other things, and this is what we’ll get to, one of my main jobs towards the end was maintaining the spreadsheet. As I said, the ballots were very complicated. As the registrations were coming in, I had to be in real time updating the information for the printer because otherwise they would have run out of time. They had to reset the whole system to run an option as ballots. So if I needed all of a sudden 3000 extra copies of the ballot for Mostar, they had to stop the press, recalibrate everything—it was a big undertaking. They weren’t just being cranky when they were telling us it was impossible. It was expensive and time consuming.

I started to see this picture of who was registering in which opština, from which country of refuge, and there was the third piece of information, the spreadsheet—I still have the spreadsheet somewhere, I’ll send it to you, the third piece of information—using which of the three methods of registering: where they lived before the war, where they lived now, or where they intended to live in the future. A pattern started to emerge that concerned me, namely there were—the country which actually hosted the largest number of Bosnian refugees was Serbia because many Serbs had been evicted from where they lived as well and all of them had fled to Serbia. The Bosnian Muslims had fled to all corners of the earth and the Croatians fled more widely. But the Serbs were all concentrated and there were about, I think I remember there were about 600,000 in total of whom about 200—why do I remember these numbers? Seriously. 285,000 of them were in Serbia.
We had this guy, what was his name, he was half Italian, half Serb, who was our representative in Serbia—and so, the pattern was, if you recall there were certain towns in Bosnia which were extremely controversial like Brčko, Srebrenica and a handful of others which had had large Muslim majorities before the war. They had all been thrown out and were very close to Serbia and it was hard to imagine rebuilding a coherent republic of Srpska if there were these enclaves. So they were really keen on maintaining control of it. In those places I started to see more people registering to vote in those towns by declaring they intended to live there in the future than had ever lived there in all of history. So you had a town that before the war had 5000 people and there are 50,000 people registered to vote there.

This kept coming and kept coming and I’d ask our guy and he’d say, “I don’t know, that’s what they’re doing.” But we didn’t have many eyes or ears on the ground. We later got wind of how the Serbs had done it sort of like a trick—“OK, you’re going to vote here or there”—and people did it. So I talked to Bill, we probably talked to General Arbenz, and decided “we have to tell Sarajevo this because this suggests there is some wider plan afoot, and that is not the intention of that provision.” So I wrote it up. I sent a memo, faxed it to Ambassador Froelich in Sarajevo who, I think, heretofore had never had reason to take note of our existence. By the next morning he had decided to cancel all the local municipal and county elections. All of those people could still vote for President because it didn’t matter which town you were registered in in terms of the President because you picked one of the three.

So all of this toil and complication with the Austrian state printer turned out to be totally in vain because I could have just printed a single ballot for everyone saying who do you want for President. Everyone got a ballot for the opština but none of that was counted. The United States freaked out. So the fig leaf that was invented was “OK, we’re going to re-run the local and municipal elections in a month.”

First we were like, “It can’t be. The problem is deeper than that.” And then we were like, “Just look. Couldn’t the administration—that’s their policy and that’s what our policy is. That policy may change after November 4th, after the American election, but for the moment that’s our policy.”

So we ran the election. We had to find—I think Arbenz eventually got the Swiss military to give us a plane for the ballots because there was no way these things were getting on the little Lear jet that they had been using as the shuttle. So the ballots got there and caused a big problem in the sense that no one was really expecting them. I had been sending reports to HQ in Sarajevo saying, “OK, here’s how many people are registered,” and so forth. I don’t know what black hole they went into, but totally dumbfounded when this plane shows up with tons and tons of ballots.

They have to sort them by opština. I think I had done this so they were in bags or something. They had to sort them, get them to the counting places and those areas. They hadn’t really factored that in in terms of time and whatever. But they were eventually counted.

The first time I ever heard of ICG, International Crisis Group, they made their name actually in and around this election; they had just been formed. They still trumpet this as their first evidence of impact—they released their ten or fifteen year history of ICG and it is on their first page. It is built on, not a lie, but totally
misunderstanding what was going on because they looked at the total number of ballots, looked at how many people had been registered in Bosnia, from the data they had, and said there has been some massive corruption here because there are roughly 600,000 ballots that shouldn’t be there. A lot of people—people in the Sarajevo HQ, OSCE didn’t necessarily understand. Most of them went, “What is going on?”

So they issued this report and it was only us who could be like “No, look over here. It is because of this.” But I was actually happy about it because it proved to me that the ballots were actually counted, because we didn’t have control of them once they got to Sarajevo. So I was, in a way happy, because there was evidence of it. If you just look at the pattern Izetbegovic won by—again I think it is probably accurate to say that without that he wouldn’t have had the tripartite presidency and if he hadn’t—. Let me put it this way, if he hadn’t, who knows whether Bosnia would have been more or less politically stable. I think it probably would have delayed the rate at which Bosnian Muslims would have felt comfortable coming home and had trust in this thing because they didn’t fight this war and agree to this compromise so that Momčilo Krajišnik or whoever could be President of Bosnia Herzegovina.

And maybe I will stop there. That’s what I remember pretty much of what we did.

WIDNER: This is a fascinating story and an important part of history and I’m sure there are many more details that you’re going to remember.

DE LORENZO: If Bill were here it would jog my memory.

WIDNER: If we can burrow in to some of these things.

DE LORENZO: Maybe if there are some specific things.

WIDNER: Yes, there are a couple of questions that I would like to put to you. First, going back to the very beginning. As I understand it the provisions for refugee voting were, in general, part of the Dayton Accords of 1995 but then some of the details were worked out subsequently. I don’t know whether you were involved at all in that or whether you could speak to that at all.

DE LORENZO: That was handed to us. We came in, again—the preparations for voting and registration in Bosnia had been underway for months and months before someone noticed that the person who was supposed to have been doing the refugee part had sort of not done it and panic ensued. That’s why the Swiss said, “OK, we’ll do the money. And where do we put these people?” So this ad hoc structure was created which, by the way, was called the Refugee Election Steering Group. A title that we invented, but under the OSCE. The steering group had members who were Bill Hyde, Peter Arbenz who was the general seconded by the Swiss and this Swiss guy called Hans-Peter [Indecipherable], who is a Swiss journalist, and Hans-Peter Kleiner, who was a former Swiss diplomat I believe. They were the steering group.

At the end, after this big thing, we thought we were going to have to re-do the local elections in a month or six weeks. I guess for lack of anything better, they actually made me the country representative to Croatia, which was the biggest one. Bill was like, “Just go. Don’t tell anyone how old you are.” And so now I’m having bilateral meetings with the foreign minister of Croatia to talk about what we’re doing and then we have to hire this whole team of Croatians to re-do the
registrations and so forth, just like an industrial process. There had been a
dispute in Split where they had gotten the wrong ballots so I had to go and re-run
it there. I had to go to Turkey suddenly with a set of extra papers because the
printers had sent the wrong Mostar ballots and there was a riot at the polling
station in Ankara. So I went and re-ran it again. It was always like, “Who can go?”
“Oh, you go.”

In Slovakia there was a whole thing. There was this woman—it was the strangest
thing—she was a Kurd who spoke English but whose mother was Slovak. So we
had this sort of game of telephone. I think I spoke in German, she then translated
German to Slovak and one of the refugees translated Slovak to Bosnian, and
then back again to explain how the voting works.

There were just a lot of little encounters like that all over Europe in addition to
stuff on the phone fixing it. But I’m getting away from the question.

WIDNER: Just so I could clarify it. So that was when they decided to re-do the local
elections or was that part of that incident earlier in the process.

DE LORENZO: That was earlier. The Slovak government was like, “We don’t really know how to
explain to the people what is going on. Can you send someone?” You show up
and it’s like hundreds and hundreds of people who have come to listen. It was
good for us and good to report back, because we’re just sort of working away,
not sure if anyone really cares or is noticing or if it is important to Bosnians or
not. That just reinforced us in our determination to maximize the number of
Bosnians who would be able to vote over formal—over having proper serial
numbers on all the registration forms. But the law was a given; it had been
negotiated long before through a process that was mysterious to me. When the
second round of Bosnian elections happened a year or eighteen months later,
that had been eliminated. The ‘intend to live in the future’ provision had been
eliminated.

WIDNER: The actual system then put in place for voting was essentially a mail system
facilitated by DHL that you could—you filled out an absentee ballot essentially
and you sent it in.

DE LORENZO: Exactly. It was a hybrid system because that was for people who were not in
these main countries.

WIDNER: That’s what I was going to ask

DE LORENZO: There were polling places.

WIDNER: OK, so there were polling places set up in the main countries.

DE LORENZO: In Germany there were a lot of polling places and we were able to use IOM’s
network. That was a real advantage to having worked with IOM. We just had at
our disposal IOM’s infrastructure and relationships and connections. And that
dramatically shortened the time it took to negotiate access because when
you’re—you know, you can’t just march into Italy or Britain and start doing
political activity with foreigners. So for any places we wanted to have polling
stations we had to negotiate an agreement and IOMs experience and familiarity
just made it—that happened, we could do it in a week or two rather than in
months and months.
WIDNER: So people came to those polling places. Were paper ballots then shipped back to be counted centrally or did they count them at the polling places?

DE LORENZO: No, they were—the ballots that were mailed out in the DHL envelopes to the people who were far flung were the same ones that were sent to the polling places. We knew roughly how many they needed. We had to design this system where there was a security envelope. You would vote, then seal that and put it in a security envelope with this red thing and then in the DHL envelope. They did the security and then they sent them in bulk to the same address in Vienna and they were put on the same pile of things. They had people come in and do it.

WIDNER: As you know, a number of countries are considering refugee voting right now in Africa and undoubtedly in other places as well and this has been a dual theme. I was very curious about the lessons from this that you might offer them. And then in a separate set of comments perhaps you could think out loud for us about the distinctions between refugee voting and diaspora voting more generally, because there is a big move now to include people of the diaspora more generally. I wonder if any of these observations you've made are pertinent to that discussion.

DE LORENZO: I'll start with that one. This is just a personal political view I suppose but I think the arguments for diaspora voting are much weaker than the arguments for refugee voting because people in the diaspora generally have chosen to be there. They could chose to go home if they wish; they're probably not paying taxes at home. They've chosen a life somewhere else and their children are somewhere else. So it's not obvious to me as I say as a citizen who lives there why they should have an equal voice with me in who is going to run the country. At least because diaspora people often get a little cranky when they're brought in. Some of them become these radical nationalists or they just go off in directions which are unrelated to the main currents in society.

For refugee voting, I think they really should be distinguished as different types of things. Refugee voting, it's an opportunity and a danger because you can't really declare a conflict over until it has been sealed by an election. Often people want to do that election fairly quickly. If you move too hastily you don't consider the refugee population, you risk entrenching ethnic cleansing and worse, and then making it even more difficult for those people to ever go home or feel safe going home. The other opportunity is that it is a tool—I mean this was the ambition or part of it, I can't say, I haven't studied enough of what happened to say whether it contributed to this but is refugee voting actually part of a strategy for actually reversing ethnic cleansing? So not just preventing a bad thing from happening but it could actually cause a good thing to happen in a way that is less likely to lead to violence? I don't know the answer to that but that was certainly part of the hope or the idealism for what we were doing or why it was important.

Now the first question—?

WIDNER: The first question was just reflections for the countries that are now considering doing this. I mean you have some reflections on the complexity of the ballot, or the character of the ballot that would be germane to this—.

DE LORENZO: So for—it nearly floundered on the complexity of the balloting arrangements. That was an artifact of the compromises and the structures that needed to be negotiated to achieve a settlement. No one at that time was thinking, nor should they have been thinking frankly about “Oh God, that's going to mean it is going to take 30 days to print ballots at the Austrian state printer instead of five days.”
That’s not what they should have been worried about but it had that consequence later on. So to the extent that you can simplify just the number of different ballots that have to be printed—the greater the margin of error you have when inevitably things go way wrong in your deadlines. Fewer people get disenfranchised because more would have gotten the ballots in good time.

Having done it once, the first questions I would ask in a situation like that—not so much about the paper, that’s important—it is about what is your master list, what is your pool, what is your gold-standard of eligibility? Despite these technical snafus at the beginning related to being unable to search in this census list, once we had cleaned it up a bit, and we cleaned it up not by making it read the diacritics, but by simply removing all diacritical marks. Instead of question marks, we had a “C”; it just didn’t have the little thing on it. So you could train people to do a search through it without the diacritical marks and more or less you would get it. That is what gave us confidence.

If we didn’t have that I think it would have been much harder for us to make the leap of faith to ignore the regulations about having serial numbers and all of this stuff. Because there was documentation which existed from before the war, which we could compare people’s claims. So if you’re submitting to me an ID and it says you’re a resident of Sarajevo and I find your name on this list, I have a high confidence that you are entitled to vote in this election as the electoral law is written.

There is no place in Africa really—well there are a few places actually where you could have those kinds of things. Rwanda now I think has a pretty computerized census of that nature. Hopefully they’ll never have to use it for this purpose, but that was, in retrospect, such an important tool. Later on when we were trying to organize ourselves for the next—I found the guy who had been the chief demographer for the census, and he was this old retired guy outside of Split in Croatia. He had been the head of that census. So I went to see him and I still have the notes. I interviewed him for hours and hours just to understand what it meant that a person—that this was there, how he registered. So a big problem was that it wasn’t clear whether guest workers—there were a lot of Yugoslavian guest workers in Europe when the war started—they were trying to register to vote. Some of them were in the census, some of them weren’t. So the question arose: “Can we register them?” I was able to find him and I flew to Split and spent two or three days in his house, time we didn’t have, but it was so important to understand the mechanics of this thing.

That tool made it possible for us to enfranchise many more people than we would have. And in a situation where people don’t even have identity documents you have to think of this in other ways—social forms of validating identity and eligibility, people come and swear affidavits—there are different techniques you can use. You can just take a simple one—this is probably what I would recommend—if you are registered as say a Chadian in a UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) camp for Chadians, that’s good enough and if you were registered by a certain date—because probably they weren’t infiltrating people into camps to register and live the miserable life of Chadians for the sole purpose of registering to vote.

So you have to figure out what is your sort of amulet of eligibility is crucial to enable people to make rapid decisions in the field under extreme time pressure. With all these elections, if you have to refer back for decisions up and down—it’s
not that kind of thing. You have to have tools that enable people in the field to make decisions with confidence and some consistency because you don’t have time. There is just no margin of error; it is always tight. So that is one thing that was good, that we were able to push this decision making fairly far down because we had come up with this jerry-rigged, masking-tape system which made it hard but if you had these two or three pieces of evidence you had a compelling case. Even if anybody audited it and looked at it, a fair-minded person would see that it was as inclusive as it possibly could be, and that we hadn’t actually compromised much in terms of security and the integrity of the vote.

Unless we had one agent in there who was really working for someone, who was registering people even though they weren’t on the list, that was just one agent. How many did you have? I mean you have these piles of registration things, he couldn’t know. It was just the luck of the draw when we handed them out. It would be very difficult to mount any kind of—because it was so decentralized—to mount any kind of concerted effort to influence the vote through our process, mostly because we were so disorganized.

WIDNER: I’m interested in the degree to which the limited engagement of the hierarchy in the international community gave you the space to make this work.

DE LORENZO: Yes.

WIDNER: And that may not be something that is always replicable or that people would tolerate. I’m curious about the story behind this. Why do you think you had that leeway in this instance?

DE LORENZO: The rest of my life is spoiled because my first job, or activity of this kind was so special and so unusual. It is not at all normal that you have a numbered bank account with 2 million dollars for which there is no further accounting procedure than two people say, “Oh yeah.” It’s not normal that you have somebody leading you who just hears and then acts. Bill Hyde did—a—he was focused on the results and that is what he inculcated in all of us, and that empowered us to be similarly decisive. He is one of the best bosses I’ve ever worked for. It has given me a model of how you manage a team in a fast-paced, totally unpredictable environment where he can’t tell you a procedural rule, he needs to give you guidelines to make your decision. Even though he was sitting in the office there, there was literally maybe 15 minutes during the day when we were both not on the phone. I would have to—we would go to lunch usually but there was no way to micromanage.

In a way, I think technologies today make it easier for managers to micromanage and even such that they would be derelict if they didn’t try to micromanage. I think in almost all cases it makes things worse. Our decisions, maybe his leadership, his vision, but our decisions were also driven by the technological options available to us. So if I had to do something like this again I would do my best to try and have it be outside the main institution and get its own financing because without a doubt—every time I had to go deal with—. The irony is, OSCE world headquarters is where? In Vienna. In this old Viennese palace on the ring. So once in a while I would have to go there for something and it was always with great trepidation because you just didn’t want them to be taking too keen an interest in what we were doing under their letterhead from this funny little office in another part of town. I’m sure they would have been horrified.
Luckily we had the full support of the Austrian government because at one time there were threats against us and threats against the office—bomb threats. Jonas, I think, knew exactly who to call and with half and hour there were like Austrian paramilitaries on the block, in the stairwell and they remained there until the end of the election. So we didn’t even need the OSCE headquarters for that sort of thing.

I remember. I had to go—you could get these laissez-passer things, which were alleged to facilitate travel although I never saw much benefit—well maybe they helped with a visa or two. To go deal with the ID person and get—it took me two days. “Oh, you don’t know the system” and so forth. Imagine if you had to do that—. The reason we were able to do it was the Swiss foreign minister was our ultimate boss really and this was the Swiss government’s own money which they were spending in order to make their chairmanship of the OSCE as successful as possible.

It was a relationship between Flavio Cotti, who was the Swiss Foreign Minister, and General Arbenz. And so it was the Swiss government putting money under the custody of a distinguished Swiss citizen and what we actually were was an operational unit of the Swiss government operating under the brand name of the OSCE. Because we were sort of created by the chairman, even though we had no formal legal attachment to the rest of the OSCE and we had our own Swiss money, no one ever questioned whether what we were doing was authorized because Cotti said to Froelich—and Arbenz was there, so it just created the impression that yes, this is what is supposed to happen. We were known to be the—. For example, when I became the country representative in Croatia, I knocked on the door of the Swiss embassy and was issued a Swiss diplomatic vehicle with Swiss diplomatic license plates for my own use and I drove all the way down to Dubrovnik in that thing. So that is how we were able to create this sort of protected zone. Even within that we weren’t—Flavio just wanted it to be seen to be done. He got reports I’m sure at some interval from Arbenz. We weren’t checking things with Cotti, we were barely checking things with Arbenz because he was in Switzerland. And he would come when we had meetings, but day-to-day it was Bill, me and Gerta and then that was that.

It was because we had I guess you could say diplomatic protection and because no one knew about us that we were able to do what we did.

**WIDNER:** But somebody in the country—some interested party did find out more about what you were doing because you had the security threat.

**DE LORENZO:** By that point everybody knew the address because we had to—at the beginning we were accepting some mail. We hadn’t set up the DHL thing so people could send us the registration forms just to the address of the building. It didn’t occur to us that that would cause problems. So the fax number was of ICMPD so people found out about the building.

**WIDNER:** I know we have to wrap up. I have one last question for now and that is, how old were you?

**DE LORENZO:** I was 19.

**WIDNER:** Thank you.