

Sliding into the abyss? Bosnia-Herzegovina 30 years after the start of the war¹

Abstract

This article reviews the current political, social and economic situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina just after the thirtieth anniversary of the start of the war (April 1992). Drawing on a variety of judiciously-chosen contemporary sources in the German language, and taking account of the parallels which can be drawn with analysis of the geopolitical significance of the war in Ukraine, the authors consider the impact of the nationalisms which have taken centre stage not only in how Bosnia-Herzegovina is currently viewed in international perspective but which, more importantly, have sparked sabre-rattling threats of secession. In part, such threats represent a diversionary tactic by political leaders in the light of various enduring domestic crises, including unemployment, corruption and the emigration of skilled young people, but they may see the country slide into the abyss. Nevertheless, the authors are not without hope that the 'togetherness' which represents the Bosnian specific can be rebuilt, despite media focus on ethnic blocs and division, but the positive signs that do exist need to be both captured and reinforced.

Keywords: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Dayton Agreement, genocide denial, secession, multi-ethnicism, dialogue

Introduction

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina began in April 1992. Around 100 000 lives were lost while two million people fled. Thirty years on, comparable basic ideological patterns (ethnicisation and chauvinism) have come once again to dominate the Bosnian agenda (Becker 2002). Now, however, instead of the murder or expulsion of non-combatants, it is now about secession, fear of war, the sovereignty of interpretation of educational and historical politics and, last but not least, quite simply about power resources. For years, everything had seemed quiet in Bosnia-Herzegovina. However, aside from individual headlines, such as the violent unrest of February 2014 when thousands across the country took to the streets against unemployment, poverty and corruption, there is now a cultivated lack of interest among the international public and politicians towards the western Balkans in general and the international protectorate of Bosnia-Herzegovina in particular. In addition, since 24 February 2022, the Ukraine war has absorbed the attention of the international public.

1 This article is a revised and updated version of the authors' earlier article entitled 'Säbelrasseln in Sarajevo' ('Sabre-rattling in Sarajevo') contained in *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* 2022(2), February, pp. 91-96.

Nationalist politics and the international response

Nevertheless, events took a turn for the worse in Bosnia-Herzegovina in December 2021. Milorad Dodik, the leading political representative of Republika Srpska (RS) and a member of the country's presidency, has long toyed with the threat of secession, jeopardising the existence of the fragile structure of the state. That month, he announced that RS would have its own courts, armed forces and tax laws, at the same time openly flirting with a connection to Serbia.² RS is, along with the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, one of the two entities of the state of Bosnia-Herzegovina which, with its total of three presidents, three governments, three parliaments and a convoluted system of proportional representation along ethnic lines, embodies a politics which is almost incapable of acting coherently. Nevertheless, secession would torpedo the 1995 Dayton Agreement which brought peace to the country and which safeguards the country's territorial integrity and prevents border changes on ethnic lines. However, the Dayton Agreement also facilitates the making of closer ties between the entities and neighbouring states, such as between RS and Serbia. Therefore, among Bosnian Serbs there are many people with dual citizenship, Bosnian and Serb, and there are regular meetings at government level and between parliamentarians.

This is also reflected in relations between Bosnian Croats and the Croatian motherland. The aspirations in Bosnia-Herzegovina of HDZ, the Croatian Democratic Union party, make a poor situation worse. Its leader, Dragan Čović, is trying to push through an election law aimed at creating a third, Croatian, entity within the state on the grounds that only ethnic Croats should be allowed to vote on Croatian representatives on Bosnian state bodies. That would force the ethno-nationalist division of the entire state which Dodik is already pursuing and which is now being given added impetus by the Croatian side. Even worse is that this demand of the Bosnian Croats is not only supported by Croatia's president, Zoran Milanović, and the relevant domestic political forces: Milanović is even threatening to veto Finland's and Sweden's plans to join NATO if specific Croatian interests, leading potentially to a union of Croatian settlement areas in Herzegovina with the Croatian motherland, are not taken into account. In so doing, Croatia – an EU Member State and a member of NATO – is, just the same as Turkey, whose President Erdoğan is demanding that the Swedish government extradite and persecute Kurdish dissidents, blackmailing the western alliances in order to enforce its own special interests. Croatia is putting itself into a low moral position by maintaining this threat of veto.

- 2 The Munich-based historian of south-east Europe, Janine Marie Calic, summarises the situation soberly: 'There have been reports for a long time that the former warring factions are secretly arming themselves. But I don't think there's an acute risk of armed conflict. Dodik has said he does not intend to resort to military action. However, he is demanding negotiations on the "peaceful dissolution" of the state of Bosnia-Herzegovina. If NATO was to intervene, they would defend themselves and call on Russia for help. You have to understand that as a threatening gesture in order to secure a policy of *fait accompli*' (authors' own translation). RS has been boycotting joint institutions since autumn 2021 while more than 200 laws and legal acts strengthening the unity of the Bosnian state have been repealed there. See *Die Welt* (2022).

At the same time, it is clear that the Croatian government, led by the social democrats and its president, who belongs to the same party, are not pulling in the same direction. The former is tacking in the face of increasing pressure, particularly from Brussels and Washington; whereas the latter is seeking to gain political ground domestically.

But let us return to the ambitions of Milorad Dodik. The decisive factor in the beating drum, mainly being sounded by Dodik himself, and which is causing unrest in the international community, is that, after years of failed efforts in the Bosnian parliament to pass a law against genocide denial, the outgoing High Representative of the United Nations, Valentin Inzko, used the ‘Bonn Powers’ to push through such a law by decree in July 2021. Genocide denial in Bosnia now carries a risk of up to three years in prison, while an additional three years may be added in respect of public officials. The ‘Bonn Powers’ of the Peace Implementation Council, stemming from 1997, authorise the High Representative to enact or repeal laws, or depose officials of the three state-forming ethnic groups (Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks), in order to safeguard the proper functioning of the state.

The decree has met with fierce criticism from Dodik and his supporters. It’s no secret that denial of the massacres which occurred during the Bosnian war in 1992-1995 is part of everyday routine in Serbian and Croatian circles. Inzko’s controversial decree specifically targets the mass slaughter of 8000 Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica, which has been recognised as genocide under the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide; as well as the public homage being paid to ‘war heroes’, such as the ‘butcher of Srebrenica’, General Ratko Mladić, who has been sentenced to life imprisonment in The Hague. Milorad Dodik and leading Serbian representatives are regularly accused of both (Zick 2021). Homage to Mladić can be found on an entire wall in the middle of Belgrade – with the acquiescence of the police, who regularly ignore complaints from residents and benevolently support the monitoring of the mural by sympathisers (Martens 2021). Such would be impossible in Belgrade without the consent of the Serbian government. Herzegovinian Croats, albeit more discreetly, also deny war crimes and venerate war criminals.

Inzko’s reasoning for his action underlines the central, even existential, problem facing Bosnia-Herzegovina:

The lack of recognition, accountability and redress for the victims of atrocities and systematic abuse has devastating effects on society.

Inzko went on to say that the ‘development of a peaceful future for Bosnia and Herzegovina’ must not be further jeopardised.³ But this is exactly what Dodik’s pronouncements now put into question. The new High Representative, CSU (Christian Social Union) politician Christian Schmidt, who replaced Inzko in August 2021, therefore felt compelled to admonish:

- 3 Both quotes from Inzko drawn from ‘Leugnung des Völkermords in Bosnien-Herzegowina künftig strafbar’ (‘Genocide denial in Bosnia-Herzegovina now punishable’) *Die Zeit* 23 July 2021, accessed 5 January 2022 at: <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2021-07/srebrenica-voelkermord-bosnien-herzegowina-leugnung>.

The problem is those forces in the country who are talking about border shifts or even the dissolution of Bosnia-Herzegovina. This is dangerous talk. We must not allow the mistakes that led to the catastrophe of 30 years ago to be repeated. (Fras 2022)

He seems to be prepared to use the full powers of the Office with this purpose in mind. But there remain some doubts. Some observers accuse Schmidt of a certain closeness to Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, who is still valued by western politicians, including many German Christian Democrats, as a guarantor of stability in the western Balkans. Serbia has manoeuvred around the EU's embargo measures against Russia, insisting like Hungary on special conditions for deliveries of Russian natural gas and continuing to maintain good relations with the Kremlin despite the Ukraine war. According to Alexander Rhotert, chief of cabinet of the staff of the High Representative in Sarajevo from 1999 to 2016, Schmidt is completely ignoring that Vučić and Dodik are a well-rehearsed duo with identical goals.⁴ In contrast, the passive demeanour of the new High Representative is encouraging RS in additional provocations in furtherance of unification with Serbia. The journalist Erich Rathfelder suspects that, behind this, is the concept of the 'Serbian World'; uniting in one state all those areas where Serbs live, akin to 'Putin's concept of returning Ukraine to the "Russian world"' (Rathfelder 2022).

However, alternative views can also be found. Serbia may well not be prepared to go so far as to 'openly support the Bosnian Serb Republic's course towards secession' because 'due to the conditionality of the EU in the accession negotiations, disadvantages would be felt immediately'.⁵ The Vučić government remains open to all sides. Nevertheless, the powers of the High Representative are based solely on the willingness of the international community to enforce those powers in cases of doubt. With Putin's Russia, however, there is a powerful actor around the table who has been setting light to foreign policy for years. Sergei Lavrov, Russia's Foreign Minister, recently described Inzko's genocide denial decree as 'completely irresponsible behaviour' and renewed Russia's call for the office to be dissolved, viewing the external protectorate, in the form of the High Representative, as having become a source of problems: 'The need to liquidate it and free sovereign Bosnia-Herzegovina from the excessive guardianship that is humiliating for its peoples is long overdue.'⁶

4 By 'identical goals', Rhotert is insinuating that Russia has an interest in a 'second front' in the western Balkans as a means of further destabilising the EU and NATO, although he does not present any particular evidence for this. See Alexander Rhotert (2022): 'Putins nächste Front' *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 25 May, accessed 7 June 2022 at: <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/meinung/bosnien-herzegowina-juratovic-dodik-covic-putin-provokationen-1.5591880>.

5 Authors' own translation. Quotes taken from *Die Welt* (2022).

6 Authors' own translation. Quotes taken from 'Za sve je kriv Inzko / Lavrov o "Dodikovim prijateljima miru i podršci Rusije": Ne dijelim takve izjave, smatram ih neosnovanim...' ('Inzko / Lavrov is to blame for everything about "Dodik's threats to peace and Russia's support": I do not share such statements, I consider them unfounded...') *Oslobodjenje* 24 December 2021, accessed 9 January 2022 at: <https://www.oslobodjenje.ba/vijesti/bih/za-sve-je-kriv-inzk-o-lavrov-o-dodikovim-prijateljima-miru-i-podrsce-rusije-ne-dijelim-takve-izjave-smatram-ih-neosnovanim-719416>.

Bosnia-Herzegovina was actually promised NATO membership at the informal meeting of NATO defence ministers held in Tallinn in April 2010. Unlike in the case of neighbouring Montenegro in 2017, however, it has not been activated. While Bosnian-Croatian politicians are in favour of NATO membership, leading pro-Russian representatives in Dodik's party in Republika Srpska oppose it. In the network of international politics, it is clear that Dodik is receiving support not only from Russia but also from Hungary. Viktor Orbán supports RS with investments in millions of euros and is considered Dodik's sponsor. In addition, according to press reports, Orbán's party colleague, EU Commissioner for Enlargement Olivér Várhegyi, has promised RS substantial funds from the pot to promote the western Balkans should Dodik postpone the planned secession steps for six months. As a concession, Várhegyi wants to work to overturn the genocide denial law, offering the frank assessment that it is not Schmidt, but his predecessor, former High Representative Inzko, who is:

... responsible for the current political crisis in Bosnia-Herzegovina and for the delegitimisation of the Office. (Wölfl 2021)

The proven 'create a diversion' tactic

Milorad Dodik's sabre-rattling is primarily a diversionary tactic. Like the state as a whole, RS is in a desperate economic situation. State-wide unemployment is estimated to be between 20 per cent and 50 per cent, depending on whether or not the informal economy is included. According to the Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, annual consumer price inflation in April 2022 was 13.2 per cent, with the division of food and non-alcoholic beverages up by more than 20 per cent year-on-year.⁷ Butter now costs the equivalent of around 3.50 euros – on a net average monthly salary of 500 euros. Meanwhile, the emigration of skilled young people continues unabated. And, furthermore, 2021 was marked by catastrophes and bad news. At the beginning of the year there was substantial criticism from the European Union of the inhumane accommodation of migrants, for example in the notorious Camp Lipa. This criticism was not only cheap because it failed to mention how relieved its own Member States were to have offloaded this burden to the countries on their external borders; in the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina, it also hit a country that is barely able to provide its own population with adequate infrastructure or medical care. The country's long-running problems with its under-funded infrastructure, already overburdened by the Covid-19 crisis, were further strained in 2021 by forest fires in Herzegovina and floods in the region around Sarajevo, on top of its infamously smog-polluted cities. In the state presidency, Dodik prevented the use of army helicopters in firefighting operations in Herzegovina, an area which is mainly inhabited by Croats (Pavica 2021). At the request of the Croatian member of the presidency, the fires were extinguished by foreign, mainly Croatian, aircraft.

Such behaviour exemplifies the political manoeuvring going on in everyday Bosnian politics. The country remains trapped in the barely functional status quo of

7 See: https://bhas.gov.ba/data/Publikacije/Saopštenja/2022/PRI_01_2022_04_1_BS.pdf.

the Dayton Agreement which not only leads to mutual institutional blockades but which also remains in place due to the lack of an evident alternative.

In 2022, elections for the three-member state presidency will be held once again. Dodik's party, the Serbian nationalist SNSD, has been in power unchallenged for years but the real approval ratings are mixed: in the presidential elections of 2018, he received 53.89 per cent of the vote – while only about 57 per cent of those eligible to vote in RS actually voted.

The Dodik way – a pan-Bosnian phenomenon

Is Dodik acting for the benefit of citizens in RS? Hardly, summarises Jasmina Zbanić whose film *Quo vadis, Aida?* recently won the European Film Prize. The director, who attaches importance to her Bosnian-Herzegovinian nationality, cannot run for the state presidency in 2022 as a result of the country's discriminatory nationality legislation because she has not – as provided for in the Dayton Agreement – decided to be classified as a member of one of the 'constituent peoples' of the state (Bosnian, Croatian or Serbian). In her view, however, it is the representatives of the SNSD nomenklatura around Dodik who are responsible for the impoverishment of RS and, at the same time, for the destruction of the wider state. All their talk of 'nation' is, she believes, with a view only to profiteering and to stealing from the citizens: it is a path that leads to isolation because, apart from Serbia or Russia, almost no country would recognise a separate Republika Srpska. But the controversial director goes even further: 'And RS is a country without young people. 80 000 young people have left because they no longer want to live in this poisoned atmosphere. Since peace began, more people have left RS than died during the war.' Thus, she believes that Dodik has damaged the RS by more than the results of three years of war. 'These politicians benefited', according to Zbanić, 'by fuelling this conflict. While they incite the people, they are enriching themselves from public money'.⁸

This marks the cornerstones that have shaped the Dodik era since 1998, when he was first elected Prime Minister of RS and dubbed a promising opposition politician to the ruling Serbian Democratic Party (SDS) of the war criminal Radovan Karadžić (Husić 2021). Many international actors, including the Socialist International, of which SNSD was a member until it was expelled in 2012, were wrong about him, deliberately ignoring his nationalist positions and the endemic corruption and ethnic clientelism.⁹

- 8 Authors' own translation. Quotes and surrounding argumentation taken from 'Was gerade in Bosnien geschieht, blüht auch euch!' ('What is happening in Bosnia is in store for you too!'), *Die Welt* 23 December 2021 (interview with Hans-Georg Rodek), accessed 7 June 2022 at: <https://www.welt.de/kultur/kino/plus235786324/Jasmila-Zbanic-Was-gerade-in-Bosnien-geschieht-blueht-auch-euch.html>.
- 9 'It was not important who was able to run a company,' noted Gavrilko Grahovac, Minister for Reconstruction and Development, as far back as 2002, 'but what nationality someone belonged to' (quoted in 'Kein Geld, halbe Häuser und rund 130 Ministerien' ('No money, pint-sized houses and around 130 ministries') *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 24 June 2002, accessed 7 June 2022 at: https://fazarchiv.faz.net/faz-portal/document?uid=FAZ__FD1200206241429479. This principle has not yet been broken.

In contrast to Zbanić, Jasmin Redžepović, Assistant Education Secretary and sector Policy Director for the Building and Wood Workers' International, states that – in both of the entities – there is a 'virtual economy' based on the bureaucratic juggernauting front of which, without *raja* (relationships) or *stela* (bribe money), no official approval can be gained for anything. This is the only way that underpaid teachers and doctors, for example, are able to keep themselves alive. Many things (the allocation of apartments, hospital operations and even the administration of justice) still take place via client relationships. This pan-Bosnian approach has long continuity, going back to the pre-1992 destroyed, socialist Yugoslavia and for which Bosnia-Herzegovina, as a multi-ethnic mini-Yugoslavia, has stood to this day, albeit with serious changes. Neither the EU nor the international organisations of the UN have drawn any fundamental lessons from this 'ethno trap' (Mappes-Niedieck 2005). The policy of muddling through continues to this day.

In his long career as prime minister and president of RS, as well as serving as a Serbian representative in the state presidency, Dodik has successfully applied the socio-economic principle of *quid pro quo*, winning elections while creating a dependency system similar to that of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić (Becker and Kulić 2021), who was re-elected by a substantial majority in April 2022. At state level, however, he has almost never been part of the solution but always part of the problem. He is one of those elites who bang the ethno-nationalist drum year after year to demonstrate internal strength and obtain concessions from outside. The logic is as transparent as it is effective: through one's own actions, the state is portrayed as incapable and unstable in order then to invoke its inability to act and instability when it comes to expanding one's own spheres of influence and securing them in the long term. This is what happened in the case of the drugs agency of RS, founded in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic in competition with the state agency, as well as in the case of the announcement of the secession of RS last December.

Threatened secession leading to renewed war?

It was no coincidence that the threat of secession was made in a year in which the man who went on to hold the Presidency of the EU Council in the second half of 2021, Slovenian Prime Minister, Janez Janša, who has since been voted out of office, served a discourse on border changes in the Balkans, and in Bosnia-Herzegovina in particular, with the so-called 'Balkan non-papers'. That Dodik announced the separation of the RS in the December of that year followed such a logic. Although Dodik expressly emphasised that there would be no war, the word 'war' again assumed a conscious present and the trauma of border revisions was evoked. When asked if he is worried about another war, Srđan Puhalo, a social psychologist from Sarajevo, replies with the kind of dark humour one finds in many of his compatriots:

Who is going to fight here? The average age of the inhabitants of Bosnia and Herzegovina is 42. That means we are talking about diabetes, sciatica, cholesterol and other diseases. We have to fight against that. There is nobody here who can wage war.

He is speaking here for many who reject the intensification of conflict – and worse. Just like the many, often very real, sufferings of citizens, such voices are often ignored in major discourses. The perspective of the international media reproduces in their reports the constitutional formula of the three ethnic blocs. The moderate, the forgiving and the resigned only appear in longer treatments. And yet: concern about armed conflicts is creeping back into the minds of the population; it ‘smells like war’¹⁰ in a country in which people have scarcely been able to overcome the physical and psychological wounds of the last one. The legacy of that war threatens to suffocate the younger generation in a fog of nationalism. A look at school history textbooks – each nation has its own – reveals how deep ethnic segregation is and how influential the narrative differences are, devised by the ideologues in the respective education ministries (Stieger 2021).

Political departure signs

In many of his world-famous novels, Ivo Andrić describes the Bosnian process of learning and understanding that lasted for centuries before the war. Can this specificity yet be rebuilt? Rada Iveković, the Croatian philosopher, points to the collision between western concepts of modernisation and the traditional Bosnian mentality:

The Bosnian specificity is integration, symbiosis, which stands above differences and refers them back to their proper place; it is cultural diversity and the living diversity of being together. This togetherness did not need to be constructed, it exists as the fruit of a long history of mixing and exchanging, as a deserved unity. It was shattered on a large scale by this war, so that what had always existed before had to be rebuilt. (Iveković 2001: 165)

Iveković was aiming her remarks at ‘silent Bosnia’. In her perspective, the Taylorist view of multiculturalism (Taylor 1994), focused on the demand for the recognition of minorities in a multicultural state, is a foreign concept which does no more than stabilise the politics of difference set down in the Dayton Agreement. In contrast, multiculturalism according to the western understanding was never a part of Bosnian history: before the war, Bosnian communities lived together not separated from each other; not as Serbs, Croats or Bosniaks. Such togetherness – based on a coexistence without ethnic politics – was destroyed by war criminals in the course of the war.

One prerequisite for resuming that pre-war ethnic coexistence described by Iveković would be the restoration of the ‘normality of the usual peaceful’ (Karl Otto Hondrich), in which the aggressive expression of collective identities is suppressed in favour of individual life opportunities and during which collective learning processes can again be triggered. There are such inner Bosnian signals of hope. Sarajevo’s 31-year-old mayor, Benjamina Karić, recently set an example by demonstratively inviting her counterparts from Banja Luka (RS) and Mostar (Herzegovina) to a dialogue in the capital. She is one of those ‘other’ nationalities who cannot be defined as ‘Bosniak’, ‘Serb’ or ‘Croat’ and who are fighting for a multi-ethnic democracy. The

10 <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/europa/bosnien-herzegovina-113.html>.

international community must rely on such forces if it wants to force backwards the revisionist influence of the ethno-nationalists.

Emerging from the pan-Bosnian local elections in 2020, especially in the major cities, it is the ‘others’ who emerged the stronger while the three ethno-nationalist parties were weakened. It is thanks to the Dodiks, Čovići, Izetbegovićs and their generation that these tenuous hopes are struggling to thrive, that young people lack prospects and that rampant nepotism is robbing them of the opportunities they need to initiate substantial change in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Americans and the Eurocrats, particularly in Bosnia-Herzegovina, seem to have lost sight of this. Yet, preserving Dayton and managing the status quo is not a long-term prospect. Inzko’s last official act, the decree against genocide denial and thus against open historical revisionism, represents a political signal for a new beginning. If this is destroyed and the internal Bosnian reform forces again wither away, Bosnia-Herzegovina will finally slide into the abyss.

The Bosnian journalist Aida Cerkez, who reported from Sarajevo for the Associated Press news agency during the Bosnian war, recently made a moving statement. In a letter to the Ukrainian people, made via a BBC programme,¹¹ she describes the situation during the 1425-day siege of Sarajevo without water and electricity and in the face of the arms embargo imposed by international powers. She finally found her 30-year-old T-shirt that said ‘Sarajevo will be’ and re-captioned it ‘Ukraine will be’. ‘The worst thing is the lies’ lay at the express heart of her message and the need for these to be fought. Unlike thirty years ago, many NATO countries have now at least supplied weapons although Cerkez is of course forgetting that this is not only being done out of solidarity with the Ukrainian people but also – and this is also a part of the truth – to use Russian aggression to weaken Russia in terms of security and geopolitics.

Last but not least, Bosnia-Herzegovina is now faced with the question of whether it is about time for the EU to strengthen the Bosnian armed forces and its security institutions and specifically to double the EU peacekeeping force from the current 1100 soldiers to 2200. This, too, would be a sign of hope in the face of the centrifugal forces that are destabilising the entire federation both from within and without.

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