

# The west's long-distorted view of the Balkans and their people led to a 'catastrophic' outcome

## Abstract

This article was written in review of the 27th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide which, in 2022, overlapped with the Eid al Adha celebrations. The author recalls some of the facts related to the Bosnian genocide and the horrific, inhumane regard which the perpetrators had for the bodies of those they had killed, reminding us that remembrance is not only crucial in itself but because genocide can happen anywhere. She then turns to the 'catastrophic' failures of western policy during the 1990s rooted substantially in Islamophobia and a desire to emphasise Christianised Europe, contrasting this with the intellectual galvanisation and growth of self-consciousness which has subsequently occurred among Bosniaks with a view to remembering the past but also to the rebuilding of a multiethnic Bosnia and Herzegovina. Healing remains fraught with difficulties, but coming to a reckoning with the past requires an ultimate rejection of the harmful stereotypes about the region and its peoples in which, recalling Marko Attila Hoare's recent essay, removal of the faultlines which stem from the western mindset is critical.

**Keywords:** genocide, Srebrenica, denialism, westernisation, multiethnicism, nation state, Dayton Agreement

## Introduction

This past weekend<sup>1</sup> was the start of Eid al Adha, the second of the two main religious holidays that Muslims celebrate annually and aim to spend joyously at gatherings with families and friends. For Bosniaks around the world, this year's celebration of Eid overlapped with the 27th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide.

In his special sermon delivered after the Eid prayers, the grand mufti and head of the official Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Husein Kavazović, said:

We should persevere in our thousand-year tradition of goodness and nobleness, develop our values of kindness and neighbourliness, without looking back at others and expecting nothing from them. We owe them nothing either; we will survive as until now, relying on our

1 This essay was first published as the 'Week in Review' Newsletter of *New Lines Magazine* on 15 July 2022: <https://newlinesmag.com/newsletter/on-the-anniversary-of-genocide-in-bosnia-a-policy-reassessment-is-in-order/> and has been minimally edited for the *SEER Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe* in respect of house style. It is re-published here by kind permission of the author and of *New Lines Magazine*.

own strength and our own choice. This struggle of ours is a struggle not to be separated from our country and tradition.<sup>2</sup>

## The Bosnian genocide

It is important to repeat a few facts related to the irrefutable crimes of the Bosnian genocide, especially in light of the increasing denial, historical revisionism and genocide triumphalism. Remembering what happened is crucial, not because I want to sound like a broken record but because genocide can happen anywhere. It matters to remember that the newborn baby Fatima Muhić – the youngest victim of the Srebrenica genocide – was just two days old when she was killed. It matters to honour the memory of thousands of other mercilessly slaughtered and innocent people, some of whose few bones were uncovered in several mass graves. In last week's forum at Zenica University, the former director and a member of the board of directors of the Institute for Missing Persons, Amor Mašović, cited one such example of a 22-year-old man – six of whose bones (there are 206 in total in the human body) were found in five graves – to point to the perpetrators' inhumane attitude toward the dead. More remaining parts of that man's body are still in some yet-to-be-discovered mass graves, Mašović said. He has participated in the discovery of about 3350 mass and individual graves containing the remains of about 18 000 victims and thus speaks with utmost authority on this subject.

People who were once buried in primary mass graves were torn apart by bulldozers and excavators and put into trucks, which went in different directions. Parts of their skeletons were buried. This is what happened in Srebrenica, for example, and it is similar in Prijedor, in the Tomašica mine.<sup>3</sup>

In July 1995, the mass executions of Bosniaks – primarily men and boys – in the UN 'Safe Area' in Srebrenica totalled 8372, victims who were just the latest in a series of country-wide targeted killings that Bosnian Serb forces had begun in 1992. Though the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) ruled that only the crimes committed in Srebrenica and its vicinity would be legally classified as genocide, the term Bosnian genocide is commonly understood as encompassing the persecution and exterminations of civilians all across the country, including the widely documented war crimes in the towns of Prijedor, Zvornik, Višegrad and Foča. All Bosniaks – those practising Islam, or not at all – were targeted. In October 1991, former Bosnian Serb leader and war criminal Radovan Karadžić announced what was to come. In an infamous speech at

- 2 As reported by N1info.com: 'Reis Kavazović: Mi nismo dužni poštovati vlast koja ne poštuje javni moral' ('Reis Kavazović: We are not obliged to respect a government that does not respect public morality') 9 July, accessed 26 August 2022 at: <https://ba.n1info.com/vijesti/reis-kavazovic-mi-nismo-duzni-postovati-vlast-koja-ne-postuje-javni-moral/>.
- 3 See 'Amor Mašović u Zenici: Fenomen genocida u Srebrenici i BiH je da su se obračunavali s već mrtvim ljudima' *Zenica Blog* 8 July, accessed 26 August 2022 at: <https://www.zenica-blog.com/amor-masovic-u-zenici-fenomen-genocida-u-srebrenici-i-bih-je-da-su-se-obracunavali-s-vec-mrtvim-ljudima/>.

the Bosnian Parliament, he argued against plans for pushing forward the country's independence from then-Yugoslavia and warned:

Don't think that you won't lead Bosnia and Herzegovina to hell and the Muslim nation to extinction. Because the Muslim people cannot defend themselves if there is a war here.<sup>4</sup>

Once the aggression started, other non-Serbs in the country were not spared, though Bosniaks made up the largest number of victims by far. At present, in 13 cases overall, 20 individuals have been tried at the ICTY for crimes related to the Srebrenica massacres specifically. Slobodan Milošević, one-time Serbian leader, died before the end of his trial and 16 individuals have been convicted. As for Srebrenica, figures compiled by the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP), as of 30 June this year, report that 36 missing persons had been identified by traditional (non-DNA) means; and 6979 had been identified using DNA reference samples from multiple family members. Moreover, the total number of Srebrenica-related sites where human remains have been recovered is 430. This includes 95 graves and more than 340 surface sites.

## Western failures

On 11 July, the anniversary of the day the Srebrenica massacre began, I read with scepticism an avalanche of solidarity messages from numerous western government officials, recalling so many empty promises from those same countries. I also felt sorrowful thinking again about all the lives lost and how none of the horrors from the 1990s had to happen. In a recent *New Lines* essay, author Marko Atilla Hoare (Hoare 2022) deems as 'catastrophic' the western policy during the 1990s war in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. He explains that:

It was spearheaded by the European powers, above all Britain and France, and meekly followed by weak, indecisive, unserious President Clinton. It focused on appeasing rather than halting Serbian aggression and genocide and on partitioning Bosnia and Herzegovina.

He points out that:

The genocidal massacre of over 8000 Bosniak civilians at Srebrenica under the auspices of the United Nations was not only the logical culmination of Western policy but also the moment domestic US pressure for intervention to halt the genocide turned overwhelming. Consequently, the Clinton administration belatedly authorized NATO military action in Bosnia in the summer and autumn of 1995. But it did so only to follow up with the disastrous Dayton peace agreement.

Throughout the past two decades, numerous Bosnian scholars, activists and individuals of all professions have been tirelessly speaking and publicly raising awareness about information related to the Bosnian genocide. An example is a recently published academic work in which Hikmet Karčić, a researcher at the Institute for

4 The 'road to hell' speech was given at the Parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina on 5 October 1991.

Islamic Tradition of Bosniaks (IITB) in Sarajevo, expertly details how Bosnian Serbs set up a system of concentration camps across the country to torture, sexually abuse, humiliate and kill Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats (Karčić 2022).

Despite the disgusting, all-too-familiar and now well-expected provocations in Bosnia's Republika Srpska that occur all the time, but particularly near the 11 July anniversary, an intellectual galvanisation of Bosniaks has continued. A maturing self-awareness has arisen, albeit from one of the cruellest tragedies for a people. More production of local scholarship about the most recent history, alongside collections of survivors' dignified testimonies through oral history projects and the extraordinary work of institutions like Srebrenica Memorial Center, has contributed to powerful memorialisation and educational efforts. The main international conference held at that location this year, Mothers of Srebrenica, was dedicated to the female heroines who have tirelessly advocated for justice and contributed to global awareness about the Bosnian genocide. A new thickening of self-consciousness has been palpable, dismaying the enemies of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

While stumbling upon nepotism and ugly corruption, Bosnia's citizens have still tried hard to move forward. But what hurts the country the most are the external sabotage efforts and internal secessionist pushes by politicians like the current Serb member of the presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik, as well as his ilk.

Rebuilding a multiethnic democracy and regenerating as a nation after a calamity like genocide is an uneasy and nonlinear process. One of the main focuses has been to research thoroughly the archives from The Hague to Sarajevo, to understand better the depths of the virulent Serbian nationalist politics that led to the Bosnian genocide. Other efforts have been directed toward pointing to hundreds if not thousands of still freely walking Bosnian Serbs who are responsible and should be held accountable for their hateful brand of politics and participation in the genocidal acts orchestrated by Milošević and his regime. Finding and sharing ways for coping with the immensity of the physical losses and psychological trauma is more difficult when genocide perpetrators are glorified as heroes in the region. Almost three decades after the systematic years-long killings, healing is fraught with difficulties.

Recent discussions among intellectual circles and in public forums have also included a more fearless reckoning with the persisting Islamophobia in some western European circles. Bosniaks from the region have been well acquainted with those prejudices and suffered brutally from the consequences of various European leaders' bigoted visions in the 90s. We know from Taylor Branch's book that Clinton admits that French President François Mitterrand insisted 'Bosnia did not belong' and about British officials' stance on 'a painful but realistic restoration of Christian Europe' (Branch 2009). Many have argued that prejudices against Muslims have remained a crucial part of the policies that have kept the citizens and the countries from the western Balkans with a Muslim majority or a sizable Muslim population – like Bosnia and Herzegovina or Kosovo – far away and out of the EU.

There should be no surprise then about the lukewarm reception within Bosnia and Herzegovina and its diaspora of the Dutch government's 'deepest apologies' offered for the first time this year to the relatives of the victims of Srebrenica (Ministry

of Defence 2022). Some Bosniaks dismissed Dutch Defence Minister Kaja Ollongren's statement as hypocritical or as too little too late. Others welcomed her statement that 'the international community failed to offer adequate protection to the people of Srebrenica' and that 'as part of that community, the Dutch government shares political responsibility for the situation in which that failure occurred' as a historic step in Holland's reconciling with not having stopped the genocide in Srebrenica.

After reading the news about the anniversary, learning about the 50 recently identified victims whose remains were buried on this year's anniversary day, and scrolling down my social media feed to see myriad compassionate messages of global support for the survivors mixed with comments reflecting genocide denial, I sighed in familiar exasperation. I felt the usual overwhelming mid-July sadness. At the same time, I was weirdly relieved to observe a gracious force among the organisers of various activities related to the commemoration, cordial survivors and so many young participants who were there to show their determination to learn, put a strong foot on that soil and send a strong message to revisionists and deniers.

## Conclusion

Yet it all reminded me how much reckoning with the past many in the west and those in the Balkans still have to do. That process must include throwing away once and for all the extremely harmful long-held stereotypes about the peoples of the region.

In his essay, Hoare explains the 'ancient ethnic hatreds' school of opinion on the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and scathingly points to the people who uphold them:

Adherents of this school ignore the reality of genocide as planned and organized by political and military leaders and implemented using modern state structures such as the army and police and instead attribute the violence to the supposed primordial hatred and primitivism of ordinary people. Such an interpretation normalizes genocidal violence and deflects responsibility away from the top perpetrators such as Slobodan Milošević and Radovan Karadžić.

As he says:

The US and its European allies remain committed to upholding the Dayton constitutional system for Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was largely the product of Balkanist thinking.

Looking toward the future and directing his criticism particularly to western writers and policy makers, Hoare adds:

Given the successive policy failures that such thinking has produced, it is time for us in the West to look differently at these countries and indeed foreign countries in general: to view them neither as the "other" nor as defective or contaminated versions of our own, but as countries whose citizens have a right to live in strong, functional, civic, liberal-democratic, sovereign states and be protected from predatory neighbors, just as much as North Americans or West Europeans. Removing the fault lines from our Western mindset is the starting point to ensure they are not created or perpetuated in the wider world.

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