



# Weekly Briefing

**Bosnia-Herzegovina social briefing:**  
**Bosnian genocide denial**  
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## **Bosnian genocide denial**

Bosnian Genocide denial is believed to be intentional act of Republika Srpska and (to a certain extent) Serbian authorities of denying the planned systematic genocide of 6000 to 7000 Bosniaks from Eastern Bosnia following the siege and capture of Srebrenica by the Srpska Army in July 1995. Serb politicians generally deny the genocide perpetrated against Bosniaks during the Bosnian war, refute claims that Srebrenica massacre constitutes a genocide, revise a number of soldiers and civilians killed during and in the aftermath of the 1995 Srebrenica siege (arguing that the total number of killed did not exceed a half of the number claimed by Bosniak side) and even claim that the genocide is perpetrated against the Serbs during the course of the Bosnian war. As a form of denialism, it can be compared to similar non-mainstream historical revisionisms such as Armenian Genocide denial and Holocaust denial. In generally accepted view shared among foreign experts and historians, however, the Srebrenica massacre is considered as the biggest genocide that occurred in Europe after WWII.

A fact exacerbating the controversy of the Bosnian genocide is that it happened relatively soon, only 24 years ago, hence is not (yet) unanimously acknowledged as a historical fact by historians and genocide scholars alike. It is also widely considered to stir a main source of animosities in Serbo – Bosniak political and social relations and is regarded as a chief impediment for meaningful reconciliation of these two constitutional ethnicities of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The political controversy of the genocide denial, as argued by Bosniak civil organizations, lies in the fact that admission of genocide by Republika Srpska authorities would not only seriously undermine its “international” reputation and political existence, but could very likely doom legitimacy of the secessionist claims by the current Srpska leadership. Instead of referring to Dayton Agreement, signed only few months after the 1995 Srebrenica genocide (as an act that constituted Republika Srpska as a political entity of the current BIH) RS authorities to support their right to secession refer to the declaration of the Bosnian Serb Assembly on the Proclamation of the Republic of the Serb people of Bosnia and Herzegovina from January 1992 as an ultimate source of sovereignty of the Bosnian Serbs (which, as interpreted, Dayton Agreement only ex post facto endorsed). In such constellation, this “proto-Republika Srpska” would be tainted by the genocide and accusations currently voiced by Bosniak war-victim organizations that Republika Srpska is in fact “created on genocide” is believed to be one of the chief arguments in deterring secessionist aspirations of the current RS leadership.

## **Recognition and denials of the genocide**

Currently, some governments and international organizations made resolutions endorsing the claim that Srebrenica massacre was an act of genocide. Bosnian institutions, including RS Parliament passed a report acknowledging the killings, but varied on terming the events as genocidal. Peace Implementation Council, an international body in charge of implementing the Dayton Agreement, has referred to Srebrenica massacre as genocide. There are no official stance and/ or legislation outlawing Bosnian genocide denial of any government (including BIH) as in cases of Armenian genocide and Holocaust.

Main legitimacy for supporters of an opinion that the Srpska Army committed genocide against Bosniaks arrives from proceedings and judgements by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ). These two courts, however, have ruled differently regarding the direct responsibility for the acts that could qualify as a genocide. The latter dealt directly with proceeding brought by BIH against Serbia and Montenegro (as successor states of Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) and has made controversial ruling in which Serbia as a state was not directly responsible for perpetration of the crime of genocide, “but was responsible under customary international law through violations of their obligations for prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide”. This ruling was partially expected outcome considering the implications it might have on Serbia’s regional and international standing, processes of ethnic reconciliation and the legal precedent it could make in international relations by ruling a state as genocidal. Moreover, political pressure on ICJ before passing of the judgement was also reported. Nevertheless, in several individual cases brought to ICTY the court concluded that the acts committed in Srebrenica are of specific intent “to destroy the group of the Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina” and can be classified as acts of genocide committed by the Army of Republika Srpska.

Despite the lack of official declaration regarding the Bosnian genocide (due to veto Serb politicians could impose on any such decision), Bosniak (and Croat) politicians and officials overwhelmingly acknowledge genocide against Bosniak population, differing in the scope and extent of the atrocities, but not in the classification of act (as genocide). In 2005, the US Congress passed the resolution on the Srebrenica massacre and other atrocities committed during the Bosnian war (1992-95) asserting that policy of aggression and ethnic cleansing of Serb forces constituted genocide. In 2009, the European Parliament passed a resolution to commemorate a day of remembrance of “the 1995 Srebrenica genocide”, explicitly referring to the ICJ decision for such reference. Many other European and regional countries followed suite and referred to the Srebrenica massacre or Bosnian war in general as purporting genocide. Other countries most controversially Serbia (pressured by direct reference to the Serbs as main

perpetrators and, in the past, by Bosnian suit before ICJ), have deliberately avoided recognizing it as a genocide and maintained ambiguous position regarding the denial of genocide. Many Serbian presidents, including Tomislav Nikolic and current Aleksandar Vucic opposed to claim that in Srebrenica happened genocide, but they have maintained different approaches regarding the Srebrenica issue in Serbo- Bosniak relations. Aleksandar Vucic tried to spearhead reconciliation efforts by visiting Srebrenica memorial site soon after becoming a president in 2016, but his visit remained controversial partially due to agenda that was short of addressing the issue of genocide. Overall, in academic circles is generally accepted the evaluation given by Sonja Biserko, president of Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, who states that Serbian society nurtures a “culture of denial” regarding the genocide in Bosnia, which “ranging from brutal to deceitful methods can be compared to similar negationist historical revisionism and denialism such as Armenian and Rwandan genocide denial”.

In 2018, the former RS President Milorad Dodik requested the Republika Srpska Parliament to disavow previously passed reports on Srebrenica and to set up a commission consisted of “neutral, foreign experts” in order to conduct a research that should unequivocally acknowledge the veracity of the Srebrenica massacre along with the war crimes perpetrated against Bosnian Serbs. As stated by Dodik, the report Republika Srpska adopted in 2004 was pressured by the international community and a new report based on independent and unbiased research should establish the real number of Bosniak victims in Srebrenica as well as open investigations on massacres against Serbs during the war, among which expulsion of Serbs from Sarajevo has elements of ethnic cleansing and organized murder.

### **Denialism**

Both Bosniak and Serb political and civil organizations have spent millions of dollars on lobbying in Washington, Brussels and other political meccas over the past two decades, mostly focusing on the Bosnian genocide issue. Diaspora organizations of the both ethnicities has mutually accused each other of attempting to intimidate investigative journalists, researchers and scholars in the field. Among them, Serb and Bosniak diaspora in the United States has been the most vocal in lobbying or pressuring politicians and media regarding the application of word genocide.

The most proponent denialist is the former RS President and current Serb member to the Presidency of BIH, Milorad Dodik. Dodik several times in his statements to media declared that he did not regard the killings at Srebrenica as genocide and maintained that “if a genocide happened then it was committed against Serb people of this region where women, children and the elderly were killed en masse”. He is also noted to employ historical revisionism regarding

the actual number of victims, and in contrast to some other Serb(ian) politicians who dared to speak on Bosniak victims defensively, mostly downsizing an appeal for collective responsibility of one ethnicity, Dodik rather aggressively presupposes Serb victims to Bosniak and maintains that genocide against Serbs should be discussed in similar terms to that against Bosniaks.

Similarly to other genocide cases, revisionist and denialist opinions of Srebrenica genocide issue range from utter denial of the facts (from calling Srebrenica massacre a staged conspiracy to negating the number of victims) to skepticism in qualifying an act as a genocide. In both cases, denialists often claim that genocide is result of international political circumstances which invoked the problem and furtherly exaggerated responsibility of one side in the conflict as a means of a political pressure for various purposes. Preventing secessionism and keeping Serbs in BIH is the most common interpretation to this end.

Among more famous international denialists are Holocaust scholar Yehuda Bauer who conclude that Srebrenica is “act of mass murder, but not genocide” and Ephraim Zuroff, director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Israel and (allegedly with good ties with Serbian establishment) who said that Srebrenica massacre simply does not fit definition of genocide. Other denial attempts include the work of genocide scholar William Schabas, who from the aspect of international law summarizes the legal opinions regarding the status of the atrocities committed in Srebrenica and throughout the Bosnian war, deeming them ethnic cleansing but not genocide. There is a so called the Srebrenica Research Group, cited extensively by Milorad Dodik, which denies a number of victims as well as a genocide status.

Bosnian genocide denial that is being present in academia helps Dodik to have a less challenging task upholding anti-genocide stance of Republika Srpska. Last occasion for his display of denialism was rejection of the appeal to Radovan Karadzic, war time leader of Bosnian Serbs, against the earlier conviction by ICTY. On 20 March 2019, Karadzic`s sentence was increased to life imprisonment, which instigated cheering sentiments across BIH together with questioning the implications his conviction could have on his ‘brainchild’- Republika Srpska. In this circumstances, Dodik`s reiterated his denial of Srebrenica genocide, only to reignite strong media and public reaction that last to date. Bosnian genocide issue, as it seems, still exacerbates inter-ethnic tensions and unwittingly confirms increased political relevancy of denialism.