



Weekly Briefing

Bosnia-Herzegovina social briefing:
Srebrenica: Crime, punishment, apology and denial
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Summary

Two Hague courts, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), characterized the crimes in city Srebrenica - the United Nations protected area - in July 1995, as genocide. The ICTY sentenced almost the entire Bosnian Serb political and military elite, led by key leaders, RS President Radovan Karadžić and RS Army leader Ratko Mladić, to life or multi-decade prison sentences. In almost all verdicts, the Srebrenica genocide is one of the key points. Since 2003, in Potočari near Srebrenica, mass funerals have been organized for those killed, with a commemoration and the presence of high-ranking dignitaries from BiH, the region and the world. However, reconciliation has so far been absent. Why, events from this eleventh of July show.

Introduction

In the cemetery of the Srebrenica Memorial Center - Potočari, a funeral prayer was held for 30 victims of the genocide committed in July 1995 against the inhabitants of the "UN protected zone" in Srebrenica. Families buried the mostly incomplete bodies of their loved ones who had been killed in the most cruel ways, and whose remains they had been searching for for years. They were found in numerous mass graves.

The anniversary of the genocide in Srebrenica was preceded by the "March of Peace", which this year was attended by about 4,000 people, who walked the route that men and boys took on the way from Srebrenica, which was occupied by Bosnian Serb forces on July 11, 1995, to Tuzla, the nearest city under the control of the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. That event is known as the "Death March" because many lost their lives on it¹.

1 Another 30 victims of the Srebrenica genocide found peace in Potočari.
<https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/liveblog/2023/7/11/oprostaj-od-jos-30-zrtava-genocida-u-srebrenici>

Funeral and messages

So far, 6,721 victims of genocide have been buried in the cemetery of the Srebrenica Memorial Center - Potočari; Almost 1,000 victims of the genocide are still being sought. The total number of victims, which is generally recognized by the international and BiH public, is 8,273 victims, although the Serbian side also questions that number. The fact that the Government of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) declared a Day of Mourning in this entity, while the Council of Ministers (CoM) of BiH, the executive power at the level of the BiH state, did not do so, due to the opposition of Serbian ministers, shows that Srebrenica is still a contentious issue².

The religious part, the one that is probably the most painful and important for the families of the victims, the funeral prayer, as in previous years, was led by the reisul-ulema of the Islamic Community in BiH Husein ef. Kavazovic. He said that Srebrenica is a “strong warning, first of all to those who survived, but, I hope, to generations to come”. Reisul-ulema, in a statement to the media of the Islamic Community, said that it is necessary to constantly remind that the crime of genocide against innocent people was committed in Srebrenica³.

The commemoration of the 28th anniversary of the genocide against Bosniaks in Srebrenica was attended by numerous delegations from the region, Europe and the world. Among those who today paid tribute to the victims and laid flowers in the cemetery of the Memorial Center in Potočari were members of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina Denis Bećirović and Željko Komšić.

Flowers were also laid by the Chairperson of the BiH CoM Ms Borjana Krišto, the Minister of Defense of BiH Zukan Helez, the Prime Minister of Montenegro Dritan Abazović, etc⁴.

2 The Council of Ministers refused to declare July 11 as a day of mourning in Bosnia and Herzegovina. <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/vijece-ministara-odbilo-proglasiti-11-juli-za-dan-zalosti-u-bosni-i-hercegovini/230705155>

3 Reisul-ulema Husein-ef. Kavazović: Srebrenica is a strong warning. <https://www.islamskazajednica.ba/index.php/vijesti/reisu-l-ulema/31190-reisul-ulema-husein-ef-kavazovic-srebrenica-je-snazna-opomena>

4 Numerous delegations from BiH, Europe and the world laid flowers and paid tribute to the victims of the genocide in Srebrenica. <https://www.aa.com.tr/ba/balkan/brojne-delegacije-iz-bih-evrope-i-svijeta-polo%C5%BEile-cvije%C4%87e-i-odale-po%C4%8Dast-%C5%BErtvama-genocida-u-srebrenica/2942610>

Before the funeral, a commemorative part was held during which the gathered were addressed by selected speakers, and children from Srebrenica, descendants of the victims, performed the composition "Srebrenica Inferno"⁵. Elvedina Memišević, the representative of the surviving victims of the genocide of July 1995, also addressed those present, who told the gathered to convey to the whole world that the people of Srebrenica were killed, but they could not kill them all: "Convey to the whole world, they did kill us Srebrenica people, but they couldn't kill us all"⁶.

At the beginning of his address, the High Representative in BiH Christian Schmidt said that the lessons from Srebrenica must not be forgotten: "It is our duty to preserve the heritage of Srebrenica. We have a clear obligation to stop the tensions that call into question the crimes committed. I call on the competent authorities to prosecute the denial of genocide and the glorification of war criminals. We need to expand the legal provisions where the perpetrators of war crimes, the convicted perpetrators, cannot have the right to hold public officeactions"⁷.

Denis Bećirović, a member of the BiH Presidency, also addressed the audience, saying that he would never bow down to the ideology of evil, and that the mothers of Srebrenica deserved the Nobel Peace Prize. He asked several questions addressed to international community: "Why are the committed mistakes not corrected, why is salt allowed to be sprinkled on the wounds of the families of genocide victims, why are those who deny the genocide not sanctioned?"⁸.

This year, the commemoration was attended by representatives of the World Jewish Congress (WJC), represented in the image and work of their vice-president Menachem Rosensaft, who in his speech connected the criminals and victims of the Nazis from the Second World War, and those from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Rwanda in the 1990s.

5 Srebrenica Inferno. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3T9XmF7otV8>

6 Potočari: Thousands of people worshiped the funeral for 30 victims of the genocide in Srebrenica. <https://avaz.ba/vijesti/bih/842808/potocari-hiljade-ljudi-klanjalo-dzenazu-za-30-zrtava-genocida-u-srebrenici>

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*

"Liquidated Bosniak men and boys are not the first and will not be the last, but they call from their graves to be remembered for what they were, for the horror they felt and for everything they were not allowed to become," said Rosensaft. He added that the Bosniak boy in Pilica, the Jewish child in Ponar, the Serbian baby in Jasenovac and Tutsi girls in Kigali are our conscience and our compass⁹.

Rosensaft's host was the director of the Srebrenica Memorial Center, Emir Suljagić, who, judging by the number of reactions that came from all sides, surprised the public both in BiH and in the region. Namely, in his introductory speech at the conference on collective memory, in which Rosensaft also participated, he apologized for the crimes of the Handjar Division¹⁰ during the Second World War in his own name and on behalf of the position he holds. Suljagić said that he felt a deep need to say the following from Srebrenica: "Eighty years ago, a part of my compatriots put themselves at the service of the German Nazi ideology and harmed you, your people, your fathers and mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers. I apologize for that and I hope that you will find room for forgiveness in your hearts."¹¹

He said that he is doing this in a place that represents the center of gravity of all BiH sufferings in the twentieth century for two reasons: "First, because I want to show that no history is elegant, every history is bumpy and winding, but we have no choice but to accept it. Second, because I am addressing you on behalf of the descendants, children and grandchildren of the generation of Bosniaks who were killed with the same or similar motive in the nineties for which your ancestors were killed in the forties of the last century: because of the skin they were born with"¹²

9 Rosensaft: If we forget Srebrenica and its victims, our souls will become stone.

<https://n1info.ba/vijesti/rosensaft-ako-zaboravimo-srebrenicu-i-njene-zrtve-nase-ce-duse-postati-kamen/>

10 The 13th Waffen SS Handžar division, which was composed of Catholics and Muslims from the territory of the then Nazi puppet *Independent State of Croatia*, which also included Bosnia and Herzegovina. More about it: <https://povijest.hr/bitkeiratovi/najneobinja-divizija-drugog-svjetskig-rata-handzar-divizija/>

11 Conference in Potočari: Apology to the Jews for the crimes of the Handžar Division.

<https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2023/7/10/konferencija-u-potocarima-izvinjenje-jevrejima-za-zlocine-handzar-divizije>

12 *Ibid.*

Suljagić's apology caused numerous reactions, both among radical Bosniaks and Serbs, both in the Republika Srpska and in Serbia. But while radical Bosniaks mostly reacted on social media platforms, Serbian reactions reached the mainstream media. Among the numerous reactions, we will single out that of the Museum of Genocide Victims, a public institution from Serbia. They criticized several things in Suljagić's apology - firstly, that it was addressed only to Jews, and not to Serbs, who were the biggest victims of the Handjar Division, such as that, in their opinion, Suljagić amnesties the nazi Independent State of Croatia (Nezavisna država Hrvatska - NDH) for the Holocaust because the Handjar Division was founded in 1943, when the NDH authorities had already eradicated Jews from BiH¹³.

Let's put history aside and let's return to reality, in which Srebrenica is still an open wound, in several ways. One of the internet portals reminded of the terrible fact that ten accused of genocide and war crimes in and around Srebrenica, including several former high-ranking officials of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (*Ministarstvo unutrašnjih poslova* - MUP) and the Army of the Republika Srpska (*Vojska Republike Srpske* - VRS), are not available to the BiH judiciary. The Prosecution of BiH clarified that the biggest problem is that the majority of these persons are in the countries of the region and most of them have dual citizenships, therefore it is impossible to expect their extradition. "For this reason, the Prosecutor's Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina is trying to find a modality for fighting impunity and prosecuting persons who are in the region within the framework of regional cooperation," the Prosecutor's Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina states¹⁴.

Another portal followed the situation after the commemoration and funeral in Srebrenica, where on the same night, a few hours after the funeral, Serbian nationalist songs were played¹⁵.

13 The Museum of Genocide Victims reacted: Emir Suljagić knowingly amnesties the NDH crime against Serbs. <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/561572/Muzej-zrtava-genocida-reagovao-Emir-Suljagic-svesno-amnestira-zlocin-NDH-nad-Srbima>

14 Ten people accused of genocide and war crimes in Srebrenica are unavailable for Bosnia and Herzegovina judiciary. <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/desetorica-optuzenih-za-genocid-i-ratne-zlocine-u-srebrenici-nedostupni-bh-pravosudju/230716038>

15 Srebrenica after the funeral: Folkloric orgies, provocations and the spread of national hatred. <https://radiosarajevo.ba/metromahala teme/srebrenica-nakon-dzenaze-folklorne-orgije-provokacije-i-sirenje-nacionalne-mrznje/504280>

Story does not end here. The media reported in detail the case of two female students of the University of Sarajevo (UNSA), of Serbian nationality, who during the eleventh of July, denied the genocide in Srebrenica, posted photos of Ratko Mladić, the convicted military commander of the RS Army, including the conviction for the genocide in Srebrenica, and after they got into a verbal conflict with their colleagues, one of them left a message: "Let us kill you."

After the whole case became public, it was announced that these two students of the Faculty of Criminology and Security Studies of UNSA will continue their education in Belgrade, with scholarships from the state of Serbia, while part of the study costs were taken over by a public company from Republika Srpska. At a press conference in East Sarajevo (Republic of Srpska), they thanked the head of the Security Information Agency (*Bezbednosno sigurnosna agencija - BIA*), Aleksandar Vulin, who organized their further education in Serbia¹⁶.

By the way, the glorification of war criminals in BiH is a criminal offense, and the Prosecutor's Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina could, according to the media, prevent these female students from leaving BiH and becoming unavailable to domestic judicial authorities¹⁷.

One small feature from the commemoration in Potočari shows that not all tones are black. Among those who stayed there was a group of men from Serbia. One of them, Boban Pantović from Belgrade, during the meeting with the survivors of Srebrenica, quoted the famous BiH poet Aleksa Šantić: "'Blessed is he who has tears, his heart did not die there'. I would just add there - there is humanity¹⁸".

16 Female students who denied the genocide are leaving UNSA: They thanked Aleksandr Vulin... <https://www.oslobodjenje.ba/vijesti/bih/studentice-koje-su-negirale-genocid-napustaju-unsu-zahvalile-su-se-aleksandru-vulinu-876864>

17 The female students who glorified Mladić could soon become unavailable to Bosnia and Herzegovina judiciary, what is the Prosecutor's Office of BiH doing. <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/studentice-koje-su-velicale-mladica-uskoro-bi-mogle-postati-nedostupne-bh-pravosudju-sta-radi-tuzilastvo-bih/230715047>

18 Emotional address of a citizen of Belgrade in Potočari: Blessed is he who has tears... <https://n1info.ba/vijesti/emotivno-obracanje-beogradjanina-u-potocarima-blago-onome-ko-suza-ima-video/>

Conclusion

Nationalist narratives are present in all the states created by the breakup of Yugoslavia, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina the situation is the most complex, because as many as three are fighting for the narrative about the war. Nevertheless, it is worrying that even about those indisputable and proven in court, there are hundreds of mutually contradictory lines of argumentation. Thus, in the case of Srebrenica, where Bosniaks were killed in the genocide, Serbian nationalists use different explanations: from denying the nature of the crime "it is not genocide, but something else", through relativizing the context "everyone killed everyone, only world hate Serbs", to the extremely creepy "it was, and it should have been" as we saw in the last part of this report. Therefore, apologies, at least in the context of the director of the Memorial Center in Srebrenica, even for long-ago historical events, are an important pledge of future peace. Because the wars in some people's minds here never end.