

**Frozen Peace: The Enduring Legacies of Genocide
and Governance in Bosnia and Herzegovina**

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Abstract

The Bosnian genocide of 1992–1995 continues to shape Bosnia and Herzegovina nearly three decades later. This paper analyzes how the atrocities, particularly Srebrenica, fractured society and how the Dayton Peace Agreement institutionalized ethnic divisions. While Dayton secured peace, it entrenched political fragmentation, corruption, and weak governance. Case studies of education and healthcare reveal how ethnic separation and institutional inefficiency persist in everyday life. The paper also examines contested memory, denial, and the limited effectiveness of international justice, which hinder reconciliation and sustain mistrust. International actors, while preventing collapse, often reinforced dependency and corruption. Overall, the genocide’s legacies endure as structural conditions, leaving Bosnia trapped in a fragile “frozen peace” that undermines justice and long-term stability.

Keywords: Bosnia and Herzegovina, genocide, Dayton Peace Agreement, consociationalism, corruption, reconciliation, collective memory, post-conflict governance, human rights.

Frozen Peace: The Enduring Legacies of Genocide and Governance in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The Bosnian genocide of 1992–1995, culminating in the massacre of more than 8,000 Bosniak men and boys at Srebrenica, remains the most devastating atrocity in Europe since the Second World War (Mulaj, 2017). While international courts such as the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) have recognized these crimes as genocide, the legacy of violence extends far beyond legal classification (Kent, 2013; Halilović, 2025). Bosnia and Herzegovina is still marked by the war's destruction and by the political architecture imposed through the Dayton Peace Agreement. Designed to end armed conflict, Dayton embedded ethnic divisions into the state's constitutional order, producing a consociational system that secured peace but entrenched political gridlock (Kasapović, 2005; Keil & Hulsey, 2024). Nearly three decades later, Bosnia's institutions reflect these structural fractures. Educational systems reproduce antagonistic narratives of “us” versus “them” (Kovač, 2025), healthcare provision is undermined by entity-level fragmentation (Miggelbrink & Meyer, 2023), and corruption thrives under decentralization and clientelism (Divjak & Pugh, 2008). In addition, genocide denial and the glorification of perpetrators remain widespread, obstructing reconciliation and perpetuating interethnic mistrust (Bećirević, 2010; Simić, 2024).

This paper argues that the genocide in Bosnia must be understood not as a concluded episode of violence but as an enduring condition that shapes the state's political, social, and institutional life. By examining governance structures, corruption, education, healthcare, and collective memory, this study highlights how the consequences of genocide continue to permeate

everyday life. Bosnia's experience illustrates how unresolved atrocities and flawed peace settlements can embed division into governance itself, undermining both justice and the possibility of a cohesive future.

Historical Context: Bosnia and the Genocide

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina emerged from the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. Rising nationalist movements among Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks transformed political competition into violent campaigns for territorial control. Following Bosnia's declaration of independence in 1992, Bosnian Serb forces, supported by the Yugoslav People's Army and political leaders in Belgrade, initiated a campaign of ethnic cleansing aimed at establishing an ethnically homogenous Serb entity (Kent, 2013). This campaign included mass killings, forced displacement, sexual violence, and the destruction of cultural and religious sites. By the end of the conflict, approximately 100,000 people had been killed and more than two million displaced, making it one of the most destructive conflicts in Europe since the Second World War (Mulaj, 2017).

The genocide at Srebrenica in July 1995 remains the most infamous atrocity of the war. In a United Nations-designated "safe area," Bosnian Serb forces under General Ratko Mladić separated and executed more than 8,000 Bosniak men and boys while forcibly displacing women, children, and the elderly. Both the ICTY and the ICJ subsequently recognized these acts as genocide, establishing the legal precedent that the crimes in Srebrenica met the threshold of genocidal intent (Bećirević, 2010; Halilović, 2025). The ICTY convicted high-ranking officials, including Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić, yet prosecutions were often narrow in scope and left survivors dissatisfied with the extent of accountability (Kent, 2013). The ICJ, in *Bosnia v.*

Serbia (2007), further held that Serbia had failed to prevent and punish genocide but stopped short of attributing direct responsibility to the Serbian state, a decision criticized for setting a weak standard of state accountability (Halilović, 2025).

Beyond the legal recognition of genocide, the events of 1992–1995 fractured Bosnia’s social fabric and institutional foundations. Communities that had been ethnically diverse were divided through systematic campaigns of forced removal and intimidation. The destruction of infrastructure, schools, and hospitals not only caused immediate humanitarian crises but also created structural vulnerabilities that continue to shape Bosnia’s institutional landscape today (Mulaj, 2017). The genocide and the broader war thus laid the groundwork for a post-conflict society organized along rigid ethnic lines. Understanding this context is critical, as the political and institutional arrangements forged at Dayton were layered atop a society already destabilized by mass atrocity.

Post-Genocide Settlement: The Dayton Agreement and State Structure

The Dayton Peace Agreement, signed in December 1995 in Dayton, Ohio, formally ended the Bosnian war and established the constitutional framework that continues to define Bosnia and Herzegovina’s governance, as codified in Annex 4 of the General Framework Agreement for Peace (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe [OSCE], 1997). Negotiated under intense international pressure, Dayton created a highly decentralized system intended to secure peace by institutionalizing ethnic power-sharing. The country was divided into two entities — the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (dominated by Bosniaks and Croats) and the Republika Srpska (dominated by Serbs) — with the autonomous Brčko District later established through arbitration. At the state level, governance was organized through a tripartite

presidency with one Bosniak, one Croat, and one Serb representative, as well as parliamentary structures designed to reflect ethnic balance (Kasapović, 2005).

Although this arrangement succeeded in halting armed conflict, it entrenched ethnic divisions within the very structure of the state. Scholars identify Bosnia as one of the most complex cases of consociational democracy, in which ethnic elites dominate institutions and exercise veto power to block decision-making (Keil & Hulsey, 2024). Instead of fostering long-term cooperation, this arrangement incentivized ethnic outbidding, with parties appealing to nationalist constituencies to maintain political legitimacy. As a result, governance is frequently paralyzed by disputes over sovereignty and representation (Kasapović, 2005).

International actors reinforced this fragile framework. The Office of the High Representative (OHR), empowered by the “Bonn Powers,” frequently intervened to impose legislation or remove obstructive officials. While such measures prevented immediate collapse, they also deepened Bosnia’s reliance on external oversight rather than fostering domestic accountability (Hartwell, 2019). Scholars describe this as “imposed consociationalism,” in which international intervention sustains peace while simultaneously freezing political development and stalling democratization (McCulloch, 2014).

The institutional complexity created by Dayton also has enduring practical consequences. Governance is fragmented across multiple layers, including state, entity, cantonal, and municipal levels, with overlapping competencies that obstruct policy coordination (Kasapović, 2005). This fragmentation has left Bosnia with weak central institutions, which contribute to corruption, inefficiency, and inadequate service delivery in key sectors such as healthcare and education. Rather than resolving ethnic conflict, Dayton constitutionalized it, producing what many scholars

call a “frozen peace” that preserved boundaries but undermined stability and reform (Hartwell, 2019).

Lasting Social and Political Impacts

Ethnic Division and Identity

One of the most enduring consequences of the Bosnian genocide is the persistence of deep ethnic divisions that permeate nearly every aspect of political and social life. While the Dayton Peace Agreement institutionalized power-sharing among Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs, it also solidified the very identities that had been mobilized during the war. Ethnic parties dominate political competition, framing their legitimacy in terms of protecting group interests rather than advancing collective civic priorities (Keil & Hulsey, 2024). This structure fosters ethnic outbidding, reinforcing the perception that national identity is inextricably linked to ethnicity (Kasapović, 2005).

These divisions are evident in Bosnia’s education system. Schools across the Federation and Republika Srpska often operate under curricula that are ethnically distinct. In some cantons, children attend “two schools under one roof,” where Croat and Bosniak students share the same building but follow separate programs. Textbooks across the three ethnic education systems consistently reproduce antagonistic narratives of history, presenting the nation as divided into “us” versus “them” and reinforcing victimization narratives while devaluing others (Kovač, 2025). As a result, new generations are raised with competing, ethnically charged understandings of Bosnia’s past, which obstructs the possibility of reconciliation.

Beyond education, the persistence of trauma continues to shape collective identities. Survivors and their descendants carry the psychological weight of atrocities, and this

transgenerational trauma sustains distrust across ethnic lines (Buljubašić & Holá, 2023).

Attempts at local peacebuilding and community empowerment often struggle against this backdrop of historical memory, which is not merely personal but institutionalized through governance, curricula, and political rhetoric (Parent, 2016). In this sense, the genocide's legacy is embedded not only in the state's structure but also in the everyday socialization of its citizens.

Institutional Weakness and Corruption

The constitutional design imposed at Dayton not only entrenched ethnic identity but also created an environment in which corruption and weak governance could thrive. Bosnia and Herzegovina's government is fragmented across state, entity, cantonal, and municipal levels, producing overlapping jurisdictions and a lack of accountability (Kasapović, 2005). This fragmentation enables political elites to exploit institutional complexity for personal and party gain. Studies show that corruption in Bosnia is not merely incidental but systemic, functioning as a mechanism of political control and resource distribution along ethnic lines (Divjak & Pugh, 2008).

The persistence of corruption undermines democratic institutions, erodes public trust, and hinders Bosnia's efforts to integrate with the European Union. Moreover, external actors have at times reinforced corrupt structures, privileging political "stability" over accountability (Hartwell, 2019). The result is a governance system characterized by clientelism and elite capture, which continues to obstruct reforms in critical sectors such as healthcare and education.

Healthcare Case Study

The health sector illustrates how the constitutional fragmentation established by Dayton has obstructed effective governance. Bosnia and Herzegovina's healthcare system is divided

along entity and cantonal lines, with little central coordination. Each entity operates its own ministries, laws, and funding mechanisms, resulting in significant disparities in the quality and accessibility of care (Kasapović, 2005). This disjointed structure undermines the state's ability to provide equitable services and creates inefficiencies in resource allocation.

The weaknesses of this system were made particularly evident in areas requiring specialized treatment and coordinated national policy. For instance, organ transplantation has suffered from paralysis because of fragmented legal frameworks and political disputes across entities (Miggelbrink & Meyer, 2023). More broadly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Bosnia's inability to implement a unified public health response exposed the limitations of its divided system (World Health Organization, 2021). These failures are not merely technical shortcomings, but rather reflect the institutional legacies of a peace settlement that prioritized ethnic autonomy over state functionality and stability (Miggelbrink & Meyer, 2023).

The healthcare case demonstrates how Bosnia's governance framework continues to translate post-genocide political divisions into tangible inequities in citizens' daily lives. It underscores the enduring cost of a system that institutionalizes ethnic fragmentation at the expense of public welfare.

Economic Stagnation

Bosnia's political fragmentation has also contributed to chronic economic stagnation. High unemployment, particularly among youth, has fueled large-scale emigration, leading to what observers call a "brain drain" that undermines long-term development (Divjak & Pugh, 2008). The privatization process, carried out amid corruption and elite capture, further entrenched inequality and weakened trust in public institutions (Belloni & Strazzari, 2014). The

absence of coherent state-level economic policy has left Bosnia dependent on external aid while discouraging foreign investment. As a result, economic instability continues to reinforce political division and social disillusionment nearly three decades after the war.

Memory, Justice, and Reconciliation

The pursuit of justice and reconciliation in Bosnia has been constrained by denial, selective memory, and the uneven implementation of transitional justice mechanisms. Although the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) prosecuted high-ranking leaders such as Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić, survivors often regarded the trials as inadequate, focusing narrowly on individual responsibility without addressing broader structural harms (Kent, 2013). The International Court of Justice further complicated perceptions of justice by acknowledging Serbia's failure to prevent genocide at Srebrenica while rejecting claims of direct state responsibility, a ruling that many Bosniaks interpreted as a political compromise rather than full accountability (Halilović, 2025). These outcomes contributed to frustration among survivors and reinforced divisions in public memory.

Denial and glorification of atrocities remain widespread, particularly in Republika Srpska, where political leaders openly dispute the characterization of Srebrenica as genocide (Bećirević, 2010). Such practices not only retraumatize survivors but also undermine possibilities for reconciliation by entrenching competing narratives. Recent scholarship shows how impunity and indoctrination contribute to the glorification of convicted war criminals, with commemorative events presenting them as heroes rather than perpetrators (Simić, 2024). Efforts to criminalize genocide denial in Bosnia have faced political resistance, revealing the extent to which denialism has been institutionalized (Memišević, 2015).

In addition to these political and legal challenges, the post-Dayton peace process has been criticized for failing to incorporate gender perspectives into reconciliation and institution-building. As Björkdahl (2012) argues, the exclusion of women's experiences from formal peace negotiations and transitional justice mechanisms has limited Bosnia's capacity to achieve a genuinely inclusive or gender-just peace.

Education and public memory further illustrate the contested terrain of reconciliation. Survivors' testimonies and oral histories, such as those collected from the women of Srebrenica, highlight ongoing trauma and the struggle for dignity and recognition (Selimović, 2016). However, these narratives often compete with nationalist reinterpretations that frame one group's suffering as exclusive or deny the victimization of others. Memorialization practices also reflect these divides: while the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial serves as a focal point for remembrance, in other parts of the country, commemorations are ignored or reframed through ethnocentric lenses (Hojić, 2015).

Taken together, these dynamics demonstrate that Bosnia's post-genocide landscape is not defined solely by the absence of violence but by an ongoing battle over memory and recognition. The failure to establish a shared narrative has hindered reconciliation and continues to embed ethnic division into Bosnia's political and cultural life.

International Dimensions

Bosnia and Herzegovina's post-war governance has been profoundly shaped by international involvement. The Dayton Peace Agreement itself was brokered under United States leadership. Since 1995, the Office of the High Representative (OHR) has exercised extensive authority to impose laws and remove officials deemed to be obstructing peace (Hartwell, 2019).

While this intervention prevented immediate collapse, it fostered dependency on external oversight and limited the development of accountable domestic institutions. Scholars describe this system as “imposed consociationalism,” where international actors sustain stability at the expense of democratic consolidation (McCulloch, 2014).

The European Union (EU) and NATO have long been presented as future pathways for integration; however, Bosnia’s fragmented political system and pervasive corruption have stalled accession efforts (Divjak & Pugh, 2008). International donors, although crucial in reconstruction, have sometimes reinforced corrupt networks by channelling aid through entrenched elites in the interest of maintaining political stability (Belloni & Strazzari, 2014). Meanwhile, external geopolitical influences complicate Bosnia’s trajectory. Russia, for instance, has supported leaders in Republika Srpska who oppose further integration with Euro-Atlantic institutions, further deepening polarization (Keil & Hulsey, 2024).

These dynamics underscore that Bosnia’s fragility cannot be explained solely by domestic ethnic divisions. International actors continue to shape its institutions and politics, often prioritizing stability over structural reform, leaving Bosnia in a prolonged state of partial transition.

Conclusion

The Bosnian genocide was not only a moment of mass atrocity but also a transformative event that continues to define Bosnia and Herzegovina’s political and social order. While the Dayton Peace Agreement successfully halted armed conflict, it institutionalized ethnic divisions and established a governance structure characterized by fragmentation, corruption, and inefficiency (Kasapović, 2005; Keil & Hulsey, 2024). The consequences of this arrangement are

evident in the persistent weaknesses of institutions, such as the healthcare system, and in widespread corruption that undermines reform and accountability (Divjak & Pugh, 2008; Miggelbrink & Meyer, 2023).

Equally enduring are the struggles over memory and justice. Survivors of genocide continue to confront denialism and glorification of perpetrators, while international tribunals and courts have delivered verdicts that many view as partial or insufficient (Bećirević, 2010; Halilović, 2025; Simić, 2024). Education systems, public commemorations, and political rhetoric all sustain competing narratives that obstruct reconciliation and entrench ethnic mistrust (Kovač, 2025; Hozić, 2015).

Taken together, these legacies demonstrate that genocide is not confined to the past but functions as a continuing condition shaping Bosnia's governance, economy, and social life. Without deeper institutional reform and a shared reckoning with the past, Bosnia risks remaining trapped in a cycle in which peace is preserved only through division rather than genuine cohesion and justice.

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