



By: The Editorial Board

# The genocide in Srebrenica and the danger of denial as state policy



Thirty years after the genocide in **Srebrenica**, committed in July 1995 by the armed forces of Republika Srpska (the armed forces of the ethnic Serb entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina that was later **formalised** by the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement), the European conscience is still deeply shaken.

In the worst crime on European soil since the Second World War, more than eight thousand Bosniak men and boys were killed, despite the formal protection of the United Nations and the presence of international peacekeepers.

The massacre took place in the so-called UN "protection **zone**" in eastern Bosnia, just a few months before the end of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995), which claimed more than 100,000 lives and permanently redefined the political map of the Balkans.

The genocide in Srebrenica was confirmed as a legal fact in several rulings by the two highest international tribunals—the International Criminal **Tribunal** for the Former Yugoslavia and the International **Court** of Justice.

But Srebrenica is not the past. It is not a closed chapter. It is an ongoing test of the international community's ability to respond to violence in real time and, even more importantly, to recognise the truth when it is politically undesirable. Europe has been failing this test for three decades.

## Denial as official politics of remembrance

In May 2024, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution **declaring** 11 July as the International Day of Reflection and Commemoration of the 1995 Genocide in Srebrenica. Although the resolution was not legally binding, it was deeply symbolic.

The reactions were sharp and immediate. Serbia, the successor to the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, led a diplomatic offensive against the adoption of the resolution. President Aleksandar Vučić **called**

the resolution "anti-Serbian" and a "historical injustice," rejected the term "genocide," and accused the West of political bias.

This kind of rhetoric is not new. It is part of a broader and longer-term strategy—deny, relativise, and suppress. In it, truth becomes a tactical issue, and the past becomes a tool in the political relationships of the present.

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Particularly in the Republika Srpska, a Serb-majority entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose political elite systematically doubts the rulings of international courts, celebrates convicted war criminals, and treats the genocide as a "historical construct."

In Republika Srpska, the political and educational system has denied for more than two decades that the crime in Srebrenica was genocide, despite the rulings of international courts. This entity, based in Banja Luka, functions as a parallel structure within Bosnia and Herzegovina and is largely under the control of Milorad Dodik, the long-time leader and current president of Republika Srpska.

Dodik publicly **denies** that genocide was committed in Srebrenica, describes the rulings as a political precedent, and rejects any form of responsibility. His rhetoric is not limited to denying the legal qualification but goes as far as openly questioning the foundations of international justice and claiming that the crime is being used as a means of collectively discrediting the Serbian people.

In Banja Luka, denial is not a deviation but part of the official politics of remembrance. From textbooks to the statements of top officials, Srebrenica is not recognised as genocide. In this policy, denial becomes a means of consolidating identity and internal cohesion. The silence of the European centres of power lends this policy tacit legitimacy.

## Appeals remain unanswered

The European Union, which on paper demands respect for human rights and legal standards, has been balancing between stability and truth for decades. In this balance, Srebrenica loses too often. Brussels has repeatedly avoided firmly sanctioning revisionist narratives, fearing that this could undermine the fragile political agreements in the region. Stability took precedence over truth, but in the long run, at the cost of losing moral authority.

In July 2021, the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Austrian diplomat Valentin Inzko, passed a **law** criminalising the denial of genocide and the glorification of war criminals.

The function of the High Representative was introduced by the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement as an international monitoring mechanism for the civilian part of peace implementation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The High Representative has the power to enact laws, overrule the decisions of domestic institutions, and replace elected officials if he believes that the constitution or the peace process is jeopardised. These powers are known as the so-called Bonn Powers.

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Inzko's **decision** sparked fierce opposition in Republika Srpska, including a boycott of state institutions, but it also symbolically marked an attempt to reconcile the legal framework with historical and legal truth.

In practice, this law continues to be insufficiently enforced. Courts and prosecutors in Bosnia and Herzegovina rarely prosecute cases of genocide denial, although there are more and more of them. Political pressure, institutional fragmentation, and the

lack of a systemic will make the law almost non-functional.

The current High Representative, German diplomat Christian Schmidt, has repeatedly warned publicly against non-compliance with the law and **called** for its consistent application. Unlike his predecessor, however, he has not introduced any new concrete measures that would ensure this. His appeals remain unanswered—both in Sarajevo and in Brussels.

## Srebrenica as a test of European values and international justice

The international context has made the attitude towards Srebrenica a crucial test for the consistency of European and Western values. Rhetorical support for justice and reconciliation does not mean much if, at the same time, governments are tolerated that deny judicially proven crimes.

If the political elites can openly ignore the rulings of two international tribunals without facing consequences, it raises questions about the international legal order.

In this space of legal and political vacuum, the influence of external actors—particularly Russia—is gaining strength. As early as 2015, Moscow **vetoed** a UN Security Council resolution that clearly labelled Srebrenica a genocide.

In 2024, the Russian diplomatic apparatus actively supported Serbia's campaign against the resolution in the General Assembly.

The support is not motivated by historical ties but by the intention to weaken the West's international position in the Balkans and undermine the idea of universal norms.



*If the EU truly views the Western Balkans as integral to its future, it must establish unambiguous boundaries. There can be no enlargement without justice. And there is no justice without recognising genocide – EU Western Balkans Summit*

In Serbia, the attitude towards Srebrenica is both a domestic and a foreign policy issue. In a country where the education system, the media, and state rhetoric have been based on denial for years, the political elite is using Srebrenica as an instrument for shaping national identity.

The formal condemnation of the crimes was never accompanied by complete acceptance of the court rulings. On the contrary, the prevailing narrative is "A crime was committed, but it was not genocide." This is not a difference of interpretation but a rejection of international law.

In such a context, Srebrenica is not just a crime of the past. It's also a threat today. Societies that refuse to recognise the truth about their past rarely succeed in building a stable future. Revisionism is not merely a rhetorical device; it indicates institutional weakness and social irresponsibility.

Today, Srebrenica is not just a wound in the Balkans. It is a mirror of European politics—or its absence. If the European Union truly views the Western Balkans as integral to its future, it must establish unambiguous boundaries. There can be no enlargement without justice. And there is no justice without recognising genocide.

The question is whether Brussels, Berlin, Paris, and Washington are prepared to end the

policy of evasion. Will the denial of truth continue to be tolerated for the sake of short-term interests? The answers so far are not encouraging. Europe remains undecided while the space of denial expands.

In the coming years, Srebrenica will not disappear from the political reality of the region. On the contrary, it will remain a fundamental test.

This test applies not only to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and the European Union, but also to the concept of an international order founded on justice. And even if there are repeated calls for reconciliation, the most important thing still applies: there can be no reconciliation without recognising the truth.

Thirty years later, Srebrenica remains an open file in today's Europe. Ignoring it does not erase the crime. It only postpones it to the future.