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Bosnia-Herzegovina 30 Years since Dayton

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Abstract

Thirty years since the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords, Bosnia-Herzegovina remains dysfunctional. Operating as a consensual confederation, the country has a hybrid system, plagued by widespread corruption, with high rates of poverty and unemployment and continued instances of post-traumatic stress disorder not only among those who lived through the three-and-a-half-year war that ended in late 1995 but also among their children. In addition, the Bosnian Serb leadership has repeatedly threatened to secede from the country and attach the region it controls to the Republic of Serbia, even though such a move would be in blatant violation of the Accords reached in Dayton.

The Dayton Peace Accords, agreed on 21 November 1995 and signed in a formal ceremony in Paris on 14 December, were intended to do two things: to end the conflict on the ground between the Army of the Republic of Srpska, commanded by Ratko Mladić, and the coalition of Croatian and Bosnian armies – a conflict in which about 110,000 persons lost their lives – and, as a by-product, to secure peace ahead of the 1996 U.S. Presidential election so that Bill Clinton could secure a second term in the White House. In terms of these two goals, the Accords can be considered successful.



In addition, following the signing of the Accords, some individuals were able to return to their homes or sell them, and most of the 161 persons indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) were brought to trial or died before it was possible to do so. Of this number, 19 were ultimately acquitted. Among those held principally (though not solely) responsible for the carnage in the years 1992-95, Slobodan Milošević, President of Serbia between 1989 and 1997, died in prison in 2006, while Radovan Karadžić, President of the Republic of Srpska during the Bosnia War, and Ratko Mladić remain in prison, serving life terms.

It was once claimed that the Dayton Peace Accords would promote justice and serve as a deterrent to future would-be aggressors. The pervasiveness of corruption, with Bosnia-Herzegovina (hereafter, Bosnia) ranking 114th among 180 countries assessed by *Transparency International* this year (where 1st is

best), shows how far Bosnia-Herzegovina is from achieving a system deemed just by its citizens. At the same time, Putin's seizure of parts of Georgia in 2008 and of Crimea in 2014, and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, put the lie to the notion that the conviction and imprisonment of war criminals in one region can serve as a deterrent elsewhere, if it even exerts any deterrent effect against future transgressions within the region itself.

Bosnia, with its Serb-run *Republika Srpska* (RS) and its Bosniak-Croat-run Federation, has been described as a consociational state. This is mistaken, since at the heart of consociation is a readiness to *cooperate*, a pledge to work based on a fundamental *agreement*. By contrast, there has been endless disagreement in Bosnia, mainly revolving around challenges by the RS's Milorad Dodik to the authority of the High Representative (appointed by the international Peace Implementation Council) and marked also by repeated threats by Dodik to pull the *Republika Srpska* out of Bosnia and attach it to the Republic of Serbia. This would violate the stipulations in the Dayton Peace Accords.

In February 2025, Dodik was sentenced to a year in prison for defying specific rulings by the High Representative, though this was later commuted to an 18,000-euro fine. However, the sentence came with a six-year ban on his holding public office, and Dodik was forced out as President of the RS in August. Whether Dodik is out of the political picture, however, is a matter of debate. Be that as it may, Dodik has worked directly against any notion of building a liberal democracy in Bosnia, among other things by rejecting the ICTY's characterization of the massacre at

Srebrenica in July 1995 as tantamount to genocide, by obsessing about the Second World War (especially to demonize Croats by ignoring the numbers of Croats who joined the anti-Axis Partisans), by demonizing gays and lesbians, and by urging Serbs to quit the federal police force and courts while constantly talking of pulling the RS out of Bosnia.

A public opinion poll conducted in the RS in 2018 found that 38% of respondents considered unemployment the entity's biggest problem, with 6% highlighting corruption, and 4% stressing the low standard of living. In addition, 7% of respondents expressed concern about the brain drain sapping the country of its professionals. When asked if the younger generation might anticipate a better future, 91% of respondents answered negatively. A survey conducted in the Federation in 2025 yielded similar results, with 83% of respondents stating that the country was heading in the wrong direction. Among respondents in the survey conducted in the Federation, 28% underlined the importance they attached to improving the economic situation, with 60% calling for a change in political leaders and parties.

Most statistics do not offer breakdowns by entity. What is confirmed is that the poverty rate in rural areas is roughly twice as high as in urban areas. About 80% of pensioners live below the poverty line, while between 60 and 80% of the unemployed are living in poverty. Moreover, although overall inflation declined from 7% in 2023 to 2% last year, food prices across Bosnia rose between 100% and 400%, depending on the food item, during the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to an average global

increase of approximately 20%.

On the bright side, there has been progress in increasing literacy. Whereas, in 1991, 14% of people aged 15 years or older were classified as illiterate, by the early 2000s, illiteracy had fallen to 5%. On the other hand, Bosnian women fare poorly when compared with those in countries elsewhere in the region. Among 12 post-communist countries in the region, women in the RS report spending 53 hours on housework per week, significantly ahead of second-place Albania, which reports 32.6 hours. Women in Bosnia earn 14.8% less than men on average, which is a considerably larger wage gap than in Romania (2.4%), Slovenia (3.1%), Poland (4.5%), or three other countries in the region. Bosnian women accounted for only 26.20% of the deputies in the lower house of the parliament (as of 2021), below Serbia, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Croatia, Albania, Poland, and Slovenia and, until 2022, unlike seven other countries in the region, Bosnia had not had a woman serving as President or Vice President or member of the State Presidency. Same-sex relationships are not criminalized in Bosnia, but recognition of same-sex partnerships is not available, unlike the situation in Slovenia, Croatia, and the Czech Republic.

The biggest challenges Bosnia as a whole faces today are: *corruption*, which feeds into poverty and discourages foreign investment; the

confederal system, in which the Federation's leaders aspire to join the European Union and NATO, while Dodik and like-minded Bosnian Serbs have dreamt instead of abandoning union with the Bosniak-Croat Federation and adhering to Serbia; and *unemployment*, which remains high. *Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)* also plagues the population. In February 2010, *Balkan Insight* reported that more than 1,750,000 citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina (out of an estimated total population of 3.8 million at that time) continued to be afflicted by symptoms of PTSD, noting that the roughly 350,000 residents of Sarajevo in the early 1990s were under siege for three and a half years.

A follow-up report by *Balkan Insight* in October 2023 reported that not only were those who lived through the war affected by PTSD, but their children, born after the war had concluded, suffer from transgenerational trauma, displaying the classic symptoms associated with trauma, with children born as a result of the rape of their mothers often having challenging experiences. The politicization of the media, as reflected in the overall low ranking for press freedom, only compounds these problems. Unfortunately, these problems are unlikely to be resolved simply by electing new people to leadership positions, as the issues are ingrained in the country's structure and in people's memories of the war.

Bosnia-Herzegovina in a nutshell

Democracy ranking:	88 th out of 167 countries ranked (2024)
Corruption:	114 th out of 180 countries ranked (2025)
Freedom of the media:	68 th out of 179 countries ranked (2025)
Poverty rate:	17.5% (2025)
Unemployment:	13.1% (2025)

Sources: *The Economist*, *Transparency International*, *Reporters without Borders*, *Trading Economics*, and *Actualitica*

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