



An Uncertain Future

Werner Sonne

Author and Journalist

The challenges facing Bosnia and Herzegovina

It is also a tourist attraction, but above all a reminder that violent nationalism has a long and bloody tradition in this region: just opposite the Latin bridge, on June 28, 1914, the Austro-Hungarian Crown Prince Franz Ferdinand was shot dead in Sarajevo by the Serbian assassin Gavrilo Princip. Only a few days later, this led to the outbreak of the First World War. Today, on this site, tourists can have their picture taken in a replica of the car which carried the Crown Prince, and large photos from that time – and a memorial plaque bear witness to the crime.

This seems to be distant history, but only on the surface. The ethnic tensions never stopped. Between 1992 and 1995, Sarajevo was the scene of a 1,425-day siege by troops of the Bosnian Serb army, in which 10,615 people died - including 1,601 children - and more than 50,000 were injured. And in Srebrenica in July 1995, troops of the Serb Republic of Srpska murdered 8,000 Bosniak men between the ages of 13 and 78 – a crime that the international community classifies as genocide.

Unprocessed history and persistent tensions

Across the still divided ethnic camps in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH), there is nevertheless agreement on at least one point: the crimes of this bloody time have not been dealt with. Even Defense Minister Zukan Helez freely admits that BiH is constantly at war mentally. A high-ranking officer of the EUFOR Althea military mission, which is trying to keep the situation stable with 1200 soldiers, including 50 from the Bundeswehr, puts it in a nutshell: "The reconciliation process has never begun, the opposite is the case". And a university rector also confirms: The students are living in an atmosphere of fear.

This results in what is probably the biggest long-term problem for this country in the Western Balkans: the mass exodus of its young, qualified people. Up to 145,000 people a year - from a population of only around 2.5 million - vote with their feet on what they think of the future in their country: obviously nothing. As soon as they have completed their training, they are leaving, many of them go to Germany. This is not difficult for the ethnic Croatian population, most of whom also have a Croatian passport, which makes them EU citizens and allows them to settle anywhere in the European Union.

The role of the High Representative

A new government is trying to buck this trend. It has also managed to pass a budget. An institution that is unique in the world also plays an important role in this: The international community's Dayton Peace Agreement created the Office of the High Representative, which has unique powers. It can legislate or dismiss politicians, so it can intervene in the political process in order to keep the country stable on the basis of the peace agreement.

Currently, the person entrusted with this complex task is former German Federal Minister Christian Schmidt, a man whose decisions contributed to the fact that the elections on 2 October 2022 took place at all and that ultimately made a government in the Federation of BiH possible.



Corruption and external influences

Many in BiH now have high hopes that, with his far-reaching skills, he can solve their many challenges. But the problems are so diverse that there seems to be little room for optimism. The need to take into account the different ethnic groups of Serbs, Bosniaks, and Croats leads to pervasive, bloated, uneconomic organizational units, often based on the ethno-nationalist parties, nepotism and the permanent cancer of corruption, including mafia-like structures. The economy is stagnating, the willingness of Western investors is low. This creates space for a big player from the Far East. China has also discovered Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Balkans and is involved as an investor, from highway projects to energy supplies.

But a power other than the West's Asian adversary has long since established itself firmly in this Balkan state. Russia is doing everything it can to destroy the fragile balance and promote the unmistakable secessionist tendencies. With Milorad Dodik, a former member of the presidency of Bosnia-Herzegovina as a representative of the Republic of Srpska, Russia has a close ally whose barely concealed goal is secession and possible integration into a Greater Serbia. In doing so, he is following the Russian narrative. Just as Vladimir Putin is striving for a "Russkiy Mir" for a Greater Russia including Ukraine, there should also be a "Sprski vet" for a Greater Serbia. If this succeeds, then there could be a new Transnistria, also involving a direct Russian military presence in a country that is striving towards the West.

The quest for EU and NATO membership

Despite all their deep, ethnic differences, there is broad support for Euro-Atlantic integration. Three-quarters, according to estimates by the government in Sarajevo, are in favour of joining the European Union. Last year, the EU also set an example for BiH and granted the country candidate status. But here, too, despite the approval of the population, there are brakes in the political camp. Many in politics have settled comfortably in the status quo and fear the far-reaching reforms demanded by the EU, not least in the fight against corruption.

As with other candidate countries, no-one doubts that this is one of the reasons why actual accession to the European Community is certainly not imminent any time soon. And the same applies to NATO. For years, the Alliance has seen the need to counter Russia's advance in the Balkans with a stop sign, and NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg has said that the Alliance cannot afford a security vacuum in BiH. In the Butmir camp on the outskirts of Sarajevo, NATO has therefore set up a headquarters together with the EUFOR force. From there, the military alliance organises aid for the Balkan state's small army, which is currently being set up, and also conducts numerous joint exercises.

Military and Security

The government is trying to fill the leadership of the armed forces in such a way that the ethnic rifts should not play a role. Defense Minister Helez says the army is the best-integrated part in the country, "better than politics." But it remains to be seen how far this will go if tensions increase. Although the salaries for the soldiers have been raised by 20 percent, the troops, which on paper are around 10,000 strong, remain dramatically underfunded and understaffed.

80 to 90 percent of the defense budget is spent on personnel costs alone. Bosnia and Herzegovina was included in NATO's Membership Action Plan (MAP) back in 2010. There is also an invitation as a guest for the NATO summit in Vilnius. But it is not really possible to predict when membership will actually take place in view of the internal resistance fuelled by Russia, especially from the Serbian camp.



An uncertain outlook

A NATO study concludes that the war in Ukraine underscores the need to prevent the Western Balkans from becoming Moscow's new field for profound disruption in Europe. But beyond these geopolitical goals, observers in Sarajevo continue to see internal conflicts as the main threat. And skepticism prevails.

"I really don't see a future for this country," is the deeply pessimistic assessment of a high-ranking Western diplomat, especially in view of the dramatic exodus of the predominantly young people. A senior EU military official sums it up this way: "The situation is fragile but stable. No one knows where the country will be in ten years."