



Preventing atrocity risks in Bosnia-Herzegovina – briefing note ahead of backbench debate on Thursday 2nd December

Approaching 30 years since the war in Bosnia began – one which claimed the lives of 200,000 people and displaced millions more – the risk of conflict and atrocity crimes is acute. Back then, Britain’s mischaracterisation of the atrocities as an inevitable by-product of the war, resulting from long-standing animosities, fed into the obstructionist role that the UK went on to play at the UN in response. With insufficient resources deployed to protect the UN’s so-called ‘safe zones’ throughout Bosnia, thousands were left to face genocide and crimes against humanity.

When the Dayton peace accords were signed in 1995, bringing the war to an end, it was hoped that stability would follow. Over the last two decades, however, [tensions have grown](#), and [secessionist rhetoric](#) has become ever more pronounced. Moreover, in violation of the terms of the Dayton agreement, leader of the Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, [announced](#) in October this year his intention to withdraw from key state institutions; seemingly in response to the steps taken by the EU’s High Representative, Valentin Inzko, to [outlaw](#) genocide denial and the glorification of war criminals.

Since the charge of genocide against General Ratko Mladic was upheld earlier this year, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, and UN Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide, Alice Wairimu Nderitu, [issued](#) a joint statement raising concerns over the glorification of convicted war criminals, and urged against ‘revisionist narratives, divisive rhetoric and incitement to hatred’.

Before this, however, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe was already [reporting](#) growing hate crime directed at ethnic and religious minorities, and the UK Foreign Affairs Select Committee [noted](#) in 2018 that high-level corruption, associations with far-right extremist groups, and neighbouring instability could threaten the fragile peace in Bosnia. Russian interference and support for an independent Republika Srpska only amplifies this risk further.

Drawing on the UN’s [Framework for Analysis of Atrocity Crimes](#), an assessment by the author finds evidence for at least 21 risk indicators of a possible 80, which, in turn, point to seven of eight risk factors common to genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing. It is worth noting, however, that the absence of mitigating factors, including inaction from the international community, could constitute the final eighth common risk factor. Furthermore, should these risks not be addressed urgently, as history has shown time and again, impunity for more minor offences will only embolden would-be perpetrators to commit far worse.

In recognition of these risks, calls from British diplomats and Members of Parliament (MP) have been encouraging; including warnings from [Baroness Helic](#) and [Anthony Mangall MP](#), and the UK’s Political Coordinator on Bosnia-Herzegovina at the UN Security Council, [Sonia Farrey](#), that the situation could deteriorate rapidly. Appeals to prevent atrocity crimes have also been made by Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Bosnia, Alicia Kearns MP, who has [urged](#) the Government to make use of its new Conflict Centre; the Chair of the International Development Select Committee, Sarah Champion MP, [asked](#) during the Commons debate in November whether the Minister would embed atrocity prevention across all British embassies – a point which he said would he would ‘pay close attention to’; and the Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Prevention of Genocide, Fleur

Anderson MP, who convened an urgent cross-party roundtable alongside international experts, to develop concrete policy asks.

To avoid repeating the failures of the 1990s, this rhetoric must be met with concrete action.

Below are some of the key points and possible actions emphasised at the emergency roundtable of UK parliamentarians, convened last week by Fleur Anderson MP (Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Groups for Prevention of Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity) and Alicia Kearns MP (chair the All-Party Parliamentary Groups for Bosnia Herzegovina). The meeting heard from recognised international experts including Dr Eric Gordy, Dr Jasmin Mujanovic, Dr Nema Tromp, Sir Geoffrey Nice, and Emir Suljagic.

1. The Situation is critical and failure to act now could be catastrophic

Experts on the region unanimously agree with EU High Representative Christian Schmidt's [assessment](#) that this crisis is *"the greatest existential threat of the post-war period"* for Bosnia and Herzegovina. [Emir Suljagic](#), a Bosnian survivor and Director of the Srebrenica Memorial told the meeting: *"The prospect of a Bosnian Serb army barracks outside of Sarajevo is not only untenable, it's an existential threat... This is the time to act. The time to act is not going to be in six months, because in six months, if My Dodic is allowed to run amok, we will be at war. Mark my words, if this gentleman is allowed to continue doing this, without consequences, this country will be at war six months from now... If we allow for this capacity, that's been responsible for genocide to be restored for the second time in our lifetime, how can we look ourselves in the mirror? And if the international community wants to prevent that, then now is the time act"*

2. A return to war in Bosnia and Herzegovina will destabilize the region and threaten UK national security

Dr [Nevenka Tromp](#), who spent 10 years as a researcher at the Hague said: *"If the political will to keep Bosnia and Herzegovina together is not there, it will be dragged into all sorts of instabilities and it all will reflect negatively on security and stability of Europe for many decades to come"*.

Several experts have commented on the conflict being tied up in power struggles between Russia and the West. Dr Jasmin Mujanovic accused Russia, specifically, of using the confusion for its hybrid wars in the Western Balkans, which are not to benefit Serbia but to destabilize Europe and undermine Nato.

While some have suggested that taking strong action risks pushing Dodic closer to Russia, Mujanovic argued: *"Dodik can't go very much further into Putin's orbit short of taking out Russian citizenship, which he actually might already have, because he's prepared contingencies for actually fleeing the country"*. He cautioned that Belgrade trying to balance east and west, while in fact being *"completely in league with the East"* is *"untenable"*, and warned *"it is, again, a security question for the UK and the Nato alliance"*.

Dr Tromp added: *"Politics is about power. Dodik does nothing else than use his power position – all his announcements are based on his idea of his political strength in relation to others. To emphasize political strength he needs to be seen as someone who has support of Serbia, and even more importantly Russia. His visit to Moscow of this week is nothing other than his demonstration of his political power."*

3. The UK has a significant and important role to play and must demonstrate its political will.

Dr Eric Gordy highlighted the importance of international pressure now, at an early stage, to demonstrate clear red lines and strong commitment to protecting the integrity of Bosnia Herzegovina: *"If we look at every instance of large scale violence against civilians, genocide, and ethnic cleansing,*

and so on, every large act of violence has been preceded by smaller acts of violence, and the smaller acts of violence are a test to see whether there will be a response. If there is not a response, then the larger act of violence follows. So, it matters what we do before it looks like the situation is extremely dangerous... It makes a difference what the UK does. And it especially makes a difference, because some activity on the part of the European Union is going to be blocked, it's going to be blocked by allies from Hungary and from Slovenia."

Mujanovic also highlighted the need, in a post-Brexit world for the, *"United Kingdom striking out a principled position, where itself is saying that it is willing to defend and speak out on behalf of Bosnia Herzegovina sovereignty, its territorial integrity, but also its democratic reforms, the rationalization of its constitutional frameworks. That makes a difference, much like it's making a difference right now that the Netherlands are taking the lead within the EU on sanctions policy."*

Tromp added: *"The UK has a lot of space to do something. And I think it is one of the states that has a huge authority among the Bosnian and Serbian public as well, not just politicians.*

Gordy agreed: *"The UK doesn't have much of an economic presence in the region, and in the military sense, there's a little that the UK can do, but not much out of the framework of NATO, but where the UK is really strong, is that it has a good reputation. That is to say, people in the region may or may not like this country politically, but they like the culture, they view it positively. They think that we are decent, well-educated and reasonable people. And this creates an opening for us to make contact all across the institutions that are most trusted everything from religion and culture to education, and, and try to try to build a presence there and attempt to develop and to elevate the dialogue that goes on."*

4. The UK must support territorial integrity of Bosnia-Herzegovina

This history of the region is complex and gives rise to competing claims and historical grievances. While it may be tempting to seek solutions by attempting to redraw borders, all our experts argued that this would create more problems than it solves. A consensus on new borders could never be agreed between competing sides and the attempt risks further inflaming conflict. This is why Republika Srpska moved unilaterally, however, Tromp predicts, *"this scenario inevitably will lead to some sort of violence and possible even full-fledged war."* Thus she argues, *"the territorial integrity of Bosnia is not up to the negotiation, it has got to be one territory, and it cannot, it cannot be talk of, of the separation. And that's a message needs to be very clear in Belgrade."*

5. EU and Nato membership are stabilising factors and accession should be fast-tracked.

Maintaining current borders is viewed as the least worst option for preventing violent conflict, however, Tromp warns this will place the Western Balkans in a situation of permanent instability similar to the Middle-East. So, to keep borders as they are, she argues: *"political forces in Europe and America should be concentrated on achieving a speedy membership of all these countries, to NATO, and European Union.... The stabilization of the region by integration into the European economic, security and political processes should be political objective of the West."*

6. The UK must have an atrocity prevention strategy

The importance of having a strategy for the short, medium and long-term was raised by experts in the atrocity prevention sector. This should include:

- an analysis by local FCDO teams on levers of UK influence
- identifying entry points around sanctions

- monitoring and analysing risk factors, including public discourse
- a specific country strategy

The UK currently does not map indicators of conflict and could learn from what other embassy teams are doing.

7. A strategy needs resourcing

The government's Strategic Defence Review rightly created a dedicated atrocity prevention unit to work across government departments, and committed to having a UK strategy, but strategies need resourcing and this comes at a time when government is cutting funding for overseas assistance.

The government must commit funds to preventing violent conflict in the western Balkans, preferably without cutting aid elsewhere. Local embassy teams will need funding for monitoring and analysis, and to support civil society actors working for peace.

8. UK should support Human Rights Defenders / Moderates within civil society

Dodik does not have the kind of massive support among Serbs in Bosnia that he likes to appear as though he has. This is shown in several ways: he has a significant opposition, including his old party, the SDS, which is in favour of compromised solutions that recognizes the importance of maintaining peace; and when he tried to put through legal changes in the Republic of Srpska parliament, last week, he failed to do it. So, there is an opportunity to support moderate voices on all sides, including from civil society, while they still exist.

It is important to remember that genocide and crimes against humanity are usually well planned and organised, and are preceded by a polarization of views, caused by manipulation of public fears and grievances, and sometimes even deliberate and targeted attacks on moderates political and civil society leaders. It is hard to overstate the importance of civil society winning over hearts and minds in these situations. There are abundant examples of this occurring in conflict settings, through investment in social cohesion and peace education work. Dr Sam Rushworth gave the example of the Aegis Trust's work in South Sudan and Central African Republic, where community-based prevention work has led to young people handing in their weapons and working together across identity groups to promote peace.

The UK government, through FCDO country teams should actively support of civil society in-country (for example, through the [Post-Conflict Research Centre](#) in Sarajevo).

9. Targeted sanctions should be implemented without delay

All the experts called for sanctions. Emir Suljagic has stated that targeted sanctions at this stage could be enough to cripple Dodik's efforts.

The counter-arguments to sanctions are that (a) they hurt 'the people' more than they do the 'leaders' and can exacerbate poverty, which is known to be a driver of identity-based prejudice, discrimination and conflict; and (b) that they are unlikely to act as a deterrent, since Dodik has already boasted that he will be able to count on China's and Russia's support if sanctions are introduced.

However, it is in sending such a message that effective implementation of targeted sanctions (through both the Government's [human rights](#) and [anti-corruption](#) streams in coordination with like-minded states), can have impact; because, in addition to disrupting Dodik's ability to move capita it demonstrates political will and communicates that the west will not look away.

Speaking to the challenge of ensuring sanctions do not hurt the poorest most, Mujanovic suggested, *“one of the key things to look at is the Swiss banking network. We don't even necessarily need to go with a robust sanctions regime. And I'm completely in agreement that obviously the general populace cannot be targeted. It's imperative that that not take place. But individual bank accounts of the leading figures and some of the coalition parties around them, those individual bank accounts can be taken effectively offline. It won't fix everything. But it will very, very seriously undermine their ability to move capital. They all have a limited amount of reserve monies available to them as it is right now. So, if we take their accounts and block them, that will be a huge, huge barrier.”*

However, while supportive of sanctions Gordy argued: *“we shouldn't have the illusion that sanctions are going to give some kind of immediately visible result. If they have any result at all, then this will be a result that is achieved over a long time. And, and the sort of response that will really be effective is a response on the level of security, heightening states of readiness, increasing numbers of troops on the ground, the sort of thing that gives vision that anything that's tried is going to be answered.”*

10. The UK should work to strengthen the international military presence

There is a strong consensus that the politics of power, rather than policy, will determine what happens in the coming months, and that the UK must demonstrate a military commitment to protecting Bosnia Herzegovina.

Suljagic called for a symbolic military presence: *“Right now, we have 700 international troops in Bosnia Herzegovina. A NATO member, battalion sized unit deployed in Bosnia would serve as a deterrent”*

Tromp asked: *“which outside parties have power in relation to Bosnia Herzegovina, how is this power used, and for what purpose? This is what the UK government has to decide and not allow the EU or Office for High Representative to hide behind the policies and governance, constitutional changes and election laws. The reforms will not keep the outside border of Bosnia Herzegovina intact. A clear political message and declaration to defend them by international actors will! Which current power holders in EU, US and UK, Germany etc will have courage to protect them?”*

A letter to the Prime Minister, signed by several of the UK's most respected atrocity prevention NGOs has stated:

“As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, a key player in NATO and a state which aspires to be a force for good in the world, HMG is well placed to lead by example. We welcome UK's [intervention](#) supporting the Office of the High Representative and EUFOR during the Security Council Briefing on Bosnia Herzegovina. At the NATO Meeting of Defence Ministers meeting in Brussels, the UK should continue voicing its commitment of supporting the stability, democracy and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina by raising the worrying developments of the Republika Srpska leadership.

The UK should also call on the EU to strengthen the EUFOR stabilisation force and to ensure the military presence is substantial enough to deter further political escalation that could spiral into violence, and increase its presence at the NATO Headquarters in Sarajevo. The UK could also consider holding joint bilateral military exercises with the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a demonstration of their strong partnership. The Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina have successfully served with NATO allies, including the UK, in Afghanistan and Iraq.”

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ⁱ UK-based non-governmental organisation REDRESS has [published](#) a template for those seeking to submit their sanctions recommendations to the Government.