



**Inflammatory political rhetoric and hate speech
in Bosnia and Herzegovina:
political elites and the media**

**AI-DPC BiH Security Risk Analysis
Policy Note # 01**

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Berlin - Sarajevo

September 2015

A report from
Atlantic Initiative
&
Democratization Policy Council

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Berlin - Sarajevo

September 2015

This paper was supported by:

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PREFACE

This DPC-Atlantic Initiative Policy Note is part of a series of occasional thematic papers which collectively compose the second edition of DPC and the AI's Security Risk Analysis Study. The first edition, published in October 2011, assessed a full spectrum of risk factors: the functionality of government institutions at all levels, political use of conflict rhetoric in the media, police, army, privately-held weapons, private security companies, religious and ethnic radicalism, socio-economic strain, juvenile delinquency and sports violence, and the posture of the international community in BiH.

This second edition assesses these same factors from the vantage point of the present day, including new information previously unavailable to the authors. These papers are not mere updates of the first edition; each Policy Note is a stand-alone assessment of the theme in question. However, where information from the 2011 edition remains relevant, it is included.

This Policy Note Series was produced with the generous support of the Geneva Center for Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation (FES) office in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Open Society Fund Bosnia and Herzegovina (OSF BiH). This paper was supported by FES BiH.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Since the international retreat to an “ownership” and EU enlargement-based policy toward Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) a decade ago, political rhetoric in the public space, propagated through the media, has become more polarizing and inflammatory. The pronounced nationalist themes articulated by politicians and their adjuncts, revolving around the future of the state and alleged threats posed to ethnic collectives by adversaries both domestic and foreign (and their supposed local allies), have radicalized the public discourse and contributed to an ambient of fear and homogenization. The topic of “war” has returned to popular discussion.

This phenomenon has been observable in media coverage of the 2012 municipal elections, 2014 general elections, issues and events relating to Srebrenica, acts of Islamist terrorism, and popular protests of February 2014. In each instance, political leaders, dubious “experts,” and commentators have all fed a dynamic which could have dire consequences in BiH’s current rules-free environment – effectively generating volatility which could ignite by design or by accident. And while all those with unfulfilled agendas are pursuing them without restraint to form perceptions and opinions in the media arena, the most consistent and radical messaging is emanating from the Republika Srpska Government, and President Milorad Dodik in particular. While BiH politicians define the agenda, the politically captured media provides the means to inflame, intimidate, provoke anger, and stoke fear. This information dominance is a vital element of the BiH political elites’ life support system.

DPC recommends the following to reduce the impact of inflammatory political rhetoric and hate speech in BiH:

- The media must maintain critical distance when reporting inflammatory political statements by representatives of the political elites and government officials, especially in highlighting them (for example in headlines).
- The media must separate reporting from commentary, drastically reduce their reliance on anonymous sources, and abstain from campaign journalism.
- Assess the options for strengthening the oversight role of the Press Council of BiH and the Communications Regulatory Agency (RAK) in fighting inflammatory rhetoric and hate speech.
- Continue to support alternative media outlets and voices to enable them to broaden their scope, reach, and access.
- Reassess the mandate and composition of the Central Election Commission of BiH (CEC) with a view to improving its capability to curb inflammatory rhetoric and hate speech during election campaigns.

Introduction

Political rhetoric has become increasingly heated and divisive in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) over the last decade or so, reflecting a deepening political crisis that began in 2006 and has since turned into a permanent, structural one. The language used by political players, and the messages it conveys, amplified and echoed by the media in reporting and commentary, has strong nationalist overtones and contributes to the radicalization of public discourse. The dominant theme is the very future of the state, raised by those questioning its durability – and even its desirability. The word “war” has explicitly re-entered public discussions on current political developments. Some of that language can be described as hate speech.

There exists no universally accepted definition of hate speech. It is often understood in a narrow sense as public advocacy of violence. In the context of inflammatory political rhetoric as exists in Bosnia and Herzegovina, however, it seems more adequate to approach hate speech from a broader perspective, to understand it as “any form of expression regarded as offensive to racial, ethnic and religious groups and other discrete minorities, and to women.”¹ The current paper documents the development of hate speech and inflammatory public speech in Bosnia and Herzegovina from October 2011² to June 2015 and tries to assess its influence on public security. It analyzes both the performance of political representatives in their public appearances and of the media in their role as opinion-makers.

The main source for this paper is the Media Center Archive, a Sarajevo-based online media database that includes four of the most influential daily papers,³ along with most of the relevant weekly and bi-weekly magazines. Internet media outlets and portals were also reviewed to compensate for other relevant dailies not included in the Media Center database.⁴ In addition, a number of press-clipping services working for international organizations have been utilized, mainly to cover important public statements by politicians given to electronic/broadcast media, that either have not or have only partly been reported in the printed press, and as an additional research filter.

The research covers the period 2011-2015. It focuses on a number of key political events from the last five years – both crucial episodes in the ongoing structural crises of the country and moments when inflammatory rhetoric and hate speech peaked. Some of these events were accompanied by political violence. These selected case studies are: The 2012 local elections; the 2014 general election; two cases of (alleged) Islamist terrorism – the October 2011 attack on the US embassy in Sarajevo and the April 2015 attack on a police station in Zvornik; and violent social unrest in February 2014. In relation to those events, databases and other sources were searched for terms identified in our 2011 security study – “state destruction,” “dissolution,” “division” (*raspad države, rušenje*, etc.), “secession,” “war”, and “violent conflict.”

¹ Elvira Kaminskaya, “Hate speech: Theory and issues,” 2008, available at: http://iseees.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/u4/iseees/caseproject_/KaminskayaFR.pdf.

² The previous hate speech chapter of the 2011 BiH security study, to which this policy note is a follow up, covered the period from 2009 till September 2011.

³ *Oslobođenje*, *Dnevni avaz* (both Sarajevo), *Nezavisne novine* (Banja Luka) and *Dnevni list* (Mostar).

⁴ Primarily: *Večernji list (BH izdanje)* and *Glas Srpske*.

The texts identified were assessed using qualitative content analysis.⁵ Patterns of hate speech and of inflammatory political rhetoric were analyzed by the author based on his background knowledge of ethnic nationalist ideologies, hate speech and war propaganda during the Balkan wars in the 1990s. The research focused on the qualitative analysis of main topics in political discourse, its main actors, and its relevance in shaping the contemporary public discourse in BiH.

Analysis of case studies

1. 2012 local elections

Local elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina took place in October 2012, halfway through the 2010-2014 term in office of state, entity and cantonal governments. During that period, a fierce battle over government formation and recomposition at the state and Federation of BiH levels broke out and turned quasi-permanent, creating an ongoing institutional crisis. This battle pitted the two largest ethnic Croat parties, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and the HDZ 1990, against Sarajevo-based and ethnic Bosniak parties; but it was also carried out among the Sarajevo-based parties. One of the root causes of this permanent crisis was the dilemma of how to accommodate a state-level coalition partner from the Republika Srpska (RS) which was (and is) seeking to undermine the State of BiH. At the same time, the RS ruling party, the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), and its main representatives in Banja Luka and Sarajevo such as RS President Milorad Dodik, were less central to public political battles than they previously had been.

In this atmosphere, national themes dominated local concerns throughout the election campaign, and included traditional topics – notably the legitimacy of the state, and alleged ethnic discrimination.

In the Republika Srpska, President Dodik set the nationalistic tone in daily appearances at SNSD election campaign rallies and through a couple of long interviews given to local and regional media. In those public appearances, Dodik covered well-known nationalist themes, using the inflammatory rhetoric that had accompanied his and his party's rise to power in the RS in and after 2006. Capitalizing on the recent shift of political conflict to the Federation, he said:

“the problem is primarily with the Bosniaks who continue to, especially in the Federation, outvote/dominate [*majoriziraju*]⁶ the Croats, and later, on the state level, Serbs together with Croats in their effort to create a kind of centralized state. They are doing all this out of an illusionary expectation that they will gain international support for some kind of *Blitzkrieg* related to constitutional reform.”⁷

Making use of the collective victim myth that paved the way for the violent ethnicization of the 1990s, he went on to accuse Bosniaks of misusing their role as victims of the Bosnian war:

⁵ Ute Nawratil/Philomena Schönhausen, “Die qualitative Inhaltsanalyse,” in: Hans Wagner, *Qualitative Methoden in der Kommunikationswissenschaft*, Munich 2008, pp.223.

⁶ The term *majorizirati* refers to the notion that for an ethnic group to remain a minority within a state means becoming oppressed by the majority. This ethnic nationalist, anti-democratic notion lay at the core of the ideology that legitimized the violent ethnic breakup of Socialist Yugoslavia, including the Bosnian war.

⁷ “Amerikanci bi nabolje učinili kad bi prihvatili tri republike u BiH,” *Večernji list* (BH edition), September 17, 2012, cited according to: <http://www.predsjednikrs.net/sr/milorad-dodik-intervju-vecernji-list-17-09-2012/>.

“With their frustrations, the Bosniaks have succeeded to hold Serbs and Croats hostage... Bosniak policy is obsessed with their position as a victim and they think that with their relative population majority they can sort out things in Bosnia and Herzegovina... they pathologically hate if something is getting done in Banja Luka... A political pattern of thought has been created that Bosniaks would be better off if there were no Croats or Serbs... Sarajevo today is an ethnically cleansed, Muslim town.”⁸

This, according to Dodik, confirmed the “impossibility of the existence of Bosnia and Herzegovina... [the country] is in the medium and long term moving towards ever greater disintegration,” which is why it would be best to divide up the country into three ethnic mini-states. Dodik insisted that “it is a fact the Federation doesn’t function at all, nor does BiH,” while in his view “Republika Srpska is the only sustainable community in BiH, in an economic, political, and every other sense.”⁹ When asked about Bosnia and Herzegovina as “his” country, he dismissed the question, commenting:

“I don’t live in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I live in the Republika Srpska and identify myself with some wider contexts. And Bosnia and Herzegovina provokes no other feeling in me than disgust.”¹⁰

Just as in previous election campaigns, Dodik used a campaign rally in Srebrenica to reject the (legally established) wartime history of this particular Eastern Bosnian town:

“All the time there were attempts to turn Srebrenica into a bad place for Serbs by claiming that genocide had been committed here. I claim that genocide has not been committed! There was no genocide! There existed a plan by which certain foreigners and Bosniak politicians wanted to inflict guilt and responsibility on us for something we didn’t do.”¹¹

Srebrenica turned into a focal point of ethnic campaign rhetoric after the launch of a citizens’ initiative, “I will vote for Srebrenica.” The initiative made use of certain provisions of the residence law and campaigned for Bosniaks to register their residence in the Eastern Bosnian town with the aim to prevent a Serb mayor and a Serb majority in the municipal council, or as the initiative put it – to prevent an election victory of the “genocide deniers.” The initiative led to a battle between Bosniaks and Serbs over residence registration. At some point during the campaign, the RS police annulled the residence permits of a number of Bosniak citizens, a move that resulted in the citizens’ initiative complaining about alleged police harassment of Bosniaks.¹² This gave rise to inflammatory rhetoric by political actors that was echoed by the media - especially but not exclusively by media from the RS. On the Bosniak side, the mayoral candidate supported by the citizens’ initiative, Čamil Duraković, told *Dnevni avaz* in a long interview: “Proponents of the policy that killed these people want to convince us that it was necessary to kill them, while others claim that those who were killed in fact never existed. Should such politicians and such a policy prevail in Srebrenica... this would be the final act of genocide.” Commenting on Dodik’s genocide denial, he said: “We’ve heard such statements over and over again, according to the Goebbels

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., “Dodik: Uveren sam da će RS biti nezavisna zemlja,” *Press RS*, October 4, 2012, available at: <http://www.pressonline.rs/info/politika/245612/dodik-uveren-sam-da-ce-rs-biti-nezavisna-zemlja.html>.

¹⁰ “Amerikanci bi nabolje učinili kad bi prihvatili tri republike u BiH.”

¹¹ Quoted according to: “Izjave Milorada Dodika o Srebrenici: Od genocida do najvećeg udarca srpstvu,” www.6yka.com, June 17, 2015, available at: <http://www.6yka.com/novost/77818/izjave-milorada-dodika-o-srebrenici-od-genocida-do-najveceg-udarca-srpstvu>.

¹² “Dodik i MUP Republike Srpske krše Dejtonski sporazum,” *Dnevni avaz*, September 27, 2012, p.8.

formula that if you repeat a lie a thousand times, it becomes the truth.”¹³

In the RS, the daily *Glas Srpske* reported on the alleged buying of Bosniak’s votes. The article quoted Aleksandra Pandurević, a state-level MP from the Serb Democratic Party (SDS), referring to “‘slush funds’ out of which dirty Bosniak election engineering in Srebrenica and Bratunac is financed,” and an SNSD MP who insisted that “the aim of Bosniak policy is not to help the ordinary citizens of Srebrenica, but to attack the constitutional order of Srpska... whereas a later step would be to detach Srebrenica from Srpska.” In the same article, the President of the Srebrenica Serb veterans’ organization, Miloš Milovanović, insisted that an election defeat of Serbs would lead to Serbs ultimately leaving the Eastern Bosnian town, commenting that “This would be, after regular departures and a lack of prospects, the last train leaving this place.”¹⁴ In another article the same daily reported about alleged posters stuck to Serb houses in town that called for forced eviction of Serbs and again cited Milovanović who insisted this incident confirmed the alleged Bosniak election aims. Though the paper cited Ćamil Duraković’s insistence that Bosniaks were not responsible for the posters, the author of the article nevertheless insinuated it to be true – by closing the text with a sentence that hinted that 1,000 Bosniaks and only 200 Serbs had registered anew for the elections.¹⁵ In the most inflammatory article on the Srebrenica campaign, a *Glas Srpske* report compared a campaign rally of Bosniak parties with the Bosnian war by quoting unnamed Serbs who had survived the war as saying that the “thunderous noise of the car horns, the noise and shouting from the platoon and the flags with the lilies” reminded them of the “Muslim incursion into Serb villages during 1992 and the beginning of 1993, when terrible crimes had been inflicted upon the Serb population.”¹⁶

National topics dominated the campaigns of the ethnic Croat parties as well, led by the larger HDZ BiH and its leader, Dragan Čović. (The campaign took place amid a government reshuffle that raised the prospect of HDZ and HDZ 1990 re-entering the Federation government.) At a campaign event in Orašje, Čović stressed that elections were not only local but part of the fight for what he called equal rights of Croats:

“The local elections are not only a measure to see who will be the new mayor and what the majority in the municipal council will look like. It will be a message on how the Council of Ministers, the new entity government in Sarajevo and many other institutions in BiH will be formed. Thus it is important to participate in the elections in large quantities, because this is the count ahead of the population census.”¹⁷

¹³ “Oni koji prebrojavaju ko je bio u Potočarima neka pokažu koliko su puteva i škola napravili!” *Dnevni avaz* – Sedmica (Supplement), September 29, 2012, p.2.

¹⁴ “Srebrenica: Bošnjaci kupuju glasove?” *Glas Srpske*, July 26, 2012, available at: http://www.glassrpske.com/novosti/vijesti_dana/Srebrenica-Bosnjaci-kupuju-glasove/lat/86832.html.

¹⁵ “Leci sa pozivom na protjerivanje Srba,” *Glas Srpske*, August 11, 2012, available at: http://www.glassrpske.com/novosti/vijesti_dana/Leci-sa-pozivom-na-protjerivanje-Srba/lat/88944.html.

¹⁶ “Srebrenica: Sa ratnim zastavama na tribinu SDA i SBiH,” *Glas Srpske*, August 4, 2012, available at: <http://www.glassrpske.com/novosti/izbori/Srebrenica-Sa-ratnim-zastavama-na-tribinu-SDA-i-SBiH/lat/95664.html>.

¹⁷ “Karamarko poručio: BiH je naša domovina isto kao i Hrvatska,” *Večernji list* (BH edition), September 26, 2012, available at: <http://www.vecernji.ba/karamarko-porucio-bih-je-nasa-domovina-isto-kao-i-hrvatska-457210>.

And HDZ BiH Vice-President Marinko Čavara described the elections as “a kind of referendum.”¹⁸

Playing on the well-worn topic of the alleged collective ethnic discrimination of Croats in the Federation, Čović rejected any further centralization of the Federation, which he claimed was an attempt to impose the will of “Sarajevo.” He opined that “What we have today leaves no other possibility than to view the Federation of BiH as the entity of the Bosniak people.” Against this background, he presented his party’s “solution to the Croat question,” a constitutional reform proposal based on what he called “territorial autonomy” based on (ethno-) “territorial equality,” explaining that “For me the real solution is – four federal units that would definitely help that we solve the question of the Federation of BiH and of the functionality of BiH.”¹⁹

Campaigning by ethnic Bosniak parties and Sarajevo-based self-described civic parties was shaped by an ongoing political struggle between them. The SDP and SDA had parted ways in the spring of 2012 over disagreements on how to deal with SNSD demands. During the elections, the SDP was still trying to evict the SDA from ruling coalitions at state and Federation levels and to replace it with the Union for a Better Future (SBB). The SBB, launched by Fahrudin Radončić, the former owner of the Avaz media company, has been in fierce opposition to the SDA. Subsequently, the campaign rhetoric of these old and new coalition partners featured mutual accusations of alignment with the SNSD and complicity in the destruction or division of the state. Sulejman Tihić, the SDA President at the time, attacked the SDP and its new coalition partner, Radončić, at a campaign event near Srebrenica:

“Because we didn’t support the [2014 State] budget that would have prevented the functioning of the state and because we resisted plans and agreements for the division of the state of BiH, Lagumdžija and his SDP attempted to throw the SDA out of government. They were joined by Fahrudin Radončić with his private party and private media that for years have been spreading division and radicalization among Bosniaks.”²⁰

The SDP and SBB promptly returned the accusations. The SDP accused Tihić of collaboration with Dodik over the RS clampdown against the Bosniak registration drive in Srebrenica, referring to “the TD [Tihić-Dodik] coalition in action – Dodik arrests, Tihić cleverly stays silent.” The SDA had “divided up BiH into zones of interest,” it claimed.²¹ The SBB joined in with a statement that “the current creators of the TD coalition for the division of BiH have been blocking the economic development of the Bosniaks for ten years already, in order to hand the country over to their coalition partner and friend Milorad Dodik.”²² *Dnevni avaz* fully joined in this campaign against the SDA. For example, it published interviews with selected intellectuals, of which one, Salih Fočo, was close to the SBB – without being identified as such in the text. In the interview, he warned that Dodik was trying to raise ethnic tensions with the aim of

¹⁸ “Hrvati su za federalizaciju, dok se Bošnjaci pozivaju na Dayton,” *Večernji list* (BH edition), September 18, 2012, available at: <http://www.vecernji.ba/hrvati-su-za-federalizaciju-dok-se-bosnjaci-pozivaju-na-dayton-454412>.

¹⁹ “Dragan Čović: HDZ BiH je za ‘teritorijalnu autonomiju’ Hrvata,” available at: <http://www.hercegovina.info/vijesti/vijesti/bih/dragan-covic-hdz-bih-je-za-teritorijalnu-autonomiju-hrvata>

²⁰ “SDA: Na dženazu u Srebrenicu su došli svi osim Radončića,” September 22, 2014, available at: <http://www.oslobodjenje.ba/vijesti/izbori-2012/sda-na-dzenazu-u-srebrenicu-su-dolazili-svi-osim-radoncica>.

²¹ “TD koalicija na djelu: Dodik hapsi, Tihić ‘mudro’ šuti,” *Dnevni avaz*, September 24, 2012, p.9.

²² “Koliko se Tihić brine o Srebreničanima najbolje otkriva antibošnjačka ideja pokušaja bojkota izbora u tom gradu,” *Dnevni avaz*, September 23, 2012, p.9.

partitioning BiH and that the SDA might be a partner in this endeavor, claiming without any proof that “at least 30% of the most radical SDA people wish for the division of BiH.”²³

2. 2014 general election

The general election of October 2014 ended a four-year mandate featuring changing coalitions and a more or less permanent institutional crisis at the state and Federation levels. This was especially pronounced in the Federation, where there was a standoff between competing governing coalitions formed around former allies SDP and SDA. In addition, violent social protests erupted in February 2014. Angst among political elites statewide was palpable. For the first time since the end of the war, BiH citizens seemed to question the entire political elite.²⁴ But by autumn that year, it was already clear that the protests had faded without tangible political results.

In the RS, despite or perhaps because of a worsening socio-economic situation, the ruling SNSD and entity President Milorad Dodik ran their election campaign with their customary inflammatory ethnic rhetoric, questioning the State of BiH and threatening RS secession. Even before the campaign was launched, Dodik sent a clear message:

“My political program is the strengthening of the autonomy of the RS all the way to achieving independence, and I think that what happened in Crimea, including the referendum, is a good example one could follow.”²⁵

During the campaign he added that “I don't believe in the possibility of BiH as an independent state” and expressed his belief in an independent RS, saying he would “love to be the man who leads that process.”²⁶ Touring the country for a series of campaign rallies, Dodik announced work on a new entity constitution after the elections as a step towards that ultimate goal,²⁷ noted that “all of those years I defended our national identity,”²⁸ and warned that “should the SNSD candidates not win at all levels of government, in a year's time only the name will survive of the RS.”²⁹

In an interview with the Croatian daily *Jutarnji list* he again advocated a Bosnian Croat state, throwing his support behind the establishment of “a republic that would have all the prerogatives of a state. Yes, I would not hesitate to support Herzeg-Bosna... I would not bother if it existed today. But it really needed to be a republic, and really have all the prerogatives of a state – just as in the case of the Republika Srpska.” He supported his argument using the ethnic victim myth and the theory of the clash of

²³ “Dodik u SDA pronašao partnera za podjelu BiH,” *Dnevni avaz*, September 18, 2012, p.3.

²⁴ Kurt Bassuener/Bodo Weber, EU Policies Boomerang: Bosnia and Herzegovina's Social Unrest, DPC Policy Brief, Berlin-Sarajevo February 2014, available at: http://democratizationpolicy.org/pdf/briefs/DPC_Policy_Brief_Bosnia-Herzegovina's_Social_Unrest.pdf.

²⁵ “Dodik: Krim je dobar primer kojim putem treba da ide RS!” July 7, 2014, available at: <http://www.pressonline.rs/svet/balkan/320195/dodik-krim-je-dobar-primer-kojim-putem-treba-da-ide-rs.html>.

²⁶ “Dodik: RS kao samostalna država nikome ne bi smetala! Uveren sam da ćemo jednom biti nezavisni!” September 9, 2014, available at: <http://www.pressonline.rs/svet/balkan/326253/dodik-rs-kao-samostalna-drzava-nikome-ne-bi-smetala-uveren-sam-da-cemo-jednom-bit-nezavisni.html>.

²⁷ “Novi pravni put za što veću samostalnost,” *Nezavisne novine*, October 4, 2014, p.3.

²⁸ “Dodik: Jakog naroda nema bez jakih lidera,” *Nezavisne novine*, October 3, 2014, p.6.

²⁹ “Ne dozvolimo da RS os ta ne ime,” *Nezavisne novine*, October 1, 2014, p.6.

civilizations:

“Yes, we Serbs and Croats belong to one, common civilization. Though some say that there is no clash of civilizations any more today. But the reality is... that both Christian people in BiH, meaning Serbs and Croats, nowadays are highly threatened by the Bosniaks, that is, the Muslims.”³⁰

The RS leadership also introduced new topics in addition to those it had promoted relentlessly over the years. At a meeting of the entity’s ruling parties, Dodik accused the US of a conspiracy against his regime, aimed at either preventing its success in the upcoming election or to bring it down in case of re-election. According to Dodik, the conspiracy was being hatched by the US embassy in Sarajevo against a background of new strains in US-Russia relations. “It is evident that the US embassy in BiH, which has been massively lying in recent days, supports the opposition [in the RS] and calls for the citizens to support it.” Dodik further insisted that the brains of the conspiracy were located in Tuzla, where social protests had started in February (see below), and that “foreigners have worked out a plan for riots” to challenge, during election night on October 12, any result unfavorable to the RS opposition.³¹

In the RS, the media largely acted at the service of the regime. Daily papers widely covered the election campaign of the ruling parties, first and foremost of the SNSD and its key representatives. Inflammatory rhetoric from political elites was reinforced by the media, which did not simply report on provocative statements but highlighted them and gave space to nationalist messages in their comment sections. *Nezavisne novine* published several opinion pieces, one by the head of the RS representation in Washington, Obrad Kesić, and one by nationalist Bosnian Croat academic Nino Raspudić from Mostar on Dodik’s conspiracy theory. Both supported the notion of a secret US plan to bring down the RS government through an instrumentalized NGO sector in BiH funded by the West. And just like Dodik, both left the reader without any evidence to support their claim.³²

Unlike regime representatives, the RS opposition kept a low profile on national topics in the 2014 election campaign – a novelty. For the first time in a decade, the main opposition parties (the Serb Democratic Party – SDS, Party for Democratic Progress – PDP, and Peoples’ Democratic Party – NDP) had managed to join forces and build a pre-election coalition, the Alliance for Change, led by the SDS. Its representatives strategically avoided competing with the regime’s inflammatory rhetoric and instead focused on socio-economic issues. For example, the opposition candidate for RS President, Ognjen Tadić, explained in an interview: “We can’t have a stable and safe RS without a strong economy. And because of this, for us the economy comes first, as does the fight against nepotism and corruption.”³³ However, despite its strategic choice, the opposition did not always refrain from adding to the radicalization of public discourse. The candidate for Serb member of the State Presidency, Mladen Ivanić, at a campaign rally countered Dodik’s claim of a conspiracy by opposition and internationals against the RS regime, claiming instead that the regime was preparing post-election violence. Ivanić said

³⁰ “Pomoći ću Hrvatima da dobiju svoju državu u BiH,” October 5, 2014, quoted according to: <http://www.radiosarajevo.ba/novost/167135/milorad-dodik-za-jutarnji-list-pomoci-cu-hrvatima-da-dobiju-svoju-drzavu-u-bih>.

³¹ “Dodik optužuje ambasadu SAD u BiH za zaveru,” September 26, 2014, available at: http://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/region/dodik-optuzuje-ambasadu-sad-u-bih-za-zaveru_521816.html.

³² “Kandidat bez odgovornosti” and “Izbor ni poučci jednog starog Talijana,” *Nezavisne novine*, October 7, 2014, p.12&13.

³³ “Biću predsjednik svih građana,” *Nezavisne novine*, September 29, 2014, p.5.

that Dodik “will not hand over power peacefully and the public in the RS should prepare for this... It is obvious that such an aggressive insistence on some conspiracy theory in fact means that he will lose the election and that he is preparing the ground for unrest and for remaining in power by force.” Just as in the case of Dodik’s claims, Ivanić offered no evidence.³⁴

On the side of ethnic Croat parties, the HDZ BiH and the so-called Croatian People’s Assembly (HNS), an HDZ-led pre-election alliance, set the public tone.³⁵ Ethnic collectivism dominated the campaign, which focused on the well-rehearsed claim of discrimination against Croats in BiH as allegedly evidenced by the HDZ’s exclusion from the Federation Government and the BiH Presidency during the mandate that was coming to an end.

HDZ President Dragan Čović, who dominated a personalized, leadership-centered campaign, at one rally called for “all to rally around the idea of the Croatian People’s Assembly. This is the Croat answer, our project for how to protect the Croat people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, how to secure constitutional and all other equality for it.”³⁶ At another rally, he described the HNS as “the Assembly of all Croats who think Croat in BiH.”³⁷ At yet other public events, Čović said that the “strongest Croat political party” had a “clear national Croat and state-building program for a democratic and pro-European BiH” and that this program enjoyed wide support throughout BiH.³⁸ He explained that the program was built around the demand for a Croat ethnic territorial unit and that “there will be no compromise over the Croat entity and the Croat national question.”³⁹ Speaking at the final campaign rally in Kupres in Western Herzegovina, Čović used a dose of war rhetoric to amplify the message: “We have to solve the Croat national question in BiH; it is not solved. We need to demonstrate and prove that we care for our identity, our cultural heritage, that we care about the sacrifices that the Croats from the Kupres region made in the theaters of war in BiH and Croatia.”⁴⁰ Asked during an interview about the possibility that he might be defeated by Martin Raguž, leader of the HDZ 1990, in the bid for Croat member of the BiH Presidency, Čović warned that Raguž potentially winning votes from Bosniaks would be “a very dangerous undertaking to destroy BiH.”⁴¹

Lower-level party officials took up the rhetoric of party leaders with even more radicalism. In the HDZ’s

³⁴ “Dodik priprema teren za nemire,” September 28, 2014, available at: <http://www.vijesti.ba/politicka-arena/239124-Dodik-priprema-teren-nemire.html>.

³⁵ The HNS is an association centered around the HDZ that includes several small ethnic Croat parties and Croat intellectuals, formed in 2000 during the first push for a third (Croat) entity in BiH. It was reactivated in 2006 as accusations of ethnic discrimination against Croats in the Federation were revived after the HDZ for the first time lost the Croat seat on the BiH Presidency. Elected instead was Željko Komšić, who was then a member of the non-ethnic SDP.

³⁶ September 12, 2014, available at: <http://www.hdzbih.org/hdz-i-hns-bih-na-kupresu-zapoceli-izbornu-kampanju-n31>.

³⁷ “Čitluk: Održan predizborni skup HDZ-a BiH,” September 30, 2014, available at: <http://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/citluk-odrzan-predizborni-skup-hdz-a-bih/140930075>.

³⁸ “Dragan Čović za Klix.ba: Imam nesumnjivu podršku hrvatskih birača,” September 17, 2014, available at: <http://www.klix.ba/vijesti/dragan-covic-za-klix-ba-imam-nesumnjivu-podrsku-hrvatskih-biraca/140917125>.

³⁹ “Nema kompromisa o hrvatskom entitetu,” *Nezavisne novine*, October 4, 2014, p.6.

⁴⁰ “Održan završni skup HDZ-a na Kupresu,” September 28, 2014, available at: <http://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/odrzav-zavrshni-skup-hdz-a-na-kupresu/140928033>.

⁴¹ “Dragan Čović za Klix.ba: Imam nesumnjivu podršku hrvatskih birača,” September 17, 2014, available at: <http://www.klix.ba/vijesti/dragan-covic-za-klix-ba-imam-nesumnjivu-podrsku-hrvatskih-biraca/140917125>. Martin Raguž ran a rather civil election campaign that struck a conciliatory tone towards Bosniaks. This raised concerns among HDZ BiH he could have a chance to win the seat for the Croat member of the BH Presidency with support of a larger number of Bosniak votes.

campaign, Marin Topić, then an advisor to the Herzegovina-Neretva cantonal prime minister, occupied a prominent place. In a video published on the HDZ's website, he compared the West's fight against the Islamic State (ISIS) with the Croat fight against Bosniaks during the Bosnian war:

“We fought against the Communists, and later in 1993 against ISIS... [Bosnian Croat wartime] General Praljak fought against the same against which the whole world, led by the US, is today fighting... Will somebody apologize to the Croats and the HVO [Bosnian Croat wartime army] for describing our defense against Islam and Communism as a criminal enterprise?”⁴²

Among Sarajevo-based parties, both avowedly civic and openly ethnic, the SDA and the SBB took the lead in using inflammatory rhetoric and populist themes (the two parties had dropped out of state and Federation governments at different times during the four-year-mandate). The SDP and the *Demokratska fronta* (Democratic Front, DF), the newly-formed breakaway party led by BiH Presidency member Željko Komšić (elected as SDP in 2006, 2010, for the Croat seat), largely refrained from inflammatory statements in their campaigns.

Bakir Izetbegović, who became acting SDA leader during the campaign as the late Sulejman Tihić was battling a long and serious illness, pushed back against secessionist rhetoric from the RS in various public appearances. He warned that “there will be attempts towards disintegration, but we can only move towards integration processes” and pledged that no referendum would take place and that BiH would not be divided.⁴³ Extending his warning to Croat ethnic policy he further warned that “they can’t divide BiH, nor create a third entity.”⁴⁴ Lower-level party officials during the campaign identified the survival of the state and the Bosniak people with their party. Thus, Asim Sarajlić stated that “the SDA is the backbone of the Bosniak people and of the politics of BiH, and that backbone will straighten up in autumn,” while Fikret Prevljak commented that “BiH is a sovereign, independent and internationally recognized state, it will never disappear, neither quickly nor slowly. Only the SDA can prevent such aims and only a strong SDA can guarantee the preservation of the unity of BiH.”⁴⁵

On the basis of the SBB's policy with its social-economic populism and enmity vis-à-vis the SDA, its representatives added revolutionary rhetoric to the campaign. The SBB accused Izetbegović and the SDA of theft and political murder throughout the postwar era and labeled them a “party-state mafia,” a standing term in the party's vocabulary.⁴⁶ In one statement, the SBB announced the formation of “emergency committees” for the stabilization of the economy and the fight against organized crime and corruption.⁴⁷ The term used, “krizni štabovi,” originated in socialist Yugoslavia's defense doctrine, and alludes to the war-time committees that organized local defense.

Dnevni avaz served as a mouthpiece for the SBB and Radončić, as it had in 2010, by extensively covering its election campaign and by using similar or identical rhetoric not only in commentaries but also in

⁴² “Savjetnik premijera HNK i HDZ porede Armiju BiH sa IDIL-om,” October 1, 2014, available at: <http://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/savjetnik-premijera-hnk-i-hdz-porede-armiju-bih-sa-idil-om/141001004>.

⁴³ “SDA korača ka nadmoćnoj pobjedi,” available at: <http://sda.ba/home/sda-koraca-ka-nadmocnoj-pobjedi/>.

⁴⁴ “Održan centralni predizborni skup SDA na Ilidži: SDA će donijeti stabilnost i ekonomski prosperitet BiH,” available at: <http://sda.ba/home/foto-sda-ilidza-sda-ce-donijeti-stabilnost-i-ekonomski-prosperitet-bih/>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ “Bakir Izetbegović odgovarat će za politička ubistva i opljačkano blago,” *Dnevni avaz*, October 1, 2014, p.6.

⁴⁷ “SBB glatko pobje | uje, izborna krađa iz 2010. ne smije se ponoviti,” *Dnevni avaz*, October 1, 2014, p.5.

news pieces. One commentator opined that “Alija [Izetbegović] and Tito built the state, while their successors [SDA and SDP and their leaders Bakir Izetbegović and Zlatko Lagumdžija] are destroying it.”⁴⁸ *Avaz* journalist Sead Numanović wrote in another commentary that “Bosniaks today find themselves in the worst situation in 80 years... It wasn’t even worse during the times of aggression on our country... [the State] today is eroded thanks to the performance of domestic traitors.”⁴⁹

3. Islamist terrorism

2011 attack on US embassy

On October 28, 2011 Mevlid Jašarević, a young Bosniak from the Serbian part of the Sandžak region who had close ties with extremist Islamist circles in the Western Balkans, attacked the US embassy in Sarajevo with an automatic weapon. The attack was not the first terrorist incident in BiH perpetrated by an adherent of radical Islamic teaching imported from outside Europe during and after the war; but it was the most prominent among a small number of post-war incidents, and the only one so far that was directed against a Western government. Jašarević inflicted only limited damage to the embassy building and injured a policeman who stood guard outside the embassy; but worryingly, he was stopped by the police only after a couple of hours, when a police sniper injured him.

The incident exposed the weak internal security architecture in BiH. The fragmented nature of the police agencies produced confusion as to which of the various agencies present in Sarajevo – municipal, cantonal, entity or state-level– was in fact in charge of responding to attacks on foreign diplomatic missions or state institutions. As a result, police reacted after a delay of several hours..

Bosniak and Sarajevo-based political leaders and state officials unanimously and strongly condemned the attack. SDA president Sulejman Tihić said:

“This is an attack on the friendly American people that proved its friendship to Bosnia and Herzegovina in the toughest moments during the aggression against our country and ever since. An attack on the American embassy is at the same time an attack on the State of Bosnia and Herzegovina.”⁵⁰

Statements by other SDA officials, such as Bakir Izetbegović, or by State Presidency member Željko Komšić from the SDP contained almost identical wording.⁵¹ The leader of the Islamic community in BiH at the time, Reis Mustafa Cerić, strongly condemned the attack with similar words, saying that “it presents an unacceptable misuse of faith, because a crime committed in the name of faith is a crime against faith.”⁵²

The Sarajevo dailies *Avaz* and *Oslobodjenje* reported objectively and condemned the terrorist attack in editorials and comments. An *Avaz* article cited domestic experts who pointed to the weakness of the

⁴⁸ “Alijini i Titovi sinovi,” *Dnevni avaz*, October 1, 2014, p.3.

⁴⁹ “Nagrižena država,” *Dnevni avaz*, September 28, 2014, p.3.

⁵⁰ “Napad na SAD i BiH,” *Oslobođenje*, October 30, 2011, p.3.

⁵¹ “Temeljita istraga,” and “Bosna i Hercegovina nije teroristička zemlja,” *Oslobođenje*, October 29, 2011, p.3&5.

⁵² “Zločin u ime vjere je zločin protiv vjere,” *Dnevni avaz*, November 1, 2014, p.8.

state and the fragmentation of the security agencies as core reasons behind the failure to effectively deal with religious extremism in BiH.⁵³ *Oslobodjenje* editor Esad Hećimović in a long commentary criticized the leadership of the Islamic Community in BiH for neglecting the problem of Islamist extremism since it was “using Islam as a platform to achieve financial, political, and ethnic national ends.”⁵⁴

In the RS, both regime representatives and media close to the regime used the incident as an occasion for inflammatory ethnic rhetoric targeting Bosnian Muslims and Bosniak politics, even resorting to a style of anti-Muslim propaganda well known from the war.

Again, Dodik took the lead, accusing the Bosniak political and religious leadership of spreading inter-ethnic fear:

“Given that Bakir Izetbegović said that he will pursue the policy of his father [wartime BiH President Alija Izetbegović], we have no reason to doubt his intentions to realize the project of an Islamic state in the territory of BiH.”⁵⁵

“It is no secret that Bakir Izetbegović maintains ongoing contacts with such [Islamist] groups. According to our information, he is highly respected among radical Islamist groups, and even maintains contact with certain intelligence agencies in Iran... This way an atmosphere is created in which radical Islamist circles develop in BiH. Their opinions and ideology of a political Islamism, but also the opinions of Reis Mustafa Cerić, promote this overall state in which BiH has become the center of Wahhabism, that is responsible for the attack on the US embassy.”⁵⁶

Dodik even misused the situation to complain about the alleged victimization of Serbs by politicians and media based in Sarajevo. “The media in the Federation of BiH state that this act was committed by a citizen of Serbia,” he said. “This should imply that the attacker was a Serb, and in this way to maintain the stereotype that Serbs are guilty of everything.”⁵⁷ In another misuse of an earlier statement by the head of the BiH Intelligence and Security Agency (OSA), Almir Džuvo, on the estimated number of radical Islamists in BiH, Dodik insisted that Džuvo had stated that “there are 3,500 people in BiH who are ready to commit terrorist acts,” even though Džuvo had previously publicly corrected similar false accounts of his statement.⁵⁸

Lower-level SNSD representatives and the RS media amplified the message. A key role was played by so-called terrorism experts from the RS and Serbia who traditionally have been giving quasi-academic authority to anti-Muslim claims. Most visible among them were members of the South-East European expert team on terrorism, which appeared a couple of years earlier and obviously enjoyed the support

⁵³ “Sigurnost u BiH prepuštena je slučaju,” *Dnevni avaz*, October 29, 2011, p.6.

⁵⁴ “Svi nadši promašaji,” *Oslobodjenje*, October 30, 2011, p.5.

⁵⁵ “Izetbegović širi ratničku politiku,” *Glas Srpske*, October 30, 2011, available at: http://www.glassrpske.com/novosti/vijesti_dana/Izetbegovic-siri-ratnicku-politiku/lat/65550.html.

⁵⁶ “Izetbegović u kontaktu s vehabijama,” *Glas Srpske*, November 1, 2011, available at: http://www.glassrpske.com/novosti/vijesti_dana/Izetbegovic-u-kontaktu-s-vehabijama/lat/65651.html.

⁵⁷ “Izetbegović širi ratničku politiku.” The accusation of planning to establish an Islamic state against SDA leader and State president Alija Izetbegović occupied a prominent place in Serb nationalist pre-war and wartime propaganda.

⁵⁸ “Je li Jašarević na Džuvinoj listi?” *Oslobodjenje*, October 30, 2011, p.4.

of the RS leadership and media.⁵⁹ Especially prominent among the team members was Dževad Galijašević, due to his ethnic Bosniak background.⁶⁰ It was Galijašević who further exaggerated Dodik's number of an alleged 3,500 Islamist extremists by claiming, without any proof, that followers of radical Islam, of Wahhabism, in fact constitute "5% of the Bosniak population," only softening his sweeping claim somewhat by adding that "of course not all of them are terrorists."⁶¹

2015 attack on Zvornik police station

On April 28, 2015, 24-year old Nerdin Ibrić, a Bosniak returnee to Zvornik, a town in northeastern RS bordering Serbia, attacked the local police headquarters with automatic weapons, killing one and injuring another two Serb policemen. The attacker was killed in a shootout with police. The incident was quickly labeled an act of Islamist terrorism, the first since the 2011 US embassy attack and the first post-war terrorist attack in the RS with an inter-ethnic revenge dimension. Still, as of this writing (September 2015), the motives behind the terrorist attack remain unclear. While it seems without doubt that Ibrić had started to align with some Wahhabi community in nearby Federation territory in the months before the incident, there are also strong indications of an element of ethnic revenge: Ibrić's father had been killed by Serb police in Zvornik in the first days of the war in 1992, at the beginning of the ethnic cleansing of the Bosnian Muslim population in Eastern Bosnia.

All Sarajevo-based parties and political leaders condemned the attack in public statements in the days following the incident. The SDA Presidency in its conclusions from a special session summoned after the attack condemned it as "a threat to the security, constitutional order and international position of BiH as well as its citizens. This at the same time is an attack on the reconciliation process and interethnic relations in BiH."⁶² In a further statement the party invited "all citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina to calm, tolerance and restraint from anything that could further complicate the situation and lead to the rise of unwanted tensions, particularly in the RS."⁶³ The second largest party in the coalition, the Democratic Front (DF), reacted similarly, and the SDP concluded that "without a doubt this has been a direct attack on the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, its agencies and institutions, as well as on each citizen of our country."⁶⁴

⁵⁹ "Uporište vehabija u 17 opština," *Nezavisne novine*, November 1, 2011, p.2-3; "Nisam nahuškan, to je u mojoj glavi," *Nezavisne Novine*, October, 2011, p.2-3; "Vehabije djeluju pod okriljem politike," *Press RS*, November 1, 2011, available at: http://www.glassrpske.com/novosti/vijesti_dana/Vehabije-djeluju-pod-okriljem-politike/lat/65648.html; "Poraz bezbjednosnih agencija u FBiH," *Glas Srpske*, November 3, 2011, available at: http://www.glassrpske.com/novosti/vijesti_dana/Poraz-bezbjednosnih-agencija-u-FBiH/lat/65750.html.

⁶⁰ Galijašević's links with Serb nationalist politics goes back all the way to the 1980s. Originally one of the leaders of a citizens' revolt against corrupt policies of the Communist apparatus in Moševac local community, in the central Bosnian municipality of Maglaj, Galijašević gained Yugoslavia-wide prominence in the mid-1980s. He was soon courted by the Milošević regime in its efforts to undermine BiH State and party leadership, which at that time was still of strong multi-ethnic and Titoist orientation.

⁶¹ "Uporište vehabija u 17 opština."

⁶² "Vanredna sjednica Predsjedništva SDA: Napad u Zvorniku je udar na proces pomirenja," available at: <http://sda.ba/home/zakljucci-predsjednistva-stranke-demokratske-akcije/>.

⁶³ "Povodom napada na PU u Zvorniku: SDA daje punu podršku radu svih policijskih struktura," available at: <http://sda.ba/home/povodom-napada-na-pu-u-zvorniku-sda-daje-punu-podrsku-radu-svih-policijskih-struktura/>.

⁶⁴ "Teroristički napad u Zvorniku je direktan napad na državu BiH," available at: <http://sdp.ba/?p=9270>.

In a similar fashion the new Reis, Husein Kazazović, also condemned the attack as well as Islamic fundamentalism in general:

“I condemn the terrorist crime in Zvornik against innocent people, be they Serbs, Bosniaks, Croats or members of any other nation... because of the acts of some Muslims worldwide, and also here in our country, we, my dear brothers, have to again ask ourselves where the Muslims are heading towards today?”⁶⁵

With the same clarity with which they condemned the Zvornik attack, parties and their representatives criticized the RS police action, code-named ‘Ruben’ and carried out on May 6 throughout the entity, as arbitrary and an act of intimidation of Bosniak returnees. As part of Ruben, which was claimed to be necessary as a pre-emptive action triggered by the Zvornik attack, the RS police searched 31 locations and arrested 32 persons, mainly of Bosniak origin. Of these, they handed over just 11 to the RS special prosecution and released the others; in the end the prosecution had enough evidence to keep just two persons in custody. Bakir Izetbegović warned that “we won’t allow that returnees are mistreated, that they are frightened and that the return process is stopped as part of an anti-terrorism agenda.” Željko Komšić insisted that the RS authorities were using the Zvornik attack as “a pretext for the systematic harrasment of citizens with the ‘wrong’ ethnic background” and that “the promotion of organized violence must not divert attention from the difficult socio-economic situation in that entity.”⁶⁶ The SDA’s Sadik Ahmetović, who is from Srebrenica, made an even more aggressive statement:

“We Bosniaks who have been returning to Srebrenica after ethnic cleansing, genocide and mass killings, are now all treated as terrorists... This turns into an open hunt on returnees in the RS and reminds us of the start of the war... This needs to stop instantly, because this selective approach could threaten the peace in BiH.”⁶⁷

Sarajevo-based dailies *Oslobodjenje* and *Avaz* predominantly reported correctly and condemned the Zvornik attack in editorials and comments. *Oslobodjenje* editor-in-chief, Vildana Selimbegović, in her leader on Zvornik criticized the inflammatory rhetoric of RS officials as well as attempts from within the Bosniak community to relativize the crime. She also praised the Islamic Community of BiH under the leadership of the new Reis Kazazović for “finally having come to reason” in clearly fighting back against religious extremism.⁶⁸

Yet in commentaries and editorials,⁶⁹ *Avaz* also echoed the approach taken by the SBB, which used its condemnation of the incident for an attack on the SDA. In a reference to the SDA, it claimed that intelligence agencies in BiH had been “instrumentalized for political harassment and plots serving the needs of the radical wing of one ruling party... An unbearable situation has been created in the society: the extraordinarily expensive security structures, instead of fighting terrorism and systemic corruption, are being used for dirty election campaigns and the destruction of individuals and political parties that

⁶⁵ “Jesu li u strahu velike oči – a i brada?!” *BH Dani*, May 15, 2015, p.20.

⁶⁶ “DF: Hapšenje onih koji su genocid preživjeli,” *Oslobođenje*, May 8, 2015, p.5.

⁶⁷ “Otvoreni lov na povratnike,” *Oslobođenje*, May 8, 2015, p.4-5.

⁶⁸ “Džihad u Zvorniku,” *Oslobođenje*, May 4, 2015, p.10.

⁶⁹ “Udar na državu,” *Dnevni avaz*, April 28, 2015, p.3”.

advocate the Euro-Atlantic integration and the European path of BiH.”⁷⁰

In the RS, President Dodik and his SNSD, despite some messages of moderation, primarily used the Zvornik attack as an occasion for inflammatory and anti-state rhetoric, further raising inter-ethnic tension. At a press conference following an emergency meeting of the RS government on Zvornik, Dodik said:

“This is an attack against the institutions of Republika Srpska... There are always those who tell you this is a diversion of attention, it is this or that, but we already for quite some time have been warning about a broader attack on the RS in which, allegedly, nothing is worth anything.”⁷¹

Though Dodik may well be the BiH politician most responsible for the failure of attempts over the last decade to overcome the fragmentation of the security agencies, and hence for the limits to their efficiency and effectiveness, he now seemed to blame them for the attack. The country’s intelligence agency had sent out a general terrorism warning (received from a Western security agency) a couple of days before the Zvornik incident, something that Dodik now used against it:

“We don’t need such an intelligence agency. They send around very general information that serves as an alibi... In accordance with our constitution, Srpska can develop its own police structures. In accordance with the BH Constitution, Srpska also disposes of an intelligence agency... What is missing will be introduced. Nobody can stop us now.”⁷²

Shortly after the events, the RS government sent its regular counter-report to the Office of the High Representative’s semi-annual report to the UN Security Council, in which it claimed without any proof that BiH was “the largest European per capita exporter of foreign fighters to the Islamic State (ISIS).”⁷³

Countering the criticism from political Sarajevo of the police action Ruben, Staša Košarac, the SNSD caucus leader in the BiH House of Peoples, attacked the SDA, declaring the criticism to be

“an attempt of the radical wing of the SDA led by Bakir Izetbegović, to put the terrorist attack on the police station in Zvornik on equal footing with a legal and legitimate anti-terrorist action of the special prosecution and the Ministry of Internal Affairs [MIA] of the RS... The debates on the MIA RS action are an attempt by the Bosniak political leadership to minimize and cover up the causes and consequences of the terrorist act in Zvornik, something we have already seen after... the US embassy attack in Sarajevo. In addition, this is an attempt to intimidate and handicap those judicial and police structures that demonstrate resolve in opposing extremists and terrorists.”⁷⁴

In another public statement, Košarac noted that the SDA leaders’ public performance “provides dangerous evidence that this party was and has remained the main patron and co-perpetrator of radical

⁷⁰ “Umjesto za borbu protiv terorizma i kriminala, agencije za provedbu zakona stavljene u funkciju političkih progona i montaža!” available at: <http://www.sbb.ba/sbb-umjesto-za-borbu-protiv-terorizma-i-kriminala-agencije-za-provedbu-zakona>.

⁷¹ “Dodik: Pucanj u Srpsku – branićemo se,” *Nezavisne novine*, April 28, 2015, available at: <http://www.nezavisne.com/novosti/bih/Dodik-Pucanj-u-Srpsku-branicemo-se/302329>.

⁷² “Dodik: Pucanj u Srpsku – branićemo se.”

⁷³ “BiH najveći evropski ‘izvoznik’ boraca u ISIL,” *Glas Srpske*, May 7, 2015, available at: http://www.glassrpske.com/novosti/vijesti_dana/BiH-najveci-evropski-izvoznik-boraca-u-ISIL/lat/182485.html.

⁷⁴ “Košarac: Sramotna informacija Savjeta ministara,” *Nezavisne novine*, May 22, 2015, available at: <http://www.nezavisne.com/novosti/bih/Kosarac-Sramotna-informacija-Savjeta-ministara/306470>

Islamists who represent the biggest danger to the security of all citizens, as well as to peace and coexistence among peoples in BiH.”⁷⁵

Again, the media in the RS uncritically echoed the political elite’s arguments and its inflammatory rhetoric. In an opinion piece published by the daily *Glas Srpske*, written by one of its journalists, the ominous number of 3,000 Islamist terrorists in BiH was re-deployed.⁷⁶ Another article in the same paper insisted that “BiH for years has been serving as a base and recruitment center for terrorists. There has not been a single terrorist attack in the world in the last 15 years in which at least one terrorist had not participated in the war here.”⁷⁷ The papers covered Ruben with headlines such as “terrorist attack on the institutions of the RS planned.”⁷⁸ Again, the usual roster of “terrorism experts” was given prominent place in the media and served as key opinion makers with conspiracy theories that reproduced anti-Muslim stereotypes and prejudices and reinforced the Islamist threat theme without offering any proof. Belgrade-based military analyst Miroslav Lazanski commented that “the terrorist attack in Zvornik represents a direct attack on the RS as well as its existence.”⁷⁹ Dževad Galijašević linked the attack on Zvornik with the town’s geographic position as a “bridge between Serbia and the RS.” Furthermore, he put the incident into a wider regional context of some alleged “planned terrorist action that shall impose certain political solutions and lead to the destabilization of the whole region.” He claimed a link between an armed Albanian group involved in a shootout with police in the Macedonian town of Kumanovo on May 10, 2015 and a unit of foreign Islamic fighters that fought alongside the Bosnian Army during the war. “We are facing a period of serious destabilization... from those Islamist elements linked to war units, and to what I would call the fundamentalist policy in Sarajevo, but also to some Western intelligence agencies,” he said. Galijašević warned of a new terrorist attack, noting this time that “there are 5,000 persons capable of conducting something like this, and there are around 100,000 that are already being prepared for such a role.”⁸⁰

Predrag Ceranić, another well-established “terrorism expert” frequently quoted by RS media, also linked Kumanovo with Zvornik. He linked the Bosnian Army and the Kosovo Liberation Army to ISIS and claimed that the violent incidents in the RS and Macedonia had been executed by “ISIS in the Balkans,” explaining that “the situation in BiH and Macedonia is very similar in terms of social polarization between Muslims and Orthodox, instrumentalized by Islamist extremists for the establishment of an Islamic transversal.” The latter is a reference to the ‘green transversal,’ a nationalist Serb propaganda trope from the 1990s on the alleged threat of a cross-Balkan Muslim state. Finally, Ceranić put his

⁷⁵ “Košarac: SDA - glavni pokrovitelj i saučesnik radikalnih islamista,” *Glas Srpske*, May 9, 2015, available at: http://www.glassrpske.com/novosti/vijesti_dana/Kosarac-SDA-glavni-pokrovitelj-i-saucesnik-radikalnih-islamista/lat/182692.html.

⁷⁶ “Terorizam u BiH,” *Glas Srpske*, May 30, 2015, available at: http://www.glassrpske.com/komentar/komentar_dana/Terorizam-u-BiH/lat/2270.html.

⁷⁷ “Teroristi među nama,” *Glas Srpske*, April 28, 2015, available at: http://www.glassrpske.com/komentar/komentar_dana/Teroristi-medju-nama/lat/2242.html.

⁷⁸ “Planirali terorističke napade na institucije RS!” *Nezavisne novine*, May 27, 2015, p.2-3.

⁷⁹ “Lazanski: BiH nije raščistila sa fenomenom vehabija,” *Nezavisne novine*, April 28, 2015, available at: <http://www.nezavisne.com/novosti/bih/Lazanski-BiH-nije-rascistila-sa-fenomenom-vehabija/302322>.

⁸⁰ “Galijašević: Motiv napada rušenje Srpske,” *Nezavisne novine*, April 27, 2015, available at: <http://www.nezavisne.com/novosti/bih/Galijasevic-Motiv-napada-rusenje-Srpske/302311>.

conspiracy theory in the context of a “Ukrainian scenario” and the alleged threat of ‘color revolutions’ against Slavic regimes in the RS and Macedonia.⁸¹

In marked contrast to government representatives and the media, Zvornik’s mayor, Zoran Stevanović, who has a long track record of promoting non-Serb return to his municipality, took a very different line. Seeking to maintain local peace, reconciliation, and interethnic cohabitation in his town, he said that “it is the duty of each of us who wishes this town well, to call for maintaining a peaceful and stable situation.” “I want to believe that the attack on Zvornik is an individual, isolated case,” he added.⁸² He reacted to the spread of interethnic hate speech on social media after the attack, noting that “I particularly ask social media users to take care of what they write, to refrain from hate speech that would raise interethnic tensions.”⁸³

4. February 2014 social unrest

On February 7, 2014, citizen frustration with the socio-economic situation and their political elites exploded in social protests across the country that soon turned violent. At the end of a chaotic day, government and party buildings in Tuzla, Sarajevo and Mostar had been burned and hundreds of protesters and policemen injured. Protests continued throughout the following weeks, but remained non-violent. The February 7 events shocked the political elites throughout the country; politicians and officials disappeared from public view for almost the entire day; only in the evening did they start to react to this expression of citizens’ discontent.

Among Sarajevo-based party leaders, SBB president and BiH Security Minister at the time, Fahrudin Radončić, made statements in line with his party’s social populist approach. By throwing his support behind the protesters, he tried to hijack the protests for political ends. In a TV interview given on the evening of February 7, Radončić claimed that the social discontent was rooted in the privatization of state companies by “party tycoons,” which had led to the loss of hundreds of thousands of jobs. Ironically, Radončić is himself one of the most prominent of those postwar tycoons who benefited from political connections and the privatization process before he became a political leader. Radončić further warned of a possible “citizens’ tsunami,” thus further raising tensions instead of trying to calm down the situation.⁸⁴ In other interviews over the following days he also presented a conspiracy theory according to which representatives of the SDP-led Tuzla cantonal government may have taken part in the burning of buildings in Tuzla with the aim to hide their participation in criminal privatizations.⁸⁵ SDP leader and foreign minister Zlatko Lagumdžija retorted that “those who are behind the events and the instrumentalization of the participants of the unrest could have sent them against the symbols of tycoon

⁸¹ “Ćeranić: BiH i Makedonija - početak akcija ‘Islamske države’ na Balkanu,” *Nezavisne novine*, May 10, 2015, available at: <http://www.nezavisne.com/novosti/bih/Ceranic-BiH-i-Makedonija-pocetak-akcija-Islamske-drzave-na-Balkanu/304338>.

⁸² *Oslobođenje*, April 29, 2015, p.4.

⁸³ *Dnevni Avaz*, Sedmica (supplement), May 2, 2015, p.3.

⁸⁴ “Radončić: nema govora da je ovo državni udar, ovo je udar na nesposobnu vlast i korupciju,” *Dnevni Avaz*, February 7, 2014, available at: <http://www.avaz.ba/vijesti/iz-minute-u-minutu/radoncic-nema-govora-da-je-ovo-drzavni-udar-ovo-je-udar-na-nesposobnu-vlast-i-korupciju>.

⁸⁵ “Neću formirati krizni štab da se tuku građan,” *Dnevni Avaz*, February 10, 2014, p.7.

privatization if they had to burn something.”⁸⁶ In further public statements, Lagumdžija and his party colleague, Federation Prime Minister Nermin Nikšić, tried to discredit the protests by portraying demonstrators as a mob, linking the February 7 violence in the capital with a seizure of drugs by Sarajevo police the same day, even though the two events were completely unrelated.⁸⁷

In this inter-party battle over the public interpretation of the protests, *Avaz* and *Oslobodjenje* performed very different roles. *Avaz* fully participated in the Radončić-SBB campaign by using identical terms aimed against the SDP and SDA in articles and commentaries and by reserving the most prominent space in the paper for interviews with Radončić and party statements. In one comment on the drug episode, a journalist labeled SDA and SDP officials as “masters of darkness, who would even embarrass Josef Goebbels.”⁸⁸ *Oslobodjenje*, by contrast, reported on the protests and reactions from political parties without open preference for any side. The paper’s journalists in editorials and comments showed solidarity with protesters and criticized the reaction of the political elites.⁸⁹

Apart from trying to discredit the protests and instrumentalize them for inter-party fights, representatives of SDP and SDA also escalated the public discourse by employing war rhetoric and attempting to ethnicize the protests. At the SDP’s first news conference on the evening of the 7th, Lagumdžija described the violent protests as an “attempted coup d’etat.” “The year 1992 will not repeat itself,” he said and stressed that the BiH Presidency building had not been torched in any war up until that day.⁹⁰ Sadik Ahmetović, then SDA vice-president, made a similar statement, saying: “Never, not even during the war, was the flag of BiH removed or burned, but this time it was.”⁹¹

Lagumdžija, in the same news conference, also suggested that the protests were an organized attempt against Bosniaks aimed to ethnically divide the country, and conjured up the possibility that the protests could spread to the RS:

“It is precisely those parts of the country with a Bosniak majority that are attempted to be shown as dysfunctional, in which institutions don’t function, which is interesting given that pensions in the Federation of BiH are 20% higher than in the RS, and average salaries are also higher. They probably aim at weakening our position ahead of negotiations, so that we say ‘here you got the third entity and we will remain in the second, burned entity’... Some want to demonstrate that problems exist only here, and somewhere else is paradise, though that paradise was built on genocide.”⁹²

This theme was taken up by the SDA, which warned in a press statement that “violent protests have

⁸⁶“Lagumdžija i Nikšić pozvali na smirivanje strasti,” February 8, 2014;

available at: <http://www.sdp.ba/novost/21457/lagumdžija-i-nikšić-pozvali-na-smirivanje-strasti>.

⁸⁷ Paulina Janusz, “Political parties and media in BiH united against the demonstrators,” February 11, 2014,

Available at: <https://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com/2014/02/11/paulina-janusz-political-parties-and-media-in-bh-united-against-the-demonstrators/>.

⁸⁸ “Vratio se Gebels,” *Dnevni avaz*, February 9, 2014, p.3.

⁸⁹ For example an editorial by the editor-in-chief, “Zlatko gladnom ne vjeruje,” *Oslobođenje*, February 10, 2014, p.10.

⁹⁰ SDP press conference, February 7, 2014, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZpPv3U3FNXo>.

⁹¹ Paulina Janusz, “Nationalism for a hungry stomach,” February 11, 2015,

Available at: <https://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com/2014/02/11/paulina-janusz-bh-politicians-have-found-a-solution-to-social-protests-in-the-country-nationalism-for-a-hungry-stomach/>.

⁹² SDP press conference.

been exclusively organized in parts of the country where Bosniaks form a majority of citizens.”⁹³ The party in a later statement added that it resists “further ethnic and territorial divisions of the country.”⁹⁴ Sadik Ahmetović, then party vice-president and former BiH Minister of Security, told the media that “I have information that a group of fans of the soccer club Slavija from Eastern Sarajevo [in the RS] burned the Presidency, that is, the flag of BiH” – without offering any evidence.⁹⁵

The main Croat party, the HDZ BiH, too, attempted to ascribe an interethnic character to the violence after the fact. In a press statement that referred to the burning of local government buildings and the HDZ party headquarters in Mostar on the 7th, the Mostar branch of the party asserted – without any evidence and by ignoring the fact that the SDA’s local office had also been destroyed – that “an organized group of 350 hooligans from [majority Bosniak] Eastern Mostar went over to the [majority Croat] Western part in its anarchic assault... a nationally and politically instructed group that had the aim to lead the town of Mostar into inter-ethnic conflict and a state of war.”⁹⁶ HDZ leader Dragan Čović and the HDZ’s Vjekoslav Bevanda, then chairman of the BiH Council of Ministers, sent out similar messages in subsequent days.⁹⁷ Čović said:

“This social revolt has obviously been misused and instrumentalized. Exclusively cantonal institutions throughout Bosniak areas in the Federation were attacked, and then it was attempted to transfer this to areas where Croats form a majority. The attack on the HDZ BiH, the burning of the Croat flag and the extent of destruction was intended to send a message. This all speaks of the amount of hatred. This was all organized because these people immediately destroyed those cameras that recorded this. I got the impression that it was desired to create anarchy and to transfer it to the areas where Croats live.... The desire to drown all into one unitarian Federation of BiH so that the Federation finally turns into the entity of the Bosniak people, just as the RS is the entity of the Serb people, is obvious.”⁹⁸

Bevanda in one of his interviews supported the views of his party leader and claimed that “there obviously were instructions to create interethnic conflict.”⁹⁹ The HNS presidency, too, said that “as the expectations of the organizers that the ‘spontaneous revolt’ would also appear in majority Croat areas of the Federation of BiH failed, we have become witness of an attempted export of an ‘anti-bureaucratic revolution’, which has been most clearly demonstrated in Mostar.”¹⁰⁰ (This is a reference to fake “spontaneous” citizens’ protests organized by the Milošević regime in the late 1980s that played a key role in the breakup of Yugoslavia.)

⁹³ “SDA poziva na prestanak nasilja i zajedničku akciju očuvanja države,” available at: <http://sda.ba/home/sda-poziva-na-prestanak-nasilja-i-zajednicku-akciju-ocuvanja-drzave>.

⁹⁴ “Utvrđiti povezanost rušilačkih napada s namjerama nekih centara i njihovih planova za budućnost BiH,” *Dnevni List*, February 9, 2014, p.5.

⁹⁵ “Sadik Ahmetović: Bojim se da je cilj protesta podjela Federacije BiH,” February 20, 2014, available at: <http://sda.ba/home/sadik-ahmetovic-bojim-se-da-je-cilj-protesta-podjela-federacije-bih/>.

⁹⁶ “Za nered u Mostaru odgovorna politički instruirana skupina iz istočnog dijela grada,” *Dnevni list*, February 9, 2014, p.5.

⁹⁷ “Uspjeh protesta u BiH: Ipak je i srpska i hrvatska i bošnjačka,” *Istinomjer.ba*, February 10, 2014, available at: <http://istinomjer.ba/uspjeh-protesta-u-bih-ipak-je-srpska-hrvatska-bosnjacka/>.

⁹⁸ “Bošnjačka dimenzija bunta pokušava se unijeti među Hrvate,” *Večernji list (BH)*, February 10, 2014, available at: <http://www.vecernji.ba/bosnjacka-dimenzija-bunta-pokusava-se-unijeti-medu-hrvate-920382>.

⁹⁹ “Bevanda: Federalna vlast snosi odgovornost,” *Vijesti.ba*, February 10, 2014, available at: <http://www.vijesti.ba/vijesti/bih/196125-Bevanda-Federalna-vlast-snosi-odgovornost.html>.

¹⁰⁰ “Suštinski uzrok aktualnog stanja je urušavanje ustavnog poretka,” *Dnevni list*, February 9, 2014, p.11.

As with the other cases analyzed here, Croat media in BiH close to the HDZ BiH line, notably *Večernji list*, made sure that their reporting and commentary took up the ethnic rhetoric of political representatives. This is most evident in tendentious questions put to Dragan Čović and other HDZ BiH leaders in various interviews.

In the RS it was again Dodik who set out the lines of argument, the basis for a massive propaganda campaign. Dodik declared the protest an attack and a conspiracy against the RS in a transparent attempt to prevent the spillover of social protests to his entity. In fact, he presented the unrest to be a Bosniak attack, supported by the international community, and targeting Croats and Serbs. He thereby attempted to make sure that the spread of protests to the RS, which in the end remained of limited scope, would be seen as an interethnic issue:

“This project is supposed to destabilize the situation and lead to a new constitutional order in BiH, or at least to draw the attention of the international community, which would then create a new constitutional order here or a new Bosnia-Herzegovina that serves the interests of the Bosniaks.”¹⁰¹

“This is all ethnically motivated, situated and implemented. It is primarily Bosniaks who participated in the protests. In the RS there were various cartoons, Bosniak associations and NGOs leaning towards the Sarajevo institutions, that tried to generate news... Their [the international community’s] intelligence structures have been active for a long time already... the aim is that Bosniaks via the Federation seize the competences of the cantons in order to completely eliminate the Croats... we learned of a plan for two to three buses full of protesters to come from Zenica to Doboј, that the same was intended from Tuzla towards Biljelјina or Brčko, that the same was done from East Mostar to West Mostar.”¹⁰²

Such rhetoric and messaging was taken up and given a more radical spin by the head of the RS veterans’ organization (BORS), Pantelija Čurguz. After a meeting with Dodik, Čurguz said that the unrest reminded him of the 1990s. As alleged attempts to send buses with demonstrators from the Federation towards the RS had failed,¹⁰³ Čurguz continued, the plan was now to deploy “extremist organizations” including “the armed paramilitary formations the ‘Sunni Legion’ movement and the ‘Green Berets’, which are supposed to completely destabilize BiH.”¹⁰⁴

The RS media opened their opinion pages to spread these conspiracy theories and to promote Dodik’s old idea of dividing up the country into three ethnic parts. The usual “terrorism experts” and prominent nationalist intellectuals from the RS and Serbia stepped up the inflammatory rhetoric and expanded conspiracy theories.¹⁰⁵ Prominent Belgrade-based Serb nationalist academic Čedomir Antić in the daily *Press RS* talked of a Bosniak conspiracy with Western intelligence agencies to stage a “constitutional coup,” noting that “unrest in the Federation of BiH is a consequence of the policy of the Bosniak-Muslim

¹⁰¹ “Policija neće dozvoliti uvoz nemira u RS,” *Oslobođenje*, February 10, 2014, p.4.

¹⁰² “Nosim cipele 47, ali mogu povući na njima 49% BiH,” *Večernji list*, February 14, 2014, cited according to: <http://www.predsjednikrs.net/sr/носим-ципеле-47-али-могу-повући-на-њима-49-б/>.

¹⁰³ “Dodik: BiH nesigurno mјesto za RS,” *Nezavisne novine*, February 10, 2014, p.4.

¹⁰⁴ “Čurguz: U destabilizaciju RS planiraju da uključe oružane paravoјne formacije ‘Sunni legion’ pokret i ‘Zelene беретke’,” *Frontal*, February 10, 2014, available at: <http://www.frontal.ba/novost/67531/curguz-u-destabilizaciju-rs-planiraju-da-ukljuce-oruzane-paravoјne-formacije-sunni-legion-pokret-i-zelene-beretke>.

¹⁰⁵ For example: “Njihova lasta ne čini naše proljeće,” *Nezavisne novine*, February 11, 2014, p.13, “Huliganska revolucija ili ‘bosansko proljeće’?” *Nezavisne novine*, February 14, 2014, p.13.

government deliberately not to develop Bosniak cantons, believing that the people will thus be unhappy and ready for some future conflict.”¹⁰⁶ Predrag Ćeranić, professor at the Banjaluka College (BLC) and a former high official of RS intelligence, declared the unrest to be an attack on the RS masked as social protests:

“The third wave of protests is expected in the RS, without at the same time provoking protests in the Federation. Until then, experienced media are tasked with explaining that the second wave of protests [the February 7 protests – Ćeranić counts the 2013 ‘Bebolucija’ demonstrations in Sarajevo as the first wave] have been social in nature, but that politicians did manipulate them. Accordingly, the RS authorities will be accused of inventing internal and foreign enemies in order to divert attention from economic and social problems. The aim of the third wave will be to achieve what has failed with the previous two – Molotov cocktails need to be thrown at the RS government building that has turned into the symbol of the Republika Srpska. Scenes of encounters between the police and violent protesters need to travel across the globe. In such an atmosphere, foreign media will accuse ‘Dodik’s nationalist police’ of brutality and the RS president will be compared to Gaddafi... The special war against the RS will be led with the most modern means currently available in that field: financial support of media and selected NGOs.”

Ćeranić called for the reactivation of the Yugoslav Socialist tradition of national defense and civil protection (‘ONO i DSZ’) in order to defend Serbs. “The police alone cannot succeed in this,” he said. “Srpska needs to revitalize the principles of ONO and DSZ that we have been taught during Socialism. It is necessary to implement the securitization of the public [an apparent reference to Romania’s Communism-era internal security service].”¹⁰⁷

Perhaps the most extreme example in the RS media of a radicalizing public discourse on the social protests was an interview with Mehmedalija Nuhčić, a mysterious Bosniak from the Tuzla region regularly cited in RS media as a “security expert.” In an article published by *Press RS*, Nuhčić insisted that some activists from Tuzla had recently stayed abroad where they had been equipped with weapons by Western intelligence agencies to be used in case of a spillover of protest to RS territory. Nuhčić claimed that “there is no doubt that the social revolt in the Federation of BiH has been politicized to the maximum to serve the unitarization of BiH.” He attributed this to “power centers in the EU and US. They stand behind this ‘revolution’ and attempt to change the constitutional structure of BiH by force. All that is currently happening in the Federation is the exclusive work of foreigners who coordinate with domestic actors. There is a real danger in BiH for conflicts on an ethnic basis. I dispose of official information that some leaders of the Tuzla protests have been invited abroad where they have received instructions! Weapons caches have been shown to them that will be at their disposal should chaos occur in Bosnia and Herzegovina!”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ “Na ulicama prah i pepeo!” *Press RS*, February 8, 2014, available at: <http://pressrs.ba/info/vesti/na-ulicama-prah-i-pepeo-08-02-2014>.

¹⁰⁷ “Dan D u RS je 1. maj!” *Press RS*, March 1, 2014, available at: <http://pressrs.ba/info/vesti/dan-d-u-rs-je-1-maj-01-03-2014>.

¹⁰⁸ “Demonstrantima obećano oružje za napad na RS!,” *Press RS*, February 10, 2014, available at: <http://pressrs.ba/info/vesti/demonstrantima-obecano-oruzje-za-napad-na-rs-10-02-2014>.

Conclusions & Recommendations

This analysis of inflammatory political rhetoric and hate speech clearly shows that the radicalization of the political and public discourse in BiH that developed during 2006-2010 has continued during 2011-2015, and peaked during the five events presented as case studies in this report. The political elites and most of the media in the country continue to play an active, indeed a lead role in this deterioration. The analysis also reveals that the public questioning of the State of BiH itself remains very high on the agenda.

The study also confirms that the discussion of political crises degenerating into violence – in effect, talk about “war” – that emerged in the previous period, continued to play an important role over the last five years. Politicians and the media are framing the issue almost entirely in terms of the 1992-1995 war. It finds use in different forms: as an expression of opinion on the possibility (or impossibility) of a new war, as a threat against political opponents and other ethnic groups, and as a defense against accusations that one’s statements and actions could have unforeseen consequences.

While representatives of the political elites remain the main agenda-setters of inflammatory rhetoric and hate speech, the media throughout the country act in an important supporting role. This support may be direct, through editorials and commentaries, or indirect – but no more subtle – through skewed reporting. This takes different forms: the uncritical quoting of inflammatory statements by political figures or their highlighting in headlines; the fudging of news reporting and opinion; alleged scoops based entirely on anonymous sources; the quoting of public intellectuals with a clear ethnic or party agenda that are presented as independent authorities; and the promotion of so-called “experts” with dubious or no expertise. When all these aspects are taken into account, almost all daily papers analyzed in this study turn out to have a clear ethnic and party affiliation. The only exception among the newspapers covered in this analysis is *Oslobođenje*, whose reporting, by and large, has been objective. It, too, has at times leaned toward particular parties, albeit in a more subtle manner than the others.

All these aspects of inflammatory rhetoric and hate speech have played out in various ways and to varying degrees in the five cases analyzed: The 2012 and 2014 election campaigns, which took place against a background of permanent political and institutional crisis and a weakening of the regime in the RS, were periods of heightened rhetoric; at the same time, infighting among Bosniak or Sarajevo-based parties and among RS-based parties to an extent reduced the intensity of inflammatory interethnic rhetoric. Yet, as shown, these infights themselves degenerated, threatening to turn violent. The two incidents of Islamist terrorism covered in this study were instrumentalized by political elites and media in the RS in a public discourse that promoted anti-Muslim stereotypes and prejudices by mixing up Serb nationalist themes from the 1990s with references to present-day global Islamist extremism and terrorism. In addition, interethnic, Serb-Bosniak fear was openly promoted. Finally, the statements and comments presented by political elites during the February 2014 unrest were clearly aimed at redefining the spontaneous social protests in terms of ethno-nationalist conflict.

These findings prompt the question as to the possible impact of this inflammatory political rhetoric and hate speech on public security in BiH, that is, the potential for the emergence of violent conflict. The question lies beyond the scope of this study and no data exists that could help to answer it; hence, just a

few preliminary thoughts can be offered. Considering the two terrorism incidents, especially the one in Zvornik, and the intensity of fear that was generated in the public sphere in the RS, it appears obvious that this could not have remained without implications for relations between the entity's Serb majority and the Bosniak returnee communities. High-level police officials actively participated in this kind of public discourse, further fanning the flames. The public discourse shaped by political elites and media following the violent social protests of February 2014 is a particularly worrying case. Given that violence ended on February 7, that is, before the elites managed to re-define the social protests as ethnic conflict through the use of war rhetoric, it is fair to ask what would have happened had there been renewed violence in the days after February 7. Finally, it is important to mention that despite the heavy regime propaganda in the RS, opinion polls conducted during the days of the protests¹⁰⁹ demonstrated that a wide majority of RS citizens did not buy into the thesis of an interethnic conspiracy against the RS, but instead identified with the social motives of the protesters in the Federation. While this is reassuring, it must be worrying for a weakening regime ready to invest in this kind of inflammatory propaganda to realize that this propaganda has lost its power to mobilize the population. What might such a regime do when faced with the immediate danger of losing power at some point in the future?

Given the analysis presented here, the following recommendations could help to reduce the impact of inflammatory political rhetoric and hate speech in BiH:

- The media must maintain a critical distance when reporting inflammatory political statements by representatives of the political elites and government officials, especially in highlighting them (for example in headlines).
- The media must separate reporting from commentary, drastically reduce their reliance on anonymous sources, and abstain from campaign journalism.
- Assess the options for strengthening the oversight role of the Press Council of BiH and the Communications Regulatory Agency (RAK) in fighting inflammatory rhetoric and hate speech.
- Continue to support alternative media outlets and voices to enable them to broaden their scope, reach and access.
- Reassess the mandate and composition of the Central Election Commission of BiH (CEC) with a view to improving its capability to curb inflammatory rhetoric and hate speech during election campaigns.

However, none of these or similar 'technical' improvements will reduce inflammatory rhetoric and hate speech to a degree that would make their impact on public security negligible. That simply appears impossible as long as the current political framework and the dynamics it creates remain in place. As long as key political and government officials – most notably, Milorad Dodik – publicly question the

¹⁰⁹ 78% of respondents from the RS supported the protests, while 72% noted that given the overall circumstances in the country protests were expected, according to *Protests in Bosnia-Herzegovina*. The country-wide opinion poll was commissioned by the EUSR and conducted by Valicon; it has not been made public by the EU.

State of BiH and its constitutional order on an almost daily basis without any consequences and as long as dozens of rulings of the Constitutional Court of BiH are not complied with by various levels of government and state institutions even though this is a criminal offense, no partial measures will have a systemic impact. In order to remove the potential security threat that emanates from inflammatory rhetoric and hate speech in Bosnia and Herzegovina, either the international community needs to reaffirm its guarantee for the sovereignty and stability of the constitutional order of BiH (which it still is obliged to do by international law), or the domestic judicial and law-enforcement institutions must be strengthened to enable them to successfully do so.