

EXTREMISM

A Feature, Not a Bug

As I'm getting ready to leave Sarajevo for a conference to speak on the challenges of violent extremism in the Western Balkans and about my experiences in Bosnia and Herzegovina, I can't help but wonder if "violent" is the type of extremism I want and need to talk about

The last week has been like a whirlwind in the region, starting with the ICTY verdict sentencing Ratko Mladic to life imprisonment on November 22, and ending with the public and broadcasted suicide of Slobodan Praljak on November 29, moments after the judges delivered their decision confirming his conviction for war crimes. Both events can be described as theatrical, though they were urgently real; public political discussion in the region quickly evolved into an intricate and choreographed game of finger-pointing among the political leaders in the region. But what does this all mean for ordinary citizens?

The Opposite of Reconciliation

In a country so divided, and with a governing system extreme by design, can I – can we – feel safe? Every time this country goes through a dramatic event, my first instinct is to go not to media portals and "mainstream" web sites, but to social media – because that's where the people are nowadays. And the last ten days have been quite revealing. Beyond the Ratko Mladic support billboards in Zvornik, Pale and Srebrenica, the comments from ordinary citizens have been everything but rational and "reconciliatory". Reconciliation is a word that might have held some hope or idealism 20, 10, or perhaps even 5 years ago, but has become so common and so abused in the everyday narrative in Bosnia and Herzegovina that it has completely lost its meaning and purpose. Instead, we see the opposite of recon-

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ciliation – if that is even a concept. Comments ranging from, "We should have let the Serbs finish the job" to "We'll be smarter next time" speak volumes, and definitely not of reconciliation. As I read them, I genuinely tried to understand where such emotions were coming from, and the sentiment(s) behind them. I have been especially curious about the age of the anonymous people writing these comments, as I assume that many of the most active users of social media are too young to have fought in the war themselves. What can account for such hatred?

Another thing that crossed my mind was – why aren't the politicians trying to calm people down? And then I go and read some of the official statements of our politicians and everything becomes completely clear. The Croat member of the BiH Presidency's statement that the sentencing of Praljak is a sentence on all Croats provides the faceless yet very real public a perfectly valid reason to be angry. The Serb-dominated entity Republika Srpska's President Milorad Dodik's statement that the Mladic verdict is a slap in the face of Republika Srpska and that Mladic will always have a place as a hero in the entity is also a perfectly valid reason for the public to be angry.

War Games

After the Mladic verdict, Serbian media reported that 9,000 Bosniaks were being trained for war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, using photos of an airsoft

game as actual photos of the training. Not long after the news broke in Serbian media, the airsoft clubs, whose photographs were used in the articles, reacted and stated that they have nothing to do with Bakir Izetbegovic and that they're just a sports association. The clubs were also surprised that some journalists are not familiar with airsoft and that they've linked it to paramilitary activities, and so they've been calling out to the public not to fall for the writings of certain media.

Hours after Praljak's suicide, a wake was organized in Mostar for the "Hague's 6" – attended by Croat leaders Dragan Covic and Martin Raguz – sending a clear message that Herceg-Bosna still lives, at least in people's minds, and that real-world leadership is ready and willing to keep this issue alive. On the other side, the Bosniak member of the BiH Presidency, Bakir Izetbegovic, spoke out after both ICTY verdicts, both times stating that no one should hold these convicts up as heroes and that he hopes the sentences will serve as a kind of sobering episode in the country and the region. With no meaningful substance or suggestions on how to move forward, though, it seems he is trying to create political relevance for himself which, if we are being honest, he lost a long time ago with the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

What worries me most is that normal, ordinary citizens who don't wake up every day looking to demonstrate hate don't have a voice, and are regularly not only dismissed, but diminished by the politicians who dominate the media playground. The instrumentalization of religion, ethnicity and identity has gone far beyond political games, I fear. We are approaching the realm of war games at this point, having been groomed by the steady and intentional political boil to expect an incident while at the same time deeply hoping it doesn't happen. One of the rare cases of a positive message in the past couple of days was that of Friar Mile Babic. When asked about the prayer event scheduled to take place before the "Hague 6" verdict, he said that a national collectivism is in power – three of them – and we know each will, without any proof, defend its own as innocent, regardless that it is not in line with



the truth. He also noted that it's very important to enable democracy inside these collectivism, without national leaders instructing the people on how to think.

"Without personal freedoms and personal confrontations with the truth, we can't make a civilizational step forward. If we want to become a healthy society and a democratic country, we will have to finish what The Hague started", noted Friar Babic.

When thinking about extremism in this 21st century, the first thing that comes to mind is religious and ethnic fundamentalism, which at its core is an unholy union of doctrine married to political agenda. Over the past couple weeks in this country, I am reminded that this is everywhere, in three different, yet fundamentally similar, forms. We listen to experts talk about extremism at conferences, we read about it, we observe it and we're constantly trying to identify the drivers of it, as if the drivers are hidden or obscured, when in reality they have been lurking in plain sight for over a generation.

The Consequences

This leads me to conclude that we have to go back to the basics, to the system itself. This system, corrupt and extreme at its core, not only enables the main political players to use inflammatory language and nationalistic rhetoric, but rewards them for it. And they are able to do so without fearing any consequences, either from a public captured by patronage and neutralized by marginalization and fear, or from an "International Community" which has long remained effectively mute on these and similar issues, and instead stands on stage with the very same individuals who stoke the embers of extremism to ensure the state of fear and crisis prevents hungry and frustrated people from really challenging this reality, as thousands did in 2014, striking fear – if for only a short time – into the political class.

The consequences these players don't think about, it seems, are those felt in local communities throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina by those forgotten by their governments, where unemployment is so high that ethnic sentiment is the only thing they can hold on to. This is a useful tool for manipulation, but I wonder if the politicians behind these dangerous sentiments think that they can indefinitely control the volatile emotions and dynamics they continue to stoke.

Extremism, but not violent extremism, is an everyday occurrence in Bosnia and Herzegovina. And do I feel safe? No. But that is exactly the point.

How Bosnia Is on the Frontline of Europe's Landmine Battle



More than 80,000 mines and unexploded ordnance still exist in the country, putting more than half-a-million people at direct risk, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross

He's the victim of a European war that had finished even before he was born. Aldin Karavdic, 16, was tending goats near his home in Bosnia and Herzegovina when he stepped on a landmine. He suffered severe injuries and was fortunate not to lose his right leg. He's been left disabled. The accident happened near his home in the hills around Mostar, which was heavily hit during the 1992-95 Bosnian War. Karavdic's is one of a dozen people to be injured by landmines in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the last couple of years. Nine people have been killed over the same period.

Experts say Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of the most landmine-contaminated countries in Europe following the war in the early 1990s.

More than 80,000 mines and unexploded ordnance still exist in the country, putting more than half-a-million people at direct risk, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of the only countries in Europe where landmine contamination is considered 'massive' because it affects more than 100 square kilometers, according to Landmine Monitor 2016. Others include Croatia, Turkey, Afghanistan, Iraq and Angola. ICRC says while progress has been made in clearing Bosnia and

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Herzegovina's landmines the country has put back a deadline to be free of them from 2019 to 2025. The country's case shows that two decades since landmines were banned - a treaty was signed on December 3, 1997 - they are still killing people in Europe.

Twenty years ago an estimated 20,000 people, mainly civilians, were being killed or maimed by them every year. But since the treaty - signed by 162 states - the numbers have gradually decreased to around 6,500 annually. Erik Tollefsen, the ICRC's head of weapons contamination, said while landmine deaths have been decreased over the last two decades there has been a hike in recent years.

"The big problem today is non-state actors," he said.

"In many of these conflicts that we see on the news and in the newspapers every day we see that many more improvised landmines are being used than we are able to clear.

"Today landmines and other unexploded ordnance such as cluster munitions are presenting a huge menace in post-conflict scenarios. It's not just a hindrance to human security, but it is also preventing life from going back to normality."