

Bosnian Serbs Block Srebrenica Massacre Resolution

Author: [Rachel Irwin](#)

They appear to fear that supporting a declaration condemning the outrage would endanger their entity. By Rachel Irwin in The Hague and RFE reporters in Belgrade and Sarajevo

Bosnian Serb legislators in Bosnia's House of Representatives this week blocked a declaration condemning the Srebrenica massacre, leaving it the only country in the region not to have passed such a resolution.

The July 1995 crime, in which some 8,000 Bosniak men and boys were killed by Bosnian Serb forces, is considered the worst single atrocity to occur on European soil since World War Two.

The Bosnian Serb rejection on April 7 came a day after Sulejman Tihic, the leader of Bosnia's Party of Democratic Action, SDA, spoke positively of Belgrade legislators, who narrowly passed a similar resolution about a week before.

Tihic told the Belgrade newspaper Danas that he had accepted an invitation to visit Serbia's capital from President Boris Tadic, and that he hoped the Serbian resolution would "positively influence public opinion and authorities in Republika Srpska in order to make a similar declaration in the Bosnian parliament".

Observers say that this is unlikely to happen anytime soon, especially while the current Republika Srpska, RS, prime minister, Milorad Dodik, is still in power.

"In the past two years, the political situation [in Bosnia] has been deteriorating, including the way in which the political elite talk about the events of the 90s," Bogdan Ivanisevic, a consultant for the International Centre for Transitional Justice, ICTJ, said.

He pointed to an example last September, when Dodik challenged "well established facts" about crimes allegedly committed in Sarajevo and Tuzla by Bosnian Serb forces.

Specifically, Dodik accused the Bosnian army of staging massacres in both cities in order to provoke NATO military action against Bosnian Serb forces. Not surprisingly, his comments infuriated Bosniaks and heightened existing tensions between RS and the rest of Bosnia.

Sinan Alic, acting president of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Bosnia, told IWPR that because of this contentious political climate in Bosnia, it was not realistic to expect a resolution condemning the Srebrenica massacre.

"The political establishment of Republika Srpska sees the resolution as endangering the existence of the entity," he continued. "Based on that, they are mobilising public opinion, and as a result, the forces that understand the importance of adopting the resolution in Republika Srpska are marginalised."

In his interview with the Danas newspaper, SDA leader Tihic noted that awareness and acknowledgement of Srebrenica had been considerably higher during the previous RS administration, which actually completed a report in 2004 on the massacre and issued an apology to victims.

Now, however, tensions are such that it seems to observers as if those steps had never been taken.

"This represents some kind of political and moral regression," sociology professor Janja Bec-Neumann said.

"This [2004 report] has to be publicly presented to people. Some people will say, 'You're lying', but others will say, 'Yes, you have to talk about the facts'."

Shortly before the parliamentary vote in Serbia last week, Slavko Jovicic, a parliamentarian in Dodik's party, the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats, said that if Bosnia were to adopt a resolution condemning the Srebrenica massacre "it would not achieve peace".

"We are going towards new conflicts and confrontations of an unforeseeable magnitude," Jovicic added.

Despite the fact that the Serbian parliament was able to pass a resolution condemning the Srebrenica massacre, the 13-hour debate that preceded the vote on March 31 contained many statements similar to Jovicic's in Bosnia.

"This declaration is a result of the pressure that was put on our country, and the ruling majority is ready to

accept it even though it will bring damage to Serbia, and the extent of that damage is not yet known," member of the Serbian parliament Dragan Todorovic said.

In addition, lawmakers from other opposition groups openly denied that the massacre had ever happened, and some high-ranking representatives from the Democratic Party of Serbia reportedly called the events in Srebrenica "the Serb army's brilliant military operation".

Many others simply left the assembly hall before the vote.

The inflammatory atmosphere during the debate – and the continued denial of Srebrenica and other atrocities during the war – raised questions about whether the resolution actually offered a genuine acknowledgement and apology to victims.

"The sincerity of this enterprise is questionable," Dusan Bogdanovic, an analyst with the Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights in Belgrade, said. "There is some kind of sharp and deep split in Serbian society, and the [parliamentary] debate reflects this gap."

Others expressed concern about the language used in the text of the declaration.

As has been widely reported, the word "genocide" was left out. Instead, the resolution refers to the 2007 decision issued by International Court of Justice in The Hague, which confirmed that the Srebrenica massacre was by legal definition a genocide.

"[The lack of the word genocide] could be viewed as a diplomatic technicality in a normal political climate, where it is sufficient to mention the ruling of the ICJ and everyone ... can know what it means," Bogdanovic said. "But here it is used purposely to mitigate the responsibility of Serbia."

Ivanisevic, of the ICTJ, said that "many in Serbia are still not able to cope with the weight that this word carries".

He said that the text also left out other important details, such as the number of people killed and forcibly displaced – figures that were included in the ICJ decision and the Srebrenica declaration passed by the European parliament in 2009.

Ivanisevic also pointed to another part of the resolution, which expresses the desire for other countries in the region to condemn crimes committed against Serbs.

"Of course, acknowledging crimes is something that should be done, but a declaration of this nature is not the place to seek a transaction of this kind," Ivanisevic said.

"That and the [other] omissions in the text give the impression that the authors were led by a concern of not wanting to anger the electorate as much as by the desire to reach out to Bosnian Muslims, who were victims of the crimes in Srebrenica."

Still, Ivanisevic and other observers stressed that despite its shortcomings, the resolution is, at the very least, important progress in the right direction.

"The positive thing is that they began to talk about it," sociologist Bec-Neumann said.

"That is better than silence, better than the hatred ... and the lack of sympathy that are here the dominant forms of genocide denial."

She spoke of the effect of a "wall of silence" that has dominated Serbia since the 1990s.

"This legacy of silence could be transmitted to the next generation, and it's not good," she continued. "With this declaration, the silence on the political level is broken, and that's important."

Bogdanovic agreed that the resolution has triggered a discussion about the past, something which is still considered taboo in many sectors of Serbian society.

"This debate will be a very difficult one, and it will have ups and downs ... but it will go on – nothing can stop it now," he said.

However, the ultimate impact of the resolution – both on society and politics – remains to be seen.

"We don't know at this point whether this will be the last word coming from Serbia or if it marks the beginning of a societal debate not only about Srebrenica, but about other crimes committed in the 90s by Serb forces as well," Ivanisevic said.

“If the latter happens, the adoption of this declaration will be seen as the beginning of an important change.”

He said that in terms of government action, the “easiest identifiable sign that the authorities really mean it [would be] the arrest of [former Bosnian Serb army general] Ratko Mladic and his surrender to The Hague”.

Mladic allegedly oversaw the Srebrenica massacre and has evaded arrest for years. He is thought to be hiding in Serbia.

As for how it the resolution will ultimately affect the situation in Bosnia, Ivanisevic noted that it could have an impact in the longer term, especially if Dodik is eventually voted out of power.

In addition, he said that the declaration could make it more difficult for those in Serbia and RS to question the legitimacy of the Hague tribunal and deny its findings - a common occurrence since the court’s inception.

“The declaration invokes the judgement of the International Court of Justice, and that in turn very much relies on jurisprudence of the [The Hague tribunal],” Ivanisevic said.

“So, indirectly this declaration has also accepted the findings of [the Hague tribunal], when it comes to what happened in Srebrenica. Of course, this is not something that’s immediately clear to the average person, but that is what this declaration means.”

**Rachel Irwin is an IWPR reporter in The Hague.
RFE reporters in Sarajevo and Belgrade contributed to this report.**

Location: [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#)

Topic: [War crimes](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/bosnian-serbs-block-srebrenica-massacre-resolution>