

The Srebrenica resolution: slim chances for reconciliation

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The UN resolution on the Srebrenica genocide has sparked a series of tensions in the Western Balkans region. On 23 May the UN General Assembly voted in favour of the resolution been put forward by Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Germany and Rwanda, its long-term goal being reconciliation between the nationalities in BiH. The Bosnian side argued that adopting the resolution would put an end to the disgraceful practice of genocide denial, while Serbian political elites claim that the document is targeted against Serbs and labels them a 'genocidal' nation.

Contrary to the Serbian narrative, the resolution does not say anything about the nation's collective responsibility; instead, its overriding goal is to declare 11 July an 'International Day of Reflection and Commemoration of the 1995 Genocide in Srebrenica' (see Appendix). It also condemns genocide denial and the glorification of war criminals, and calls on member states to develop appropriate educational programmes with due regard to historical facts. 171 UN member states participated in the vote, with 84 supporting the resolution, 19 opposing it and 68 abstaining.

Reactions to the resolution across the Western Balkan region

The vote was preceded by intense discussions in BiH and other countries in the region. Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik used this issue to escalate threats that the entity he leads, the Republika Srpska (RS), which is a constituent entity of BiH (see '[Bośnia i Hercegowina – gry separatyzmem Republiki Serbskiej](#)') would secede from Bosnia. Dodik organised a massive protest against the resolution in Banja Luka and announced that a document containing a proposal for the peaceful secession of RS from BiH would be prepared. He also initiated a debate on changing the name of the town of Srebrenica, which is located within RS.

This issue has provoked particularly heated discussions in Montenegro, where about 30% of the population identify themselves as ethnic Serbs. To minimise tensions at home and in relations with Belgrade, the Montenegrin government has put forward amendments to the resolution emphasising the individual nature of responsibility for the crimes committed and the inviolability of the Dayton Agreement provisions. Additionally some Montenegrin MPs, dissatisfied with the government's decision to support the Srebrenica resolution, proposed a similar document regarding the crimes committed in Jasenovac (a concentration camp in the Independent State of Croatia during World War II). This idea was immediately criticised by the Croatian foreign minister, who argued that this move could adversely affect Montenegro's aspirations to join the EU.

The dispute over the resolution has also led to a pre-election scandal in Bulgaria. The local media revealed correspondence in which the interim prime minister Dimitar Glavchev (formerly linked with the GERB party) pressured the Bulgarian ambassador to the UN to change the country's position on the document and vote against it. GERB's current leader and former prime minister Boyko Borisov maintained close relations with Serbia's president Aleksandar Vučić. The attempt to change the stance was most likely Borisov's initiative. Ultimately, however, Bulgaria voted in favour of the resolution.

Vučić's diplomacy and propaganda arithmetic

President Vučić actively lobbied for UN members to vote against the resolution, or at least to abstain or not participate in the vote at all. The Serbian president's diplomacy relies on personal contacts and a transactional approach (such as offering countries visa liberalisation or financial aid in exchange for a decision to his liking). For example Hungary was the only EU country to vote against the resolution, which was a result of Vučić's close ties with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (in addition Slovakia, Greece and Cyprus abstained from the vote). The Serbian president persuaded countries that share his strong anti-Western sentiments, such as Russia, Belarus, China, North Korea, Syria, Cuba and Nicaragua, to vote against the document (Serbia, as the successor state to Yugoslavia, still maintains close ties with some of these nations).

Even though the resolution was adopted, the governments of Republika Srpska and Serbia declared a "moral victory", claiming that the document lacked proper international legitimacy. Billboards and posters in RS and Serbia prominently displayed the result as 109:84 (the countries that did not participate in the vote, abstained or voted against were all added together). The day after the results were announced, numerous demonstrations were held to celebrate the 'victory' of Serbian diplomacy at the UN. Vučić used the resolution to reinforce his image as the leader of all Serbs and to stir nationalist sentiments in the region. The EU states' failure to adopt a unified stance among has also made it clear that the EU has no cohesive approach to the Western Balkans, even as regards symbolic issues.

Prospects: reconciliation remains a distant goal

One of the intentions of the resolution was to facilitate the reconciliation process between ethnic Bosniaks and Serbs. The document is both morally and legally justified, since the Srebrenica massacre has been recognised as an act of genocide by international courts (see Appendix). However, the resolution was adopted too late, and has reignited disputes over the traumatic past amid increasing instability in the region.

Discussions concerning the UN resolution and its adoption have provided additional fuel for the nationalist narratives used by Vučić and Dodik, who present any attempts to address the crimes committed by the Serbian military during the wars in the former Yugoslavia as attacks on the contemporary Serbian nation. Previous efforts to counter Serbian historical revisionism, such as amendments to the BiH criminal code that criminalise the denial of the Srebrenica genocide and the glorification of war criminals, have not yet been effectively enforced. Therefore, given the fact that history is being used here for political purposes and there are no grassroots initiatives to mend fences between the two nations, genuine Bosniak-Serb reconciliation seems a distant prospect. In the near future these issues will continue to provoke more tension, especially before 11 July, when the International Day of Reflection and Commemoration of the 1995 Genocide in Srebrenica will be celebrated for

the first time.

APPENDIX

The Srebrenica Genocide. In July 1995, during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Bosnian Serb Army (Army of Republika Srpska, VRS) killed over 8000 Bosnian Muslims who were in the UN safe area near Srebrenica. The Srebrenica massacre was one of the reasons for the start of NATO's Operation Deliberate Force, during which military targets of the Bosnian Serb forces were bombed. The Srebrenica massacre has been recognised as an act of genocide by both the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the International Court of Justice.