



Research Article

International Intervention and Security Challenges: Has Local Ownership in Bosnia and Herzegovina Proven Successful?

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Abstract: This article examines the post-war security challenges and fragile peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, emphasizing the ongoing debate between international intervention and local ownership. Following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Bosnia and Herzegovina has been significantly influenced by external actors, notably the Office of the High Representative, which has played a crucial role in maintaining peace and implementing reforms. The article critically assesses the balance between international oversight and fostering local governance. While liberal peacebuilding has its limitations, prioritizing local ownership also presents challenges, particularly amid ongoing security threats and political instability. Despite criticisms, this analysis argues that international intervention remains a necessary “lesser evil” to maintain peace, especially in the context of secessionist risks and potential conflict. An integrated approach that aligns international and local efforts is essential for Bosnia and Herzegovina’s long-term stability and self-sufficiency.

Keywords: Bosnia and Herzegovina, international intervention, liberal peacebuilding, Office of the High Representative, local ownership.

Introduction

After the death of Josip Broz Tito, the country's long-term leader, in 1980, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia fell into a deep political crisis and disintegrated in the 1990s. Earlier, under Tito's leadership, there had always been a certain balance between the country's different republics and national groups, maintained through a carefully managed system of federalism.¹ Tito's passing created a void in this balance, which was duly filled by Slobodan Milosević's opportunistic and power-hungry ambitions that grew immensely popular.

Milošević attempted to use national-socialist rhetoric to consolidate power over the institutions in Serbia, Vojvodina, Kosovo, and Montenegro, thereby significantly altering the political balancing map of the Yugoslav Federation. His policies contributed to escalating tensions among the republics, mainly due to his expressed desire for a "Greater Serbia" that aimed at uniting all Serbs in a single state. This made other Yugoslav groups wary of him, increased their desire for independence, and ultimately contributed to the collapse of the state.²

Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), and Macedonia (now North Macedonia) separated from Yugoslavia from June 1991 to April 1992, while the remaining two, Serbia and Montenegro, formed a federation and tried to retain the name Yugoslavia. The wars of separation began in June 1991 when Slovenia and Croatia declared independence, which led to the Ten-Day War in Slovenia. During this conflict, the Serbian-led Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) attempted to regain control and suppress the independence movement but later agreed to withdraw to Croatia, where it became fully involved in the Serbian effort to take over the control of sizeable parts of Croatia.³ After about a year of fighting in Croatia, JNA was forced to withdraw to BiH, where it finally transformed into a Serbian Army.⁴

Finally, BiH, with its mixed population of Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs, became the main theater of war during the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. A state-wide referendum on Bosnian independence was held on February 29 and March 1, 1992, with over 60 percent of participants voting in favor, while the majority of Bosnian Serbs boycotted it. Similarly to Croatia, in January 1992 the unelected

¹ Sabrina P. Ramet, *Nationalism and Federalism in Yugoslavia, 1962-1991* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), <https://doi.org/10.2979/NationalismandFedera>.

² Louis Sell, *Slobodan Milosevic and the Destruction of Yugoslavia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822385257>; Sonja Biserko, *Yugoslavia's Implosion: The Fatal Attraction of Serbian Nationalism* (Oslo: Norwegian Helsinki Committee, 2012), https://nhc.no/content/uploads/2018/07/YugoslaviasImplosion_book.pdf.

³ Marie-Janine Calic, *A History of Yugoslavia* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2019), 297-300, https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/purduepress_ebooks/46/.

⁴ Marko Attila Hoare, "The War of Yugoslav Succession," in *Central and Southeast European Politics since 1989*, ed. Sabrina P. Ramet and Christine M. Hassenstab (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 111-135, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108752466.006>.

and self-declared Bosnian Serb Assembly proclaimed the “Serbian Republic of BiH,” which was later renamed Republika Srpska.⁵ However, since it was perceived as part of Milošević’s Greater Serbia project and lacked democratic legitimacy, it was not recognized internationally.

By April 1992, the European Community and the United States officially recognized the Republic of BiH as an independent state, as their condition for recognition—an open state-wide referendum—had been met. The Republic of BiH joined the United Nations in May 1992, alongside Croatia and Slovenia. However, BiH did not enjoy lasting international recognition without facing continued aggressive attacks from Serbian paramilitaries. These forces, backed and encouraged by Milošević’s regime in Serbia, launched attacks across the newly independent country, with military and logistical support from the JNA, aiming to eradicate Bosniak and Croat communities and establish a mono-ethnic Serb territory through violence and territorial control.⁶

The dissolution of Yugoslavia marked a shift in international influence in the Balkans, transitioning from the goal of maintaining Yugoslav unity to managing the stability of its successor states. This shift was characterized by the European Community’s intervention and the Arbitration Commission, which played a pivotal role in recognizing new states, including BiH. Despite gaining sovereignty, BiH soon faced devastating conflict, leading to the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement, which reshaped its governance and established the Office of the High Representative (OHR), tasked with overseeing the civilian aspects of peace agreements, facilitating the political process, and ensuring democratic standards.⁷ This

⁵ Calic, *A History of Yugoslavia*, 301.

⁶ Iva Vukušić, *Serbian Paramilitaries and the Breakup of Yugoslavia: State Connections and Patterns of Violence* (Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2023); Hikmet Karčić, *Torture, Humiliate, Kill: Inside the Bosnian Serb Camp System* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2022), 23-24, <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.12079875>.

⁷ The Office of the High Representative is an ad hoc international institution. Under Annex 10 of the General Framework Agreement for Peace, usually known as Dayton Peace Agreement, the OHR has the status of a diplomatic mission to BiH. In general terms, the High Representative collaborates with people and institutions of BiH and the International Community with an aim of ensuring the peaceful and viable democracy in the country. Under BiH’s constitutional order and the position of the OHR, the High Representative has the power to enact laws, dismiss elected officials and annul the decisions of the Constitutional Court. For further information, see “Office of the High Representative: General Information,” accessed May 11, 2023, www.ohr.int/about-ohr/general-information. For a time, after the Dayton Accords were signed, the OHR had no enforcement powers. Its role was to act as a guarantor of the Accords and to “facilitate” the signatories’ own efforts to implement the peace settlement. The High Representative’s role was to be that of a senior foreign politician-diplomat with sufficient moral weight to contribute to the settlement of disputes. However, especially after the Peace Implementation Council (PIC) granted the ‘Bonn Powers’ in 1997, this ad hoc international institution effectively became the executive and legislative body of BiH. At the Bonn conference, the PIC called on the High Representative to remove public officials from their position for violating legal commitments and the Dayton Peace Agreement, and to take appropriate legal action if the BiH legislature

international oversight aimed to stabilize BiH during its post-conflict reconstruction.⁸ However, the balance between external intervention and local ownership⁹ has been a persistent challenge. The Office of the High Representative, wielding substantial “Bonn powers,” played a crucial role in maintaining political stability and advancing governance, anti-corruption, and human rights reforms, including amending Entity Constitutional Laws.

As time passed, the need for renewed interventionism emerged, with the extra-constitutional powers of the Office of the High Representative becoming increasingly prominent in BiH’s governance. This raises critical questions: Can democratic principles be temporarily suspended for peacebuilding? Can a post-conflict nation transform into a stable democracy through external impositions? The debate over the Office of the High Representative’s role highlights the complexities of balancing international intervention with local ownership.¹⁰

Critics argue that the Office of the High Representative’s continued presence undermines local sovereignty, fostering dependency on international oversight

failed to do so. For a comprehensive assessment of the Office of the High Representative’s mandate, See Tim Banning, “The ‘Bonn Powers’ of the High Representative in Bosnia Herzegovina: Tracing a Legal Figment,” *Goettingen Journal of International Law* 6, no. 2 (2014): 259-302, <https://doi.org/10.3249/1868-1581-6-2-BANNING>.

⁸ While the Office of the High Representative was mandated to oversee the civilian aspects of the peace process in BiH, the implementation of the military clauses of the peace agreement was assigned to the NATO-led Implementation Force. A force of up to 60,000 NATO soldiers was deployed with the objective of ensuring the end of hostilities, monitoring the disarmament process, and, from 1997, playing a more active role in arresting war criminals and supporting the implementation of the civilian aspects of the peace agreement. By the time of the September 1996 elections, NATO had determined that the Implementation Force had successfully accomplished its mission. However, due to the persistence of instability on the ground, a complete withdrawal of forces from Bosnia would not have been prudent. Consequently, in December 1996, a smaller Stabilization Force was deployed to assist in maintaining a secure and stable environment, thereby facilitating civil and political reconstruction. See Soeren Keil and Anastasiia Kudlenko, “Bosnia and Herzegovina 20 Years after Dayton: Complexity Born of Paradoxes,” *International Peacekeeping* 22, no. 5 (October 20, 2015): 474-475, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2015.1103651>. The Stabilization Force continued its operations until 2004, when it was succeeded by the European Union’s Operation Althea, which remains in Bosnia to this day. European Union Force’s mission is to ensure a safe and secure environment, support the ongoing peace process, and contribute to the stability of the region. See “European Union Force in BiH – Mission Background,” 2023, <https://www.euforbih.org/index.php/background>.

⁹ In the context of BiH, local ownership means empowering locals, institutions, and political and civil society to play a bigger role in BiH governance, reforms, and integration processes while considering external support and intervention.

¹⁰ Gerrit S.A. Dijkstra and Jos C.N. Raadschelders, “The High Representative in Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Unusual Institutional Arrangement of a Non-Authoritarian, Yet Controlled, Democracy,” *World Affairs* 185, no.2 (Summer 2022): 285-311, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00438200221087971>.

and impeding the growth of autonomous local institutions.¹¹ Concerns also persist regarding the lack of mechanisms for reviewing its decisions and ensuring fairness in the dismissal of local officials or the passage of laws.¹²

The uncertainty surrounding the OHR's mandate in BiH persists. While its mission is to prepare BiH for self-sufficiency, it remains unclear what criteria will determine this and when the Office's mandate will expire. Russia, a member of the Peace Implementation Council's Steering Board, advocates for the Office's closure, contingent on fulfilling the "5+2 agenda," benchmarks set by the Peace Implementation Council's Steering Board in 2008. The five objectives include resolving state and defense property issues, completing the Brčko Final Award, ensuring fiscal sustainability, and entrenching the rule of law.¹³

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- ¹¹ Gerald Knaus and Felix Martin, "Lessons from Bosnia and Herzegovina: Travails of the European Raj," *Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 3 (July 2003): 60-74, www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/lessons-from-bosnia-and-herzegovina-travails-of-the-european-raj/; Oliver P. Richmond and Jason Franks, "Between Partition and Pluralism: The Bosnian Jigsaw and an 'Ambivalent Peace,'" *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 9, no. 1-2 (March 2009): 17-38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683850902723389>; Maria O'Reilly, "Muscular Interventionism: Gender, Power and Liberal Peacebuilding in Post-Conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 14, no. 4 (December 2012): 529-548, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2012.726096>; Matthew Parish, "The Demise of the Dayton Protectorate," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 1, no. 11 (2007); Richard Caplan, "Who Guards the Guardians? International Accountability in Bosnia," *International Peacekeeping* 12, no. 3 (October 2005): 463-476, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533310500074549>; David Chandler, "Introduction: Peace without Politics?" *International Peacekeeping* 12, no. 3 (October 2005): 307-321, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533310500073988>; David Chandler, "From Dayton to Europe," *International Peacekeeping* 12, no. 3 (October 2005): 336-349, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533310500074077>; David Chandler, *Bosnia: Faking Democracy After Dayton* (London: Pluto Press, 2000); Vivienne Jabri, "Peacebuilding, the Local and the International: A Colonial or a Postcolonial Rationality?" *Peacebuilding* 1, no. 1 (March 2013): 3-16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2013.756253>; Richard Caplan, "International Authority and State Building: The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations* 10, no. 1 (August 2004): 53-65, <https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-01001006>; Richard Caplan, "Partner or Patron? International Civil Administration and Local Capacity-Building," *International Peacekeeping* 11, no. 2 (June 2004): 229-247, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1353331042000237256>; Timothy Donais, *Peacebuilding and Local Ownership: Post-Conflict Consensus-Building*, *Studies in Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding* 5 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 78; Roland Kostić, "Nationbuilding as an Instrument of Peace? Exploring Local Attitudes towards International Nationbuilding and Reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Civil Wars* 10, no. 4 (December 2008): 384-412, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698240802354482>.
- ¹² Caplan, "International Authority and State Building," 62; Knaus and Martin, "Lessons from Bosnia and Herzegovina: Travails of the European Raj"; Banning, "The 'Bonn Powers' of the High Representative in Bosnia Herzegovina."
- ¹³ Kurt Bassuener, "A Durable Oligarchy: Bosnia and Herzegovina's False Post-War Democratic Transition," in *Building Democracy in the Yugoslav Successor States: Accomplishments, Setbacks, and Challenges since 1990*, ed. Sabrina P. Ramet, Christine M.

The first condition is signing the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA), which BiH completed in 2008. The second condition's "elastic clause" grants the Peace Implementation Council discretion in determining whether these benchmarks are met, underscoring the complexities of international governance in BiH. Although the BiH authorities would fulfill all five objectives, it remains unclear what would trigger the PIC's Steering Board to issue a positive assessment regarding BiH's full compliance with the Dayton Peace Agreement. Russia's push for closure contrasts with the EU's emphasis on sustained intervention to prevent regression and maintain fragile peace.

The ongoing presence of the OHR and the European Union Force underscores the challenges of achieving stable governance in BiH. Political blockages, such as efforts to transfer state competencies to the Republika Srpska entity and secession threats, complicate the prospects of closing the Office of the High Representative. Ironically, political instability in BiH has reinforced, rather than diminished, the need for international oversight.

The 2024 OHR report highlights significant progress in BiH's EU integration, marked by the European Council's decision to begin accession negotiations. While this is a "game changer," the report cautions that this opportunity alone may not resolve threats to BiH's stability. Concerns persist over Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik's attempts to undermine BiH's institutions, which could derail the country's progress.¹⁴

In theory, successful EU integration should facilitate the closure of the OHR.¹⁵ However, this has not materialized, as EU conditionality alone has proven insufficient to drive necessary reforms. The stronger the OHR role, the slimmer BiH's chances of EU membership – a paradox illustrating the complex relationship between external intervention and local ownership.

BiH faces a central dilemma: Can international intervention align with the development of a sovereign, democratic state? This debate reflects broader discussions on balancing international intervention with local ownership. While OHR plays a vital role in maintaining peace and preventing regression, it raises questions about the legitimacy of external governance and the long-term prospects

Hassenstab, and Ola Listhaug (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, May 2017), 216-255, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316848289>.

¹⁴ "65th Report of the High Representative for Implementation of the Peace Agreement on Bosnia and Herzegovina to the Secretary-General of the UN," Office of the High Representative, May 29, 2024, www.ohr.int/65th-report-of-the-high-representative-for-implementation-of-the-peace-agreement-on-bosnia-and-herzegovina-to-the-secretary-general-of-the-un/.

¹⁵ Susanne Fraczek, Beáta Huszka, and Zsolt Körtvélyesi, "The Role of Human Rights in the EU's External Action in the Western Balkans and Turkey," *Fostering Human Rights among European Policies* (European Commission, April 2016), <https://repository.gchu.manrights.org/handle/20.500.11825/91>; Hamza Preljević and Mirza Ljubović, "Contested Statehood and EU Integration: The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Politics in Central Europe* 20, no. 3 (September 2024): 403-435, <https://doi.org/10.2478/pce-2024-0018>.

for local ownership. Navigating this balance is crucial to ensuring that international involvement supports, rather than undermines, BiH's goal of becoming a self-sustaining, stable state within the European framework.

Should a consensus emerge to reduce or phase out the OHR, a carefully managed transition plan would be essential to maintain stability and support ongoing reforms without direct involvement from the Office. This article examines the post-war security challenges, fragile peace, and the future of BiH, analyzing the dilemma of international intervention versus local ownership. While acknowledging both the shortcomings and legitimacy issues of the OHR, the authors argue that international intervention remains necessary due to persistent security challenges within and surrounding the country.¹⁶

Liberal Peacebuilding

Initially defined in broad and abstract terms as the creation of structures to prevent the recurrence of conflict,¹⁷ peacebuilding began to take shape and be implemented in the post-Cold War era, heavily influenced by liberal peace theory. This theory posits that liberal democratic states are inherently more peaceful than non-liberal ones, both domestically and internationally. Consequently, the liberal peacebuilding agenda—advocating for the establishment of lasting peace in war-torn countries through external interventions that promote liberal democratic values, stable institutions, and market-oriented economies—gained prominence in the post-Cold War era.

Post-conflict interventions have often followed a standardized, top-down approach emphasizing Western political and cultural norms and neoliberal economics, driven by a global consensus on achieving peace through liberalization.¹⁸ This liberal agenda entails interventions by powerful states, international organizations, and financial institutions that encourage—or even impose—democratization, good governance, respect for human rights, and the rule of law.¹⁹ Despite

¹⁶ See more on the dissolution of Yugoslavia: Misha Glenny, *The Fall of Yugoslavia: The Third Balkan War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996); Misha Glenny, *The Balkans, 1804-2012: Nationalism, War and the Great Powers* (London: Granta Books, 2017); Noam Chomsky, *Yugoslavia: Peace, War, and Dissolution* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2018).

¹⁷ Boutros Boutros-Ghali, "An Agenda for Peace: Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peace-keeping," *International Relations* 11, no. 3 (December 1992): 201-218, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004711789201100302>.

¹⁸ Oliver P. Richmond, *Failed Statebuilding: Intervention, the State, and the Dynamics of Peace Formation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 64; Roger MacGinty, Madhav Joshi, and SungYong Lee, "Liberal Peace Implementation and the Durability of Post-war Peace," *International Peacekeeping* 26, no. 4 (August 2019): 457-486, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2019.1618189>.

¹⁹ Roland Paris, *At War's End: Building Peace After Civil Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 37; Oliver P. Richmond, "The Globalization of Responses to Conflict and the Peacebuilding Consensus," *Cooperation and Conflict* 39, no. 2 (June 2004): 129-150, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836704042865>; Oliver P. Richmond,

the high hopes for top-down liberal peacebuilding efforts in numerous conflicts—from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo to East Timor, Sierra Leone, Haiti, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, and Afghanistan—the desired outcomes of sustainable peace and democratization have yet to be achieved.²⁰

A growing body of literature has critiqued the top-down, interventionist liberal peacebuilding approach to post-conflict reconstruction, highlighting its limitations and negative consequences.²¹ While some studies question the effectiveness of liberal peacebuilding in achieving sustainable peace, arguing that it has often failed,²² others challenge its legitimacy, denouncing it as “aggressive

“UN Peace Operations and the Dilemmas of the Peacebuilding Consensus,” *International Peacekeeping* 11, no. 1 (March 2004): 83-101, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533331042000228403>.

²⁰ Richmond, *Failed Statebuilding*; Susanna Campbell, David Chandler, and Meera Sabaratnam, eds., *A Liberal Peace?: The Problems and Practices of Peacebuilding* (London: Zed Books, 2011); Mats R. Berdal, *Building Peace After War* (London: Routledge, 2009); Daniel Bochsler, Adis Merdzanovic, and Davor Petrić, “Turning International Intervention into Domestic Cooperation in Post-War Societies,” *International Peacekeeping* 27, no. 1 (January 2020): 125, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2019.1680291>; John Karlsrud, “From Liberal Peacebuilding to Stabilization and Counterterrorism,” *International Peacekeeping* 26, no. 1 (January 2019): 1-21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2018.1502040>; Toby Dodge, “The Failure of Peacebuilding in Iraq: The Role of Consociationalism and Political Settlements,” *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 15, no. 4 (August 2021): 459-475, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2020.1850036>; Toby Dodge, “Afghanistan and the Failure of Liberal Peacebuilding,” *Survival* 63, no. 5 (September 2021): 47-58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2021.1982197>; Stein Sundstøl Eriksen, “The Liberal Peace Is Neither: Peacebuilding, State Building and the Reproduction of Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo,” *International Peacekeeping* 16, no. 5 (November 2009): 652-666, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533310903303289>.

²¹ Oliver P. Richmond, “Failed Statebuilding versus Peace Formation,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 48, no. 3 (September 2013): 378-400, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836713482816>; Kirsti Samuels, “Post-Conflict Peace-Building and Constitution-Making,” *Chicago Journal of International Law* 6, no. 2 (2006): 663, <https://chicagounbound.u-chicago.edu/cjil/vol6/iss2/10>; Berdal, *Building Peace After War*; David Chandler, *Peacebuilding: The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1997-2017*, Rethinking Peace and Conflict Studies (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-50322-6>.

²² Chandler, *Bosnia: Faking Democracy After Dayton*; David Chandler, *Empire in Denial: The Politics of State-Building* (London: Pluto Press, July 2006), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt18fs393>; Roger MacGinty, “Indigenous Peace-Making Versus the Liberal Peace,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 43, no. 2 (June 2008): 139-163, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836708089080>; Oliver P. Richmond, *The Transformation of Peace*, 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Neil Cooper, “Review Article: On the Crisis of the Liberal Peace,” *Conflict, Security & Development* 7, no. 4 (2007): 605-616, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14678800701693025>; Oliver P. Richmond, “Becoming Liberal, Unbecoming Liberalism: Liberal-Local Hybridity via the Everyday as a Response to the Paradoxes of Liberal Peacebuilding,” *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 3, no. 3 (November 2009): 324-344, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502970903086719>.

social engineering”²³ or a modern form of colonial “civilizing missions.”²⁴ This critique suggests that the Western interventionist belief—that the West has a moral obligation to modernize, democratize, and develop “others”—is fundamentally at odds with liberal and democratic values.²⁵

Despite the consensus that state-building and peacebuilding should be grounded in liberal and democratic principles, there is an assumption that post-conflict countries might need to remain under tutelage to become sufficiently liberal and democratic.²⁶ This creates a paradox: on the one hand, democratic governance and local ownership are promoted, but on the other, top-down decisions and reforms are imposed by international actors.²⁷

Criticism of top-down liberal peacebuilding has led to the emergence of new approaches, often described as the “local turn” in peacebuilding. These approaches emphasize the significant role of bottom-up dynamics and advocate for local actors to be active participants in the peacebuilding process rather than passive recipients. The goal is to counterbalance top-down, standardized practices that often prioritize official “big peace” processes with insights from the grassroots level.²⁸ The inclusion of local practices and perspectives is seen as essential for achieving sustainable peace, which is difficult to attain through top-down approaches alone.²⁹

²³ Michael Pugh, “Transformation in the Political Economy of Bosnia since Dayton,” in *Peace without Politics? Ten Years of State-Building in Bosnia*, ed. David Chandler (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 142–156; O’Reilly, “Muscular Interventionism,” 530.

²⁴ Nemanja Džuverović, “‘To Romanticise or Not to Romanticise the Local’: Local Agency and Peacebuilding in the Balkans,” *Conflict, Security & Development* 21, no. 1 (January 2021): 21–41, 22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2021.1888517>; Roland Paris, “International Peacebuilding and the ‘Mission Civilisatrice,’” *Review of International Studies* 28, no. 4 (October 2002): 637–656, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026021050200637X>.

²⁵ Vjollca Krasniqi, “Imagery, Gender and Power: The Politics of Representation in Post-War Kosova,” *Feminist Review* 86, no. 1 (July 2007): 1–23, 7, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400354>.

²⁶ Chandler, “Introduction,” 311; Caplan, “International Authority and State Building,” 53.

²⁷ Richmond and Franks, “Between Partition and Pluralism,” 34; O’Reilly, “Muscular Interventionism,” 532.

²⁸ Roger MacGinty, “Everyday Peace: Bottom-up and Local Agency in Conflict-Affected Societies,” *Security Dialogue* 45, no. 6 (December 2014): 548–564, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010614550899>; Roger MacGinty and Pamina Firchow, “Top-Down and Bottom-Up Narratives of Peace and Conflict,” *Politics* 36, no. 3 (August 2016): 308–323, 311–312, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395715622967>; Roger MacGinty and Oliver P. Richmond, “The Local Turn in Peace Building: A Critical Agenda for Peace,” *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 5 (June 2013): 763–783, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2013.800750>; Patricia Justino, Tilman Brück, and Philip Verwimp, eds., *A Micro-Level Perspective on the Dynamics of Conflict, Violence, and Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199664597.001.0001>; Richmond, “Becoming Liberal, Unbecoming Liberalism.”

²⁹ MacGinty and Firchow, “Top-Down and Bottom-Up Narratives of Peace and Conflict,” 309; MacGinty and Richmond, “The Local Turn in Peace Building.”

It has been suggested that lasting peace through international intervention is unlikely to foster democratic development via standardized third-party solutions, as imposing viable local institutions is challenging. Moreover, outside intervention is often unwelcome by the government and people of the affected country,³⁰ as it is perceived as an intrusion on sovereignty.³¹ A common critique of liberal peacebuilding is the exclusion of local actors and dynamics, with a preference for “internationals” over “locals” as peacebuilding agents.³² Richmond, one of the most prominent critics, argues that this approach creates a “virtual peace” reliant on long-term external intervention.³³ In response to these deficiencies, proponents of more effective and comprehensive approaches advocate for a locally-owned perspective in peacebuilding.³⁴

Peacebuilding and Statebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina

BiH is often cited as a prime example of the limitations and failures of the liberal peacebuilding approach. The post-conflict political and institutional arrangements, which Merdzanovic terms “imposed consociationalism,” represent one of the most controversial instances of top-down liberal peacebuilding.³⁵ Following the brutal 1992-1995 war, BiH became known as “the world capital of interventionism.”³⁶

The Dayton Peace Accords, which ended the war in 1995, established an international administration with unprecedented control mechanisms over affairs in BiH. These included election management, oversight of local authorities, hu-

³⁰ The September 1998 elections in BiH illustrate the potential unintended consequences of third-party intervention. International support for reformist candidates, including financial assistance, appears to have contributed to their electoral defeat. Such support resonated negatively with voters, who resented the International Community’s involvement. See Caplan, “International Authority and State Building,” 59.

³¹ Kimberly Stanton, “Pitfalls of Intervention: Sovereignty as a Foundation for Human Rights,” *Harvard International Review* 16, no. 1 (1993): 14-16, 15.

³² MacGinty, “Indigenous Peace-Making Versus the Liberal Peace”; Roger MacGinty, “Hybrid Peace: The Interaction Between Top-Down and Bottom-Up Peace,” *Security Dialogue* 41, no. 4 (2010): 391-412, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010610374312>.

³³ Oliver P. Richmond, “The Problem of Peace: Understanding the ‘Liberal Peace,’” *Conflict, Security & Development* 6, no. 3 (October 2006): 307-310, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14678800600933480>.

³⁴ Séverine Autesserre, *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 102, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107280366>.

³⁵ Adis Merdzanovic, “‘Imposed Consociationalism’: External Intervention and Power Sharing in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” *Peacebuilding* 5, no. 1 (January 2017): 22-35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2016.1264918>.

³⁶ David Chandler, “Bosnia: The Democracy Paradox,” *Current History* 100, no. 644 (March 2001): 114-119, 116, <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2001.100.644.114>.

man rights monitoring, and the implementation of regional arms control programs.³⁷ Despite significant international efforts to rebuild institutions, promote democratization, and create a multi-ethnic, inclusive society—with billions spent on the peace process and transforming the country into an “NGO haven”³⁸—the liberal peacebuilding model has failed to achieve sustainable peace in BiH.³⁹ The country remains deeply divided along ethno-nationalist lines, beset by political instability, persistent separatist threats, and economic challenges.⁴⁰ For many scholars, this underscores that the top-down peacebuilding approach fails to address the complex social, cultural, and political dynamics inherent in war-torn societies.⁴¹

The shortcomings of liberal peacebuilding are clear and undeniable. In this context, local ownership offers a valuable bottom-up perspective that can address some weaknesses of the top-down approach. However, the intense criticism of top-down liberal peacebuilding reflects unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved in war-torn countries.⁴² While international interventions have often fallen short of establishing positive peace, they have effectively achieved the critical goal of ensuring negative peace by halting war and violence.⁴³

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Dayton Peace Agreement was primarily designed to end the violence and stop the war,⁴⁴ although it also included elements to promote positive peace.⁴⁵ Ending war and restoring security are essential steps toward achieving positive peace, but positive peace cannot be realized if negative peace remains at risk. In post-conflict countries, peace and security are

³⁷ Roberto Belloni, “Civil Society and Peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” *Journal of Peace Research* 38, no. 2 (March 2001): 163-180, 164, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343301038002003>; Chandler, *Bosnia: Faking Democracy After Dayton*, 34.

³⁸ Belloni, “Civil Society and Peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina.”

³⁹ David Chandler, “Denying the Bosnian Protectorate,” in *Empire in Denial: The Politics of State-Building*, 123-142, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt18fs393>.

⁴⁰ Keil and Kudlenko, “Bosnia and Herzegovina 20 Years after Dayton.”

⁴¹ Richmond, *The Transformation of Peace*; Richmond and Franks, “Between Partition and Pluralism”; Caplan, “International Authority and State Building”; Caplan, “Who Guards the Guardians?”

⁴² Roland Paris, “Saving Liberal Peacebuilding,” *Review of International Studies* 36, no. 2 (April 2010): 337-365, 339-340, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000057>.

⁴³ Johan Galtung and Dietrich Fischer, “Positive and Negative Peace,” in *Johan Galtung: Pioneer of Peace Research*, vol. 5 (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, 2013), 173-178, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-32481-9_17.

⁴⁴ Florian Bieber, “Building Impossible States? State-Building Strategies and EU Membership in the Western Balkans,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, no. 10 (December 2011): 1783-1802, 1783, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2011.618679>; Elizabeth M. Cousens and Charles K. Cater, *Toward Peace in Bosnia: Implementing the Dayton Accords*, International Peace Academy Occasional Paper Series (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001); Ivo H. Daalder, *Getting to Dayton: The Making of America’s Bosnia Policy* (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2000).

⁴⁵ Keil and Kudlenko, “Bosnia and Herzegovina 20 Years after Dayton,” 473.

more likely to be sustained with international intervention.⁴⁶ Therefore, in any post-conflict scenario where security threats persist, prioritizing local ownership over international intervention may not be viable.

The success or failure of peacebuilding efforts is often attributed to collaboration and reconciliation among the conflicting parties. However, in the absence of such cooperation, it is beyond the international community's capacity to transform the parties' political positions. In post-conflict situations where local actors are not inclined toward peace and cooperation, international efforts are better focused on preventing the re-emergence of political crises or armed conflict rather than attempting to transform local actors.

The liberal peacebuilding approach reflects an inherent distrust of local actors, whereas post-liberal approaches often exhibit excessive optimism about the intentions and capacities of the locals. More balanced perspectives, such as the hybrid peace approach⁴⁷ or complexity-sensitive peacebuilding,⁴⁸ are needed. These approaches advocate for interaction and collaboration between local

⁴⁶ Virginia Page Fortna, *Does Peacekeeping Work?: Shaping Belligerents' Choices after Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 104-126, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt7sv7j>.

⁴⁷ Roberto Belloni, "Hybrid Peace Governance: Its Emergence and Significance," *Global Governance* 18, no. 1 (2012): 21-38, <https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-01801004>; Elly Harrowell and Alpaslan Özerdem, "Negotiating Reconstruction: Understanding Hybridity in Sri Lanka's Post-Disaster and Post-Conflict Reconstruction Processes," *Peacebuilding* 8, no. 2 (April 2020): 218-239, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2018.1551304>; Roger MacGinty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance: Hybrid Forms of Peace* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230307032>; MacGinty, "Hybrid Peace: The Interaction Between Top-Down and Bottom-Up Peace"; Laura McLeod, "A Feminist Approach to Hybridity: Understanding Local and International Interactions in Producing Post-Conflict Gender Security," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 9, no. 1 (2015): 48-69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2014.980112>; Roger MacGinty and Oliver Richmond, "The Fallacy of Constructing Hybrid Political Orders: A Reappraisal of the Hybrid Turn in Peacebuilding," *International Peacekeeping* 23, no. 2 (2016): 219-239, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2015.1099440>; Roger MacGinty and Gurchathen Sanghera, "Hybridity in Peacebuilding and Development: An Introduction," *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 7, no. 2 (2012): 3-8, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15423166.2012.742800>; Roger MacGinty, "A Material Turn in International Relations: The 4x4, Intervention and Resistance," *Review of International Studies* 43, no. 5 (2017): 855-874, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210517000146>; Roger MacGinty, "Where Is the Local? Critical Localism and Peacebuilding," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 5 (2015): 840-856, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1045482>.

⁴⁸ Elisa Randazzo and Ignasi Torrent, "Reframing Agency in Complexity-Sensitive Peacebuilding," *Security Dialogue* 52, no. 1 (2021): 3-20, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010620904306>. See also Cedric De Coning, "Adaptive Peacebuilding," *International Affairs* 94, no. 2 (2018): 301-317, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix251>; Thania Paffenholz, "Perpetual Peacebuilding: A New Paradigm to Move Beyond the Linearity of Liberal Peacebuilding," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 15, no. 3 (2021): 367-385, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2021.1925423>.

and international actors without idealizing the local ones. It is important to recognize that “local” does not refer to a single, homogeneous category of actors applicable in all cases. Instead, it includes diverse groups with varying interests and objectives, which can differ significantly depending on the specific context.⁴⁹ Thus, it is unrealistic to assume that local actors are inherently committed to peace and non-violent solutions.⁵⁰

In BiH, while existing studies have examined the marginalization of local actors in top-down liberal peacebuilding efforts and questioned the role and legitimacy of international institutions like the Office of the High Representative, little attention has been given to the alternative scenario of increased local ownership and reduced international intervention. Therefore, whether this scenario could lead to a peaceful and stable future for BiH remains unclear. This article argues that international intervention might be considered the “lesser evil,” akin to Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*,⁵¹ particularly given the fragile peace and security risks in the country, such as recurring political crises driven by the secessionist tendencies of Republika Srpska authorities, and even the potential recurrence of war. Consequently, as elaborated below, although third-party intervention mechanisms—such as OHR’s role in a democratic country—are controversial, it is difficult to argue that BiH’s future would be better without them.

Security Challenges in Post-Conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina: Fragile Peace and Political Stalemate

Multiple factors threaten security in post-conflict BiH, eroding stability and progress. The fragile peace established by the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement relies on a complex power-sharing arrangement among Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs. However, this balance is frequently disrupted by political deadlock, ethnonationalist rhetoric, and ineffective governance, undermining state functionality and public trust in democratic institutions.⁵² A key concern is the secessionist threat

⁴⁹ Gearoid Millar, *An Ethnographic Approach to Peacebuilding: Understanding Local Experiences in Transitional States* (London: Routledge, 2015); Andreas T. Hirblinger and Claudia Simons, “The Good, the Bad, and the Powerful: Representations of the ‘Local’ in Peacebuilding,” *Security Dialogue* 46, no. 5 (2015): 422-439, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010615580055>.

⁵⁰ Džuverović, “To Romanticise or Not to Romanticise the Local,” 25; Fortna, *Does Peacekeeping Work?*, 82-86; Elisa Randazzo, “The Paradoxes of the ‘Everyday’: Scrutinising the Local Turn in Peace Building,” *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 8 (2016): 1351-1370, 1356, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1120154>.

⁵¹ Ben Jones and Manshu Tian, “Hobbes’s Lesser Evil Argument for Political Authority,” *Hobbes Studies* 35, no. 2 (September 2022): 115-134, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18750257-bja10048>.

⁵² Lidia Bonifati, “Constitutional Design and the Seeds of Degradation in Divided Societies: The Case of Bosnia-Herzegovina,” *European Constitutional Law Review* 19, no. 2 (June 2023): 223-248, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1574019623000123>; Aleksandra Zdeb, “Ethno-Nationalism and Political Conflict in Bosnia (Europe),” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Ethnicity*, ed. Steven Ratuva (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2019), 595-

from the Republika Srpska entity, where calls for greater autonomy or independence strain national cohesion.⁵³ This secessionist agenda, coupled with a need for greater consensus on national issues, creates a volatile political environment where the risk of renewed conflict, though not immediate, remains a concern. BiH's geopolitical context, particularly in light of Russia's aggression in Ukraine, also adds external risks that further destabilize internal security.⁵⁴

These internal and external challenges underscore the ongoing necessity of the OHR in maintaining peace and stability in BiH. Nearly three decades after the Dayton Peace Agreement, the persistence of these security issues confirms that the OHR's mission is not yet complete. The future of BiH and the Office of the High Representative's role will hinge on the severity of these challenges and broader international politics. Divisions within the Peace Implementation Council's Steering Board, especially with Russia's opposition, could impact the OHR's effectiveness. Therefore, while the Office of the High Representative remains crucial, BiH must strengthen its internal capacity to address security challenges independently rather than relying solely on external support.

The Dayton Peace Agreement's constitution, initially a temporary measure to end the war in BiH, has become the de facto governing framework. The complex power-sharing arrangement among the three main ethnic groups—Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs—creates significant challenges.⁵⁵ The veto power⁵⁶ held by the Parliamentary Assembly, the Presidency, and the Council of Ministers often leads to political deadlock, hindering progress on domestic reforms and EU and NATO integration. The tripartite Presidency, representing the three ethnic groups, has the authority to veto decisions deemed harmful to their vital interests. Similarly, the Council of Ministers operates on a parity principle, requiring consensus or

612, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-2898-5_43; Pol Bargués and Pol Morillas, "From Democratization to Fostering Resilience: EU Intervention and the Challenges of Building Institutions, Social Trust, and Legitimacy in Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Democratization* 28, no. 7 (October 2021): 1319-1337, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.1900120>.

⁵³ Paul Anderson and Soeren Keil, "Territorial Autonomy, Ethnic Conflict, and Secession: Between a Rock and a Hard Place?" in *Handbook on Decentralization, Devolution and the State*, ed. Ignacio Lago (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021), 236-254, <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839103285.00021>.

⁵⁴ Majda Ruge, "The Past and the Furious: How Russia's Revisionism Threatens Bosnia," European Council on Foreign Relations, September 13, 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-past-and-the-furious-how-russias-revisionism-threatens-bosnia/>.

⁵⁵ Roberto Belloni and Shelley Deane, "From Belfast to Bosnia: Piecemeal Peacemaking and the Role of Institutional Learning," *Civil Wars* 7, no. 3 (September 2005): 219-243, 231-234, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698280500423874>.

⁵⁶ "The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina," Office of the High Representative, accessed August 27, 2024, <https://www.ohr.int/dayton-peace-agreement/>.

majority votes that include members from each ethnic group. This structure enables ethnic groups to block reforms, stalling BiH's progress.⁵⁷

The Parliamentary Assembly, a bicameral legislature, also has veto mechanisms that impede legislative progress. Both the House of Representatives and the House of Peoples require a quorum and votes from each ethnic group, allowing ethnic interests to dominate or obstruct legislation. Since November 2017, representatives from the Republika Srpska entity have boycotted Bosnia and Herzegovina's institutions on three separate occasions, significantly stalling reforms. These political blockades, compounded by the structural complexities established by the Dayton Peace Agreement, have posed serious obstacles to governance.

Earlier boycotts occurred in February 2020, following the Constitutional Court's repeal of a key Republika Srpska agricultural land law,⁵⁸ and in 2017, after BiH Presidency member Bakir Izetbegović suggested that Kosovo should have been recognized by then.⁵⁹ The most recent boycott, initiated in 2021, was a response to the then-High Representative Valentin Inzko's decision to impose amendments to the law prohibiting and penalizing the denial of genocide and the glorification of war criminals.⁶⁰ These repeated disruptions highlight the ongoing challenges in achieving political stability and effective governance in BiH.

The 2021 blockade was distinct as it coincided with unilateral efforts by the Republika Srpska entity to transfer jurisdiction from the state level to Republika Srpska. On December 10, 2021, the Republika Srpska National Assembly adopted measures to transfer competencies in indirect taxation, justice, defense, and security from BiH to the Republika Srpska entity, alongside attempts to reestablish the Republika Srpska Army and revoke powers previously granted to the state of BiH.⁶¹ These actions, including the refusal to register immovable defense property with the central state, threatened BiH's European integration and NATO

⁵⁷ Allison McCulloch and Aleksandra Zdeb, "Veto Rights and Vital Interests: Formal and Informal Veto Rules for Minority Representation in Deeply Divided Societies," *Representation* 58, no. 3 (July 2022): 427-442, 435-437, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2020.1778065>.

⁵⁸ Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, "Decision on Admissibility and Merits (Case No. U 8/19)," February 6, 2020, accessed August 14, 2024, https://www.ustavni.sud.ba/uploads/odluke/_en/U-8-19-1212620.pdf.

⁵⁹ "Vučić: Izetbegović's Position on Kosovo Will Have Far-reaching Consequences," *Al Jazeera Balkans*, November 14, 2017, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2017/11/14/vucic-izetbegovicev-stav-o-kosovu-ce-imati-dalekosezne-posljedice>. – in Bosnian

⁶⁰ "HR's Decision on Enacting the Law on Amendment to the Criminal Code of Bosnia and Herzegovina," Office of the High Representative, July 23, 2021, www.ohr.int/hrs-decision-on-enacting-the-law-on-amendment-to-the-criminal-code-of-bosnia-and-herzegovina/.

⁶¹ National Assembly of Republika Srpska, "24th Special Session Concluded: Declaration on Constitutional Principles and Four Sets of Conclusions on the Transfer of Jurisdiction with Conclusions Were Adopted," December 10, 2021, <https://www.narodna.skupstinars.net/?q=la/vijesti/okon%C4%8Dana-24-posebna-sjednica-usvojena->

membership prospects.⁶² However, on May 26, 2022, the Constitutional Court of BiH declared these moves unconstitutional, prompting the Republika Srpska National Assembly to postpone the transfer of competencies due to complex geopolitical circumstances.⁶³

These political blockades and attempts to transfer state competencies to the Republika Srpska entity have obstructed the potential closure of the OHR and the European Union Force. The escalating political crisis in BiH since 2021, exacerbated by Russia's aggression against Ukraine, underscores the importance of the European Union Force Althea, which has reinforced its presence in response to growing instability. Rather than being phased out through reforms leading to EU membership, these institutions remain vital, as BiH's instability necessitates continued international intervention. This intervention is regarded as the "lesser evil" to prevent conflict escalation.

Years of neglect have worsened instability, fueling radical views and secessionist calls. BiH remains fragile, with ethnic agendas often overshadowing national progress, hindering its path toward stability and Euro-Atlantic integration. Without a unified vision among ethnic groups and necessary reforms, progress will remain elusive, and the country's future will likely reflect its current challenges.

Secessionism Threat and Geopolitical Concerns

The declaration of BiH's independence triggered a secessionist response from the Serbs, leading to the formation of Republika Srpska. The Dayton Peace Agreement aimed to address ethnic and territorial grievances through decentralization, but the conflict was primarily driven by territorial ambitions and resistance to BiH's independence. Decades later, these secessionist ambitions persist, undermining BiH's unity and stability. Serbian secessionism, rooted in historical ideologies like the "Greater Serbia" concept, continues to shape regional politics.⁶⁴ Croatian ambitions during the 1990s also sought to redraw borders to include Croat-populated areas within BiH.⁶⁵

deklaracija-o-ustavnim-principima-i-%C4%8Detiri-informacije-o-prenosu-nadle%C5%BEnosti-sa-zaklju%C4%8Dcima. – in Bosnian

⁶² "At Dodik's Request: Transfer of Jurisdiction from BiH to the Republika Srpska Entity Postponed," *Al Jazeera Balkans*, June 6, 2022, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2022/6/6/ns-rs-odgodio-prijenos-nadleznosti-sa-bih-na-entitet>.

⁶³ Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, "Decision on Admissibility and Merits (Case No. U 2/22)," May 26, 2022, accessed August 14, 2024, www.ustavnisud.ba/uploads/odluke/_bs/U-2-22-1323203.pdf.

⁶⁴ Hamza Preljević and İbrahim Fevzi Güven, "The Continued Challenges of the Bosniak Returnees in Republika Srpska and the Threat of Secessionism," *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review* 24, no. 1 (August 2024): 41-74, <https://doi.org/10.62229/sprps24-1/2>.

⁶⁵ International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, "PRLIĆ et al. – The Prosecutor v. Jadranko Prlić, Bruno Stojić, Slobodan Praljak, Milivoj Petković, Valentin Ćorić &

In 1996, Republika Srpska President Biljana Plavšić called for secession to join Yugoslavia, a move halted by her indictment by the ICTY.⁶⁶ After Kosovo's recognition in 2008, Republika Srpska's leadership revived secessionist rhetoric, arguing for a similar right to independence. This assertiveness is further exemplified by Milorad Dodik, a prominent advocate of Republika Srpska's secession, who has consistently expressed ambitions to organize a referendum on Republika Srpska's independence. Dodik's alignment with the "Serbian World" project, akin to the "Greater Serbia" concept, further fuels these ambitions.

Since resuming the presidency of Republika Srpska in 2022, Dodik's secessionist actions have intensified, coinciding with Russia's aggression in Ukraine. In June 2023, the National Assembly of Republika Srpska adopted legislation suspending rulings by the BiH Constitutional Court and halting the publication of High Representative decisions.⁶⁷ Despite the High Representative's attempts to overturn this, Dodik signed it into law, defying the authority of the High Representative.⁶⁸ His actions, including suggesting Republika Srpska's independence if Donald Trump were re-elected, have further strained the fragile peace in BiH and increased geopolitical instability in the region.⁶⁹

Dodik's alignment with Russia and China—both opposing the High Representative's role in BiH—underscores his geopolitical maneuvering. His refusal to support EU sanctions against Russia, ongoing economic cooperation with Russia, and the awarding of Republika Srpska's highest Medal of Honor to Putin in January 2023 have drawn criticism from Western officials.⁷⁰ The international community has responded to Dodik's actions with sanctions, though these have had mixed results. The United States and the United Kingdom imposed sanctions, but

Berislav Pušić (IT-04-74)," November 29, 2017, https://www.icty.org/x/cases/prlic/cis/en/cis_prlic_al_en.pdf.

⁶⁶ Robert Bideleux and Ian Jeffries, *The Balkans: A Post-Communist History* (London: Routledge, 2007), 361.

⁶⁷ "RSNA Adopts Law on Amendments to the Law on Publication of Laws and Other Regulations," *Federal News Agency*, June 22, 2023, <https://fena.ba/article/1536435/rsna-adopts-law-on-amendments-to-the-law-on-publication-of-laws-and-other-regulations>.

⁶⁸ "Decision Preventing the Entry into Force of the Law on Non-Application of Decisions of the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina," Office of the High Representative, July 1, 2023, <https://www.ohr.int/decision-preventing-the-entry-into-force-of-the-law-on-non-application-%d0%bef-decisions-of-the-constitutional-court-of-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>.

⁶⁹ "Dodik Says He Will 'Declare Independence of RS' If Trump Is Re-elected US President," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 3, 2023, www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/dodik-trump-rs-nezavisnost/32712045.html. – in Bosnian; "Bosnian Serbs' Move Toward Secession 'Dangerous, Irresponsible,' U.S. Envoy Warns," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 24, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/dodik-secession-resolution-murphy-dayton-srebrenica/32962229.html>.

⁷⁰ "Bosnian Serb Leader Awards Putin Highest Medal of Honor," *Deutsche Welle*, August 1, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/bosnian-serb-leader-awards-putin-highest-medal-of-honor/a-64320315>.

internal divisions within the European Union, particularly opposition from Hungary, have hindered broader European measures.⁷¹

The persistent secessionist threat in BiH profoundly affects the operations of the European Union Force, especially given the intensified security concerns following Russia's aggression in Ukraine. The prolonged presence of the European Union Force and the Office of the High Representative in BiH has impeded the country's progress toward fulfilling the "5+2 agenda," crucial benchmarks for the potential OHR closure and BiH's advancement toward EU and NATO membership.

BiH's path to EU and NATO integration is unlikely if it remains a "soft protectorate" reliant on the OHR. Addressing the secessionist threat through international intervention is essential for enhancing BiH's security and advancing its Euro-Atlantic integration. Given BiH's limited internal capacity to counter secessionist threats, substantial international engagement remains critical for stability and progress. Local mechanisms alone are insufficient to neutralize the persistent secessionist pressures without significant external support.

Conclusion

BiH stands at a pivotal moment in its pursuit of stability, democratic development, and Euro-Atlantic integration, heavily influenced by its complex institutional framework and ongoing secessionist threats. The Dayton Peace Agreement, initially designed to end hostilities, has become entrenched, creating a fragmented governance structure that impedes effective reform. The Dayton Peace Agreement's provisions, granting significant veto powers to ethnic groups, have stalled legislative progress, obstructing BiH's path toward EU and NATO integration.

Secessionist tendencies, particularly within the Republika Srpska entity, rooted in historical ideologies like "Greater Serbia," have persisted as a major challenge. Leaders like Milorad Dodik have exacerbated these ambitions, aligning with Russia and China and undermining BiH's constitutional order. The Republika Srpska's efforts to weaken the OHR authority and the BiH Constitutional Court have further destabilized the fragile peace.

The ongoing debate between international intervention and local ownership presents a critical dilemma. While international intervention is essential for maintaining stability and protecting BiH's sovereignty, it can also foster dependency, hindering local democratic development. Ideally, a transition to local ownership would empower local actors to sustain peace and advance reforms. However, this is complicated by resistance from certain leaders, particularly in the Republika Srpska, who pursue agendas that threaten the country's stability.

Local ownership, while often seen as a positive indicator of commitment to peace, is undermined in BiH by secessionist rhetoric and actions. The reluctance of some leaders to support the peace process suggests that local ownership

⁷¹ Ruge, "The Past and the Furious."

alone may be insufficient to ensure stability. Before transitioning to a model of local ownership, the international community must carefully assess BiH's security and political challenges.

Despite its flaws, international intervention remains crucial for safeguarding BiH's sovereignty, particularly given the current limitations of local actors. The challenge lies in balancing the need for international support with fostering local ownership. Effective intervention should create conditions that enable local actors to work genuinely toward sustainable peace while protecting BiH's sovereignty from secessionist threats.

Ultimately, BiH's path to stability and integration depends on navigating the complex interplay between international intervention and local ownership. Although international support is not a perfect solution, it is the "lesser evil" compared to the ongoing security threats and political instability. A strategic approach is necessary to facilitate a gradual transition toward local ownership while ensuring safeguards remain in place to protect BiH's long-term stability and progress.

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