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Thirty Years of Negative Peace: Mladić's Death and Bosnia's Ethno-National Divides

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THIRTY YEARS OF NEGATIVE PEACE: MLADIĆ'S DEATH AND BOSNIA'S ETHNO-NATIONAL DIVIDES

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Executive summary

More than thirty years after the Dayton Peace Accords, Bosnia and Herzegovina has seen no widespread return to war (section 2). Yet some of the divisions inherited from the conflict continue to shape political and social life, and everyday contact does not always build trust between communities (sections 3 and 4). Although friendships and ties between neighbours and colleagues cross these boundaries, the boundaries can regain significance when political and social divisions overlap (section 5). The contrasting reactions to Ratko Mladić's death illustrate this dynamic: they brought competing narratives about the war back to the fore and showed that these narratives can still mobilise people (section 6). On the basis of these findings, the article proposes three ways to strengthen trust and prevent tensions from escalating:

***1. Develop joint projects*:** Create regular opportunities for communities to work together on shared needs and interests, involving schools, associations, and sports or cultural organisations. Give priority to activities that participants design and carry out together so that relationships can develop beyond one-off encounters. The aim is to strengthen a shared sense of civic belonging that respects different identities and fosters trust, coexistence and social cohesion.

***2. Support initiatives for dealing with the past*:** (A) *Spaces for dialogue*: Offer voluntary discussions led by trained facilitators, where participants can share their experiences of violence, listen to others and explore what leads them to perceive one another as a threat. These discussions would aim to acknowledge suffering, challenge prejudice and gradually build trust. (B) *Education*: Involve young people, teachers and, where appropriate, parents in critically examining the narratives passed on in families, at school and through the media. Combine this work on stereotypes and narratives that glorify wartime figures with practical opportunities for young people from different communities to work together.

***3. Foster institutional cooperation*:** Facilitate dialogue among civil society organisations, schools and education authorities to identify obstacles to joint activities and agree on arrangements that allow them to take place regularly. Civil society can support these efforts and the participation of young people and families, while public authorities retain responsibility for preventing discrimination and ensuring equal treatment.

1. Introduction

The death of Ratko Mladić on 27 August 2026, more than thirty years after the end of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, immediately prompted sharply divergent reactions across the country and the wider region. While survivors, victims' associations and representatives of the Srebrenica Memorial Centre recalled the crimes for which the former commander of the Bosnian Serb army had been convicted in a final judgment, gatherings in Republika Srpska and Serbia paid tribute to him. Within days, his death had brought narratives, symbols and affiliations directly linked to the 1992–1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina back to the forefront of public life (United Nations 2026; BTA 2026; Ourdan 2026a).

These reactions raise a question that extends well beyond the figure of Ratko Mladić. Since the Dayton accords of 1995, Bosnia and Herzegovina has not experienced a widespread resumption of armed conflict. Yet ethno-national affiliations continue to shape aspects of political, institutional, territorial, educational and social life.

This contrast makes it necessary to distinguish between the cessation of war and the deeper transformation of conflict. Johan Galtung's concept of negative peace and John Paul Lederach's approach to conflict transformation provide a useful framework for this purpose. Both make it possible to assess peace by more than the absence of armed violence, drawing attention to changes in the structures and relationships shaped or reinforced by conflict (Galtung 1969; Lederach 2003).

Applying the concept of negative peace[*] to Bosnia and Herzegovina is not new. Previous studies have examined the gap between the stability of the post-Dayton order and the limits of reconciliation, or the transformation of structures inherited from the war (Clark 2009; Begičević and Balint 2023). This article has a more specific aim: to explore the connections between the persistence of certain group boundaries, the current quality of intergroup relations, the ways in which different lines of division can overlap, and their potential to regain prominence when tensions rise.

[*] For Galtung, negative peace denotes the absence of personal or direct violence, whereas positive peace refers to the absence of structural violence and to social justice (Galtung 1969, 183).

The article therefore asks: to what extent, more than thirty years after Dayton, have relations and ethno-national boundaries in Bosnia and Herzegovina been transformed beyond the cessation of violence alone, and what does the death of Ratko Mladić reveal about the depth of this transformation?

The analysis begins by distinguishing negative peace from conflict transformation. It then examines the persistence of these boundaries in institutions, territorial organisation and education, before turning to trust and relations between groups. It explores how different lines of division can intersect or overlap, weakening or strengthening their influence on political and social life, and how periods of tension can intensify these dynamics. Finally, reactions to Mladić's death provide an opportunity to examine how these dynamics manifest themselves in an already fragile political context. The question is not simply whether peace has endured, but what it has actually changed.

2. Ending war without fully transforming the conflict

The Dayton accords marked a decisive turning point in the history of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Signed in December 1995 after more than three years of war, they brought an end to a conflict that had claimed more than 100,000 lives (ICMP n.d.). Approximately 2.2 million people, representing more than half of the pre-war population, had also been forced to leave their homes: around one million had been displaced within the country, while 1.2 million had sought refuge abroad (Bosnia and Herzegovina 2009, para. 81). Since then, the country has not experienced a widespread resumption of armed conflict. Whatever the limitations of the political order established at Dayton, this achievement should not be underestimated: the agreement fulfilled its most immediate objective by bringing hostilities to an end (Office of the High Representative 1995).

Johan Galtung's distinction between negative and positive peace offers a useful lens for assessing the significance of this achievement. In his seminal 1969 article, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," Galtung associates negative peace with the absence of direct violence, while encouraging broader consideration of the structures and social conditions through which the quality of peace can be assessed. The absence of war is essential, but it is not in itself a measure of how deep peace runs (Galtung 1969).

This distinction is particularly relevant to the analysis of societies emerging from war. A peace agreement can bring direct violence to an end without immediately dismantling the structures, relationships or forms of differentiation developed or reinforced during the conflict. Negative peace is therefore neither a worthless peace nor a failure. Rather, the concept distinguishes the essential achievement of ending violence from the broader question of the quality and depth of the peace that subsequently develops.

Applied to Bosnia and Herzegovina, this distinction highlights a paradox: the Dayton accords ended hostilities in 1995, with no widespread resumption of armed conflict since then, yet this sustained absence of war does not, in itself, indicate the extent to which the structures and relationships shaped by the conflict have been transformed.

John Paul Lederach's approach helps take this question further. Rather than treating conflict as a problem definitively resolved by an agreement, Lederach focuses on long-term changes in relationships between individuals and groups, social structures, and the broader dynamics within which conflict is embedded. Ending a war is not the same as transforming the conflict (Lederach 2003).

Lederach distinguishes structural, relational, personal and cultural dimensions of transformation. Two are particularly important for this article: the structural dimension, which draws attention to the political and social frameworks within which relationships develop, and the relational dimension, which focuses on how groups perceive one another and interact.

Lederach's contribution complements Galtung's while remaining distinct from it. Galtung distinguishes the absence of direct violence from a deeper conception of peace. Lederach, in turn, directs attention to the processes of change affecting the structures and relationships within which conflict is embedded. Together, these approaches move the analysis beyond the question of whether war has resumed, towards an examination of what has actually changed in society since violence ceased.

From this perspective, Dayton can be understood both as the foundation for a sustained absence of war and as the starting point of a much longer process of transformation. The absence of war has been sustained for more than thirty years. Assessing progress towards the

second requires examining the settings in which ethno-national affiliations may still have concrete effects.

3. Where do ethno-national boundaries persist?

The end of the war did not eliminate all the categories and lines of differentiation that had structured the conflict. Some persist in the political, territorial and educational organisation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosniak, Serb and Croat affiliations do not, however, correspond to homogeneous, mutually isolated social groups, nor do they encompass the full diversity of the country's population. Everyday contacts, shared spaces and relations between communities coexist with these distinctions, in configurations that vary from one locality to another. The question, then, is how certain ethno-national affiliations retain institutional and social significance even as neighbours, friends and colleagues build ties across these boundaries.

3.1. Ethno-national affiliations within the institutional framework

The institutional framework established at Dayton provides a first illustration of this continuity. Designed in the immediate context of the war, the agreement sought to enable political coexistence between the former parties to the conflict while providing guarantees of representation and security. The resulting architecture rests in particular on the political recognition of three "constituent peoples"—Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats—and on a complex system of power-sharing between groups, entities and different levels of government (Office of the High Representative 1995).

Bosnia and Herzegovina comprises two entities—the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska—alongside the Brčko District, which has a special status. This territorial organisation is combined with mechanisms of representation based on membership of the three constituent peoples. At the state level, for example, the Presidency consists of three members: one Bosniak and one Croat elected from the territory of the Federation, and one Serb elected from the territory of Republika Srpska. The House of Peoples follows a similar logic: five Bosniak and five Croat delegates come from the Federation, while five Serb delegates come from Republika Srpska (Office of the High Representative 1995).



Figure 1. Territorial organisation of Bosnia and Herzegovina: the two entities, the Brčko District and the ten cantons of the Federation. *Source*: Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2025, 6.

This institutional framework is situated within a sharply differentiated demographic landscape. According to the 2013 census, 70.4% of the Federation's population identified as Bosniak and 22.4% as Croat, while 81.5% of the population of Republika Srpska identified as Serb. Other communities remain present in both entities, which should not be seen as territories belonging exclusively to a single group. Nevertheless, these figures show that territory and ethno-national affiliation remain closely associated in several parts of the country following the war (Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2016).

This architecture has helped stabilise the country, but it has also entrenched ethno-national categories in the very functioning of the state. Grbavac, Pepić and Zdeb highlight the continuing centrality of power-sharing and collective affiliations in Bosnian politics thirty years after Dayton (Grbavac, Pepić and Zdeb 2026). Begičević and Balint, meanwhile, show how the constitutional order that emerged from the war reinforced certain ethno-territorial divisions by placing collective

identities at the heart of political organisation (Begičević and Balint 2023).

This does not mean that institutions alone create identities or social divisions. These have much more complex historical, political and social roots and were profoundly reshaped by the war. However, when a system consistently organises political representation and access to certain resources around the same ethno-national categories, it can help preserve their political significance.

Satoshi Tanaka's research illustrates one mechanism through which this reproduction can occur. He shows how ethno-national parties can consolidate their position through patronage networks and access to public-sector employment, resources and opportunities. In this sense, institutions do more than represent existing affiliations: their operation can also help maintain the central role of these affiliations in relations between citizens, parties and public authorities (Tanaka 2025).

3.2. Ethno-national boundaries in urban space: the case of Mostar

This association between territory and ethno-national affiliation is not confined to the entity level. It also remains visible in some urban spaces that were deeply transformed by the war. In several regions, territory and ethno-national affiliation remain more closely associated than before 1992 (Begičević and Balint 2023).

Mostar, one of the country's principal cities, provides a telling illustration of this phenomenon. With just over 100,000 inhabitants within its administrative boundaries at the 2013 census, its demographic, political, economic and symbolic importance makes it a particularly relevant setting for examining post-war transformations of urban space (Aceska and Doughty 2024).

Before the conflict, Mostar had a much more mixed demographic composition. The war, particularly the fighting between Bosniak and Croat forces, changed this radically. In the post-war period, the city became largely organised around a predominantly Croat western area and a predominantly Bosniak eastern area. This differentiation remains apparent in residential patterns, as well as in some institutions and in the way urban space is perceived (Carabelli 2018; Aceska and Doughty 2024).

It is reflected, for example, in the existence of two universities associated with largely distinct areas and student populations: the University of Mostar, located in the west and attended predominantly by Bosnian Croats, and Džemal Bijedić University, located in the east and attended predominantly by Bosniaks. Differentiation is also visible in the city's symbolic landscape. The post-war renaming of streets and squares helped inscribe new national references into the urban landscape, particularly in the western part of the city. Religious markers add another dimension: Aceska and Doughty show how bell towers and crosses are more prominent in the western landscape, while minarets are more prominent in the east. The sounds of bells and the call to prayer also contribute to the symbolic presence of different communities in urban space (Aceska and Doughty 2024).

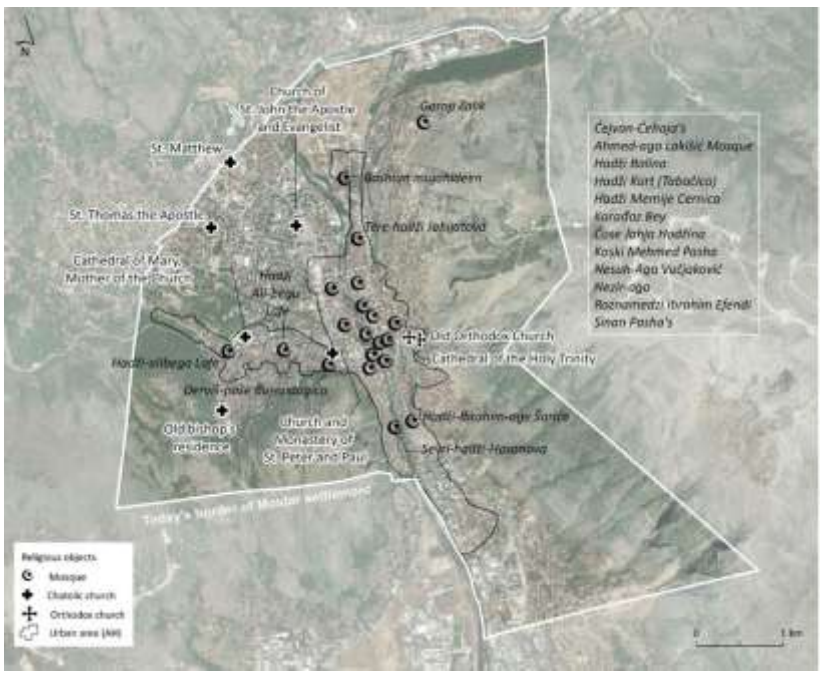


Figure 2. Churches and mosques in Mostar.
Source: Robert M. Hayden, Ante Šiljeg and Ivan Marić, *Geoadria*, vol.29, no.2, Fig.2.Original article.CC BY4.0.

These distinctions do not, however, mean that Mostar functions as two wholly separate spaces. Residents move between different parts of the city, use shared spaces and maintain relationships that cut across the divide. Carabelli shows that urban divisions are continually negotiated in

everyday life and coexist with practices of cooperation, solidarity and challenges to ethnic separation (Carabelli 2018). Complementing this analysis, Aceska and Doughty show that the religious and identity markers signalling distinct affiliations can themselves cross the city's physical boundaries: the sounds of bells and calls to prayer, for example, are audible beyond the spaces with which they are associated (Aceska and Doughty 2024).

Mostar's relevance to the analysis of post-Dayton peace lies precisely in this coexistence of everyday interactions and persistent lines of differentiation. The end of violence and the resumption of relations between groups do not mean that all the structures and representations arising from the conflict have disappeared.

3.3. Education and the reproduction of boundaries

The education system reveals another dimension of this phenomenon: not only the persistence of ethno-national differentiation, but also its potential reproduction among generations with no direct experience of the conflict.

The practice known as *Two Schools under One Roof* refers to arrangements in which pupils predominantly belonging to different communities share school facilities while following separate educational pathways. Depending on the schools concerned, this separation may involve curricula, the spaces used, teaching staff, entrances, timetables or the activities available to pupils.

This arrangement was introduced after the war as a temporary measure in three ethnically divided cantons of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was intended, in particular, to enable children from displaced families returning to their areas of origin to regain access to school facilities, as some had previously been taught in separate and sometimes unsuitable premises.

The decision to maintain separate educational provision responded in part to the concerns of some of these families. Parents feared that their children would encounter a hostile school environment or teaching that did not respect their language and identity. To enable their return to school buildings, the authorities, with the support of the international community, accepted the continuation of separate curricula and organisational arrangements within shared premises. This compromise was intended to facilitate access to education in a context of mistrust

between communities, ahead of gradual integration (OSCE 2018, chap. 1).

This transitional arrangement nevertheless gradually became entrenched. In 2024, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe still recorded more than fifty cases of *Two Schools under One Roof*. On 7 September 2026, the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina again noted that what had been conceived as a temporary solution had become an enduring practice, without a systemic transition towards integrated schools (Council of Europe 2024; OSCE 2026).

The day-to-day operation of individual schools illustrates the extent of this separation. In Stolac, for example, the OSCE's 2018 report describes two primary schools operating within the same school complex but following separate Bosnian-language and Croatian-language curricula. Pupils use separate wings of the building, while some facilities, such as the library and sports hall, are shared. However, the two schools have no shared staffroom, do not share teachers and do not organise regular joint activities, apart from a few occasional extracurricular initiatives (OSCE 2018). Sharing facilities, in other words, does not mean sharing an educational experience.

According to the OSCE, progress towards integrated education faces, above all, political resistance. Some officials present separation as a safeguard for each community's language and identity, while control over school leadership positions and employment provides a source of local influence that may encourage them to preserve existing structures. In the Federation, where education falls primarily within cantonal jurisdiction, transforming these schools depends largely on the commitment of cantonal authorities (OSCE 2018, chaps. 3 and 6).

These obstacles are also reflected in the failure to implement judicial decisions. The European Commission notes that, in 2025, the Herzegovina-Neretva and Central Bosnia cantons continued to disregard the rulings issued in 2014 and 2021 by the Federation's Supreme Court requiring the elimination of the *Two Schools under One Roof* practice to ensure inclusive and non-discriminatory education for all pupils (European Commission 2025, 41).

The effects of separation extend beyond school administration to the ways in which pupils get to know one another. School is one of the main settings for socialisation outside the family. When children from the same locality attend the same school complex but follow different

curricula, have different teachers and rarely take part in joint activities, physical proximity does not necessarily lead to interaction. Separation may also lead pupils to take the boundary between communities for granted in everyday life. The OSCE argues that this arrangement teaches pupils to regard differences between groups as inherent and contributes to mutual mistrust (OSCE 2018, 4). Tveit, Cameron and Kovač also found that discriminatory attitudes and perceived imbalances of power complicated relationships between pupils (Tveit, Cameron and Kovač 2014). What matters, then, is both the lack of contact and the perceptions of others that the organisation of schooling may help sustain.

This matters all the more because it now affects generations born long after 1995. These divides are not passed on solely through personal memories of the war. They may also be sustained by the institutional, educational and social environments in which new generations grow up.

Mostar and *Two Schools under One Roof* illustrate two distinct but complementary dimensions of persistent group boundaries. In the first case, certain distinctions remain embedded in urban space while being crossed daily through residents' practices and interactions. In the second, they may be reproduced within institutions of socialisation themselves, among generations that did not experience the war. In both cases, the end of violence has left in place structures within which ethno-national affiliations continue to carry concrete weight.

4. Coexistence, trust and social cohesion

The examination of institutions, urban space and the education system shows that some ethno-national divisions persist more than thirty years after the war. Their persistence alone, however, says little about relationships between individuals: separate structures can coexist with regular everyday interactions, without those interactions necessarily indicating high levels of trust between groups.

Social cohesion provides a framework for examining these different dimensions. It encompasses a sense of belonging, relationships with institutions and relations between groups. This article focuses on its intergroup dimension by examining trust, social distance and the quality of interactions between people of different ethno-national affiliations (Uretici et al. 2026, 3–4; Lederach 2003).

4.1. From coexistence to trust

The most recent data paint a mixed picture. The Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Index (SCORE 2025), based on data collected between November 2025 and February 2026 in 63 municipalities across Bosnia and Herzegovina, measures, among other dimensions, "intergroup harmony" between Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs. This indicator combines positive feelings towards other groups, intergroup trust, social distance and anxiety associated with interactions with members of other communities (Uretici et al. 2026, 3–4).

The intergroup harmony index stands at 6.3 out of 10. Social distance is relatively low (2.9 out of 10), as is social anxiety associated with interactions with other groups (1.9 out of 10). Respondents report relatively high levels of openness to working or forming friendships with members of other communities. These findings indicate a declared openness to relationships with members of other communities, but do not, on their own, establish the frequency or quality of actual interactions (Uretici et al. 2026, 3–4).

This declared openness to professional relationships or friendships does not, however, automatically translate into institutional transformation. As the school arrangements discussed earlier illustrate, political interests linked to the representation of identities and control over institutions can help maintain separate structures, even when individuals are willing to build relationships with members of other communities (OSCE 2018, chap. 6).

The SCORE data also show that this coexistence is not necessarily accompanied by high levels of trust between groups. Intergroup trust stands at 4.2 out of 10, while positive feelings towards other communities score 5.4 out of 10. The report describes relatively functional everyday relations that do not always translate into emotional closeness or high levels of trust between groups (Uretici et al. 2026, 4).

Openness to an individual relationship should be distinguished from trust in a group: expressing a willingness to work or become friends with someone from another community does not necessarily mean trusting that community as a whole. Nor does this willingness establish whether such relationships actually exist in the respondent's life (Uretici et al. 2026, 4).

4.2. Social distance and intergroup closeness

This distinction becomes even clearer when examining the kinds of relationships individuals are willing to form with members of other communities. Several studies of social distance in Bosnia and Herzegovina show that acceptance of others varies according to the degree of closeness involved in the relationship.

Research by Majstorović and Turjačanin on young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina shows that members of other communities are generally more readily accepted as colleagues, neighbours or friends than in more intimate relationships, particularly marriage. Social distance thus tends to increase when relationships more directly involve family and collective belonging (Majstorović and Turjačanin 2013).

Ivor Sokolić reaches a similar conclusion in his study of interethnic romantic relationships in Bosnia and Herzegovina. His analysis shows that individuals may be willing to socialise with members of other communities while encountering greater resistance when relationships become intimate and enter the family sphere. This resistance does not stem solely from individual preferences: it is also embedded in social norms and environments characterised by various forms of separation along ethno-national lines (Sokolić 2023).

These findings help clarify the nature of the boundaries examined in the preceding sections. Such boundaries do not necessarily function as barriers preventing all interaction. They may be relatively weak in some everyday relationships and become more apparent as social closeness increases. A person may readily accept someone from another community as a colleague, neighbour or friend, while being more hesitant when a relationship involves family or marriage.

Social cohesion, then, is not simply a matter of whether groups are in contact. It also concerns the depth of these relationships and the extent to which ethno-national affiliations continue to define some of their limits.

Several mechanisms help explain the persistence of limited intergroup trust. First, experiences of violence can leave lasting mistrust that renewed interaction alone may not dispel. A study conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina shows that the relationship between post-war contact and trust in other groups varies according to previous experiences of violence and contact (Voci et al. 2017).

Second, the social context in which individuals live may also play a role. In a study of young people across five Western Balkan countries, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Čehajić-Clancy and colleagues find that an environment characterised by more frequent and higher-quality intergroup contact is associated with greater trust in other groups, over and above respondents' personal contact (Čehajić-Clancy et al. 2025). Opportunities for building closer ties should therefore also be examined in terms of local environments and the settings in which people socialise.

Third, everyday relationships can continue without disagreements about the past being addressed. Mijić shows that avoiding topics related to the war can facilitate coexistence while leaving conflicting interpretations intact. When these issues are discussed mainly among people who share the same narratives, negative perceptions of the other group may persist despite individual interactions free from hostility (Mijić 2018).

Finally, intergroup relations develop within a political and institutional environment that can sustain divisions. The separation of certain educational pathways limits opportunities for shared socialisation, while narratives presenting this separation as a means of protecting identity may reinforce fears of other communities. The OSCE highlights the role of political strategies and control over schools in maintaining educational divisions (OSCE 2018, chap. 6). Trust is built through individual experiences, but also within social and institutional frameworks that can facilitate or hinder its development.

These findings are consistent with Lederach's approach to conflict transformation. If conflict has lasting effects on relationships in the form of mistrust, distance or polarisation, transforming it also involves creating conditions in which those relationships can evolve. The quality of contact, opportunities for cooperation and the availability of spaces in which ties can develop across ethnic lines become important dimensions of a peace that extends beyond the absence of violence (Lederach 2003).

5. Overlapping cleavages and reactivated ethno-national boundaries

The preceding analyses have identified different lines of differentiation in post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina: political and institutional, territorial, educational and social. Their significance lies not only in their separate existence, but also in how they relate to one another. Some may

cut across one another and create ties between communities; others may instead tend to overlap around the same affiliations. This configuration is important for understanding what can happen when tensions rise.

To clarify this dynamic, it helps to distinguish between cross-cutting cleavages and reinforcing cleavages, a distinction employed by Čermák (2016). Here, a cleavage refers to a line of differentiation between groups, which may be ethnic, territorial, political, economic or religious.

Cleavages are described as cross-cutting when people divided along one dimension remain connected along others. Two individuals belonging to different ethno-national communities may, for example, be neighbours, colleagues or friends, or share political or economic interests. These relationships can limit the extent to which a single affiliation structures all their interactions. Conversely, several cleavages can reinforce one another when they tend to follow the same lines. Ethno-national affiliation may then align, to varying degrees, with place of residence, political orientation, educational environment or particular social networks.

Petr Čermák's research on five ethnically mixed municipalities in the Western Balkans shows that, in the cases studied, several territorial, ideological and socioeconomic divisions tend to reinforce ethnic divisions rather than cut across them. His findings cannot be generalised to Bosnia and Herzegovina as a whole, but they show that how divisions combine matters as much as their mere existence (Čermák 2016).

The recent history of Bosnia and Herzegovina provides a concrete illustration of this distinction. Before the 1992–1995 war, ethnic affiliations existed, but they did not determine every aspect of everyday relationships. In some ethnically mixed localities, Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats worked together and maintained ties of neighbourliness and friendship.

The Bosnian concept of *komšiluk*, which encompasses neighbourly relations, mutual assistance and everyday closeness, illustrates these ties. Ethnic affiliation remained present without becoming the main boundary organising relations between residents.

Sandra Grudić's research on Bosanski Novi nevertheless shows how these relationships could become vulnerable as the context changed. In the locality she examines, everyday interethnic relations remained largely functional until the outbreak of violence in 1992. They subsequently deteriorated amid political mobilisation, the separation of populations,

restrictions on contact and nationalist propaganda. Some forms of interethnic solidarity weakened as ethnic affiliation became more salient (Grudić 2025).

Komšiluk should not, however, be read as evidence of a lost interethnic harmony. Rather, it shows that an ethnic boundary can exist without dominating all social relations, but also that its significance can change as the political and security context shifts.

This observation is directly relevant to post-Dayton Bosnia. The preceding sections have shown that several dimensions of political and social life continue to follow similar ethno-national lines. This does not mean that communities live separately: contacts, friendships, professional relationships and shared spaces are numerous. However, when several political, territorial, educational or social divisions partially align with the same affiliations, a period of tension can lend greater weight to these boundaries.

An initially political or social disagreement may then be interpreted more broadly in ethno-national terms. The problem, then, lies not in the existence of different communities, but in the possibility that several distinct tensions may eventually reinforce one another around the same affiliations.

Charles Tilly's concept of *boundary activation* helps explain this mechanism. A social boundary may exist for a long time without consistently determining relationships between individuals, then become much more significant when particular circumstances make it more visible and more relevant to the interpretation of events (Tilly 2004).

In post-Dayton Bosnia, the question becomes what happens when an event brings to the fore a dividing line that remains present across several dimensions of political and social life. Such reactivation can intensify polarisation and give existing tensions a broader ethno-national dimension. The death of Ratko Mladić provides an opportunity to observe this mechanism in contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina.

6. Mladić's death as a lens on post-Dayton tensions

The death of Ratko Mladić on 27 August 2026 provides a revealing illustration of the dynamics analysed in the preceding sections. At the time of his death, the former commander of the Bosnian Serb army was serving a life sentence in The Hague for genocide, crimes against

humanity and violations of the laws or customs of war, including the Srebrenica genocide and crimes committed during the siege of Sarajevo. His conviction and sentence had been upheld in a final appeal judgment on 8 June 2021 (IRMCT 2021).

Despite these established judicial findings, public reactions revealed sharply opposing interpretations of his legacy. While representatives of the victims emphasised the crimes for which he had been convicted and the need to preserve their memory, several gatherings in Republika Srpska and Serbia portrayed Mladić as a hero or defender of the Serb people. The controversy extended beyond political statements into different spheres of social life (United Nations 2026; BTA 2026; Ourdan 2026a).

In Zvornik, a few dozen kilometres from Srebrenica, several hundred people, including many young people, marched following the announcement of his death, chanting his name and displaying symbols associated with the Army of Republika Srpska (BTA 2026). The episode carries particular significance given the region's history: following the fall of Srebrenica in July 1995, several execution sites associated with the genocide were located within the municipality of Zvornik.

This glorification was also evident in football in Serbia. On 6 September 2026, during the Belgrade derby between Red Star and Partizan, a minute's silence was observed in Mladić's memory and his name was chanted in the stadium. In the Red Star stand, a huge portrait of Mladić was displayed alongside the inscription *Pravac Potočari*—"Towards Potočari"—echoing his words as Bosnian Serb forces entered Srebrenica in July 1995. A few days earlier, Partizan supporters had also displayed a banner reading "General, thank you", together with a flag bearing his image (Softic 2026).

The significance of this episode extends beyond sport. Red Star and Partizan are usually associated with a fierce rivalry. Yet, within days of one another, supporters of both clubs paid tribute to Mladić. A shared national and historical reference cut across this rivalry without erasing it. The reference to Potočari gives this tribute added weight, invoking one of the central sites of remembrance of the Srebrenica genocide.

The day after the derby, on 7 September 2026, his funeral in Belgrade continued this mobilisation, bringing together several thousand people in the presence of political officials, including ministers from Serbia and Republika Srpska. While many participants paid tribute to Mladić,

representatives of the victims and several international actors condemned the glorification of a man whose convictions for wartime crimes had been upheld on appeal (Ourdan 2026b).

Taken together, the gatherings in Zvornik, the stadium tributes and the funeral show that mobilisations around Mladić are not confined to political institutions. They extend across different social settings and also attract young participants. The events in Belgrade highlight their regional dimension, without providing, on their own, a measure of intergroup relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The presence of young people in the pro-Mladić mobilisations raises the question of how some of them come to reproduce cleavages inherited from the war. Families and schools are important settings for the transmission of representations: in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 55.9% of young respondents to the *Shared Futures* survey identified parents and family among their important sources of information about other peoples in the Western Balkans, compared with 48.8% for school and 20.5% for social media (UNDP 2021, 112). This transmission is not necessarily associated with hostility, but it may sustain perceptions of threat when narratives portray the other community primarily through the violence and suffering of the war. Regarding school content more specifically, the European Commission noted in 2025 that biased narratives about war heroes and victims were present across all curricula, contributing to politicised education (European Commission 2025, 79).

Nationalist discourse can reinforce these representations by emphasising the suffering of the community it addresses and glorifying particular wartime figures, whose defence becomes a way of affirming belonging (Bianchi 2021). Finally, when educational pathways and settings for socialisation offer few opportunities to develop personal relationships with members of other communities, young people have fewer opportunities to test inherited representations against different experiences. These mechanisms help explain how divisions inherited from the war can remain meaningful to new generations.

This reactivation of references to the war takes on added significance when situated within Bosnia and Herzegovina's political context. In his May 2026 report, the High Representative described the country's security situation as "stable but fragile". He highlighted persistent difficulties in the functioning of state institutions, political polarisation and the return of explicitly secessionist rhetoric among some officials in Republika Srpska (Office of the High Representative 2026).

These tensions overlap with the social and institutional divisions examined in the preceding sections, in a context where intergroup trust remains relatively limited. Reactions to Mladić's death show that references to the war can still mobilise people and make some of these boundaries more visible. The persistence of these boundaries is a source of vulnerability for the post-Dayton peace that institutional tensions and secessionist rhetoric can exacerbate.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

More than thirty years after Dayton, the absence of a widespread resumption of war remains a major achievement. However, the analysis shows that everyday coexistence can be accompanied by limited trust and persistent institutional divisions. Reactions to the death of Ratko Mladić show that references to the war can still trigger fresh mobilisation. The studies reviewed suggest that trust develops through individual experiences, transmitted representations and the frameworks within which relationships take shape. These findings highlight the need for complementary actions to address the mechanisms that sustain mistrust, strengthen relations between communities and improve local capacities to prevent tensions from escalating.

A first recommendation is to create regular opportunities for cooperation between communities in the places where people live. Joint projects involving schools, associations and sports or cultural organisations could foster sustained interaction around shared needs and interests. The aim would be to improve the quality of relationships and expand opportunities for shared socialisation beyond one-off encounters.

A second recommendation concerns addressing experiences of violence and disagreements about the past. Spaces for dialogue based on voluntary participation and supported by trained facilitators could allow people to share their experiences, listen to those of others and examine perceptions of threat. These exchanges could foster a better understanding of other communities' lived experiences, challenge prejudices and help build trust gradually.

A third recommendation addresses the mechanisms through which representations are transmitted to young people. Work involving young people, teachers and, where relevant, parents could encourage critical engagement with narratives transmitted within families, at school and

through the media. This would involve questioning stereotypes and narratives of glorification, distinguishing established facts from their political uses, and enabling young people to test representations of other communities against concrete experiences of cooperation.

Finally, these initiatives must be accompanied by efforts to address institutional barriers. Education authorities and schools have a role to play in developing joint activities, preventing discrimination and ensuring equal treatment of pupils. Civil society organisations can facilitate these efforts, support residents' participation and contribute to dialogue with institutions. Support for civil society organisations should enable them to develop their initiatives alongside the work of public authorities.

The implementation of these recommendations should draw on locally identified needs, existing initiatives and the participation of the people affected. Their effects on the quality of relationships, the continuity of cooperation and the capacity to manage disagreements should also be assessed. The aim would be to create conditions for cooperation that can endure beyond the lifetime of projects and help prevent tensions from escalating. The broader objective is to strengthen both the depth and the durability of peace.

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