

Quaderni di Comunità

Persone, Educazione e Welfare
nella società 5.0

Community Notebook

People, Education, and Welfare in society 5.0

n. 2/2026

EASTERN EUROPE ECHOES: NARRATIVES,
CULTURES, AND MEMORIES FROM COLD
WAR TO DAYTON'S LEGACY (1946–2026)

Edited by

Vito Saracino, Giacomo Giuseppe Colaprice



Iscrizione presso il Registro Stampa del Tribunale di Roma
al n. 172/2021 del 20 ottobre 2021

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Eurilink University Press Srl
Via Gregorio VII, 601 - 00165 Roma
www.eurilink.it - ufficiostampa@eurilink.it
ISBN: 979 12 82274 15 9
ISSN: 2785-7697 (Print)
ISSN: 3035-2525 (Online)

Prima edizione, luglio 2026
Progetto grafico di Eurilink

È vietata la riproduzione di questo libro, anche parziale,
effettuata con qualsiasi mezzo, compresa la fotocopia

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5. DAYTON AT 30: PEACE, POWER, AND THE POLITICS OF POST-WAR BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA

by Amir Duranović*

Abstract: Trent'anni dopo la firma degli Accordi di Dayton, la Bosnia ed Erzegovina rimane un caso complesso di ricostruzione post-conflitto ed evoluzione istituzionale. Questo saggio rivisita il significato storico di Dayton, evidenziandone il ruolo nel fermare la violenza e nell'avviare la pace. Esamina i punti di forza strutturali dell'accordo e le sue limitazioni perduranti, in particolare il suo quadro etno-politico e le implicazioni per la governance democratica. Vengono esplorate le prospettive di tutti i popoli costituenti e degli altri cittadini della Bosnia ed Erzegovina, unitamente al ruolo evolutivo della comunità internazionale nella costruzione dello Stato e nelle riforme. Vengono dedicate particolare attenzione alle sfide dello sviluppo istituzionale, dell'inclusione civica e della riconciliazione. Tracciando la traiettoria dalla cessazione delle ostilità alla statualità contestata, il saggio offre una riflessione sull'eredità di Dayton, sulla sua rilevanza futura e sulle prospettive accademiche correnti.

Parole chiave: Dayton, Europa post-guerra fredda, Bosnia ed Erzegovina, Jugoslavia, guerre jugoslave.

Abstract: Thirty years after the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement, Bosnia and Herzegovina remains a complex case of post-conflict

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Research conducted within the framework of the project "Integration, Disintegration, Reintegration: Bosnia and Herzegovina and Cyprus in the Historical Perspective of the 19th and 20th Centuries – phase one", funded by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

reconstruction and institutional evolution. This essay revisits Dayton's historical significance, highlighting its role in halting violence and initiating peace. It examines the agreement's structural strengths and enduring limitations, particularly its ethno-political framework and implications for democratic governance. The perspectives of all constituent peoples and other citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina are explored, alongside the evolving role of the international community in state-building and reform. Special attention is given to the challenges of institutional development, civic inclusion, and reconciliation. By tracing the trajectory from cessation of hostilities to contested statehood, the essay offers a reflection on Dayton's legacy, future relevance and current academic perspectives.

Keywords: Dayton, post-Cold War Europe, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Yugoslavia, Yugoslavian wars.

Introduction

The Dayton Peace Agreement, signed in December 1995 at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio, remains one of the defining diplomatic milestones of post-Cold War Europe. It brought an end to the Bosnian war, a conflict that had devastated communities, claimed over 100,000 lives, and displaced millions. For Bosnia and Herzegovina, Dayton was both a lifeline and a constraint: it secured peace and international recognition, yet it also locked the country into a political framework that continues to shape and limit its development. Three decades later, the agreement is still at the centre of debates about sovereignty, governance, and the future of Bosnia's democracy.

The war that preceded Dayton was brutal and complex. Bosnia and Herzegovina, a republic of the former Yugoslavia, had long been home to a multi-ethnic society. When war broke out in 1992, that diversity became the fault line of violence. Ethnic

cleansing, mass atrocities, and the destruction of centuries-old coexistence shocked the world. International mediation efforts repeatedly failed until the United States, working with European partners, pushed forward negotiations that culminated in the Dayton Peace Agreement. The accord did more than silence the guns as it imposed a constitutional order that remains the foundation of Bosnia's political system today. It recognised Bosnia and Herzegovina as a sovereign state but divided it into two entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska and Brčko – District of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as decided in post-war arbitration process. This compromise was designed to balance ethnic interests and prevent renewed war, but it also institutionalised divisions that have proven resilient. In the immediate aftermath, Dayton was celebrated as a triumph. It achieved what had seemed impossible: an end to Europe's bloodiest conflict since World War II. NATO forces, later replaced by EU missions, ensured compliance with military provisions and safeguarded the fragile peace. Bosnia and Herzegovina gained further international recognition, humanitarian aid poured in, and reconstruction began. For many, Dayton symbolised the power of diplomacy to halt violence and rebuild shattered societies. Over time, however, the flaws of Dayton became harder to ignore. The constitutional framework it enshrined created one of the most complicated governance systems, with overlapping jurisdictions, multiple layers of authority, and extensive veto powers. While this design prevented domination by any single group, it also fostered gridlock. Political elites, often entrenched along ethnic lines, learned to exploit the system to block reforms, preserve patronage networks, and resist modernisation. As a result, Bosnia and Herzegovina has struggled to build functional institutions, reform its constitution, and advance toward European Union membership. The very system that secured peace has become a barrier to progress.

The international community's role in sustaining Dayton has been equally complicated. The Office of the High Representative (OHR), created to oversee civilian implementation, has wielded sweeping powers, including the authority to dismiss officials and impose laws¹. These interventions have occasionally broken deadlock but have also raised questions about sovereignty and democratic legitimacy. The European Union has tried to encourage reforms through the promise of accession, but progress has been slow so far. The United States continues to reaffirm its commitment to Bosnia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, while also acknowledging the need for constitutional modernisation. Thirty years on, Dayton remains both a shield against renewed conflict and a straitjacket constraining Bosnia's political evolution.

Scholars and policymakers remain divided in their assessments. Some argue that Dayton should be judged primarily by its success in ending the war and preventing its recurrence. From this perspective, the imperfections of governance are a small price to pay for peace². Others contend that Dayton entrenched ethnic divisions and created a dysfunctional state incapable of meeting the aspirations of its citizens. For these critics, the agreement was a temporary fix that has outlived its usefulness. Still others adopt a middle ground, recognising Dayton's achievements while calling for reforms that preserve stability but enhance functionality. These debates highlight the enduring relevance of Dayton as both a historical milestone and a contemporary challenge³.

The thirtieth anniversary of the Dayton Agreement is therefore not just a commemoration but an opportunity for

¹ Decisions of the High Representative listed here: <https://www.ohr.int/decisions-of-the-high-representative/> (Last Accessed: March 5th 2026).

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NfyKhyhrhCM> (Last Accessed: March 22nd 2026).

³ <https://www.unsa.ba/en/novosti/international-conference-bosnia-and-herzegovina-25-years-dayton-peace-agreement> (Last Accessed: March 20th 2026).

reflection. Bosnia and Herzegovina today is peaceful but politically stagnant, caught between the stability Dayton guarantees and the stagnation it perpetuates. The country's path toward European integration remains uncertain, hindered by internal divisions and external scepticism. Citizens express frustration with corruption, inefficiency, and the lack of meaningful reform, yet political elites remain entrenched within the Dayton framework⁴. International actors continue to emphasise Bosnia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, but their capacity to drive change is limited without domestic consensus. The central question is whether Dayton can be reformed to enable functional governance, or whether Bosnia requires a fundamentally new constitutional arrangement.

1. One Agreement - Many Perspectives

The Dayton Peace Agreement of 1995 is often remembered for its complexity and the political challenges it created, but it is equally important to recognise the remarkable successes it achieved in terms of peace implementation. Over the past thirty years, Bosnia and Herzegovina has remained free from large-scale armed conflict, a reality that cannot be taken for granted given the intensity of the war that preceded Dayton. The agreement not only ended hostilities but also laid the foundation for a peace process that has endured, supported by international institutions and domestic actors. This section highlights the positive aspects of peace implementation, focusing on security, reconstruction, institution-building, and the

⁴ <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/bosnia-and-herzegovina> (Last Accessed: March 25th 2026).

gradual integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina into broader European and global frameworks⁵.

One of the most significant achievements of Dayton was the immediate cessation of violence. By securing a ceasefire and embedding military provisions within the agreement, Dayton created conditions for stability. NATO's Implementation Force (IFOR), followed by the Stabilization Force (SFOR), played a crucial role in ensuring compliance with military aspects of the accord. Their presence deterred renewed hostilities and provided a security umbrella under which reconstruction could begin. Later, the European Union Force (EUFOR) continued this mission, symbolizing the transition from military stabilization to long-term peace support. The absence of renewed war over three decades stands as a testament to the effectiveness of these arrangements⁶. Beyond security, Dayton partly facilitated the return of displaced persons and refugees, a process that was central to rebuilding Bosnia's social fabric. Although challenges persisted⁷, international organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) coordinated efforts to enable returns and restore property rights. These initiatives helped partly reestablish multi-ethnic communities and underscored the principle that displacement caused by war should not be permanent. The return process was slow and sometimes contested, but it represented a tangible step toward reconciliation and the restoration of pre-war diversity.

⁵ <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15696.doc.htm> (Last Accessed: March 20th 2026).

⁶ About Eufor: <https://www.euforbih.org/index.php/en/background> (Last Accessed: February 20th 2026).

⁷ Political and social consequences of continuing displacement in Bosnia <https://www.fmreview.org/dayton20/pasic/#:~:text=Bosnia%20and%20Herzegovina%20was%20ethnically%20the%20most,pre%2Dwar%20residence%2C%20ethnic%20homogeneity%20was%20further%20embedded> (Last Accessed: March 10th 2026).

Reconstruction was another area where Dayton's framework proved quite effective. International donors, led by the World Bank and the European Union, invested heavily in rebuilding infrastructure, restoring utilities, and reviving economic activity. Roads, schools, hospitals, and housing were reconstructed, enabling communities to resume normal life. The infusion of aid not only repaired physical damage but also created opportunities for economic recovery. While Bosnia's economy has faced ongoing challenges, the initial reconstruction phase was critical in preventing collapse and laying the groundwork for future development.

Institution-building under Dayton also deserves recognition. The agreement established a constitutional framework that, despite its complexity, provided Bosnia and Herzegovina with functioning institutions. The Presidency, Parliamentary Assembly, Constitutional Court, and Council of Ministers were created to embody shared governance⁸. These institutions, though often gridlocked, have nonetheless persisted for three decades, ensuring continuity of statehood. The Constitutional Court, in particular, has played a vital role in adjudicating disputes and safeguarding the rule of law. The very survival of Bosnia as a sovereign state, despite political tensions, reflects the resilience of the institutions born out of Dayton⁹.

Another positive aspect of Dayton's legacy is Bosnia's gradual integration into international and regional frameworks. The country joined the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE),

⁸ Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo, 2010. See: <https://www.parlament.ba/Publication/Read/3594?title=parliamentary-assembly-of-bosnia-and-herzegovina&pageId=239>.

⁹ Constitutionale Position. See <https://www.ustavnisud.ba/en/constitutional-position> (Last Accessed: March 2nd 2026).

gaining recognition as a sovereign state. These memberships have provided Bosnia with platforms to engage in diplomacy, human rights monitoring, and regional cooperation¹⁰. The European Union has offered a long-term perspective of accession, encouraging reforms and aligning Bosnia with European standards. Although progress has been uneven, the EU path remains a powerful incentive for modernization and integration. Peace implementation has also fostered civil society development. International support for non-governmental organizations, media, and grassroots initiatives has strengthened democratic culture and promoted reconciliation. Civil society actors have worked to bridge ethnic divides, advocate for human rights, and hold political elites accountable. Their contributions, though sometimes overshadowed by political stagnation, represent an important dimension of Bosnia's post-war recovery. The development of independent media and civic activism reflects the broader democratizing impact of Dayton's peace framework.

Education and cultural exchange have benefited from peace implementation as well. International programs have supported the rebuilding of universities, schools, and cultural institutions. Student exchange initiatives and academic partnerships have connected Bosnia to global networks, fostering new generations committed to peace and cooperation. These efforts have helped counteract the isolation of the war years and opened avenues for dialogue across ethnic and national boundaries. Finally, the endurance of peace itself is perhaps the most profound achievement of Dayton. Bosnia and Herzegovina has faced political crises, nationalist rhetoric, and institutional challenges, yet it has not returned to war – if this is to be considered as success. The agreement created a framework that, while imperfect, has proven

¹⁰ Regional Cooperation Council: About is: <https://www.rcc.int/pages/2/about-us> (Last Accessed: March 4th 2026).

resilient in maintaining stability. For citizens who lived through the horrors of the 1990s, the preservation of peace is an invaluable outcome. For the international community, Bosnia and Herzegovina stands as an example of how sustained engagement and careful institutional design can prevent relapse into conflict.

While the Dayton Peace Agreement of 1995 succeeded in ending the Bosnian war, its legacy has been marked by deep structural shortcomings. The constitutional framework embedded in the accord institutionalized ethnic divisions, created one of the most complex governance systems in the world, and left Bosnia and Herzegovina in a state of chronic political stagnation. Over the past three decades, these flaws have been interpreted differently by Bosnia's three main ethnic groups Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs, each of whom views Dayton through the lens of their own historical experiences, political aspirations, and collective memory. Understanding these divergent perspectives is essential to grasping the contested nature of Bosnia's post-Dayton trajectory. The most frequently cited shortcoming of Dayton is its constitutional design. By dividing Bosnia and Herzegovina into two entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska, Dayton institutionalized wartime territorial divisions. Within the Federation, further subdivision into cantons added layers of complexity. The central government was deliberately weakened, with extensive veto powers granted to representatives of the three constituent peoples. This arrangement prevented domination by any single group but also fostered paralysis. Decision-making often requires consensus across ethnic lines, and political elites have repeatedly exploited veto powers to block reforms. As a result, Bosnia and Herzegovina has struggled to modernize its institutions, harmonize laws, and advance toward European Union membership.

For Bosniaks, for instance, it was a lifeline that ended a devastating war and preserved the sovereignty of Bosnia and

Herzegovina, preventing its partition at a time when survival itself was at stake. Yet it also entrenched division by recognizing Republika Srpska, which many Bosniaks view as “a reward for ethnic cleansing”. This duality, relief at the war’s end and disappointment at the institutionalization of division has shaped Bosniak politics ever since, fueling demands for constitutional reform and stronger central institutions, though these efforts have consistently met resistance. Croats, initially welcomed Dayton because it secured their representation and created the Federation with Bosniaks, offering protection against marginalization. Over time, however, they have grown dissatisfied, arguing that the system allows Bosniak voters to influence the election of the Croat member of the Presidency, undermining their autonomy. This grievance has led to calls for greater safeguards, even proposals for a “third entity,” reflecting a persistent sense that Dayton has failed to guarantee equality. Their ambivalence lies in the tension between relief at the war’s end and frustration with structural inequities that leave them overshadowed, as claimed by major Croat political leaders.

For Serbs, Dayton was largely seen as a victory. It recognized Republika Srpska, legitimizing territorial control and preserving autonomy against the threat of a centralized Bosnian state. Serb leaders have defended Dayton as a shield against Bosniak and (partly) Croat attempts to strengthen central institutions, while criticizing international interventions, particularly the powers of the Office of the High Representative, as infringements on sovereignty. For many Serbs, the problem lies not in Dayton’s design but in its implementation, which they perceive as biased toward centralization. Periodic calls for greater autonomy or even secession reflect the tension between Dayton’s framework and Serb aspirations¹¹.

¹¹ Ker-Lindsay, James. *The Hollow Threat of Secession in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Legal and Political Impediments to a Unilateral Declaration of Independence* by

Placed side by side, these perspectives reveal the importance of a comparative lens. Dayton was not a uniform solution but a compromise experienced differently by each group. What Bosniaks see as betrayal, Serbs celebrate as autonomy; what Croats value as protection, they later condemn as inadequate. The agreement ended war but institutionalized division, preserved sovereignty but weakened central authority, guaranteed representation but entrenched grievances. Its legacy is contested, and its meaning depends on the vantage point. Understanding Bosnia's post-war trajectory requires acknowledging these divergent interpretations, for only by recognizing the grievances of all groups can reforms be imagined that balance autonomy with functionality. Dayton teaches that peace is not a static achievement but an ongoing process, and its endurance depends on legitimacy across communities. The comparative perspective is thus essential: it reveals not only the complexity of Bosnia's political system but also the unfinished work of building a state that is both unified and just¹².

These divergent ethnic perspectives have made reform of Dayton extraordinarily difficult. Bosniaks push for stronger central institutions, Croats demand greater autonomy and safeguards, and Serbs insist on preserving entity powers. Each group interprets Dayton through its own historical lens: Bosniaks see it as a compromise that saved the state but entrenched injustice, Croats view it as a framework that failed to protect their equality, and Serbs regard it as a guarantee of autonomy threatened by international

Republika Srpska. LSEE - Research on South Eastern Europe, London School of Economics. See: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/LSEE-Research-on-South-Eastern-Europe/Assets/Documents/Publications/Paper-Series-on-SEE/KerLindsay-Hollow-Threat-of-Secession-in-BiH.pdf> (Last Accessed: March 7th 2026).

¹² Korkut, Hasan, and Muhidin Mulalić. *Implications of Dayton Peace Agreement on Current Political Issues in Bosnia-Herzegovina*. International University of Sarajevo. DergiPark, <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/117964> (Last Accessed: March 25th 2026).

interference. The result is a political stalemate in which consensus is elusive and reforms are blocked. Dayton's shortcomings are thus not only structural but also interpretive, rooted in the competing narratives of Bosnia's constituent peoples¹³.

2. Academic Reflections at the 30th Anniversary of the Dayton Agreement

The thirtieth anniversary of the Dayton Peace Agreement in 2025–2026 provided a unique opportunity for scholars, policymakers, and citizens to reflect on its enduring legacy. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, commemorations were not limited to political statements; they included major academic events organized by the University of Sarajevo and partner institutions, which brought together researchers, diplomats, and civil society actors. These conferences underscored the dual nature of Dayton's legacy: while it has preserved peace for three decades, it has also entrenched divisions that complicate the state-building process. The discussions revolved around two central themes, integration into European and global structures, and the risk of disintegration through ethnic fragmentation and institutional paralysis¹⁴.

The University of Sarajevo marked the anniversary with interdisciplinary conferences that combined scholarly panels, cultural programs, and public debates. These events sought to situate Dayton within broader questions of peacebuilding and democratic consolidation. One gathering, for instance, organized in

¹³ Kapidzic, Damir & Piacentini, Arianna & Husremović, Dženana (2025). Stuck in the Past: Bosnia and Herzegovina's Enduring Struggle with a Fractured Legacy. *Southeastern Europe*. 48. 173-190. 10.30965/18763332-48020001.

¹⁴ Grbavac, V., Pepić, I., & Zdeb, A. (2026). Dayton at 30: Unpacking the Politics of Power-Sharing. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 32(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2026.2622180>.

cooperation with the Pan-European Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Human Brotherhood Foundation, was titled *Peace as the Foundation, European Integration as the Future of Bosnia and Herzegovina*. It attracted more than 160 participants, including academics, diplomats, and even figures involved in the original negotiations. A dominant theme in Sarajevo's academic discussions was the prospect of integration. Scholars emphasized that Bosnia's long-term stability depends on embedding itself within European structures, particularly the European Union. EU accession was framed as both a technical process, requiring harmonization of laws, reforms of governance, and strengthening of central institutions and a symbolic commitment to shared sovereignty. Integration was seen as a way to transform ethnic competition into cooperation under a broader European identity, reducing the salience of divisions entrenched by Dayton¹⁵. Academic discussions warned that without reform, Bosnia and Herzegovina could drift toward institutional disintegration, where state-level governance becomes increasingly irrelevant and entities act as quasi-independent units. The prolonged presence of the Office of the High Representative was cited as evidence of Bosnia's unfinished sovereignty, raising concerns that international support may eventually wane. The academic reflections at the 30th anniversary thus framed Bosnia's future as a kind of a crossroads. Integration into Europe offers the promise of stability, prosperity, and democratic consolidation. Disintegration, however, remains a risk if ethnic divisions continue to dominate politics and institutional reforms fail. The challenge for Bosnia and Herzegovina is to reconcile these competing narratives, transforming Dayton's compromises into a foundation for unity rather than fragmentation.

¹⁵ Konferencije Srebrenica 1995-2025 <https://30godina.unsa.ba/#about-us-eng> (Last Accessed: March 14th 2026).

Conclusion

The University of Sarajevo's commemorations of Dayton's 30th anniversary highlighted the enduring relevance of the agreement in Bosnia's state-building process. Academic discussions emphasized both the achievements of peace implementation and the shortcomings of governance, situating Bosnia's future between the poles of integration and disintegration. Thirty years after Dayton, Bosnia remains peaceful but politically stagnant, caught between the stability guaranteed by the accord and the divisions it entrenched. The debates in Sarajevo underscored that the next phase of Bosnia's journey will depend on whether it can reform its institutions, embrace European integration, and cultivate a civic identity, or whether it will remain trapped in a cycle of fragmentation and stagnation. In this sense, the anniversary was not only a commemoration of past achievements but also a call to confront the unfinished challenges of state-building.

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