



## **BIH AND LEBANON: SHARING EXPERIENCES OF PEACEBUILDING AND DEMOCRACY NIKOLA VUCIC**

### **ABSTRACT**

As a visiting scholar in Beirut, Lebanon, in fall 2023, I often found myself enjoying discussions with various actors on the challenges of peacebuilding in this multi-confessional country, particularly this city that was once known as the Paris of the Middle East. However, the conversations with representatives of different generations did not instill much optimism as the worries dominated their thinking of the future. They spoke about many reasons for the lack of contentment, including the failure to reach internal consensus – even with mediation of foreign actors, who invested significant funds over the past decades to build institutions, infrastructure and peace. For someone coming from Bosnia, the country with still visible scars of the 1990s war, the Lebanese social-political context seemed appropriate to apply certain solutions from Bosnia and Herzegovina. I could not even imagine that the Bosnian peace may serve as an inspiration for thinking about changes in Lebanon, changes that are much needed in this country – particularly the reform that would treat so-called grey zones in the management of different sectors. As I am writing these lines, the uncertainty of whether Hezbollah will drag this unstable country into a new conflict with Israel echoes in the international media. Now, let us see what this article can achieve for the better understanding of both post-conflict contexts.

### **INTRODUCTION: SIMILAR YET DIFFERENT CASES**

In the first place, we should not ignore the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina and Lebanon have been a subject of comparison processes for decades – by journalists, sociologists, political scientists and experts in various fields of interest. With the exception of a number of successful comparative studies, many of them have used a reductionist approach to the Bosnian and the Lebanese internal dynamics and their historical layers, which sometimes simplified complex processes and challenges that these countries and societies went through, especially in the periods that followed after the conflicts at the end of the last century. As an objection towards the simplifying analyses that often found the internal diversity of these countries as a good basis for the comparison of the two cases, we can point out a non-critical isolation of both states from their historical, cultural and political specificums, particularly from their geopolitical environment and position, which are significantly different in Lebanon and Bosnia. However, despite the specific contextually ingrained peculiarities of the two countries, the experience of a conflict and strong post-conflict animosities are common to both. These animosities of the identity politics serve as a propellant for their tendency to maintain status quo. This paper will review the cases of the functional state building, building the peace and democracy with focus on convenient elements to share the experience.

## A BRIEF HISTORIC BACKGROUND

Both Lebanon (1975-1990) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995) went through hardships of war. Contrary to the Bosnian war, the war in Lebanon stretched throughout a lengthy timeframe and, similar to the war in Bosnia, it involved several conflicting parties.

The Lebanese war was not only an internal conflict but included a number of regional and international actors: this war concerned the matters that dominated the Middle East regional politics of the second half of the 20th century, including the Palestine-Israel conflict, the Cold War competition, Arab nationalism and political Islam.

The Lebanese Civil War was one of the most destructive conflicts of the 20th century. In addition to a large number of the casualties, most of Lebanon's infrastructure was destroyed, as well as Lebanon's reputation of being an example of coexistence in the Arab Middle East (*ibidem*). The diversity of the Lebanese population played a key role in the beginning and throughout the conflict: Sunni Muslims and Christians were a majority in the coastal cities; Shia Muslims primarily inhabited the south and the Beqaa valley in the east; while the Druze and Christians covered the mountainous parts of the country.

In 1975, the members of the Phalange party's militia opened fire on a bus carrying Palestinians in the Beirut neighborhood of Ain el-Rammaneh, provoking the start of the Lebanese war. Slowly, all sects and classes of Lebanon were dragged into the conflict, either as participants or as victims. Eventually, the neighbouring countries – Syria and Israel also got involved in the war. As a result of the conflict between different factions in East and West Beirut, a dividing line emerged as a boundary between Christians (East Beirut) and Muslims (West Beirut). This line became known as the Green line due to the overgrown vegetation covering this uninhabited area.

Even today, when the Middle East is in the spotlight because of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there is a valid fear that Lebanon might be drawn into the war because of Hezbollah, whose power should not be underestimated in this country; this group is marked in the western circles as radical and militant paramilitary unit.

Fortunately, Bosnia and Herzegovina sees no presence of such organised groups on its territory at the moment. Contrary to the aforementioned circumstances of the Lebanese Civil War, the past war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was waged as a part of the fall of Yugoslavia, a socialist federal state within which Bosnia existed as a separate republic. The war of the 1990s was mostly the consequence of the aspirations among the neighbouring states – Serbia and Croatia – whose political leaderships of the 1990s planned a division of Bosnia and Herzegovina, claiming the parts of its territory inhabited by the ethnic Croats (Catholics) and Serbs (Orthodox Christians) – autochthonous Bosnians who, along with the Bosniaks (Muslims) make up for a dominant part of the population and share power ever since the Yugoslav era, where Bosnia and Herzegovina was defined as a republic that was “neither Serb, nor Croat nor Muslim (Bosniak)” but is “Serb, Croat and Muslim (Bosniak).”

While in Lebanon the majority of people is identified as Lebanese, but is at the same time divided into a number of factions in mutual rivalry, ethnic affiliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina was formed on the grounds of religious affiliation – where the Bosniaks are mostly Muslims, the Croats are Catholics and the Serbs are Orthodox Christians. The Bosnian nation can thus be comprehended as the identity which represents the main state identity within the 1995 Dayton constitutional-legal framework and encompasses the members of different ethnic groups and other citizens.

## PEACE AGREEMENTS

The crucial document that brought peace to Bosnia and Herzegovina was signed in 1995 – the Dayton Peace Accords, while in Lebanon it was the Taif Agreement from 1989, which promised the recovery of Lebanon's political and administrative institutions, the reform of Lebanon's political system and the restoration of Lebanon's independence.

The Taif Agreement legitimised a previously informal share of positions among the sects – the president would be a Maronite, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, while the parliament speaker would be a Shia Muslim. It also increased the number of seats in the parliament equally divided among Christians and Muslims. The deal restricted the power of the Maronite president in favour of both the Sunni prime minister and the Shia parliament speaker.

The Taif Agreement called for gradual abolition of confessionalism and for the establishment of social and economic freedom, but with the ethnic-religious divisions still remaining very strong.

Many attribute the reinforcement of sectarianism to the lack of trust between communities (Ghosn and Khoury, 2011:384). The agreement signed over three decades ago attempted to correct the imbalance in the power sharing by establishing parity between Muslims and Christians and by transferring the executive power from the president onto the prime minister. Today, many actors of the civil sector demand the end of the 'political sectarianism' practice, and constitutional law expert Lara Saade deems that the Taif Agreement managed to put an end to the Lebanese war but did not achieve a sustainable peace and political stability.

There are similar stances in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with political and legal debates on relevancy of the constitutional-legal foundations of the modern Bosnia and Herzegovina simmering for a while now. The advocates of constitutional reforms argue that the Dayton Peace Agreement contributed to the peace and the end of the war in Bosnia, but that today, in the form which defines Bosnia and Herzegovina as a country of three constituent peoples and Others, it is outdated and discriminatory. Its discriminatory provisions were confirmed by the European Court of Human Rights, explicitly ordering the amendments that would enable all citizens to run in elections and be elected, which current formal-legal mechanisms are still blocking due to the constitutional architecture made of three constituent groups.

Although we can say with certainty that both the Dayton and Taif agreements ended wars, we see the elements that spark discontent among the people of these two countries – in case of Lebanon the discontent is larger considering the fact that the country is institutionally paralysed and unstable in terms of security.

All previous challenges stemming from constitutional debates in Bosnia and Herzegovina mostly created political crises, which were overcome thanks to the active involvement of the Office of the High Representative, the institution that represents the will of the Peace Implementation Council – the international body in charge of the implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement and of overseeing that process. In the modern context, this is seen as a unique example. Also, the role of the international community i.e. its treatment of Bosnia is often met with harsh criticism in academic debates and sometimes we even hear an interpretation of Bosnia as a protectorate.

Research and analyses in Bosnia and Herzegovina show that the majority of reform processes that the country managed to conduct over the past three decades were unimaginable without the mediation of the international community represented through the institution of the High Representative. Given the Bosnian example, the lack of an international peace envoy is a possible reason why the implementation of the Taif Agreement in Lebanon was constantly in a status quo, thus blocking all the options of infrastructural and economic development.

But, with all the objections towards the role and efficiency of the international community's High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, his role in the adoption of relevant legislation like the Criminal Code provisions on the ban of genocide denial and other war crimes from the 1990s war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was crucial. This minimised the practices of genocide denial as well as the suffering of the victims, especially the Bosnian Muslims who were the victims of the 1995 Srebrenica genocide, so the provocative and politically motivated discussions on war crimes were replaced by other subjects.

## DOES LEBANON NEED A HIGH REPRESENTATIVE?

The question may sound provocative, but one could say almost certainly that Bosnia and Herzegovina would still have been far from the EU candidate status without the institution of the High Representative. Furthermore, Bosnia would have still been without legal ban of genocide denial if it was not for the appointment of the High Representative following the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement and the now former High Representative Valentin Inzko. His historic decision infuriated most of the Bosnian Serb political representatives, who actively denied that genocide was committed against the Bosniaks despite the international court rulings that said so. Inzko's decision made genocide denial punishable by law, stipulating even prison sentences. There is a long list of decisions that were imposed and not reached in consensus, again in the interest of Bosnia's development. Which leads us to a very challenging discussion: has the role of the high representative deteriorated democratic processes that were supposed to be established in consensus or did the high representative's decisions come as a relief for the citizens at crucial moments and as a boost for the acceleration of the development?

So, does Lebanon need a reform that would also introduce the institution of the High Representative? Some may say that a high representative represents a modern version of colonial administrator, while others would see a solution in this idea for the most difficult issues of Lebanon's internal political complexity. Also, the circumstances that would lead to such institution should also be taken in consideration: this would certainly require an international conference. But, again, with whom? Bosnia, contrary to Lebanon, is a European country and its European integration path is an internal consensus. On the other hand, Lebanon is a Middle East country with history and geopolitical interests that confront each other, which adds more complexity to its internal search for peace; because Lebanon is the place where influence is pursued both by the Western centres of power on one side and, for instance, Iran on the other side – the country which is not likely to be a part of a solution together with the West in current circumstances.

This takes us to the question: where to find the international consensus on peace in Lebanon? which also poses a challenge for Lebanese people. Although not impossible, the idea is not without complications. For instance, the Russian Federation achieved significant influence through Bosnian Serb politicians, often in a way where it competes with the Western countries at the expense of the Bosnian citizens. This often sparked tensions and insecurities, and sometimes even caused problems to international peace envoys. However, due to its geopolitical position, in the heart of Europe, Western influences have always had higher impact in Bosnia rather than the negative ones coming from Russia. Despite all the injustice done in the war and post-war period to the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the EU membership seems like a motivational speech still keeping people's attention.

## WARNINGS INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS

Lebanon is known as a country of impressive cultural-historic heritage, lovely people, being even more diverse than Bosnia and Herzegovina, but the stagnation in its functionality is obvious. Infrastructural deterioration accompanied with economic crisis and the lack of motivation among its population is a dominant impression that raises the alarm and calls for a domestic and international solution to this Middle East pearl situated between Israel and Syria. Over a hundred years Lebanon has not conducted a population census because, no doubt, its result would damage the 'Taif balance', given the change in the Muslim population in relation to the Christians, which guarantees some peace.

Upon my return, I have been thinking about the remarkable resistance among the Lebanese and, once I put it in the context of the Bosnian life experience, the Lebanese were winning my sympathies more and more. Under the dire circumstances and with the country's internal complexity, they manage to survive their own powerlessness and that of the world to establish a sustainable peace and functional state of Lebanon. For a Bosnian observer, Lebanon stands today as a warning - about how deep a decline can go, while life, nevertheless, goes on.

## NOTE

Author of the essay is Nikola Vucic, a journalist based in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who graduated from the Faculty of Philosophy in Sarajevo. Vucic is also a researcher with the interest in the fields of culture and human rights. He is an associate of the Forum Ziviler Friedensdienst (Forum ZDF) and an editor at N1 TV BiH. The article is a result of the author's research visit to Beirut, Lebanon in the fall of 2023. The author uses as reference the articles by Joseph Bahout (The Unraveling of Lebanon's Taif Agreement: Limits of Sect-Based Power Sharing, 2016), Haugbolle Sune (Historiography and memory of the Lebanese Civil War 1975-1990, 2011), Alasdair Soussi (Thirty years after Taif, Lebanese seek end to sectarian politics, 2019), Faten Ghosn and Amal Khoury (Lebanon after Civil War: Peace or the Illusion of Peace, 2011).

