

# SPEECH – BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

## *‘Stability and peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina’*

2<sup>nd</sup> December 2021

*My draft speech which I was unable to deliver due to quarantine*

Mr Speaker, I would like to start by congratulating my colleague, the Honourable Member for Rutland and Melton, (Alicia Kearns) for securing this essential debate – I know this is an issue she is deeply invested in, and under her Chairmanship, the APPG for Bosnia and Herzegovina has been instrumental in moving this important issue up the agenda.

I would also like to offer my thanks to Waqar Azmi, the Chairman of Remembering Srebrenica, for the critical work he and his organisation do in reminding the world of the realities of the horrific bloodshed that took place.

There is no doubt that we are all incredibly grateful for the work Waqar does building social cohesion and pushing for unity in the wake of one of Europe’s worst post-World War II atrocities.

Mr Speaker – today’s debate is absolutely essential.

No doubt you are aware that the NATO Foreign Ministers met this week to take on matters of security that are vital to us all. And I’ve played my part at the NATO Parliamentary Assembly this week, which took place at the Washington Defence University and included over 90 politicians representing 22 NATO partners dealing in part with a looming crisis in Bosnia.

So, today is an opportunity to lay down this Parliament’s position, and to remind ourselves, our friends, and our adversaries that we have not forgotten the people of Bosnia.

That we have not forgotten the 100,000 lives lost through the conflict, and the hundreds of thousands more left to live with its consequences.

That we have not forgotten the multinational efforts that went in to bringing about peace under the Dayton Agreement.

And that we have not forgotten that what most people in Bosnia want is a stable, secure and peaceful future for themselves and their families, away from talk of secession, genocide denial, and hatred.

Indeed, we have a moral, historic and political duty to stand with those who are trying to preserve the peace, and against those pushing for secession and genocide denial, whether they be forces in Bosnia or external countries using the region as a proxy.

Moral because it is the right thing to do – keeping Bosnia united peacefully will save hundreds of thousands of lives in the country, and show that Global Britain truly stands by its commitments in the global community.

Historic, because 59 British soldiers gave their lives fighting to help bring about a unified and stable Bosnia, and like the late Paddy Ashdown, believed that a peaceful future could be a reality, not just a pipedream.<sup>1</sup>

We have significant expertise on our own benches from people who served and continue to carry the scars of their experiences, who now offer necessary insight into the politics and potential conflict in Bosnia – and in particular I want to pay my respect to my colleague Bob Stewart DSO, who commanded United Nations forces on the ground in Bosnia.

His experiences help this place understand the complexities of the region.

And finally political, because the United Kingdom played an active and essential role in bringing all sides to the table during the war to hammer out peace all those years ago, and Global Britain must now stand by the rule of law and work to uphold international agreements.

Mr Speaker, the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina has rapidly deteriorated, following months of increasing genocide denial and ethno-nationalism from Milorad Dodik, the Serb member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In response to the introduction of a genocide denial law by the previous High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Valentin Inzko, Dodik is now threatening to quit state institutions – including raising a Bosnian Serb army, the very institution responsible for genocide at Srebrenica.

And let us be very clear – what happened at Srebrenica was genocide.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/bosnia>

Over the course of 10 days, Ratko Mladic, the commander of the Bosnian Serb units, oversaw the only genocide to have occurred since World War II in Europe.

His units sifted through terrified, starving and beaten Bosniak refugees, removing any boy or man aged between 12 to 77 – they took sons away from their mothers, brothers away from their sisters, husbands away from their wives.<sup>2</sup>

And then they murdered them.

They shot them, rolling their bodies into mass graves with bulldozers, and in some cases burying them alive.<sup>3</sup>

Over 8,000 people, people just like you and me, systematically murdered in just over a week – over 8,000 lives ended, and many thousands more forced to live with the horror and pain of what happened haunting them for the rest of their lives.

As the unanimous ruling in 2001 at the International Court of Justice made clear: *‘By seeking to eliminate a part of the Bosnian Muslims, the Bosnian Serb forces committed genocide. They targeted for extinction the forty thousand Bosnian Muslims living in Srebrenica, a group which was emblematic of the Bosnian Muslims in general. They stripped all the male Muslim prisoners, military and civilian, elderly and young, of their personal belongings and identification, and deliberately and methodically killed them solely on the basis of their identity.’*<sup>4</sup>

So even while some actors attempt to undermine the legitimacy of this decision, rest assured that we, the international community, will always recognise it for what it is.<sup>5</sup>

And as I said in this place last month, the Government can set a clear red line by standing behind the UN’s decision of genocide, and against those who seek to deny it.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://srebrenica.org.uk/what-happened/history/happened-srebrenica>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-53346759>

<sup>4</sup> <https://bfpg.co.uk/2020/07/srebrenica-is-a-reminder-of-why-britain-must-lead-the-fight-against-human-rights-violations/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/24/genocide-denial-outlawed-bosnia-srebrenica-office-high-representative>

And I want to take a minute to pay tribute to Sir Geoffrey Nice QC, who worked at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia – the ICTY – between 1998 and 2006 and led the prosecution of Slobodan Milošević, former President of Serbia.

Sir Geoffrey is now chairing the independent Uyghur Tribunal, which is examining allegations of genocide and crimes against humanity being committed against the Uyghurs by the Chinese Communist Party in Xinjiang, and which will announce its verdict next Thursday.

Sir Geoffrey has spoken about the genocide that took place in Srebrenica, and one quote that always stands with me is when he remarked “one has a need for an explanation of how this could have occurred, under the eyes of the international press, under the protection of ... peacekeepers.”

And Mr Speaker, I fear the eyes of the world are not focussed enough yet - we are now hearing significant warnings from international observers and those in the region that Bosnia is standing at the precipice, looking down into to a very dark place indeed.

As Christian Schmidt, the high representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, recently said in a report to the UN, Bosnia and Herzegovina is “*facing the greatest existential threat of the post-war period*”.<sup>6</sup>

We should heed his warnings, and I want to put on record my support for his authority and position – we are all aware that Russia and China are attempting to chip away at his legitimacy, which is a sure sign that he is doing the right thing.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/02/bosnia-is-in-danger-of-breaking-up-warns-eus-top-official-in-the-state>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/02/bosnia-is-in-danger-of-breaking-up-warns-eus-top-official-in-the-state>

Mr Speaker, we have a historic duty to prevent Bosnia from breaking apart.

In 1992, British soldiers were deployed to protect aid convoys during OPERATION GRAPPLE.

Through our role as part of NATO, we acted to try and stop the worst of the violence through targeted airstrikes, in a move that is credited as helping bring warring parties to the negotiating table.<sup>8</sup>

And in 1995, the United Kingdom was one of six witnesses to observe the signing of the Dayton Agreement.

Peace is hard won and requires significant and continued investment to stop it deteriorating – and as one of the nations that played a key role in helping secure peace over twenty-five years ago, we now need to act in coalition with our friends in America and the European Union to preserve it.

So I back the calls of my friend Honourable Member for Rutland and Melton for the UK to increase our deployment to NATO HQ in Sarajevo – we must not be afraid to uphold our obligations here.

I will work with Colleagues on the NATO Parliamentary Assembly to ensure that we put pressure on institutions who at present seem to be slow in responding to what is clearly an unfolding crisis.

The absence of a strong United Nations and NATO presence on the ground fuels these so-called strong men, which is why we need a coherent and rapid international response.

Now more than ever, it is absolutely essential that the international community comes together and acts with a firm voice on this issue.

We will not stand by and watch Russia, China, Serbia and others use Bosnia as a proxy for their own agendas.

We know they are doing this, because Dodik has told us so.

In an interview with the Guardian on Tuesday, he said *“When I go to Putin there are no requests. He just says, ‘what is it I can help with?’. Whatever I discussed with him, I’ve never been cheated on it. I don’t know what else to base trust upon, if not that. With Xi Jinping, he also says, ‘if there is anything I can help with I am there’.”*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/bosnia>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/29/bosnian-serb-leader-putin-and-china-will-help-if-west-imposes-sanctions>

Mr Speaker, as someone who has faced the wrath of the CCP for raising an ongoing genocide in China, it is not without irony that I note President Xi seems happy to interfere with another country's domestic affairs – a charge his officials frequently level at us here in this place when we discuss the plight of Hong Kong and the Uyghur.

So, what can our Government do?

First, we should consider working with our allies in America and the EU to implement Magnitsky sanctions against Dodik's closest circle.

Second, as I mentioned earlier, we must reinforce the peacekeeping mission on the ground, to act as a deterrent to any violence breaking out, and to ensure democratic integrity.

And third, our Government should work with other likeminded Governments to stop offering any credibility to discussions around constitutional reform that damages the democratic process in Bosnia. We should also encourage our allies in the States to invite Bosnia to the United States' Summit for Democracy – in fact, when I was in Washington earlier I raised NATO Parliamentary Assembly and was disappointed that the invites hasn't been sent yet - I will keep encouraging NATO to do so.

Ultimately, we must show the so called 'strong-men' - Dodik, Putin, Xi and the others – that they cannot get away with ripping apart the peace so many worked so hard to create and maintain.

We must act with one unified voice, and show them that we have not forgotten Bosnia, and that Global Britain and our allies stand with our Bosnian friends.