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Defense College

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STRATEGIC TRENDS

July 2015

BALKANS

The Srebrenica massacre, twenty years later

Twenty years ago the entire world dealt with the worst single atrocity of the war and the biggest massacre in Europe since the second world war. Even though the negotiations between Serbia and the international community were underway, in the summer of 1995 the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was at his peak.

Srebrenica and its surroundings in the North-East of Bosnia and Herzegovina, declared “safe area” by the United Nations Security Council with the Resolution 819 on the 16th of April 1993 and protected by UNPROFOR troops since that moment, were attacked in the morning of the 6th of July 1995 by units of the Bosnian Serb Army of Republika Srpska (led by General Ratko Mladić), supported by paramilitary units. In a few days, the Serbs defeated the defense of the city and humiliated the Dutch UNPROFOR contingent. Despite of the requests for reinforcements, NATO carried out only one demonstrative air raid. After the conquest of the area, between the 11th and the 16th of July, Serbs regular and irregular forces captured, tortured and violently executed more than 8.000 Bosnian Muslim.

Twenty years later, the Srebrenica massacre remains a deep open wound in the heart of the Balkans. In the last days, the twenty year anniversary gave the occasion to reopen several controversies in the relationship between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the international community.

A week before the anniversary, The Observer revealed the existence of documents that proves responsibilities of western powers in the massacre. In particular this documents strengthen the thesis that the UK and the United States were informed of Serbs' purposes, but decided to sacrifice Srebrenica in order to continue the negotiations ongoing with Milosevic.

Another current dispute is related to the legal definition of the massacre. The day before the twenty year anniversary, Russia vetoed a Resolution proposed at the United Nations Security Council that would have condemned the massacre as a genocide. Even if the Srebrenica massacre was defined as genocide more than once by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, Russia vetoed the Resolution because: *“not constructive, confrontational and politically motivated”*.

However, the most significant incident occurred during the celebration of the anniversary held at the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial and Cemetery for the Victims. The event was attended by representatives of high level from at least 80 countries, including Bill Clinton and Madeleine Albright. Serbian Prime Minister Aleksander Vučić was forced to leave the ceremony because of a huge crowd throwing stones and bottles against him and the Serbian delegation. Vučić is accused both for his actual role of Serbian Prime Minister and for his past alliance with Milosevic's government, in which he also served as minister.

What happened during the ceremony, definitely comprehensible, is a backward step in the purpose of the stabilization of the region and for the normalization of the bilateral relations. In fact Vučić's government, also conditioned by European requests, tried during the last months to carry out a policy of reconciliation. The Serbian government in fact stated that it *“unambiguously condemns this horrible crime and is disgusted with all those who took part in it and will continue to bring them to justice”* and Vučić's presence itself was a sign of openness. Is crucial for the future of Serbia-Bosnia and Herzegovina relations that the Potočari incident does not compromise the complicated reconciliation process.