



## Ethnopolulist Denial and Crime Relativisation in Bosnian Republika Srpska

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## Republika Srpska

### Introduction

The denial of violence, the relativisation of crimes and the refusal to acknowledge collective guilt have long been important tools in the hands of political leaders seeking to leverage nationalism and extremism into power. In the formerly socialist parts of Europe, political contestation has recently shifted to meticulously crafted strategies of denial and revisionism as part of a broader playbook that some scholars have termed “ethnopolulism” as an overarching term for various forms of populist, nationalist, autocratic and chauvinistic political manifestations (Madrid 2008; Bieber 2018; Jenne 2018; Vachudova 2020). Ethnopolulism as “an elite strategy for winning votes and concentrating power” (Vachudova 2020, p. 318) is revisionist as it challenges the tenets of liberal democracy and targets the purportedly “predatory establishment” within national boundaries (especially opposition political elites) and beyond (including transnational institutions and groups). While a more narrowly defined nationalism (see Bieber 2018) is contained within the ethnopolulist repertoire, it does not allow for the political elasticity of ethnopolulism, which is a broader concept. Ethnopolulism encompasses flexible strategies of defending the “real” and “deserving” people who are often identified by their descent, religion, race and even civilisation, depending on the current political need. It is also characterised by leaders who present themselves as the only legitimate representatives of the will of the masses, as fighters for the “folk” and as defenders against (often imagined) old and new threats (Madrid 2008). This rise of exclusivist, polarising and majoritarian politics across post-socialist Europe has been extensively analysed, especially in the cases of Hungary and Poland.<sup>1</sup> But what varieties

of ethnopopulism have been successful, and what specific appeals and tactics have been deployed by political leaders elsewhere?

In this article I conceptualise one such variety in the case of Republika Srpska (RS), the smaller, Serb-dominated part of Bosnia and Herzegovina (henceforth Bosnia) where the appeals and tactics of ethnopopulist leaders have centred on the denial of war crimes, genocide and collective responsibility. Although such war crimes and genocide denials in RS preceded the current wave of ethnopopulism, they have recently been adapted to more pragmatic and opportunistic political strategies, following the wider trend as described below. Indeed, historically, such denials have been framed as part of the nationalist trend in the region, originating in the break-up of the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. Given the complexity of the conflict and policy biases in addressing it, many influential voices – not only in the former Yugoslavia but also abroad – have questioned the scale of the atrocities committed in the 1990s. They have even questioned the claims of victims and whether such crimes happened at all. Writers such as Harold Pinter and Peter Händke, scholars such as Noam Chomsky and Jessica Stern, and well-known public figures such as Claire Fox are a sample of famous supporters of revisionist and conspiracy theories that have sought to undermine the historical record of the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia.

With this widespread culture of denial of war crimes as a backdrop, I focus on a prominent case of denialism in Bosnia and analyse how and why the political leadership of RS has relied on denial as a critical part of its political playbook. Supported by a pervasive public denialist sentiment in RS (Majstorović 2019), I specifically focus on the institutional build-up of denial by a domineering figure in RS politics, Milorad Dodik, the current Bosnian Serb member of the Presidency and the leader of the Serb Alliance of Social Democrats (SNSD), a misnomer for the largest Bosnian Serb nationalist party. While Dodik is only one among many prominent genocide deniers in RS, his voice is often heard above all others. His

flexible tactics of manipulating facts, celebration of sentenced and known war criminals and identity entrepreneurship have become central to the RS variety of ethnopopulist politics. While such tactics evokes nationalism too - the defence of the semi-statelet of RS in order to unite polity and people (Gellner 1997) - Dodik and his numerous supporters use ethnopopulist denial to protect and amplify their political power as their prime objective in a flexible manner. As recent years have demonstrated, performative strategies of ethnopopulist denial are especially efficient when the incumbent's power is contested and under threat. Rather than a sign of strength, ethnopopulist denial is a sign of the challenges faced by SNSD's power monopoly across RS. As discussed below, this was best demonstrated by SNSD's losses in recent local elections in the two key cities of Banja Luka and Bijeljina (Latal 2020), preceded by Dodik's announcements of new revisionist "truth commissions".

The key theoretical contribution of this article is demonstrating why and how ethnopopulism and denial can be crafted to resonate strongly in countries with unresolved past legacies. Ethnopopulist incumbents in Central Europe maintain the trappings of democracy while eroding democratic institutions such as the judiciary, elections and open civil society. In the RS they are embracing autocracy openly while directly endangering peace by threatening with secession. While this is not the only strategy in their playbook as patronage acts as a direct tool to canvass support, it is a particularly effective discursive strategy. Although Bosnia is often studied as a *sui generis* postconflict case due to its cumbersome political structure, the current wave of ethnopopulist denial is part of a broader political trend. This article is based on extensive fieldwork, qualitative interviews and observations combined with document and media analysis. This evidence has allowed me to trace why and how ethnopopulist denial emerges as such a powerful and attractive discursive tool to consolidate power and silence the opposition. Through hegemonic impositions of one-sided narratives, lack of public discussions and demonisations of "others" it is a strategy to

mainstream illiberal discourse and blatant manipulations with historical facts. Used by extreme revisionists, ethnopopulism in RS weaponises the past at the cost of peace and stability.

The rest of this article is divided into five parts. First, I unpack the concept of denial and how it has resonated in the Bosnian case in order to contribute to the growing literature on the political uses and manifestations of ethnopopulism. I locate the case of RS within the more sinister stream of ethnopopulism and show why and how denial can resonate in the wider society. Second, I provide some background to the Bosnian case and the extent of victimisation. Third, I elaborate on the methods I used to study the case. I then explore the initial efforts to cover-up and deny war crimes in Bosnia to showcase how ethnopopulist denial gained ground. Fourth, I map out the strategies of wider denialism spearheaded by the political coalition around Milorad Dodik and his institutional efforts to secure power. The purpose of this section is to outline the tactics used by ethnopopulist deniers and their pragmatic somersaults regarding opinions about key historical facts. As I argue, flexibility in discourse is an important aspect of ethnopopulist denial as opposed to the ideologically driven nationalism. Fifth, in order to show how and why such strategies have resonated and even fed them, I present bottom-up evidence from respondents who have become part of the denial culture. While I show the attractiveness of the constructed denialism, I also point towards growing opposition and dissent, which has threatened the wall of denial in RS. In the conclusion, I reflect further on the consequences of such divisive politics and the current use of ethnopopulist denialism from a comparative perspective, and ponder over policy implications.

## Understanding Denial within Ethnopopulism

In order to understand the RS variety of ethnopopulist denial, it is first important to outline some key elements and purposes of denial, as well as why and how it can resonate across

societies. Especially in societies recovering from extreme suffering caused by wars, denial is “the most common response to group-based transgressions” (Bilali et al. 2019, p. 992). As a prominent scholar argued, the main purpose of genocide denial is to erase the crime from memory as the last stage of genocide (Stanton 2016). Yet other motivation to deny may range from malevolent bigotry to “human shallowness” (Charny 2003). The latter, more “innocent”, types of denial stem from human lack of ability to grasp the scale of suffering, a lack of empathy with other than one’s own suffering and a lack of cognitive capacities to make sense of potentially dissonant information, which is common among believers in conspiracy theories and consumers of disinformation (see Bandura 1999). Conversely, “malevolent” denial is driven by bigotry, opportunism and ambition. Using this dichotomy, ethnopopulist denial is located primarily within the malevolent stream as it is used to protect and amplify political power. In terms of its practice, ethnopopulist deniers exercise a full spectrum of denials (e.g., turning victims into victimisers, refusing to accept facts, labelling crimes differently), but tailor it to their specific political needs. When convenient, they accept parts of the truth. At other times, they reject what they previously stated. The inconsistency in their “belief” is a prime example of an ethnopopulist strategy: the aim is to appeal to the masses (or international donors), not convince them of a lasting and ideology-driven truth.

In terms of its form, ethnopopulist deniers utilise what Stanley Cohen called “interpretive denial” (it did happen but differently than what we are told or we should give it a different name) and “implicatory” (it did happen but implications and consequences are different to what we are told) (Cohen 2001). Interpretive denials are raft in academic circles and the media, veiled under terms such as “freedom of expression” or “diversity of opinion”. It is thus also difficult to counter as it is based on the seemingly liberal discourse of free speech and often mixes real facts with fiction – as encapsulated in the infamous misnomer “alternative facts” used by the Trump administration in the United States. Implicatory denial

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2  
3 is equally dangerous as it undermines the value of long-term consequences of denying. What  
4  
5 Cohen called “literal” (it never happened) is less common among the mainstream  
6  
7 ethnopopulist deniers as many of them – and in the case studied here – are forced to be  
8  
9 responsive to external pressures – be they diplomatic or financial – and thus have to play a  
10  
11 double game of accepting some facts internationally while refusing recognition domestically.  
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14  
15 It is important to stress that moderate selectivity in remembering and forgetting the past  
16  
17 can have nation-building effects, which can unify new states (Connerton 1989; Anderson  
18  
19 1991). Yet extreme selectivity, which reaches denial, has the opposite effect in excluding and  
20  
21 antagonising members of a community. Extreme “symbolic politics” (Kaufman 2001) is a  
22  
23 particular strategy of ethnopopulist deniers who embrace flexible identity entrepreneurship  
24  
25 and amplify tensions to either obtain or preserve power. What is remembered today, may be  
26  
27 intentionally denied and forgotten the next day, depending on the political expediency. While  
28  
29 nationalist discourse is frequently part of these strategies (i.e., the focus on uniting all people  
30  
31 of the same background within state borders), it is not its main feature. Top-down  
32  
33 ethnopopulist politics draws on public feelings and emotions and misuses them to their best  
34  
35 conflictual potential. Existing or imagined animosities, emotions and feelings across different  
36  
37 groups play a key role in whether ethnopopulist denial “sticks”. As social psychologists  
38  
39 argue, group-level behaviour is driven by the existing imaginations of a group about itself  
40  
41 (based on memory, history and remembering) and highly subjective views about other out-  
42  
43 groups (Čehajić-Clancy et al. 2011; Sahdra and Ross 2007). Tendencies to glorify the past  
44  
45 are a common group behaviour to instil a sense pride and collective identification.  
46  
47 Correspondingly, acknowledging guilt and responsibility for crimes can undermine group-  
48  
49 level bonding.<sup>2</sup> Savvy ethnopopulist deniers tap into these feelings and use evidence flexibly  
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51 to present new heroes and traitors that would amplify such polarised group dynamics.  
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Following from this, what are the key components of ethnopopulist denial studied here?

Ethnopopulist denial is best conceptualised as belonging among malevolent, intentional and conscious strategies driven by opportunistic motives to maintain and gain power. Ethnopopulist deniers draw on group dynamics of tailored selective forgetting and remembering to tap into wider emotions and biases. As the empirical material presented below shows, RS deniers deploy a combination of defending the foundation myth of RS and defending its existence by building institutions to present “alternative facts”, banalising crimes, offering frames of one’s own national victimisation and refusing to accept responsibility. Their ethnopopulism is flexible in its application (it is not consistent and highly pragmatic) and opportunistic in its main focus – ranging from defence of religion, civilisation, values and worldviews. It allows the incumbents to select whom to include and whom to exclude at any specific time without doctrinal adherence to the nation. It focuses on standing up for the interests of the “deserving” people against “predatory” establishment, as well as internal and external enemies. Using fear and imagined threats, it allows for a wide attraction of voters. Ethnopopulist denialism is thus a powerful strategy in defence of the “righteous” people who are being “unjustifiably” accused of past horrors and a useful electoral tool to unify population behind a common narrative and leadership. It is especially effective at times of crisis when new enemies are invented (e.g., refugees, banks, pharmaceutical companies) and when society feels under threat. As the rest of his article traces, ethnopopulist denial has been a particularly effective strategy in RS to attract voters and maintain power in the hands of a dominant – and highly corrupt – ruling elite.

**The Origins of Bosnian Victimisation and Disputes**

It is important to briefly outline why ethnopopulist denial has gained traction in Bosnia and RS in particular. Leaving the complex history of the former Yugoslavia aside, it was especially the 1992-5 Bosnian conflict that has produced an ample space for brazen



manipulations with established facts and conspiracy theories.<sup>3</sup> The quick demonisation of the Bosnian Muslims<sup>4</sup>, Croats and Serbs continues to puzzle researchers and locals alike. Despite common (and false) arguments that the war was fuelled by ancient animosities, the war was essentially a political contest, caused by power ambitions of elites who strategically embraced violent nationalism that ultimately broke up Yugoslavia (Dragović-Soso 2008). With the involvement and instigation of neighbouring Serbia and Croatia, from the start of the conflict in March 1992, not even the war's definition has been agreed upon. Bosniaks label it an "aggression" and a "defensive-liberation war", Serbs "civil" or "patriotic war" and Croats a "homeland war". Extreme symbolic politics indeed played an important role as past historical injustices were reinvented, primordial identities exploited and ethno-religious identities used as the key framing tool. However, it was mainly political leaders in Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia who manipulated stereotypes about the three main Bosnian groups and reduced complex identities to "us" against "them" (MacDonald 2007, pp. 167–9).

Until today, disputes over the main victims and perpetrators rage in Bosnia. Although international and even domestic criminal investigations ascertained that the aim of the Bosnian Serb leadership was to ethnically cleanse territories and create mono-ethnic units, the RS discourse maintains that the aim was the protection of Serbs and their defence against Muslims. For example, many Bosnian Serb leaders have argued that during the 1,425-day Bosnian Serb siege of Sarajevo when civilians of all ethnicities were targeted, the main war crimes were committed by the Bosnian Muslim leadership, allegedly trying to amass external sympathy. Yet the main apple of discord has been over the "crime of crimes" of July 1995 when nearly 8,000 mostly Muslim men were massacred by the Army of RS (VRS) under Ratko Mladić in the United Nations (UN) protected and demilitarised "safe zone" of Srebrenica. A raft of conspiracy theories surrounds the lead-up to Srebrenica's fall, the executions, the role of Serbia, the aims of international actors, as well as the identity of the

victims (see Gordy 2013; Nettelfield and Wagner 2013; Obradovic-Wochnik 2009; Wagner 2008).

The delayed external reactions to the war, only added extra potency to local imaginations about how the conflict was orchestrated from the outside. The ultimate arbiter of the war record was meant to be the UN-sponsored International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), set up in 1993. However, until today the ICTY remains one of the most disputed institutions across the former Yugoslavia (M. Kostić 2018; Meernik and Guerrero 2014; Yesilyurt and Hasić 2020). Similarly, the so-called Dayton Peace Agreement from November 1995, which secured a compromised peace, augmented the convoluted understanding of the conflict by introducing a complex consociationalist governance structure. It divided Bosnia into Republika Srpska (RS) and the Bosniak-Croat Federation (FBiH)<sup>5</sup>, and introduced an external administrator, the High Representative (HR). The three so-called “constituent peoples” of Croats, Bosniaks and Serbs gained significant collective rights at the expense of individual and minority rights (also referred to as “others”). Paradoxically, while Dayton was initially opposed in RS and supported by Bosniaks, the roles later reversed as Bosnian Serbs realised that preserving Dayton granted them a certain level of existential security and autonomy.

Yet numbers of victims clearly show the pattern of crimes.<sup>6</sup> By the end of the war in late 1995, around 2.5 million people were forced out of their homes, 80 percent of which were Bosniaks, and only 13 percent Croats and 6 percent Serbs (UNHCR 2003). Up to 20,000 (and potentially more) mostly Bosniak women (but also men) were sexually violated (Clark 2017). According to the International Commission for Missing People (ICMP), 32,169 people went missing (ICMP 2017); the vast majority Bosniaks (88 percent), followed by only 9 percent Serbs, 3 percent Croats and a very small number of other groups (Wagner 2008, p. 86). The overall human loss was long disputed. While Bosniaks and external actors reported over

250,000 dead, Bosnian Serbs claimed the number was as low as 25,000 (Skrbic 2006). By 2007, a Bosnian Research and Documentation Centre (RDC) in Sarajevo established that 95,940 people were killed. According to these findings, 64.6 percent of casualties were Bosniaks and 41 percent were civilians, again mostly Bosniaks (Tokača 2012, pp. 116–124). ICTY later concluded that war-related deaths amounted to 104,732 with a clear preponderance among Bosniaks, over one third of whom were civilians (Tabeau and Zwierzchowski 2010).<sup>7</sup>

### **Denial in Republika Srpska: Actors, Actions and Institutions**

Despite 25 years of extensive research, the “number wars” and disputes about the course of the war continue to entertain Bosnian politics. As this section demonstrates, RS political leaders have utilised the disputed nature of the war to its maximum potential and misused it to build an ethnopopulist denial culture. In particular, Milorad Dodik and his party, the SNSD, have in the past 15 years built up institutions and cultivated networks that propagate denial, silence, banalisation of crimes and counter-narratives, underpinning the discourse of Bosnia that is “dysfunctional”. While the RS political opposition is also denialist, it is not as proactive in fomenting denialism as SNSD’s discourse has been. This discourse is accompanied by poisonous and divisive conspiracy theories about the motivation of external actors, frequent threats of RS secession and attacks on state institutions. Its main aim has been opportunistic, using denial as a tool to win and concentrate power and to justify attacks on the Bosnian state institutions such as the judiciary, international actors and local opposition. Any potential “concessions” regarding the past, such as recognising responsibility, are framed as treacherous. This strategy is similar to the ways that incumbent ethnopopulist parties in Poland and Hungary have reframed the 1989 roundtable agreements that ended communism as a great betrayal of the people by treacherous dissidents. This makes it necessary, they argue, to aggregate great power in order to undo this betrayal

(Bernhard and Kubik 2014, p. 67). As in these two cases, the main villains in RS are framed as liberals imposing principles such as freedom of expression and forcing RS to take in “radicalised refugees” while conspiring to abolish RS and threatening with radical streams of Islam and anti-Christian values.

The following section analyses the Bosnian Serb denial, using material from extensive fieldwork in Bosnia and several fieldwork trips to RS conducted between 2015 to 2019 as part of a wider project on dealing (cf. xxx). The fieldwork resulted in 120 semi-structured interviews with state and international elites including ministers, local and international human rights workers and lawyers, journalists and civil society members and representatives of victim and veteran associations.<sup>8</sup> After an initial identification of key individuals involved in debates about dealing with the past such as NGO workers, victim and veteran leaders, political and international representatives, additional interviewees were approached using the snowball method – i.e., references from respondents – to reach saturation in answers. The interviews were open-ended and differed depending on the expertise of the respondent: legal experts were consulted on the nature of existing legislation about dealing with the past while civil society workers acted as bridges between official discourses about the Bosnian 1992-5 war and the factual evidence presented in court investigations and academic research. Respondents among the victim and veteran population were particularly useful as important public voices of the past war. The aim was to gain varied perspectives and knowledge about how the war and its consequences have been interpreted in Bosnia. The interviews were conducted across Bosnia, including both entities and the District of Brčko. Denial emerged as a particularly salient theme during the analysis on Bosnian Serb narratives about the past.

As for my media and document analysis, I analysed local news in Bosnian, laws and policy reports issued by official bodies, international organisations and civil society to triangulate the fieldwork data. While existing legal documents and reports were used to

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3 establish the basic facts, respondents' views were used to establish how they "play out" and  
4  
5 are interpreted in the field. Regarding media sources, I first relied on the *Infobiro.ba* library  
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7 of Bosnian newspapers and magazines (since the end of the war until 2019). I conducted  
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9 searches using key terms such as Srebrenica, genocide, denial and justice. While the database  
10  
11 offers only a basic search function, it provides a good overview of the various war-related  
12  
13 debates in the 25-year post-war Bosnian history. I then also used publications such as *Balkan*  
14  
15 *Insight* and *Radio Free Europe* with targeted searches about the more recent political  
16  
17 development in RS on genocide denial. The full analysis was conducted using the qualitative  
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19 coding tool NVivo by the analytical method of process tracing, i.e., tracing how the  
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21 phenomenon of genocide denial developed in RS over time. This also allowed me to identify  
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23 emerging patterns, general views and attitudes of the respondents and compare them to the  
24  
25 collected documents. By doing so, using the empirical material I was able to explain how  
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27 ethnopopulist denial has manifested itself in the RS case. In what follows, I first trace the  
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29 origins of denial before framing them in the contemporary discourse.  
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### 35 ***Initial Cover-up and Silence: Defending the Foundation Myth of RS***

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37 The origins of RS denial go back to the perpetration of crimes in the 1990s. Already in 1992  
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39 in the Krajina region where Muslim civilians were brutalised and executed, mass graves  
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41 could fulfil the role of crime evidence. Cognisant of this danger, Bosnian Serb military  
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43 embarked upon covering up grave locations by moving bodies to different sites. But even  
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45 bones later equalled to evidence once DNA analysis was developed in the early 2000s (see  
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47 Wagner 2008). The same approach was later used along the Drina river in the east and in the  
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49 case of the Srebrenica massacre that necessitated a mass logistical enterprise to bury, move  
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51 and rebury approximately 8,000 mainly male bodies in over 90 mass graves (Rohde 2015).  
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53 Silence about these graves among individual VRS soldiers but also RS authorities has  
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55 especially pained victims searching for their missing relatives. The paucity of knowledge has  
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led to what some call “ontological insecurity” among victims (Hamber and Wilson 2002, p. 40), further tensing inter-group relations in Bosnia. As some respondents noted, “it is hard to understand why they would not tell us where our sons are after so many years have passed”.<sup>9</sup> Crime cover-up has been a direct and immediate form of denial.

While such manifestations of denial were at times at the level of individuals (mainly out of fear of backlash and prosecution), groups (e.g., military units) and entity authorities, a more pernicious form of denial was designed by the RS political leadership soon after the war: a discourse aimed at undermining the veracity of the ICTY, national courts and effectively witness testimonies. The ultimate objective was to rewrite the official history of the war as a civil conflict where all parties were equally guilty. This discourse initially resided among RS military and political structures. That was natural as RS elites were implicated – and correspondingly indicted by the ICTY – in the atrocities. Radovan Karadžić, the wartime leader of Bosnian Serbs and the Serb Democratic Party (SDS), famously claimed that accounts of Srebrenica atrocities were “a propaganda trick in the run-up to the negotiations at Dayton” (Vulliamy 1994, p. 3). As Republika Srpska’s internal borders were effectively created on the territory previously cleansed by VRS and Serb paramilitaries, the newly carved out RS needed reference points to evoke pride rather than shame in order to survive as a separate entity (aka “statelet”). In particular, strong denial of Srebrenica in RS persevered despite confessions at the ICTY by some of the participating soldiers and the 2001 genocide conviction of Radislav Krstić, as well as admissions of guilt of political leaders such as Biljana Plavšić. In 2002 RS sent an official report about the massacre to the ICTY, calling the killings “alleged”, arguing that those who had fled and died in the genocide were soldiers. The argument ran further that only “less than 100” Muslims had been killed “by Bosnian Serb forces for personal revenge or in simple ignorance of international law” (Mallinder

2009, p. 139). Several of my respondents in RS used these arguments, noting that there was no orchestrated plan to kill the Muslim men.

Yet by the early 2000s, it became clear that the true foundation myth of RS was both violent and criminal. Given the emerging research on the ethnic skewedness of the death toll and missing people, the new RS authorities faced a challenge in justifying how RS was created. Moreover, as Srebrenica victim movements turned into vigorous fighters for justice and truth (Barton-Hronešová 2020; Helms 2013; Nettelfield and Wagner 2013), domestic authorities had to face up strong bottom-up as well as international pressure to investigate the past. Victims of Srebrenica assumed the role of the main victims of the war (Henig 2017), supported by Bosniak nationalist parties – the Party of Democratic Action (SDA) and the Party for BiH (SBiH). Arguing that Bosniaks were trying to “Srebrenise” Bosnia, i.e., to use the genocide in any public or political discussion to legitimate centralisation, RS authorities responded with inflated RS victimisation. As the victimhood identity among Bosniaks intensified, so did denialism among Bosnian Serbs. Serb political authorities and victim associations insisted that the numbers of Serb victims were underreported and that Bosniaks were trying to appropriate victimhood. In these conflicts over numbers, victims became bargaining chips, “statistics”, and “dead heads”, as described by my respondents.

The subsequent rise of Milorad Dodik and the SNSD in the mid-2000s was preceded by an important – and lost – window of opportunity to come to terms with the genocide. In 2003, 49 relatives of Srebrenica submitted a case to the Human Rights Chamber in Sarajevo arguing that their rights to know the truth about their relatives were violated by RS authorities.<sup>10</sup> The Chamber decided in favour of the victims and ordered RS to disclose information about the missing persons and pay out the equivalent of two million Euro. The then HR Paddy Ashdown exerted pressure on RS to comply and create an investigative commission. After an initial bogus attempt, the commission at last produced a report that



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3 admitted that around 7,779 Bosnian Muslims were “liquidated” in Srebrenica. It also included  
4 names of 20,000 persons implicated in the killings (Stan and Nedelsky 2013, p. 41). In June  
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7 2004, the then RS President Dragan Čavić (SDS) issued a televised apology for Srebrenica.  
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10 The RS government subsequently expressed its “true regret” and apologised to the survivors  
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12  
13 for the “tragedy” (Milanovic 2006, p. 255).

14 Čavić and SDS felt they had no other option at the time because of strong external  
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16 pressure, the judicial ruling as well as the involvement of experts on the commission close to  
17  
18 SDS (Mallinder 2009, p. 142). While the apology eluded the term genocide (and the term  
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20 remains a taboo across RS and neighbouring Serbia), the 2004 admission resulted in a  
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22 political backlash against SDS in RS and contributed to its subsequent electoral defeat. SNSD  
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24 capitalised on this sentiment. Although Dodik himself served as an SDS-deputy during the  
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26 war, he later crafted a reputation of a moderate politician, famously called a “breath of fresh  
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28 air” by Madeleine Albright in 1998 (Majstorović 2013). After the 1998 elections, he created a  
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30 minority coalition government called “Concord” to signal cross-entity cooperation and  
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32 worked with external actors out of political convenience. RS had been cut off from  
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34 desperately needed foreign funding for reconstruction. He went as far as to call Srebrenica a  
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36 genocide in recorded interviews and seemingly embraced a discourse of reconciliation.  
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38 However, after SNSD lost the next elections in the early 2000s and after witnessing the anti-  
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40 SDS backlash in 2004, Dodik changed strategy. As wartime disputes raged and the ICTY was  
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42 in the midst of prosecuting leading Bosnian Serb and Serbian politicians that were held in  
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44 high public esteem in RS, Dodik turned towards a discourse of belittling the committed  
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46 atrocities and presenting himself as a defender of RS. While he responded to the general  
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48 denialist sentiment, succinctly summarized by Majstorović as “being a Serb today” among  
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50 others means “saying that no genocide against Bosniaks during the 1992-5 war took place”  
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(2019, p. 212), the RS leadership under Dodik intensified the pervasiveness of denial in the general public discourse.

### ***Ethnopolulist Denialism as a Political Strategy to Defend Srpska***

Indeed, the lesson Milorad Dodik took from his electoral loss was that defence of the people and RS against internationals and Bosniaks (who had been mistrusted across RS) was an effective political strategy. In the 2006 elections, Dodik presented himself as the only true defender of RS. He campaigned on a newly invented identity of RS that mainly concentrated on preserving Srpska under all costs, countering the ICTY, HR and other pernicious international actors, and opposing centralisation efforts of his political nemesis, Haris Siljadžić, the leader of SBiH. The two subsequently clashed over constitutional reforms put forward to modify the Dayton structures (Perry 2016). While Dodik used Dayton as a safeguard to keep RS as a separate entity, Siljadžić called for the abolition of entities and the creation of one Bosnian government, ultimately allowing Dodik to frame RS as under existential threat. Siljadžić became the main champion of the frame that RS was a “product of genocide” and that Bosnia lived in an “ethnic apartheid” dominated by Serb separatism (Bennett 2016, pp. 193–5). These attacks, combined with the intensified victimhood identity among Bosniaks, not only effectively stalled inter-entity cooperation, but nudged Dodik towards augmented denial. As some interviewed respondents noted, Dodik would still privately acknowledge war crimes and Srebrenica, but when “on stage” (i.e., on TV or any public discussions), he resorts to denial.

Yet even after his election in 2006, Dodik opportunistically recognised Srebrenica, as he was in need of international funding and loans that in turn funded his coterie of supporters. In a TV interview with Senad Hadžifejzović in 2007 (i.e., a non-electoral year) he stated: “I know full well what happened; it was genocide in Srebrenica. That is what the court in The Hague [ICTY] found and it is an undisputable legal fact” (AlJazeera on YouTube 2018).

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3 Within a year (and before local elections), though, he set up the “Historical Project of  
4 Srebrenica” as an entity-funded commission of denial led by Stefan Karganović, a dubious  
5 Bosnian-American researcher with a history of fabrications and lies about his own identity.<sup>11</sup>  
6  
7 The purpose of the project was to undermine the veracity of the existing data, disseminate  
8 false information and sow seeds of doubts about the genocide. As a result, as Srebrenica  
9  
10 became the pillar of Bosniak identity, its denial became the pillar of Bosnian Serb identity. In  
11 the electoral year of 2010, when instructed by international actors in Bosnia that Srebrenica is  
12 a recognised genocide, Dodik retorted by saying: “this attempt to limit the freedom of  
13 thought and expression, unknown in modern democracies, is very worrying” (Arslanagić  
14 2010). Yet when in need of external support, Dodik as well as other RS deniers (including  
15 from other parties such as the former mayor of Prijedor Marko Pavić) would deliver on  
16 public displays of remorse. For example, in April 2015 when Dodik lay wreath in Srebrenica  
17 saying “I am sorry for all those who suffered” (Radio Televizija BN 2015). “He needed IMF  
18 loans, so he went there [Srebrenica]...”, a Sarajevo-based analyst scoffed.<sup>12</sup> His visit during a  
19 non-electoral year not only poorly covered by the media, but he also visited the controversial  
20 memorial to killed Bosnian Serbs in neighbouring Bratunac to make a point about where his  
21 allegiances lied. Such acts only demonstrate the pragmatic nature of ethnopopulist denial.

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23 As literal denial was unrealistic given the mounting evidence and financial pressures in RS  
24 that needed external loans, the aim became to undermine the accuracy of information and  
25 offer “alternative” interpretations of what happened, i.e., using interpretive denial. Pretending  
26 to open a debate about the past, RS authorities have turned existing mechanisms of the  
27 international human rights institutions on their head – and used them to counter and reframe  
28 the past. In 2008, Dodik’s government established the “Republican Centre for the  
29 Investigation of War” to create a counter-narrative about Serb victimhood.<sup>13</sup> By 2012, the  
30 “Centre for Research on War, War Crimes, and Search for Missing Persons” was set up as an

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3 investigative commission to allegedly verify war-time data. Its true purpose was to highlight  
4 the suffering of Bosnian Serbs and undermine existing investigations. Its director Goran  
5 Krčmar in our interview provided an elegantly crafted justification for the existence of the  
6 centre, pointing to the flaws of the ICTY, ICMP and the state Institute for Missing People  
7 (INO). He combined truthful facts with fabrications. For example, he acknowledged that the  
8 main war victims were Bosniaks. Yet he added that it is the circumstances of their deaths that  
9 remain manipulated as most died in conflict with Croats (not Serbs) or during the inter-  
10 Muslim conflict in the Bihać area.<sup>14</sup> This is not true, as the highest death toll among Bosniaks  
11 was in eastern Bosnia and Krajina where Serb forces and Serbian paramilitaries operated.  
12 However, it is an argument I have heard repeatedly.  
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16 Moreover, Krčmar refused to accept that “only” around 4,000 civilian Serbs died during  
17 the conflict – a verified figure (see Tokača 2012, p. 134). He further claimed that mass-  
18 graves’ openings were delayed in support of ICTY’s cases. He offered the example of  
19 Tomašica in Krajina that was excavated in 2014 to argue that its location had been known to  
20 the ICTY for years but its “discovery” was delayed to strengthen the case against Karadžić.  
21 Having interviewed members of INO as well as investigators on the ground, I did not find  
22 any persuasive evidence to support such claims. Krčmar also leveraged dissatisfaction with  
23 the functioning of the existing institutions to point towards an anti-Serb bias and “incorrect  
24 interpretations of data”. INO (created in 2008) has indeed been widely criticised for letting  
25 political objectives influence investigations.<sup>15</sup> To Krčmar, INO is not fulfilling its role and  
26 only investigates Bosniak disappearances, allegedly driven by Bosniak politics (INO’s board  
27 member, Amor Mašević, is also a key member of SDA). The slow progress of identification  
28 has caused frustration among interviewed Bosniak victims too. However, the pace of  
29 identification is not caused by evident biases but due to political disputes over funding and  
30 RS obstructionism regarding information provision. For example, in 2008 Dodik’s  
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government directly obstructed the work of INO by withholding information and confiscating key documents (Vulliamy 2012, pp. 297–8). More importantly, as over 80 percent of all missing individuals have been identified, Bosnia provides a unique case of success rather than failure in investigating disappearances (ICMP 2017).

In addition to institutions, a particular discourse about the origins of atrocities has emerged that rests on the idea that Serb attacks were pre-emptive. Krčmar's colleague Nevenko Vranjaš in our interview offered a clear example of this: "The first victims in Prijedor were Serbs and the same happened in Sanski Most. The later reaction of Serbs ... was a response to the previous actions of Bosniaks. It was a retaliation... defence."<sup>16</sup> While Prijedor currently hosts a number of influential and courageous civil-society initiatives (e.g., The Day of White Ribbons by NGOs *Kvart* and *Izvor*), trying to pierce the dominant denialist culture in RS (Barton-Hronešová 2020; Vučkovac 2021), "the wall of silence" regarding the local killings of Bosniaks prevails (Hodžić 2015). Also the idea that Srebrenica was a retaliation and preventative is common across RS, including among the main opposition parties. In 2017, Mladen Ivanić, the then leader of one of the three main opposition parties (Party of Democratic Progress, PDP), in an interview explained that while he disagreed with the term genocide, Srebrenica was a "preventative genocide" (Slobodna Bosna 2017) as history taught Serbs that they could always become victims of genocide themselves (cf. Majstorović 2019, pp. 215–8). Allusions to Serbs as perennial victims on par with Jews have a long history in Serbian mythology (see Subotić 2019), as do references to the Jasenovac camp that is framed as genocide on Serbs during World War II. The current wide acceptance of such distortions across the opposition parties in RS is further a sign that there is a cross-party unity on refusing to accept Bosnian Serb responsibility over the past – even among those who openly criticise SNSD (Vukomanović 2020). As an interviewed journalist in RS noted, "accepting it

[Srebrenica as genocide] would mean accepting that RS is an entity that was created on genocide, which no political leader can afford to do and only few of us dare to say”.<sup>17</sup>

The other strategy that has paid off at times when the Dayton structures were under revision was to defend RS against centralisation and thus loss of autonomy. Attacks on democratic institutions such as the judiciary are a well-known strategy among ethnopopulist leaders in Central Europe. In April 2011, initiated by SNSD and Dodik, the RS National Assembly voted to organise a referendum on the Bosnian State Court, a direct attack on the fragile central state (Hasić 2020). Although it had been later called off after a direct European Union (EU) intervention, the referendum was followed by several years of smear campaigns against judicial institutions of BiH in order to pivot RS towards a judicially independent statelet, controlled by SNSD. At that time, Dodik’s rhetoric became more separatist, pro-Russian and anti-Bosnian – in direct response to his growing political opposition. Although SNSD still won the 2014 assembly elections, it lost eight seats. Dodik again countered by strengthening his ethnopopulism. By September 2016, he organised a successful referendum on celebrating the anniversary of the creation of RS on 9 January 1992 in order to frame himself as a “defender of RS”. Ignoring the previous decision of the Constitutional Court (and EU warnings), he enacted 9 January as the “Day of Srpska”.<sup>18</sup> The very same year RS government announced that a student dormitory in the wartime seat of the RS in Pale would be named after Karadžić, at that point already a sentenced war criminal, but a popular figure in RS (The Guardian 2016). Only after fierce international pressure did Dodik grudgingly succumb and removed the plaque with Karadžić’s name in 2020.

Finally, in the summer before presidency elections in 2018, Dodik submitted a motion to the RS Assembly to annul the 2004 RS report on Srebrenica, which was accepted in August 2018 (NSRS 2018). Dodik accused the commission of publishing false data under the pressure of Paddy Ashdown.<sup>19</sup> In his address to the deputies he stated that “the Srebrenica

crime is a conspired tragedy with the intention of demonising Serbs” (AlJazeera on YouTube 2018). Shortly before that, a board member of SNSD Rajko Vasić went a step further in threatening with a repeat of Srebrenica on Twitter, stating: “if you really love this genocide on you so much, just wait for the next opportunity” (Katana 2018). As a follow-up, in late 2019 Dodik announced plans for the start of two new “independent” commissions examining war crimes in Sarajevo and Srebrenica (Rudic 2019; Sorguč 2019). Nothing about either commission is independent – quite the opposite. He appointed dubious “experts”, known for their support of the Serbian version of history.<sup>20</sup> Turning transitional justice on its head, these new initiatives institutionalised the current ethnopopulist denial but were also part of campaigning strategies in the run up to the 2020 local elections. Dodik’s “RSexit” – effectively a secessionist threat (though so far empty) from Bosnia – announced in early 2020 was equally part of a political game.

The combination of institutionalisation of denial, rhetoric of flexible selectivity and attacks on purported enemies of RS has so far paid off. Dodik has stayed in power since 2006 when he scored his largest electoral victory: as the Prime Minister (2006-2010), President of RS (2010-2018) and a member of the Bosnian Presidency (2018-today). Every electoral round (effectively every two years) , when the focus should have been on economic deprivation and widespread corruption – the two main concerns of RS citizens<sup>21</sup> – Dodik escalated his rhetoric, attacked the opposition and Bosniak politicians and advanced conspiracy theories about the past war with more vigour (cf. Yesilyurt and Hasić 2020). SNSD has been generally successful by relying on a simple political ruse “to distract voters from multiple high-level corruption cases including the plunder of several public companies” (Hasić 2020, p. 30). Several of my respondents noted that Dodik was a “safe” political option as his corruption was open and well-known, and as he was the only capable politician to counterbalance “Sarajevo politics” (i.e., state-level corrupt politics and international actors).

Yet the interesting pattern to observe is that Dodik's reliance on ethnopopulist denial intensifies as his political position is put in question. The latest escalations in the form of creating new "truth commissions" and fully denying Srebrenica must be understood at the backdrop of RS' overall economic deprivation, US sanctions against Dodik's personal assets under US jurisdiction (since 2017), widespread public dissatisfaction with the rule of law in RS and a growing opposition. In local elections in November 2020, SNSD lost two key cities Banja Luka and Bijeljina to its main rivals PDP and SDS, respectively. Although the incoming opposition is equally denialist, notably with the new mayor of Banja Luka (PDP) denying Srebrenica (Novosti.rs 2020), the political double game is not only to buy out as many votes as possible through patronage, but also to present one's credentials in the defence of Srpska. While the power of SNSD is somewhat eroded, as the next section shows, ethnopopulist denial has so far been effective due to a number of enabling actors within RS.

### ***Everyday Banalisation of Crimes: Popular Support and Opposition***

The interesting question remains whether and how such efforts have resonated among RS citizens, or whether they have in fact been inspired by some wider public sentiment. As I show here, political leadership is the product of the wider sentiment as well as its enabler. First, there has been a palpable long-term dissatisfaction across the RS public with international interventionism (HR, ICTY, EU and others) in Bosnia and as RS citizens have felt victimised by the discourse about their entity being created on genocide (see also Bennett 2016, pp. 170–3). For example, the 2015 proposal by the United Kingdom to declare Srebrenica genocide at the UN (Mehler 2017) caused a public outrage in RS. An interviewed journalist who was otherwise open to recognise some RS wartime responsibility stated: "I do not understand why they [UK] had to do this. ... I think Americans have bought them. (...) It feels like as if they had extinguished a cigarette on my hand. We will never forgive the Brits".<sup>22</sup> The motivation for such attitudes stems mainly from less malignant variations of



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3 interpretive denial that originate in banalisation, fatigue and “moral disengagement”, i.e. the  
4 individual and group tactics to distance from violence and crimes (Bandura 1999, p. 195).  
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8 “We have done bad things, but they do not need to call us genocidaires all the time”, another  
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10 journalist in Banja Luka stated.<sup>23</sup> A victim leader from Višegrad argued that “there is no  
11  
12 chance that Serbs would have killed people with tied hands. That would only be some  
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14 lunatics. I am not saying that Srebrenica did not happen. There was a crime but not  
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16 genocide.”<sup>24</sup> The widespread attitude that can be summarised as: *Crime? Maybe. Individuals*  
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18 *need to pay for it if found guilty. Genocide? Certainly not as we Serbs are no genocidaires.*  
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22 Second, ethnopopulist denialism also tallies with the wider cacophony about what  
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24 happened in Bosnia between 1992-5 and who suffered the most (cf. R. Kostić 2007).  
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26 Disputing numbers of dead and their identities has been widespread among the public, as  
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28 have been fictitious narratives – or outright ignorance – about Srebrenica (Milanovic 2015).  
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30 Some of the respondents in Banja Luka were convinced that bodies buried in Srebrenica were  
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32 either Serbs or transported from other locations such as Kosovo to vilify Serbs as mass  
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34 killers. A victim respondent in Eastern Sarajevo was convinced that the genocide was an  
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36 international ploy and that the ICTY moved bodies to eastern Bosnia to strengthen its  
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38 prosecution of the Serbian leadership. Among various interviewed Serb victim associations  
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40 such narratives were often supplied with additional conspiracy theories about the financial  
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42 benefits for international actors during the war, effectively deploying implicatory and  
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44 interpretative denials. The leader of an association of the missing in RS described Srebrenica  
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46 as a tool to disparage Serbs, offering counter examples of Serbian suffering since the  
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48 Ottoman Empire. “History teaches us that Serbs have always been the main victim in this  
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50 region... During World War II, 80 percent of all casualties here were Serbs,” he argued. This  
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52 number is incorrect.<sup>25</sup> Established facts, though, are fully rejected, rhetoric endorsed by the  
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political leadership is repeated and memorials are erected (such as in Bratunac and Jasenovac) with inflated figures that are directly sponsored by RS government.

Third, the dynamics of how denialism is accepted must also be understood at the backdrop of pragmatic distributive politics. Dodik directly finances a large group of military, victim and other interest associations (so-called “organisations of special interest”) that vigorously support and publicly defend him (cf. Šegrt 2009). Although some of the organisations may endorse denial because of their convictions, traumas and war suffering; many belong to “uncivil society” (Kopecky and Mudde 2005) that it is driven by the need to obtain funding. In a patron-client style such ties are based on mutually agreed obligations and supplied resources. SNSD provides patronage through political appointments, jobs, payments and lucrative business opportunities (Bennett 2016; Hasić 2020; Kurtović 2016). Many of such associations have been in the media presented as those protecting RS against its enemies and ensuring the Serb suffering during the war is recognised (see Barton-Hronešová 2020). This is not helped by the fact that school curricula have been aligned with neighbouring Serbia (Lakic 2019), presenting one-side views about the past (cf. Vučkovac 2021), and that Bosnian Serb pupils undertake school trip to Belgrade rather than to Sarajevo. As an interviewed former VRS soldier noted, many Bosnian Serb children (including his own) have never been to FBiH.<sup>26</sup>

A respondent who has been blacklisted by RS authorities several times for his/her public views summarised the situation as follows:

Although people are not happy in RS, there are some rules here: If you protest against RS, you are a traitor because you are fighting against its survival. You are on the side of Bosniaks and internationals who are conspiring against us to destroy RS. You have media articles about elaborate plans. In the end, everyone works on the annihilation of RS, but only a few forces - SNSD, SDS, Socialist Party - are able to preserve it; the rest is fighting against it. So you need to blacklist those enemies from within and shame them publicly.<sup>27</sup>

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3 Finally, such group-based solidarity is maintained by glorifications of the past, victimhood  
4 tropes and a growing sense of pride to be a member of RS that is widely propagated by the  
5 subjugated and censored academia, public discourse (Majstorović 2019) and media in RS  
6 (Scancariello 2017). For example, as several interviewed journalists noted, public media have  
7 limited leeway in how and what they report as they are required to paint a positive picture in  
8 support of the SNSD leadership. “It pains me to do this”, a journalist of the official news  
9 agency SRNA told me. “But I have a family to feed”, he added, suggesting a strong indirect  
10 patronage tie to SNSD.<sup>28</sup> During an interview with another journalist, she whispered when  
11 talking about the political and economic censorship that media in RS have been facing for  
12 several years, and then loudly stated, “Mr Dodik is only protecting the original Dayton  
13 agreement”. The fear of backlash and personal sanctions was palpable.

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15 All the points above explain how denial – and its politicisation – have penetrated RS  
16 society. However, the 2014 protests and floods, poor economic situation, growing political  
17 opposition and corruption have presented new challenges (Blagovcanin 2020; IPSOS Public  
18 Affairs 2019; Lai 2020; Lippman 2019). The economic and political situation in RS has not  
19 improved since Dodik came to office in 2006. For example, in 2014, more than a third of RS  
20 citizens earned less than the minimum wage, which amounts to around 230 Euro (Obradović  
21 et al. 2019, p. 6). Data on youth out-migration that is mainly driven by unemployment (and  
22 clientelistic employment) are even more troubling (IMF 2020). Social benefits have become  
23 for many citizens in Bosnia the only income, making them dependent on the ruling SNSD  
24 authorities. High levels of corruption and distrust in public authorities have been equally  
25 criticised in recent polls across the country (IPSOS Public Affairs 2019; Regional  
26 Cooperation Council 2020). A retired Bosnian Serb veteran mockingly noted that “Dodik is  
27 good for us as long as pensions come on time. Let him rule 100 years! People do not see the

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3 forest for the trees. And the forest is called criminality and corruption, which will bring this  
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5 country down”<sup>29</sup>.  
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8 Yet the winter of 2018 saw massive protests in Banja Luka organised by the father of a 21-  
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10 year old David Dragičević who was murdered under suspicious circumstances after RS police  
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12 interrogations (BIRN 2019). The case galvanised RS public demanding truth about the case  
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14 and ultimately the rule of law. The movement, led by David’s charismatic father Davor, has  
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16 grown in force, supporting some previous initiatives of civic resistance (such as in Prijedor  
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18 and 2014 protests). RS authorities reacted by framing the protestors as traitors and Davor had  
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20 to flee to avoid arrest. The movement remains active but is repeatedly attacked by RS  
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22 authorities and the likes of Karganović for “destroying Srpska” (Transparency International  
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24 2020). In addition to criticising the rule of law in RS, Justice for David has challenged the  
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26 widespread denial and targeted some prominent politicians who are known to have been  
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28 directly involved in war crimes, including among the opposition (such as the leader of the  
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30 United Srpska party, Nenad Stevandić). Most recently, during the COVID-19 outbreak, a  
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32 representative of the movement was arrested for allegedly posing a public threat when  
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34 speaking to the press. Similar to other countries across the region, RS authorities have used  
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36 the 2020 pandemic to stifle opposition and crack-down on dissent that is growing in force.  
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38 Yet the stronger repression grows, the clearer it becomes that there are new actors within the  
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40 civil society to counter. While still sparse in numbers, challengers to denial exist. The manner  
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42 in which ethnopopulist denial has been used to date in RS and deployed in critical moments  
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44 (such as before elections and during crises such as today) suggests that its escalation may  
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46 signals that the leadership is concerned with other issues taking political centre-stage and  
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48 resorting to political denial all the more.  
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## 56 Conclusion

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3 In this article, I analysed the political dynamics of ethnopopulist denialism as a pragmatic  
4 and opportunistic political strategy used by the political leadership in RS to protect and  
5 amplify their power in Republika Srpska. I distinguish between more rigid ideology-driven  
6 nationalist strategies and the flexible and power-driven ethnopopulism that has been deployed  
7 by politicians such as Milorad Dodik. The RS variety of ethnopopulism is based on the  
8 promise to protect RS people from the “evil” outsiders and all who aid them, including  
9 international institutions, Bosniaks and domestic opponents. All are framed as enemies of the  
10 people, reminiscent of the previous communist rhetoric. The incumbents’ grip on power  
11 hinges on their ability to “defend” Srpska in the eyes of the public as well as on their  
12 financial means to distribute privileges. Despite years of poor economic performance and  
13 high levels of corruption under his leadership, Dodik uses denial to frame himself as the main  
14 defender of the “threatened” RS people. While the majority of the political opposition is  
15 equally denialist, it is evident that Dodik has been ratcheting up his rhetoric of denial before  
16 elections and when his power is challenged, which has recently been a common occurrence.

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18 Such ethnopopulism mirrors in many ways the appeals and strategies of ethnopopulist  
19 incumbents in other post-socialist countries, especially Poland and Hungary. Combining  
20 victimhood narratives with resentment against outsiders, justifying a strong state with the  
21 imperative to right alleged historical wrongs and targeting domestic and foreign liberals as  
22 enemies of the state have become inherent parts of the politics of Viktor Orban’s Fidesz in  
23 Hungary and Jaroslaw Kaczynski’s Law and Justice party in Poland (Enyedi 2020;  
24 Vachudova 2020). Milorad Dodik has not only taken a clear inspiration from their strategies  
25 of undermining democratic institutions such as the judiciary, but he has received active  
26 support from these leaders. During the 2020 pandemic, Orban sent material support to RS  
27 only rather than to Bosnia as a whole, leading to an international outrage (Kovačević 2020).  
28 Yet given the specific set of historical grievances and unresolved legacies in Bosnia, the RS

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3 variety has been adapted to resonate strongly with RS voters who have felt marginalised in  
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5 the post-war Bosnian developments and demonised. As an analyst in RS noted in our  
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7 interview in 2015, “in 2003 Dodik was the first one to talk about war camps. ... Now he is  
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9 the primary denier of all of this. Why? He once said that when he was pushing for the social  
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11 democratic story, he had three seats in the parliament, now he has 80”. Denial has this way  
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13 become central to the ethnopopulist playbook in RS as it taps into the wider denialist  
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15 sentiment and helps the incumbents to win votes and concentrate power. What is important to  
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17 highlight, however, is that intensification of ethnopopulist denial signals weakness rather than  
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19 strength as the current SNSD’s incumbency becomes threatened by political opposition  
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21 (which is by no means liberal and willing to accept responsibility) and more liberal strains of  
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23 civic resistance.  
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28 While conceptualising RS ethnopopulist denial as an opportunistic political enterprise to  
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30 distract voters may suggest that it can be easily dismantled, it continues to resonate among  
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32 the public (see also Karacic 2020). RS denial culture has been sustained by the combination  
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34 of bottom-up clientelistic networks and a closed information and educational environment  
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36 that have provided further legitimacy and credibility to the widespread patterns of denial.  
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38 Deep-seated stereotypes and in-built scepticism towards the other groups in Bosnia and lack  
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40 of trust towards external institutions (including the European Union<sup>30</sup> and NATO) have led to  
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42 deeply felt fears about the future of RS among its citizens. The top-down propaganda has  
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44 been underpinned by patronage and a number of institutions, including the educational  
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46 system that excludes any materials that may foster identification with Bosnia as a functioning  
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48 state among young people and heavily politicised media. While there are pockets of true civil  
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50 society and societal resistance in RS, these remain under vigorous domestic pressure and  
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52 sadly benefit from only limited external attention as international actors remain reluctant to  
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54 confront Bosnian corrupt ethnopopulists.  
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Dismantling the existing culture of denial is by no means an easy undertaking. Although civil society in particular has so far been spearheading initiatives about truthful approaches to dealing with the past, it has been weakened by the uniformity of views between the incumbents and opposition regarding denial and left to its own devices by international actors. As the top political echelons of RS are gripped by denial, tackling it may necessitate not only political courage and but also capitalising of windows of opportunity that crises may offer (such as the latest pandemic) by exposing the levels of governance mishaps and by increased international shaming. At the same time, top-down messaging as well as opening truthful and critical debates about the past will need to be cultured and introduced in the media, universities, schools and public institutions. Without these debates and more democratic deliberation, RS and Bosnia will remain in a limbo, caught between past and present, without any viable future prospects for its citizens. These are important lessons with policy implications for those interested in helping divided societies build a positive future.

<sup>1</sup> For a review of these debates, see *Ethnopolitics* (Vol 17:5, 2018) and this journal (Vol 36:3, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> For example, many military organisations refuse to accept crimes committed by their co-combatants as it delegitimises the existence of their own sacrifices and potentially incriminates them.

<sup>3</sup> It is no coincidence that some recent terrorist attacks (e.g., New Zealand in 2019) were inspired by the Bosnian Serb nationalists.

<sup>4</sup> Also (imprecisely) called Bosniaks as a new, reinvented political identity (Bougarel 2009).

<sup>5</sup> A smaller District of Brčko was also designed under international administration.

<sup>6</sup> War crimes were recorded not only by Bosnian Serbs and Croats but also by Bosniaks.

<sup>7</sup> Although the RDC and ICTY numbers somewhat differ, these differences may be caused by different methodologies (who died when) and how “missing people” are categorised – whether indeed missing or assumed dead.

<sup>8</sup> The interviews were conducted with the approval of Oxford University’s Social Science Ethics Committee and are stored with the author.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with a survivor, Srebrenica, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> In the so-called ‘Srebrenica Cases’, Selimović and 48 Others (CH/01/8365), Decision on Admissibility and Merits, Human Rights Chamber for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

<sup>11</sup> Karganović led the project from 2008 to 2014. It received 1,923,900 KM (close to 1 million Euro) from RS. See: <http://srebrenica-project.com/>. He was later prosecuted in RS for embezzling nearly 50,000 Euro.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with a political analyst, Sarajevo, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Serbia has equivalent institutions such as the Centre for Crimes against Serbs (*Centar za zločine nad Srbima*).

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Goran Krčmar, Banja Luka, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Interviews with victim representatives and ICMP researchers, 2015 and 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Nevenko Vranjaš, Banja Luka, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with a former VRS soldier, Banja Luka, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Bosniaks celebrate 1 March as the “Day of Bosnian Independence”, and with Croats also the “Day of Bosnian Statehood” on 25 November as the historical creation of BiH in 1943. In August 2020, Serbia and RS also declared to celebrate 15 September as a “Day of Serbian Unity”.

<sup>19</sup> Whom he continues to acrimoniously attack even after his passing, well aware of how disliked Ashdown remains in RS.

<sup>20</sup> A group of academics led by Eric Gordy published a protest letter about their establishment.

<sup>21</sup> Most surveys shows that unemployment and corruption are main concerns of citizens in Bosnia and RS (IPSOS Public Affairs 2019; National Democratic Institute 2010; Prism Research 2013).

<sup>22</sup> Interview with a SRNA journalist, Banja Luka, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with a journalist, Banja Luka, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with a victim representative in Višegrad, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> In Bosnia, World War II claimed the lives of nearly 17 percent Bosnian Serbs, 13 percent Croats and 9 percent Muslims (Hoare 2010, p. 1203).

<sup>26</sup> Similarly, pupils in the Federation rarely travel to RS.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with a political analyst, Banja Luka, 2015.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with a journalist, Banja Luka, 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with an NGO worker, Banja Luka, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> According to a 2019 poll, while 54 percent of Bosnian Serbs support membership in the EU (as opposed to 88 percent Bosniaks and 75 percent Croats in favour), the majority (53.1 percent) would vote against NATO membership (IPSOS Public Affairs 2019).



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