

**Danijel Džino: “Inconvenient questions about post-Dayton
Bosnia and Herzegovina. A review of Dražen Peħar,
Peace as War: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Post-Dayton”**

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Dražen Peħar, *Peace as War: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Post-Dayton*.
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It is little over 25 years since the bloody conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which caused the loss of ca. 100,000 lives from 1992 to 1995 and ended with the Dayton peace-agreement. While the bloodshed was is over and the war-damage has mostly been repaired, and most of those accused for war-crimes have been brought to justice, Bosnia and Herzegovina still does not function properly. At best, it can be described as a deeply divided country, and at worst as a ‘failed country’ perpetually on a brink of collapse. The new fourth book of Dražen Peħar focuses on identifying what went wrong in the implementation and functioning of the Dayton peace-agreement over the last 25 years. Peħar is certainly well-positioned to discuss these matters as an independent political analyst with practical experience in the politics of Bosnia and Herzegovina and an academic career that has seen him hold teaching positions at several universities in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Peace as War is composed of essays previously published in the *Transconflict Journal*. Some of these (chapters 2 and 7) have undergone significant revision in light of later political developments. The book is divided into two, with chapter 5 acting as a transitional section between them. The first half of the book (chapters 1-4) deals with the legal documents and issues which, in the author’s opinion, substantiate the thesis that the official reading of the Dayton Constitution, rather than stabilizing the country, maintained its ethnic

and political divisions. The second half of the book (chapters 6-8) charts the political vision and cluster of political narratives underpinning interpretations of Dayton over the last 25 years, which in the author's view could be characterised as 'pseudo-legal'.

Pehar bases his arguments upon several different and mutually supporting theoretical approaches: political theory, theory of discourse, and legal theory. A wide range of primary sources is consulted and meticulously analysed, including legal documents such as the Dayton Constitution and later additions to it such as the Bosnian-Herzegovinian Constitutional Court decision U5/98-III from July 2000 (p. 71-120), and different amendments and changes to electoral law and the Constitution in the form of edicts issued by the High Representatives or other international diplomats. In addition to legal documents, Pehar utilizes the testimonies of primary actors involved in the creation of and subsequent changes to the Dayton Constitution – in particular the American diplomat Richard Hoolbroke and other international diplomats acting later as High Representatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1997 to the present day.

Major points of Pehar could be summarized as follows. The most significant source of instability and continued conflict in post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina has been created by the interventionist policies of international diplomats. This process began with the creation of the instrument of change – the Office of High Representative. The High Representative is the international diplomat defined by the 1997 Bonn amendments as the 'interpreter' of the Dayton accord, empowered to impose decisions in the form of edicts by circumventing the executive, judiciary and legislative branches of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian government structures. These decisions of several High Representatives (especially before 2006) had the clear aim of centralising the country and defending the extraordinary powers of the High Representative when questioned by local government and judicial structures. In some instances, such decisions even ran contrary to elementary logic – a good example being the decision of the outgoing High Representative Valentin Inzko in 2011 to overturn the decision of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian Central Electoral Commission by proclaiming that the five Croatian members of the Upper House of Parliament of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina somehow constituted one third of 17 elected Croatian members to this body(!) In Pehar's view, the unilateral decisions of the High Representatives, working outside of any legal and parliamentary framework, encouraged local political actors to continue their conflicts without worrying about their inability to solve differences peacefully (pp. 169-194).

Pehar sees the initiatives of the High Representatives almost exclusively in accordance with only one side in the conflict – the Bosniaks – as an extension of the US political approach towards Bosnia and Herzegovina. This approach developed in the 1990s after the Cold War as a way of demonstrating American superiority over the European Union and the need for a continuing American presence in Europe. Such a political initiative was justified by the development of what Pehar calls the ‘American political narrative’, a discourse detectable in the language of the major American diplomats when describing the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Pehar recognises stereotypical labels within this discourse of Europe as ‘hesitant and inactive’, the Americans as ‘rescuers’ and the local leaders as blind forces led by their inherent ‘Balkan character’, incapable of acting in a civilised way without foreign tutelage. The ‘American narrative’ also arbitrarily defined ‘good guys and bad guys’ in Bosnia and Herzegovina, constructed the role of victims for the Bosniaks, ‘junkyard dogs who keep American interests’ for the Croats, and ‘villains’ for the Serbs. (p. 195-233). This political discourse was soon reified into ‘knowledge’, which impacted later decisions and the presentation of the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina to American policy-makers regardless of the political changes and behaviour of local leaders. One example of this reified ‘knowledge’ is the partial and misleading portrayal of the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina by Steven Woehrel, the European affairs expert, in his report to US Congress in 2013 (p. 235-250).

While focusing on the impact of international factors, the book does not discuss local actors in much detail, except the Bosniaks, who in Pehar’s opinion are the most problematic side in the continuing post-Dayton conflict. He argues that their political leaders, especially Alija Izetbegović, acted as ‘dediscoursifiers’, which designates the side in a conflict that loses credibility due to a lack of rational and coherent argumentation and is unable to fulfill promises in the political discourse (p. 15-41). While the Bosniaks are seen as America’s favourites, sometimes acting as ‘American proxies’ in Bosnia and Herzegovina (p. 204), their political aims of dominating the country are in Pehar’s opinion essentially irreconcilable with the US pragmatist approach. For that reason, US diplomacy uses Bosniak political leaders to maintain instability in the country through the well-known strategy of *divide et impera* (divide and rule), rather than being emotionally attached to their political aims (p. 265-271).

Overall, this is a very interesting and well-written book that provides the interested reader with a different view on post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina by challenging the dominant political discourse about the ‘good guys’ and ‘troublemakers’. It invites many uncomfortable subjects – in particular the totalitarian ways in which the West tried to impose democracy upon Bosnia and

Herzegovina, what Wolfgang Petrisch, one of the High Representatives, quite frankly calls “*democracy imported by means of dictatorship*” (p. 179). Problematic questions can also be raised about the naïve Western assumptions believing that all the refugees would return, that multiethnic political parties would take power in Bosnia and Herzegovina and that its population would reject their existing group identities in order to embrace civic, non-ethnic ‘Bosnian’ identity. One also cannot ignore relevance of the book. The American vice-president Joseph Biden, who said to the leaders of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2008 that “*we (the US) are your project*”, is now the new president. Biden was clearly implying that Bosnia and Herzegovina should become a European version of the US by adopting the ideas of American federalism and an American-style civic identity that transgresses ethnic origins (p. 219-220). The events of the last few years, culminating in the crises of 2020 and early 2021, revealed simmering political and racial divisions in the USA, frequently resulting in violence and instability, and so it is certainly worth asking whether becoming the ‘European USA’ is a good idea for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

It will be interesting to see whether Biden’s new administration continues using imperial and colonial approaches in Bosnia and Herzegovina in this post-imperial era. The Biden administration is already under pressure from lobby groups in the US to get more involved in the centralization of the country, along the lines of ‘American political narrative’.¹ By reading Pehar it is easier to interpret these moves as a strategy to successfully maintain instability and distrust within the country, as only 50% of the population (the Bosniaks) support centralization while the other 50% (the Serbs and Croats) reject it. A lasting political solution can come only from within the country itself, and the most effective way to prevent that solution is to maintain instability and distrust. As Pehar says, the Americans are not emotionally attached to Bosnia and Herzegovina. They use it very pragmatically, as a pawn in much wider geo-strategic games, and recent initiatives possibly sought to re-establish American influence there, since it had been undermined in recent years by Turkey and Russia.

The book is well-organised with frequent cross-references that integrate the chapters, originally written as different articles, into a coherent structure. There is not much to criticise in the book from a technical perspective except perhaps that this reviewer would like to see a more thorough review of recent literature on the topic. Not everyone will agree with Pehar’s views, in particular

¹ See the article of R. M. Hayden and the response from one such lobby group on <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/whither-bosnia> (published 2/3/2021, last access 19/3/2021).

scholars and political analysts who subscribe to the 'American political narrative' as a blanket interpretation of the past and future events in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This certainly does not mean that Pehar's views are the only possible interpretation and should not be challenged and questioned with different and even opposing interpretative approaches. Regardless of one's opinions on this topic, however, I still see this book as a refreshing contribution on the modern history of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which broadens the scope of interpretative approaches and moves the debate from a simplified and stereotypical black-and-white portrayal of historical actors towards a more insightful post-colonial and post-imperial analysis of the events.