

# Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

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## Submitted to the House Foreign Affairs Committee (the “Committee”)

Congress of Bosniaks of North America

December 5, 2025

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Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record in response to several points raised during the Committee’s December 2, 2025 Western Balkans Hearing (the “**Hearing**”), particularly those presented by Mr. Max Primorac. While we appreciate the importance of hearing a range of different perspectives, it is essential that congressional deliberations, decisions and recommendations are made based on accurate, fact-based assessments of conditions in the Western Balkans and their implications for the national interests of the United States.

### 1. **Bosnia and Herzegovina is not a “failed” state. Bosnia is a fragile democracy that is under sustained obstruction by ethno-nationalists.**

Framing Bosnia and Herzegovina (“**Bosnia**”) as a “failed” state obscures the realities of what is actually occurring daily in Bosnia. Specifically:

- Bosnia’s core institutions continue to function despite persistent obstruction by nationalist actors, particularly those that are members of, or associated with, the *Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica* party (“**HDZ**”, i.e., the Croatian Democratic Union party) HDZ in the Federation entity and the *Savez Nezavisnih Socijaldemokrata* (“**SNSD**”, i.e., the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats party) in the Republika Srpska entity.
- Bosnia has made significant progress in defense reform, border management, counterterrorism cooperation, and alignment with European Union (“**EU**”) policies. In December 2022, the European Council granted it candidate-country status and in March 2024 the European Council opened EU accession negotiations with Bosnia.
- As cited by multiple reputable analysts, including Mr. Luke Coffey during the hearing, Bosnia’s challenges stem not from inherent dysfunction, but from actors who continuously exploit the Dayton Agreement’s weaknesses, resist Euro-Atlantic integration, and undermine state-level authority in order to maintain their power-

sharing ethnocracies.

These facts contradict the subjective characterizations of Bosnia as a “failed” state, which has the effect of placing blame on the concept of a multi-ethnic state itself rather than on those working to dismantle it. Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that labeling Bosnia as a “failed” state is absurd and outrageous when compared to states that have genuinely “failed” (such as Somalia or the Central African Republic). Such subjective assertions completely erode the credibility of any expert advancing such a claim and egregiously undermine decades of bi-partisan U.S. foreign policy which has helped shore up Bosnia’s institutions and democratic processes as part of the U.S.’s national interests in Western Balkans.

## **2. Calls to abolish the Office of the High Representative (the “OHR”) ignore ongoing destabilization efforts and overlook efforts that have been successful.**

Arguments that the OHR “undermines” Bosnia’s sovereignty do not reflect current realities in Bosnia. The most serious threats to Bosnia and Herzegovina’s sovereignty are ethnonationalist political actors who foment nationalism and overtly defy and violate the Dayton Agreement. Specifically:

- Secessionist leaders in Republika Srpska continue to pass unconstitutional laws, reject state court decisions, and threaten referendum-based secession. These actions are fundamentally incompatible with the Dayton Agreement and with Bosnia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.
- High Representative Ashdown’s tenure demonstrated that an involved OHR through the use of its “Bonn Powers” can deliver real progress. High Representative Ashdown’s removal of more than 80 obstructionist officials produced the most stable and reform-oriented period in post-war Bosnia, enabling the rapid adoption of EU-related reforms and strengthening state institutions.
- Recent inconsistent actions (i.e., partial interventions without enforcement) under High Representative Christian Schmidt have further emboldened destabilizing actors. Bosnia needs predictable and decisive application of existing tools by the OHR, not their abandonment.

We acknowledge that a broader desire within Bosnia for the OHR to eventually close exists. Nonetheless, this should occur only after the satisfaction of the conditions set forth in the “5+2 agenda” established by the Peace Implementation Council (of which the U.S. is a member). Any ad-hoc or premature closure would create deeper structural problems and undermine long-term stability in the region. Abolishing the office of the OHR prior to the satisfaction of the conditions set forth in the “5+2 agenda” would reward obstructionism, weaken institutional integrity, and increase instability in the Western Balkans, which undermines the national security interests of the U.S. in the region.

## **3. Assertions of the existence of a “centralization project” in Sarajevo are blatantly false and dangerous.**

Assertions that the United States is pursuing a “Muslim-dominated” centralized state

in Europe are blatantly false, Islamophobic, dangerously inflammatory, and increase security concerns and the risk of armed conflict in Bosnia and the wider region. Specifically:

- Bi-partisan U.S. foreign policy and diplomacy has consistently supported the Dayton Agreement's multi-ethnic constitutional framework and territorial integrity for Bosnia, while reinforcing equality for all of Bosnia's citizens.
- We are unaware of any U.S. official, U.S. diplomat or U.S. foreign policy document or statement that expressly supports or otherwise implies the creation of a centralized, unitary, "Muslim-dominated" Bosnian state.
- We believe that the U.S. supports a functional state-level governance framework that is necessary for EU/NATO accession and integration, promotes economic investment in Bosnia, and upholds Bosnia's compliance with its international obligations.

As a candidate for EU membership and a participant in NATO's Membership Action Plan, Bosnia is required to align and implement EU and NATO standards and conditions for accession. Both frameworks require transparent, accountable, rational and functioning institutions. Claims of a "centralizing project" therefore contradict not only the facts but decades of U.S. and EU foreign policy supporting Bosnia's accession to, and eventual integration into, Euro-Atlantic institutions. In that regard, Mr. Primorac's arguments severely undermine U.S. national security interests in the region and we request that Mr. Primorac produce **credible** evidence, documents and witnesses that support such reckless and incredulous assertions and claims.

#### **4. Claims of Croat "persecution" are unfounded, ignore political realities and disregard final international court judgments.**

Claims that Croats are "denied the right to elect their own representatives" center almost entirely on the election of Bosnian Croat Željko Komšić, to Bosnia's Presidency with significant support from Bosniak voters. This overly simplistic narrative is misleading and omits several key facts:

- Voters supported Mr. Komšić for his values and his political platform and not because of his ethnicity. Mr. Komšić is a decorated wartime veteran, a Golden Lily recipient, and a long-standing advocate of a civic, multi-ethnic Bosnia that is governed by the rule of law (one where every citizen would be equal before the law, regardless of his ethnic, religious or other background). In that regard, Mr. Komšić's values are aligned with fundamental "western" constitutional values and principles that protect the rights of individuals (which are also express constitutional rights that exist and protect the citizens of Bosnia's neighbors Serbia and Croatia).
- The Federation's joint electoral framework is part of the Dayton Agreement's design. Bosnia's constitution requires all voters in the Federation (i.e., Bosniaks, Croats, and others) to vote for both the Bosniak and Croat members of the Presidency. This is not a Bosniak-engineered system; it is the system negotiated and agreed to by all parties to the Dayton Agreement (including Croatia) and endorsed by the United States.
- No legal mechanism prevents Croats from electing their preferred candidate. Croat political parties have put forward candidates with narrow ethno-nationalist agendas that have struggled to gain broader appeal.

- To date, no international human rights court ruling has identified Croat discrimination. Every European Court of Human Rights ruling (Sejdić-Finci, Zornić, Pilav, Šlaku, Pudarić, etc.) confirms discrimination against minorities and citizens outside the “constituent peoples” framework – not discrimination against Croats. The only one of the constituent peoples who are disenfranchised in Bosnia are the Bosniaks whose votes are substantially discounted when compared to the votes of Croats and Serbs in Bosnia.
- Proposals for a “third entity” are covertly separatist political projects, not rights-based remedies. Creating an ethno-territorial Croat entity would deepen segregation, fragment the state, and run counter to U.S. strategic objectives of stability, Euro-Atlantic integration, and functional governance for Bosnia.
- There is no evidence that the decline of the Croat population in Bosnia is the result of persecution or political discrimination. Population decline affects all communities in Bosnia (and generally in the Western Balkans) and is driven primarily by the country’s dysfunctional constitutional system and weak economy. Croatia’s own census shows a nearly 10% population drop in the same period, with Croats from both Bosnia and Croatia emigrating to Germany, Sweden, the U.K., and elsewhere for better opportunities. These trends make clear that economic conditions – not ethnic discrimination – are driving emigration, with the impact in Bosnia intensified by a poorly functioning political system.

As an EU member state, Croatia has built one of the most robust minority-rights frameworks in Europe. Bosniaks enjoy constitutionally protected status, access to minority councils, cultural autonomy, and, very importantly, representation in the Croatian Parliament through reserved minority seats. While the one seat Bosniaks hold is shared with several smaller communities and implementation at local levels is uneven, the model itself demonstrates that inclusive governance is both possible and stabilizing.

This stands in stark contrast to Bosnia and Herzegovina, where minorities (whether Serbs in the Federation or Bosniaks and Croats in Republika Srpska) lack governance and political mechanisms that would guarantee fair representation or participation in public institutions. Rather than continuing to amplify narratives of Croat victimhood unsupported by evidence, Bosnia’s regional neighbors should look to Croatia’s EU-aligned norms as a blueprint. A model anchored in population based reserved seats, proportional employment, and enforceable protections would strengthen Bosnia’s democracy, reduce zero-sum ethnic competition, and align the country more closely with European standards.

In that regard, these points refute and invalidate any claim or assertion of Croat “disenfranchisement” in Bosnia. As noted, it is rhetoric taken from the HDZ “playbook” that is blatantly false, dangerously inflammatory, and undermines the national and security interests of the U.S. in Bosnia.

## **5. Serbia’s and HDZ’s destabilizing actions (and not “Muslim intransigence”) block regional energy security projects.**

Contrary to Mr. Primorac’s statement, the primary obstacles to the U.S.-backed Southern Gas Interconnector have come from HDZ-linked authorities in the

Federation. Specifically, HDZ-linked authorities:

- refuse to designate a state-level public operator,
- attempt to route control through narrowly aligned party structures,
- exhibited years of administrative obstruction documented by both U.S. and EU officials.

Secretary Blinken's correspondence from just last year directly identified Dragan Čović and HDZ obstruction as the central impediment to the Southern Gas Interconnector. We welcome U.S. companies' interest in the project but note that HDZ's pattern of ethnic gerrymandering and governance obstruction undermines not only Bosnia's stability but may now also impede U.S. economic interests in the Western Balkans.

Moreover:

- Serbia continues deepening its ties with Russia with respect to energy supplies, security cooperation, and disinformation networks.
- Secessionist rhetoric from the political leadership of Republika Srpska is unchallenged from the political authorities in Serbia, and remains synchronized with the Kremlin's strategic objectives of keeping the Balkans destabilized.

While some argue that regional stability depends primarily on engagement with Belgrade, the evidence suggests that Serbia is currently one of the main drivers of instability in the Western Balkans. U.S. policy should reflect this reality with clear-eyed realism.

## **6. U.S. engagement in the Balkans is an important matter of national security for the U.S. and not a “social re-engineering” exercise.**

U.S. engagement in the Western Balkans promote:

- NATO's stability on the alliance's southeastern flank,
- countering malign influence from China, Iran and Russia,
- energy diversification vis-à-vis Russia's energy sources and supplies,
- prevent conflict from spreading into other parts of, and
- preserve the credibility of U.S.-brokered peace agreements.

The United States was the main architect of the Dayton Agreement, which is widely regarded as one of the most successful diplomatic achievements of the U.S. in the post-Cold War era. Any attempt to categorize Dayton as “social engineering” is undermining a core pillar of the U.S.'s strategic national security interests in Southeast Europe.

If anyone has a social re-engineering project in Bosnia, it is those advancing arguments like Mr. Primorac's – arguments designed to sow division and fear so that political figures such as Milorad Dodik and Dragan Čović can maintain control over what they consider to be “their” population.

## **7. Political ambassador appointments cannot and must not replace**

## **professional diplomacy.**

A call for “political ambassadors” in a region (especially ones who have ethnic ties to such region) facing active malign foreign interference contradicts basic diplomatic best practices and significantly increases the risk of partiality of any decisions made by such political ambassadors and would undermine and destabilize national security interests of the U.S. in the region.

- The Western Balkans is a theater of intense strategic competition, where China and Russia maintain a significant and growing presence.
- Given this complexity, U.S. ambassadors in the region must be career diplomats with deep regional expertise, knowledge and a clear understanding of the Chinese and Russian malign influence. This is essential for sustaining consistent, credible, and long-term U.S. policy.
- Political appointees risk sending mixed signals to partners and adversaries and may lack the specialized knowledge needed to defend U.S. national security interests effectively.

The Balkans require continuity, expertise, and steady leadership. The Balkans do not need improvisation or political appointees who make decisions that are not rooted in facts or make dangerous and inflammatory statements based on nationalistic or partisan narratives that undermine U.S. policy and security interests in the region. This is not a partisan view; it is a principle of national security.

## **8. What the region needs is actions that aligns with U.S. foreign policy interests.**

The United States should continue to support the following:

- Territorial integrity and sovereignty of all Balkan states, including Bosnia and Herzegovina;
- Accountability for destabilizing actors, using targeted sanctions and diplomatic pressure;
- Energy diversification, including completion of the Southern Gas Interconnector;
- EU and NATO integration, which benefit U.S. national security interests;
- Defense sector modernization across the region;
- Clear condemnation of genocide denial, glorification of war criminals and secessionist rhetoric; and
- A strong diplomatic presence grounded in facts, not partisan narratives.

## **9. Bosnia is one of Europe’s oldest models of pluralism and coexistence.**

During the hearing, Bosnia was inaccurately portrayed through a narrow religious lens. In reality, Bosnia has a long and proud history of interreligious coexistence that directly contradicts claims of civilizational conflict.

- Bosnia is one of Europe’s oldest examples of successful pluralism. Its Christian heritage stretches back more than a millennium, and for over 650 years Catholic, Orthodox, Islamic, and Jewish traditions have lived side by side, shaping a shared

civic culture.

- This long-standing coexistence is not theoretical; rather, it is a lived reality. Even after the trauma of the war in the 1990s, Bosnia remains a multi-religious, multi-ethnic society where daily life is defined by interwoven communities, not confessional division.
- Attempts by chauvinistic or sectarian actors to weaponize religious or ethnic identity run counter to Bosnia's history and to U.S. strategic interests. Reducing Bosnia to a "Christian-versus-Muslim" narrative ignores centuries of coexistence and serves only those who profit politically from division.
- Bosniaks, in particular, are among the most secular and pro-Western political communities in Southeast Europe. Characterizing them solely as "Muslims" is inaccurate and often employed cynically to strip them of their ethnic identity and stoke Islamophobia rather than to inform policy.
- The persecution narrative advanced by some political actors is contradicted by their own participation in government.
  - With the exception of a brief period from 2011 to 2015, every Federation government has included the HDZ.
  - There has never been a state-level government formed without the inclusion of HDZ.
  - The HDZ has controlled the Justice Ministry for nearly the entire 30-year post-war period and yet not a single persecution case against Croats has been initiated, investigated or prosecuted since the war in Bosnia ended in 1995 (i.e., they have not, because none exist).
- Declines in Croat population mirror broader regional demographic trends. Croats from Bosnia and from Croatia itself have emigrated primarily for economic reasons, not ethnic pressure – an established pattern across the EU. If Croats in Bosnia were fleeing as a result of political prosecution, they would seek protection in Croatia (as they also have Croatian passports) and not emigrate like their Croatian counterparts to other countries in Western Europe.
- Bosnia's real challenges are institutional, not religious. Structural constitutional dysfunction (and not interreligious hostility) is the primary driver of instability. Strengthening state institutions, not reframing the country through civilizational narratives, aligns with U.S. national security objectives.
- Bosnia and Herzegovina's tradition of coexistence is an asset to the Euro-Atlantic community, not a liability. U.S. policy should reflect and support this pluralistic reality.

## Conclusion

The testimony suggesting that Bosnia is inherently unworkable, that one ethnic group seeks dominance over another, or that foreign-imposed fragmentation is the answer, risks repeating the mistakes of the 1990s. It is essential that the U.S. Congress base its decisions on accurate facts and analysis, and not partisan narratives promoted by actors with political or ideological ambitions and motivations.

A stable, sovereign, multi-ethnic Bosnia and Herzegovina aligned with the Euro-Atlantic community remains firmly in the national security interest of the United States. We urge the Committee to continue supporting policies that strengthen institutions, uphold democratic norms, deter malign influence, and ensure long-term

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regional stability.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement. We stand ready to provide any additional insight the Committee may require.

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