Protest movements as reconciliation drivers in BiH

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How a tram incident reflected three decades of unfinished statebuilding

On the morning of 12 February 2026, in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, a 1975-model tram on Route 1 failed to brake at a sharp turn near the National Museum in the central part of the city. It derailed at near full speed, striking the platform and killing Erdoan Morankić, a 23-year-old student of fine arts from Brčko. A 17-year-old girl, Ela Jovanović, lost a leg. By the following evening, citizens had gathered at the crash site to pay their respects and leave flowers and candles. By 14 February, thousands had blocked the main roads in protest. Within days, the Prime Minister of Sarajevo Canton had resigned.

The tram had told a story before it even derailed - it was nearly fifty years old, and, as investigators would later confirm, the vehicle's onboard camera system had not recorded footage since November 2025. This was not simply an infrastructure failure. For many of the demonstrators who filled Sarajevo's streets following the incident, it was the manifestation of what they had long suspected: that the political system around them was not designed to keep them safe, it was designed to sustain itself.

As protests grew, the frustration was not directed towards the tram driver, rather towards the authorities. The messages that echoed were “Justice”, “Your hands are bloody”, and perhaps most symbolically, “We are angry in all three languages.” They represented the discontent that led Bosnia and Herzegovina’s protest movements over the past decade, which emphasized that corruption, institutional failure, and political irresponsibility affect citizens across ethnic lines. In a political system still heavily structured around the ethnic divisions institutionalized by the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement, such messages represent a powerful attempt to articulate political grievances in civic rather than ethnonational terms.

More broadly, the Sarajevo protests illustrate an important dynamic in contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina: growing frustration among younger generations with political structures that many perceive as ineffective, unaccountable, and disconnected from everyday social realities. This raises the question of whether the emerging generation in BiH is willing and able to transcend ethnonational divides on the basis of shared sociopolitical grievances.

A system based on division

To understand why a tram accident could carry this much political weight, it helps to understand the system in which it occurred. The 1995 Dayton Agreement ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina but embedded ethnicity into the constitutional fabric of the state. Political representation was made dependent on ethnic identity (Bosnian, Serb, and Croat) which created, as scholars have noted, a system that keeps institutions in a near-permanent state of deadlock, as elites face few incentives for cross-ethnic compromise and instead sustain zero-sum competition.[1] The system was led by a liberal peacebuilding logic: stabilise the country, separate the warring factions, build institutions, and democratic long-term peace

and stability will follow. Three decades later, BiH records a democracy score of 3.18 in Freedom House's Nations in Transit report - one of the lowest in the region.[2]

What the Dayton framework could not resolve was the gap between its formal institutional architecture and the everyday realities of a society that had, before the war, been deeply interwoven across ethnic lines. Over time, this system has contributed to widespread public frustration. Three decades after Dayton, Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to struggle with political paralysis, corruption scandals, and slow progress in democratic reforms.[3]

One questionnaire respondent, a 27-year-old student of history at the Faculty of Philosophy in Sarajevo, described the system's structural dysfunction: "There is a certain apathy in Bosnian society when it comes to protests and resistance. Society unfortunately resembles a group of people with a high tolerance for injustice, until - as a local saying goes - shots are fired. … Parliament blockades, where parties simply don't show up to sessions until they get something in return, should be treated as criminal offences, but the entire judicial system is corrupted and under the influence of different political parties." For him, the question is not whether BiH needs reform, but whether the civic energy to push for it can survive the weight of the structures pushing back.

"We are angry in all three languages"

The slogan "we are angry in all three languages" did not originate in February 2026. It first appeared in 2014, during protests that began with laid-off factory workers in Tuzla which spread across the country. The previous version "we are hungry in three languages" was a direct pushback to ethnonationalist post-war politics by insisting on a shared experience of hardship that goes beyond ethnic lines. An interesting characteristic of those protests were plenums: open citizen assemblies where people made decisions outside the established party structures, imagining, at least briefly, a different kind of political community.[4] As philosopher Slavoj Žižek observed at the time, the demonstrators' act of waving Bosnian, Serb, and Croat flags side by side reflected "a rebellion against nationalist elites - the people of Bosnia have finally understood who their true enemy is: not other ethnic groups, but their own leaders who pretend to protect them from others."[5]

That movement lost momentum. But the slogan survived, and the generation now carrying it is a different one - younger, less familiar with the war, and increasingly impatient with a system they did not choose. Journalist Slađan Tomić, in an interview for the news portal *Mašina*, explains the logic behind the more recent protest messages: "When you live in a system that kills you because of corruption, it kills you equally, whether you are Serb, Bosniak, or Croat. In all three languages we are angry, and in all three languages we demand accountability" ; in addition, he observed that this new generation in BiH is "less receptive to narratives of ethnic division."[6]

A 26-year-old philosophy student at the University of Sarajevo described the recent events: "The girl injured by the tram attends a Catholic school centre, and a large number of her classmates come from different parts of Bosnia, and had participated in the protests out of solidarity with her. There was even a solidarity march organised in Banja Luka. Despite

strong ethnonational pressure on the protests, they did gather people from different ethnic backgrounds." The significance of a support march in Banja Luka (the capital of Republika Srpska, the ethnically Serb entity) should not be overlooked. It is the kind of cross-national solidarity that the Dayton framework's borders perhaps could not understand.

The same student reflected on the generational dimension of what he was witnessing: "What mostly gave me hope from the start was the rebellion of young people, particularly high school students, who are completely unaware of the many premises of BiH's complicated political system, yet who came out and demanded basic human rights and justice in the face of a failing system." The protesters who blocked Sarajevo's main streets in February 2026 were largely born after the end of the war. As such, this generation appears to truly push back on the strict ethnonational divisions and reject the institutional legacy that continues to shape their everyday lives.

Glimpses of regional solidarity

The resonances with Serbia's ongoing protest movement were impossible to ignore. Since November 2024, when a concrete canopy collapsed at the newly renovated Novi Sad railway station, resulting in 16 victims, Serbian students had led one of the largest civic mobilisations the country had seen in a generation, eventually spreading to over 400 cities and towns. The many slogans that emerged including "Corruption kills", "Your hands are bloody" and red handprint iconography, crossed the border into Sarajevo almost entirely.

The borrowing of protest slogans was noted by participants with both admiration and honest critique. Sarajevo students explained: "The same slogans, the same age group, the same desire for a better tomorrow",," If anything needed to be borrowed from Serbia, it should have been the organisational model: a central social media account, an efficient stewarding structure, chosen speakers, avoiding a fan-chant style of protest." They also noted that while demands evolved with each gathering, becoming "more inclusive - a platform for every bereaved mother, father, brother and sister", the lack of a coordinated organisational structure ultimately cost the movement momentum.[7] Tomić also observed the resemblance between the two movements: "A similar generation of young people is mobilising against similar social deviations caused by nepotism, corruption, and the appointment of the politically loyal rather than the capable".[8] These testaments uncover that the protests in BiH and Serbia are less a story of regional solidarity by design, rather a parallel dissatisfaction that led to the same conclusions.

The solidarity went both directions. During the earlier phase of the Serbian protests, students in Bosnia, Croatia, Montenegro, and Slovenia organised their own demonstration, thus sharing the underlying grammar of generational frustration with systems perceived as corrupt, unaccountable, and unmoved by the tragedy.[9] Additionally, several news articles reported that the participation of Bosniak students from Novi Pazar in the Serbian protests was widely noted as a meaningful moment in Serb-Bosniak relations.[10]

What connects these two movements is neither shared ethnic identity nor post-Yugoslav nostalgia. It is something more pragmatic - a shared civic language, developed by a

generation that sees its problems as structural and regional rather than national and cultural. This cross-border dynamic carries a significance that should not be overlooked.

Applications for regional reconciliation

The Dayton framework has proven remarkably resilient to change, in part because the elites who benefit from it have every incentive to preserve it.[11] But the local perception has changed - the understanding of civic identity as first, and ethnic as second is precisely what top-down peacebuilding has struggled to create in the past three decades. This bottom up development creates an interesting environment for building sustainable peace, especially for younger generations, who find themselves in a key moment between choosing to continue imposed narratives or create their own path, in both national and regional contexts.

For organisations working on regional reconciliation, these events highlight some conclusions worth thinking about. The cross-border sharing of the protest slogans suggest that this generation perceives their struggles as structurally connected rather than nationally separate, thus reconciliation may be more effective in initiatives where shared problems are at the forefront of the stage, rather than ethnic relations themselves. Additionally, the acknowledgement of the obstacles is real: the politicisation of universities and civil society, and the continuing grip of nationalist elites on the media landscape, pose genuine challenges to sustaining civic momentum. Continued trust and a platform for the young generation to work together on shared challenges across borders, may prove a more durable basis for building reconciliation efforts, than any framework imposed from above.

To close off, I want to share what the students from Sarajevo responded when asked what changes they wanted to see in BiH in the next decade: "Change this paradigm," one respondent wrote, "and I can then hope for many other changes." The paradigm he had in mind was the grip of party rule on every sphere of public life. That aspiration, not ethnic reconciliation as an abstract goal, but the dismantling of a system in which ethnic categories are deployed to maintain elite power, may be the most honest account yet of what reconciliation looks like to the generation that is attempting to make themselves heard on the streets of Sarajevo.

Notes

1. Belloni, “Bosnia: Dayton is Dead! Long Live Dayton!”, 360.
2. Nations in Transit 2024, Freedom House.
3. Richmond and Franks, “Between Partition and Pluralism.”, 29; Lausevic,“Sarajevo Tram Protests Reflect Deeper Frustration With a Dysfunctional Bosnia.”; Wankiewicz-Kłoczko, “Bosnia and Herzegovina in Limbo.”
4. Milan, “‘Sow Hunger, Reap Anger.’”, 186-189; Lai, “Practicing Solidarity.”, 7-15; Belyaeva, “Citizen Plenums in Bosnia Protests.”, 115-117, 129-132.
5. Žižek, “Anger in Bosnia, but This Time the People Can Read Their Leaders’ Ethnic Lies.”
6. Tomić, “Protesti u Bosni i Hercegovini.”
7. Student respondents: Faculty of Economics, Burch International University, age 26; Faculty of Philosophy, University of Sarajevo (History), age 27, written questionnaire, March 2026. (names known to author)

8. Tomić, “Protesti u Bosni i Hercegovini.”
9. “Podrška srpskim studentima stiže iz Hrvatske.”, N1; “Stotinjak studenata na protestu u Sarajevu podržali kolege u Srbiji.”, Radio Slobodna Evropa; Novaković, “Studenti iz Crne Gore podržali kolege u Srbiji.”
10. Ivković, "No, Nationalism Has Not Taken Over the Student Protests in Serbia."
11. Wankiewicz-Kłoczko, “Bosnia and Herzegovina in Limbo.”

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