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HOW ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM THREATENS THE BOSNIAN STATE

By Matthew James Hone

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Abstract

When the wars ceased in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, as in the aftermath of other past conflicts in the Balkans, ethnic and religious divisions prevailed. Bosnia Herzegovina is perhaps the most vulnerable of the newly independent states of the former Yugoslavia, partially due to the manner it was established. Ethnic cleansing and discord have marred Bosnia while the three principal ethnoreligious entities continue to struggle to maintain their distinct identity within the context of a convoluted political system wrestling against domestic and international intrigue. Ethnoreligious nationalism threatens to further rupture the Bosnian state and create a renewed state of violence that ultimately endangers this nation's future.

Introduction

Within the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina,¹ there exist three predominantly ethnic and religious categories that have historically generated animus. While ushering in the eventual dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, the Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats and Bosnian Muslims vied for territorial control and engaged in brutal conflicts in Bosnia & Herzegovina from 1992 to 1995. Religious and ethnic identity are so traditionally intertwined in the former Yugoslavia that scholar and Balkans expert, Paul Mojzes, in his book *Yugoslavian Inferno: Ethnoreligious Warfare in the Balkans*, has employed the term 'ethnoreligious' to characterize the nature of the

¹ The official name of the country is Bosnia and Herzegovina but conventionally it is abbreviated as Bosnia & Herzegovina (B & H) or even more simply Bosnia.

Balkan wars during the 1990s. Mojzes furnishes a concise example of the indelible link between ethnic and religious connectivity in the ex-Yugoslavia when referencing the ethnic Croats.

Often, when Croat Catholic priests in the past (and even in the present) spoke or wrote, it was not clear whether he was more a Croat to whom Catholicism seemed a useful instrument to assert Catholic interests, or whether he was a Catholic Croat who so desired the victory of Catholicism over Orthodoxy and Judaism that he was willing to accept Serbs and Jews as Croats, provided they convert to Catholicism.²

A similar psychological approach can likewise be equated to the Serbs and Bosniaks in the region where ethnicity and religion remain practically inseparable, especially in periods of contention.

Following the violent rupture of Yugoslavia that compelled the establishment of seven newly formed largely homogenous states and territories, the notion of ethnic and religious coexistence, a fundamental component that the Balkan nation was constructed upon, collapsed as well. Population demographics shifted throughout the ex-Yugoslavia and nowhere was the ethnic map more transformed than in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The situation in Bosnia created a humanitarian crisis where tens of thousands perished and hundreds of thousands were displaced. The Dayton Peace Accords, besides concluding overt hostilities, formed a single sovereign state comprised of the Croat-Bosniak Federation of Bosnia & Herzegovina and the Serb dominated Republika Srpska. The temporary peace brokered by the international community has sustained numerous impasses that have grappled with the legitimacy of the Bosnian state which has called into question whether Bosnia & Herzegovina can endure as an entity in its current incarnation. Presumably, the primary existential crisis for Bosnia moving forward, is ethnic and religious tumult punctuated by the weight of historic discord and political ambitions, which ultimately begs the question: How does the nationalistic agenda, domestic and international, prompted by ethnoreligious polarization, threaten the integrity of the Bosnian state?

A State Formed from Ethnic Cleansing

The Bosniaks or Bosnian Muslims, who are presently the largest ethnoreligious community in the Bosnian state, have been exposed to immense brutality at certain points of

² Paul Mojzes, *Balkan Genocides: Holocaust and Ethnic Cleansing in the Twentieth Century*, (Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), p. 63.

history, specifically following the relinquishment of Ottoman control over the territory in the later part of the 19th century. From the time that Bosnia was subjected to Austro-Hungarian rule in 1878, the Muslim population was gradually pushed to the political and social fringes. The Austro-Hungarian Empire, in contrast to the Ottomans, favored its Christian (especially Catholic) communities over its other constituents. Muslims throughout Bosnia & Herzegovina, and in the Balkans in general, subsequently languished as a result of their cultural and religious identity, ultimately inciting distinct periods of atrocity.

The partition of Yugoslavia during World War II established a multitude of paradoxes in the Balkans. In the case of the Bosniaks, their involvement in the conflict ranged from Nazi collaborator to Partisan fighter, mirroring the complex dynamic of their fellow Croats and Serbs. They were also one of the most victimized ethnic groups in the region during the Second World War as well and according to *Balkan Genocides: Holocaust and Ethnic Cleansing in the Twentieth Century* by Paul Mojzes, approximately 86,000 Muslims in the territory of the ex-Yugoslavia perished.³ The principal perpetrators of massacres committed against the Bosniaks were Serbian Četniks, forces loyal to the Yugoslavian king. “Dragan Cvetković, in an analytical study based on existing statistical data that are neither fully reliable nor complete, but are the best available, states that Četniks were responsible for 65.89 percent of the losses of Bosnian Muslims.”⁴ Decades later, the Bosniaks would once again be victimized by nationalistic ambitions emanating from both Serbia and Croatia.

The war in Bosnia during the 1990s, besides being the most catastrophic of the clashes in the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, engulfed the Bosnian Muslim community in violence once again. According to statistics collected by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia: “The final estimate rests at 104,732 individuals killed, as stated in a report produced in January 2010, after 12 years of data collection.”⁵ The Bosniak population was subject to atrocities in the form of ethnic cleansing and even genocide. As Serbia and Croatia carved up the Bosnian state, the Bosniaks became ensnared between rival factions, politically and militarily supported by their respected nations, which failed to respect or even acknowledge their distinct ethnic and religious identity. For many nationalistic Croats and Serbs, Bosniaks

³ Mojzes, *Balkan Genocides*, p. 49.

⁴ Mojzes, *Balkan Genocides*, p. 98.

⁵ International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, “New War Demographics Feature on the ICTY website”, *United Nations*, (The Hague, March 29, 2011), <https://www.icty.org/en/press/new-war-demographics-feature-icty-website> Viewed on December 5, 2019.

were either ethnic Turks or treacherous former Christians that had converted to Islam in order to gain favor under Ottoman rule centuries earlier.

The Dayton peace accords that ended the conflict in Bosnia ultimately vindicated the policy of state violence and ethnic cleansing. “The halving of Bosnia had been created by “ethnic cleansing” through mass killings and deportation, a policy carried out by the Bosnian Serb leader, Radovan Karadžić, with his military commander, Ratko Mladić, and orchestrated from Belgrade by Milošević himself, the saviour of Dayton.”⁶ For their part, the Croatian leadership under President Franjo Tudjman conducted similar policies with the assistance of Bosnian Croat ultra-nationalists. According to his testimony before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, Ante Marković the last prime minister of Yugoslavia claimed: “Tudjman and Milošević agreed to divide Bosnia.”⁷

Dayton has assisted in establishing nearly 25 years of temporary peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina and yet, it remains a horrible basis for successful state-building. Academic Valerie Perry rightly describes Dayton as "a type of Bosnian entrapment: An institutional trap imposed or at least facilitated by outsiders that makes Bosnians choose ethnonationalism against their best interest."⁸

The Pseudo State of Republika Srpska

Bosnian Serbs supported by the Serbian state were responsible for majority of the atrocities in the most recent bloodshed and this was the principal component of a coordinated plan for Serb unification. “The reason for the war in B&H was to make it impossible for people of various ethnic groups to continue to live together peacefully. The territories where Serbs lived were scattered, the only way to bring Serbs together was to dislocate the other populations by war.”⁹

⁶ Julian Borger, “Bosnia's bitter, flawed peace deal, 20 years on”, *The Guardian*, (London, November 10, 2015), <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2015/nov/10/bosnia-bitter-flawed-peace-deal-dayton-agreement-20-years-on> Viewed on November 10, 2019.

⁷ BBC News, “Milosevic Trial hears of Bosnia plot”, (October 23, 2003), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3209225.stm> Viewed on December 10, 2019.

⁸ Riada Asimovic Akyol, “Remembering Dayton: The accord that ended Bosnian war”, *Al Jazeera*, (December 14, 2015), <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/12/remembering-dayton-accord-ended-bosnian-war-151213140151610.html> Viewed on November 13, 2019.

⁹ Mojzes, *Balkan Genocides*, p. 172.

The Serbian policy in Bosnia Herzegovina transcended the immediate aims of the conflict and was pursued as a means to safeguard the Serb's future stranglehold on Bosnian territory. "The alleged rationale for ethnic cleansing was that the land belongs to those that inhabit it, and in the mind of many ethnic cleansers, it was not enough to obtain numeric prevalence on that land. They sought to assure that in the future, the descendants of their enemies wouldn't threaten the demographic domination of their own descendants."¹⁰

Ratko Mladić, the Bosnian Serb General who orchestrated the Srebrenica massacre and who was convicted of war crimes committed during the Bosnian war, utilized this very strategy while engaging in ethnic cleansing in the 1990s.

"Here is the village of Plane, it used to be Turkish. Now we will go toward it," Mladić says, speaking to an unidentified cameraman. "Let our Serbs see what we have done to them, how we took care of the Turks . . . we thrashed the Turks. If the Americans and English, the Ukrainians and Canadians in Srebrenica, in the meantime it's the Dutch, would not protect them, they would have disappeared from this area long ago"¹¹

The Muslim population in Srebrenica would eventually be significantly diminished as a result of the worst massacre perpetrated in Europe since the Second World War and Mladić himself was the principal catalyst behind this horrific crime. Today Srebrenica is approximately 55 percent Serb and 45 percent Bosniak. In some parts of Bosnia, the Bosniak inhabitants were practically vanquished as in Foča and Banja Luka. "By 1994, nearly all of the 22,000 original inhabitants had fled, and Foča was triumphantly renamed Srbinje, meaning "Place of the Serbs." In 2004, the town's old name returned, but few of the old inhabitants did; Muslims make up only five percent of Foča's population today."¹²

Ultimately the Serbs of Bosnia were rewarded for committing ethnic cleansing and acts of genocide in Bosnia. Republika Srpska was granted 49 percent of Bosnian territory through the Dayton Accords and an equal power sharing stake in the government even though the Serbs remain an ethnic minority at approximately 37 percent. The nimble negotiations of ex Serbian President Slobodan Milošević solidified the Serbian ethnic and religious position in Bosnia. Muhamed Sacirbey, Bosnia's foreign minister, who resigned in the midst of the Dayton talks in

¹⁰ Mojzes, *Balkan Genocides*, p. 172.

¹¹ David Rohde, "Why did Ratko Mladic Commit Genocide Against Bosnia's Muslims", *The New Yorker*, (New York, November 26, 2017).

<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/why-did-ratko-mladic-commit-genocide-against-bosnias-muslims>
Viewed on November 17, 2019.

¹² Michael Colborne, "Bosnia's Mosques Without Muslims", *Los Angeles Review of Books*, October 24, 2019, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/bosnias-mosques-without-muslims/> Viewed on November 17, 2019.

protest at the pressure being applied on the Bosniaks, argued that Milošević simply out-gamed his fellow leaders. He stated, “He was the chatty guy around the poker table, and when he chatted you up he understood what your position was but you didn’t get to know what his bottom line was.”¹³

How the Bosnian Serbs forged their position in Bosnia has ultimately weakened the foundation of Bosnia & Herzegovina moving forward. According to British historian Marko Attila Hoare: “Thanks to Dayton, Karadžić’s Serbs snatched a victory from the jaws of defeat, the Republika Srpska was consolidated and Bosnia was condemned to permanent dysfunction. So it would have been much better for Bosnia if Dayton hadn’t happened.”¹⁴ However, Dayton did happen and Bosnia & Herzegovina and its people are victims of one of the most complex and convoluted political processes in the world.

In the aftermath of Dayton, one of the greatest menaces to the existence of the modern-day Bosnian state is the propagation of ethnic Serb nationalism. Republika Srpska has threatened to leave the Bosnian Federation on numerous instances and this aspiration could possibly rekindle the conflict. Milorad Dodik, who was recently elected to be the Bosnian Serb representative in the power-sharing presidency, has publicly called for the Republika Srpska to break off from Bosnia proper. From the onset, Dodik has been nothing less than provocative. “Before his inauguration in November, Dodik brought the flag of Republika Srpska to Sarajevo, where he planted it outside his new office in the presidency building. The act seemed calculated to spark anger, given that Republika Srpska has flirted with secession more than once.”¹⁵

Milorad Dodik has a troubling history of championing the Serb ultranationalist agenda and this has included the defense of Bosnian Serb war criminals. “By 2013, Dodik was defending Radovan Karadžić, a former leader of Republika Srpska who was found guilty by an international tribunal of committing genocide at Srebrenica, where thousands of Bosnian Muslims were killed. When a new student dormitory in the town of Pale was named in honor of Karadžić in 2016, Dodik unveiled a plaque bearing Karadzic’s name.”¹⁶ Dodik has even publicly

¹³ Julian Borger, “Bosnia’s bitter, flawed peace deal 20 years on”, *The Guardian*, (London, November 10, 2015), <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2015/nov/10/bosnia-bitter-flawed-peace-deal-dayton-agreement-20-years-on> Viewed on November 20, 2019.

¹⁴ Borger, “Bosnia’s bitter, flawed peace deal 20 years on”.

¹⁵ Maxim Edwards, “The President Who Wants to Break Up His Own Country,” *The Atlantic*, (January 2, 2019), <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/01/serb-president-dodik-bosnia/579199/> Viewed on November 23, 2019.

¹⁶ Edwards, “The President Who Wants to Break Up His Own Country.”

called into question the validity of war crimes in Bosnia and has gone as far as negating the massacre at Srebrenica.

Although ethnic violence and attacks are not presently customary within the Bosnian state, Serb ultranationalism has inspired violence from the far-right internationally. “Outside of the country, the war remains a potent symbol for those on the right-wing terrorist fringe, many of whom who have lionized wartime Bosnian Serb leaders for pursuing the politics of ethnic cleansing and genocide. In his notorious political manifesto, Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik revealed himself to be obsessed with the wars in the Balkans. Breivik heaped praises on Karadzic and openly defended the genocide, depicting it as model for a future race war in Europe.”¹⁷ Considering how Serb ultra-nationalists and even war criminals remain glorified figures in Republika Srpska, this sentiment has the potential to trigger renewed ethnic violence, especially if the political circumstances in Bosnia continue to embrace the hardline.

To further distinguish the Bosnian Serbs and to emphasize their ethnoreligious identity, Dodik has taken measures to include religious education as a part of the mandatory high school curriculum in Republika Srpska. “ ‘This will be done, for sure, there is no reason to doubt it... the Serbian Orthodox Church is a very important part of our national identity, here in Republika Srpska and in Serbia, and we must work together,’ Republika Srpska’s President Milorad Dodik told media at an Easter reception.”¹⁸ Since approximately 19 percent of the population of Republika Srpska are non-Serb, compulsory religious instruction automatically alienates a considerable minority while solidifying the status of the Bosnian Serbs as a separate entity independent of the Bosnia state.

Religious nationalism expressed by the Serbian Orthodox Church makes Dodik’s statements even more ominous. In May of 1996, the Serbian Bishops Assembly were highly critical of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and institutions they perceived to be targeting the Serbs. The Assembly stated:

¹⁷ Murtaza Hussain, “Rise of Europe’s far right emboldens Serb extremists and threatens a fragile peace in Bosnia”, *The Intercept*, (November 15, 2018), <https://theintercept.com/2018/11/15/rise-of-europes-far-right-emboldens-serb-extremists-and-threatens-a-fragile-peace-in-bosnia/> Viewed on November 23, 2019.

¹⁸ Mladen Lakić, “Bosnian Serbs to Introduce Mandatory Religious Education”, *Balkan Insight*, (Sarajevo, April 12, 2018), <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/04/12/bosnian-serbs-mull-for-mandatory-religion-classes-04-11-2018/> Viewed on November 23, 2019.

For the first time in history, the Hague Tribunal is prosecuting war crimes of the leaders and representatives of virtually only one of the parties of the civil war, the Serbian side, thereby in fact indicting an entire nation. The abuse of justice and international law in the Hague as an instrument of politics, if carried out to completion, will remain as a dark blot on the face of the contemporary world.¹⁹

Given that the Serbian Orthodox Church has recently been attacked in Bosnia through acts of vandalism but has also expropriated land from Bosniak victims and survivors, Orthodoxy in the territory continues to be at the center of controversy.

Foreign influence has further stoked Bosnian Serb ambitions to separate from the Bosnian Federation and this has also raised the specter for future violence.

With Russian assistance, the police forces of Republika Srpska have undertaken an ominous program of militarization with weapons and training provided by Russian advisers. Russian-owned state media outlets have also been accused of spreading sectarian propaganda in the country, adding to a febrile climate of ethnic tension and atrocity denial that Dodik has been glad to capitalize on.²⁰

The Russian relationship with the Serbian state will certainly continue to bleed into Repulika Spska. While the European Union has been reluctant regarding EU membership in the Balkans, Russia has been solidifying its relationship with Serbia harking on the common bonds of Slavic heritage and Orthodox Christianity. Moreover, with Russia being implicated in a coup attempt in Montenegro in 2016, it has illustrated its propensity to intervene in the territories comprising the former Yugoslavia.

Croatian Ambitions in Bosnia & Herzegovina

What is often referred to as ‘the war within the war’ during Bosnia’s struggle for independence was the Croat and Bosniak conflict. These hostilities are often overshadowed by the assault on the Bosniaks perpetrated by the Bosnian Serbs. However, Bosnian Croat atrocities inflicted on Bosniaks in Herzegovina were nevertheless appalling, albeit on a more diminished scale.

In early 1993 the Croats then moved on their land grab, encouraged by the efforts of Lord Owen whose territorial division awarded tracts of ethnically mixed central Bosnia to the Croats. The Croats torched Muslim villages, massacred hundreds of elderly peasants, set

¹⁹ Michael A. Sells, “Serbian Religious Nationalism, Christoslavism, and the Genocide in Bosnia, 1992-1995”, Paul Mojzes, ed., *Religion and the War in Bosnia*, (Atlanta, GA, Scholars Press, 1998), p. 204.

²⁰ Hussain, “Rise of Europe’s far right emboldens Serb extremists and threatens a fragile peace in Bosnia”.

up a string of camps where inmates were tortured, conducted night-time roundups in the towns to evict non-Croats, and prosecuted the siege of east Mostar. The aim was to establish the mini-state called Herceg-Bosna in the south-west of the country bordering Croatia proper.²¹

Echoing what transpired with the Bosnian Serbs and the Serbian aspirations in the Bosnian state, Croatia sought to extend its presence in Western Bosnia, the region historically known as Herzegovina. During the trial of six Bosnian Croat individuals at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), the Bosnian Croat leadership was convicted of ethnic cleansing. The tribunal concluded: "The ultimate purpose was to create a Croat entity, to unify the Croatian people in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Later these areas were to be either joined with the Republic of Croatia, or remain in close association with it."²²

Some of the most intense battles between the Croats and the Bosniaks occurred in the Herzegovinian city of Mostar. The lingering image from this phase of the Bosnian war was the Bosnian Croat destruction of the '*stari most*' or the old bridge which was described internationally as a direct cultural assault on global patrimony. Although the violence ceased decades ago, Mostar is an example of a city that remains partitioned along ethnoreligious lines as Bosnian Croat nationalism continues to provoke its neighbors. "The city remains ethnically divided until this day. The Croats erected a soaring Roman Catholic cross to dominate the skyline above the mainly Muslim eastern side."²³

Herzeg-Bosna, not unlike Republika Srpska, was another pseudo state founded in B&H territory. This Bosnian Croat entity ceased to officially exist in 1996; however, Herzeg-Bosna was functioning for a time as an autonomous region within B&H proper. According to John Mearshimer and Stephen Van Evera in 1995:

It has its own 50,000 man army, it delivers the mail, runs the schools, and collect taxes. It is already closely related to its Croatian mother state: Bosnian Croats carry Croatian passports, use Croatian currency and Croatian license plates, route their telephone calls

²¹ Ian Traynor, "Bosnian Croat leaders convicted for ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia breakup" *The Guardian*, (London, May 29, 2013), <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2013/may/29/bosnian-croats-convicted-ethnic-yugoslavia> Viewed on November 20, 2019.

²² Traynor, "Bosnian Croat leaders convicted for ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia breakup".

²³ Traynor, "Bosnian Croat leaders convicted for ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia breakup".

through Croatia, and vote in Croatian elections, as they did in Croatia's October 29th, 1995, parliamentary elections.²⁴

It wasn't just the Bosniak territory that was desired by the Croats, but Croatian President Franjo Tudjman's territorial aspirations included the now capital of Republika Srpska, Banja Luka. In light of the Croatian offensive in Krajina that created the largest refugee disaster in Europe since the Second World War, the U.S. ambassador to Croatia, Peter Galbraith claimed that Dayton inevitably halted a further humanitarian catastrophe. According to Galbraith in the wake of Dayton:

The Croatian leader had long harboured ambitions for a 'Greater Croatia' (a mirror of Milošević's 'Greater Serbia') that would encompass Banja Luka. But the killing of civilians after Tudjman's offensive the previous month to wrest control of Serb enclaves inside Croatia raised fears that worse might yet be to come. If the Croats had behaved better after Operation Storm, you might have had a very different outcome in Bosnia.²⁵

The Bosnian Croats, a key component of the Bosnian Federation, have been dwindling in numbers over the past decades. According to a 2015 report,

"In the past 20 years, Bosnia has lost more than 45 per cent of its Croat population; in Republika Srpska, the number has decreased by 90 per cent," Franjo Komarica, the archbishop of Banja Luka and current President of the Bishop's conference of Bosnia, said on Monday [December 14, 2015] (while presenting the conclusions of the Church's Commission, 'Justitia et Pax' ['Justice and Peace'], marking the 20th anniversary of the Dayton Peace Agreements).²⁶

Between migration and the erratic support received from Croatia, the perception that the Bosnian Croats are an endangered minority feeds into an already volatile dynamic.

The aforementioned impression has led to a drive for the Bosnian Croats to push for a third state entity within Bosnia akin to Republika Srpska. The Bosnian Croats have the unenviable position in being the minority group in both the Bosnian-Herzegovinian federation and Republika Srpska, hence leading to a sense of disenfranchisement. This sentiment of marginalization has prompted a nationalistic response. Recently, when moderate Bosnian Croat,

²⁴ Raju G.C. Thomas, *Yugoslavia Unraveled: Sovereignty, Self-Determination, Intervention*, (Lanham, Lexington Books, 2003), p.10.

²⁵ Borger, "Bosnia's bitter, flawed peace deal, 20 years on".

²⁶ Radolfo Toe, "Croats Vanishing from Bosnia, Bishop Says", *Balkan Insight*, (Sarajevo, December 16, 2015), <https://balkaninsight.com/2015/12/16/catholic-leaders-lament-disappearance-of-croats-from-bosnia-12-15-2015/> Viewed on November 28, 2019.

Željko Komšić, was nominated to the three-person presidency, there were mass protests by Bosnian Croat nationalists. Komšić has been accused by many Croats in being backed by Muslim voters and not representing their interests. Dragan Čović, the Croatian Democratic Union party candidate who lost the vote has called for the formation of a third Croat entity in Bosnia, which would mean further division of the country along ethnic and religious lines.

For its part, Zageb has recently been accused of undermining Bosnian sovereignty and this has been spurred by the HDZ [Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica—Croatian Democratic Union], Croatia's nationalistic political party, and its failure to officially recognize the office of Željko Komšić. While it is true that two-thirds of Bosnian Croats did not vote for Komšić due to how Bosnia is politically and ethnically delineated, Komšić received more votes, just not from the Croatian minority. Nevertheless, the ethnic vulnerability perceived by Bosnian Croats along with political intervention emanating from nationalist elements of the Croatian state threatens the future of Bosnia similar to Serbian ethnic nationalism. Jasmin Mujanović, a political scientist who focuses on southeastern Europe has ascertained: "[T]hat the issue centres on the HDZ's pursuit of permanent power by maintaining and further deepening the country's 'segregationist regime.' The creation of a so-called 'third entity' is the most obvious way to do this; the HDZ is deeply envious of the one-party regime Dodik has built in the Republika Srpska; they want the same in Western Herzegovina."²⁷

Finally, according to Mato Zovkić, a Catholic priest, the Croatian Catholic leadership has added to the consternation in Bosnia & Herzegovina much like Serbian bishops and the future of the Bosnian Croats may contingent on a shift:

The Croatian Catholic population of B&H is proportionately the greatest loser of the war, half of the Catholics have left or been driven out from their parishes in Banja Luka, Sarajevo, and Trebinje dioceses. Those who have remained in their parishes or are about to return to their burned out homes will become an absolute minority and even greater losers if their spiritual leaders do not help them to cherish their own ethnic and religious identity while respecting the identity of their Bosnian Muslim and Serb Orthodox fellow citizens.²⁸

²⁷ Gadzo, "Is Croatia undermining Bosnia's sovereignty?", *Al Jazeera*, (December 20, 2018), <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/croatia-undermining-bosnias-sovereignty-181218142705856.html> Viewed on November 29, 2019.

²⁸ Mato Zovkić, "War Wounds in Croatian Catholic Population of Bosnia Herzegovina", Paul Mojzes Eds., *Religion and the War in Bosnia*, (Atlanta, GA, Scholars Press, 1998), p. 217.

The Post-War Bosniak Identity

The Bosnian Muslim population are one of the few indigenous Muslim populations in Europe, Slavs who adopted Islam during Ottoman rule starting in the 15th century. Following the Bosnian war, Bosniak ethnoreligious identity naturally took on a renewed significance. Since their faith and ethnicity was being attacked, the Bosniaks garnered a more defensive posture in protecting their traditions that were being threatened by ethnic cleansing and genocide. Bosnian Muslims have traditionally leaned more secular and tolerant when it came to religious expression and this dynamic changed to an extent in the shadow of the conflicts in Bosnia when radical Islam was introduced, specifically by foreign fighters from the Middle East and North Africa. “Hundreds of Muslim volunteers from those regions came to Bosnia in the early 1990s to fight what they saw as a war of faiths, taking up arms to defend their Muslim brothers and sisters against the Croats and Serbs.”²⁹

Ethnoreligious tension has emerged and been accompanied by violence in Bosnia on some rare occasions, such as what occurred in 2015.

There, a crowd of furious Bosnian Muslims jumped over fences and attacked Serbia's prime minister with stones and water bottles on Saturday [July 11, 2015] marking the 20th anniversary commemorations of the Srebrenica massacre. Aleksandar Vučić, a former ultranationalist during the Balkan wars but who is now a moderate with a pro-Western stance, escaped serious injury. He said he was hit in the face with a rock as the crowds chanted "Kill, Kill" and "Allahu akbar," the Arabic phrase for "God is great."³⁰

There is no denying the impact that the war has procured on Bosnia and a segment of the Bosniak population has undergone radicalization, however, the external perception of this identity shift has been more fundamental than the reality on the ground. This has been utilized to propagate ethnoreligious hatred.

According to the European Islamophobia Report 2018 which was published by the Ankara-based Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research think tank on Friday [September 20, 2019], politicians and some sections of the media are today attempting to falsely present Bosnia as a "radical Muslim haven" in order to undermine the country—again with the aim of dividing it territorially.³¹

²⁹ Dario Sito-Sucić, “War brought Bosnian Muslim women back to Islam”, *Reuters*, (May 5, 2007), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-muslimwomen-europe-bosnia/war-brought-bosnian-muslim-women-back-to-islam-idUSL0465833220070505?pageNumber=2> Viewed on November 30, 2019.

³⁰ CBS News, “Serbian PM attacked at ceremony marking Srebrenica slaughter”, (July 11, 2015), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/serbian-pm-aleksandar-vucic-attacked-at-ceremony-marking-srebrenica-slaughter-in-bosnia/> Viewed on November 30, 2019.

³¹ Gadzo, “Large increase in anti-Bosnian, anti-Muslim bigotry: Report”, *Al Jazeera*, (September 23, 2019),

The Bosnian Serb leadership and Milorad Dodik have pushed the narrative to portray Bosniaks unfavorably and to even belittle Islamic culture in Bosnia.

In 2018, Milorad Dodik, the Bosnian Serb leader and newly elected Serb member of the Bosnia and Herzegovina presidency, dehumanised Bosniak Muslims by referring to adhan (call to prayer) as 'howling' on a show on public Serbian television," wrote Hikmet Karčić, a researcher at the Institute for Islamic Tradition of Bosniaks who authored the report's section on Bosnia and Herzegovina.³²

The Croatian discourse has embraced the concept of radical Islam infiltrating the Bosnian state. This agenda has been supported by erroneous facts emanating from the highest political office to include the recent presidency of Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović. "In 2017, Croatian media reported that Grabar-Kitarovic's office warned that Bosnia was harbouring '5,000 Salafists, who along with their supporters make up 10,000 people with very radical rhetoric and intentions.' A year earlier, she warned of 'radical Islamism,' claiming that a couple of thousand of ISIL fighters had returned to Bosnia."³³ In contrast, Bosnia has made a concerted effort to expel extremists from the country.

After the war, the Bosnian government asked all foreign fighters to leave the country. Some stayed, forming Salafi communities in the mountains with other Bosnian nationals from the mujahedeen unit. "Our data showed that 5,000 came and went out of Bosnia and Herzegovina during the war," Bosnia's Assistant Security Minister for terrorism issues, Vjekoslav Vuković, told Voice Of America. "Nearly 1,000 were present after the war and after our reviewing procedure, we withdrew citizenship and expelled nearly 500 of them."³⁴

Other members of the Croatian leadership doubled down on claims that Islam was forcibly imposing its customs on the more secular Bosnian society, stoking fears that the Croatian minority in Bosnia and the Croatian state itself were in peril.

Croatian MEP Marijana Petir expressed concern at the European Parliament, citing "radicalisation" in Bosnia due to money allegedly sent from Saudi Arabia, Turkey and other Muslim countries. "Foreign fighters are returning to Wahhabi settlements that have

<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/increase-anti-bosnian-anti-muslim-bigotry-report-190923053105055.html> Viewed on November 30, 2019.

³² Gadzo, "Large increase in anti-Bosnian, anti-Muslim bigotry": Report."

³³ Gadzo, "Large increase in anti-Bosnian, anti-Muslim bigotry": Report."

³⁴ Jeff Swicord, "Seeds of Jihad Planted in the Balkans", *Voice of America*, (November 17, 2015), <https://www.voanews.com/europe/seeds-jihad-planted-balkans> Viewed on December 1, 2019.

sprouted right along the Croatian border, radicalising the Muslim population in Bosnia,” she said, falsely claiming female students who receive scholarships from certain countries must wear the hijab, while men must grow a beard and attend daily prayers.”³⁵

Clearly, this discourse is politically motivated. According to *Al Jazeera*, the aforementioned statements highlight Croatian nationalist aspirations in Bosnia. "By showing Bosnia as an unstable country, they seek justification in future possible carving up of Croat-majority areas in Bosnia.”³⁶ Political Scientist Jasmin Mujanović added: “By painting the Bosniak community in Bosnia as latent radicals, they can justify in the eyes of the international community the HDZ's appeals for greater autonomy.”³⁷

It is not only the ethnoreligious groups within Bosnia Herzegovina that have sought to negatively portray the perceived realities of an extremist Bosniak state, the conservative leadership within the European Union has attempted to paint Bosnia as a hotbed for Islamic radicalism. French President Emmanuel Macron recently told *The Economist*: "If you're concerned about this region, the first question is neither Macedonia, nor Albania, it's Bosnia-Herzegovina. The time-bomb that's ticking right next to Croatia, and which faces the problem of returning jihadists, is Bosnia-Herzegovina.”³⁸

Religious and Ethnic Minorities

The Bosnian Muslims, the Croatian Catholics and the Orthodox Serbs are not the only ethnoreligious groups in Bosnia. Minority religious and ethnic groups have been officially excluded in determining the future of Bosnia & Herzegovina. If an individual is not a member of the aforementioned predominant categories, they garner even less rights and representation. “Roma, who are by far the largest national minority in Bosnia and Herzegovina, suffer disproportionately from ethnic discrimination. The direct discrimination against Roma inherent

³⁵ Gadzo, “Large increase in anti-Bosnian, anti-Muslim bigotry”: Report”.

³⁶ Gadzo, “Large increase in anti-Bosnian, anti-Muslim bigotry”: Report”.

³⁷ Gadzo, “Large increase in anti-Bosnian, anti-Muslim bigotry”: Report”.

³⁸ Riada Asimovic Akyon, “Why Macron's remarks on Bosnia are dangerous”, *Al Jazeera*, (November 11, 2019), <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/macron-remarks-bosnia-dangerous-191110133224396.html?xif=%20Viewed%20on%20December%2010>

Viewed on December 10, 2019.

in Bosnia's political structure reinforces the indirect discrimination they often face in the provision of services like housing, health care, education, and employment."³⁹

Migrants who have been displaced by war, famine and economic hardship worldwide have been using Bosnia as a jumping off point to enter the European Union and have caused additional strain to this small Balkan country even though very few have sought permanent asylum.

About 26,000 people last year [2018] and 9,000 this year [2019], chiefly from Pakistan and Bangladesh, entered the country of 3.5 million, mostly from Serbia after a trek through Greece, North Macedonia and Montenegro. Most continued clandestinely over the 1,000-kilometer (620-mile), mountainous border into Croatia. Some 10,000 remain, chiefly in the Krajina area that has EU-funded camps for families which can hold 3,500.⁴⁰

The diminishing Jewish community of Bosnia has seen its status become even more precarious in Bosnia of late. "A Bosniak-dominated district in Sarajevo recently named a school after Mustafa Busuladžić, a notorious antisemite and propagandist for the Nazis. When the Israeli government protested, Bosniak authorities and media chose to attack Israel for its settlement policy."⁴¹ In Bosnia Herzegovina, even though it is a breach of Bosnia's commitments under European human right's law, the Jewish population and other minority groups are ostracized from the political process. "The country's election law requires each of the state's three presidents, who serve concurrently, to be from each of the country's three 'constituent peoples': Bosniak Muslims, Orthodox Christian Serbs and Catholic Croats."⁴²

The aforementioned law, perhaps more than any other aspect of the Bosnian state, illustrates the co-dependent relationship between ethnicity, religion, and the state. Bosnia and Herzegovina is nothing more than a de facto religious state in the heart of Europe and this phenomenon hinders ethnoreligious compatibility while inadvertently encouraging intolerance

³⁹ Human Rights Watch, "Second Class Citizens: Discrimination against Roma, Jews, and Other National Minorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina", (April 4, 2012), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/04/04/second-class-citizens/discrimination-against-roma-jews-and-other-national> Viewed on December 1, 2019.

⁴⁰ Sabina Nikšić, "In Bosnia, refugees stuck in a country its own people leave", *AP News*, (June 20, 2019), <https://apnews.com/e662a6f352784871ae6005fcb4a6d219> Viewed on December 3, 2019.

⁴¹ Ivan Pepić, "The country where Jews are not allowed to run for the presidency", *The Jewish Chronicle*, (March 29, 2018), <https://www.thejc.com/comment/comment/the-country-where-jews-are-not-allowed-to-run-for-the-presidency-bosnia-herzegovina-1.461752> Viewed on December 3, 2019.

⁴² Pepić, "The country where Jews are not allowed to run for the presidency".

between the three principal competing entities, which are the fundamental lynchpin for Bosnia's existence. In reality, Bosnia & Herzegovina is a weak state and in an attempt to avoid conflict and to try to appease the principal entities within that country, Bosnia has sabotaged its own existence through this continued capitulation to ethnoreligious nationalism.

Conclusion

Ultimately, what is the probability of violence returning to the Balkans and Bosnia and Herzegovina? This depends on a number of factors, including how invested the international community is at maintaining the status quo in Bosnia or in taking safeguards to prevent further conflict. It is hard to imagine that outside forces like Russia, Croatia, and Serbia will cease to interfere with Bosnia's sovereignty through the manipulation of ethnoreligious and nationalistic sentiments. With tensions re-emerging between Russia, the United States and her NATO allies, the Balkans as a whole is once again trapped by the whims of foreign aspirations. Even Turkey, with significant Bosnian support, seeks to re-establish its regional impact. Former Bosnian diplomat, Zlatko Dizdarević, claims that Turkish aspirations for Bosnia are a threat to the stability of the state as attested through the relationship between former Bosniak president Bakir Izetbegović and Turkey's leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Dizdarević ascertained:

Turkey's influence is connected to the Muslim Brotherhood. We have a very strange reality today. The majority of the Muslim Bosnians are trying out the identity of the Ottoman Empire. On the night of the election of Erdogan as the president of Turkey, Izetbegović, as president of Bosnia-Herzegovina, congratulated Erdogan on his victory, saying: "Mr President, you are not only the president of Turkey, you are the president of all of us."⁴³

There are a multitude of fundamental divisions that potentially endanger the future of Bosnia and ethnoreligious perceptions are at the top of the list.

The average nationalist Croat—and nationalist Serb, for that matter—often mocks Bosniaks for being Muslim and culturally influenced by “the East” branding them as “Wahhabis” or “turned Turk.” Serb nationalists mock Croats for their centuries-old deference to the Vatican or their World War II Nazi puppet state. Bosniak nationalists often generalize both of

⁴³ Hans Van de Breile, “Foreign influence taking over Bosnia and Herzegovina?” *Euronews*, (April 27, 2018), <https://www.euronews.com/2018/04/26/insiders-foreign-influence-taking-over-bosnia-and-herzegovina> Viewed on December 7, 2019.

the other ethnic groups as “killers,” whose goal it is “exterminate” Bosniaks and divide the territorial spoils between themselves. These nationalisms play off of, and reinforce, one another.”⁴⁴

The future of Bosnia Herzegovina appears bleak and this is reflected by how future generations are being educated about the nation’s tumultuous past sowing further divisions for future generations. “As a result, each ethnic group is taught a Bosniak-, Croat-, or Serb-specific curriculum, complete with its own textbooks, that often portray the other groups as aggressors and its own as victims. Serb textbooks describe the Ottoman period as a cruel time, while Bosniak textbooks call it a golden era. “National” history in the Serbian curricula is a history of Serb people and of Serbia, not of Bosnia and Herzegovina.”⁴⁵

In the end, Bosnia is only as strong as its ability to quell discord. Dayton laid a fragile foundation for future generations out of necessity; however, there was very little follow through in bridging the gap created by ethnoreligious alienation. Although the brutal conflicts are decades in the past, the potential for future bloodshed reverberates with the re-emergence of nationalistic politics, the same politics that established the conditions for the vicious wars of the 1990s. This burgeoning nationalism is bolstered by the historical weight of ethnoreligious struggle that motivates political opportunism while stoking communal fears between unwelcome neighbors obliged to coexist.

⁴⁴ Una Hajdari and Michael Colborne, “Why Ethnic Nationalism Still Rules Bosnia, and Why It Could Get Worse”, *The Nation*, (October 12, 2018), <https://www.thenation.com/article/why-ethnic-nationalism-still-rules-bosnia-and-why-it-could-get-worse/> Viewed on December 5, 2019.

⁴⁵ Kristen Chick, “In Bosnia's schools, three different people learn three different histories”, *Christian Science Monitor*, (August 13, 2014), <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2014/0831/In-Bosnia-s-schools-three-different-people-learn-three-different-histories> Viewed on January 24, 2020.

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