

# Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Ethnification of the Citizenry

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Despite the almost millenary territorial continuity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the country has suffered constant and deliberate historical obstructions of denial of its statehood due to its status as a multiethnic republic. The three majority groups that make up the territory – Serbs of Orthodox faith, Croats of Catholic faith, and Muslims – coexisted united until war broke down in 1992, a tragedy whose trigger was the ethnic ideology of identity populism that had been forged in the previous years and would become innate for the following generations. Since then, Bosnia and Herzegovina has been immersed in a long-lasting crisis – aggravated by the war in Ukraine – as a result of a poorly resolved peace and which has trapped the region in a convoluted system of ethnic weights and counterweights.

Since the 1990s, international opinion has embraced the theory of “irreconcilable ancestral hatreds” to define the Balkans, a statement that sought to justify the genocide perpetrated in the backyard of the European Union in the 20th-century, and the subsequent construction of states in which the citizenry was caught in an ethnonationalist web of demographic reservations of shielded identity, so present now beyond this region. Curiously, despite being a common argument, the ethnic foundation is not an ancestral issue in Bosnia and Herzegovina – the most multiethnic republic from the Yugoslavian disintegration and that runs through this article – because, as the British historian Noel Malcolm (2011: 19) describes, it is “one of the countries in Europe with an almost uninterrupted history of geopolitical construction since the Middle Ages.” However, despite its almost millenary territorial continuity, in its political dimension it has

suffered constant and deliberate historical obstructions of denials of its statehood due to its status as a multiethnic republic – which has always been characterised by a marked multiethnic character as a bastion of an autochthonous Eastern European microculture –, which would be built upon the premise that Bosnia and Herzegovina has not had a nation of its own, placing the concept of ethnic group at the same level as that of *people* (Ibrahimagić, 2015). In this way, and against the modern formulation of the nation state – which understands the *demos* as a social community of citizens with a political and territorial organisation, regardless of their ethnic or religious belonging –, Franjo Tuđman, the man who is considered the founding father of the new Croatia and one of the artifices of this ethnonationalist construction stained with blood who died without having answered to international justice, eventually said that Bosnia and Herzegovina

is not a nation because several peoples inhabit it: “How do they pretend to shape a whole out of such an ethnically impure mixture and situation? No, ladies and gentlemen, Bosnia must disappear” (Ibrahimagić, 2015, cited in the book *Le lys et la cendre*, by the French philosopher Bernard Henri Lévy).

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It is therefore worth recalling that, for much of the medieval period, between 1180 and 1463, Bosnia was an independent kingdom and that its inhabitants, who followed different faiths – including the so-called Bosnian Church (Manicheans), the Catholic Church or the Orthodox Church – called themselves *bošnjani*. During the period of the Ottoman Empire, over five centuries, the term *bošnjaci* was used, which encompassed Orthodox, Catholics and Muslims (*krstjani*, *ristjani* and *muslimani*) to denominate the people of what at that time was an *eyalato*, a term that denoted the largest territorial unity of the Empire. From 1878 to 1918, it was the “imperial province” in the whole of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, while from 1945 to 1992 it continued to be a federal republic. “Therefore, for approximately six hundred and fifty of the last eight hundred years there has been an entity called Bosnia on the geographical maps” (Malcolm, 2011: 19).

The birth of the nation states in Europe began before it happened in the Balkans, where the great multinational and multireligious empires, and specifically Bosnia and Herzegovina, continued until the end of the First World War. However, its annexation to the Austro-Hungarian Empire after the

Berlin Congress of 1878 did not ensure the survival of the notion of a single people of different faiths. Under pressures from the already sovereign Serbia and Montenegro, on the one hand, and Croatia as part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire – but with clear hegemonic and territorial pretensions –, on the other, a process of nationalisation and identitarianism got underway, by which those hitherto known as “Bosnians” who professed the Orthodox and Catholic religion recognised themselves as Serbians and Croats, respectively. This process of ethnic nationalisation lasted for a whole century, as indicated by Ibrahimagić et al. (2010), from the mid-19th-century to the mid-20th-century, although all the censuses conducted in that period – from the one by Omer Pasha Latas in 1851, those of 1879 and 1910 by the Austro-Hungarian institutions, and those by the representatives of the kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenians (Kingdom of Yugoslavia) in 1921 and 1931 – focused on religious identity rather than on ethnic configuration of the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Muslims, who continued to assert their Bosnian identity, did not find a political framework that gave way to their ethnic expression and, therefore, in that same period, they went through different phases in which they were pushed to identify themselves as Croats or Serbs (although Croatian or Serb was in its turn a synonym of Catholic or Orthodox, with the consequent rejection of assimilation by the majority of the Muslim population), Yugoslavs, undeclared, or to express their individuality with the term *muslimani*. Depending on the political moment, their name was capitalised, thereby equating the religious sense with the ethnic, and when it was not appro-

priate, *muslimani* were again lowered to the religious category with the letter *m* in lower case (Ibrahimagić et al., 2010).

### “Neither Serbs, Nor Croatians, Nor Muslims... but Bosnians”

The regional approach of the *demo* of Bosnia and Herzegovina beyond ethnic labels was not resumed until the Second World War, when all the peoples united in the movement of resistance established by Tito fiercely struggled against the Nazi and fascist occupation. The AVNOJ (Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia) assemblies of November 1942 and November 1943, which laid the foundations for the Constitution of the 2nd Yugoslavia – Tito’s – and formulated the structure of the country as a federation made up of six republics, and that of the ZAVNOBIH (State Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Bosnia and Herzegovina), of 25 November 1943, established the foundations of the modern statehood and constitutionality of Bosnia and Herzegovina and of its people, which continued until its independence in 1992. Those foundational acts proclaimed a multi-ethnic republic – in contrast to the other five, whose inhabitants were Serbians, Croatians, Slovenians, Macedonians, or Montenegrins – made up of three equal and twinned peoples who had fought against the enemy. The statement read as follows: “*Bosnaci i Hercegovci* [Bosnians and Herzegovinians] only united [...] can you build a common and more beautiful future [...] All of you, Serbians, Croatians and Muslims, need a sincere and fraternal cooperation so that Bosnia and Herzegovina as a unity can advance to the satis-

faction of all, without distinction of faith or belonging” (Proclamation of AVNOJ to the peoples of Yugoslavia, 27 November 1942). Eighty years ago, therefore, in the city of Mrkonjić, a unique and indivisible state was agreed and the ZAVNOBiH Resolution was adopted, which expresses the determination of ensuring the full equality of all the peoples and nationalities, as well as the equality of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina within the Yugoslav federation. On this point, it is worth mentioning that *bosanci i hercegovci* (Bosnians and Herzegovinians) is a term that refers to a single people or nation, although because of its structure it seems to designate two units. These are exclusively regional, but in no case ethnic.

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It continued to be so in the successive constitutions that mark the history of Bosnia and Herzegovina. That of 1946, as the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia, ratifies that sovereignty of the people (as a political *demo*) and the equality of its nations (in its ethnic meaning), without distinction of national or religious belonging. Under article 2, and drawing on its right to self-determination, including the right to secession and union with other peoples – such as that of Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Slovenia –, this came to form part of a community: the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia. In 1953 the constitutional act was passed, which complements the definition of the form of state regulation as that of a “democratic

socialist” People’s Republic “of the working people of Bosnia and Herzegovina”, a reflection of the introduction of the formula of the self-managed socialism in 1950. In the 1963 Constitution, as the Socialist Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina within the Federation, emphasis was placed on the decision-making of these Serbian, Muslim and Croatian workers and citizens, members of other peoples and nationalities, and ethnic groups who lived in it in all the organisational structures of labour, in those of the municipalities or in the bodies of the sociopolitical communities. Despite the supranational formulation of the constitution, the conception of *Bosnians and Herzegovinians* was always used, along with that of the united and twinned ethnic groups: Serbs, Croats and Muslims. The latter, however, had to wait for twenty years, until the 1971 census, to be considered as a national category, being definitively reincarnated as *Bosniaks* in 1995.

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With the 1974 Constitution, Bosnia and Herzegovina renewed its “sovereignty” as did the other republics under their inalienable right to self-determination. Its constitution is considered the most progressive of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and, in fact, in 1990 served as a basis for the necessary amendments for the transition towards a parliamentary system of division of powers. With it began the process of decentralisation of Yugoslavia, which could embrace a new federal model committed to the balance of the “small nationalisms” and which offered

the necessary space for the cultural awakening characteristic of the nations with the granting of political transfers, but, as Malcolm (2011: 353) notes, in communist Yugoslavia, any desire for greater national autonomy necessarily involves the start of the political frustrations behind any totalitarian structure. “It is easy to convince a people that the other is subjecting or exploiting it when their whole political system is antidemocratic and in essence oppressive,” Malcolm states. However, what the nationalist doctrine of all sides would attempt to justify as an eruption caused by the weakening policies imposed “from above” is in reality the result of an ideological work of decades in which the idea of the hegemony of supposed original ethnic groups was incubated, which could only survive under the empire of the unity of their people throughout the Yugoslav territory. For the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, this was a Great Serbia, as formalised in 1986 in its memorandum. For Tuđman, it consisted of enlarging the Croatian matrix dividing up Bosnia and Herzegovina, as the Serbian prime minister Cvetković and the Croatian political leader Maček agreed in 1939 within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. During the division between the new Banovina of Croatia and what would be that of Serbia, one of those present famously asked: “And what do we do with the Muslims?” To which Maček replied: “We’ll act as if they didn’t exist.” In reality, the ethnic ideology of identity populism would be an element common to the hitherto twinned peoples, and the trigger of the Yugoslav tragedy which would become inherent to the coexistence of the upcoming generations, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina. “Probably, we will have to search for firmer and more long-lasting foundations for the interests of the three

peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina than those provided by the ideology. We have seen how easily an ideology is replaced by another opposed ideology: nationalism, which rapidly slips into fascism and questions the flow of centenary civilisation and cultures of this area” (Ibrahimagić, 2003).

## The “Gordian Knot”

How to resume life under conditions of war in which the population has to return to their burnt and sacked homes? And how to do so when, as happens after a civilian conflict, the perpetrators of these crises were their fellow citizens, who perhaps continue to live nearby, or even hold the government of the city or the country? Only in the last decade of the 20th-century has this question appeared before our eyes in settings such as Bosnia, Rwanda, the Republic of the Congo, Sierra Leona, Chechnya, Palestine or Kosovo and, since the early 21st-century, also in Afghanistan, Iraq and, more recently, Syria, Libya or Yemen.

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The answer to this question is one of the main challenges of 21st-century sociology which, beyond transforming absolutely fragmented societies, post-conflict societies, has to find a formula so that the former enemies can seal the fissure. Briony Jones (2008) points out that the characteristics of the new wars that leave societies divided and institutionally unviable are “complex political emergencies.” Emergencies in the sense

of the physical paralysation of the conflict is not always a guarantee of stability.

In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the bloodiest balance of the Balkan wars, after almost three decades of the signing of the peace agreements, known as the Dayton Agreement as they were signed in the military base of Ohio, United States, the country is facing the worst crisis since its aggression in 1992. The war in Ukraine has stirred up the phantoms haunting the region, as well as the fear of repetitions of the conflict based on movements of borders along ethnic lines. Neither the international community nor the internal political fabric has found a solution to what is popularly known as the Dayton “Gordian knot”. This is the price of a poorly resolved peace that managed to halt the bloodshed but had the nation trapped in an entangled system of ethnic weights and counterweights. In the Dayton Peace Agreement (OHR, 1995), signed three ways between the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro), Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the United States plays a major role after the European failure to find a solution to the conflict. The agreement halted the bloodshed that had claimed over one thousand deaths and two million displaced people, but left a volatile and dysfunctional state structure that disfigured the previous *acquis* of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina and established the formula of “one state – two entities (plus one district) –, three constituting peoples (Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks).” The two entities are the Srpska Republika (Republic of the Serbs), with a unitary structure and mostly Serbian (Orthodox) population, and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, decentralised in ten cantons and with a majority Bosniak (Muslim) and Croatian (Catholic) population.

The governmental structure also has institutions formed on the basis of ethnic quotas, with two fundamental mechanisms: the veto on the national interest of some of the three sovereign ethnic groups – which only enables them to opt for the presidency and the High Chamber of the Parliament –, and the entity vote in the Chamber of Representatives of the Parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a principle of equality of the entities. However, both instruments are used as a lever to hinder the operation of the central institution, with the bias of prioritising the interest of ethnicity over citizenry. In the first general elections, held on the insistence of the international community in 1996, immediately after the signing of the peace agreement, the parties that survived the war took power, institutionalising ethnicity as the foundation for a segregated democracy that could be called *ethnocracy*. It is a design of the international community, which plays at stabilitocracy with those same warmakers in order to pacify the region, albeit artificially. The obstacle, therefore, emerges when the political priority is not to create the mechanisms for a multiethnic participation in the construction of the country but to prioritise the intraethnic or intragroup interests over those of citizens as a whole.

In *Imagining Balkans* (1997), Maria Todorova deliberates at length about how the image of a territory can gradually degenerate in the people's imaginary until it becomes the regional sewage of a continent. Labelled

as the “powder keg” of Europe, Todorova explains that the territory in which the Western Balkans is now located has gradually lost prestige in international eyes to the extent that terms such as *Balkanisation*, a synonym of ethnic fragmentation, have been coined.

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The use of the concept spread after the Second World War, when the transformation of the African continent was called the “Balkanisation of Africa” because of the ongoing emergence of new states and national consciousness similar to those that, historically, have continued to be repeated in the geopolitical framework of the Balkans (Stanovic, 2004: 12). The most recent examples include the scenarios of social fracture and armed confrontation that the Arab Springs have left in countries such as Libya, but above all in Syria, which has come to be known as the “Balkanisation of the Middle East”.<sup>1</sup>

These transition and post-war years have not managed to improve the international image of the Balkans, despite all the efforts at home and abroad to search for somewhat aseptic denominations such as “Western Balkans” or “European Southeast”. Terms which have not convinced the inhabitants

1. The former president of the US Barak Obama, in an interview (Friedman, 2014) published by the newspaper *El País* immediately after the decision of the Administration to create the International Coalition to intervene in Syria and Iraq and weaken the Islamic State (ISIS) or Daesh, reflected on the role of the international community in the Middle East, particularly on the role of the big power embodied by the UN. Faced with the idea of witnessing the birth of a new world order, Obama pointed out that the “maximalisation of politics” was the great enemy of the world: “Our policy is dysfunctional and we should pay attention to the terrible divisions in the Middle East as a warning: societies do not work if the different political factions adopt maximalist positions. And the more varied a country, the less it can permit itself the luxury of these maximalisms.”

of the region themselves, who do not find historical or cultural nexuses in these names, while in the prevailing imaginary they are a society being disfigured in “state nations” rather than in “nation states”. Authors such as Vlasisavljevic (2006: 34) use the definition of the ethnic typology produced by Anthony D. Smith in *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (1986) (in Vlasisavljevic, 2006), in which he places the subject of the Balkan reality as an ethnic minority made up of different communities. In these communities, the dynastic bonds are blurred in favour of the search for new elements of historical memory particular to each community and, therefore, the political objective becomes territorial. This character is not archaic, but a rising trend in the whole Euro-Mediterranean arch (Matvejevic, 1999). The political philosopher Sarajlic (2010: 227) argues that these characteristics do not have a premodern root, as it might seem when we speak of the state nations in the case of the Balkans, but a postmodern character that should serve as a lesson: “The rejection of the universal narratives (there is not a historical narrative about the existence of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a united country or about the real character of the conflict) in the deconstruction of the authority and the relativisation of the state (state institutions are only the bark of the ethnic power, do not have public authority) [implies] the reduction of politics to a conflict between culturally defined actors.”

### The Shielded Identity that Defines Postmodern Times

In this theoretical framework that it is appropriate to develop to better understand

the postwar period throughout the Balkan territory, we must place the transition that the countries have experienced for three decades, after the fall of communism in the “European Southeast”. In *Lost in Translation, Lost in Transition* (2007: 30) the philologist Danijela Majstorović researched the transition from the semiotic perspective of the discourse, understood as the unidirectional communication of the international community towards the country in the postwar period, and the more or less successful acceptance by its citizens. Europeism is thematised in the Balkans, according to the author, through the metaphor of those who dream of being Europe, those who are its centre and those who will remain the periphery. And this is also applicable to the Mediterranean. Majstorović analyses this idea from the stance of the international community in Bosnia and Herzegovina during this postwar period, which – through the propulsion of the discourse of democratisation first, to later focus on the discourse of transition and the accession to the EU – has clear overtones of colonialism (see Todorova’s conceptions of Balkan barbarism, 1997). It is a common characteristic of the postwar transitions in the Balkans that appears in almost all the cases in three ways: through the passage of a country from war to peace; in an attempt to reconstruct society and change its guidelines and mentalities; and, finally, in the transition from a centralist and monopolistic economy and policy to the free market of neoliberalism.

It is a transition imposed from above which, camouflaged by international solidarity, forcibly introduces the changes, without emerging in a natural and real

manner in the citizens' conception, with the aim of making this change profitable – although the price to pay for this is the cementing of “stabilitocracies” with which the international community collaborates. The Balkans Wars (1991-1999) have meant for the international community a turning point in how armed conflicts are addressed, as well as for the international media, which turned this conflict into the most broadcast in history, not always with the necessary rigour. For the United Nations, it meant its first – and one of the longest-lasting and most costly – peace missions (UN-PROFOR). The mission and the promise of maintaining peace were not fully effective, because in the case of Bosnia – for example in Srebrenica, a zone controlled and protected by the blue helmets – the UN forces did not react to safeguard people, leading to the perpetration of the greatest genocide of the conflict. For NATO, the Balkans was the first war scenario of relevance in which its troops entered into combat, and where one of its first offensive actions was conducted, although under the legal umbrella of UN. For transitional justice, the Balkans is also a key scenario. The International Criminal Court for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) was the first international court against war crimes and the first war court since the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials created after the Second World War, established through Resolution 827 of 25 May 1993 of the United Nations Security Council.

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From the European perspective, the extensive enlargement of the European Union towards the East (Rodríguez, 2017) would take place from 2004 with the accession of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechia, Hungary, Slovenia, Malta and Cyprus, followed by the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 and Croatia in 2011. This seems to have been the end of the en masse enlargement of the EU, and a lost decade, particularly visible following the war in Ukraine, where forces such as Russia or China have had some influence. There is a growing “Balkan fatigue” caused by the non-fulfilment of the accession perspectives (Milosevic, 2021). As pointed out by Zdeb (2022), “for years the EU’s enlargement in the region has been considered the key to the stability and long-term development of Bosnia, but the accession process as well as the EU-backed Berlin Process<sup>2</sup> have stalled.” This stagnation is due to EU internal problems and a lack of a solid agenda, while regional initiatives, such as the one proposed by Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia under the name of Open Balkans – embodied by a mini regional Schengen –, have been perceived among the neighbouring countries (particularly from Kosovo, Bosnia and, to some extent, Montenegro) as proof of the power of Belgrade – as happened in Yugoslavia – in

2. The Berlin Process, under the aegis of the former German chancellor Angela Merkel, began with a series of periodical high-level meetings between the leaders of the Western Balkans and some EU countries in favour of the enlargement. Throughout the years, it became not only an emblematic initiative, but the most outstanding driver of the enlargement, with the aim of fostering regional cooperation and sectorial integration.

the regional political sphere, as well as the helping hand of Russia and China (Németh, 2022). With Ukraine burning, the EU seems to have realised that stick and the carrot politics no longer work in its so-called “backyard” (Milosevic, 2021) and that conditionality must be readjusted in favour of security. The surprising acceptance of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s candidacy in December 2022 has been a step forward, but what will happen with the construction of an institutional system of modern democracies? In most cases – i.e., Bosnia, Serbia, Kosovo or North Macedonia –, the creation of sovereignties has only been half effective, and the ethnic puzzle continues to suffocate the exercise of citizenship. The political expert Tarik Haveric (2009: 256) finds a common nexus in all the transitions of the Western Balkans: the factor of the “pseudo-sovereignties”. Haveric argues that “the imposition of constitutions, state symbols and law, and the appointment and replacement of civil servants and judges, the freezing of funds in the banks, the blockage of air traffic, the prohibition of access to international organisations, the bombing; all this suggests that the principles of sovereignty, self-determination and formal democratisation have been played out faced with liberal democracy, which, systematically, is becoming the organisational principle of the international direction.”

In this respect, Haveric finds two clear reasons concerning the dysfunctional character of Western democracies in the new Balkan states. In the first place, there is no common stance at an international level with respect to the action in the field, and a clear example has been the action of NATO in the case of Serbia – the country was not attacked in 1995 after the war with Croatia and with Bosnia,

and it was in 1999, after the war with Kosovo – and the difficult negotiations under which decisions were made. A second observation by the author refers to the very birth of the new states of the former Yugoslavia, all of them backed and legitimised by the international community under the pretext that they had emerged from the democratic will, despite the atrocities that such a will brought with it.

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This reflection leads us to the concept of the “culture of impunity”, which Carla del Ponte, Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and of the court that judged the crimes in Rwanda, reported as one of the main conditioning factors for the birth of the new Balkan states. The impunity of the “murdering identity” noted by Vukovic (2015) – paraphrasing the French-Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf – refers to the identities that are reduced to a single belonging and take individuals to an intolerant, abusive and sometimes suicidal identity by which they eventually become murderers or defenders of them. From this perspective of a shielded identity as an element of postmodernity, the Balkans is not an example of what happens when mosques, churches and synagogues are built next to each other, but of what happens when, out of fear and thirst for nationalism, misanthropes are chosen as leaders and, therefore, at this time this lesson is more than necessary for the Europe and Mediterranean of the 21st-century.

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