

“Hungry in Three Languages”: (Un)Conscious Youth Efforts at Crossing Ethnonational  
Divisions in Post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina

by Matt Roge

HIST 400 - Sackman and Fry

In April 2014, nineteen years after the Dayton Accords signed Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) into statehood, the first “Bosnian”<sup>1</sup> was born. Faruk Salaka was still just a baby when he became a profound symbol of the nation’s reckoning with its hegemonic<sup>2</sup> policies of ethnonationalism and separation that permeate nearly all aspects of contemporary life. The child of Bosnian Muslims<sup>3</sup> Kemal and Elvira Salaka, Faruk was expected to be registered as a Bosniak, one of BiH’s three officially recognized constituent ethnic and national groups (the other two being Croats and Serbs). Faruk’s parents however, decided to fight to register their son as “Bosnian” in an unprecedented act of “patriotism.”<sup>4</sup> Paradoxically, in Bosnia there is no “Bosnian” national group or people, as nationhood is associated solely with ethnic identity. Thus, there is no one unifying national Bosnian identity, but rather three exclusive ones (Croats, Serbs, and Muslims). As Faruk’s father told the Balkan news agency BIRN: “I defended Bosnia and Herzegovina from ethnic exclusivity when Serbs were doing that. Now when Bosniaks are doing the same, I have to fight. Is it possible that we who were born in Bosnia do not have anything in common?”<sup>5</sup> But, in Bosnia-Herzegovina—a country plagued by the memories of Yugoslavia’s bloody fragmentation—division, not unity, has been the status quo for nearly thirty years.

---

<sup>1</sup> All citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina are “Bosnians” in the sense that they are members of the Bosnian state, and I will use the term Bosnian to refer to citizens of the State of Bosnia and Herzegovina throughout the paper (Croats, Serbs, and Muslims alike).

<sup>2</sup> I use this term (hegemonic and hegemony) to denote the way in which ethnonational identity permeates and dictates social and political dynamics in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The potency and legitimization of ethnonational identity has made it an established order of categorization that keeps Croats and Bosniaks divided, both physically discursively.

<sup>3</sup> Hereto referred to as Bosniaks.

<sup>4</sup> Elvira M. Jukic, “Bosnian Baby Beats Ethnically Divided System,” *BIRN*, February 16, 2015. <https://balkaninsight.com/2015/02/16/bosnian-baby-beats-ethnically-divided-system/> 2

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

Bosnia is a country defined by profound internal boundaries. Ravaged by war between 1992 and 1995 (when Yugoslavia collapsed), the Yugoslav identity that had been employed to unify the nation violently fragmented along ethnic lines, as Croats, Serbs, and Bosniaks took up arms against one another. Each group envisioned their own independent state emerging in the wake of Tito's Yugoslavia, and war-mongering ethnic elites harnessed ethnonational identity as both a rallying cry and cause for persecution of the proclaimed "other." Peace finally came to the small and beleaguered former Yugoslav republic in the form of the Dayton Accords.

Brokered by the Clinton administration and implemented by the UN, the peace deal created one country with three entities: The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>6</sup>, whose residents are mainly Bosniaks with a large Croat minority; Republika Srpska, whose population is almost entirely Serb; and Brcko, a self-governing, ethnically mixed city in the northeast. Together, these three comprise the State of Bosnia and Herzegovina; however, this paper focuses on the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as Republika Srpska is much more ethnically homogenous. Its dominant Serb ethnic identity is more reminiscent of a unifying national identity, and its institutions more centralized. Each entity (the Republika and Federation) has its own institutions and legislative bodies, and the Federation is divided into cantons, each with its own administrations and governing bodies (in territorial terms, Republika Srpska occupies 49% of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Federation occupies 51%). The central institutions of the State of Bosnia and Herzegovina, such as the rotating tripartite presidency and parliament, are relatively weak,<sup>7</sup> and the prevailing hegemony of the OHR (Office of the High Representative, appointed

---

<sup>6</sup> Like Bosnia-Herzegovina as a whole, the Federation is frequently referred to as BiH. For the purposes of this paper, I will be examining the Federation and frequently referring to it as BiH and Bosnia.

<sup>7</sup> "Bosnia and Herzegovina," Britannica, accessed December 16, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bosnia-and-Herzegovina/Government-and-society>.

by the UN) over the Bosnian government(s) considerably limits the country's sovereignty, resigning it to the status of a near-international-protectorate.

The political and jurisdictional framework of separation exacerbates and is in turn exacerbated by the institutionalization and potency of ethnic identity in BiH. In many ways, this can be traced back to the Dayton Accords which, with the aim of ending a violent war that was fought along ethnic lines, essentially separated the combatants—Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks. A key element of the approach taken by the Accords, however, was the inherent—and emphatic—recognition of ethnic division as a legitimate, even necessary, institution, and the Accords simultaneously worked ethnic separation into the constitutional fibre of the new Bosnian state.<sup>8</sup> Thus, through war and international intervention, the citizens of Bosnia found themselves in a new system that essentially forced (and forces) them to embrace their now entirely unilateral Croat, Serb, or Bosniak identity. As such, one's ethnonational identity remains incredibly relevant. The resulting ethnic factionalism permeates politics and Bosnian society as well.

Given the painful memories of the ethnonational fervor that led neighbors to take up arms against one another across Bosnia in the early 1990s, ethnonationalism has remained a wedge driven through contemporary Bosnian society. Additionally, the continued acceptance and normalcy of ethnic division keeps alive the very sentiments that contributed to the outbreak of the Bosnian war in 1992. The country was itself born of fighting that occurred specifically along ethnic lines, and the Bosnian social fabric that was torn apart has never been truly repaired. The resulting social paralysis, where ethnic integration has continually failed to succeed, is accompanied by an equally devastating political and economic paralysis, where politics continue

---

<sup>8</sup> "Summary of the Dayton Peace Agreement on Bosnia-Herzegovina," Human Rights Library, University of Minnesota, accessed December 16, 2021. <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/icty/dayton/daytonsum.html>.

to be dominated by ethnic partisanship and economic depression is widespread. Importantly, these social cleavages and economic malaise are particularly perpetuated by the continued potency of ethnicity, as well as that of the ethnocracy—the ruling of ethnonational elites and their exclusive rhetoric.<sup>9</sup> In Bosnia and Herzegovina, ethnonational identity is—and, since 1992, has been—the overarching determinant in the development of modern Bosnian state. This has turned Bosnia’s transitional phase—that is, its charted path towards becoming a strong, independent democracy suitable for admission to the E.U.—into one without end, a sort of sociopolitical purgatory between a future of reconciliation, reconstruction and integration, and a past marked by ethnic strife and profound disunity.

However, as the memories of the 1990s—memories that, for many Bosnians, justified the divided landscape of their new state in 1995—drift further into the past, and the uniquely Bosnian paralysis continues with no end in sight, dissatisfaction with the current situation has begun to reach a tipping point, exemplified most notably during the February 2014 protests in Tuzla, Mostar, Zenica, and Sarajevo, which turned violent. For the youngest generations that have grown up in what has come to be referred to as post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina, the stagnation of the economy, (perceived) increasingly illegitimate yet rigid ethnic segregation,<sup>10</sup> and corrupt and paralyzed ethnic politics are all they have ever known.

---

<sup>9</sup> Sunčana Laketa, "The Politics of Landscape as Ways of Life in the 'divided' City: Reflections from Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina," *Space & Polity* 23, no. 2 (2019), 171.

I also employ this term to refer to structures and policies of separation promoted by ethnonational elites and the ethnofactionalism they engender.

<sup>10</sup> I use this term not in reference to racial segregation in America, where one group holds more privilege and power than the other, but rather the way Bosnia has developed to be a state comprised of two parallel societies separated along ethnic lines. They exist alongside one another but largely refrain from interacting as a singular, truly integrated society.

Bosnia's youth is separated by age from the traumatic events of the 1990's, yet live their legacy day-to-day simply by existing in a state structured around ethnonational identity. Growing up in a post-war transitional state that has seemingly failed to reconcile Bosnia's troubled past—and adequately provide for its citizens—has put many young Bosnians in a position of conflict with the ethnocracy, whose legitimacy is based in division and memory. Faruk Salaka's parents exemplify this, as their decision to register their son as "Bosnian" was a direct and conscious effort to move beyond the rigid ethnic categorization that continues to anchor BiH to its past. Young Bosnians increasingly perceive the status quo as unjustified absurdity, and have begun to directly defy it. The distinctly youthful character of the resulting confrontation with the Bosnian establishment is based in the paradox of youth's disconnect from—yet entrapment by—a nationalized memory of the 1990s—that legitimizes blatant social segregation. It is defined by movement beyond the traditional discursive sphere of inter-ethnic relations and politics, as well as the conscious and unconscious crossing of constitutionally established ethnic divisions. Accordingly, young Bosnians are actively reimagining a unified and reconciliatory Bosnian state, community, and identity.

This paper elaborates on ethnographic work that has been conducted since the early 2000s concerning the self-identification of youth in post-Dayton Bosnia, specifically with regard to their perception of ethnic identity and BiH's recent history, in order to examine the position of Bosnian youth in the State's developing social and political climate. Additionally, I employ surveys, news articles, and scholarly essays that have emerged more recently—and that directly examine the social, political, and economic development of the transitional Bosnian state—in order to investigate the characteristics that distinctly pertain to the generations born after the

Dayton Accords, as well as those who experienced the war as children. In conjunction with this, I also seek to examine the way in which these young people have sought to reconcile and interact with the divisive institutions that characterize the place they call home.

Life in post-Dayton BiH is characterized by divisions and categories, and for the youngest generations this is particularly tangible as they intimately interact with ethnocratic policies and structures on a daily basis. For example, in the aftermath of the Bosnian War, the so-called “two schools under one roof” system was established in the Federation<sup>11</sup> in an effort to separate Croat children from Bosniak children during the school day. Within this structure, two different curricula are taught—in the respective, albeit nearly identical, languages of the two respective ethnic groups—and each “school” has its own administration.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, Bosniak and Croat schoolchildren tend to learn differing narratives about the war in the 1990s, itself part of the greater debate over guilt that continues to take place across the entirety of the former Yugoslavia.<sup>13</sup> In the two schools system, ethnic identities are inherently naturalized, legitimized, and stressed via a rigid system of segregation into which children are socialized, as well as through the nationalized curricula they study. As of 2018, 56 schools remained in BiH that adhered to this structure,<sup>14</sup> 16 years after the IC (international community) in Bosnia began its

---

<sup>11</sup> Republika Srpska is considerably more homogenous (Serb) than the Federation, whose citizens are primarily Bosniaks and has a large Croat minority (30%???)

<sup>12</sup> Monika Palmberger, *How Generations Remember* (Basingstoke: Springer, 2016), 93-97.

<sup>13</sup> These narratives tend to emphasize the victimhood of the respective group learning it, while emphasizing the guilt of the other group.

<sup>14</sup> OSCE, “OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina launches report on ‘two schools under one roof’ concept as most visible example of discrimination in education,” December 3, 2018, accessed December 16, 2021, <https://www.osce.org/mission-to-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>.

attempts to integrate schools as a mechanism for unified state-building.<sup>15</sup> Given the amount of time that children spend in school, youth interact directly and immersively with the ethnocracy and its policies of division through the ethnic categorization maintained by the two schools system. The ethnocracy directly injects itself into the lives of schoolchildren by separating them in accordance with their ethnonational identity from the moment they begin school.

Moving beyond the social sphere, the segregationist<sup>16</sup> policies of ethnocratic hegemony have, from the onset of Yugoslavia's collapse in the early 1990s, been accompanied by economic malaise, creating what Fritsch and Puljek-Shank term "dual hegemony:"<sup>17</sup> a dynamic where the two forces dominate the development of the Bosnian state. As Kurtovic notes, Dayton has "been a protracted – if not hidden from view–postsocialist economic transformation."<sup>18</sup> In addition to implementing a "consociational model of power sharing" explicitly along ethnic lines, the Accords took on the reconstruction of Bosnia's economy,<sup>19</sup> which was already in transition away from Yugoslavia's socialist model when the war broke out in 1992. As such, the chaos of liberalization so emblematic of the immediate post-Soviet era and space was compounded by the destruction of war. The cannibalization of factories and industries became frequent as political and economic interests were merged via black markets that took shape during the war, and as

---

<sup>15</sup> Azra Hromadzic, "Discourses of Integration and Practices of Reunification at the Mostar Gymnasium, Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Comparative Education Review* 52, no. 4 (2008): 544.

<sup>16</sup> See footnote 9.

<sup>17</sup> Felix Fritsch and R.J. Puljek-Shank, "Activism in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Struggles against Dual Hegemony and the Emergence of 'Local First'," *East European Politics and Societies* 33, no. 1 (2019), 135.

<sup>18</sup> Larisa Kurtović, "'Who Sows Hunger, Reaps Rage': On Protest, Indignation and Redistributive Justice in Post-Dayton Bosnia-Herzegovina," *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 15, no. 4 (2015), 641.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

elites began preparing for the capitalist future that was in sight.<sup>20</sup> Naturally, BiH came into being as an ethnically heterogeneous state coming down from the fervor and trauma of ethnic war, its economy in tatters. The hegemony of ethnocentric rhetoric and policies have failed to address either of these core problems. The economy has never fully recovered, and the State has never truly unified. Because of this, the post-Yugoslavs of BiH have grown up in a state characterized by grinding poverty and economic depression, made all the more difficult to rectify by a stagnating political sphere dictated by ethnonational allegiances.

For a youth that has only ever experienced a post-war state in endless transition, the dual hegemony is often experienced on the personal level as economic and political paralysis, as well as profound inequity. Unemployment in BiH is currently a staggering 27%, and for youth it is an astronomical 60%.<sup>21</sup> Two thirds of the population below the age of 30 wish to emigrate.<sup>22</sup> While Bosnia is one of the poorest countries in Europe, its politicians are the highest paid in comparison to the local average wage, and the wealthiest 85 individuals have fortunes that equal 50% of the GDP.<sup>23</sup> Though one would go too far by saying that BiH is a country without hope, it is certainly lacking—and pessimism characterizes the youngest generation's attitudes towards their country. In 2014, the OSCE conducted a survey in BiH—titled *The Silent Majority Speaks*—with the aim of analyzing the population's opinions and general outlook. As its surveys with youth focus groups found, “there is a sense of exclusion, especially by the actions of older

---

<sup>20</sup> Kurtovic, “Who Sows Hunger,” 643.

<sup>21</sup> Kurtovic, 644.

<sup>22</sup> UNDP, “Executive Summary of Main Findings.” *The Silent Majority Speaks*. July 11, 2014, accessed December 16, 2021, [https://www.ba.undp.org/content/bosnia\\_and\\_herzegovina/en/home/library/democratic\\_governance/the-silent-majority-speaks.html](https://www.ba.undp.org/content/bosnia_and_herzegovina/en/home/library/democratic_governance/the-silent-majority-speaks.html), page 2.

<sup>23</sup> Jasmin Mujanovic, “The evolution of Bosnia's protest movement: an interview with Jasmin Mujanovic,” interview by Heather McRobie, *OpenDemocracy*, May 7, 2014, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/evolution-of-bosnias-protest-movement-interview-with-jasmin-m/>.

people. Young people seem to feel that potentially they could make a difference but that in reality they have no real effect,”<sup>24</sup> as “the relationship between young voters and elected representatives appears to be characterized by mistrust and low efficacy. Politics does not emerge as an arena where young BiH citizens feel they can realize their aspirations and make their voices heard.”<sup>25</sup> In summary, young Bosnians have grown up in a state that has failed to deliver the end of post-war transition espoused in the Dayton Accords. Instead they find themselves trapped in political and economic gridlock, and young people feel powerless to forge the future they desire.

Youth discontent is compounded by post-Yugoslavs’ disconnect with the traumatic events of the 1990’s, events that were—contrastingly—experienced directly by Bosnia’s older generations. In her quasi-ethnographic book, *How Generations Remember*, Monika Palmberger explores the way in which the memories of Yugoslavia and its collapse are encountered and confronted across three generations: the First Yugoslavs (young adults during the formation of Yugoslavia after the Second World War), the Last Yugoslavs (adults during the collapse of Yugoslavia), and the post-Yugoslavs<sup>26</sup> (children during the 1990s or born shortly after). Palmberger conducted her research in Mostar, and frames the city as a microcosm. This is effective, as Mostar—an ethnically mixed city during the Yugoslav era—became rigidly separated with the outbreak of war in 1992. All aspects of life fragmented along ethnic lines as a product of the vicious fighting that took place in and around the city. Croat and Bosniak schoolchildren ceased to attend school together, and the river that runs through the city became—and still is—a *de facto* border between the two ethnic

---

<sup>24</sup> UNDP, “Executive Summary,” 109.

<sup>25</sup> UNDP, “Executive Summary,” 115.

<sup>26</sup> Palmberger defines the post-Yugoslavs as those who were children during the Bosnian War, and thus spent most of their life in the post-Dayton Bosnian state. For the purposes of this paper, I use the term post-Yugoslavs to refer to all Bosnians born after the war, as well as those who were children during it.

groups, with Croats on the West side and Bosniaks on the East side. Since the implementation of the Dayton Accords in 1995, this separation has remained the status quo and has become further institutionalized. The two schools system is the norm in Mostar, and has perpetuated segregation among the youth, as well as the nationalization of education.

Palmberger's findings show that, for each generation, the collapse of Yugoslavia holds different significance, largely a product of how old they were when the war began. For the Last Yugoslavs (frequently the parents of post-Yugoslavs), the war is a directly experienced cosmic event in their lives. One of Palmberger's interviewees, Minela, for example, biographically structures her life as "before the war," or "after the war." As Palmberger points out, Minela does "not refer to the time before the war as the time when she was a child, but divided her life neatly around the rupture of the war."<sup>27</sup> The post-Yugoslavs, on the other hand, experienced the war at a very young age—at a time when they were incapable of truly understanding the events that unfolded around them—if they were alive yet to experience it at all. Particularly for those born after the war, Palmberger found that post-Yugoslavs tend to dissociate from the war experience,<sup>28</sup> as they either experienced it as less of a "biographical rupture"<sup>29</sup> than their parents, or simply did not experience it at all. As such, the war that created the Bosnian state in which young people live is much like a specter. It is invisible—banished to the past—yet ever present in the high levels of "mistrust"<sup>30</sup> that pervade Bosnian society and the continuation of war-time segregation. It remains active in the country's ethnocratic institutions, such as the "two schools under one roof"

---

<sup>27</sup> Palmberger, *Generations*, 178.

<sup>28</sup> Palmberger, 203.

<sup>29</sup> Palmberger, 165.

<sup>30</sup> UNDP, 37.

system, and in the stories or charged silences concerning the past that Bosnian youth receive from the older generations.<sup>31</sup>

This positions the post-Yugoslavs differently than the older generations within the landscape of memory and ethnic rifts that defines BiH. As Palmberger communicates in her findings, the youngest generations tend to “distance themselves from the nationalized discourses of victimization.”<sup>32</sup> These discourses harken back to the Bosnian War, when Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs fought each other, and are frequently employed by political elites when justifying the continued ethnic separation endemic to Bosnian society. Simply put, the war and its traumatic hemorrhaging of Bosnian society is far less personal for post-Yugoslavs. As Leijla, a 16 year old Bosniak admits, “It is for sure easier for us than for our parents, because they are familiar with everything, with the situation that led to war and everything else, while we were protected from everything; we were just facing some consequences of the war.”<sup>33</sup> Here, Leijla makes the interesting choice to refer to the collective youth of Mostar as “we.”<sup>34</sup> However, Bosniak and Croat youth frequently adhere to the rigid structures of segregation that permeate Mostar’s physical and social landscape in their daily lives.<sup>35</sup> Or, they are left without a choice, as when attending school. Thus, it is significant that Palmberger’s interviewee still appears to see the identity of youth as superseding that of ethnicity. As Leijla explains, it is largely in part because the older generations lived the history that created Bosnia as it is today. To the younger

---

<sup>31</sup> Palmberger, 237-238.

<sup>32</sup> Palmberger, 207.

<sup>33</sup> Palmberger, 206.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

generations, it is just that: history. Despite this disconnect, the past is very much so ingrained in the Bosnian present, and for Croat and Bosniak youth, daily life is characterized by structures of segregation—such as the *de facto* border of the river in Mostar—directly tied to the memories of the war in the 1990s. In this sense, the post-Yugoslavs live within a projection of memory they cannot directly relate to, and the war remains a proverbial elephant in the room.

In conjunction with their disconnect with nationalized memory, the daily experience of paralysis and interaction with ethnonational institutions generates a distinctly youthful friction between young people and the ethnocracy. Nataša Garic-Humphrey fittingly terms the youngest generation in BiH as the “absurdistan generation,” as “they often say they live in Absurdistan,”<sup>36</sup> a phrase coined to express frustration with “a place that is so ridiculous it is hard to believe it exists in real life.”<sup>37</sup> Young Bosnians have grown up in a state where all they have ever known is an inefficient and corrupt government, weak central institutions, profound inequality, and the hegemonic division of society along ethnic lines. As such, and in contrast to their elders, their sole frame of reference for the endless transition in which they find themselves is the consequences they suffer daily, not the war or Dayton Accords that catalyzed the transition. According to *The Silent Majority Speaks*, “young people feel held back by intergenerational conflict, the authorities and the media.”<sup>38</sup> In her piece on intergenerational dynamics during the 2014 protests in Sarajevo, Garic-Humphrey interviews Jasmina, a young activist, who says,

the elders obviously have no clue how it is to grow up in this dump...at least they experienced better days under socialism that perhaps was not fabulous but was definitely much better than this post Dayton crazy place that

---

<sup>36</sup> Nataša Garić-Humphrey, “Negotiating “True” Politics: Intergenerational Dynamics During Social Uprising in Sarajevo, Bosnia–Herzegovina,” *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 43, no. 1 (2020), 73.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> UNDP, 114.

everybody wants to run away from...at least in times of socialism, people had something to look forward to. Today we have nothing.<sup>39</sup>

What Jasmina expresses is telling in a variety of ways. First, she turns to the Yugoslav past as an example of when things were good in BiH, at least better than they are presently. Secondly, she directly addresses one of the key differences between generations in reckoning with the Bosnian situation: that the young people have only ever known a transitional Bosnia, whereas the older generations experienced Yugoslavia, its collapse and subsequent outbreak of war, and the creation of a transitional state. For the youngest generations, the ethnocracy is abstract but hegemonic, and young people tend to harbor quite polarized and disillusioned frustration with the ethnonationalist policies that continue to divide and paralyze the country.

Generally speaking, there is considerable resignation on the part of the Bosnian population—Croats and Bosniaks alike, and regardless of age—in adhering to the structures and institutions in place that support ethnocratic rule and contribute to stagnation. As “The Silent Majority Speaks” found in 2014, there is “reluctance by a large minority to let go of ethnic politics, and the powerful idea that politicians and government rather than the people should be in charge of change.”<sup>40</sup> This is in spite of the fact that common opinion in Bosnia declares that a united state and nation would be best.<sup>41</sup> It is also in spite of common mistrust of political structures.<sup>42</sup> In BiH, there is a widespread, albeit frequently resentful, acceptance of the status-quo, and thus a chronic lack—but not complete absence of—grassroots political activism. Despite—

---

<sup>39</sup> Garic-Humphrey, “Negotiating True Politics,” 74.

<sup>40</sup> UNDP, 58.

<sup>41</sup> UNDP, 112.

<sup>42</sup> UNDP, 118.

or perhaps because of—this apparent reluctance to engage in political activity that could initiate constitutional and institutional change, the friction between Bosnian youth and the ethnocracy manifests itself in the myriad of ways in which young people have countered the hegemony of stagnation, both consciously and unconsciously.

A profound case of Bosnian youth directly countering the divisive structures of the Bosnian state's ethnocratic institutions can be seen in schools. As mentioned earlier in this paper, the “two schools under one roof” system became commonplace throughout Federation in the immediate aftermath of the Dayton Accords, when the war in Bosnia ended. Having just a year earlier been at war, Croats and Bosniaks were constitutionally reunited via the creation of the Bosniak-Croat Federation. As elaborated on above, the peace and unification brought by the Dayton Accords was based on a “consociational power-sharing model” promoted by the IC that has legitimized and institutionalized ethnic divisions within BiH. In other words, the IC's state-building strategy is based in the separation of *nations* within the Bosnian state.<sup>43</sup> During the Bosnian War, the education system quickly fragmented along ethnic lines, and this fragmentation was further institutionalized and legitimized by the Dayton Accords as a mechanism of its consociational power sharing strategy.<sup>44</sup>

Under the “two schools” system, exclusive identities—namely ethnicity—are heavily emphasized. Curricula in the two schools system are nationalized and work to reinforce the

---

<sup>43</sup> Azra Hromadzic, “Bathroom Mixing: Youth Negotiate Democratization in Postconflict Bosnia and Herzegovina,” *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 34, no. 2 (2011), 271.

<sup>44</sup> Hromadzic, “Discourses of Integration,” 544.

imagined communities<sup>45</sup> of each respective ethnonational group.<sup>46</sup> Thus, schools are a frequent channel through which nationalized and exclusive rhetoric purported by ethnic elites is communicated to youth. The administrative, linguistic, and physical separation that forms the basis of the “two schools” system creates a sort of DMZ between Croat and Bosniak schoolchildren. Whether they share the building but occupy different sides, or alternate classroom time in the morning and afternoon, students develop and grow in an environment constructed around rigidly separated coexistence. Even the 2004 “reunification” of the Mostar Gymnasium—the first school to reunify—only merged administrations.<sup>47</sup> Beyond that, it has been incapable of overcoming the policies of division so ingrained in the Bosnian school system, as the structures of linguistic and physical separation—which began during the war—have persisted via homogenous classrooms and nationalized curricula. This normalized separation actively resists the IC’s goal of unified state building in BiH. As a teacher at the Mostar Gymnasium says: “if a child learns in the elementary school that Croats go here and Bosniaks go there, and if that continues, unfortunately, in high school, and at the university...I think we will create degenerate

---

<sup>45</sup> In his 1983 book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson defines “imagined communities” as an integral part of the creation of the first European nation states and nationalism. With the advent of widespread print media, individuals became capable of absorbing rhetoric and conceptualizing a national identity much larger than their local identity. According to Anderson, these communities that became the basis for nationhood are imagined because even citizens of the smallest nations do not, and will never know, all of their countrymen. While such rhetoric and ideologies that allowed for this imagination functioned horizontally, bringing people together under a single flag, the dispersion of rhetoric and ideology was vertical, conceptualized by elites and intellectuals. I use the term “imagined communities” in a similar sense, referring to the perceived supra-national Croat identity (ethnic Croats being in Croatia *and* BiH) as well as the Bosniak identity unique to BiH, that re-emerged as the imagined Yugoslav national community fell apart in 1992. Both identities (Bosniak and Croatian) are unilateral and, in the contemporary Bosnian context, draw on heavily nationalized memories of the wars in the 1990s, providing a history that is both unifying for, and exclusive to each ethnic group. In line with Anderson’s definition, a Bosniak or Croat does not know all other members of their ethnic group, however self-identification with an ethnic group is inescapable in BiH, and exclusively positions an individual within an abstract, impersonal national community, while simultaneously alienating the “other.”

<sup>46</sup> Hromadzic, “Discourses,” 555.

<sup>47</sup> Palmberger, 96.

[degeneracy in the youth] young people who will not be ready to be creative members of any society.”<sup>48</sup>

Despite the apparent failure of “reunification” (at least in the common sense of the word) at the Mostar Gymnasium, youth have found a way to directly, yet unconsciously, challenge the segregated structure of schooling in Bosnia and, by proxy, the hegemony of the ethnocracy. This tends to occur in the bathroom, of all places. In 2006, Azra Hromadzic conducted 9 months of ethnographic research at the Mostar Gymnasium, and her findings portray a Bosnian youth that appears to be turning away from the ethnic politics that dominate the Bosnian sociopolitical sphere. At the Mostar Gymnasium, the bathroom has emerged as a space “that enables experimentation with ethno-religious [and ethno-national] identity,” while students can share a common activity that defies authority and the “academic architecture”: smoking cigarettes.<sup>49</sup> Inter-ethnic intermingling only happens during passing periods in the bathroom and never in the classroom (since classrooms are ethnically homogeneous),<sup>50</sup> thus the bathroom emerges as a limited yet impactful space for what appears to be an unconscious challenging of ethnocratic policies that promote separation. It is unconscious in the sense that students are driven by an adolescent, social desire to “mingle” and explore the unknown, rather than by ambitions of creating a national identity that defies the status quo. However, they inherently do challenge the status quo, because such intermingling is politicized in the ethnocratic state.

Students feel that the bathroom is the only legitimate space in which to meet “other” students, even if they strongly desire to do so in other spaces. According to Hromadzic’s work,

---

<sup>48</sup> Hromadzic, “Bathroom Mixing,” 277.

<sup>49</sup> Hromadzic, “Bathroom Mixing,” 278-279.

<sup>50</sup> Hromadzic, “Bathroom Mixing,” 278-281.

many students who do not smoke are willing to endure the suffocating air of a carcinogen-filled bathroom just to meet other students and “hang out with them.”<sup>51</sup> One student that Hromadzic interviews says: “I cannot just go to their classrooms and say: ‘Here I am,’” and then proceeds to ask Hromadzic to introduce him “to the guys from IV-c.”<sup>52</sup> Within the more exposed spaces of the school and beyond, such as the public spaces of Mostar, mixing is not a reality. Hromadzic notes how she experienced a “mixed” mass of 300 students leave the Gymnasium, and immediately split into two distinct and separated groups.<sup>53</sup> It is only when given a more private and, paradoxically, exclusive space like the bathroom that students are able to cross the fault lines of ethnonational and ethnoreligious identity, if only for a short while.

However, even in the bathroom the divisions that dominate the public spaces within and outside of the school can manifest themselves in the form of graffiti such as the Ustasha symbol, a loaded historical emblem used by the Croatian Nazi puppet state, or frequently soccer teams like the Bosniak “Red Army” and the Croat “Ultras.”<sup>54</sup> This evidences the apparent, and expected, incompleteness of “bathroom mixing.” Students do not rewrite the history or constitution of BiH in the restrooms of the Mostar Gymnasium (nor do they seek to), but they do create their own space—quintessentially youthful in its rejection of authority via smoking—in which they can at least begin to reimagine the Bosnian community and national identity.

---

<sup>51</sup> Hromadzic, “Bathroom Mixing,” 281.

<sup>52</sup> 281. IV-c is an iteration of the system used to designate Croat classrooms, while the system for designating Bosniak classrooms uses Roman numerals with Arabic numbers (1, 2, 3, etc.) In this instance we see a Bosniak student accepting the legitimacy of ethnic separation and identification via the usage of differing systems of reference, while simultaneously striving to overcome them.

<sup>53</sup> Hromadzic, “Discourses,” 551.

<sup>54</sup> Hromadzic, “Bathroom Mixing,” 282.

The dynamic of bathroom mixing appears to be even more profound and suggestive of a youth willing to pursue the construction of a unified and reconciliatory Bosnian state when it is viewed within greater context of debate over integration in Bosnia's school system. As Hromadzic eloquently states, "the educational system in BiH reflects the consequences of the destruction of the war, the paradoxes of the Dayton Peace Agreement, and the weaknesses of the BiH constitution(s)."<sup>55</sup> The two schools system inherently naturalizes ethnic sentiment and encourages the development of Croats and Bosniaks as two distinct and incompatible peoples. Bosnia can be understood as a nation of external national minorities— ethnic groups that reside outside of the nation and state in which most who share that ethnic identity reside. When calls for the integration of schools under a unified curriculum came from the IC in the early 2000s, this evidenced itself. Croats are the minority in Bosnia, and while Bosniaks largely accepted and supported calls for integration, "the local [Mostar] Croat political community bordered on the 'hysterical'... calling the Croat representatives who agreed to integration 'traitors of the nation' if they support the project."<sup>56</sup> By and large, "integration was understood as the forced incorporation and assimilation of the Croat population into a seemingly equal power-sharing pluralist BiH state, which, for most Croats, is experienced as one of Bosniak hegemony,"<sup>57</sup> at least politically speaking. The Croat political leadership in Mostar envisioned the city as a sort of corridor between the Croatian external national minority in BiH, and the Croatian homeland.<sup>58</sup> As such, they were utterly opposed to even the OSCE's ideas for less far-reaching integration.

---

<sup>55</sup> Hromadzic, "Discourses," 544.

<sup>56</sup> Hromadzic, "Discourses," 552.

<sup>57</sup> Hromadzic, "Discourses," 552-553.

<sup>58</sup> Hromadzic, "Discourses," 550-553.

With a discourse on unification that quickly took on such a rigid, ethnonational character oriented around the protection of imagined ethnonational and religious communities, it is remarkable that bathroom mixing occurs, and it highlights the generational differences in the perception of Bosnian identity. Clearly, the Croat political community felt strong ties to the Croatian state, seeing themselves as Croatian rather than Bosnian in terms of both nationality and citizenship. This identification with a long-imagined historical Croat community was (and is) certainly exacerbated by a minority status in Bosnia, and led many Croats to see the Mostar Gymnasium as a sort of front line in the battle for the survival of Croatian national minority in BiH. Students, on the other hand, who actually spend their days in the school, repeatedly, yet unconsciously, move beyond the limitations of this exclusive discourse when taking part in “bathroom mixing.”

While the phenomenon of graffiti does entail the Ustasha symbol, the more frequent use of soccer logos seems to communicate that youth interpret ethnic “otherness” in more contemporary and less loaded terms. It is defined by the ethnocratic state into which they have been socialized, rather than by the history of an imagined homogenous national community and a war that turned “others” into existential enemies. After all, sports rivalry—though certainly polarizing—has a much more playful and competitive—but also unifying—connotation to it. While you may belong to different teams, you can share the common ground of playing the same game. As Hromadzic shows in her work, this idea of “otherness” is sometimes even a source of humor for youth. She writes that, while smoking in the bathroom, a student asks Amna (a Bosniak girl) “Amna, would you ever marry a Croat?” Amna replies “Sure, but he would need to convert to Islam first.” Damjan (a Croat boy) then interjects “No problem, teach me some verses from the

Koran.” When Hromadzic points out that Marijan (a Croat boy) “said yesterday that he would marry a Muslim girl,” Marijan replies “Sure but only if she is infertile.” Everyone laughs, and “Amna and Marijan hug tenderly.”<sup>59</sup>

While the Croat political community (presumably adults) viewed ethnic distinctions as a zero sum game when addressing calls for integration, students actually integrate in their own way and space, apparently recognizing ethnic divisions to be the very real systemic force that they are, but not as absolute as their elders deem them to be. The language of instruction, for example, was long a source of friction between Bosniaks and Croats during discourses on integration. However, as Palmberger writes in reference to Carolynne Ashton’s survey work on the Mostar Gymnasium:

The Gymnasium Mostar students interviewed had moved over three years [2006-2009] from support of separate languages to believing that language was a ‘silly’ thing to be fighting over. This did not happen because they were forced to integrate language in school, but because they made contact with each other and, over time, began to accept each other’s language.<sup>60</sup>

She continues that “the fears come more from the parents than the students.”<sup>61</sup> Clearly, the mingling brought about by “bathroom mixing” has slowly but surely chipped away at purportedly exclusive distinctions between Croats and Bosniaks, such as language.

Youth dynamics in the bathrooms of Mostar’s schools demonstrate the ability and tendency of young people to unconsciously move beyond the ethnocentric structures of ethnic exclusivity and division that permeate the Bosnian state, and create new discursive spaces for imagining a new Bosnian identity. In doing this, youth actively challenge the status quo.

---

<sup>59</sup> Hromadzic, “Bathroom Mixing,” 269.

<sup>60</sup> Palmberger, 97.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

However, they do this consciously as well, as shown by the protests that shook the nation in February 2014. Beginning in the northern industrial town of Tuzla, protests spread to Mostar, Zenica, and Sarajevo, and quickly turned violent.<sup>62</sup> The protests themselves had economic roots: workers from several privatized factories in Tuzla united over jobs, unpaid salaries, and pensions. Soon, however, they were joined by students and local political activists.<sup>63</sup> As the hours passed by, cars were overturned, political offices and buildings were burned to the ground, and stones and Molotov cocktails could be seen hurtling through the air while police and protestors alike were injured.

The protests had two different dimensions. On the one hand they were prompted by widespread anger and discontent with the dysfunctionality of the post-Dayton Bosnian State. On the other, they emerged as a simultaneous and inevitable challenge to the war-time ethnic politics that perpetuate such dysfunctionality. As elaborated on earlier in this paper, economic stagnation was one of the two primary byproducts of the Dayton Accords, the other being the institutionalization of ethnic politics and segregation (if one excludes peace). A largely overlooked component of BiH's transition as a post-conflict state was a catastrophic shift away from socialism towards capitalism. This was marked by rampant corruption, clientelism, and ethnic partisanship,<sup>64</sup> and has brought crippling economic depression—even hunger—for most of Bosnia's citizens.

---

<sup>62</sup> Tim Judah, "Bosnian protests: A Balkan Spring?" *BBC*, February 7, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26093160>.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Kurtovic, "Who Sows Hunger," 642-645, 651-654.

Critical to understanding the protests and their profundity, it must be recognized that they were not directed at ethnic politics and division, but rather at the economic malaise and systemic dysfunctionality that have been perpetuated by ethnocratic institutions. However, the collective suffering experienced by so many Bosnians emerged as an avenue towards questioning the status-quo, as well as one towards the crossing of ethnic lines, during the protests. The popular and emblematic protest slogan “we are hungry in three languages”<sup>65</sup> eloquently and pointedly demonstrated this. While the slogan recognizes the boundaries within Bosnian society (language), it unifies them under hunger. Here, collective hardship supersedes prescribed ethnonational identity, and this is reflected in the ethnically heterogeneous demographic of the protests. The slogan becomes even more profound when one considers that language of academic instruction became one of the main discursive battlegrounds during attempts at integration in schools.

It was during the protests that youth operated within their own distinct, largely apolitical space in order to challenge ethnic politics. In doing this, youth embodied the aforementioned slogan in many ways. Looting and burning<sup>66</sup> certainly did not turn Bosnia’s economic spiral around, but it demonstrated the youth’s willingness to turn away from the system in order to express their discontent with it, while the local plenums<sup>67</sup> that followed in the weeks after found more support from the older generations<sup>68</sup> than the protests did. Additionally, this direct challenge of the status-quo was highly conscious. Bosnians were (and are) dissatisfied with the

---

<sup>65</sup> Fritsch and Puljek-Shank, “Activism in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” 143.

<sup>66</sup> The violence was mainly at the hands of the relatively young protestors.

<sup>67</sup> Legislative sessions organized by citizens and similar to town hall meetings in which attendants can voice concerns, make suggestions, and call for votes.

<sup>68</sup> Garic-Humphrey, 76.

condition of their state, and decided to protest in full view. The focus on “hunger” in slogans<sup>69</sup> decisively cut across ethnic lines, focusing on the collectively experienced failure of ethnic politics and transition, while the turn to violence directly contrasted the common disposition of Bosnian citizens to accept the status quo and only rarely pursue avenues of grassroots political activism.<sup>70</sup> The destruction of political offices in particular speaks volumes to young Bosnian’s cynical perception of their politicians. Rather than speak to political authorities, the protestors called for their resignation and destroyed the physical spaces of their power. This perception was grounded, as most politicians opted to sneak out of basement windows and flee to their BMWs, rather than face the angry crowds demanding change.<sup>71</sup>

The violence that erupted at the protests was interpreted and presented by various media outlets, politicians, and the public along a spectrum that reflected the generational differences in memory examined extensively by Palmberger. These differences are well engendered by the derogatory label “hooligan” ascribed to the presumably “young, rowdy, and immature protestors” by certain media outlets.<sup>72</sup> Kurtovic sums up the significance of this label and the violence that served as grounds for its use: “The hooligans’ relative youth, immaturity and lack of foresight divided the opinions of the public even further...Because their violent outburst had turned the centre of Sarajevo into a war zone, their actions were equated with those of the Serbian paramilitaries that twenty years earlier tried to shell the city into oblivion and

---

<sup>69</sup> Another slogan was “who sows hunger, reaps rage.”

<sup>70</sup> Garic-Humphrey, 75.

<sup>71</sup> Jasmin Mujanovic, “The evolution of Bosnia’s protest movement,” 5.

<sup>72</sup> Lana Pasic, “Who is behind Bosnia’s riots?” *Aljazeera*, February 10, 2014, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/2/10/who-is-behind-bosnias-riots>.

submission.”<sup>73</sup> The violence, especially at the hands of young people who were frequently perceived as radical, looked all too familiar to those who experienced the three years of war in the 1990s. However, the willingness of young people to turn to the distinctly apolitical sphere of destructive protest is emblematic of how their position within nationalized memory and disconnect with the 1990s allows them to move beyond the traditional ethnonational discourses that dominate the Bosnian political sphere.

The use of the term “hooligan”<sup>74</sup> also reflects an attempt by the Bosnian “establishment” (to invoke a frequently employed term of protest discourse) to intentionally delegitimize and subvert the apparent validity and urgency of the protests. “Hooligan” has a youthful connotation, frequently associated with soccer fans in Europe, and it painted the protests to be the immature rampages of children. Although a large minority certainly did take part in property damage and looting, they were still voicing discontent with a regime that takes for itself and provides very little. While the protests were initiated by workers, they gained impactful momentum when other groups joined, one of the largest being young people and students.<sup>75</sup> Additionally, the local plenums that followed the protests took inspiration from those initiated by students at the University of Tuzla in 2009, who sought to confront the corruption and oppression that was commonplace at the university.<sup>76</sup> The protests and plenums in 2014 were a moment when young people emerged as a force capable of moving beyond the limitations for political action that

---

<sup>73</sup> Kurtovic, 648.

<sup>74</sup> Kurtovic, 646.

<sup>75</sup> Pasic, “Who is behind Bosnia’s riots?”

<sup>76</sup> Citizenship in Southeast Europe, “Protests and Plenums in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” Accessed December 16, 2021, <https://www.citsee.eu/citsee-story/protests-and-plenums-bosnia-and-herzegovina>.

promote complacency, especially among the older generations, in order to directly confront the ethnocracy.

Indeed, it was the older generations that voiced the strongest disapproval for violence, taking the stance of “the young people don’t know what we went through and fought for to make the peace we have now.” In contrast, many young people, such as Jasmina, took a more positive view, undoubtedly informed by their position in Bosnia’s landscape of nationalized memory, as well as their experience of the dysfunctional transitional state. As Jasmina says,

I know the war was horrible. But, if they think we live in peace now, they are mistaken. You hear them say ‘anything is better than shooting.’ But what does that mean? That we must bend our heads forever? Obey? Not say anything?

Just keep our mouths shut and go on with our miserable lives?<sup>77</sup>

Jasmina appears to see resignation to the status quo as a product of the fear of the past and what strong, ethnically-aligned sentiments are capable of in BiH. Like many young people, however, Jasmina is determined to break out of this prison of memory, even if it involves direct conflict with the system. Garic-Humphrey describes this dynamic of generational variance well, writing that

Elders and youth are both stuck in a conundrum of either trying to work the existing system to their advantage or fight the mainstream political structure and risk losing what little opportunities they have in the first place. Elders seem to be solving this problem more pragmatically by focusing on everyday socioeconomic concerns. Youth, on the other hand, do not see Absurdistan as a place of opportunity but as one that is constraining their full potential.

Therefore, they lean on the side of “destroying” it.<sup>78</sup>

In terms of political action, the protests and plenums in February unfolded within two distinct political spheres, and this reflects the generational differences in memory and national

---

<sup>77</sup> Garic-Humphrey, 75.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

orientation espoused throughout the paper. As Randall Puljek-Shank and Felix Fritsch explain, the protests—in addition to having a distinctly large youth demographic—were distinctly anti-political. While they certainly voiced demands they also rejected interaction with political figures, instead burning offices to the ground. This was based on the assumption that politics in BiH are so irreconcilably corrupt that one cannot create reform within the existing system, as it will immediately fall prey to rapacious individualism and, in the case of BiH, ethnic politics.<sup>79</sup> In contrast, the plenums that were opted for by the majority of the older generations (instead of violence) reflected their experiences with violence in the 1990s, and were based around working within the system to reform it. Particularly for the generation that came of age during the war, avoiding a guiding ideology in the plenums was very important, as they were personally familiar with the potentially disastrous consequences ideologies can have. They also reimagined the structures of governance in a way that was distinctly reminiscent of Socialist Yugoslavia, with governing bodies based on horizontal organization rather than hierarchies.<sup>80</sup> While the plenums were more prone to reimagining the existing structures of BiH—albeit fairly radically—many of the demands still operated within the existing sphere of governance, and built off of the tried and true Yugoslav system.<sup>81</sup>

The plenums and protests shared calls for institutional and constitutional change in BiH, and were far from mutually exclusive of one other, both in terms of goals and demographics. However, the youthful character of the protests and older character of the more tempered plenums reflect the generational differences that characterize physical and discursive challenges

---

<sup>79</sup> Fritsch and Puljek-Shank, 136.

<sup>80</sup> Garic-Humphrey, 79.

<sup>81</sup> Fritsch and Puljek Shank, 145.

to the status quo in Bosnia. An aversion to more violent forms of protest among the elder generations demonstrates the potency of memory in BiH, particularly that of Yugoslavia's collapse. The violence that occurred mainly at the hands of young people highlights the disconnect youth experience with regards to these memories, a critical aspect of the way youth are actively reimagining the Bosnian state, community, and identity.

The protests brought very little significant structural change to post-Dayton Bosnia, at least so far. While some politicians did resign, the ethnocracy has remained intact, the two schools system still exists, and economic depression continues to plague the country. One could perhaps say that the most profound accomplishment of the protests was the creation of a movement with an "all-Bosnian and Herzegovinian character,"<sup>82</sup> as Jasmin Mujanovic terms it, as short lived as it may have been. Even still, as Garic-Humphrey points out, "since the February, 2014 uprisings, political elites are no longer able to disguise their capitalist policies and projects under the pretext of the ethnonational interests of three constitutive peoples, which has been the foundation of their divisive politics since the end of the war."<sup>83</sup> The protests laid bare on the national level the inequalities and divisions that were already well known to citizens of BiH. In contrast to the unconscious, invisible protesting evident in bathroom mixing, the 2014 protests made the ever growing friction between youth and their ethnocratic rulers—as well as the failure of the post-war Bosnian State—manifest. Whether Bosnians read about, watched, or took part in the protests and plenums, they were forced to recognize and reconcile themselves—at least for a

---

<sup>82</sup> Jasmin Mujanovic, 3.

<sup>83</sup> Garic-Humphrey, 82.

moment—with the absurdity of the state in which they live, and the very real problems it perpetuates.

Activism exists in BiH beyond protesting. In fact, many organizations existed before the protests—a reflection of growing friction between the ethnocracy and its citizens. Organizations like OKC Abrasevic aim to bridge the gap between segregated youth communities via a common cultural center, and have been doing so since 2008.<sup>84</sup> Catering to the youngest generation, OKC Abrasevic uses them as a starting point for crossing ethnic divisions. As elaborated on earlier in this paper, youth have been finding their own ways of moving beyond the discursive limitations and physical boundaries of ethnic politics in order to come together socially. The explicit intention to restructure Bosnia’s constitutional and institutional foundations may not be the driving force behind Croat and Bosniak teenagers smoking in a bathroom or meeting at a bridge symbolic of division.<sup>85</sup> However, the desire to cross (to them) considerably ungrounded ethnic lines and know the proclaimed ‘other’ is. In looking at the protests, one can see that young Bosnians are willing to come together to *consciously* challenge the status quo as well.

In summary, Bosnia’s current situation is an incredibly intricate one in which economic depression and political paralysis stemming from a corrupt war-time transition to capitalism are compounded by a social landscape characterized by rigid division along ethnic lines. This system of segregation is maintained by memories of a bloody past marked by ethnic war, but primarily by institutionalized ethnic-politics that frame separation as safety. As Mujanovic says, “you’re never going to replace the Dayton constitution until you actually build movements that are

---

<sup>84</sup> Kiss the Bottle, “Abrasevic is Mostar’s Most Important Bridge,” accessed December 16, 2021, <https://kissthebottle.org/okc-abrasevic-mostars-important-bridge/>.

<sup>85</sup> Laketa, “The Politics of Landscape,” 178.

capable of addressing the issues Dayton itself was first meant to address.”<sup>86</sup> From this perspective, significant structural change in BiH (i.e. doing away with the Dayton constitution) means primarily addressing the ethnic rifts that keeps Bosnian society divided and virtually powerless. Dayton was, before all else, a *peace* deal aimed at keeping Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs from war. As such, separation was deemed to be the most effective measure to ensure armistice. This separation has promulgated a vicious cycle of political stagnation and economic malaise, made seemingly insurmountable by the social divisions so deeply entrenched in the fabric of Bosnian society.

The past is ever present in Bosnia and Herzegovina—its constitution the direct product of the conflict and painful memories from which the country is purportedly transitioning. But Bosnia is no longer the war torn land that it was when Slobodan Milosevic, Franjo Tujman, and Alija Izetbegovic met at the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio to sign the Peace Accords in February 1995. Twenty-six years later however, Bosnia still suffers from an acute case of ethnofactionalism that keeps alive the very sentiments that started the war in 1992. However, youth pose a challenge to this dynamic. Despite having no direct connection to the traumatic events of the 90s—events that birthed the modern Bosnian state—youth live their consequences and legacy each day through the institutionalization of ethnic politics and ethnic separation, as well as the grinding economic depression and political stagnation that pervade daily life. They have grown up in a state defined by the vague idea of an internationally imposed “transition,” which has failed to reconcile Bosnia’s troubled past. As such, the youngest generations in Bosnia increasingly perceive their country to be one of absurdity, where the

---

<sup>86</sup> Mujanovic, 6.

specter of a recent history defined by ethnic strife holds sway over all aspects of daily life, and they struggle justify the existence of an ethnocratic regime whose legitimacy is based in memory and division. This struggle is based in their disconnect with—yet entrapment by—the nationalized memory of war that legitimizes segregation; and defined by movement beyond the traditional discursive sphere of inter-ethnic relations and politics, as well as the conscious—and unconscious—crossing of deeply entrenched ethnic divides. Consequently, the post-Yugoslav generations are actively reimagining the Bosnian state, identity, and community, as well as the constituent imagined Croat and Bosniak communities therein.

Naturally, not all young Bosnians are consciously or even unconsciously attempting to cross ethnic lines. Some believe the status quo (i.e. division) to be best for Bosnia, and some are outright radical nationalists. Some simply don't care. As is always the case, the environment into which Bosnian youth have been socialized over the last twenty-six years has affected each individual differently, repelling some and satisfying others. However, it is critical to see the efforts that have been made to bring Bosnian society closer together as a crucial form of dissent. All too often does analysis of the Balkans fall into the same trap of the “Balkan myth,” in which the diverse and complicated nations that comprise southeast Europe are imagined to be spaces of inherent violence and instability, a supposed natural product of different peoples living in such close proximity. The term “Balkanization” has even become commonplace in the English lexicon, meaning the “division of a multinational state into smaller, ethnically homogenous entities.”<sup>87</sup> While violence has all too often plagued the region, in reality, the history of the Balkans is marked by clumsy foreign occupation and international intervention, as well as

---

<sup>87</sup> Britannica, “Balkanization,” accessed December 16, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Balkanization>.

neglect by an increasingly globalized world. Youth attempts (conscious or unconscious) to unify, integrate, and constitutionally reshape Bosnia and Herzegovina today actively defy these myths, and show BiH to be the complicated and dynamic place that it is. Like all other nations, it is part of an ongoing history.

In many ways, the crisis of common national identity—where ethnic identity takes precedence over the national one—fits into the larger history of Bosnia’s crisis of belonging. For centuries, the region has been the home of ethnic Serbs, Croats, Albanians, and Muslims, all living outside their respective “homelands.” Like the rest of the Balkans, they sometimes lived together in peace, and sometimes not. Under Ottoman rule until 1878, then a subject of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until the First World War, and later invaded by the Wehrmacht in 1941 and joined with the Nazi-backed Independent State of Croatia, Bosnia has never truly belonged to one people. Throughout history it has been the subject of nationalistic debate between Serbs, Croats, and Muslims seeking to realize expanded visions of their greater homelands, the absorption of their ethnic kin in Bosnia being an integral part of these plans.<sup>88</sup>

In this sense, the First and Last Yugoslavs experienced a historical anomaly when the federal Yugoslav identity superseded that of ethnonationality and religion. All “homelands” and imagined communities were brought together under the Yugoslav flag, and lived in peace for nearly half a century. The post-Yugoslavs, on the other hand, have grown up in a state that is in many ways more emblematic of Bosnia’s history and the great question it has always faced: who can truly call this land home? In the aftermath of the Bosnian War, this question has been discursively mapped onto a polarizing spectrum of ethnic identity, victimhood, and memory, and

---

<sup>88</sup> Edin Hajdarasic, Dave Hall, and Jon Ulrich, *Whose Bosnia? : Nationalism and Political Imagination in the Balkans, 1840-1914*, 1st ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 6-13.

the post-Yugoslavs have been socialized into a society where this spectrum is ever present. As a result, a new Bosnian question has emerged: who *are* Bosnians?

A longstanding goal of the IC's activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina was to groom the post-war state for EU membership. The supreme irony is that the conditions under which Bosnia emerged as an independent state actually ensured very little self-governance, as well as the perpetuation of the ethno-factionalism (both in terms of politics and geographically based demographic homogeneity) that helped catalyze the Bosnian War in the first place. Democratic change takes time, especially when ethnically aligned partisan politics are the status quo and when the majority of the population still aligns themselves with an ethnic identity rather than that of a collective national one.<sup>89</sup> But, these obstacles are not insurmountable. The self-governing city of Brcko, sandwiched between the Federation and Republika Srpska has proved to be a case study in successful social and political ethnic-heterogeneity in Bosnia. A city of 100,000, Serbs, Croats and Bosniak children study one curriculum in integrated classrooms. The mayor is a Croat, his deputy is a Bosniak, and the assembly's speaker is a Serb.<sup>90</sup> Though it is not completely free of the ethnic divisions and the shackles of memory that plague the rest of BiH, Brcko is a compelling template for integration. If the 2014 protests said anything, it was that Bosnians are tired of the status quo, old and young alike. As the generations born after the Dayton Accords come of age—foreseeably encountering heightened agency and political consciousness—Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs may all follow Faruk Salaka's lead, and come together under one Bosnian flag, and one collective Bosnian state, community, and identity.

---

<sup>89</sup> Sejma Malanovic-Adilovic and Muhidin Mulalic, "Whither the National Identity in Bosnia and Herzegovina?" ResearchGate, accessed December 16, 2021, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/>, 107-108.

<sup>90</sup> Peter Geoghegan, "Welcome to Brcko, Europe's only free city and law unto itself," *The Guardian*, May 14, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/may/14/brcko-bosnia-europe-only-free-city>.

## Works Cited

- Britannica. "Balkanization." Accessed December 16, 2021. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Balkanization>.
- Britannica. "Bosnia and Herzegovina." Accessed December 16, 2021. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bosnia-and-Herzegovina/Government-and-society>.
- Citizenship in Southeast Europe. "Protests and Plenums in Bosnia and Herzegovina." Accessed December 16, 2021. <https://www.citsee.eu/citsee-story/protests-and-plenums-bosnia-and-herzegovina>.
- Fritsch, Felix and R.J. Puljek-Shank. "Activism in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Struggles against Dual Hegemony and the Emergence of "Local First"." *East European Politics and Societies* 33, no. 1 (2019): 135-56.
- Garić-Humphrey, Nataša. "Negotiating "True" Politics: Intergenerational Dynamics During Social Uprising in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina." *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 43, no. 1 (2020): 69-86.
- Geoghegan, Peter. "Welcome to Brcko, Europe's only free city and law unto itself." *The Guardian*, May 14, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/may/14/brcko-bosnia-europe-only-free-city>.
- Hajdarasic, Edin., Dave Hall, and Jon Ulrich. *Whose Bosnia? : Nationalism and Political Imagination in the Balkans, 1840-1914*. 1st ed. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015.
- Hromadzic, Azra. "Bathroom Mixing: Youth Negotiate Democratization in Postconflict Bosnia and Herzegovina." *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 34, no. 2 (2011): 268-89.

- Hromadzic, Azra. "Discourses of Integration and Practices of Reunification at the Mostar Gymnasium, Bosnia and Herzegovina." *Comparative Education Review* 52, no. 4 (2008): 541-63.
- Judah, Tim. "Bosnian protests: A Balkan Spring?" *BBC*, February 7, 2014. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26093160>.
- Jukic, Elvira M. "Bosnian Baby Beats Ethnically Divided System." *BIRN*, February 16, 2015. <https://balkaninsight.com/2015/02/16/bosnian-baby-beats-ethnically-divided-system/>.
- Kiss the Bottle. "Abrasevic is Mostar's Most Important Bridge." Accessed December 16, 2021. <https://kissthebottle.org/okc-abrasevic-mostars-important-bridge/>.
- Kurtović, Larisa. "'Who Sows Hunger, Reaps Rage': On Protest, Indignation and Redistributive Justice in Post-Dayton Bosnia-Herzegovina." *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 15, no. 4 (2015): 639-59.
- Laketa, Sunčana. "The Politics of Landscape as Ways of Life in the 'divided' City: Reflections from Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina." *Space & Polity* 23, no. 2 (2019): 168-81.
- Mujanovic, Jasmin. "The evolution of Bosnia's protest movement: an interview with Jasmin Mujanovic." Interview by Heather McRobie. *openDemocracy*, May 7, 2014. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/evolution-of-bosnias-protest-movement-interview-with-jasmin-m/>.
- Malanovic-Adilovic, Sejma, and Muhidin Mulalic. "Whither the National Identity in Bosnia and Herzegovina?" ResearchGate. Accessed December 16, 2021. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330025863\\_Whither\\_the\\_National\\_Identity\\_in\\_Bosnia\\_and\\_Herzegovina](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330025863_Whither_the_National_Identity_in_Bosnia_and_Herzegovina).

OSCE. "OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina launches report on 'two schools under one roof' concept as most visible example of discrimination in education." December 3, 2018.

Accessed December 16, 2021. <https://www.osce.org/mission-to-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>.

Palmberger, Monika. *How Generations Remember*. Basingstoke: Springer, 2016.

Pasic, Lana. "Who is behind Bosnia's riots?" *Aljazeera*, February 10, 2014. [https://](https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/2/10/who-is-behind-bosnias-riots)

[www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/2/10/who-is-behind-bosnias-riots](https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/2/10/who-is-behind-bosnias-riots).

UNDP. "Executive Summary of Main Findings." *The Silent Majority Speaks*. July 11, 2014.

Accessed December 16, 2021. [https://www.ba.undp.org/content/bosnia\\_and\\_herzegovina/en/home/library/democratic\\_governance/the-silent-majority-speaks.html](https://www.ba.undp.org/content/bosnia_and_herzegovina/en/home/library/democratic_governance/the-silent-majority-speaks.html).

University of Minnesota. "Summary of the Dayton Peace Agreement on Bosnia-Herzegovina."

Human Rights Library. Accessed December 16, 2021. <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/icty/dayton/daytonsum.html>.

Matt,

This is an intellectually rich and ethnographically multifaceted examination of nationalism, ethnofactionalism, memory and identity in BiH. I appreciated your sharp analysis and sophisticated writing and observations. You've made several enhancements for the final draft (including the helpful discursive note on imagined communities, among others). You look at the seam—or fracture line—between the past, present and possible future in a land riven by divisions, uncovering the will to cross borders (at least for the post Yugoslav generation) as people move forward in time. This gives this historical project and multilayered, and meta, quality. It makes for an exciting and bold investigation, even as we will, in a sense, need to wait to see how this history plays out. Superb work.

course grade: A