

“[T]hrough the complicated, long-term effects of converging postwar and post-socialist forces, the Bosnian state continues to be emptied of its citizens.”

Disillusioned with Dayton in Bosnia-Herzegovina

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After Slovenia and Croatia's declarations of independence from Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, Bosnia-Herzegovina found itself faced with a choice between following suit and remaining in the Yugoslav federation. Among the three main ethnic groups, the majority of Bosniaks and Croats supported independence, while most Serbs preferred staying in Yugoslavia. In February and March 1992, a statewide referendum, boycotted by Serb leaders, resulted in an overwhelming vote in favor of independence. The European Community recognized Bosnia-Herzegovina's independence on April 6. On the same day, Serbian paramilitary units and the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) attacked the Bosnian capital, Sarajevo.

The army of the self-proclaimed Serb Republic (RS) within Bosnia-Herzegovina, with the help of troops and weapons from Serbia, conquered close to 70 percent of the country's territory by the end of 1993. It also perpetrated some of the most brutal acts of violence against the non-Serb populations, including mass killings, ethnic cleansing, rape, and torture. After more than three years of failed negotiations, over 100,000 deaths, and the displacement of some 2 million refugees, the Dayton Peace Agreement, brokered by the United States, brought an end to the Bosnian war on December 14, 1995.

The agreement constituted the state as a consociational democracy (that is, one based on ethnic power-sharing). This was envisioned as a way to accommodate sociopolitical diversity while safeguarding the sovereignty and integrity of the state.

The aim was to contain ethnonationalism and limit its opportunities to take over the state's political and social spheres.

In order to achieve these goals, the agreement divided the nation into two entities: the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (FBiH), which held 51 percent of the territory and was inhabited mostly by Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats; and the RS, with 49 percent of the territory, populated almost exclusively by Bosnian Serbs. These entities were given all the characteristics of states—with developed governmental institutions, decision-making power, and clear borders—within a larger, more complex state. Furthermore, the agreement separated the FBiH into ten largely autonomous cantons, with little intermixing between the ethnic groups. This produced an intricate and layered system of governance. The new country had three rotating presidents, one from each ethnic group, and, in some areas, 13 levels of government.

While proclaiming reconciliation, democracy, and ethnic pluralism as its objectives, the Dayton agreement inscribed into law the ethnic partitioning of Bosnian Serbs (mostly Eastern Orthodox), Bosnian Croats (mostly Catholic), and Bosniaks (mostly Muslim). As the political scientist Florian Bieber put it, Dayton created a state that was “an empty shell with the Serb Republic governing itself autonomously and the Croat cantons in the Federation having a comparable degree of self-governance.”

This massive state-building project required a huge investment by the so-called international community, composed of mostly Western governments, political and economic institutions, nongovernmental organizations, charity and voluntary groups, and a variety of “experts.” In the immediate years after the war, their presence and influence was so substantial that the country was

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often described as an international protectorate. These structures of transnational expert governance often overlapped with the Bosnian state, where the main leadership roles and governing bodies were in the hands of Western officials. The heavy investment and presence of the international community started to diminish in the 2000s, however.

While bureaucratically massive, the ethnically fragmented state was in effect simultaneously emptied of its citizens, who were spatially, politically, and ideologically consigned to their separate ethnic enclaves. These postwar citizens were conceptualized by the international community as homogeneous, antagonistic units, the sources of a local culture of violence. This made a consociational power-sharing model and extensive international engagement and management both logical and necessary.

The problem with this ideology of “good enough” plurality is that it takes ethnicity as an a priori organizing principle. This vision of separate peoples and territories goes against the grain of their intertwined history in Bosnia. While in some countries such as Switzerland and Belgium the consociational model perhaps produces more functional systems of governance and coexistence, in Bosnia it has generated a dysfunctional state, a frozen peace, and a perpetual distancing of ethnically defined people from each other and from the common state. They are stripped of their identity as citizens of the nation.

The Dayton mandate, which its designers imagined as a temporary measure to bring peace to the Balkans, became a permanent political arrangement. This is perhaps most visible in the fact that the same conservative, ethnonationalist political parties (and their close allies) that started the war have ruled the country almost uninterruptedly for the past 23 years. In the FBiH these are the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), the main Bosniak nationalist party, and the Croat Democratic Union (HDZ). In the more centralized RS, in 2006 the Serb Democratic Party lost its status as the leading party to the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats and its leader Milorad Dodik, who has ruled the entity for the past 12 years. Dodik has repeatedly called for the RS to secede from Bosnia, and in January 2017 the United States imposed sanctions on him for obstructing implementation of Dayton.

Reflecting this order, the current tripartite presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina is composed of the SDA/Bosniak leader Bakir Izetbegović, the HDZ/Croat leader Dragan Čović, and the Serb leader Mladen Ivanić from the Party of Democratic Progress. These leaders and their parties employ similar nationalist political rhetoric, and they depend on one another to keep their respective ethnic bases in a state of perpetual antagonism. They help each other stay in power while preserving and spreading the fear of the ethnic “other.”

Changing or overthrowing the existing order of things seems almost impossible. The system itself discourages cross-ethnic affiliation and cooperation among ordinary people. Instead, a new generation of Bosnian citizens was born and folded into this system. Most of them became habituated to it, regardless of its dysfunctionality and absurdity.

LIFE IN A DIVIDED CITY

The paradoxes of Dayton’s effects in everyday life are on stark display in Mostar, the largest city in Herzegovina, the country’s southern half. It is in the context of Mostar that international diplomatic visions, local ethnonationalist projects, and the ethnicization of everyday life reveal themselves most vividly.

Mostar was one of the most ethnically mixed cities in the former Yugoslavia, and it is often remembered as a place of awe-inspiring beauty and a cosmopolitan spirit. Centered on the Neretva River and the sixteenth-century Old Bridge (Stari Most) built by the Ottomans, the city was a well-known tourist destination before the war.

It was precisely due to its ethnically intermixed history that Mostar suffered terribly during the war, when ideas of national purity and ethnic homogeneity became dominant. After Croats and Bosniaks jointly defended the city against JNA forces, fighting broke out between the two groups, leading to the complete division of the town into a Croat-dominated western side and a Bosniak-dominated eastern side. The destruction of the Old Bridge in November 1993 by Croatian nationalists punctuated the physical and symbolic segregation of the two communities.

The international community, and especially the United States, brokered the Washington Peace Agreement in March 1994. It halted the fighting between Croats and Bosniaks, but left Mostar a deeply divided city. In many ways, Mostar almost

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perfectly encapsulates the consociational model and dysfunctionality of the larger Bosnian state.

Under heavy international pressure, some of the city's divisions have been eliminated or lessened over the years, and people today cross from one side to the other more frequently than before. The international community tried to overcome the segregation of the two sides by rebuilding the Old Bridge in 2004, and by encouraging other projects that are intended to "build bridges" between the city's Bosniaks and Croats. This embedded and lived tension between simultaneous projects of unification and Dayton-legitimized segregation is perhaps most tangible at the first reunited school in Bosnia, the famous Mostar Gymnasium.

The school is located on Mostar's main street, the Boulevard. During the "times of peace" this was the city's main artery, where people came to shop, drink coffee, exchange news, and engage in small talk. During the war, the Boulevard became the front line of the urban battlefield, and most of its buildings were burned to the ground. It emerged from the war empty, almost ghostly, a shocking contrast to its former life.

The school building itself is a national monument, an astounding structure built in the Moorish Revival architectural style during the Austro-Hungarian annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the early twentieth century. The Mostar Gymnasium was well known in the former Yugoslavia for providing an excellent secondary education. Many prominent freedom fighters, poets, artists, and scientists attended the school. Almost every family in Mostar has at least one member who went there.

During the war, the formerly centralized and integrated Bosnian school system was sharply divided across ethnonational lines. The Mostar Gymnasium, located on the western/Croat side of the Boulevard, became a "Croat" school, enrolling a small number of mostly Croat students. The school survived the war but was heavily damaged.

After the war ended, the international community recognized the symbolic importance of the Mostar Gymnasium and worked for years to rebuild the school and integrate its ethnically divided students. It was believed that this act of unification would send a strong message to the rest of the country: If the famous divided high school in Bosnia's most segregated city could be reintegrated,

maybe the country could reunite as well. Over \$1 million and many years of diplomatic persuasion and negotiation were devoted to this project. After much effort and compromise, the Gymnasium finally reopened in 2004 as the first "reintegrated" school in postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The school has one administration, with one principal, one vice principal, and one budget. However, due to the organization of education under Dayton, whereby each ethnonational group or canton is given full autonomy, the students were not integrated into the same classrooms. Rather, the school retained two separate "national" curricula—one for Croats and another for Bosniaks.

The students attend the same renovated school building, but once inside they are segregated into their own "ethnic" classrooms, taught by ethnically appropriate teachers. They are educated in their own language about their ethnic group's view of history and geography. (There are three official languages in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian. The languages are very similar, grammatically almost identical, with minor, manufactured differences in vocabulary.)

The school therefore resembles the state itself. It is administratively unified (to a shallow extent), but the form of this

unification perpetuates, legitimizes, and institutionalizes ethnic divisions among the school's students, teachers, and administrators.

The ethnic symmetry in the Mostar Gymnasium's internal geography is ubiquitous and precise. In order to avoid total segregation, the Mostar office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the international community's main representative in charge of the school's unification, decided with the school administration to alternate Croat and Bosniak classrooms. The Croat classrooms are marked with Roman numerals and lowercase English alphabet letters (I-a, II-b, III-c) to designate each class of a specific grade. The Bosniak curriculum (officially called "Federal") classrooms are marked with Roman and Arabic numerals (I-2, II-3, IV-2). If someone says "III-1" or "II-a," everyone at the school knows whether the person is referring to Croat or Bosniak students and curricula.

The one place where this ethnic symmetry partially collapses is the unisex bathroom, where students come together to smoke during recess. This

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is the only room in the school that was not ethnically conceptualized, calculated, and supervised by international state-builders or local ethnonationalist leaders. It is within this semipublic, secluded, subversive, and smelly space that students are able to explore the boundaries of ethnicity and cross them by smoking and laughing together.

The students' willingness to fraternize and maneuver around existing ethnic divisions is an indirect yet profound critique of the consociational model of democracy and its spatial division of people and territory. Their bathroom smoking is typical of the paradoxical nature of living with Dayton in postwar Bosnia—where, in the name of unification and state-building, people are perpetually homogenized, categorized, segregated, and stripped of state-level identification on the basis of ethnicity.

POSTSOCIALIST CORRUPTION

In addition to being politically dysfunctional, the Bosnian state, with its sprawling bureaucracy and convoluted, unsynchronized laws, is an ideal ground for ethnonationalist elites to engage in overt corruption. These widespread practices have led some observers to claim that Bosnia is the most corrupt country in Europe. A 2009 Transparency International report called it a “captive state” in which “all levels of government and state institutions are highly affected by corruption.” A more recent (2017) report by the same organization echoes some of these findings and says that 84 percent of surveyed Bosnian citizens perceive their state as very corrupt.

In Eastern Europe and the Balkans, such problems are often described as side effects of “postsocialist transitions,” manifested most visibly in the hasty and illicit privatization of state resources. The privatization process typically led to centralization of wealth and power in the hands of a few elites, and to a sense of dispossession among a public that had been accustomed to collective ownership of resources under socialism.

Many of Bosnia's factories, which used to employ the majority of the country's workforce, were damaged during the fighting of the 1990s, but they continued to operate throughout the war, albeit in a reduced and altered capacity. Many Bosnians observe that these companies could have been modernized after the war. Instead, they were caught up in illicit processes of postwar privatization, which exposed them to bankruptcy and the cannibalistic policies of the state's new elites.

This left hundreds of thousands of workers perpetually suspended between employment and unemployment, or wait-listed (*na čekanju*) for jobs. Most of these workers have not received any compensation for the past 20 years. Their families' lives are marked by chronic, deepening, and structural poverty. Most people facing this predicament survive by relying on remittances from abroad, seasonal employment (usually in the EU), informal work (primarily in the logging industry), and prolific networks of distribution among family and friends. This story of the illegally orchestrated dispossession of collective ownership by the local elites has been elided by diplomatic, academic, journalistic, and other accounts of the war and ethnic nationalism.

Through embedded clientelistic and nepotistic networks, Bosnia's contemporary ethnonationalist elites control access to employment, salaries, contracts, and international aid. This has generated deep disillusionment among the country's citizens.

PROTESTS FROM THE PERIPHERY

Given this context, it was not surprising that Bosnia erupted in massive protests in February 2014. Tellingly, the protests did not start in the capital, Sarajevo, but in the Bosnian periphery—the former socialist industrial centers, today's epicenters of postindustrial unemployment.

People took to the streets to express their anger against *lopovi* (thieves) who, hiding behind the structures of the Dayton agreement and its ethnic nationalisms, grew rich through the processes of peace-building and state-making. With their self-interested policies, these elites directly contributed to the high levels of unemployment and unpaid employment. They are responsible for a steep rise in poverty for the majority of workers and other citizens.

The protests started in Bosnia's third-largest city, Tuzla. At first it appeared to be just another localized gathering of people angered by growing social inequality and corruption. The protests quickly spread throughout the country, however, erupting not only in larger urban centers but also in smaller, primarily postindustrial towns facing severe poverty and the country's highest unemployment rates. They were both a symptom of and a reaction to decades of accumulated frustrations, feelings of betrayal, and the arrogance and negligence of local and international political elites.

As the initial chaos and physical destruction subsided, more and more ordinary people of all

generations and diverse backgrounds took to the streets, peacefully walking together under banners that spoke of the hungry *narod* (people) and empty bellies. The symbolic power of these demonstrations unleashed a new politics, culminating in the creation of citizen plenums. In these assemblies, people came together in the spirit of direct democracy and engaged in discussions about their immediate political and economic concerns, and their aspirations for the future.

The country's elites tried to use ethno-political manipulation to portray the rising anger born of hunger as an ethnically motivated issue, highlighting the fact that most of the protests took place in FBiH with limited outbreaks in the RS. Acting, as usual, in tandem with the local ethnonationalist political elites, the international community in Bosnia responded, through its high representative Valentin Inzko, by threatening to deploy troops if the violent demonstrations continued.

The protesters won several political victories, obtaining commitments for the elimination of the practice of paying politicians "white bread," or salaries after they leave office, and the ouster of officials heading four cantonal governments in FBiH. But despite the initial enthusiasm, the protest movement waned and had died out by April 2014.

Many of its victories were reversed and other goals were left unfulfilled. This created further disappointment and raised doubts that any change could happen in Bosnia under Dayton. And yet, many protesters felt that something did change—in their political consciousness. The experience gave them a sliver of hope that political activism and a better future are possible in Bosnia. They showed that Bosnian citizens are not lethargic and disengaged, as they are so often portrayed.

'I WILL TRY TO STAY'

For most Bosnians, however, especially youth, the combination of a dysfunctional postwar state, extreme levels of corruption, chronic unemployment and disillusionment, and the failure of the February 2014 protests to achieve significant structural change inclines them to view their future as a predicament rather than a source of hope. During multiple visits to Bosnia over the past 20 years, I witnessed Bosnian youth existing in a kind of hibernation, a state of detachment from official politics.

During my most recent visit, when I went to Bosnia as a Fulbright scholar in the spring of 2017 to teach at the University of Bihać, I engaged in long and challenging discussions with my students about their future in Bosnia and beyond. During one of our many conversations, Selma (a pseudonym), a sophomore in the English Department, said to me, "Professor, I will *try* to stay" in Bihać or Bosnia. This statement captured the overwhelming sentiment among the students I befriended: that staying at home is almost impossible due to the country's desperate prospects. In a context where extreme unemployment is a structural condition that stretches across generations, only the politics of distribution, and remittances from abroad that circulate among family and friends, keep people fed and alive.

This calamitous present perpetuates youths' visceral disappointment in the country and their lack of confidence in its future. It also creates a sharp distinction between politically corrupt Bosnia, where one feels that she or he must either withdraw from the state and its dirty politics or engage in corruption in order to survive, and an idealized "Europe" where the rule of law is in place and a person can choose not to engage in corrupt behavior and still be a recognized, respected citizen. This stimulates a desire among youth to leave home for better places. It also creates a further gap between Bosnia and Europe, and between young people and the state.

Bosnia has formally applied for EU membership, but has not yet received official candidate status. The country was identified as a potential candidate for membership in June 2003, and the Stabilization and Association Agreement between the EU and Bosnia entered into force in June 2015. But Bosnia is behind on many of the reforms required for membership.

The common attitude of detachment and anti-citizenship is often interpreted by international officials and researchers as a sign of Bosnian youth's apathy and lethargy. However, nonparticipation can be also understood as a form of agency, calculated choice, and political and moral self-preservation. In other words, through indifference, apathy, humor, irony, and scorn, young people avoid participation in the established political system in order to attend to their own practical needs. For many Bosnian youth, stay-

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ing in their country presents a challenge, even an impossibility, and planning to leave becomes a normal expectation for peers and oneself. Indeed, young Bosnians are leaving their country in large numbers.

One of my interlocutors recently called it an “epidemic.” All over Bosnia, classroom sizes are shrinking, schools are closing, and teachers are losing jobs because there are no children to teach. In this way, through the complicated, long-term effects of converging postwar and postsocialist forces, the Bosnian state continues to be emptied of its citizens. Many of these young people would like to *try* to stay in Bosnia, but like Selma, they do not know how.

BEYOND THE HEADLINES

In November 2017, Bosnia was in the news again. In The Hague, the former Bosnian Serb army commander Ratko Mladić received a sentence of life in prison from the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia after being found guilty of genocide for crimes committed during the Bosnian war. Numerous reports speculated about the possible impacts of the verdict on the state’s fragile ethnic relations and imperfect peace. Ethno-nationalist leaders and some ordinary people were featured in the media speaking about heightened ethnic tensions. On social media there was much commentary—sometimes congratulatory, sometimes angry, and sometimes humorous—on the theatrical nature of this case and other war crimes trials. There was a shocking moment in November

2017 when Slobodan Praljak, an ex-Bosnian Croat general, drank poison in the courtroom and died soon after his 20-year sentence for war crimes was confirmed by judges in The Hague.

Many people complained about the orchestrated redeployment of ethnic sentiments that the Mladić verdict inspired. In their view, this trial and its aftermath were masking, yet again, what is really at stake. A month after the verdict was announced, I spoke to friends and family in Bihać. No one mentioned Mladić. Rather, they recounted how on Christmas Eve three buses full of young people mostly in their twenties had left Bihać’s main bus station, on their way to start new lives in Germany. I was told that no one, except for one elderly woman, cried as they saw the emigrants off. The fact that no one cried, and that young people were leaving the state happily and in large numbers, was the main news.

On October 7, 2018, Bosnia will hold another general election, its eighth since the war. While many political analysts, journalists, and common folk expect that nothing will change after this election, there are some who see it as a possible game changer. This is mostly due to intense internal tensions that could weaken the nationalist parties. There are indications that a new, reunited left front might solidify around the issues of unemployment, corruption, hunger, the extraction and destruction of natural resources, and the “brain drain” caused by the emigration of educated youth. Ordinary people are watching these developments, simultaneously hopeful and disillusioned. ■