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Role of Religious and Ethnic Identity in Dissolution of Former Yugoslavia

- Case Study of Bosnia and Herzegovina -

Abstract:

Using the main tenants of the Social Identity Theory, this paper contemplates role of religion and ethnic identity in dissolution of former Yugoslavia, with a specific focus on Bosnia and Herzegovina and its governmental system and security situation, accompanied with social and cultural consequences.

After the civil and interreligious war that Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) experienced in the last decade of the 20th century, this country made religion and ethnic affiliation as a pre-condition to all the political, social, educational and cultural undergoing processes.

Any significant demographic changes in BiH could have grave, if not dangerous, impact on fragile political and security situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This hypothesis is based on the fact that political system in BiH is a product of consociationalism, an institutional

instrument used to manage conflicts among nations of different, even adversary, religious and ethnic groups.

Key words: identity, immigration, cohesion, consociationalism, ethnic conflict resolution, primordialism and instrumentalism.

Introduction:

Identity

As underlined in the *Foreword* of the Anssi Paasi' paper *Region and place: Regional identity in question*, "identity has become a major watchword since the 1980s".

Identity is defined as a sense of one's self or self image of individual, which is measured by belonging to certain categories. People identify themselves as belonging to a group on the basis of characteristics and categories shared with other members of a particular group.

With this word we try to comprehensively define qualities, beliefs, looks and behaviour that make every individual similar or different in comparison to other individuals or groups.

Identity revival and awareness is one of the reborn issues among European nations, traditionally Christian and of Western European values. However, in countries of the Western Balkans, other communities, like Muslims, have undergone stages from „moderate“ towards „radical“ and „islamised“.

This trend is most visible in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In times of crises, like during the civil inter-religious war (1992-1995), population of Bosnia and Herzegovina went through the metamorphosis in terms of religious and ethnic awareness, a long way in a short period of time.

When in crisis, ethnic groups gather together and *tighten their grip* on the things they know best and hold dear — their family and neighborhood, identity, language, culture, and values.

Current geopolitical issues around the world influence many aspects of our lives, in terms of policies, social, economical, security, demographic challenges, to name just a few.

In some countries, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereinafter referred to as: BiH) is one of them, identity (specifically religious and social, and their derivatives of ethnicity and cultural identity), has become the most important “category” forming and developing not only individual or group, but also political life of the country, and massively influence BiH's both internal and foreign politics, heavily shaping and modelling the reality the citizens of BiH live in.

Identity Discourse - Connection Between Various Notions of Identity

According to Castells (Castells, 2006:63), identity is being built upon personal experience, while individual is heavily turning to history and culture, and has linguistic and geographical components.

An important element of the identity of the three ethnic groups (constitutive ethnic groups/peoples) in Bosnia and Herzegovina nowadays is their religious faith. Those ethnic groups are Serbs (Orthodox Christians), Croats (Roman-Catholics), and Bosniacs (Muslims).

Religious identity is a sense of membership belonging to a group which defines God in a specific way, creating around this particular definition its customs, and traditions. Religious identity provide a perspective from which to view the world, and oneself in the world.

In order to understand the situation in former Yugoslavia and BiH, some definitions that fall within the domain of the Social identity theory should be added as well. According to the Social Identity Theory (Hirschman, 2004), when individuals of ethnic minority backgrounds feel as if their identity is threatened, they may emphasize their other social identities as a means to maintain a positive self-concept. Members of one group tend to grouping, meaning categorising themselves as belonging to a certain group of individuals of same characteristics, where they perceive their group as „in-group“, and other groups belonging to other religion/ethnicity/characteristics then belong to „out-group“.

This is critical to understanding prejudice, competition and hostility.

Ethnic identity is a sum-up of commonalities of a group of individuals, such as common religion, common tradition, ancestry, language or dialect, and common historical and social

experiences. Ethnic identity is a manifestation of heritage, society norms, mannerisms, and behaviors. Ethnic identity makes a basis for cultural identity.

Political Identity and Identity Politics:

Proponents of a political identity also draw on a common descent, language, or culture, while Identity politics is identified when groups of people of same ethnicity tend to promote their own specific political interests or concerns without regard to the interests or concerns of any other political group.¹

Relations Between Identity, Ethnicity and Politics

If the society is a fragile one, with recent history of civil and inter-religious wars in which the category of ethnicity prevailed, it is obvious that such a society, or at least a significant part of it, will not be welcoming towards out-groups, especially if it means that internal national/ethnic balance - which was a starting point for governmental framework to be established and operating – is to be disturbed and suddenly in favour of only one side.

Since 1995, politicians in BiH lead their campaigns, construct their party programs and distribute benefits on an ethnic basis only.

That is why voters already polarized along ethnic lines, view themselves belonging to an ethnic group, and view politicians the same way, and vote only for those who belong to their own ethnic group, regardless of the political program (Petrovic, 2019). Their only concern being to contribute to their ethnic group earns as many benefits as possible. The idea behind such a behavior is not a national cohesion of the state but over-voting of the opponents, not political but ethnic ones. For politicians in Bosnia and Herzegovina, religious identity as a resource which can provide an effective path to power and influence (Fox, 2007:34).

Pre- and Post-war Ethnic Relations in former Yugoslavia/BiH

What was known as Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (1945-1991), was a federal state comprised of six republics (Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Macedonia), where many ethnic groups co-existed in peace, quite often

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/identity%20politics> as visited on 23 February 2022

unaware of other's ethnicity. Visitors of Yugoslavia encountered a tolerant and successful multiethnic country, where no religious or ethnical group had advantage in comparison to other (Prato et al. 2017), and this state-of-art remained such until the 1980s.

During the 1980s, the concept of ethnicity strengthened and one by one former Yugoslav republics started to claim their independence and sovereignty on the basis of ethnic lines that already existed in Yugoslavia in the form of borders between respective republics. Each of the republics had a „mixture“ of all the ethnic groups that coexisted in former Yugoslavia, but also had their majority which was reflected in the very name of each of the republics, all but Bosnia and Herzegovina (Slovenia – Slovenians, Croatia – Croats; Serbia – Serbs; Macedonia – Macedonians; Montenegro – Montenegrins).



Ethnic map of Yugoslavia based on 1991 census data, published by CIA in 1992²

² https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/F%C3%A1jl:Yugoslavia_ethnic_map.jpg as visited on 23 February 2022

One more characteristic of the region is that each and every ethnic group in the Western Balkans has its “adversarial” minority, that is, the ethnic outgroup with whom the majority group had a history of violent conflicts or tensions.

Geography, administrative boundaries, religion distribution, ethnic identity, all played a key role in dissolution of Former Yugoslavia. They are also playing equally important role in political and governmental system of today's Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Historians, social scientists, politicians have a say that BiH is “a small Yugoslavia”, because in BiH all ethnic/social/religious/cultural groups that were living in respective republics as a significant majority had its percentage in BiH, meaning that, in terms of population and therefore ethnic identity, BiH was a mixture of them all.

In 1991, dissolution of Yugoslavia began, and its former Republics wanted independence and sovereignty. Actually, they wanted ethnically homogenous national states. All ethnic groups except for Muslims in BiH, that have been calling themselves Bosniacs after 1995 - achieved this goal (of having homogenous national states), because high percentage of presence of other constitutive peoples, primarily Serbs and Croats, objected and prevented such a scenario. That was the direct cause of the civil war outbreak in 1992.

They however have not abandoned the idea and continue their struggle through political means.

One of the tools is demography, because if Muslims become majority, they will claim a completely different governmental system. Castells claims that religion provides an identity that is very different from based on state legitimacy. Within the Arab (Muslim) world, the State is only legitimate insofar as it embraces Islam and represents the interests of God on Earth. (Castells, 2006:63).

The proof for the aforementioned can be found in the treatise titled “Islamic Declaration”, where the author Alija Izetbegović, later on the President of Bosnia and Herzegovina and leader of a nationalistic party that led Muslims of BiH into the ethnic civil war 1992-1995), stated:

The treatise considers that for the main principle of Islamic order, the unity of faith and politics, leads among others to the following "first and foremost conclusion":

"There is no peace or coexistence between the Islamic faith and non-Islamic social and political institutions. The failure of these institutions to function and the instability of these regimes in Muslim countries, manifest in frequent changes and coups d'état, is most often the consequence of their a priori opposition to Islam, as the fundamental and foremost feeling of the people in those countries. Claiming its right to order its own world alone, Islam clearly rules out the right and the possibility of the application of any foreign ideology in its own region. There is, therefore, no lay principle, and the state ought to be a reflection of and to support the moral concepts of the religion." (Pavković. p. 96).

Vjekoslav Perica meanwhile states that it called on Muslims to demand a state of their own, once they became the majority in a country, organized according to Islamic laws and norms. (Perica, p. 77).

For majority of ex-Yugoslav republics, exit from Yugoslavia was politically challenging but peaceful. For BiH, unfortunately was not. There was a brutal civil, inter-religious war between three major ethnic groups that had been living there for centuries (Serbs - Eastern Orthodox Christians; Croats – Roman-Catholic Christians; Bosniacs – Muslims). The war lasted from 1992-1995 and ended when Dayton Peace Agreement (hereinafter: DPA, drafted in Dayton, USA, signed in Paris, France) was signed.

In this way, BiH was created as a state union comprised of two highly independent and ethnically divided entities (Federation of BiH and Republic of Srpska).

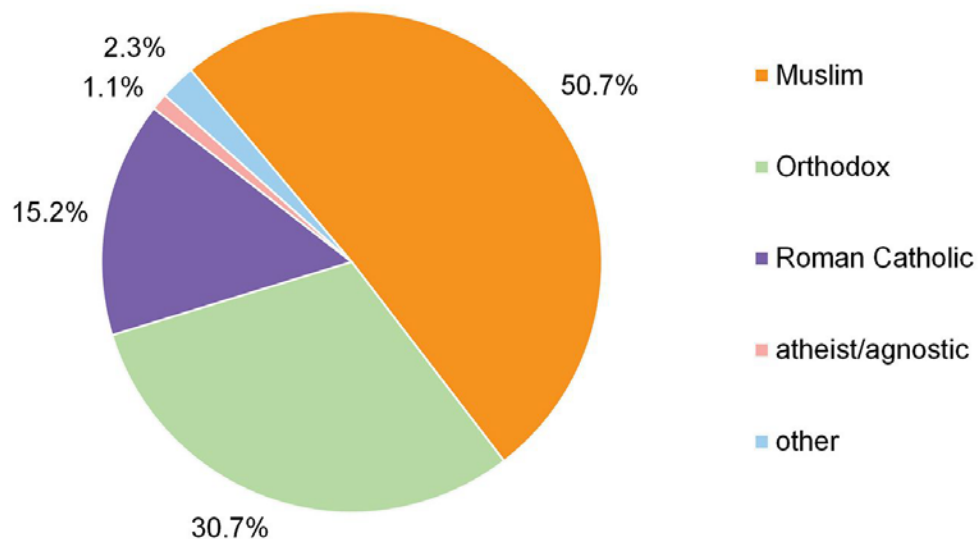
The Constitution and all other legal and by-legal documents were adopted, all on the basis of ethnic and religious affiliation of the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This structure may seem complicated and fragile to outsiders, but majority of politicians and citizens, as well sociologists and political scientists claim that this structure is the only viable option to keep the country together and in peace.

The institutional power system in BiH is based on the consociationalism. Consociationalism is a power-sharing agreement which co-opts the leaders of ethnic groups into the central state's government (Wolff). Each of these ethnic groups that have their representatives in the state's governments has veto powers, or so called "the question of the national interest".

Dominant norm is the one of ethnical proportional representation, meaning that each group is represented in the government in a percentage that reflects the ethnicity's demographic presence in the state (Lijphart, 2001). This definition is very important in regard to BiH.

Bosnia and Herzegovina had a census in 2013. Although highly disputed because of claims that number of Bosniac/Muslims were significantly „inflated“³, results were internationally recognized⁴.

Bosnia and Herzegovina religious affiliation (2013)

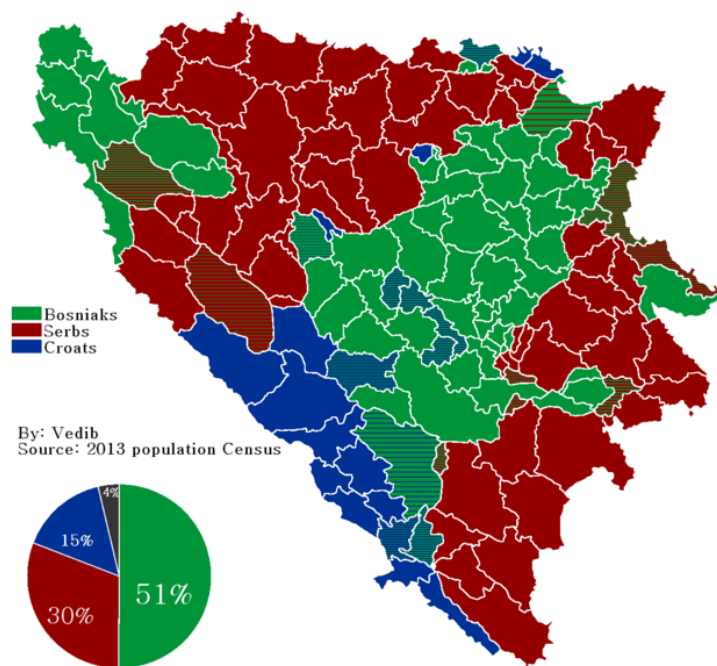


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³ Popić: Rezultati popisa neupotrebljivi i lažni: Zamjenik direktora Agencije za statistiku BiH Miljan Popić istakao je da su rezultati popisa stanovništva u BiH lažni i statistički neupotrebljivi, te da je u ovom slučaju struka pala na koljena pod pritiskom politike, as published at <https://lat.rtrs.tv/vijesti/vijest.php?id=208668>

⁴<https://www.britannica.com/place/Bosnia-and-Herzegovina/People> visited on 23 February 2022



Source: File:Bosnia and Herzegovina Ethnic map⁶

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bosnia_and_Herzegovina_Ethnic_map.png visited on 23 February 2022