EUROPE and the BALKANS

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FACING THE PAST FACING THE FUTURE: CONFRONTING ETHNICITY AND CONFLICT IN BOSNIA AND FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

Edited by Florian Bieber and Carsten Wieland

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PART THREE - FACING THE FUTURE

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INTRODUCTION

The late former chair of the Bosnian presidency, Alija Izetbegović, once made a remarkable admission: "When you call on a public debate on democracy, some hundred intellectuals will come. When it is about nationalism, you will get tens of thousands of all social layers into the street"[1]. A decade after the end of the Bosnian war, the "magic" force of ethno-nationalism is still clearly present. The big advantage of this concept is that it is thin on substance but simple to understand. It does not need long preceding discussions and opinion-building, which, in times of turbulent transition, gives ethno-national spokesmen a lead vis-à-vis civic democratic forces with a differentiated party program. People are objectively ascribed into categorical blocks, and quickly become a potential constituency. The ample literature on nationalism points to the fact that this phenomenon was often linked with democratic elements, it even constituted a broad democratic movement by itself in many cases in the 19th century.

After the collapse of Yugoslavia ethno-nationalists were the first ones who took over the new public arena, and they succeeded with democratic means – without, however, creating a real democracy but an exclusive ethnocracy. Elections have since then always been a double-edged sword, especially in Bosnia-Herzegovina where international institutions with strong competences organized and supervised elections after the war. Not everything went according to their plans in this "laboratory of sovereignty", as *The Economist* once coined it[2].

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[1] Quoted according to: Klaus von Beyme, *Systemwechsel in Osteuropa*, Frankfurt/M., Suhrkamp, 1994, p. 127.

[2] "Balkan Survey", in *The Economist,* 24.1.1998, p. 18.

Elections in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2002 and 2004 demonstrated once again that ethno-nationalists are still strong players to be reckoned with.

A remarkable democratic act, which sidelined electoral institutions, took place on Bosnia's eastern flank, in Serbia. With a peaceful revolution in October 2000 the people in the street ousted the ethno-national tyrant in socialist dressing, Slobodan Milošević. In contrast to Bosnia, where internationals are strenuously trying to pave the way for the concept of a civic democracy by political and social engineering, the Serbs have opened the window to a new political culture from within and by themselves. The reform of political institutions is one thing. The other is a psychological change. In this sense, the late Serbian prime minister Zoran Djinjić described his domestic aim in "de-emotionalizing" the political discourse, and pushing through a "change of priorities from nation and state to the economy"[3]. He even looksed at the separatist ambitions of Montenegro from an economic angle. Thus he reacted in a more relaxed way than his ethno-nationalist predecessors when it came to the possibility of a loose confederation. Djindjić set new tones in a courageous way. After his assassination in March 2003 this approach has been challenged once again.

On the other flank, in post-Tudjman Croatia, a similar shift has contributed to crack open the circular debate on ethno-national territory and pride. More than in Belgrade, the discourse in Zagreb has become enriched by another political cleavage: the issue of an rapprochement towards the European Union. All this has repercussions for sandwiched Bosnia-Herzegovina too, to which ethno-nationalists from both sides have laid claim throughout history. Only with Serbia and Croatia breaking out of the "ethnic" paradigm, its traditional reality as a multi-"ethnic" society has a new chance, despite the horrors of the war in the 1990s. Any other solution would fall back into the vicious circle of "ethnic" propaganda, expulsions and extinction. Even more, Bosnia's fate is conceptually and ideologically linked with the whole of Europe and its basic idea of how to arrange the Union. As the former High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch, put it: "A specific Bosnian share could be the contribution to the tradition of multiethnicity and to a better understanding in united Europe, which can only be a multiethnic Europe"[4]. In this sense, this book wants to make a case for multi-"ethnic" societies in general and for former Yugoslavia in particular. It aims to contribute to the understanding of the nature and the contradictions of the "ethnic" concept, of the role and the interactions of historians, politicians, and journalists in this process, and of the blessings, difficulties and limitations of international intervention in this region.

The first article provokes with a fundamental theoretical critique of the ap-

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[3] Zoran Djindjić: "Serbien und seine Nachbarn", in *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen*, Vol. 42, No. 2, 2002, p. 32.

[4] Branislav Milošević, "Bosna i Hercegovina u evropskoj porodici", *Danas*, 23 January 2002.

proaches of local and international actors. Putting Muslim nation-building in comparative perspective, it comes to the conclusion that ethnic conflicts do not exist, and that the confusion about the term ethnicity is too large to make it useful for academic research. So far, no universally valid definition of ethnicity and (ethno-) nation has been found – neither by political scientists, nor sociologists, historians or ethnologists. And still, everyone speaks of ethnic conflicts, particularly the protagonists themselves. Instead of giving up the term altogether, the article presents a new definition of "ethnicity" (in quotation marks). In this concept *one* primordial characteristic (ethnicentre) is taken out as the main means of contrast, in this case religion. However, for political mobilization other primordial components must be settled around the central element, like historical myths, language or customs. The chapter contrasts ethnic groups, which are historically embedded, pre-political and whose borders are blurred, with "ethnic groups", which are of structural nature, a political concept of action and whose borders are rigid. The lesson for future conflicts is to withstand ethno-national claims and to strengthen alternative forces from the outset in order to avoid a political escalation within the "ethnic" paradigm.

A great chance to change paradigms and to set new agendas is a kind of *Stunde Null* – the Hour Zero as it was coined in Germany after the Second World War in 1945. Senada Šelo Šabić defines *Stunde Null* – a watershed moment which divides the past from the present – as a metaphor for the state of mind of those who were to carry out thorough and rapid social transformation. However, in Bosnia-Herzegovina this start from scratch has just been missing. Partly responsible was the international community that did not break out of the "ethnic paradigm" in its rather timid political and societal engineering. So the Dayton Accord of 1995 did not mark the start of a new political culture like in post-war Germany. In addition, local actors obstructed the agreements. This contributed to continued insecurity. Even partition of Bosnia-Herzegovina was still discussed – the final goal of the ethno-national rivals.

One reason why in Bosnia there was no *Stunde Null* is that in Germany the Allied Forces were the winners, and in Bosnia, the international actors were just arbitrators. The fighting could continue with different means. Germans were bombed into accepting Hour Zero, Bosnians were talked into a cease-fire. However, around 1997 the patience of the international community with the local actors started to run out. It tightened the ropes and, for example, banned parties opposing the Dayton Peace Accords. In a certain sense, writes Šelo Šabić, from 1997 the international community adjusted own approaches away from the consociational model which cemented the ethno-national camps. Thus it evolved towards the meaning of the Zero Hour with politics of social plurality, territorial integrity, and economic revival. This new momentum of the peace process gives hope for the Bosnian state-building process and lessons for future interventions.

However, a concept of political and social engineering can be worked out as

well as it may be on the macro-level. It is doomed to failure if the micro-level is ignored. One example is the consequent re-education in post-war Germany. People need new mental maps on which to build their ideas, they need new worlds of experience. It is just these factors of education and cultural engineering which are used for nation-building. Therefore, counter-actions cannot ignore these components. This becomes particularly obvious with regard to long-living stereotypes which are still present, and even cultivated in the Balkan and international minds. So the national character is often defined as a natural character – predestined and unmovable.

As Biljana Bijelić warns, this way of depicting the atrocities of war ignores the agents. Instead, it concentrates on fuzzy, and even amorphous categories such as culture, the dichotomy between orient and occident, circular history or pseudo-psychological descriptions like the "inevitable" behavior of "country-bumpkins" or "mountain men". Bijelić cites some Western authors who used such undifferentiated approaches with regard to the Balkans. It is not necessarily a careless slip of – undoubtedly senior – journalists who try to write (about) history. They fall back on old stereotypes and comparative techniques of description which also Balkan authors themselves use as a self-image. Among others, the movie director Emir Kusturica ("Underground") responds to the Western stereotype of violence as a part of the Balkan specific cultural realm (like the "Balkan powder keg"). This has two consequences: First, it suggests that wars, in a somehow regular frequency, are unavoidable in the Balkans. This strengthened the position of non-interventionists in the West. Secondly, it distracts from the question of individual responsibility, and supports national self-victimization.

For the ex-Yugoslav societies in transition, this is a delicate issue. Against the background of the Serbian experience, Eric Gordy digs deeper into the question of responsibility, and distinguishes it from guilt. Serbs are confronted with the fact that international observers attribute most of the war crimes of the 1990s to their political leaders, and those who followed them. It does not make sense, however, to speak of a collective political guilt. For guilt is a legal category and thus individual. The institutional instance that determines guilt is a criminal court or maybe the War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague. The concept of political guilt can be offensive to people with different backgrounds or even encourages them to identify with the criminals because they share their ethno-national camp. The task of "breaking with the past" can only succeed with a different category: responsibility, as a social and moral issue. It needs a debate which takes place at home, free from external pressure.

Gordy follows Karl Jaspers who differentiates responsibilities in political, moral, and metaphysical realms. In Serbia there are first signs that post-Milošević politicians, the media, and the public become ready to face such responsibilities. This happens in the debates about war crimes, mainly triggered by the discovery of a freezer truck, full of corpses, at the bottom of the Danube. According to Gordy,

many Serbs in the past have gone through authoritarianism, fascism, communism and ethno-nationalism with a sense of passivity entailing the pretext that all this came about them by somebody else's fault. No matter which era of the past is addressed: "An effort to build a culture of responsibility probably does more to challenge authoritarian legacies and lay a groundwork for a democratic future than any other intervention in political culture", Gordy holds.

In this process the media plays a crucial role in investigating and airing war crimes as facts. But they also depend on the cooperation of the executive organs, which is improving in Serbia, and on the public if it is prepared and willing to see and hear the uncomfortable truths or not. In this context the press represents a mirror of the society and some form of collective consciousness. Journalists in the affected countries often perform a tightrope act between their own consciousness, the political courage of their editor-in-chief, and the financial interests of the publisher. Naturally, most of them work under much more difficult conditions than their Western colleagues. And yet, as we have seen in the third chapter, it has been extremely difficult for Western journalists as well to depict facts and contexts in a differentiated way. For them it is mainly the financial pressure to sell nicely written and impressive stories, and the lack of time for thorough research, which account for omissions or distortions.

Chris O'Sullivan concentrates on the way U.S. media portrayed the war in former Yugoslavia from a distance. The conflict caught the U.S. media at a time of cost-cutting measures and fierce competition of market shares. In addition, the author criticizes that many journalists lacked the background to report on the Balkans and to analyze the events. This led again to the perpetuation of "ancient hatred" stereotypes as mentioned above. O'Sullivan points at the interdependent influences of interpretations in a triangle of journalists, politicians, and viewers. While recipients were left at a loss because of poor coverage of the complex conflict, politicians felt reassured that they "did not have a dog in the fight", as former Secretary of State, James Baker, put it. In turn, the statements of the State Department and the Pentagon carried considerable weight for the U.S. media and became part of the narrative, without being easily challenged.

On the other hand, journalists also influenced politics. The example of Kaplan's writing has already been mentioned. What makes his book "Balkan Ghosts" even more influential is that it had a great impact on former U.S. President Bill Clinton and his policy towards the Balkans. Only later these simplified views were challenged by another journalist, Strobe Talbot, former editor in chief of the *Time* magazine, whom Clinton could win as assistant secretary of state. However, although the coverage on Bosnia was not universally bad, differentiated approaches like Talbot's did not prevail in the journalistic field – although he can take credit of having influenced politics in an important way unlike many others of his colleagues. Mediocre coverage is not a problem of the complexity of the Balkan war only, but a general flaw, like reporting on other "ethnic conflicts" like

in Northern Ireland show.

While many reasons can be found in the structural constraints of the Western media, others may lie in the particular deficits of education in U.S. schools, colleges, and universities. As Margaret Vandiver shows in stunning surveys, U.S. American students have a quite poor knowledge about their own history, and an even worse one about events abroad. For example, of 86 students questioned in the University of Memphis, not a single one knew about Srebrenica as the site of the killing of up to 8,000 Muslim men, although this massacre had happened only three and a half years previously, and received tremendous coverage by U.S. media. Many students have wrong ideas about Balkan Muslims as well. They believe that all Muslims are Middle Easterners and Arabs instead of Europeans, who are sometimes secular in practice after having lived in a multi-"ethnic" society for a long time. Vandiver pledges to make students more aware of genocides, teach them universal human values, and encourage them to press their politicians into action. For the poor educational background has also lead to political apathy in the United States.

Against this background, it is very difficult for politicians, who have to win elections at the home front, to convince the public that a political and military engagement in a remote area is necessary, be it because of long-term parochial interests or because it is a matter of international law or ethics. The longer an engagement takes, the shorter runs the patience of isolationists or unilateralists. This is particularly true when a presence, like in Bosnia or in Kosovo, does not deliver daily results (any more). Peacekeeping is a task of often sluggish negotiations, of subtle political instinct, and of a long breath. As a result, the media loses interest, and so do many politicians.

These are the obstacles against which the international peacekeepers in Bosnia have to struggle in their daily work: turning the old model of a multi-"ethnic" society into a new and functioning reality again. This process has proven to be bumpy. David Chandler reveals some flaws of such international approaches, and how a well-intended initiative can turn into a boomerang. He holds that the extended anti-corruption campaign of the international institutions in Bosnia-Herzegovina did more damage than good. It even broadened support for the ethno-nationalists. Since the campaign reduced the general trust of Bosnians in the political process, the more they fall back on parochial attitudes and local links. A more general side-effect of the anti-corruption strategy is a weakening instead of a strengthening of self-government, which discourages public participation. In turn, external decision-makers re-gain power over Bosnian affairs.

Chandler holds that the international actors mixed together the notion of corruption and ethno-national platforms. An ethno-national politician is not necessarily corrupt. But fighting him in the name of corruption creates a popular backlash that supports him. However, the anti-corruption campaign did not only target ethno-nationalist hardliners. Chandler attributes the bad performance in the elec-

tions in 2000 of Milorad Dodik, the Western-backed Serb prime minister in the *Republika Srpska*, to allegations of corruption against him. The same applies to the poorer than expected showing of the Social Democrats due to reports on corruption in Tuzla, a social democratic stronghold.

A reflexion on the nature of the system of government in post-War Bosnia-Hercegovina is the focus of the last chapter of this book. After ten years of international presence in Bosnia-Hercegovina, Florian Bieber draws up a mixed balance sheet. He explores how the institutionalization of ethnicity has often not been matched by adequate human rights protection. In fact, the high degree of political representation of the three "constituent nations' – a complex power-sharing arrangement – has frequently reinforced the lines of divisions. The "ethnic key" has been the most important parameter in shaping the state's institutions down to the lowest level. This withdraws resources from multi- or trans-"ethnic" political alternatives.

Apart from this fundamental misconception, some practical obstacles are on the way, too. Bieber holds that the more determined intervention has lead to a lack of responsibility and accountability of the political elite. And despite all efforts, this elite is still ethno-nationalist, and not voted out of office as the international strategists had hoped. These politicians can take extreme positions, and blame the need for compromise on the High Representative. Even when a decision is taken, the existence of parallel and multiple power structures makes it hard to identify the location of power in the first place. Even if there are first signs of change recently, these shortcomings impede the development of a democratic culture and dims the prospects of handing over the power to mature politicians and institutions one day.

Nobody knows today when this day will come. The big project to reconstruct not only a state but also society of Bosnia-Hercegovina takes more time than some of the international actors expected. With the gradual reduction of international presence and money, the people of this country will have to become more and more self-reliable. The biggest challenge in this process is to create new realities of experience in which a life beyond the "ethnic" paradigm becomes self-evident. Indeed, most of the daily problems which Bosnia-Hercegovina is facing today, are shaped along other cleavages, like rich and poor or urban versus rural areas. If everything goes well in the long run, also the cleavage pro- or anti-European Union will arise. Apart from economic considerations, this will be another test if Bosnians of all backgrounds are ready to reduce the (ethno-) national element in their political and psychological reality – this time not by intervention but by conviction.

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Bosnia-Herzegovina has seen a decade of post-war reconstruction. As Bosnia has seen substantial advances in comparison to the immediate post-war period, Croatia and Serbia have democratized and the wars of the region have come to an end. Nevertheless, none of the societies has yet come to terms with the recent past. The political system in Bosnia furthermore consolidated some of the divisions over which the war was fought.

This book brings together political scientists, sociologists, and historians in a multi-disciplinary study of post-war Bosnia. The articles in this book examine ways in which the past in Bosnia and in the region is being addressed, the post-war system of government and the challenges it poses for self-sustainability. Other contributions focus on the perception of Bosnia and the conflict in the West, in particular in North America. The contributions challenge the notion of rigid national belonging constituting a natural cause of confrontation. Instead, the articles demonstrate how Western perceptions and the legacy of the conflict have contributed to reconstruction without reconciliation.

Cover Illustration: *Student Wall Painting On The Ruins Of A Building In The Historic Town Center (Sarajevo, 1995)* Courtesy of Mario Boccia