

## **Bosnian Elections and Recurring Ethnonationalisms: The Ghost of the Nation state**

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To an impartial observer, any of the post-Dayton elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina might look like an exercise in conflict between forces of integration and disintegration. Structurally, this is not so different from other patterns of viewing and interpreting contemporary Bosnia, which are dominated by mutually exclusive categories similar to these. The appeal of a dyadic analysis stretches beyond the rhetoric of Bosnian policy makers and permeates other professional communities involved in Bosnian issues, from academics and journalists to European bureaucrats. Every few years, the eve of general and/or municipal elections witnesses a surge in rhetoric that tries to advance the cause of Bosnian representative democracy by pointing to the benefits of integration and the high costs of disintegration. Often, Bosnia's envisaged "European future" or, alternatively, return to a belligerent past are invoked to remind the country's population of the possible outcomes of their voting choices.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, if integration is something that is valued and promoted, why is there so much disintegration in the country? Why have almost all elections since Dayton

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produced a disintegrative outcome, in terms of widespread support for ethno-nationalist parties and their programmes? Explanations of Bosnia's elections, both by scholars and policy analysts, offer a range of answers. Some point to an institutional framework that, by design, favours ethno-nationalist actors and undermines others,<sup>2</sup> while others present less constructivist arguments based on path dependency and historical determinism<sup>3</sup>. Some of these answers are correct in their own right. It is true Bosnian political actors are significantly shaped by the institutional structures that frames their choices. It is also true that historical legacy plays an important role, providing a narrative that gives meaning to contemporary political agency. However, few accounts have tried to answer the question with reference to the way it was phrased in the first place: why is Bosnia and Herzegovina so often seen and interpreted through mutually exclusive categories of unity/fragmentation, integration/disintegration, civic/ethnic and similar?

This paper takes a different route. It criticizes the categorical structure of the question, and arrives at an alternative explanation. It argues that one of the causes of recurring ethnonationalisms in post-Dayton elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the underlying logic that also manifests itself at the level of analysis: the logic of the nation state. I will claim that this logic helps to explain not only the ethnic quality of Bosnian political outcomes and corresponding disintegrative tendencies, but also the failure to conceive of a viable normative alternative to the country's political malaise.

First, I will defend a preliminary view that the theses and arguments which seek to explain Bosnia and Herzegovina, and which revolve around the civic versus ethnic dichotomy, are analytically false. I will argue that they take the nation state as a crucial qualitative reference and thus yield no viable normative alternative for one simple reason: Bosnia and Herzegovina has never been a nation state and it is unlikely

that it will become one in the near future, at least not in the current territorial or political capacity. Such arguments suggest that the integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina depends primarily on the relative strength, on the one hand, of forces willing and able to unite the country under a common ideological framework and, on the other, of those who aim to fragment and dissolve it. I will try to show that this explanatory device fails to answer the question of the causes of political disintegration in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Ultimately, I will argue that at both “extremes” of this explanation there is the same underlying logic of the nation state. The epistemic and political nature of this logic is, I believe, one of the main obstacles to the democratic transformation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Second, I will argue that the same logic determines the outcome of Bosnian elections. I will take the recent elections (October 2010) as a litmus test for assessing the validity of this thesis, and will also apply it to previous elections and other political events. I will focus on the most important political agents, and for the sake of brevity will omit the less relevant ones. By doing this, I aim to position the latest (2010) elections on a longer political–historical trajectory, and include previous events and developments into a cross-temporal analysis. In terms of method, I will rely on analysis of political party discourse, media and election campaign statements, symbols and discussions, in both recent and preceding elections. I will rely on the election results provided by the official Electoral Committee of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but will not dwell too much on a detailed numerical analysis of the results: these have already been presented in a number of articles, and in any case the Committee’s website offers a precise data set. Additionally, I will employ arguments based on my reading of Bosnia’s twentieth century history, especially the war and immediate post-war periods. The article will be presented in a form of a commentary

rather than a study, which means I will refrain from outlining broader and more detailed analyses.

### **A false dialectic and its consequences**

The classic distinction between “civic” and “ethnic” nationalism, which had gained traction in nationalist literature by the end of the twentieth century,<sup>4</sup> seemed to provide a useful blueprint for understanding and explaining Bosnia in the early nineties. It fitted nicely with the country’s distinct history and offered a simple framework for understanding the nature of its social and political problems. Being the only constituent republic of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) without a clear ethnic majority, Bosnia and Herzegovina never attained the same nation state characteristics as other republics in the federation.

Although on a par with other Yugoslav republics in terms of constitutional balance and relative internal autonomy, Bosnia was never considered the homeland of any particular Yugoslav nation, but rather a conglomerate of different nationalities and a mirror image of the great federation itself, a “miniature Yugoslavia” as it was often dubbed. It was home to Bosnian Muslims, the largest ethnic group in the country, but was constitutionally established as a republic of three equal groups – Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims. As the Yugoslav federation disintegrated along ethnic lines, which roughly mirrored the boundaries of constituent republics, Bosnia and Herzegovina was unable to face the challenge of ethnic fragmentation peacefully and descended into a war. Unlike Slovenia and Croatia, it lacked a dominant nation that would represent the incipient state and provide legitimacy to its independent path. The ethno-national logic of Yugoslavia’s dissolution left Bosnia’s first post-communist government with few alternatives; it was riddled with internal conflicts

and deeply divided on the country's future existence. Nonetheless, in a popular referendum, which was boycotted by the majority of Serbs and their representatives, government leaders (mostly Bosniak and Croat) chose independence and presented themselves as leaders of a multicultural and civic nation, a state for all Bosnians regardless of their ethnic affiliation. This understanding of an independent Bosnian republic, which was built on dichotomous views of ethnic versus civic alternatives, remained dominant during the initial stages of the country's sovereignty and the ensuing conflict.

However, the war that began in 1992 as a clear-cut case of military aggression by the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) and Serbian forces against a multicultural and independent Bosnian republic soon blurred into an ethnic conflict of indeterminate ideological boundaries. By late 1993 the military and political struggles had become almost exclusively ethnic. The idea of a multicultural Bosnian citizenship that had been adopted and promoted by Bosnia's first post-Yugoslav leadership seemed to evaporate as the government-loyal Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina began fighting not only JNA and Serbian but also local Croatian forces. As a result of external pressure, but also an internal priority to continue building a Bosnian Muslim *national* identity, the leadership of Bosnian republic – which itself consisted mainly of Bosnian Muslims from the Party of Democratic Action (SDA) – gradually gave up the ideal of creating a civic Bosnian state and began infusing the institutions of the republic with a distinct ethnic quality.

Part of this process was a decision by the Bosnian Muslim political and intellectual elite in 1993 to change the name of the group – from Bosnian Muslim to “Bosniak”. The background to these events was not only a desire to recreate a Bosniak nation, but also a systematic effort on the part of both Serb and Croat

political elites in Bosnia – which were supported politically, financially and militarily by the “homeland” bases in Serbia and Croatia – to detach the loyalty and sentiment of their populations from Bosnia and Herzegovina altogether. References to a shared past and the historical continuity of the Bosnian state gradually disappeared from public discourse in the Serb- and Croat-controlled parts of the country. The Republic of Srpska and the (partially) Croat Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia, which were internationally unrecognized political entities established by force, set about removing references to Bosnia or Bosnian common belonging from symbolic usage in public spaces, by changing names of cities, streets, buildings and monuments that contained a Bosnian reference. Consequently, the idea that there was such a thing as Bosnian identity had evaporated in two thirds of the country. All that remained were weak notions of regional and geographical landscape, such as the river Bosnia or mountainous locality of Herzegovina, which were now infused with a new ethnic quality.

But, the idea of an overarching Bosnian identity that would transcend ethnic cleavages never ceased to exist completely. It was nurtured by the non-nationalist opposition and carried from the war into the post-war Dayton period by the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and their political allies, who were the heirs of former communists. Their vision of the Bosnian state aimed to overcome the ethnic and religious differences that had raged during the conflict by downplaying the role of ethnicity, and promoting a secular politics that was free of the exclusive religious sentiments so widely used by other political agents. The “Bosnian idea” that the Social Democrats were attempting to promote was founded on a notion of civic Bosnian identity that would surpass existing ethnic differences and promote an old communist formula of Bosnian belonging that was equally inclusive of all constituent

communities in the country. Although it was dubbed “civic” on the basis of its opposition to destructive and conflict ridden ethnonationalism, the citizen-based character of this identity vision was questionable, since it was dependent on a political elite (most of whom had been members of the former Communist Party) and prescribed little or no citizen participation in public affairs beyond regular elections. It was also essentially paradoxical since existing patterns of Bosnian electoral participation and other forms of political expression gave rise to almost exclusively ethnic outcomes. However, because of its non-nationalist character and opposition to ethnic warmongers, it was endorsed by both local and international activists who were critical of Bosnia’s ethnonationalisms. This was especially true of certain international representatives. For example, Paddy Ashdown actively supported the SDP-dominated state government after the general elections in 2000, as did other European Union (EU) bureaucrats who saw Bosnian civic unity as a prerequisite for the country’s eventual integration into the Union.

The dialectic between ethnic and civic agents of Bosnian politics infused public discourse and was embodied in a number of symbolic references, such as the “Dayton versus Brussels” metaphor that was frequently invoked by analysts and practitioners as a means of highlighting the need for the country and its peoples to overcome wartime divisions and unite towards the ultimate goal of European integration. The widespread belief that Bosnia needed to adopt a civic rather than an ethnic understanding of belonging seemed to resonate with practical measures for the country’s post-Dayton transformation. However, it also produced inadvertent consequences that illustrate its analytic fallacy and political myopia.

The problem with the “civic” versus “ethnic” understanding of nationalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina is twofold. First and foremost, it is essentially embedded in a

particular Bosniak political discourse and has few supporters outside political and intellectual circles of this ethnic group. For example, most of the SDP leaders, including the party president, Zlatko Lagumdžija, are themselves Bosniaks. Although he has not made any explicit public references on the question of his ethnic identity, several facts indicate that Zlatko Lagumdžija *does* seem to assume a Bosniak identity in the public sphere and even implicitly perceives SDP to be a Bosniak party. First, Lagumdžija plays a leading role in a distinctively Bosniak cultural institution, The Bosniak Institute, established by the late Adil Zulfikarpašić. For several years, Lagumdžija has served as head of the Senate, an honourable body within the Institute that gathers together distinguished Bosniak members of society.<sup>5</sup> Although this does not necessarily confer an ethnic quality to his political activity, it nevertheless contributes to public perceptions, especially among non-Bosniaks who might regard Zlatko Lagumdžija's opinion and actions as being formulated in accordance with a particular set of ideas. However, more importantly, public discourse pushed forward by SDP leaders often reflect Bosniak political aims and values. For example, in a recent response to media speculation about the possibility of a coalition between SDA and SDP, Lagumdžija stated that he was reluctant to participate in the creation of "ethno-national blocks", seemingly confirming an implicit understanding of the SDP as a primarily Bosniak party.<sup>6</sup> Third, SDP rallies usually take place in Bosniak-majority areas of the country, and the party counts on the electoral support of this ethnic group, seldom courting the votes of members of other ethnic communities.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the notion of civic belonging in Bosnia and Herzegovina is often identified with Bosniak political discourse and does not resonate in areas dominated by Serbs and Croats. The discursive overlap of civic and Bosniak identity also chimes with the inclinations of the Bosniak intellectual elite, who regard Bosniaks as the



“owners” of the Bosnian state, as well as with other facts of demography, history and politics that indicate that Bosniaks would find greatest utility in a civic transformation of the Bosnian polity. Thus, their insistence on the creation of a civic Bosnian identity leads to ever greater detachment of Serb and Croat political elite from the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina and makes democratic transformation of the country increasingly difficult. In that sense, it also leads to fragmentation and fails to produce political stability.

The second problem with a civic alternative to ethnic nationalism in Bosnia is that it is founded on the idea that the ultimate cure for Bosnian problems is a reconceptualization of identity. It seems to suggest that all the political problems in Bosnia and Herzegovina stem from a lack of common identity and that the creation of a stronger civic identity would inevitably produce more favourable and democratic outcomes. However, the reality is different. Conflict and tension in Bosnia is far more a result of insistence that identity issues are a crucial precondition for resolving all other social and political problems. This insistence on identity frames all political struggles as conflicts over essential ethnic issues and creates a political deadlock that hinders concrete institutional and social reform. Almost all reform projects that were framed in these categories faced strong opposition from political agents reluctant to identify with such thick notions of Bosnian belonging. Issues from state symbols to identification documents and car licence plates caused fierce ethnic and political struggles in the initial post-Dayton period, and international representatives were invited to reach decisions on Bosnia’s behalf.

However, the prevalence of the ethnic versus civic dichotomy indicates an important structural fact: the ghost of the nation state has haunted Bosnia and Herzegovina ever since its modern conception in the mid-twentieth century. The

friction produced by the dominance of the nation state in Europe , the corresponding logic of Yugoslavia's internal organization, and Bosnia's exception to the prevailing political rule, have consistently raised question about the country's political and historical *raison d'etre*, providing as many arguments for its fragmentation as for its unity. So essentially, the ethnic versus civic dialectic that prevails in contemporary Bosnian politics are two sides of the same coin, both of which are firmly embedded in the idea that cultural and political boundaries should overlap, and differing only on what type of cultural "content" is appropriate for a Bosnian understanding of common belonging.

This frames dominant perceptions of citizenship in Bosnia and Herzegovina through the prism of the nation state, in its two dominant continental European guises: ethno-cultural (German) and civic-political (French).<sup>8</sup> Most ethnic Bosniak political leaders see the country as the exclusive homeland of their ethnic group, with other communities as subsidiary constituents of Bosnian commonality. Croat and Serb leaders, on the other hand, see the country as a product of historical incidence and themselves as belonging to wider national bodies with nation state homelands in the immediate neighbourhood, or regard their territorial domains in Bosnia as smaller versions of the nation state, with cultural and political boundaries overlapping to create homogenous socio-political units. The minimum commonality and identification they are willing to concede to the Bosnian polity rests on notions of consociational relationships between ethnic groups and the shared state. The non-nationalist parties and their political leaders still tend to see Bosnia and Herzegovina as a civic state with a unified body of citizens whom they wish to perceive in secular and non-ethnic terms, but fail to acknowledge the strategic link between this vision

and the majoritarian Bosniak ethnic discourse, or to come to terms with the irreconcilable pluralism of values and political visions at play.

### **Parties, elections and the state**

The logic of the nation state permeates the agenda of the majority of Bosnian electoral candidates. There are two opposing ways in which the dominant political parties position themselves in relation to the Bosnian state and its political character: “fragmentarians” and “unitarians”. Both of these groups operate under notions of overlapping cultural and political boundaries and frame their political agency within these categories, affecting popular perceptions of politics. The position of some of these parties along this axis is firm and unchangeable while others, such as SDA, repositioned themselves during the first decade and a half after the end of the Bosnian war. The following sections analyse the most important players in the Bosnian political arena and their position on the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as reflected in recent elections (October 2010) and in previous elections. As mentioned earlier, the aim of applying this explanatory logic to the analysis is to demonstrate that none of these positions seeks to envision the Bosnian polity beyond the conflict-ridden logic of the nation state. What this logic does succeed in doing, however, is producing mutually exclusive visions and conflicting relations between Bosnia’s constitutive groups and their party representatives.

#### ***Fragmentarian Serb parties***

The most fervent advocates of Bosnia’s political fragmentation have been Serb parties, beginning with the Serb Democratic Party (SDS) that led the Serb armed resistance to Bosnian independence from Yugoslavia and their political heirs.

In the post-Dayton years, the SDS lost its dominant position in the Serb ethnic camp, mainly due to concessions they were forced to make by the international community. The reason why SDS was willing to concede to such pressures is linked to the legacy of the war and the involvement of their leadership in planning and executing mass war crimes and ethnic cleansing, which led to arrests and criminal prosecutions. Concessions were made in the course of initial post-Dayton years and the development of Bosnian state institutions left SDS without much of popular support in the Serb entity of Republic of Srpska, which turned instead to other, more successful political agents.

One of the most successful was the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), led by Milorad Dodik who was able to separate Serb politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina from the tarnished war legacy of the SDS leadership and enjoyed the initial support of Western powers. Although he was perceived in the early phases as a non-nationalist willing to reach consensus with other, non-Serb partners in Bosnian politics – especially given his presumed leftist and social-democratic inclinations – Dodik gradually became a strident advocate of the ethnic Serb cause. His transformation followed confrontations with the Bosniak political leadership, embodied in Haris Silajdžić, the leader of the Party for Bosnia and Herzegovina (SBiH) which was seen as a negative (unitarian and majoritarian) influence on Serb politics in the country. The general elections of 2006 were the pinnacle of Dodik's political success: after a long and bitter political campaign in which two visions of Bosnia's political future – Silajdžić's unified and centralized and Dodik's fragmented, decentralized and possibly dissolved polity – clashed in a Schmittean fashion<sup>9</sup>, both players establishing themselves as the leaders of their ethnic constituencies and winning most of the ethnic votes. In the years following the 2006 elections, Dodik's

ultimate power in the Republic of Srpska was further consolidated, thanks to his party's overwhelming dominance in the entity institutions, and their access to public funds and development projects, which contributed to his image as a defender of Republic of Srpska's socio-economic sustainability and political subjectivity.

As a result of overwhelming popular support, funding, and the lack of a negative war legacy, Dodik's willingness to concede to projects aimed at developing the institutions and subjectivity of the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina was virtually non-existent. Furthermore, his vision of Bosnia was minimal, based on acceptance of what he perceived as a political and historical necessity of limited duration. During the post-2006 years, he managed to stall various reform processes and bring the Republic of Srpska into a much closer political alliance with Serbia, which he regarded as the homeland of Bosnian Serbs to whom they owed ultimate political allegiance. However, the way he positioned the Republic of Srpska within Bosnia and Herzegovina indicated a pattern of political subjectivity that reflected nation state norms of cultural and political boundary overlap. The current relationship between the Serb entity and the institutions of the common Bosnian state resembles the internal constitution of Yugoslavia, with the common confederate state as a political framework devoid of cultural meaning and sovereignty, within which the Republic of Srpska exists as a sovereign body is bound to seek more autonomy and resume the conceded political subjectivity. In other words, the Republic of Srpska is perceived as a "nation statelet" of Serb people in Bosnia, determined by an ethno-cultural understanding of citizenship.

Such activities and political developments have earned Milorad Dodik extended tenure as the head of Bosnian Serbs: the October 2010 elections illustrated that his support among Serbs remains still significantly higher than any of his Serb

political opponents. His party secured a relative majority of votes in the entity parliament; he was elected President of Republic of Srpska (with more than 50% of the votes) and his candidate, Nebojša Radmanović secured another term as the Serb member of the state presidency (with 48% of the votes).<sup>10</sup> Under the SNSD, the political dynamic in the Serb entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina will most probably continue to revolve around claims for greater autonomy for the Republic of Srpska and less authority for the common Bosnian state.

The more assertive the unitarian Bosniak parties become, the more detached and conflicting the Serb political leadership appears to be. Post-electoral alliance building has already taken this route. In early November 2010, SNSD and SDS announced a common political platform for Republic of Srpska representation in the common state institutions, and highlighted that the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina is merely “derived” from the sovereignty of the entities and the different ethnic communities.<sup>11</sup> In early December, SNSD began to negotiate for political cooperation and a possible state-level alliance with the SDP, formed around minimal shared political values and priority projects: from EU integration, to implementation of a European Court of Human Rights decision on the *Sejdić/Finci* case, to the census.<sup>12</sup> So, far, however, none of the initial talks have yielded a concrete result and the two parties remain at both ideological and political distance from one another.

### ***Fragmentarian Croat parties***

Although all constituent ethnic groups in Bosnia share power on an equal basis, the relative strength of the main ethno-political agents is substantially different.

The Croat population in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the smallest of the three ethnic groups and is further depleted to ongoing migration to neighbouring Croatia.

Consequently, Croat political agents in Bosnia and Herzegovina feel overshadowed by the more populous ethnic groups and their dominant political position in the country. The relative subjugation of Croat parties to larger ethnic powers was especially evident during the 2006 electoral campaign, which was completely dominated by clashes between Serb and Bosniak political leaders (notably Dodik and Silajdžić) and their competing visions of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is further exacerbated by the structural fact that Croats and Bosniaks share one of the two state entities – the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina – which, due to the asymmetric size of the two communities, is often perceived as an essentially Bosniak political entity. These two facts were at the centre of Croat political campaigns in the last elections, with a single theme dominating the agenda: the creation of a third, Croat, political entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Croat politicians have been pushing this agenda for some years, but the latest elections saw a surge in demands for a Croat entity across almost all Croat parties for a number of reasons. The first relates to downward social trends within the Croat community and the emigration of many young and educated Croats to neighbouring Croatia. The latter pattern has been exacerbated by Croatia's structural support to emigrant Bosnian Croats, whereby it provides them with Croatian citizenship.<sup>13</sup> If the trend continues, as Croat leaders fear, there will be less and less basis for obtaining future political concessions from the other two groups – especially Bosniaks. These fears are at the root of the fervent demands by political and other social and cultural leaders to secure Croat political sustainability and autonomy while the conditions for such structural changes are still favourable.

Another reason behind calls for a third Croat entity within the Bosnian state is dissatisfaction with electoral rules that have, for the second time, enabled a Social

Democrat (and mostly Bosniak favoured) candidate to become elected as the Croat representative in the tripartite state presidency. Under the existing constitutional and electoral structure, voters must elect the Bosniak and Croat members of the state presidency from the territory of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. As in 2006 the SDP nominated Željko Komšić, a Croat from Sarajevo, for the post. Given the numerical weakness of Croat voters who, presumably, favour candidates from Croat nationalist parties, they have been unable to elect their representative, and thanks to the support of SDP voters (most of whom are believed to be Bosniaks) Komšić won the election. Headed by the dominant Croat political party, the Croat Democratic Union (HDZ) – whose candidate (with 20% of votes) would have won the Croat presidency post had it not been for Komšić (who won 60%) – expressed deep dissatisfaction with the existing constitutional structure and announced further steps towards reform of Bosnia's internal structures.<sup>14</sup>

The reason Croat political agents opt for a more balanced (or fragmented) structure of the Bosnian polity, however, is not a desire for more equitable relations between the country's constituent communities. The group-based rights system has been firmly established, and opportunities for infringement of ethno-cultural rights (of all three groups) are minimal because ethnic groups govern themselves through a territorially organized system and enjoy a number of legal mechanisms that prevent dominance by a single ethnic group. What seems to be at issue is the desire of Croat political agents to establish cultural and political boundaries within Bosnia and Herzegovina that will delimit the Croat social and political domain and frame all future outcomes in an ethno-national fashion. The case of Željko Komšić suggests that what Croat parties seem to opt against is an open-ended political system, where



the identities of both citizens and their political representatives are not subject to structural ethno-cultural limitations.

### *Unitarian Bosniak parties*

As already outlined, most Bosniak political parties seem to push for a more unitarian vision of the Bosnian state. Two structural causes seem to feed into this fact. The first is the Bosniak position within former Yugoslavia, whereby the community had no external leverage in the form of a national homeland or a “natural” (ethnic) ally to rely on. Unlike the Bosnian Serbs and Croats, Bosniak ethnic identity is directly dependent on the existence and political sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Second, as the most populous community in the country, Bosniaks are most favourably positioned to exert higher levels of political control over the country’s democratic institutions. These facts mean that Bosniak political parties are more inclined to opt for unitarian political arrangements and, consequently, to campaign on these grounds during elections.

The high point of Bosniak unitarianism occurred in 2006 when Haris Silajdžić, leader of the SBiH, was elected as the Bosniak member of the state presidency following an extremely unitarian political campaign advocating the abolition of the Republic of Srpska and the creation of a “civic” polity in Bosnia. If the Serb and Croat parties played the fragmentation card (independence of the Republic of Srpska or the creation of a Croat entity), in 2006 the Bosniaks relied on notions of Bosnian unity and a civic vision of the state.

Traditionally influential among Bosniaks, the Party of Democratic Action (SDA) lost significant electoral support because it was perceived as overly conciliatory towards Serb claims and their visions of constitutional reform. However,

the elections in 2010 witnessed a radical shift in the Bosniak camp, with the SDA returning to its position as the most influential ethnic Bosniak political agent. There was also support to new ethnic players, such as the Party for a Better Future (SBiH), formed and headed by Fahrudin Radončić, a controversial businessman and media magnate. The reason behind the loss of electoral support for Silajdžić's unitarian visions can be found, among other things, in popular disappointment with Silajdžić's rigid attitude towards Milorad Dodik's radicalization of political circumstances, and fears that too much unitarianism on the part of Bosniaks would endanger the minimal stability and unity underlying the country's political existence. The new Bosniak member of the presidency, Bakir Izetbegović, the son of the party's founder, Alija Izetbegović, is already adopting a more conciliatory and cooperative attitude that counters the hitherto unitarian and imposing thrust of Bosniak political leadership. This also reflects the SDA's gradual shift from a unitarian stance to greater acceptance of consociationalism between Bosnia's constituent groups.

However, this does not mean that Bosniak political parties will cease to push for a unitarian agenda. The structural determinants of Bosniak politics will frame outcomes in the future, but some modifications can be expected, especially if the SDA manages to successfully balance post-electoral alliances and politics between extremes of left unitarianism and right fragmentation.

### ***Unitarian non-nationalists***

The unitarians camp is made up of the most dominant Bosniak parties, such as SBiH and SDA, and the non-nationalist, mainly left-leaning parties which advocate more civic, secular and trans-ethnic visions of the Bosnian state. Among these, the only one that has managed to garner significant support is the Social Democrat Party (SDP),

which won the post of Croat member of presidency, but also secured a high number of seats in parliament at different levels across the country. The SDP campaign for the 2010 elections was dominated by a unitarian vision of the Bosnian polity.

As a result, the reach of the SDP has been largely confined to the Bosniak-majority areas of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with slim electoral success in Croat and Serb areas. The civic nature of the SDP vision resonated with just one of the ethnic groups, alienating others. Alienation was strongest in the case of the Croats, predominantly because of the *Komšić* case, but also among Serbs from the Republic of Srpska who perceive SDP not as a cross-ethnic party with a unifying social-democratic ideology or welfare agenda, but as one of the Bosniak Sarajevo-centered parties whose aim is centralization of the Bosnian state.

Immediate post-election events, together with the SDP electoral campaign, seemed to confirm the suspicion that what the SDP was looking for was not conciliatory and consensual politics, but the greatest possible control of state institutions. Shortly after their relative electoral success was announced by the Electoral Committee, they extended their claims to include the highest offices in the common state, and announced their dedication to see the party head, Zlatko Lagumdžija, in the post of Chairman of the Council of Ministers, which showed no respect for the informal consociational rule of ethnic rotation in high office. Under this rule, previously respected by all political actors, the post of Chairman should be occupied by a Croat candidate for the next four years. Needless to say, this has further exacerbated Croat dissatisfaction with the state of political affairs and deepened their alienation from the outcomes generated by “civic”-minded political agents.

These indications show that the SDP’s “civic” and non-nationalist political agenda is far from independent from Bosnia’s ethnic power relations. Instead, it is

closely entwined with the structural position of Bosniaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and builds on both their numerical predominance and their strategic visions of the state. It is thus poised to create an alliance between Bosniak ethnic and unitarian parties, and to produce outcomes which will necessarily be seen as particularist and ethnically-motivated by the two other constituent groups. Does this make SDP an outright Bosniak party? Not necessarily, or at least not directly. The party's membership is multi-ethnic and the symbolic image it aims to create in the public sphere relies far more heavily on a leftist ideology and a communist past than on Bosniak ethnic values, which makes the SDP more inclusive and more conciliatory towards ethnic differences than any of the other larger parties in the country.

However, the position the SDP often assumes in Bosnian party politics gives some indication that the SDP defends interests of Bosniaks more than other ethnic groups, a message that is sent implicitly sent both to their Bosniak constituency and to Serb and Croat voters in non-Bosniak parts of the country. Thus, the SDP can be considered a Bosniak party, but only indirectly, with the structure of the political realm rendering it as such, much more than a their explicit ideological profile.

### **Conclusion: beyond the (nation) state?**

The problem of all political actors and ideological visions in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the impossibility of going beyond arguments that reflect the prevailing structures of the nation state and its dominant rule of cultural and political overlap.

Fragmentarians, both Serb and Croat, seem unable to conceive of a vision of the Bosnian state which goes beyond a mere aggregative framework for reflecting ethnic sovereignty and the territorial ethnocultural organization of the country's constituent communities. Almost every reform that aims to develop central state

institutions or build up the symbolism of a common Bosnia and Herzegovina and which does not emphasize its aggregate, synthetic and incidental nature, is bound to be seen as an infringement on essential ethnic and communal sovereignty, understood as the fundamental element of Bosnia's historic existence.

Conversely, Bosniak unitarians are unable to conceive of a vision of the Bosnian state which can take account of the deep differences and disagreements that exist between different groups of people. Their political actors seem to lack the conceptual framework to imagine a political community beyond what they regard as the standard mode of "normalcy" – the European nation state.

This lack of conceptual framework is, however, much more complex than the Bosnian political and party strategies would indicate. The fact that truly non-nationalist and social-democratic minded Bosnian politicians ended up in the same camp as unitarian nationalists reveals not only their embeddedness in local power relations but also the existence of structural barrier to thinking about complex states such as Bosnia and Herzegovina in ways that go beyond prevailing historical and conceptual models. Thus, both the post-Dayton electoral outcomes in Bosnia and their analyses, which are framed in categories that revolve around the civic and ethnic poles, cannot provide an indication of what the normative solutions to the Bosnian political problem might be. They can only describe the dominant cleavages in the country's political sphere, but since these have recurred in a structurally similar way since the end of the war, such a description seems superfluous.

In my view, the real challenge in both analysing and resolving the Bosnian political deadlock is to redefine the Bosnian state and its role in people's lives. Though there is a scarcity of theoretical mechanisms for such an undertaking, one domain is both conceptually viable and contextually relevant: that of human rights.

The minimalist definition of the Bosnian state as an institutional anchor for a broad spectrum of human rights (political, social, cultural) could potentially be acceptable to all political actors in the country and conceptually satisfy the need to reflect the reality of Bosnia's "deep pluralism", while remaining normatively fixed and justified on the basis of universal principle.

There was a missed opportunity during the October 2010 elections to position human rights as one of the key factors in political resolution, though some incentives were visible, mainly in the European Court of Human Rights decision on minority disenfranchisement in Bosnia. None of the incumbent political parties have rallied around human rights arguments nor attempted to see the role of the Bosnian state in this way. However, if the momentum for such discussions and developments appears in time for the next municipal elections (2012) or general elections (2014), and is coupled with European regional integration and pressure to comply with European human rights standards, a window of opportunity may open for structural change in Bosnian politics. At this point it remains firmly closed.

### Notes

- 1 On integration and disintegration in the EU context, see T. Gromes. 'The prospect of European integration and conflict transformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina'. *European Integration* 31(4) (2009): 431–47.
- 2 See the analysis of Bosnian elections at <http://www.opendemocracy.net/bosnia's-politics-of-paralysis/peter-lippman>. Retrieved: Nov, 28 2010. For a more detailed view, see A. Mujkić, 'We, the citizens of Ethnopolis'. In *Constellations* 14(1) (2007): 112–28.
- 3 The most prominent and influential deterministic interpretation of Bosnia's problems in the region was an account by the Croatian political scientist, Mirjana Kasapović, in her *Bosna i Hercegovina: podijeljeno društvo i nestabilna država*. Zagreb: Politička kultura, 2005.
- 4 See E. Hobsbawm. *Nation and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990; H. Kohn. *The Idea of Nationalism*. New York: Macmillan, 1945. Excerpts in J. Hutchinson and AD. Smith. *Nationalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- 5 See more at <http://bosnjackiinstitut.org/home/sadrzaj/57>. Retrieved: Nov, 28 2010.
- 6 See more at <http://depo.ba/vijest/24352>. Retrieved: Nov, 28 2010.

- 7 This was clearly visible during the most recent elections in 2010 and Željko Komšić's campaign for the post of Croat member of the state presidency. Media appearances and the political discourse employed during the campaign, both by Komšić and other candidates, indicated that Komšić's main opposition was not Croat but Bosniak party candidates: Bakir Izetbegović and Haris Silajdžić. This was evident in some of the issues raised, notably the war experience, the *Zlatni ljiljan* medal for war commitments in the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina (mainly supported by Bosniaks), and direct comparisons between Bosniak presidential candidates and their roles during the war. These things seemed to indicate that Komšić was primarily counting on Bosniak, rather than Croat, support for his post.
- 8 I am drawing on Brubaker's historical ideal type models here. See R. Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- 9 See E. Sarajlic. 'Djeca Carla Schmitta: Fenomenoloska analiza sukoba Dodik-Silajdzic, *Puls demokratije*. January 10 2008.  
<http://www.pulsdemokratije.net/index.php?id=670&l=bs>. Retrieved: Nov, 28 2010.
- 10 See more on the webpage of the Central Electoral Committee of Bosnia and Herzegovina.  
<http://www.izbori.ba/WebModule18/Finalni/PredsjednikRS/Nivo.aspx>. Retrieved: eg. Nov, 28 2010.
- 11 See *Oslobodjenje*. 04 November 2010: 3.
- 12 See *Oslobodjenje*. 05 December 2010: 3.
- 13 On Croatian citizenship policy see F. Ragazzi and I. Štiks. 'Croatian citizenship: from ethnic engineering to inclusiveness'. In *Citizenship Policies in the New Europe*, eds. R. Bauböck, B. Perchinig and W Sievers. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009.
- 14 See *Oslobodjenje*. 05 October 2010: 7.