

Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

An International, Interdisciplinary, Bilingual, Online Journal
Međunarodni, interdisciplinarni, dvojezični, online časopis

No Final Curtain: The Neverending Drama of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Rusmir Mahmutćehajić

On 18 July 2010, the president of the Republic of Serbia, Boris Tadić, played host to Ivo Josipović, the president of the Republic of Croatia. Examined from a Bosnian and Herzegovinian perspective, this event was both welcome and important. Through the entire 20th century the Bosnian and Herzegovinian question has been at the very heart of Serb and Croat relations. Matters came to a head at the end of the century with the direct involvement of practically all the available resources of the Serbian nationalist project, on the one hand, and of the Croat nationalist project, on the other, involving nearly all the resources of the states of these former Yugoslav republics, whose independence and sovereignty were the result of the dissolution of the Federation within which they had been incorporated.

This culmination was of course the war against the state and society of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a war both neighbouring states took active part in. Their participation was coordinated with a view to preventing a Bosnian and Herzegovinian state developing as a factor of Western Balkan political architecture. The proposed tri-partition of Bosnia and Herzegovina was expected to supply material for the expansion of Serbia and Croatia. It is impossible to observe a meeting between the presidents of Serbia and Croatia without comparing it to earlier positions regarding Bosnia and Herzegovina. Given their tragic and criminal contents any serious analysis and comparison must start from the important, even paradigmatic agreements and programmes known as Cvetković-Maček 1939 and Milošević-Tuđman 1991.

These Serb and Croat nationalist programmes, developed and instrumentalized during the 19th and 20th centuries denied the integrity and future of Bosnian and Herzegovinian society and the state. They provided the basis for crimes committed against the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the destruction of practically all forms of cultural plurality. During the most recent war, the essence of these schemes was clearly revealed. While instrumentalization took a more explicitly violent form, these anti-Bosnian programmes nonetheless remained and remain substantially identical with their 19th century forerunners.

It is incumbent upon all observers and participants in the international order, which makes peace its supreme ideal, and particularly on people from Bosnia and Herzegovina whose very existence is affected by all things connected with their state,

that they investigate this encounter in all its aspects, but particularly on the basis of a comparison with all similar programmes from the past. The only sage approach to this encounter is one which posits and critically questions its impact on the future of the country, both positive and negative. It is far from wisdom to be satisfied by the fine phrases that adorn the public face of politics.

The present condition of the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina can only be understood by reference to the question: how did this condition come about and how and by what has the present political order been produced? On the basis of certain uncontested historical facts from the past two decades we may proffer the following: the destructive participation of Milosević's Serbia and Tuđman's Croatia are without doubt the most important causes of the present condition of the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the society it comprises. Without the state powers availed of by presidents Slobodan Milošević and Franjo Tuđman in the war against Bosnia and Herzegovina, it would not have been possible to bring Bosnia and Herzegovina to its current condition. This condition can be illustrated on the basis of three aspects.

The first aspect is that Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (and Montenegro) are inextricably interconnected geopolitically, but also culturally and economically. The second is that the causes of the current condition of the state and society of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in this act of its drama, are to be found almost entirely in the state policies of Serbia and Croatia. The third aspect is that under the current constitution, which is an important factor in the paralysis affecting Bosnian and Herzegovinian society and the state, both Serbia and Croatia are directly involved.

Each of these aspects will be found empirically to be present within the political mantra emphasized to a greater or lesser degree during speeches by the presidents of both Serbia and Croatia: we recognize the sovereignty of the Bosnian and Herzegovinian state, its territorial integrity, and any achieved change to the constitution that is the result of agreement between all three peoples and both entities. Alongside this, Tadić has reiterated his emphasis on Serbia's role as a guarantor of the Dayton agreement, which in fact means of the current constitutional paralysis.

Stable relations between these three neighbouring states - Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina - are possible only on the basis of an affirmation of the principles of political order which form the basis for the European elites' programme to develop lasting European integration. All sides, and that means each state involved in the building of these relations, possess statehood [i.e. is recognized as a legitimate political subject] allowing it to take part in negotiations, contract agreements, and give shape to the common interest. Such common interests may take the form of investigating the levels of sovereignty of individual countries and capacity to transfer certain of its elements to joint organizations and institutions which make up one part of the international order and which are constituted by the participants in answer to their common needs.

Of all the states in the Western Balkans, Bosnia and Herzegovina is the weakest. Looking at the various parameters that determine the degree of sustainability - for example, the presence of state-level authorities active throughout its territory or of

legally prescribed forms of organisation and coordination of various functions - there is no getting away from the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina is not an equal partner to either Serbia or Croatia in any area of international relations under current circumstances. This situation is a consequence of the breaking up and disabling of state structures whose functionality is a precondition for disposing of the necessary degree of sovereignty required for compatibility with the international political architecture.

The structure of state-level governance and government in Bosnia and Herzegovina is remarkably complex. The society of this state comprises two collectives developed over recent centuries within the framework of a pair of nationalist programmes - the Serb and Croat. These two nationalist projects were and remain in a dialectical relationship. The Orthodox inhabitants of Bosnian and Herzegovinian state territory have gradually been incorporated within the construction of a homogenous Serb nation, while Catholics have been drawn into a parallel construction of a Croat nation.

Both Serb and Croat nationalist programmes, like all similar programmes, involve an elite, an ideology, and an apparatus for which a national state, founded in historical claims and natural right, has become the most important, if not actually sacrosanct goal. This has further meant that national identity has become necessarily associated with a national territory. The very suggestion of dividing up or limiting the Serb or Croat national corpora leads to the problematization of Bosnian and Herzegovinian territory as a sort of enigma or labyrinth out of which some way must be found. Given the existing complex interpenetration of populations and cultural heritage, no solution is possible without changing the circumstances.

Within the enigma and labyrinth of Bosnian and Herzegovinian territory, the reality was, however, considerably more complex. While Orthodoxy and Catholicism, with all their connections to Serb and Croat national programmes, and their respective churches provided an important measure for differentiation and delimitation, the Muslim presence throughout the area was a complicating factor that both Serb and Croat elite groups found frustrating. The Muslim presence has, in line with this frustration, as a rule been presented as a European anomaly. In so far as Europe is Christian, which has been and continues to be repeatedly stated, then any Muslim presence is surplus to requirements and must be excised. The better to serve these requirements, an ideological construct was created that argued the historical discontinuity of Bosnian Muslims with regard to their existence as a people.

These are the circumstances within which the drama of this European people has been played out. The well-known description of its destiny by Selimović describes it as unsuited for any future European order, and so as the most tragic of the peoples of the region, as mocked by history. It is these circumstances, marked by ideological anti-Muslimism and the political programmes based upon it, which give life to the frustrations in which the deniers of Bosnian and Herzegovinian social, cultural, and political unity find the justifications they desire and need.

Like its Croat counterpart, Serb national integrity has developed generally in line with European trends and in assumed compatibility with them. These national integrities extend into Bosnian and Herzegovinian territory, so that the anticipated equality of

the peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina is interpreted in terms of the right to special relations with Serbia and Croatia as the “matrices/mother states,” as well is in terms of those states’ rights to become involved in all and any internal matters of the Bosnian and Herzegovinian state.

The stress on the incompatibility of the Muslim presence with the process of European consolidation in this part of the world is reflected in collective xenophobia and the fabrication amongst Muslims of stories of allies and friends elsewhere in the world. Given the emotional and moralizing nature of this imaginary confabulation, these allies and friends are located in the so-called Islamic countries.

This provides fertile ground for an imaginary culture, for caricaturish “pro-Islamic sentimentality,” the epigonic aping of pseudo-Islamic forms, and, worst of all, the simplistic psychological susceptibility of Muslims to modern ideological movements packed up in ideologized Islam. These are simply some of the consequences of the frustration produced by nationalist interference by neighbours, the passivity of some of the main players in the international order, and inability to exit the stubbornly contraining

framework of segregation in order to see in the state a reliable instrument of the rule of just laws.

The weakness of the Bosnian and Herzegovinian state and its struggle with the issues of legitimacy and survival, as well as with the opposition of the nationalist elites receiving effective psychological and material support from neighbouring states – these have caused Muslim frustrations and xenophobia to find expression above and beyond understandable political articulation of the sort that is a precondition for negotiation and agreement on common state-level interests. Fear gains an ever greater hold on Bosnian Muslims, the weaker the Bosnian and Herzegovinian state becomes. This fear grows in proportion to the strengthening role of politics centred in Belgrade and Zagreb.

Under such circumstances, pseudo-religious rhetoric, and not infrequently an avidity for public demonstrations, has become the most important characteristic of the Muslim presence in public life, and this is taken as a key point against them and a support to enemies of the Bosnian and Herzegovinian state. This deficient and feeble state-level politics lends credence to the claim that the Bosnian Muslims are a non-political nation, incapable of being the subjects of a credible democratic politics.

We may conclude that the phenomena provided by Muslim xenophobia and the extreme behaviour of individuals and groups based upon it are both welcome and necessary to those who would deny Bosnian and Herzegovinian statehood. If this is the case, should we not look in these very forms of Muslim extremism for the hand of those same forces that fought in language, and with fire, and with sword through the long 20th century to deny Bosnian and Herzegovinian society and its state?

The Bosnian Muslims have never, through their history, lived with another Muslim people as neighbour. Both diachronically and synchronically, they have lived only with Christians. In a diachronic perspective, they have lived with Christians as their

immediate ancestors, while synchronically Christians have been their neighbours. This has had a determining influence on both their culture and their mentality. The widespread aping of foreign cultures and incorporation of aspects of them is a lethal poison for them.

Failure to understand these facts and to maintain a distance even in frustrated wish fulfilment has robbed this people of the ability to articulate a political consciousness that is a necessary precondition if they are to join in constructing the political order they lack, which cannot be founded except on realistic political and other forms of relations with Serbs, Croats, Montenegrins, and all the other groups sharing the time and space of their existential drama. It also strips them of the possibility of articulating and realizing their rights and duties, of building broadly-based friendships in the legal order, and determining to oppose all denial of their rights.

So long as the presence of Serbia and Croatia remains simplistically visible in Bosnian and Herzegovinian political life as the drama of unreconciled contradictions, there will, as both a psychological and a real need of such politics, be a desire to ascribe links to Bosnian Muslims and Bosniaks with the "Islamic world," "fundamentalist organisations," and "the resurgence of Turkey in the Balkans." In referring to a "desire to ascribe," we have no intention of excluding a real Muslim acceptance of being included in such forms of articulation of collective Muslim consciousness and its associated terrors.

In this way, at the level of collective consciousnesses and the political and other forms of behaviour associated with them, a triangle is produced whose three sides are the Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks. In such a conception of national homogeneity and separation, a demand is placed on the three nations in Bosnia which cannot be met anywhere in Europe, or indeed anywhere that the experiences of Western political philosophy hold sway: namely, three peoples must reach agreement, which in reality means three political parties, each winning a majority of votes, or three alliances based around them.

The demand that this confused political setup be respected forms a major premise of the state-level policies of both Serbia and Croatia. They insist on this premise, even though as states they have been on multiple occasions involved in actively undermining the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is also worth stressing that there is not now and never has been a Bosnian and Herzegovinian political programme that opposes in any similar way either Serbia or Croatia.

It would be possible to list any number of ongoing forms of involvement by Serbia and Croatia in Bosnia and Herzegovina which are literally intended to hinder consolidation of the state system, albeit presented and defended as national and state duties and rights, political benevolence, etc. No comprehensive analysis of these interventions has yet been made, but they are evident at every turn.

I have in mind interventions in issues of education and culture, social welfare, energy policy, the segregation of Bosnian and Herzegovinian citizens, downplaying of state-level authorities, refusal to accept responsibility for the current situation, protecting and hiding war criminals, etc. There is not a single important consequence of the war

against Bosnia with regard to removing which Serbia or Croatia have offered their active and constructive involvement. In fact, both states have taken a more or less passive stand with regards to the continued existence of anti-Bosnian and Herzegovinian programmes which are just as opposed to the survival of the state now as they ever were.

Milorad Dodik repeats this mantra of opposition to any Bosnian and Herzegovinian state with even greater determination than Milošević and Karadžić or Tuđman and Boban ever did. But president Tadić stubbornly keeps silent. How is one to consider his harmonization with the aria of his political soulmate in Banja Luka, a harmonization which supports every and any solution supported by all three peoples and both entities, a hearty welcome and encouragement for the next act of the Bosnian drama as foreshadowed by the statements of Milorad Dodik. Statements which include the following variation: "I am certain that the day will come when the Serb people decide on their own destiny in a referendum. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a nightmare for the Republika Srpska, but like any nightmare, it will last only as long as it must" (Oslobođenje, 25th of July, 2010, 2).

But what does it mean for peoples, which in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina means ethno-nations, to agree? Does it entail territorialization, with each brought within its own individual borders and in this way provided an opportunity to elect its own democratic representatives, authorized to negotiate for the people? Is this even possible under current circumstances, with two entities which are not de iure ethnonational, which de iure belong fully and at one and the same time to each one of the three constitutive peoples and all of them in concert, as well to the Bosnian and Herzegovinian people as a whole, which is not reducible to just these three ethno-nations?

Given such a conception of ethno-nation, these entities are the de facto rule of ethnic majorities over those who have been made minorities in a land they have inhabited since they came into being. This conception is reproduced de facto in every part of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The image of a state constituted as a whole through segregation permeates, from the highest level to the lowest. In accordance with it, collective identities are forced to become either majority or minority, so that one's destiny depends on the ethnic majority rather than on the individuals or state.

This condition of segregation throughout the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina is founded upon the toothlessness of state-level government and the direct and indirect support of Serbia and Croatia for "their" ethnic fellows in this country. The state-level government of Bosnia and Herzegovina is not in a position to be partner to either of these states, as it lacks the necessary capacities. It lacks them, because dependence on the fiction of uni-centric nations is fostered by separatist and autonomy-seeking activities under the familiar nationalist programmes.

The active involvement of Serbia and Croatia in the existential and political drama of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which lasted through the 20th century, with culminating points during World War Two and the dissolution of Yugoslavia, has not ceased during the first decade of the third millennium. This involvement does not take the same form as before, but is in essence the same. Given their active role in the recent war against

Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia's current apparently passive policies conceal a destructive intent, as they undermine any transformation of the broken-backed state into a capacity for active partnership with neighbours and other actors in the international order.

If what we are looking for is a coherent and sustainable political order comprising both Bosnia and Herzegovina and her neighbours, then three things are needed: fundamental change in how Serbia and Croatia behave towards Bosnia and Herzegovina, and that means stopping forthwith the pattern of patronage, mentoring, and illegal arbitration within the Bosnian and Herzegovinian drama; unwavering support from the main advocates of peace and integration in Europe and the world for a plural society within Bosnia and Herzegovina and a state that recognizes and protects that plurality; the exclusion of all forms of segregation and apartheid from political life and the consistent punishment of any and all destructive and criminal acts against humanity committed within the Bosnian and Herzegovinian environment.

The meetings and statements of Boris Tadić, the Serbian president, and Ivo Josipović, the Croatian president, which we saw take place during July of this year, contained no concrete evidence of the changes required in their national policies towards the state and society of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Unfortunately, no one from Bosnian and Herzegovinian political life has sent them a convincing list of concrete and necessary steps that might bring about a positive resolution of this new act of the national drama, a resolution without which there is not and cannot be peace or stability or justice or progress in the country, the region, Europe, or in the final analysis the world.

These three conditions for the normalization of social, cultural, political, and economic conditions in the Western Balkans, which are but three aspects of the single goal of Bosnian and Herzegovinian policy with regard to the world, and so with regard to Serbia and Croatia, are realisable, if they are accepted as a core task by those actors in the political order whose job it is to defend the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a common good. If Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia are not to be equal states in all their mutual relations, with the proviso that Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot be a national state in the same way as Serbia and Croatia, then no coherent relationship will ever be possible between them.

If such a relationship of equality is to be, the onus is on Serbia and Croatia. Not that current players on the Bosnian and Herzegovinian political scene have no responsibilities to define and make known the unacceptable forms Serbia and Croatia's behaviour has taken with regard to this state. Their responsibility is perhaps the greatest. Are Silajdžić and Komšić, members of the presidency at the time of writing, incapable of doing this jointly and of presenting the Bosnian and Herzegovinian public and the world with a list of unacceptable positions and actions taken by Serbia and Croatia against the state they lead? Only by defining problems which are the result of a type of action unacceptable in the political architecture of Europe can we take the full measure of the dominant role being played by the anti-Bosnian and Herzegovinian activities of Dodik, his followers, and their allies. Given that neither has done so, the question must be asked: Can it be that this political confusion and the absence of whole series of statelevel documents, to mention only the

lack of a national spatial plan or energy strategy - that it suits them as individuals and/or the groups whose political and financial interests they represent?

The plurality of Bosnian and Herzegovinian society cannot be articulated in any way that involves territorialization of the ethno-nations. The lasting consequences of the wartime attempt to achieve that by force must be addressed. If peace, security, and justice are the goals of political reform in the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the wider geo-political region, the current weaknesses of the state must be tackled by defining and rendering functional those elements which have been gradually degraded and transforming these enervating actions into a centripetal force that aims at peace and equity.

© 2011 *Rusmir Mahmutćehajić*

Note: This essay appeared recently in Forum Bosne and is republished with the permission of the author.

The preceding text is copyright of the author and/or translator and is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.