Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

Bosnia And Herzegovina: Facing the Challenge of Independence

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Introduction

What holds today's Bosnia and Herzegovina together? Unfortunately, there is no internal cohesive energy that would be strong enough to keep it together if the international community would cease to guard its integrity. This insight is disturbing, but if it is accurate, there is no use turning one's head away from it. Rather, this insight should serve as the starting point for all intellectual, theoretical, and political re-thinking in the search for the most adequate solutions that might help lead to a gradual reaching of the political cohesion necessary for a self-sustaining and functioning Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Historical experience, particularly the recent tragic one, whose beginning is simultaneous with the beginning of the multiparty democracy in 1990, brings forward a general lesson–-that the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina lies in the recognition and adequate political articulation of its pluralities, and not in any kind of singularity. Insisting on singularity (political, administrative, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, etc) is, in fact, a clear symptom of the fear to recognize differences. A true and serious loyalty to Bosnia and Herzegovina will therefore be best demonstrated by those political and intellectual forces that are most ready to face all the implications and the consequences of the search for a pluralistic solution with an open mind and without a priori judgment.

I.

Stagnation is the summary characteristic that has been used in descriptions of the shared circumstances in Bosnia and Herzegovina thirteen years after the recent war. The process of changes that would become structural and irreversible has somehow not started yet. The stagnation characterizes equally the political, socio-economic, cultural, educational realms. Most importantly, the stagnation characterizes the character of reconciliation and the renewal of mutual trust in inter-ethnic and inter-confessional relations. In all three ethnic communities, ethno-nationalism, combined with and strengthened by its religio-confessional component, has deeply impregnated all structures of social life: the official political discourse, the cultural sphere, the educational system, the media, the discourse of religious communities and their

leaders. Added to this are the common phenomena of a decline of cultural and value criteria as well as intellectual and professional standards. And all of this has lasted for a long period of time (eighteen years, if the year 1990 is taken as the date of political shift), and it is important to keep in mind that an entire generation of young people, in their most formative period, has been included in this process.

There are two important factors that make the Dayton political-administrative design of Bosnia and Herzegovina an obstacle to any serious reform process. The first relates to the territorial-administrative division of the country, and the second to the functional relationship between the international and local authorities. The formula of one state with two asymetric entities, plus one district (Brčko), and then three 'constitutive peoples' is a product labeled only for a single, one-time, pragmatic purpose. It is a mixture of disparate elements and compromises whose only aim was to stop a war, but in such a way that it forced all 'sides' to concessions without any side seeing itself as defeated.

Practically, Republica Srpska is constituted as the Serb national administrative-political unit, and this criterion is systematically applied to all aspects of public and social life, with discrimination against non-Serb and non-Orthodox collectivities. The existence and the international legalization of such a 'state' model cannot but reflect on political life in the other entity, namely, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Among the Croats in the Federation, because of a sense of minority imperilment, this is reflected through the request for a 'third entity.' Among Bosniaks/Muslims, it is manifested through a reflex for domination, based on the majority sense of 'natural right.' All together, this repoduces a constant instability, a deepening of interethnic distrust, and a compromizing and suspending of the already fragile foundations for creating transethnically oriented political programs, parties and projects.

Another reason why the Dayton structure represents an obstacle to Bosnia and Herzegovina for departing from the vicious circle of stagnation is the relationship between the international and local administrations. The issue here is a special form of 'dualism of rule' that raises the question of in whose hands is really Bosnia and Herzegovina? Who governs it, who directs its march toward the future? Is it at all possible to know toward what model of society and social rationale we strive?

The existing model is set in such a way that it prevents the maturing of the local political structure toward full responsibility for its own country, leaving political subjects in a sort of constant adolescence; it also reduces the international community, even with its enormous power, to the limited capacity of protectorate. In this way, the latter is left without real and transparent responsibility and without a clear task, and paradoxically this enables its willful and impulsive acting in ad hoc ways. This entire interrelationship looks as if it was conceived solely to serve the purpose of enabling and maintaining the status quo!

II.

The fact of religious, cultural, and national plurality is a historical constant within Bosnia and Herzegovina. The fundamental issue of political articulation of this basic historical plurality, as an invariable element of its social structure has always been

interconnected with Bosnian "destiny." All the political regimes and systems that succeeded each other had to face this imperative of plurality, and they all responded to it in good and functional ways, more or less just. In itself, this plurality is neither a blessing nor a curse, but it has been and could be both, depending on concrete historical circumstances and the political and constitutional concepts which we have adhered to.

Today's Bosnia and Herzegovina faces these issues in its history in perhaps a more dramatic way than ever before. Perhaps its every survival depends on the responses to these questions. Ivo Andrić, the greatest Bosnian and Yugoslav writer, in his well known prose work A Letter from 1920 wrote how the towers of the places of worship of four religions in Sarajevo mark four different time-counting systems, and how people living around them live according to four "feuding" calendars. However, never has the ethnic/national plurality had a clearer and sharper appearance of social fragmentation, never have such disparate perceptions of land, history and culture had such a demanding impact on political ambitions and preferences. The problem, then, is an old one, regardless of the fact that the responses to it must be entirely new (because our situation is also entirely new); it is impossible to arrive at these responses without understanding the structure and the genesis of the plurality that is under consideration here.

The fact cannot be emphasized enough that this structure is a historical phenomenon of long duration. The story of plurality starts as early as in the pre-Ottoman period in the history of Bosnia and Herzegovina, because even then this interesting religious diversity was in place. However, that medieval world sank into oblivion forever, and we are in possession of sparse living memory of it. The civilizational and political framework of what we are interested in here was set after the Ottoman invasion in the second half of the fifteenth century and establishment of Ottoman rule, after the wide-ranging conversion of many inhabitants to Islam, and after the forms of Islamic civilization took hold. It was then that a specific social, cultural, and spiritual framework was created, within which three religious communities, three cultural and concentric civilizational circles developed and established themselves, with common ethnic origins, language, and folklore substratum which are reflected today in the existence of three national groups: Bosniak, Croat, and Serb.

III.

Throughout that past until today, a persisting ambition is present in Bosnia and Herzegovina toward the social, political, and cultural domination of one of these groups (now nations) over the others. In the historical vicissitudes of civilizational formations and state and ideological systems, within which Bosnia and Herzegovina was included and belonged to, mostly as a passive political-territorial object, the desire to dominate changed its forms, but not its content. The drama that it is undergoing today, for the first time as an internationally recognized political subject, can be seen as well in this light.

The crucial issue of political organization to replace the provisional and externally imposed Dayton constitution is in fact reduced to the following question: Can political representatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina with common will find and apply such a

democratic model that will make possible true equality of all people, all ethnic groups and their cultures, and finally remove the ambition to dominate over others from the historical agenda?

In the Ottoman imperial system, based on Islam as a state religion, the full citizenship was reserved for Muslims, while members of other monotheistic religions––the Orthodox Christians, the Catholics, and the Jews––were recognized as second-class, protected groups, paying special taxes. In the long centuries, as the power of the Ottoman Empire declined and its splendor faded away, this relationship in Bosnia and Hersegocina further deteriorated, especially through the process of turning the state-owned lands into private property, leading to further enrichment and arrogant increasing of the independence of the Muslim landlord class, on the one hand, and increasingly difficult social and economic status of the non- Muslim population (reaya), on the other hand. The unbearable social situation, accompanied with numerous political pretensions and strategic combinations of European powers, led in the 19th century to a great rebellion that lasted from 1875 to 1878. It was ended by the Austro-Hungarian occupation (following the decision of the Berlin Congress) and resulted, according to some high estimations, in 200,000 dead.

The relationship between the Orthodox Christians and the Catholics, even though both were equally subjugated, was also not free of antagonisms and pretensions to dominate. First, there was a constant tendency from Orthodox bishops to ensure, at the Ottoman courts, the complete subjugation of Catholics under their church. Following the common legal procedure, the Turks allowed such court cases, until both parties exhorted substantial amounts of money. Then the Turks would adjudicate according to the highest imperial decrees which nevertheless took into account the separeteness of the Catholic community and its rites. The antagonistic character of the relationship was also a result of the papal tendencies toward "reunification of churches," which the Orthodox Church viewed as life-threatening, and Turkish government condemned, for Rome was the center of its enemy's power.

Thus in 1878 Bosnia and Herzegovina comes under Austro-Hungarian rule, with already and for a long time delininated and mutually antagonized ethno-confessional groups. At the beginning, the new authorities favored Catholic-Croats, seeking their support for its consolidation of power in Bosnia and the Balkans. Thus Muslims-Bosniaks and Orthodox- Serbs were in a subordinate position. Soon, however, the Austro-Hungarian administration abandoned this course, searching for a balanced approach. That search found its expression in an integral political Bosnian identity as a well conceptualized but futile attempt to prevent a shaping of the three modern ethnonational identities: Serb, Croat and Bosniak.

In the monarchic Yugoslavia, created on the ruins of both the Ottoman and the Habsburg Empires, and thus also in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbs were the dominating nation, and the Serb-Orthodox element was the foundation of the Yugoslavism of King Aleksandar Karađorđević, which was the ideological "armature" of the monarchy. In Pavelić's Independent State of Croatia (NDH) from 1941 to 1945, with absolute politcal domination of the Croatian nation, Bosnia and Herzegovina was briefly erased as a historical and territorial political unit. Muslims-Bosniaks, as a religious group, were declared by fiat as a part of the Croat nation, and a three-fold

treatment was applied to the Serbs: assimilation (through conversion to Catholicism), expulsion to Serbia, or physical liquidation. The Jews were mercilessly exterminated in accordance to the Nazi laws of ethnic purity. During the NDH regime, Croats likewise demonstrated willingness to dominate over others, and the means used to achieve that and the suffering that was caused were of such proportion that this less than four year long period of NDH rule will represent for a long time a dark period of Croatian history.

With the emergence of communist Yugoslavia the relationship between the dominating and the subjugated undergoes an important change. This change is caused by a new type of power, and it is particularly visible in Bosnia. The power and the state are no longer based on belonging to one priviledged religion or nation, but rather on belonging to the working class and its "vanguard," the Communist Party. The line of distinction between those who dominate and those who are subjugated is now defined in a different way. A new, collective supraidentity is being formed, no longer religious/ethnic/national, but rather a class-ideological identity, whose members come from all national groups. That new collectivity is the dominating one, and "old", religio-national ones are, in principle, all equally subjugated to it. Until the 1960's political, economic, and cultural centralism and unitarism ruled, in close relation with the dominance of the Belgrade metropolitan and a Serb national element. Beginning with 1966, however, the situation began to change thoroughly in Bosnia and Herzegovina in favor of the concept of national equality, which, as an idea, had been formed already at the well-known Partisan meeting of ZAVNOBiH in 1943.

The fall of communism and the dissoultion of Yugoslavia brought to Bosnia and Herzegovina an idiosyncretic return to the political legitimacy of ethnonationalism and the power that was built on it. Under the banners of ethnonationalism, the war of 1992-95 was fought, which once again demonstrated the bloody and murderous potential that is built in the striving for national domination.

The emergence of a multiple, domination-subjugation scheme is a very peculiar phenomenon in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, that came as a natural upshot of the kind of war and the method in which it was fought and the way in which it was concluded (or not concluded). Here is the rough sketch of it: In the Republica Srpska, the strong domination of Serbs over Bosniaks and Croats is at work, in the Federation of Bosnia and Hezegovina it is the domination of the Bosniaks and Croats over the Serbs, and the Bosniaks over the Croats. On the level of some kantons,there is domination of the majority nation over the minority one, depending on the numerical proportions and political relations between the Croats and the Bosniaks. On the state level of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the picture is one of competition between two equally nationally "formatted" blocks of Serbs and Bosniaks, with the Croats in the position of an extra whose political role is made possible by the letter of the Dayton Accords.

It is clear, then, that, for Bosnia and Herzegovina, the type of government and democratic order that is needed is one that will systematically remove the necessity and potential of domination of any national group over another, regardless of current numbers and regardless of possible demographic and statistical developments in the future. Such a system can be conceived only through common agreement and

voluntary acception by all political factors in the country, for which it is of extreme importance to develop a culture of negotiation, sober compromise, and consensus. It is posssible to search for such type of government in those democratic models that make possible just and balanced distribution of power between all groups that participate in a relevant way in shaping the society that is as divided as the Bosnian-Herzegovinian one. The consociational type of democracy could be one direction of such a search. There are many models and arrangements that could be called consociational, and they are the outcome of various local and lasting experiences, but it is safe to say that they all rest on four main principles: government of a large coalition, the right of veto, the proportionality rule (with correction in the principle of parity when it becomes necessary to support the minority position), and the autonomy of the segment. We can see already, that in the multiethnic Bosnia and Herzegovina these are known principles, some of which have been practiced in the past as well as today, but they have never formed a balanced and thoroughly applied democratic system.

IV.

In the subtext of many public discussions among politicians and intellectuals about the desirable future of Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is an implicit bythought about a Bosnia that 'was before' and for which, as the best solution, Bosnians should strive even now. It is almost as if there were an ideal, prototypical, 'Ur-Bosnia," and all that needs to be done is to return to it or produce its faithful historical replica, and everybody will be happy and satisfied.

In crying out for what was before, it is, of course, necessary to distinguish between the private-psychological and the political level. While the general public remembers how life used to be beautiful in the old times, that is a natural nostalgy for one's former life, on the one hand, and an expression of dissatisfaction with the current social degradation and uncertainity, which in Bosnia and Herzegovina is assuming ever more alarming proportions, on the other hand. Additionally, this nostalgy reflects the well-known colective psychological mechanism of longing for the one-time 'golden age.' However, the national-romanitic Ur-Bosnia cannot be taken as a matrix and inspiration for any new political model, because in regard to continuity of statehood and democratic traditions Bosnia and Herzegovina does not have a historical experience. If we leave aside the remote Middle Ages and the feudal Bosnian kingdom, which was lost five and a half centuries ago during the Ottoman invasion, there has been no statehood in a real, non-relativized sense until 1992.

And what is the situation in regard to democratic traditions? For the last half millenium of its history Bosnia and Herzegovina has gone through successive changes of eras, wherein it was under theocratic and ideologic regimes of greater imperial and state structures, and hence state-hood as well as democracy in the full civil and political sense could not be considered. As much as the Ottoman millet-system was, in its time, a wise way to preserve the internal stability under the conditions of enormous diverstsiy and over a huge territory, it rested on essentially undemocratic principles and practice. An individual with his private and family life was entirely under the authority of his religious leader (Millet-baša), and then the organs of the state, whereas the confessional communities lived separate, parallel lives. The deep and vivid traces of that system, in form of collectivism and corporativism, the merger of

the ethnic and religious identities, and the unreceptiveness toward modern civil democracy, are still very much visible in the political behavior of contemporary Bosnian nations and in their fear of each other.

For reasons listed above, it seems, then, that a proposal to consider the current historical moment of Bosnia and Herzegovina a kind of zero point in both aspects of statebuilding and democracy might be much closer to the historical truth, and methodologically and critically more productive.

This proves to be especially important in the context of the search for the optimal political model for the contemporary political articulation of the inherited, fundamental Bosnian- Herzegovinian plurality, while necessarily keeping in mind that one has to take into consideration the three forged nations in one common state territory. One can often hear the politicians and intellectuals saying that the solutions are 'known' and 'simple.' What one needs to do, they say, is just make a 'normal European country,' follow the 'Euro-American model of democracy,' apply 'fundamental democratic principles,' actually having in mind only one, i.e. the principle of one man, one vote. It would be usefull to question what these notions actually mean and how applicable they are in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Also, it would be useful to have a permanently open public debate about these issues, the debate that, unfortunatelly has not even started.

It is needless to discuss the comparison with the American model of multiculturalism, since we are aware of the completely different historical genesis of American society and state in comparison to that of Bosnia and Herzegovinia. Also, it is important to bring to attention the non-existence of one common model of 'normal European state.' If that applies to classical (mono)national European states, such as France, it is more than obvious that such experiences could not be applied to multinatioal Bosnia and Herzegovina. On the other hand, European experience recognizes different and democratically successful examples and consociational models, that could be instrumental in seeking adequate solutions for Bosnia and Herzegovina, such as the Netherlands, Belgium, and Switzerland.

V.

In order to arrive at appropriate answers to the question about the new forms of organization of Bosnia and Herzegovina an analytical and political judgment is necessary about the type of society Bosnia and Herzegovina is today. Multiple indicators as well as daily experience demonstrate without doubt that here we have the case of what political scientists and sociologists call divided society. The dividedness (religious, ethnic and cultural) has, as we can see, deep historical roots, but today's structure of that dividedness also has historical dimensions that have not been seen until now. The last war, together with the democratic prelude of 1990, was obviously a "forging of nations" – newly coined political entities. Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks from the past would hardly recognize their national counterparts if they were suddenly to awake in the present time.

Today's Bosnia and Herzegovina is nominally a secular state where religious communities have open access to the spheres of social activism (education, culture,

humanitarian work) from which they were expelled in the socialist period, but they are prevented from participating in state politics. Both sides, i.e. political structures and religious communities, pay lip service to their attachment to the main postulate of European democracy – separation of church and state. However, at each step they have proven the opposite by their own practice. So the game goes on – with some oscillations and small changes – since the beginning of the multiparty system in the fall of 1990. No one can precisely point out who is the leader and who is lead or who manipulates and who is manipulated in that cordial pas de deux. The only thing that is sure is that both sides invest the same passion and endurance in that embrace. Herein lies one of the reasons for the great ability of ethno nationalism to transform and regenerate itself. It will not be possible to neutralize ethno-nationalism overnight, but only though the process of evolutionary "civilizing," accompanied by a whole range of uncertainties.

One of the most serious problems of Bosnia and Herzegovina is certainly the fact that its society is still not capable of political self-reflection (auto-reflection), of realizing its division and its historical origin, its nature and contemporary typology, and potentials for democracy in such a type of society. That all of its segments are passive and impotent in face of the phenomenon of a divided society can be best seen from a schematic overview of what they offer as their own vision of the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina in lieu of a serious, final encounter with their own responsibilities. Serbian politics is interested only in an exclusive "Serbian state" within Bosnia and Herzegovina. Thus it argues for a hardcore federalist attitude within Bosnia and Herzegovina, and a unitaristic one within Republica Srpska. It has long left the Serbs outside Republika Srpska to the fate of complete political and cultural marginalization, in fact to a kind of silent assimilation, identical to its own politics toward Croats in the Republika Srpska. Croatian politics does not have its own idea in this matter, but rather lags behind the Serbs and their articulations in conditional terms: if the Serbs have their own entity, we, too, want ours. In its conduct as well as in its programmed silence about any elaborate, concrete view of the future state, Bosniak politics gives reasons for suspicions that it wants a unitary state with the Bosniaks as the nation founding bearers of statehood. Such desire is most clearly demonstrated through animosity toward ethnic and cultural diversities. The view is very common, equally among the common people, academicians, and politicians that only religious identity could be a criterion of group identity, and that Croatian and Serb national identities are "imported," non-indigenous.

Here, both in the methodological and in the political sense, it is very important to be reminded of the turbulent historical curve that shows that the attitude toward differences, throughout modern South Slavic and Bosnian-Herzegovinian history has been one of the crucial and determining factors of stability/instability and trust/distrust. In an incorruptible and clear way, that curve shows that here the canceling out and refusal to acknowledge differences ends in unitaristic violence, and at the other pole, as reaction, it causes absolutization of differences which, as a rule, ends in political separatism. From this, it is more than clear that those political forces that would truly opt to be pro-Bosnian should develop the approach toward differences. At the same time, this should also be an important lesson for the international community which, until now, has not put in an intellectual and political effort to truly understand Bosnia and Herzegovina as a multiethnic community and all

of the problems stemming from that.

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