

Carla Schraml and Kristina Ćorić

Ethnicised politics and everyday life in Mostar and the region

*How can mediation, dialogue, and improved political communication
contribute to weaken it?*

Due to the war 1992-1995 and the Dayton Treaty which ended it, Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) is in a challenging political and social situation. The state is divided into two formalized, extensively self-governed entities: Federacija Bosne i Hercegovine (FB&H) and Republika Srpska (RS), and the autonomous Brčko District. The FB&H itself consists of ten districts also known as Cantons, out of which only two are mixed cantons – not dominated by one ethnic group. The complex state structure reflects continuing fundamental debates regarding the identity of B&H state and its population. Crucial questions concern the structure of the state as well as a definition of the population and political relationships among the three constituent people (Croats, Bosniaks, and Serbs) and the Others (undeclared, undecided and minorities, often reflecting a large part of the population stemming from mixed marriages or socio-democratic background).¹ A struggle over the diverse narratives and truths is ongoing, political claims regarding the current and future forms of the state B&H are present. Post-conflict nationalism dominates and sets political agendas.²

¹ Moll, Nicolas. 2018. Bosnien und Herzegowinas Wechselhafte Geschichte: Ein Überblick. In: Flessenkemper, Tobias, Moll, Nicolas (ed.). 2018. Das Politische System Bosnien und Herzegowinas. Herausforderungen zwischen Dayton-Friedensabkommen und EU-Annäherung, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

² Hodzic, Refik. Twenty Years Since Srebrenica: No Reconciliation, We're Still At War, June

Mostar as one of the biggest agglomerations of the country and one of the very few multi-ethnic cities in B&H reflects the complex social and political situation at a local level: the last elections for the city council took place in 2008, since then the City Statute and Election Law provisions for Mostar are subject to political struggles. Despite increasing possibilities for encounters and interaction, Mostar is de facto a divided city: Croats live almost exclusively in the western part, whereas Bosniaks are living mainly in the eastern part.

“CSSP Berlin Centre for Integrative Mediation” works in Mostar and Herzegovina region to strengthen mediation, dialogue and political communication. The CSSP project, funded by the German Federal Foreign Office (AA), strengthens a multi-ethnic ethnic approach of politics and daily life in Mostar. The following analysis, which is mainly nurtured by working experiences in Mostar and Herzegovina,³ is meant to provide a closer look at two questions: (1) In which ways are politics and everyday life ‘ethnicised’ in Mostar? In order to depict the situation in Mostar in this respect, the analysis focuses on ethnicised politics and narratives as well as on separately organised everyday life. (2) Furthermore, based on the work of CSSP, it is illustrated how mediation, dialogue and improved political communication can contribute to strengthen multi-ethnic politics and everyday life in Mostar and Herzegovina region?

29, 2015, *Balkanist Magazine*; Kostovicova, Denisa; Bojicic-Dzelilovic, Vesna. 2014. Ethnicity Pays: The Political Economy Of Post-Conflict Nationalism In Bosnia-Herzegovina. In: Kissane, Bill (ed.). *After Civil War: Division, Reconstruction, And Reconciliation In Contemporary Europe*. National And Ethnic Conflict In the 21st Century. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

³ Carla Schraml works for CSSP and travels regularly to Mostar and the region. Kristina Čorić has been living and working for the last 25 years in Mostar and also works for CSSP.

1. In which ways politics and everyday life in Mostar are ethnicised?

1.1 Ethnicised politics on all level of politics

The strongest parties in B&H, Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica (HDZ), Stranka Demokratske Akcije (SDA), and within the Republika Srpska political arena currently Savez Nezavisnih Sociodemokrata (SNSD), are ethnically defined and highly identified with Bosniak, Croat and Serb ethnic communities and – today even more important – with corresponding political identities. This is favoured by the Constitution (being an Annex of Dayton Peace Agreement) identifying, in an unusual framing, Bosniak, Croats and Serbs as the “constituent peoples”, defining politics and political functions to be based on ethnicity and without providing a viable framework for the political representation of Others. One of many examples is that the Presidency is composed of three members, defined by ethnicity: a Croat, a Bosniak, and a Serb. Also, the members of the “House of People” of the Federation are equally elected based on their ethnicity. By law, it consists of 17 Serbs, 17 Croats, and 17 Bosniaks as well as seven Others.⁴ Generally, deputies in B&H are elected to represent their ethnicity and are tasked with “protecting the vital national interest.” However, this model showed its weakness of definition when Željko Komšić, ethnic Croat by birth but member of non-national(ist) party, won the Croat seat in the Presidency in 2010 in great part thanks to the votes of Bosniaks. This raised protests by the leaders of the B&H Croats who are, since that time, proposing changes and amendments to the existing federal laws in the direction that would further strengthen the ethnic and territorial domination and provide greater level of autonomy and control. For this initiatives they have found an eager partner in the Republika Srpska, currently Milorad Dodik and his SNSD.

The voter turnout has been constantly low in B&H. Throughout the last elections it was only about 50 per cent.⁵ Many voters, through a complex ballot

⁴ Don't Believe the Hype. Why Bosnian Democracy Will Not End This October, *ESI Discussion Paper*, January 2018, Berlin – Sarajevo.

⁵ Dümmler, Karsten. *Kommunalwahlen In Bosnien und Herzegowina. Eine Wahl Im Zeichen des Nationalismus. Länderbericht, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung*, Oktober 2016.

voting for local, cantonal, federal and state level representatives, do not know which of the around 102 political parties, around 103 coalitions and around 171 independent candidates⁶ to vote for in order to support an opposition, which has the chance to decisively influence politics. Those not being in favour of nationalist politics are not sufficiently mobilised and do not know how to channel their possible political influence. On the other hand, the way the country is currently organized, completely based on ethnic principle and territorial domination, makes it difficult to implement reforms and create significant changes – even if the opposition forces won the elections.

Furthermore, the parties being highly identified with Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs became very powerful and well established throughout the recent political history. They have been in power for the last 28 years after they came into charge with the first multi-party elections held in 1990. They were powerful actors during transition, as well as during and after the war, occupying and privatizing what were once socially and state owned resources. They are equally disposing of current budgets, public companies, and resources as their or their party's own; this is why the parties and some of their personnel are disposing a huge network and financial resources and are securing stable support in the elections.⁷

This stable support from the population for HDZ, SDA, and SNSD and the ethnically driven agenda-setting allows the parties to claim legitimacy and remain in power. During the last local elections in autumn 2016 HDZ, SNSD, and HDZ were even able to strengthen further their position basing their campaigns on war-time narratives, antagonizing other ethnic groups, and provoking moves towards further destabilization of B&H.⁸

⁶ Numbers from communal elections held in 2016, see: Dümmel, Karsten. Kommunalwahlen In Bosnien und Herzegowina. Eine Wahl Im Zeichen des Nationalismus. Länderbericht, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Oktober 2016.

⁷ Kostovicova, Denisa; Bojicic-Dzelilovic, Vesna. 2014. Ethnicity Pays: The Political Economy Of Post-Conflict Nationalism In Bosnia-Herzegovina. In: Kissane, Bill (ed.). After Civil War: Division, Reconstruction, And Reconciliation In Contemporary Europe. National And Ethnic Conflict In the 21st Century. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

⁸ Dümmel, Karsten. Kommunalwahlen In Bosnien und Herzegowina. Eine Wahl Im

1.2 Ethnicised narratives about history and war

There are contrasting narratives regarding the more recent history and the last war. These differing narratives promote opposing ideas in respect to independence, victimhood, and guilt. Accordingly, they focus on diverging aspects of history and omit other important parts. For example, when Slobodan Praljak committed suicide in the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) after his verdict was announced in autumn 2017, there were several hundred people mourning publicly in the Croat part of Mostar, a theatre performance of the Croat Cultural Theatre was cancelled due to this event, and HDZ and other representatives of religious, social and political life publicly expressed their grief. On the other hand, it caused spontaneous reactions of joy with the people in the Bosniak part of Mostar, perceiving it as the ultimate act of justice

Contemporary toponyms in the region exemplify opposing versions of recent history, such as Šušakovo or Bobanovo selo. These villages are named after Gojko Šušak and Mate Boban, leaders of Croat Republic of Herceg Bosna who died before there was a chance for them to be seriously investigated and possibly processed by ICTY. Another example is a bridge in Čapljina, which is called after the late Croatian president Franjo Tuđman, who by the ICTY judgement in autumn last year was seen to have helped conceive and execute a plan to carve out a Croat state in B&H. These names – for some related to heroes, who defended mostly Croats during the last war, for some related to atrocities and aggressions committed mostly against Bosniaks and Serbs – show fundamentally differing narrations of recent history and war. This phenomena is present with all ethnicities throughout the country.

However, opposing ideas about history also reach further back. The well-known Partisan memorial monument in Mostar commemorating (mainly youth) antifascist combatants, who died defending Mostar during Second World War against Nazi Germany and their local allies, the Ustaša, became a disputed symbol in the war and post war time. Since the first days following the

Zeichen des Nationalismus. Länderbericht, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Oktober 2016.

independence of B&H in 1991, when it was mined, until today when the site is often targeted and vandalised with swastikas and fascist Ustaša insignia and messages, the memorial is reduced to a mere symbol of communism, a perceived source of all strife for the Croat people which is to be fought against on all occasions, in particular on symbolically charged days of commemoration. The way of how resistance against fascism and Nazi Germany is remembered changed with the last war and post-war times, being shaped into a completely different narrative containing omissions, fabrications, and relativizations of historic events.

1.3 Separately organised everyday life

Despite positive developments since the end of the war and an exaggerated focus on the division by NGOs and researchers in the last twenty years⁹, Mostar is a de facto divided town: Croats live almost exclusively in the western part, whereas Bosniaks are living mainly in the eastern part. From the presence of symbols in public space (flags, churches or mosques), it is easy to tell the part of the city. Substantial parts of public infrastructure (such as health, communal, or postal services) are organised separately in both parts of the city. Huge parts of social, educational, cultural, and sports events are either mostly frequented by Croats or Bosniaks (party also due to the simple fact that they are located on the one or the other side of the city). Most of the media is known to be either rather Croat or rather Bosniak.

In the Federation of B&H pupils are following either the Federal or the Croat Curricula. This means that they are being taught different content by different teachers going either to a “Bosniak” or “Croat” school. The well-known „two schools, under one roof“ exist in areas with undecided distinct majority of one ethnic group over another, to which pupils either go in two different shifts or use different door entrances.

In Mostar only two schools are „two schools, under one roof“. The huge majority of pupils in Mostar go to totally separate buildings, situated deeply in Croat or Bosniak territories, following separate curricula. One of the schools being “two schools under one roof” introduced a break of one hour between the shifts, so that the pupils will not even meet each other. This separation starts in kindergarden and is sustained throughout university.

Separately organised life and education contributes to the lack of contact among people with different ethnic backgrounds. Young people are growing up in mono-ethnic communities partly without knowing Bosniak or Croat persons. Within the frame of the Youth Strategy of the City of Mostar some 2000 pupils were interviewed in 2012. 55 per cent said they do not know a person from another ethnicity. However, 78 per cent also said they would like to get to know a person from another ethnicity.

Fear and prejudices are also growing in this atmosphere. Although the majority of people in Mostar live a normal life, not being intimidated by crossing to “the other side”, prejudices and fear do exist. A known Serbian rap artist, called Marcelo, interviewed pupils from the “two schools under one roof” - schools in Mostar in a show called Perspektiva in 2015. Some of the pupils told that they would be scared to go to “the other” side. One boy, called Ante, explained that he has never visited the Old Bridge, although his school is only 500 meters away, because he was scared and assumed that he would not be welcome to go there. He also said in the interview that he thinks that he can identify Bosniaks only by seeing them because they look darker. Ante was taken to the Old town by the show crew and was positively surprised by “how he was well accepted by them.” He also said that he holds responsible the older generations for this division and proved again how the post-war youth is being held hostage by the unresolved political issues. Ante is a typical example of what the divisions and separate education, as well as unwillingness to face with the past, produce as a perspective for upbringing and the future of youth in B&H.

Nonetheless in Mostar exist very well established civic initiatives, such as Mostar Rock School, OKC Abrašević, LDA, Nansen Dialogue Centre Mostar and other, who contribute to an atmosphere where people live, work, and socialise in a peaceful and open manner.

⁹ Cateux, Aline. Mostar: Beyond The Stereotypes Of A Divided City, September 30, 2017, Balkanist Magazine.

On a political-administrative level the ethnic division goes back to war and post-war time when Mostar was divided into six ethnically homogeneous municipalities (three Croat in the West and three Bosniak in the East and an ethnically neutral central zone). The High Representative imposed a statute on unified Mostar, that instead of six municipalities and one central zone, fore-saw a unified city territory with one joint administration, which in 2010 were declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court of B&H.¹⁰ To this day, the HDZ and SDA, as the leading political factors in Mostar, did not reach a decision on the future statute and consequent changes to the B&H election law, which left Mostar without the local elections since 2008 and without a legislative body since 2012.

2. How can mediation, dialogue, and improved political communication contribute to weaken ethnicised politics and everyday life?

CSSP Berlin Centre for Integrative Mediation works currently in Kosovo and B&H, Ukraine and Germany. The organisation was founded in 2005 as a “Lessons Learned” project, which drew lessons from Prof. Dr. Christian Schwarzschilding’s work as the International Mediator in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1995 – 2004). CSSP has specific expertise in applying mediation to community conflicts, i.e. conflicts involving group identities. Community mediation transforms the ways groups and individuals deal with conflict at the local level by focusing on transforming relationships, solving concrete problems, and enhancing inclusive decision-making processes.

CSSP has been promoting community mediation and dialogue in various projects and with various partners in B&H, and specifically in Mostar and Herzegovina area. Amongst others, a platform was (re)established and sup-

ported that strengthens the dialogue and exchange between civil society and the City of Mostar from 2012 to 2014. More recently, dialogues between Mjesne zajednice (MZ) and civil society as well as with municipality representatives have been conducted in other municipalities in Herzegovina.

The current CSSP project has a specific focus on challenging the ethnic focus of everyday life and politics in Mostar and Herzegovina and strengthening a multi-ethnic and diverse perspective through mediation, dialogue, and improved political communication.

The approach focuses on building capacities and infrastructure for inter-personal and community mediation. Mostar-based NGOs working on inter-ethnic relations, teachers, and pedagogues as well as representatives from public institutions are trained in mediation and dialogue. Already trained and registered mediators are supported to strengthen and intensify their mediation practice. The broader public as well as political and social stakeholders are informed and sensitised for the relevance of (community) mediation. Free of charge mediation services are offered to raise awareness for mediation as well as to strengthen the practice of mediation. For all these activities, CSSP cooperates with the Association of Mediators of B&H, already trained, local mediators, civil society actors working in the field of dialogue and mediation, political representatives and relevant actors from the legal and the public sector. In order to improve political communication at the municipal level in Herzegovina, workshops and roundtables as well as joint activities are organised and conducted with the aim of building trust as well as to identify relevant issues which will improve political communication and cooperation among civil society actors, community representatives, and the municipality.

3. Final remarks

Recent political developments in B&H again prove the political leaders’ intention to not decrease, but on the contrary, to even further strengthen and

¹⁰ Gusic, Ivan; Björkdahl, Annika. 2016. Sites Of Friction: Governance, Identity And Space In Mostar. In: Björkdahl, Annika; Höglund, Kristine; Millar, Gearoid (eds.). 2016. Peace-building And Friction: Global And Local Encounters In Post Conflict-Societies, New York: Routledge.

radicalise the ethnic aspects of politics.¹¹ Decentralized and multiple levels of government controlled by various coalitions make it possible for the political parties to destabilize on a daily basis the already fragile functioning of B&H politics.

This became in particular visible during the campaign for the general elections in B&H in the year 2018. The election campaigns were launched softly ever since the processes stemming from the last local elections were completed. The pre-election campaigns were fully blown to outrageous extent by now. This is best illustrated by: the House of People and Election Law crisis, where the HDZ, in the eve of the upcoming elections, wanted to change the way in which the Croat representatives are elected in a way that would favour dominance of representatives from the regions controlled undisturbedly by the HDZ (such as cantons of Herzegovina and Central Bosnia canton);¹² a referendum in the RS on the question of 9th of January, the holiday of Republika Srpska's foundation, otherwise declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional court of B&H; and the support of SDA for the pre-election campaign of Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Sarajevo and its diligent promotion of its close ties with his party.

¹¹ Weber, Bodo. *Bosnian Croat Leadership On Course to Throw Bosnia and Herzegovina Into Electoral Chaos*, Herinrich Böll Stiftung, December 2017.

¹² Don't Believe the Hype. *Why Bosnian Democracy Will Not End This October*, ESI Discussion Paper, January 2018, Berlin – Sarajevo.