



POLITICAL IDENTITY AND VIOLENCE: THE CASE OF THE BOSNIAN WAR

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Abstract

Political identity, once exploited through extreme nationalism and ethnic division, can escalate into violence and armed conflict, as demonstrated by the Bosnian War (1992–1995). The ethnic cleansing carried out by Bosnian Serb forces against Bosnian Muslims was driven by identity politics, as Serbian nationalist elites pursued an ethnically homogeneous territory following the dissolution of Yugoslavia. This case illustrates how ethnicity and religion can be instrumentalised to justify mass atrocity. The Dayton Agreement of 1995 ended the fighting but institutionalised power-sharing along ethnic lines, a structure that continues to hinder the formation of a cohesive national identity and that has produced political marginalisation for minority groups. A more inclusive framework is required to accommodate ethnic diversity while building a unified national identity. This article examines political identity and violence during the Bosnian War using identity politics theory and ethnic nationalism theory as its analytical framework. The study applies a qualitative method through a literature-based (library) research design.

Keywords: *Bosnian War, Political Identity, Ethnic Nationalism*

INTRODUCTION

Nationalist leaders play a decisive role in triggering ethnic violence. When political elites mobilise nationalist rhetoric, out-groups that are cast as threats become considerably more likely to resort to violence, since such groups may come to view armed resistance as a

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legitimate response to exclusion (Choi, 2022). This dynamic illustrates the corrosive effect that instrumentalised nationalism can have on inter-ethnic relations. The consequences of political violence, moreover, are not confined to the generation that experiences it directly. Evidence from Ukraine shows that the intense victimisation suffered by a first generation continues to shape the identities, attitudes, and behaviour of their grandchildren, influencing ethnic attachment, self-perception as victims, threat sensitivity, support for in-group interests, hostility toward perceived aggressors, and levels of political engagement (Lupu & Peisakhin, 2017). Such intergenerational transmission demonstrates that the political identities forged by violence rarely dissolve with the passage of time.

The Bosnian War (1992–1995) offers a paradigmatic case through which to examine these dynamics. Several prior studies have approached the conflict from complementary angles. Peinhopf (2020), for instance, analyses the relationship between identity and political violence through two intersecting lenses: one that treats violence as a consequence of ethnic antagonism, and another that treats ethnic antagonism itself as a product of violence; the study further shows how inter-group violence is frequently instrumentalised by threatened elites before it diffuses into the wider population. Basic and Delic (2024) examine how ideology sustains and legitimises violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, arguing that the crime of genocide becomes possible only when perpetrators and their supporters come to believe that violence committed in the name of identity politics serves a higher, justifiable purpose. Pratama (2023) traces the historical evolution of ethnic and religious conflict resolution in Bosnia-Herzegovina, showing how the shift toward nationalism produced three religiously defined communities – Bosniak Muslims, Orthodox Serbs, and Catholic Croats – whose rivalry subsequently escalated into violence.

Building on these studies, this article investigates how political identity was constructed and exploited during the Bosnian War, and how that exploitation translated into organised violence and ethnic cleansing. Using a qualitative, literature-based approach, the discussion that follows traces the dynamics of violence and ethnic cleansing directed against Bosnian Muslims, as well as the international community's subsequent efforts to mediate and reconcile the resulting divisions.

ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

Political Identity

Identity politics, as a mode of political analysis, foregrounds the significance of specific group identities – such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or sexual orientation – for understanding power relations and political conflict. The concept has, since the mid-2000s, been extensively theorised as a mechanism through which marginalised or oppressed groups organise collectively to claim recognition and rights that established political institutions have historically withheld from them (Bernstein, 2005). Identity politics can accordingly serve as an instrument of social and political transformation, as demonstrated historically by movements pursuing civil rights and gender equality.

At the same time, identity politics carries an inherent duality: while it can unite the members of a previously fragmented group, it can just as readily fracture the wider society if group identity is elevated above shared national belonging or common humanity (Fukuyama, 2019). Political identity also shapes electoral competition, since parties and candidates that successfully mobilise identity-based appeals tend to secure strong support from the constituencies whose sense of self they address – a dynamic that simultaneously heightens the exclusion of groups whose identities remain politically unrepresented (Huddy, 2001).

The Bosnian War (1992–1995) constitutes a historically significant instance in which identity politics substantially intensified an armed conflict. In the confrontation between Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims), Croats (Catholics), and Serbs (Orthodox Christians), ethnic and religious identity became a central organising axis of the war. Political and institutional structures that allocate authority strictly along ethnic lines, as later occurred in the post-war settlement, tend to entrench rather than dissolve these divisions (Kapidžić, 2020). In the Bosnian setting, identity politics thus functioned both as a tool of political mobilisation and as an instrument for fragmenting communities that had previously coexisted (Bieber, 2018). Understanding these dynamics is essential for the design of political arrangements capable of accommodating ethnic diversity without reproducing the conditions that make violence politically expedient.

Ethnic Nationalism

Ethnic nationalism holds that a nation is constituted around an ethnic community bound by shared myths, collective historical memory, and cultural markers that distinguish it from

neighbouring groups. This body of theory emphasises the role of ethnic identity in the construction and consolidation of the nation, anchored in the distinguishing characteristics attributed to each ethnic community (Smith, 1991). Ethnic nationalism also operates as a quiet political mediator within a state, shaping national policy and, by extension, the distribution of resources and power. Where a single ethnic group is dominant, this framework grants it a de facto claim to self-governance organised around its own norms and objectives.

The presence of multiple ethnic groups within a single state, however, renders ethnic nationalism considerably more contentious, since it generates almost inevitable friction between competing languages, values, and claims to territory or governance (Ogendi, 2022). Gellner (1983) further argues that ethnic nationalism tends to grant dominant groups privileged access to the resources of a shared “high culture”, while marginalised or less-educated communities remain confined to a subordinate “low culture”. Conflict becomes more likely when disadvantaged groups attempt to elevate their position, an aspiration that dominant groups frequently perceive as a threat and resist accordingly. As tensions between dominant and subordinate groups deepen, the resulting social strife can escalate into open violence between ethnic communities occupying unequal positions within the same nation.

RESEARCH METHOD

This article employs a qualitative research design to construct an in-depth account of the political and social dynamics surrounding the Bosnian War. Qualitative inquiry is well suited to generating an accurate, systematic, and contextually grounded analysis of the phenomenon under study. The specific approach applied here is a literature-based (library) research design, in which data are drawn from academic definitions, prior analyses, established theories, and documented perspectives found in books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government publications, and verified news reporting (Adlini et al., 2022).

Data obtained through this desk-research method provide the historical foundation for reconstructing the Bosnian War of 1992–1995, with particular attention to how identity politics was exploited to trigger violence and to the importance of inclusive, tolerant approaches to managing identity within a multi-ethnic society. The role of the international community in mediating and resolving the conflict is likewise treated as an integral part of the analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Identity Politics in the Formation of Conflict Narratives

The Bosnian War emerged from the disintegration of Yugoslavia, which precipitated conflict between the constituent communities of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Its immediate causes reflected a complex interplay of religious, nationalist, and ethnic tensions. Extreme nationalism instrumentalised ethnic and religious identity to mobilise populations, drawing on religious symbols – principally those associated with Christianity and Islam – to consolidate group cohesion. This form of nationalism cultivated a psychological fear of collective extinction, channelling inter-ethnic anxiety into open conflict and encouraging groups to regard violence as a legitimate response. Political leaders exacerbated the situation by manipulating these fears to incite hatred, a dynamic widely identified as a principal driver of the violence in Bosnia (Shahzadi & Hashmi, 2022).

Economic competition, resource scarcity, and rising unemployment stemming from the broader economic crisis further intensified the conflict (Blagojevic, 2009). As hostilities escalated, they culminated in a campaign of ethnic cleansing carried out by armed groups affiliated with the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS), the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS), the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), and the Croatian Defence Council (HVO). These groups sought to establish ethnically homogeneous territories by killing or expelling other ethnic communities, a strategy associated with the political leadership of Radovan Karadžić. The resulting campaign displaced more than half of the pre-war population and caused approximately 100,000 deaths (Ó Tuathail & O'Loughlin, 2009). The Dayton Peace Agreement subsequently sought to reverse the demographic consequences of ethnic cleansing by enabling refugees and displaced persons to return to their homes and reclaim their property; obstacles to minority return nevertheless persisted, sustaining housing segregation and preventing a full reversal of wartime displacement (Ó Tuathail & O'Loughlin, 2009).

Dynamics of Violence and Ethnic Cleansing

The 1992–1995 Bosnian War produced an especially severe pattern of violence against civilians, alongside a deliberate campaign of ethnic cleansing. The dissolution of the Yugoslav federal government and the multiparty elections of 1990 fuelled aspirations for independence among the three constituent communities of the former Yugoslavia, aspirations that in turn ignited the conflict. Divergent nationalist sentiments, cultural norms, claims to political power,

language, and religious belief drove the confrontation between Muslim Bosniaks, Orthodox Serbs, and Catholic Croats. The war subsequently turned violent along explicitly ethnic lines, with Bosnian Serb forces conducting the ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims. In 1992, these forces launched attacks against Bosnia and Herzegovina in response to its declaration of independence, seeking to expand Serbian-controlled territory by targeting the eastern and northern regions of the country and deliberately striking population centres across multiple areas (Bayraktar, 2021). Sarajevo's city centre was subsequently besieged for nearly four years, during which repeated attacks by Bosnian Serb forces caused hundreds of casualties and extensive infrastructural destruction. Detention camps established for ethnic Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats, such as Keraterm, subjected captives – the majority of them Bosnian Muslims – to systematic torture, sexual violence, and mass killing (Sucu, 2024).

The violence perpetrated by Bosnian Serb forces intensified over time, culminating in outright massacre. The 1995 Srebrenica massacre, in which more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys were killed, stands as the starkest illustration of this escalation (Ariani et al., 2018). Beyond the killings themselves, Bosnian Serb forces subjected the targeted population to public humiliation, killed children in front of their parents, and raped Bosnian Muslim girls and young women. Although Srebrenica had been designated a United Nations-protected safe area under UNPROFOR, it was nonetheless overrun and occupied by Bosnian Serb forces (Mulalic, 2019), an occupation that forcibly displaced the town's entire population of roughly 30,000 people. The scale of the killing was such that perpetrators subsequently exhumed mass graves and redistributed the remains into smaller, scattered burial sites in an effort to conceal the crime.

Taken together, this evidence indicates that identity politics – specifically, the pursuit of an ethnically homogeneous Serbian territory following the dissolution of Yugoslavia – constituted the principal motivating force behind the violence. The resulting campaign of ethnic cleansing, directed by Bosnian Serb forces against Bosnian Muslims across Bosnia and Herzegovina, demonstrates with particular clarity how ethnicity and religion can be mobilised to justify acts of mass atrocity.

International Role in Mediation and Conflict Resolution

The international community's engagement in the 1995 Dayton Agreement marked a critical juncture in restoring peace to the Balkan region and formally ending the Bosnian War. Intense mediation by the United States and the European Union enabled negotiations among

the governments of Bosnia, Serbia, and Croatia, producing a new governance framework for Bosnia and Herzegovina built around a complex power-sharing arrangement (Zupancic & Dragnic, 2020).

While the Dayton Agreement succeeded in halting the fighting, its long-term consequences for ethnic identity in Bosnia and Herzegovina are considerably more ambivalent. Power-sharing arrangements organised around ethnic identity carry serious implications for how ethnic identity is subsequently managed, since the agreement implicitly reinforces exclusive ethnic claims to authority and representation, thereby impeding the emergence of a broader, shared national identity. The post-Dayton governmental framework, which privileges distinct ethnic interests over common national ones, has correspondingly constrained the consolidation of a cohesive Bosnian state (Bieber, 2018).

A further consequence of the agreement has been the constrained political participation of minority groups: power arrangements based on ethnic representation allow majority communities to dominate minority ones, a dynamic that can deepen inter-ethnic tension and sustain ongoing political injustice (Zupancic & Dragnic, 2020). Although the Dayton Agreement thus succeeded in ending physical bloodshed, it left considerable obstacles in the way of resolving Bosnia and Herzegovina's underlying disputes over identity. Addressing these obstacles will require a more comprehensive and inclusive strategy, one capable of acknowledging ethnic diversity while creating space for a unified national identity.

CONCLUSION

The Bosnian War originated in the breakup of Yugoslavia and was shaped by an intersecting set of religious, nationalist, and ethnic tensions. Extreme nationalism instrumentalised group identity and religious symbolism to mobilise populations toward violence, while economic competition and resource scarcity added further pressure that contributed to the outbreak of armed conflict, ethnic cleansing, and substantial loss of life. Subsequent efforts to reverse the demographic effects of ethnic cleansing have encountered persistent obstacles, leaving full reconciliation incomplete. The war's defining feature was the systematic violence directed by Bosnian Serb forces against Bosnian Muslims, culminating in the Srebrenica massacre, in which thousands were killed. This trajectory of violence was driven throughout by nationalist sentiment and identity politics, underscoring how ethnicity and religion can be marshalled to justify grave acts of violence.

The 1995 Dayton Agreement was instrumental in ending the war and establishing a new governance framework for Bosnia and Herzegovina. Yet its emphasis on ethnic power-sharing has generated lasting challenges for the consolidation of a unified national identity and has constrained the political participation of minority communities. These outcomes point to the continuing need for a more inclusive political framework, one capable of resolving the underlying identity disputes that the Dayton settlement left unaddressed.

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