



ONE HUNDRED YEARS IN SARAJEVO

Prof. Jens Woelk
Faculty of Law
University of Trento

Where are the Balkans? The Balkan peninsula comprises Croatia, Bosnia, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo, Northern Macedonia, Albania, Greece and Bulgaria, Moldova and even parts of Romania. However, today people often refer to the 'Western Balkans', in particular when referring to relations with the EU. This area is, to use a simple formula, 'Yugoslavia minus Slovenia plus Albania' (Slovenia joined the EU in 2004, while Albania was never part of Yugoslavia).

Today's situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)¹: the country has a population of slightly more than 3 million people. There has been a considerable population decline in the last 30 years (about 1 million people), due to the war and emigration. The same trend also extends to Croatia and Serbia, with people migrating to Austria, Germany, and other EU countries. Bosnia is characterised by a diverse population. There are three large ethnic groups living together, namely Bosniaks (referred to as 'Muslims' in the 1970s-1980s), who account for almost half of the population, followed by Serbs (31.3%) and Croats, who are the smallest group (17.3%). There is also a sizable number of people who do not declare any affiliation, and also minorities, including Italians, people from other parts of former Yugoslavia, or smaller groups like Sinti and Roma [Data refer to the census of 1991. At that time, some people declared to be 'Yugoslavs' rather than part of other groups.] Incidentally, the adjective 'Bosnian' is a neutral one and does not refer to an ethnic group but to the whole State (e.g. 'a Bosnian citizen', 'the Bosnian Ambassador').

To a large extent, the diversity of ethnic groups also corresponds to religious diversity. There is some coincidence between ethnicity and religion, with 40% of the population being of Islamic faith, 31% Orthodox Christians, and 15% Catholics. There are also a few Protestants (4%), some Jews and other religions (10% altogether). While Bosnia and Herzegovina is by and large a secular country, religion still plays a role culturally. The coincidence between ethnic groups and religions dates back to the Ottoman

¹ Throughout the text, the term 'Bosnia' may be used as a synonym for Bosnia and Herzegovina; also the acronym 'BiH' stands for the country's full name.



Empire, when groups were actually organised according to their religious faith, and family laws, funerals, weddings, divorce and so on were regulated by the groups themselves autonomously, according to their religious rules.

As for languages, in former Yugoslavia there were two alphabets, Latin and Cyrillic scripts, the latter used mainly by Serbs. After the war, a process of linguistic differentiation began in BiH, in order to justify the three official languages – Bosniak, Croat and Serbian.

Politically, [the State is organised](#) according to a federal system made up of two different subnational entities, that is the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, which consists of ten smaller units, “Cantons” and municipalities (and thus has itself a federal structure), and the Republika Sprska, which has a unitary organization (apart from the entity government, there are only municipalities).

Diving into history, I should start with a famous quotation attributed to Winston Churchill: ‘The Balkans have produced more history than they can digest’. In an essay written in 1993 called ‘The Clash of Civilizations?’, Samuel Huntington argued that the border areas between different civilisations are inevitably characterized by war and violence. Although I do not subscribe to this theory, it might have some foundation. Surely, the Balkans is an area that has been continuously situated on the border between two larger cultures, power areas or [spheres of influence](#), namely the Latin influence in the North and the Greek influence in the South, from ancient history through to the Middle Ages until modern times.

A [map of the Balkan peninsula in the late 18th century](#) shows the Austrian-Hungarian or Habsburg Empire, the Ottoman Empire and also Venice, which played an important role in Dalmatia. There is a clear division between two very different entities – the Catholic, Central European Habsburg Empire bordering with the Turkish, Muslim Empire –, but a triangle, which corresponds more or less to modern Bosnia, can be clearly identified, too. This division is in part due to geographical features like mountain ranges, which shield the country from direct access from the Adriatic sea. Similarly, it is interesting to observe the [number of years a territory has spent under Ottoman rule](#) because of the cultural differences between Slovenia and Macedonia, for example, or Central Bosnia and parts of Vojvodina. These differences are often ascribed to the mentality as part of the legacy of the rule of the Ottoman Empire. The changes in variety and the borders that occurred in different historical periods are a characteristic feature of the situation in the Balkans. At the Berlin Congress in 1878, the borders of the Balkans were redrawn once again due to the weakness of the Ottoman Empire. After a huge expansion in the late Middle Ages, the latter was

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basically inward-looking and considered the 'sick man on the Bosphorus'. Such a power vacuum was quickly filled by others. Bosnia was occupied by the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, which became a kind of protection power until it annexed the country in 1913.

Between the two world wars the idea of '[self-determination](#)' of nations started to circulate, as announced by President Woodrow Wilson in 1918. Self-determination, however, could not be achieved in areas where the composition of the population was extremely diverse. This is where, on the contrary, the idea of unity of Southern Slavs (i.e. Yugoslavia) spread, which was realised in the Kingdom of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs under a Serb dynasty with the capital Belgrade. This kingdom lasted for the whole interwar period.

In the Balkans the Second World War basically meant [occupation](#) by Italy and Germany. In particular, Bosnia became part of the independent State of Croatia, which was a puppet State with a fascist, nationalist government controlled by the 'Ustaša' (Croatian Revolutionary Movement, i.e. nationalist militias), who ran the country on behalf of the Germans and Italians. In Serbia, on the contrary, there was a Serb nationalist guerrilla movement called 'Chetniks'. Both Chetniks and Ustaša were basically, to a large extent, terror movements that committed violent crimes against the population belonging to other nationalities. These were counteracted by the Partisans, an interethnic movement based on the socialist ideology, founded under [Josip Broz Tito](#)'s leadership. Tito united all nationalities in this partisan movement under a Communist and later socialist ideology which led to the foundation of [Yugoslavia in 1945](#). It consisted of six Republics – Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia – and two Autonomous Provinces – Vojvodina and Kosovo, which were part of Serbia but had a special autonomy. One of the reasons why Vojvodina obtained this autonomy is the diversity of its population, which still nowadays is made up of more than 20 different groups; Kosovo had and still has an Albanian majority. This is how the country was formed: while ethnic principles formally played a role (one could in fact speak of 'ethnic federalism'), it was actually Tito and his party who guaranteed the unity of that arrangement. The political denomination of the country was 'SFRY' or Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, whose motto was 'Brotherhood and Unity' (*Bratstvo i jedinstvo*).

Ethnic federalism grew stronger in Yugoslavia over the decades. Three Constitutions were introduced in slightly more than 40 years which shifted more and more power from the capital, Belgrade, towards the capitals of the Republics. The person who embodied the unity of Yugoslavia, Tito, passed away in 1980. In the 1980s there was also an economic crisis, during which the situation became very difficult for many people due to unemployment, inflation, falling salaries, and this had serious

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consequences on a political level, too. Moreover, when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1989 due to Gorbachev's reforms, the strong model of the Communist system collapsed with it. And although Yugoslavia was not directly linked to the Soviet Union, in a way the outside pressures which had held Yugoslavia together disappeared and politicians in the capitals of the Republics started to use nationalism as a vehicle for establishing their 'democratic' parties and their own political agendas. However oversimplified this overview may be, in a nutshell this is what happened in the late 1980s-early 1990s, leading to the [dissolution of Yugoslavia](#), which started with a wave of secession in 1991 – first Slovenia and Croatia, then Macedonia. As a reaction, in some areas of Croatia and in parts of Bosnia, Serbs, who were the majority of the population, started to proclaim their autonomous Serb Republics within these Republics.

The seceding Republics were recognised as independent States by several European countries, due to the idea that Republics were based on the nationality principle. Although true to some extent, this was particularly problematic in Bosnia, owing to its multi-ethnic population. For Western governments the status of 'Republic' meant a right to secede and become independent, although the situation in the area was much more complex: Kosovo, with its non-Slavic majority, for example, was not a Republic but only an Autonomous Province (and thus denied the right to secede). Politically, the new States were soon dominated by nationalist regimes and parties. However, the nationalist assumption of a homogenous population (Serbia as the country of all Serbs, Croatia the country of all Croats, etc.) contrasted with reality, as in all areas a sizeable part of the population belonged to a minority and started to ask for rights and guarantees, as a reaction to the nationalism of the majority. This is what happened in Croatia and Bosnia, where in the self-declared Serb parts of the country Serbs took to the arms and started to fight for their own assumed right of self-determination. Nationalism turned into violence on the basis of the assumed homogeneity of the population.

A diverse population characterized Yugoslavia, overall but also *within* the different Republics, as well as on the territory of Bosnia before the war. This explains why the wars in Yugoslavia were soon characterized by 'ethnic cleansing' which aimed at eliminating diversity by chasing away people, expelling or killing them. This happened although, for centuries, people from different groups had peacefully lived together, for example during the Ottoman empire, under which they could profess their religion, they could marry according to their own beliefs, while in other parts of Europe, for example, Protestants could not live in the same place with Catholics but were expelled. But in the 1990s, nationalism became the vehicle for politics in Yugoslavia and the nationalist movements exploited several misconceptions that were still

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present in the population, while the intervention by the international community shamefully did not take place or took place much too late.

In addition, the wars have been 'civil wars' only to a certain extent, as the neighbouring countries, Serbia and Croatia, strongly interfered with Bosnia. Their objective was to divide Bosnia up, which happened in practice with the support of the Serb forces and the Croat forces in Bosnia during the war.

The city of Sarajevo, situated in a long, narrow valley, surrounded by the mountains, was encircled by the Serb forces and put under [siege](#) for more than three years. The city was continuously shelled from the mountains with artillery, mortars, snipers, although it was not a military objective – at least not as a whole. The result was destruction and 11,541 victims altogether, among whom almost 2,000 were children. There was a very impressive [ceremony](#) in 2012, when for each of the victims a red chair was put in the main street of Sarajevo to remember these people.

To complicate things, there was also a war within the war within the larger war scenario which saw three opposing sides – Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks. In Herzegovina and some other parts of the country, Croats fought Bosniaks. Mostar is a city where Croats and Bosniaks lived together, Bosniaks on the Eastern side and Croats on the Western side of the river Neretva. Between 1992 and 1994, they were fighting to control the city. The [destruction of the 400-year Old Bridge](#) (*Stari Most*), became a symbol of the war. For many in the West this was a wake-up call, although the war had already been waged for more than a year. As a consequence, in 1994, with the Washington Peace Agreement, the Americans forced the Bosnian Croats and the Bosniaks to cease their fighting and to agree on a 'Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina' which gave each of them control over some territory. In fact, until today the Federation of BiH is divided into ten Cantons, most of them with a majority of Croats or Bosniaks, two of them mixed.

In 1995, the genocide of [Srebrenica](#) took place. Srebrenica is situated on the border with Serbia, to the east of the country. A lot of Bosniaks fled there, as the area was controlled by a battalion of Dutch UN peacekeeping forces and had been declared a UN safe zone. However, the city first, and later the UN compound, were surrounded, and families were divided: mothers, sisters and grandmothers were put on buses and trucks and driven out, while all males above a certain age (12 years old) were killed over a few days. This is an event to which the international definition of 'genocide' applies as a mass execution of civilians was committed against the Bosniak population because of their being Bosniak and mostly of Muslim faith. In other words, this was a deliberate attempt to physically eliminate the Muslim Bosniaks living in Eastern Bosnia. The genocidal character has been repeatedly denied by many Serb politicians, despite

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evidence and verdicts by international courts. Yet numbers speak for themselves: 8,372 young, middle-aged and old men were killed in Srebrenica simply because they were of a different faith and had a different name and surname. This corresponds to the legal definition of genocide.

‘Ethnic cleansing’ happened everywhere in Bosnia. The ‘White Ribbon day’ is widely known: on that day Serbs in Prijedor ordered the non-Serb population to wear a white ribbon in order to distinguish them, i.e. the equivalent of a yellow star for Jews in German-occupied areas during the Shoah. These people, especially males, were later deported to concentration camps, and many were killed.

Until today, the elaboration of the past is still very much a private issue, not only in Bosnia, but in the whole Balkan area, and an official, institutional elaboration of the past that could form the basis for a new democratic system is still missing. A legal elaboration of the past has been the task of a specific court: the [International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia \(ICTY\)](#), with its seat in The Hague, put war criminals on trial. After the closure of ICTY, war crimes are still tried in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but the denial of genocide and the glorification of war criminals continues. In summer 2021, Bosnia and Herzegovina’s top international official, [High Representative](#) Valentin Inzko, amended the national criminal code to outlaw the public denial of genocide and war crimes during the armed conflict.

After Srebrenica, NATO intervened with air strikes in the summer of 1995, bombing in particular Serb positions. Then Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks as well as representatives from the neighbouring countries were ‘invited’ to the US Air Force base in Dayton, Ohio, and were practically locked in for more than two weeks. The outcome was a compromise which is still the basis for the situation today: the [Dayton Peace Agreement](#) (which contains the [Constitution](#) of the country in its Annex 4). The ceasefire line became the ‘[Inter-Entity Boundary Line](#)’, crazily running in a zig-zag pattern through the country, even cutting municipalities in two. Today’s Constitution recognizes three ‘constituent peoples’ – Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks –, and two territorial entities – ‘Republika Srpska’ (with a Serb majority) and the Muslim-Croat dominated ‘Federation’. After more than three years of war, more than 100,000 victims (the exact number is unknown) and 1,000,000 refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) the essential question is: **Who** reached the goals?

In the second half of the 1990s, there was a military mission with 50-60,000 NATO soldiers. The international community appointed a High Representative with special powers: in order to guarantee the peace process, the High Representative can impose laws and fire politicians and people in the institutions who work against peace. There have been discussions for 15 years now that Bosnia should become a member of the

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European Union in the future, and that it should adopt reforms, mainly constitutional reforms, to be able to become a functional State. In fact, since the EU has taken over, international presence and pressure have been consistently reduced, and the prevailing idea is that Bosnia should manage things on its own (according to the principle of 'ownership').

More information about the region and its [prospects for European integration](#) can be found on the [European Commission's website](#). Since 2003 the European Union has promised that the Western Balkans will become members of the EU if certain conditions are met. However, right now, it's only Montenegro and Serbia who are negotiating with the European Commission. Northern Macedonia and Albania are candidates, but are still waiting for the negotiations to begin, while Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are only 'potential' candidates. The process is very long, and the longer it takes, and the further away the objective of membership is in the future, the less attractive it is for politicians to engage in reforms right now. Currently, the situation is stalled.

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