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# INTRODUCTION

## Undermining democratic transition: the case of the 1990 founding elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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In retrospect, with nearly 20 years of uneasy peace and three and a half years of war behind us, the outcome of Bosnia and Herzegovina's first election appears nearly inevitable – the resounding victory of ethnonationalist parties. However, hindsight makes sense of this election that paved the way to war some 17 months later. The victory of three political parties representing each of the three nations of Bosnia and Herzegovina and offering little programmatic detail beyond protecting national interests was not inevitable to voters at the time and neither did this outcome invariably mean war.

This special section looks back at these first post-communist multiparty elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina in November/December 1990. These founding elections were crucial as they led to an overwhelming victory for the three ethnonationalist parties – the Party of Democratic Action (*Stranka demokratske akcije*, SDA), the Croat Democratic Community (*Hrvatska demokratska stranka*, HDZ) and the Serb Democratic Party (*Srpska demokratska stranka*, SDS) that were key political actors throughout the war and have remained so ever since. Today, these three are not the only parties claiming to represent the interests of the three constituent people of Bosnia and Herzegovina and in some cases they have been displaced by their competitors. However, the principle of voting along ethnonationalist lines has dominated the country's politics in all its elections since 1990.

There are two ways of looking at these elections. Taken in a larger historical context, including the Yugoslav multiparty elections during the interwar period and the Bosnian *Landtag*, the assembly within Austria–Hungary in 1910, a majority of voters have repeatedly chosen parties that appealed to one particular national group. In 1910, the four parties were the Serb National Organization, the Muslim National Organization, the Croat National Community and the Croat Catholic Community. During the interwar years, Muslims tended to vote for the Yugoslav Muslim Organisation, Serbs for the National Radical Party and Croats for the Croatian (Republican) Peasants Party (Arnautović 1996, 25–8). Thus, the elections in 1990 could be seen as simply a repetition of these earlier results where Bosnians and Herzegovinians chose ethnonationalist parties. The exceptions to this rule were the

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tightly controlled elections of late interwar Yugoslavia and the socialist period when such options were not permitted. Thus, the 1990 elections appear like a return to a historical pattern (e.g. Hayden 2013, 296, 323, 358). However, such an interpretation is flawed. These earlier elections all took place between 1910 and 1927, some 63 years before the 1990 elections. It seems far-fetched that a pattern that lasted three decades (only) would have sufficient salience to express itself six decades later and in a Bosnia and Herzegovina that had profoundly changed. Not only had the republic undergone massive modernization, including large-scale movement to the urban centres, the population had also grown more secular, thus reducing the significance of the single most important marker of difference in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The inevitability argument resembles the claim of the 'return of history', popular in the 1990s among Western journalists and some academics. The idea that post-communist Europe and especially the Balkans would continue where they left off before communist rule ignored the transformative impact of this period and absolved its actors from agency.

On the other hand, one might attribute too much importance to the 1990 elections or the victory of the ethnonationalist elite it entailed. Here, the elections brought to power leaders whose interest it was (or became) to reinforce ethnonationalist divisions for the sake of preserving their political power. War and post-war order have only reinforced the predominance of nationalism and the rule of parties associated therewith (e.g. Mujkić 2008). However, here as well we can find weaknesses in the argument. Voters have, from 1990 until today, consistently and repeatedly chosen ethnonationalist parties, even when parties with multinational platforms and deemphasized ethnicity were on offer. Even after the war and once the dangers of supporting ethnonationalist parties was arguably apparent, the support continued; this continued even after the immediate post-war period when the perceived threat to ones community might have been more plausible. Not just institutions or structures, but also voters with their electoral choices, gave rise to persistent ethnonational institutions.

In interpreting and understanding the persistence of electoral support for ethnonationalist parties, the 1990 elections are crucial. These elections took place in a context wherein the institutional set-up of Bosnia and Herzegovina did not (yet) reward national parties nor gave them institutional legitimacy. Furthermore, there was a genuine opportunity for choice at these elections, with no clear frontrunner, and all parties, save the League of Communists, merely a few months old. Of course, it would be simplistic to argue that understanding the victory of the ethnonationalist parties in 1990 helps explain all their subsequent victories, but understanding how and why they won sheds light on the path to war, as well as on a large comparative scale, i.e. in explaining the success of ethnonationalist parties in multinational countries at crucial founding elections. As such elections set party patterns, establish institutions and otherwise normalize certain political choices, understanding the success of ethnonationalist parties at such critical junctures is essential. Yet, the results of this election remain curiously under-researched. Much of the writing on the period before the war appeared during the 1990s, when data were not always available.

The relevance of revisiting these elections is twofold. First, how did the strong showing of the ethnonationalist parties come about and where in Bosnia was it particularly pronounced? Second, how did the electoral system, that included both PR and majoritarian dimensions, impact the result, and how might this shed light on

broader dynamics in ethnically divided or polarized contexts? The authors in this special section return to the 1990 election and offer new insights based on new data. The municipal level data of the election results, previously unanalyzed, allow us to find out more about the degree to which cross-ethnic voting took place and where multinational and ethnonationalist parties fared best.

The Bosnian elections took place in two rounds – on 18 November and 2 December 1990 – during a year that had earlier seen elections in Slovenia, Croatia and Macedonia and, later, in Serbia and Montenegro. During the same year, not only had the League of Communists of Yugoslavia ceased to exist, elections were held for the first time in all other communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, with the exception of Albania. The call for multiparty elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina came not from the opposition – there were few dissidents and hardly any organized groups that could make such demands. It was rather the domino effect of elections to the north of the country that made elections inevitable.

As elections were held throughout Yugoslavia in 1990, two features of these founding elections are crucial to note for the Bosnian context. First, no Yugoslav-wide election was held or even seriously planned. While Ante Marković, Yugoslavia's last prime minister and the country's most popular politician at the time favoured such an approach, the republican leaders rejected Federal elections (Marković 2004, 30, 918–9). This rejection was certainly in part opportunistic: Such elections would legitimize federal institutions and also allow for Yugoslav-wide campaigning that could challenge the power base of the republic elites. There were also institutional obstacles, as the electoral system would not easily achieve cross-republican consensus. However, as Dejan Jović points out, the 'fact that it was impossible [to agree on federal elections] already indicates that no elections in themselves would have saved the unity of Yugoslavia' (Jović 2009, 33). The republican elections were contested by republican parties and no single party ran in all elections. The Reformists of Ante Marković were only established in July and August 1990, after elections in Slovenia and Croatia, and thus they ran only in the southern republics: with limited success in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, failure to make any headway in Serbia and a good result in Macedonia.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, political alternatives to the incumbent League of Communists only emerged gradually in the Spring and Summer of 1990. While the three ethnonationalist parties emphasized national identity and held different views of the future of Yugoslavia and Bosnia and Herzegovina within it, the main competition during these elections was not between these parties, but between the ethnonationalist parties and the still dominant League of Communists as well as the Reformists. The ethnonationalist parties were all founded less than half a year prior to the elections and built up their platforms and party infrastructures in the run up to the elections. As Nenad Stojanović explores in his chapter, parties with national alignment were originally prohibited by law and this ban was only overruled by the Constitutional Court in June 1990. The ban on ethnic parties was by no means unique to Bosnia and Herzegovina, as similar parties were banned in Bulgaria and Albania in the Balkans and such bans were common in post-Soviet elections, as well as in Africa (Basedau and Moroff 2011; Bieber 2008; Birnir 2008; Bogaards 2008). The ban on ethnonational parties in the Balkans was only moderately effective, as the main minorities in Albania and Bulgaria were able to circumvent the ban (with the tacit consent of the majority). These two cases differed from Bosnia

and Herzegovina, however, as the ban only affected minorities, not the majority, whereas in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the ban would have shaped the entire political landscape as it was the three majorities that formed ethnonationalist parties. National minorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina were too small to hope to achieve parliamentary representation through their own political parties.

Although it is impossible to determine the likely outcome had the ban remained in place, there is reason to doubt its potential effectiveness. The main Muslim party, the Party for Democratic Action, was established prior to the lifting of the ban in May 1990. The party clearly catered only to Muslims, as reflected in the party programme that defined the SDA as 'the political alliance of citizens of Yugoslavia who belong to the Muslim cultural-historical circle, as well as other citizens of Yugoslavia who accept the program and the goals of the party' (SDA), yet at least its name was more ambiguous than the ethnonationalist parties founded after the ban was dropped (Andjelić 2003, 143). The time that passed between the founding of the party and the lifting of the ban was too brief to determine whether courts would have upheld the ban with regard to the SDA. Furthermore, as Andjelić points out, the Croat Democratic Community had begun to set up party branches in Herzegovina from neighbouring Croatia before the ban was dropped (Andjelić 2003, 136). Thus, the emergence of parties catering to only one nation predates the lifting of the ban, suggesting that the ban, had it remained in place, would have failed to prevent the emergence of such parties.

This dynamic can be further understood through two observations. First, a party can formally obscure its ethnic affiliation, while catering only to a mono-ethnic electorate. Thus, the burden of proof would lie with the courts and banning an existing party is more challenging than preventing its establishment in the first place. Second, a party that appears to enjoy some popular support but is banned by courts or institutions dominated by a deeply unpopular League of Communists could have undermined the legitimacy of the elections. Although, some surveys suggest that the ban had some popular support (although varying across the republic), it appears unclear whether it would have been able to genuinely change the political dynamics (Andjelić 2003, 135).

The ban on ethnonationalist parties notwithstanding, the political system in 1990 was already heading towards some form of power sharing. The electoral law did not just reserve two seats in the presidency for Serbs, Croats and Muslims, and one for others,[1] it also required that the ethnic structure of the elected institutions would have to reflect the populus within 15 percent of the latest census results (Andjelić 2003, 151). Thus, the three largest nations (*narodi*), Muslims (from 1993, Bosniaks), Serbs and Croats held an institutionally and constitutionally strong position and greater rights than others even prior to the electoral success of the three ethnonationalist parties.

After the SDA's establishment in May, the other two ethnonational parties were formally established over the summer of 1990, the SDS in July 1990, just five months before the elections. Its program combined broad goals, such as multiparty democracy, rule of law, peace and co-operation, with particularly Serb demands, such as maintaining the Yugoslav state with Bosnia and Herzegovina as a republic within it as well as support for the Orthodox Church and Serbs in Kosovo (Treanor 2002, 20). While the HDZ had established branches in Herzegovina, as noted above, it was formally registered a month after the SDS and, unlike its Serb counterpart, saw several changes of leadership, mostly as a reflection of changing

priorities in Croatia, where the governing HDZ dominated its sister party in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Arnautović 1996, 43). The other political parties could be categorized as either ethnonationalist (such as the Serb Renewal Movement, the sister party of the main ethnonationalist opposition party in Serbia, and the Muslim Bosniak Organization, a liberal split-off from the SDA), Yugoslav or leftist parties (such as the Alliance of Reform Forces of Yugoslavia), or the Democratic Socialist Alliance (Arnautović 1996, 44–5).

Of course, the main party in the republic, at least for the time being, was still the League of Communists. However, the Bosnian branch of the party had been more discredited than elsewhere. The *Agrokomerc* scandal surrounding an agricultural company in north-western Bosnia not only highlighted the scale of patronage and abuse of office in the republic, but also brought economic hardship to the region (Andjelić 2003, 54–9). Thus, ironically, the director of *Agrokomerc* and the main person responsible, Fikret Abdić, was able to win more votes than any other presidency member in 1990. In addition to the higher level and visibility of corruption and scandals, such as communist officials' personal construction of a hotel and villas on the short Adriatic coast with republican funds, the more repressive climate of the republic undermined the party's support. While a reformist younger group rose to power in the late 1980s after the Agrokomerc affair, this legacy weighed heavily on the party. The fact that it remained the most popular party in most pre-election opinion polls – while support for the League of Communists declined between the first polls in June and November, the party and the reformists consistently outperforming the ethnonationalist parties (Arnautović 1996, 47–66) – is probably more a function of the weak profile of the new parties and their late establishment than genuine support for the communist party, as the election results would in the end highlight. In addition, as Andjelić points out, the polls were unreliable because citizens were not used to expressing their political views freely (Andjelić 2003, 173–4).

Originally, the main alternative to the League of Communists was the Reformists, announced by Yugoslav Prime Minister Ante Marković in July 1990 at the commemoration of a renowned Partisan battle against German occupation forces at Mount Kozara. However, his party did not take off until September, later than the ethnonationalist parties and with a weak infrastructure. Its leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina were mostly intellectuals previously close to the League of Communists. Thus, the reformist party could not clearly position itself as an alternative to the incumbent communists and also failed to build a popular leadership beyond Marković to draw mass support (Pejanović 2004, 27–31). After all, Marković himself was not a candidate in the elections. As Nenad Stojanović notes in his article for this special section, in Bosnia '[t]he ethnic parties were the only anti-communist option available', as the reformists drew heavily on former communists. The ethnonationalist parties did as well, but reformists, as the name suggests, favoured reforming, but not fundamentally departing from the socialist Yugoslav framework. Thus, in effect, Bosnia had the choice between reform-communist civic parties and ethnonational parties. Parties defining themselves along the conventional left–right spectrum without ethnic prefix was not on offer. Thus, the victory of the ethnonationalists in Bosnia was also the result of the poverty of choices.

The ethnonationalist parties did not offer striking slogans, but rather suggested that their victory was inevitable or natural as they were the representatives of the three nations. Thus, the SDS campaigned with the slogan: 'Serbs, you are allowed

to be Serbs' (see Toal and Maksić 2014) and HDZ with the slogan 'Zna se!' (One knows) or more indicative 'Our name is our program', while the Muslim SDA used the slogan 'SDA-Democracy' and 'SDA-Muslim Party' to first challenge claims that the party was undemocratic and second to undercut the Muslim Bosniak Organisation's claim to represent Muslims (Arnautović 1996, 99–100). The mutual presence at the parties' founding congresses and some joint election rallies, such as in Konjic in November, suggested to the electorate that the parties were able to collaborate (Andjelić 158, 171). Even if this appears not to have translated into significant cross-ethnic voting for the seven members of the presidency, as Damir Kapidžić argues in his chapter for this special section, it certainly helped dispel some reservations about voting for the ethnonationalist parties. In parallel to the elements of cooperation, tensions also increased in Bosnia and Herzegovina. First, the regional conflict between Serb leaders in Croatian Krajina and the new Croatian government in the summer of 1990 especially affected Serb–Croat relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina. At the same time, numerous interethnic incidents heighted tensions and both Croatia and Serbia polarized the climate in Bosnia and Herzegovina itself (Andjelić 2003, 164–167). Mirko Pejanović, a prominent politician for a multinational party at the time, describes the rise and success of the ethnonationalist parties as nearly inevitable, especially in smaller towns and villages. The combination of charismatic leaders within or outside the republic and their monopolistic claim on their respective communities gave them the aura of inescapable dominance (Pejanović 2004, 33–4).

A common misconception of the election results is that the voters chose war by supporting the three ethnonationalist parties. As Nina Caspersen has highlighted in her study of Serb party politics in Croatia and Bosnia, the SDS did not radicalize itself to gather more votes in elections, but rather took a less compromising nationalist line after the elections. The radicalization took place as the SDS took control over municipalities it had won in the 1990 election and the regional power structures it established in the year prior to the outbreak of war, leading up to the establishment of the *Republika Srpska* (Caspersen 2010, 71–2). This argument closely follows the broader findings of V.P. Gagnon on the dynamics of nationalist radicalization in Croatia and Serbia (Gagnon 2004). Thus, the vote certainly did not express support among voters for violence or even political projects that entailed the significant risk of violence. Yet, it empowered three parties that made competing demands and that proved unwilling to compromise. The willingness to use force came primarily for the SDS, aware of their backing by Serbia and the Yugoslav army. Yet similarly, the SDA and HDZ pursued political goals – an independent Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the case of the latter some degree of secession from Bosnia to join Croatia – and were willing to take up the associated risk of violence. The grand coalition of the three ethnonationalist parties turned out to be inefficient and preoccupied with discussing the differences over the future of the republic. The only level at which the cooperation worked was in the complete takeover of state institutions, municipalities and state-owned structures by the three parties in the election's aftermath (Bougarel 1996). Thus, with a two exceptions, Tuzla (Armakolas 2011) and Vares, the control of Bosnia and Herzegovina by the ethnonationalist parties was nearly complete after the 1990 elections. The referendum in February/March 1992 over Bosnia and Herzegovina's independence highlighted the depth of the divisions between the parties and their electorate. Boycotted by most Serbs,[2] the referendum reflected the will of a majority, but not of a majority of all

three nations to become independent. The outcome sufficed for international recognition – the referendum had been a condition of the European Community – but it made Bosnia and Herzegovina a state unrecognized by many of its own citizens.

The outcome of the elections did not lead straight to war. In Croatia, the SDS won only 1.6 percent of the vote, a minority of 13.5 percent even within the Serb community (Caspersen 2010, 59), but support from Belgrade, the wiliness to use force in taking over municipalities and the weakness of the League of Communists to protect the interests of the Serb community gave it the strength to dominate Serb politics in Croatia within a year. Thus even a relative victory or a strong showing of the reformists or communists did not necessarily implied the avoidance of war. The strong interest in confrontation by the Serbian leadership and the matching nationalist rhetoric in Croatia suggest that ethnonationalist parties might have gained ground without elections. In fact, many reformist politicians later joined the nationalists (e.g. Dragan Kalinić), or founded their own competing ethnonationalist parties (e.g. Milorad Dodik). The success of the ethnonationalist parties in the winter of 1990, however, facilitated the road to war and excluded from power those that might have tried to stop the violence.

The contributions in this special section by Nenad Stojanović, Damir Kapidžić and Boriša Mraović demonstrate that there is much to be learnt about the elections. As Stojanović argues, this was not a vote for nationalism, but rather a vote based on the fear of the other's nationalism. Thus, citizens voted against their preferences for fear of other's preferences. This prisoners' dilemma does not deny the salience of nationalism, but rather than understanding the vote as an enthusiastic endorsement of ethnonationalist parties, it is better understood as a vote out of fear and uncertainty. Kapidžić shows us that despite the option for cross-ethnic voting and even some parties' encouragement for it, little actually took place. Had more cross-ethnic voting occurred, it would have benefited the multinational parties, and not the ethnonationalist ones. Similarly, Mraović shows that the different electoral systems used for the various chambers of parliament – proportional and majoritarian – did not significantly impact the outcome of the election. Instead, homogeneity and heterogeneity are the key two predictors of votes for multinational or mononational parties; the former have more success in more diverse municipalities. In line with the contact hypothesis, it is thus not the degree of exposure to the other, but rather distance that explains the success of ethnonationalist parties. It comes as no surprise then, that with substantially more alienated communities after the war and the reality of minimal contact, ethnonationalist parties have continued to be predominate politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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## Notes

1. Pejanović describes the negotiations within the League of Communists and with the newly established ethnonationalist parties over the composition of the presidency. Originally, the presidency was intended to hold three Muslim, two Serb and one Croat member (Pejanović 2004, 19–20).

2. The SDS had organized a seperate plebescite in November 1991 over whether Bosnia and Herzegovina should remain in Yugoslavia with a strong support among those supporting in favour of Yugoslavia.

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