

O Land of Bosnia: Identity, Belonging, and the Nation

You're the light of the soul

Eternal fire's flame

Mother of ours, o land of Bosnia

I belong to you¹

I grew up in the neighborhood of Grbavica, just outside of Sarajevo's center. I remember thinking how unfortunate it was to spend my childhood in a place so grey and dreary, masquerading itself as a family friendly neighborhood with good public schools and plenty of parks. My apartment building offered the quintessential Eastern European residential experience. It is a miserable sight to behold to the Western eye; a semi-rectangle with blocks of concrete that serve as the façade. My elementary school, located just a couple of blocks away, was shut down during the war, and repaired with the help of generous donations from foreign embassies. I attended high school in the city, and commuted by tram every single day. With my backpack pressed against my stomach, and some change clinking in my pockets, I would make it outside the tiny, compressed cubicle just before the doors shut.

I always had an understanding of my background. Whether it be my name or certain cultural and religious practices that I took part in, my identity was also largely shaped by events that preceded me. My very own neighborhood, now known for its stretches of nearly identical apartment buildings, was once a site of systemic rape and violence committed against Muslim women. Once an ethnically mixed neighborhood, Grbavica remained under the control of Serb forces

¹ First verse of the proposed lyrics to the national anthem of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

throughout the war. Besides the use of gendered violence as a tool of warfare, the non-Serb population was expelled, and the neighborhood became a pivotal spot in the city.

I knew how important it was for me to have an understanding of that history. What I did not know, however, was what me being a Bosnian Muslim meant to the world, and more specifically, what it meant to Europe.

I grew up in a wreck of a nation. A lot has changed since my early childhood. Potholes were filled. Promises made. A couple of luxury apartment buildings sprung up in parts of Sarajevo. There were talks of unity and the European Union. Divisions prevailed. Unlike my parents and family members who had endured years of violence and uncertainty, I had the privilege of dreaming of a better tomorrow, one which almost always included a life outside of Bosnia.

People in Bosnia often have a fragmented perception of time. In conversations time is usually divided into *the before* and *the after* the war. I belong to the so called post-war generation, one which did not experience the violence of an armed conflict, yet struggled with a different set of questions. Who are we? How do we move on? Should we be moving on in the first place? What could the future look like?

I felt guilty for wanting to leave. To have a nation to call home is a privilege in itself, regardless of how one feels about the modern nation state. After years of violence, genocide, and utter loss and destruction, many were relieved to finally have a semblance of peace. I do not take for granted my privilege to have a very strong sense of home and self, yet I also find myself thinking about how my identity is shaped by how others perceive me.

When it was time for me to pursue higher education, I found myself without access to a wide range of opportunities. Not being a member of the European Union complicated things, and

upped the prices of most universities. That led me to the United States, where I was offered a full ride to a prestigious liberal arts college.

In the United States I became European. Well, *Eastern European*. It did not really matter which of the two variations of the label I received on a given day. I found myself getting quite comfortable with the term, embracing an identity and a community that I never really saw myself as part of. I shared many of the same experiences as other European international students, and boasted about public transport and free healthcare.

The idea of what it means to be European, and what Europe exactly constitutes as a culture and a place, has changed over the course of history, and varies greatly depending on who you ask. If you were to ask Douglas Murray, the author of *The Strange Death of Europe*, Islam as a religion needs strong reforming before Muslims can become integrated members of the European society. Murray mainly focused on the mass wave of migration of a largely Muslim population in 2015. He argued that the changes that these new Europeans brought to their respective communities were irreversible, and will ultimately lead to the fall of the Western civilization. He also argues that the new wave of Muslim immigration is unprecedented, and therefore, unpredictable.

What Murray fails to mention in his book is the existence of Muslims indigenous to Europe, one like myself. The issue here might simply be a question of semantics, as his “Europe” is Western Europe, and my Europe is, well, Bosnia.

He also downplays the prevalence of xenophobic attacks against migrant communities, claiming various anti-fascist movements serve no purpose in a democratic and liberal Europe. “When it

comes to anti-fascism in most of Western Europe, there would appear for now to be a supply-and-demand problem: the demand for fascists vastly outstrips the actual supply.’’²

Murray does not, however, mention how a genocide took place in the heart of the continent in 1995. An act of ethnic cleansing committed against the local Bosnian Muslim population does not fit his argument because Bosnia, and more broadly the Balkans, exist outside of the realm of ‘‘Europe’’.

The interchangeable and somewhat ambiguous use of the word ‘‘Europe’’ is not uncommon. The high standards of living, booming economy, open borders, and the respect for human rights, certainly make up the definition. The connotation is almost always positive.

My experiences have been vastly different. My parents helped rebuild a nation that was torched to the ground. I ran around tarnished playgrounds and learned foreign languages out of necessity. Family members drove trucks or worked in construction in Germany, sending home euros and the occasional chocolate bar. Jobs at the *Baustelle*³ kept food on the table. My friends struggled to secure even the lowest paying jobs at their universities, as work permits were hard to come by.

I felt like I was on the outside looking in. Being in such close proximity to what I deemed as a happy, stable, and fulfilled life, made things seem a lot worse. Not being able to partake in any of the aspects of ‘‘Europeanness’’ felt like I was peeking over the fence, waiting to be let in.

Besides the suspicious glances at various border check points in Europe, the lack of opportunities in Bosnia led me to a dangerous path of self-hate. I started to feel like a hypocrite. While many

² Murray, Douglas (2018-06-14), *The Strange Death of Europe: Immigration, Identity, Islam* (Paperback ed.), London: Bloomsbury Continuum.

³ Construction site.

died trying to defend a patch of land I call home, I became jealous and resentful of the so called Europe I was told we were a part of.

The United States offered me break. I did not have to be concerned with the endless bureaucracies of the European Union. What changed, however, was that sense of self that I was so aware of. Unfamiliar with the history of the place that I was coming from, most people did not understand the full complexity of my ethnic and religious identity. Because there were very few expectations, the experience felt like a clean slate. I also started to feel somewhat invisible.

Cultural identities and ethnic backgrounds are relative. I become fully aware of that whenever I get the question of *where are you from?* The geographic location becomes the sole identifying factor of who I am in the United States. I had spent my entire life obsessing over the idea of ethnic identity and belonging. Crossing the ocean seemed to have rendered that notion pointless.

My freshman year of college we read *Imagined Communities* by Benedict Anderson, in which the author examines the idea of the nation, seeing it as entirely socially constructed. “I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community-and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.... Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined...”⁴. Anderson might have also predicted the fall of Yugoslavia, noting: “Who can be confident that Yugoslavia and Albania will not one day come to blows?”.

⁴ Anderson, Benedict R. O'G. 1936-. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. and extended ed. London; New York: Verso, 1991.

I knew exactly what Anderson meant, perhaps even more so than my classmates. The place that I call home had existed under a different name only a couple of years before I was born. It is no wonder that the term *balkanization* exists, referring to the fragmentation of a larger region into smaller, usually uncooperative states. My understanding of the nation was therefore not one of the sovereign state's perpetual existence and comradeship. It was quite the opposite.

What I have been grappling with is how an idea so relatively *new* and *imagined* had completely shifted the course of my life, and the lives of many others. It seems almost slightly dismissive to refer to the nation as *imagined* after its "elastic boundaries" had singlehandedly caused the deaths of millions across the globe, and nearly eradicated entire communities of people. I do understand that social constructs have real, material consequences on the world. I am fully aware of the fact that these two ideas can exist simultaneously. However, on a more emotional and personal level, it is difficult for me to not see my identity as so intrinsically linked to nationhood. "Don't think that you won't take Bosnia and Herzegovina into hell, and the Muslim people into extinction. Because the Muslim people cannot defend themselves if there is war here,"⁵ Radovan Karadzic said at a hearing at the Bosnian parliament in October 1991.

There is little consensus among historians on why the conquest of the former Kingdom of Bosnia by the Ottoman Empire resulted in such a significant change in the religious practices of the native population. Many argue that the fall of the Bosnian Church, deemed heretical by Christian hierarchies in both the East and the West, left people in need of an organized religion. There were also economic incentives that promoted conversion, as well as a number of other factors.

⁵ Hemon, Aleksandar. "Opinion | How Radovan Karadzic Made Bosnia Suffer." The New York Times, 26 July 2008, www.nytimes.com/2008/07/27/opinion/27hemon.html.

After the formation of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia in 1945, the Bosnian Muslim population struggled to find legal recognition. In the census of 1948, Bosnians could identify themselves as either Serb Muslims, Croat Muslims, or as undeclared. Most chose the latter. Higher government officials hoped that the "Muslim problem" would disappear over time, and that the majority of the population would ultimately align themselves with either of the two ethnic identities. However, in 1971 the constitution finally included "Muslims", informally known as "Muslims in the national sense", as constituent peoples of the republic.

The death of Josip Broz Tito exacerbated a lot of the issues the country had been battling. Rising unemployment, historic inflation, massive debts, and a failed attempt to transition into a market economy left the nation in shambles. Ethnic identities solidified. A decade of unfiltered nationalism paved the way to violence.

After three and a half years of the Bosnian War and killings, torture, rape, and the destruction of property, as part of a planned effort of ethnic cleansing, a peace agreement was signed in Dayton, Ohio in 1995. Its effectiveness is a current matter of heated debate in the political discourse in the country. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) will persecute many high profile cases, such as the ones of Slobodan Milosevic and Radovan Karadzic. Their sentencing will receive mixed responses from the public in former republics.

So where exactly does this leave us? For one, mass graves will continue to be uncovered in Srebrenica and the surrounding areas. Public burials will take place every year on the 11th of July, and people across the country will tune in to watch. Some will walk the annual peace march. It will rain on that day, as it does every year.

Throughout the rest of the year we will be concerned with other things, such as high unemployment rates, a complicated system of government, rampant poverty, crumbling roads, lack of investment in public education and healthcare, and corruption.

Every once in a while an event will steer the public into a debate on the legacies of war. The hate slogan *Nož, žica, Srebrenica* or *The Knife, The Barbed Wire, Srebrenica*, glorifies genocide, and is often used by members of the far right in Serbia. At the 2016 World Cup, a Greek football fan flew a banner with the slogan during a match. Greek officials apologized for the incident. Until recently, a Serbian online clothing store carried merchandise with the offensive slogan.

Genocide denial has been on the rise. Srebrenica's current mayor, Mladen Grujicic, recently stated that: "No Serb would deny that Bosniaks were killed here in horrible crimes ... but a genocide means the deliberate destruction of a people. There was no deliberate attempt to do that here."⁶ Peter Handke, recent Nobel prize winner, previously gave a eulogy at the funeral of Slobodan Milosevic and brushed off allegations of genocide denial as "hate mail". Srebrenica survivors pleaded to have his prize revoked.

I come from a place known for its political instability and a bitter conflict. The idea of belonging is therefore a fairly complicated issue for me. My identity was victimized in the past. Yet, when I look to the future, I do not look at Bosnia. Here we often speak of the brain drain, or the loss of skilled labor. Many of my friends look to start their lives elsewhere. Do I have a responsibility to stay? Did my ancestors fight for a land that only grants opportunities to the privileged few?

In the past month hundreds of migrants have been stranded in Bosnia without shelter in freezing temperatures. Many of them forced to bathe in cold rivers. Almost all are merely hoping to pass

⁶ Walker, Shaun. "Genocide Denial Gains Ground 25 Years after Srebrenica Massacre." *The Guardian*, 4 Dec. 2020, www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/10/genocide-denial-gains-ground-25-years-after-srebrenica-massacre.

through Bosnia and make it to the European Union. Local authorities have refused to open housing facilities for “safety” concerns, and local populations gathered in protest in small villages across Bosnia to show off their disapproval.

The lack of solidarity baffled me. *Did these people actually think that they were better than the migrants?* Are we perpetuating the same hierarchies Europe imposed on us? What exactly are we gatekeeping? And for whom? Nearly 25 years before the recent events *we* were the refugees, yet now had the audacity to judge others for trying to make a better life for themselves.

I was privileged enough to do some traveling through Western Europe. I found myself interacting with Europeans in various walks of life. I noticed a sense of aloofness to their demeanor that I could never quite wrap my head around. Whether it was going shopping or drinking at a local bar on a Friday night, their lives vastly differed from mine. It seems like my generation was raised to see the world in a hyper realistic way. Our parents have seen war, and carried with them psychological distress that was never properly cared for.

I feel quite tired most of the time. It is a not a mind-numbing or physical type of tiredness. I wake up in the morning and think about how my sense of belonging is also fragmented, just like Bosnia’s perception of time. In the United States I found a new home. Albeit temporary, it has allowed me to exist without some of the baggage that I carry back home. That has also come at the expense of people not knowing how some of my most formative experiences have had to do with histories much larger than myself.

I would love to exist in a world in which nations are mere imagined communities. I like to think that we are all more than just our passports. However, for now, I feel a deep responsibility to maintain a sense of self that is, perhaps unfortunately, strongly linked to my national and ethnic

identity. To be able to sit down and write this essay, to get an education, and to have a deep understanding of who I am as a Bosnian Muslim is an immense privilege. For now, I am here. Regardless of how others might perceive me. I am nowhere close to being extinct. And I will use my voice to hopefully help alleviate some of the pain my generation has felt.

Now whenever someone asks me where I am from, I like to say that I live on the periphery of Europe. *What do you think that makes me?*

The beautiful blue sky

Of Herzegovina

In the heart are your rivers

Your mountains

Proud and famous

Land of ancestors

You shall live in our hearts

Ever more

Generations of yours

Show up as one

We go into the future

Together⁷

⁷ Last three verses of proposed lyrics to the national anthem of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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