

# The Bosniaks: Failing Role Models for Muslim Europeans

ADISA BUSULADŽIĆ

*University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina*

THIS PAPER EXPLORES THE DIVERGING political orientations and the revival of Islam in the post-socialist and post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, arguing that these new trends among the Bosniaks are resulting from their unclear viewpoints on security, citizenship and state. As a nation emerging from the political culture of a mixed eastern and communist heritage and the recent genocide, the Bosniaks are lacking trust both in institutions and in the essential mechanisms of European political heritage. This volatility is amplified by the Bosnian institutional framework in which the local political and religious leaders – along with the international community’s representatives effectively ruling the country – keep on squandering the historic opportunity for redesigning the Bosniaks into a vibrant nation which could serve as a role model for the growing population of Muslim Europeans. The specific capacity and texture of Bosnian European culture in-between elaborated in this paper, indicates the need for multilateral cooperation in reshaping its outdated mechanisms with the emerging ones. While obtaining an appropriate niche on the European soil, the Bosniaks would also be able to contribute to a makeover of the traditional European contours into wider, all-inclusive and ecumenical European perspectives.

The Bosniaks entered the contemporary European and the world’s stage, closing the 20th century as the victims of a genocide, better known as ‘ethnic cleansing’ during the 1992–1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although journalists’ reports from the field clearly stated that there was a *genocide* going on (Gutman 1993; Vulliamy 1994; Rieff 1995), and even after they had won the most prestigious journalistic award for those dispatches, once the dispatches were bound in a book, the word *genocide* would be followed by a watered down apposition – ‘ethnic cleansing,’ albeit in inverted commas. Roy Gutman’s book: *A witness*

*to genocide: The 1993 Pulitzer Prize-winning dispatches on the 'ethnic cleansing' in Bosnia* is the most telling example of the occurrence.

[212]

This post-modernist euphemism was finally dropped fourteen years later when, in January 2009, the European Parliament adopted the Srebrenica Genocide Resolution and recognized July 11th, as the Day of commemoration of the Srebrenica genocide all over Europe. The Resolution refers to the infamous massacre of Bosniaks in July of 1995 as 'a carnage' in which 'more than 8 000 Muslim men and boys, who had sought safety in this area under the protection of the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR), were summarily executed by Bosnian Serb forces commanded by General Mladić and by paramilitary units, including Serbian irregular police units which had entered Bosnian territory from Serbia; whereas nearly 25 000 women, children and elderly people were forcibly deported, making this event the biggest war crime to take place in Europe since the end of the Second World War' (European Parliament 2009).

Nevertheless, the Resolution somehow avoids to mention that (a) those 8,000 Muslim men and boys, were the Bosniaks, and /b) that those victims were not 'men and boys' only.

According to the data available at the official web-site of Srebrenica-Potocari Memorial Center (Memorijalni Centar Srebrenica-Potocari 2010), there were 57 women and girls among the massacre victims. Actually, a careful look at the still incomplete list of 8,373 Srebrenica genocide victims shows that the oldest victim happened to be a 97-year old woman, while the youngest was a girl, age 8. Alas, there was no mention of them in the European Parliament's Resolution on any official UN or EU document dealing with, what now everybody recognizes as, 'the biggest war crime to take place in Europe since the Second World War.'

The aforementioned General Mladić, indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) for the 1992–1995 siege of Sarajevo and the Srebrenica massacre is still a fugitive from justice, since the attempts to hunt him down and arrest him have not hitherto produced any results. The only thing the police had managed to seize from Mladić were his diaries, whose content has been recently made public by the Tribunal. One of the most quoted lines from those



diaries refers to the fact that during the Bosnian war the then-Serbian and Croatian Presidents, Slobodan Milošević and Franjo Tuđman, respectively, held several clandestine meetings ‘offering Bosnian Muslims to each other and none wanted them’ (Macedonian Information Agency 2010).

[213]

#### THE HISTORY OF UNWANTED NATION

For the past hundred years or so, the Bosniaks seem to be the main subjects of constant haggling and trade-offs of the ruling elites in Bosnia’s neighboring countries – Serbia and Croatia. As a result, there have been constant reductions and changing interpretations of their national identity and fate in both the European and the international context. The root cause of this phenomenon can be tracked down by following the historic roots of Bosniaks.

The Bosniaks made up about 44 per cent of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s 4.5-million pre-war population. They embraced Islam some 600 years ago, when the Ottomans conquered the Balkans. Many of them converted to Islam from another Bosnian peculiarity – the Bosnian church, which constituted an indigenous separatist and schismatic sect, resulting from the import of Bulgarian and Manichean spiritual heritage, as well as Bosnian refusal of Hungarian attempts to appoint a Hungarian bishop in this medieval kingdom. Consequently, Hungarian leaders convinced the Pope of religious heresy in Bosnia and the need for a crusade against the Bosnian church between 1235 and 1241 (Fine 1975, 328).

This historic episode is very significant for the overall political and cultural profile of Bosnia, showing that even before the Ottomans, this country’s inhabitants had never been a part of the European mainstream.

After the Austro-Hungarian Empire took over Bosnia from the Ottomans at the end of 19th century and, particularly, after Bosnia subsequently became adjacent to the newly formed multiethnic Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later called Yugoslavia) in the aftermath of the First World War, Bosnian Muslims residing in towns started embracing secularism, while the rural ones continued to adhere to what would be later dubbed ‘being Muslim the Bosnian way’ (Bringa 1995).

[214]

In Yugoslavia, where religion primarily served as a major ethnic identifier of the Slavic-speaking populations, the followers of Islamic faith were regarded by the largest ethnic groups (all of whom were Christians) as somewhat ominous reminders of 500 years of the Ottoman rule in the Balkans.

While the Bosnian Muslims remained uninterested in and unclear of their own ethnic identity, the orthodox (Serbs) and catholic (Croats) Christians – with whom the Bosnian Muslim shared the same land and language – grew progressively nationalistic. In the midst of competing Serbian and Croatian nationalisms within Yugoslavia, Bosnian Muslims limited their religious practice to occasional visits to the mosque, observation of religious holidays or important rites of passage, e. g. birth, marriage, and death.

Lacking the European cultural heritage, the Bosniaks had not understood the importance of ethnic identity in gaining recognition as a group, due to the universalistic and highly antinationalistic stance of Islamic traditional theology.

Therefore, they kept on identifying themselves as a religious group, seeing its own cultural and political identity as some sort of sacrilege against the universal Islamic nation – *Ummah* (the Islamic community). Such a stance was persistently spread by the local *Ulema* (Muslim clergy), as well as by the neighboring nationalist circles of Serbia and Croatia, who, in this way, were given a chance to assimilate the anti-nationalistic Bosniaks (thus considered ‘anationalist’) and include the Bosnian territory within their own national boundaries.

This trend was meandering in different directions during 45 years of the communist era following the end of the Second World War. At first, the Bosniaks were not recognized at all as a separate ethnic and cultural group. For the first 25 years in power, the communist regime continued to exploit the universalistic stance of immature Bosniak national elites.

Ironically, at the peak of secularization and atheization of Bosnian Muslims in the early 1970s, the Yugoslav communist leadership decided to forestall the rise of competing Serbian and Croatian nationalisms within the Yugoslav Communist Party leadership by recognizing Bosnian Muslims as ‘Muslims,’ a separate ethnic, in fact, a quasi-



religious nation, bestowing upon them a name which denoted their diminished, almost non-existent religious identity. Paradoxically, in this way the communist regime set the basis for an intense identification with the religious aspect of Bosniak identity which followed a couple of decades later.

[215]

The communists decided to 'promote' the Bosniaks under the odd ethnic name – the 'Muslims,' as opposed to the religious group of Muslims (the local language requires the word 'Muslims' as a religious group to be written with lower case first letter 'm,' since the adherents of any religion, i. e. *'brščani/krščani,' 'muslimani'* or *'budisti,'* are all written with lowercase first letters). In addition to the Bosniaks, the Muslims in Yugoslavia included the ethnic Albanians and some smaller ethnic groups (i. e. Gorani and the Turkish minority) residing primarily in the Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

The communists needed the Bosniaks and Bosnia to serve as the Piedmont of the future socialist nation, which was meant to emerge from the melting pot of traditional nations. The recognition of the so-called 'Muslim' nation was an ironic compromise within the communist bureaucracy, since the recognition of the true national identity of Bosniaks was not convenient for either the Serbian or the Croatian nationalists within the communist establishment. Given the utopian cultural melting pot of Yugoslavian nations, the Bosniaks – as the central cultural corpus without any stronger political backing from the neighboring republics or abroad – was intended to be the main melting ingredient in the process of making a syncretic Yugoslav nation.

Consequently, the official recognition of Bosnian Muslims as 'Muslims' – a constituent nation within the Former Yugoslavia – actually made them vulnerable to the Serb and Croat pressures (Friedman 1996), because their national elites among the Yugoslav communists were not willing to accept the Bosniaks as anything more than a religious entity. At the time, they adamantly opposed the idea of allowing them even a somewhat more appropriate name – 'Bosnian Muslims'). Actually, having been aware of the fact that the recognition of the Bosniaks as an ethnic group would have been a true disaster for the Serbian and Croatian expansionist nationalism directed toward Bosnia and Herzegovina, those nationalists invested a full measure of their in-

fluence in the Yugoslav Communist Party to prevent recognizing the Bosniaks even as 'Muslims.'

[216]

Consequently, the fall of communism – which also resulted in the renewed ethnic nationalisms all over the Former Yugoslav republics and led to the series of wars in some of them – stirred even deeper turmoil in this semi-recognized group. The Bosnian Muslims became main victims of the 'ethnic cleansing' – the campaigns of mass murders, mass rapes and forceful expulsions of the entire Bosniak community, practised by the Serbian and Croatian nationalists in an attempt to conquer, divide and annex Bosnian territory into Serbia and Croatia proper.

As documented in the Report of the UN Secretary General on the fall of Srebrenica (United Nations 1999), for the first six months of the war, the Bosnian Serb Army in a blitzkrieg backed by then Yugoslav Army, managed to conquer and ethnically cleanse from non-Serbs some 70 percent of the Bosnian territory. It has been estimated that about 80 per cent of some 200,000 people killed in the 1992–1995 Bosnian war were Bosnian Muslims, while around 400,000 were expelled from their homes and left the country during the war.

As the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina broke out, the Bosniaks started being described and recognized in the international media as 'Bosnian Muslims.' However, no sooner had they risen from a relative international obscurity becoming a household word internationally, than they became an endangered species.

Regardless of the extensive media coverage and academic research (Cigar 1995; Cushman and Mestrovic 1996), the West remained a silent witness to the atrocities and crimes against them.

'If Bosnian Muslims had been bottle-nosed dolphins, would the world have allowed Croats and Serbs to slaughter by the tens of thousands?' – rhetorically exclaimed an American military strategist at the height of the Bosnian war (Luttwak 1993).

Around the same time, the political leaders of the Bosnian Muslims finally opted for the official name change: in September 1993, the Congress of Bosniak Intellectuals re-introduced the historical ethnic name for their nation – The Bosniaks. Many applauded this decision, interpreting it as an attempt to discontinue European indifference to



the plight of those indigenous European Muslims, as well as a main barrier to the growing trend of globalization that came to Bosnia from the East (Alibašić 2005). At the height of Bosnian war, several hundred mujahedeens and other missionaries from the Muslim East came to Bosnia to fight alongside the Bosnian Army, which was comprised not only of Bosniaks but a significant percentage of Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats as well.

[217]

While the arrival of mujahedeens and the missionaries in their war-torn country helped create the global Muslim awareness, solidarity and emotional attachment to the global Muslim community among Muslims in Bosnia (Alibašić 2005), it also contributed to deepening polarizations along religious and ethnic lines in hitherto multiethnic institutions on the territories controlled by the Bosnian Army. It helped give a certain legitimacy to the term 'Bosnian Muslim Army', which up till then could only be interpreted as a, more or less, unintentional and ignorant generalization made by the international journalists and other international representatives reporting from the ground on the war in Bosnia.

Therefore, the official name change that Bosniaks' leaders undertook in 1993 did not seem to help either this nation's destiny, or the fate of a multiethnic Bosnia. The European and the worldwide media continued reporting on the losses of Bosnian Muslim Army and the massacres of Muslim civilians, while the long lists of civilians massacred from the the Bosnian Serb Army artillery positions around Sarajevo, and Tuzla, or Bosnian Croat Army positions around Zenica, and other larger urban centers under the control of the Bosnian Army, continued to reflect and testify about the multiethnic character of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Europe, as well as the rest of the world, continued to stand idly by well after the aforementioned Srebrenica massacre in July 1995 took place.

However, it took yet another massacre in the besieged Sarajevo six weeks after the Srebrenica massacre, before the Western powers finally decided they had had enough of atrocities and genocide and launched a sustained air campaign led by NATO. The second massacre which occurred in Sarajevo's Markale Open Market in late August 1995, fi-

[218] nally prompted the NATO intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which successfully undermined the military capability of the Bosnian Serb Army in less than 21 days. The NATO military intervention was credited for bringing the Bosnian Serb leaders to the peace table and effectively ending the 3,5-year-long Bosnian war.

What followed was the Dayton Peace Agreement which officially ended the war by carving up once multiethnic Bosnia and Herzegovina and reducing it to what henceforth has been recognized as the country 'increasingly divided along ethnic lines' (Amnesty International 2010).

#### THE NATION IN SEARCH OF R&R

After they had been forcefully expelled from the rest of the country and squeezed on to roughly 25 percent of Bosnian territory, for the past 15 years the Bosniaks have experienced a collective notion of living in some sort of a Bantustan.

As explained in the above paragraphs, the Bosniaks are a European nation which has been constantly denied the possibility of self-declaration, while being continuously reduced to some other term for the purpose of ostracism.

On the other hand, the Bosniaks themselves have been traditionally confused by their politicians, their *Ulema* (Muslim clergy), as well as the competing Serbian and Croatian nationalisms. This has been further amplified by the notion of global indifference towards the uninterrupted annihilation policies aimed at Bosniaks, primarily originating from the neighboring countries of Serbia and Croatia.

Stymied and dysfunctional due to the intricacies of the Dayton Agreement, today's Bosnia lingers on as a semi-protectorate of the international community, i. e. European Union and the United States. Simultaneously, the Gulf countries, i. e. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE and Qatar invest heavily in its economy, as well as the religious revival of the country's Muslim community. The King Fahd Bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud Mosque in Sarajevo, built five years after the war, is supposedly the biggest mosque in the Balkans. The Saudi government is said to have admitted spending \$1 billion on 'Islamic activities' in Bosnia and Herzegovina between 1992 and 1998 (Pejić 2010).

These parallel differing processes are resulting in numerous contro-





versies. Continuance of such a complex position makes the Bosniaks deprived of a clear stand on their national future, as well as of their past. They constantly vacillate between what at the very beginning of his book *Islam between East and West*, Izetbegović, the Bosniak war-time political leader, calls 'the third way in today's polarized world,' and *the submission* Izetbegović also calls upon in the book's last chapter (Izetbegović 1988). [219]

The Bosniaks nowadays seek comfort in the revival of traditional religion, along with the imitation of life in popular Spanish soap operas. Their current political culture is somewhat chaotic, confusing and mostly inconsistent with any recognized political orientation. Thus, their current position is best described as utter political desolation and disorientation – the feeling of a life on the edge of a precipice prior to the inevitable plunge into another round of carnage.

With their current political leadership (both secular and religious) being corrupt and incapable of devising any meaningful political strategy, the Bosniaks are growing all the more destitute. In search of a refuge, they have become increasingly susceptible to any sort of indifference or radicalism as their expedient.

In today's Bosnia, Islamic radicalism masquerading as *salafism* is facing off aggressive secularism masquerading as *liberalism* (Hladnik-Milharčić 2008). And once again, Europe and the rest of the world, together with the incompetent and corrupt Bosniak political leadership, idly stand by. This way, instead of capitalizing on the European shame over its repeated failure to stop the annihilation of one more European nation based on its religion, they have all become unwilling accomplices in the crime of turning one of the oldest Muslim Europeans into some sort of foreigners on their own continent.

Having no viable role model for this authentically European Islamic culture, that has never before in its history succumbed to Islamic radicalism, the international community eventually generated a confusion and lack of vision, trust and vigor among the Bosniaks. The failure to recognize the background of the Bosniaks' socio-cultural milieu, and to provide a new framework for this rather specific ethnic community, also translates into another failure – the failure to use the potentials of the Bosniak cultural reservoir for an updated model of European cit-

izenship, more fitting for the people of non-European cultural backgrounds.

[220]

Nevertheless, the Bosniaks still have the chance, as well as the necessity, to devise and communicate their message to the rest of Europe and the world in a way that would make them stakeholders of their own destiny. What needs to be avoided, though, is what Almond (2010) astutely calls ‘the persistence of eschatology’ among contemporary European theorists, e. g. Baudrillard and Žižek, who seem to have used Islam ‘as a handy, minor component in a larger geo-political game’ whose central quality is its resistance to the New World Order represented by the West.

Along the same lines, the Bosniaks are not to be used as yet another set of pawns in the global chess game between the pro-EU and anti-EU forces. If the Bosniaks are to be used as a model for Muslim Europeans, the specific texture of their European culture in-between should be first helped in reshaping its outdated mechanisms with the emerging ones. This, in return, would help them find their appropriate niche on the European soil, from where they can contribute to a makeover of the rigid Christian-only European contours into wider, all-inclusive and ecumenical European perspectives. That’s where the Bosniaks *shall* also find some well-deserved R & R (rest and re-creation in military vocabulary) for their frazzled national identity, along with a refuge from the R & R (remove and replace) policies hitherto exercised toward them.

As prospective EU citizens, the Bosniaks are now drifting between the near past, which brought genocide and ethnic cleansing, and current European Islamophobia that constantly reminds them of their recent past and makes them skeptical regarding their collective and individual equality among the other European nations.

At the same time, the Bosniaks themselves do not invest enough effort in to adjusting their inherited political culture to the requirements of contemporary European integrations. But, being a small nation, the Bosniaks need a stronger external pull to be towed out of the present quagmire. Thus, the existing standstill requires a joint effort and strong initiative, both from the European strategists and their Bosnian counterparts.



REFERENCES

- Alibašić, A. 2005. Globalization and its impact on Bosnian Muslim practices. UC-Berkeley, Center for Institutions and Governance Presentation 4. [Http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/5h65w129](http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/5h65w129).
- Almond, I. 2010. *Representations of Islam in Western thought*. Sarajevo: The Center for Advanced Studies. [221]
- Amnesty International. 2010. *Amnesty International annual report 2010: The state of the world's human rights*. London, UK: Amnesty International Publications.
- Bringa, T. 1995. *Being Muslim the Bosnian way: Identity and community in a Central Bosnian village*. New York: Princeton University Press.
- Cigar, N. 1995. *Genocide in Bosnia: The policy of 'ethnic cleansing'*. College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press.
- Cushman, T., and S. G. Mestrovic, eds. 1996. *This time we knew: Western responses to genocide in Bosnia*. New York: New York University Press.
- European Parliament. 2009. Resolution on Srebrenica. [Http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+20090115+ITEMS+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN#sdocta6](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+20090115+ITEMS+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN#sdocta6).
- Fine, J. V. A., jr. 1975. *The Bosnian church, a new interpretation: A study of the Bosnian church and its place in state and society from the 13th to the 15th century*. Boulder, CO: East European Quarterly.
- Friedman, F. 1996. *The Bosnian Muslims: Denial of a nation*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Gutman, R. 1993. *A witness to genocide: The 1993 Pulitzer Prize-winning dispatches on the 'ethnic cleansing' of Bosnia*. New York: Macmillan.
- Hladnik-Milharic, E. 2008. *Reportaža Vahabiji: V Bosni in Hercegovini spopad civilizacij poteka med muslimani samimi*. *Dnevnikov objektiv*, 25 October.
- Izetbegović, A. 1988. *Islam izmedju istoka i zapada*. Sarajevo and Belgrade: Biblioteka nova 51.
- Luttwak, E. 1993. If Bosnians were dolphins. *Commentary*, October. [Http://www.commentarymagazine.com/viewarticle.cfm/if-bosnians-were-dolphins-8158](http://www.commentarymagazine.com/viewarticle.cfm/if-bosnians-were-dolphins-8158).
- Memorijalni Centar Srebrenica-Potocari. 2010. Liste zrtava. [Http://www.potocarimc.ba/\\_ba/liste/liste\\_11072009.php](http://www.potocarimc.ba/_ba/liste/liste_11072009.php).
- Macedonian Information Agency. 2010. Milosevic, Tudjman wished for Bosnia division, Mladić's diaries say. [Http://www.mia.com.mk/default.aspx?vId=74185096&IId=2&pmId=502](http://www.mia.com.mk/default.aspx?vId=74185096&IId=2&pmId=502).

Pejić, N. 2010. Commentary: The suicide of multiethnic Sarajevo. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, April 25. [Http://www.rferl.org/content/The\\_Suicide\\_Of\\_Multiethnic\\_Sarajevo/2023847.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/The_Suicide_Of_Multiethnic_Sarajevo/2023847.html).

Rieff, D. 1995. *Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the failure of the West*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

[222]

United Nations. 1999. Report of the Secretary-General pursuant to General Assembly resolution 53/35: The fall of Srebrenica. United Nations O D S A/54/549.

Vulliamy, E. 1994. *Seasons in hell: Understanding Bosnia's war*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

