



# The Civic and (or) the National in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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## **1. Manipulations of identities in order to remain/come to power**

In the chaos of the BiH political scene, which has been going on for years but is fully "palpable" in mid-2015, there is little attempt to radically and analytically consider the roots of the problems.<sup>1</sup> One of them is the political manipulation of identities of people and opposition of the civic identity to the national.

What allows this manipulation:

- Throughout history, BiH didn't have, from various objective reasons, a civil society and consciousness, the semi-colonial consciousness didn't prevail, what is today called the syndrome of dependence on foreign factors. At the same time, democratic traditions in our country are very poor.
- The Constitution of BiH (Annex IV of the Dayton Agreement), striving to end the aggression on Bosnia and Herzegovina and the war of nationalisms in BiH, structured a state organisation so that all nationalisms are met. A sovereign, internationally recognized state was born, which is at the same time administratively and nationally divided.
- The political organizations in BiH falsely present themselves as political parties, they are cartel maintained interest groups that materialize their share of government through reigning over parts of public resources, employing "party soldiers" etc. In a country that does not have an ideologically and politically profiled right wing or a left wing, and that "greyness" is trying to present itself as the centre, all political alliances or confrontations are taking place in the distribution of power over public resources. The defence of nationalist interests is just a

transparent cloche attempting to obscure the real political programme – "take as much as you can, while you can".

- On the other hand, a "citizenism" ideology is trying to develop, focused on civic identity and ignoring all other identities, confronting national identity. Manifestations of citizenism require a functional state (ergo centralization) and do not accept the practice of ethnic equality (because we are all just people and nations are irrelevant, etc.). This pseudo-civic orientation is essentially an attempt to achieve "unity" with the domination of the majority nation with new collectivism, the civil (rather than the working people from the time of ex Federal Republic of BiH). This "curse of the majority nation" that seeks domination later develops into aggressive nationalism. It was the "path" or "curse" of Serbian ideology which ultimately led to the bloody breakup of Yugoslavia. In our case „history is not life's teacher“.
- The manipulation of confronting the civic and the national identity, as we can see, has its political and social carriers, the existing political "cartels" and with them the networked tycoon oligarchy.

## **2. Civil society – why we do not have it**

Regardless of the principally good intentions, support to the development of a civil (for unknown reasons we took the term "civil" in Bosnian/Serbian/Croatian) society by international organizations gave few results. This "glass is nearly empty“.

One of the main reasons for that is the focus on non-governmental organizations with disregard for other important civil society "sectors" - the unions, religious communities, academia, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> One such attempt was in the form of a policy brief by E.Kazaz, M.Lasić, S.Cenić, S.Alić, I.Lovrenović and Ž.Papić, „6 Theses on Repetition – Crisis as Fate“, IBHI, April, 2015.



It seems that they are left to party influences and manipulations. In the first years after Dayton the media had support, then the public broadcast services lost that support and the independent media, both those existing at the time and new, entered the privatisation process. Paradoxically, today it is the independent media, with all the possible criticism, that comes the closest to having a critical stand of civil society towards the authorities. The start of this process means the termination of support from international donors.

The NGO sector, dependent on donors, followed their logic of "enlightenment of the people" with endless training sessions and roundtable discussions on democracy, human rights - the so-called "change of consciousness". Every subsequent round of elections showed that the concept had failed, the "old nationalist wolves" kept on winning. At the same time, the NGO sector became a part of the "project industry" losing the civic character and not advocating through its practice for the values of civil society.

The main mistake was that, conceptually, civil society defined itself as the opposite of national identities, which is in no way a concept of civil society developed in the specific BiH conditions, a multinational community. As a collateral result, national divisions were created among the think tank NGOs, broadcast media and particularly web news portals.

On the other hand, NGOs at the local community level, especially those in the social welfare sector, have proven to be a lot „more civic“ than other parts of the NGO sector by working with the people and for the people. Also, owing only to their specific capacities, several think tank NGOs have a critical impact on the public in BiH. Due to the two aforementioned parts, the NGOs glass is not "completely empty".

What is perhaps more important than the above, in order for civil society and its awareness to have their economic and social basis, there must exist that which is called the "middle class". There is no middle class in BiH, society is divided into a narrow circle of tycoon-political oligarchy, and the vast majority of impoverished people, who are out of work and living on minimum of existence. Inequalities, both material and social, in BiH are enormous, and the factor that increases them is the presence of discrimination (territorial, status-based, marginalized groups, etc.). The absence of the middle class is one of the reasons for the lack of democracy here.

These are not economic and social conditions that allow the development of civil society, and none of them can be replaced with "stars of the grants", so-called capacity building of NGOs.

The economic and social conditions are not favourable for the development of civil society and no "grant stars" or so-called capacity building of NGOs can change that.

On the other hand, these are the ideal conditions for ideological and political manipulation of the national or civic identity. For important, positive changes in BiH, development of civil society is an important prerequisite, first and foremost the development of awareness that the government should serve citizens rather than citizens "need" the government in order to sustain. The best way to achieve that is to learn lessons and change their approach through supporting policies aimed at strengthening the real private sector and conjoining the national and civic identities. That is a good recipe against nationalisms and the „production“ of national conflicts.



### **3. Multiplicity of identities**

Basically, identity is not a political but a life category. Like life itself, identity is very complex, multifaceted. What prevails in the context of daily life in personal identification, abstract political categories (civic and/or national) or the actual economic and social position?

In the context of multiplicity of identities, for example, someone is a Bosniak, Croat or Serb, a member of a different religion, unemployed or employed, male or female, rich or poor, economist or engineer, educated or uneducated, disabled or non-disabled, citizen of Sarajevo, Mostar or Banja Luka. The identity of the unemployed, the poor, the disabled, etc., then, regardless of nation or religion, is not the same as the identity of the person of the same nation and religion that is employed, rich, educated and so on. Instead of the political opposition of the civil and national, a „third way“ should be sought to understand the multiplicity of identities and fuse their different characteristics.

In this sense, can we build a „human and humane identity“ and base it on the concept of human development, reducing inequality, measuring the development not only by financial categories (BDP) but also health, education, social inclusion of the population?

It is very hard for an actual, practically realised civil society, especially in „peripheral“ (undeveloped or transitional) countries, to be strong and socially dominant in circumstances of „market fundamentalism“ and a „mutilated“ globalisation which has „forgotten“ globalisations of public goods.

How does this look like in real, everyday life, because practice is the best theory? The following is a personal and analytical story of A. Burić.

### **4. Identity and (or) life: do not exclude, include**

I do not know exactly when I started thinking about identity, nor when that term became indispensable in public discourse. Anyway, I understood at least two things. Firstly, that every identity is a construct, therefore, conventions derived from (pre)political situations that were placed in a specific practice of living in a time and space. And secondly, more importantly, that, the more it is reduced to a smaller number of cultural and anthropological elements, identity becomes a goal within itself, and therefore becomes more vulnerable to mass manipulation, and hysteria, as a result of a monochromic understanding of identity. In other words - it is impossible to be solely a Bosniak, Serb, Croat, Moroccan, Scottish, Chinese or American.

I was reminded of that by Rachid Taha, a musician and star of rai, Maghrebian pop-folk, in an interview that we did for Radio of Bosnia and Herzegovina, when he said:

"I am Algerian, and French, and European, and Muslim and a rocker. I hope that is a sufficiently precise answer to the question on how I feel! "

Following this logic of identity "distillation", a space larger than this text would not be enough to enumerate all the identities that this author has, but it is clear that the width and multiplicity of identities, or their many layers, are the prerequisite for identity not being perceived as an instrument for achieving political power, but as a sum, more precisely a process of adding up to achieve totality and the qualitative development of a nation.

You could say that in Bosnia and Herzegovina joining particular, national identities ended in failure and in war which, apart from the civilian and military victims of the war, again for a while suspended thinking about identity as not



exclusively national, or in a very small number – civic.

It should be noted that the “system” that has been in power, with a few minor breaks, for the past twenty years gave priority to the national above any other principle. On the other hand, the civic had no tradition, lost its economic and social basis with the disappearance of the middle class and it was wrongly built on donations to NGOs and “imported” models, all of which could give rise to a permanently prosperous social action.

The best statement on this, essentially unrealised, suppressed identity was given by an elderly lady a little after the first elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina. “I am for the King, for Tito and for Alija”.

##### **5. Work has no nation**

No matter how paradoxical it may sound, the thing is (was) possible, and her statement - fact: among the Bosniaks, primarily, but also in other nationalities in BiH in different eras, there was an identity of adaptation, where the national dominance was, here and there, suspended by the social dimension which appeared in certain periods. Because, in the social context, the question of the nationality of a Miner, Baker, economist, journalist, or IT engineer – is basically irrelevant. They either have or do not have a job, social legitimacy, they either have or do not have the accessible living conditions of modernity. If they are permanently unemployed, their identity is reduced exclusively to being a national individual who can in every way be persuaded that their situation is a result of the others, those from another people or group, not wanting the state to work. Which of course is not true, because one nationalism in BiH keeps the second (and third) vital, and regardless of seeming

impossible to agree on anything, they cooperate fruitfully in the division of the “cake” brought to them by power.

In this context of „exclusive“ and steroid-pumped collective identities, the position of the marginalized groups is barely visible. Because, who sees the needs of the *small, disadvantaged*, those who were pushed to the margins by society when “vital national issues” need to be resolved, “Bosnia and Herzegovina saved”, “the right solution found” and a “new legal framework developed”? The needs of those whose identity is not based on (almost always) false invocations of „bigger interests“, but have to deal with overcoming problems such as the social treatment of children on the outside, or the impossibility of approaching the majority of public buildings in wheelchairs, or finally, those whose identity is negated and underestimated by the applicable stereotypes because of their skin colour or customs. Someone clever recently noticed that all Balkan nations are struggling to prove that their identity is timeless, “heavenly”, the oldest, the most authentic, that they are actually the right ones, while only the Roma, who are somehow always pushed to the side, really know where they come from, the origin of their race and their culture.

Today, in this context, it seems that the only thing that makes sense is that people need to find in themselves the level of identity that builds, in us and in others, some kind of consensus, on the micro level. To help as much as they can to take the seemingly small steps that enable someone who does not move in this world with the same speed and ease, to feel and see, hear and watch the world in all its fullness.



## 6. Reduced, but not induced

Because, no political identity that we "received", to which we have been reduced, has proven to be a successful solution: neither as a constitutional framework for the country, nor for any kind of social dynamics that would achieve some sort of prosperity. A dynamic in which identity, or any part of identity, could be built on universal principles. In that sense, why don't we start with including those who lack social, economical and professional acknowledgement? Those whom we can call as we want - the disabled, the handicapped, those with special needs - those who cannot defend themselves, and often cannot even protest. Or find their voice. In public, or in private, „ordinary“ life.

## 7. From day one

It could be said that Bosnia and Herzegovina today, twenty years after Dayton, faces a dilemma that can, perhaps too simply, but not without reason, be called "identity(ies) and (or) life(s)". However, this should not be an exclusive design that excludes one or the other, but must find a *modus vivendi*, if it wants to come up with an answer that would move things forward. The answer would certainly be positive „both identity and life“, just as the country that we are talking about was more or less orderly and on the road to prosperity when it was an „and“ (Serbian, Croatian and Muslim) and wasn't "neither", for any of those three nations, once "unfree" and today constitutive.

And finally, a genuine anecdote: I have a friend, who joined an elite unit in the defence of Sarajevo at the beginning of the war and was seriously wounded.

After about forty operations, and many years of rehabilitation, he returned to his business in which he is very successful.

Shortly after the war, a woman knocked on his door, who worked with his father in "the company", and is from „the other side“, from Lukavica, where she lived throughout the war. My friend swallowed hard, and then hired to clean his office building, then his house, and later help raise his children. She became, as it is said, a family member.

In the meantime, my friend got politically engaged: he joined a small political party, „moderate centre“, and tried to work in the war invalid „sector“, the largest marginalized group, which is also the most vulnerable to illegal actions and manipulation.

Having seen him a couple of time on television, and in the company of officials from Republika Srpska, the maid asked help for her son, who was severely wounded, and is diabetic, who "earned" his handicap in the Army of Republika Srpska.

Namely, he hadn't received his benefit for several months, so his mother, reluctantly and certainly breaking all her principles, not knowing how go about it, searched for a „way out“ with her employer, saying:

„You know, son, I saw that you know that minister of ours, so if you could, say something to him, my son hasn't received any benefits for more than 6 months, so please see if, well, if he can do something about it...“

Then she said the *crucial* sentence:

„He, like yourself, was a fighter from day one.“

At first, my friend was petrified, and then a few moments later, he laughed bitterly. Everything this woman said was true; mothers do not choose the armies that someone is sent to, just like no one knows where they will be placed, with what advantage or handicap they will be born with.



And so, the more often we listen to such stories, and the more often we question our identity, we will be closer to ourselves, to some solutions to our problems, and the only thing that is "holy", incomparable with other categories. Life. With diverse identities.

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