

# BREAKUP AFTER BREAKUP

After the war in Yugoslavia, many Bosnian Muslims emigrated to various European countries. How do they construe their identity when living in a diaspora? How do they perceive their own community?



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*Literackie narracje tożsamościowe po 1992 roku* ["The Bosniaks: Literary Identity Narratives After 1992"].

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**S**hortly after I defended my doctoral dissertation seven years ago, I began to contemplate a project that would allow me to continue my research into the identity of Bosnian Muslims, this time those who lived outside the borders of their country. At the time, the migration crisis sparked by the wars in Syria and Africa was yet to occur. Europe still had several years to prepare itself for the dramatic images of crowded boats nearing the Greek islands, a wave of refugees making their way through the Balkans, and anti-immigrant or, in extreme cases, Islamophobic sentiments growing among the inhabitants of the Old Continent.

Back then, I was interested in immigrant communities as “extensions” of the communities that lived within the borders of their home country on a permanent basis. As a researcher of the culture and literature of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Balkans, I asked myself two questions. Firstly, to what extent had the identity transformations that took place in the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina after a bloody war and the breakup of Yugoslavia been transferred into the diaspora communities? Secondly, did ethnic animosities and the country’s complicated domestic situation also continue outside its borders?

I spent several years in Bosnia and Herzegovina studying the community of Muslims in relation to their Christian neighbors – Croats and Serbs. My findings were surprising, despite the fact that they partially overlapped with the pattern known from neighboring Serbia and Croatia.

## Stories told

The Bosnian Muslims – who adopted the ethnonym “Bosniaks” in 1992, when the war was in progress – did not avoid what the sociologist and political scientist Prof. Radosław Zenderowski called the ethnicization of religion and the sacralization of ethnicity. They built their new, postwar identity as Bosniaks based on the idea of martyrdom for their faith (*shahadat*) and somewhat archaic ethno-psychological concepts according to which they perceived themselves as un-aggressive, noble, and morally pure victims. Of course, the history of the conflict, statistics about casualties on each side, and the number of criminals brought before the International Court of Justice in The Hague (Serbs accounted for around 70%, Croats for 20%, and Bosnian Muslims for 10%) all work to the advantage of Bosniaks. They have gained the world’s sympathy and compassion, with the nearly four-year Siege of Sarajevo and the massacre of Muslims in Srebrenica becoming symbols of the decline of humanity and humanistic ideals that are nearly as powerful as the gas chambers in the Auschwitz concentration camp.

When we set the four-million population of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Bosniaks (in other words

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Bosnians adhering to Islam) form the largest group, against the three million who live in foreign countries, we can see that in order to get a comprehensive view of the situation we need an inside look at the functioning of the latter community, its inner dynamics and new neighborly relations.

Between 2012 and 2016, as part of my postdoctoral fellowship funded by Poland's National Science Center (NCN), I conducted field research in Turkey, Austria, Scandinavia as well as in former Yugoslav republics, namely Slovenia, Macedonia, Croatia, and Serbia, all of which had become new homes for millions of Bosnian refugees and immigrants. When visiting the main communities of the Bosnian and

Herzegovinian diaspora, I met both activists, campaigners, artists, authors, diplomats, and journalists of both sexes as well as "ordinary" Bosnians who had decided to leave their home country for various reasons. As a researcher of culture, I was not limited by the methodology of sociological research. I did not use questionnaires for a reason – I decided to rely on the method of oral history, allowing the people I interviewed to talk about their (often painful) road to a new country and their life abroad.

I also used my own method of selecting respondents based on intuition and the well-known technique of snowball sampling, in which interviewees point to other individuals that the researcher should

contact. I visited cultural centers, associations, language schools, cafés, and restaurants. I followed the recommendations made by my Bosnian friends and made contact with random people I met in the Balkan districts. I did not restrict myself to Bosniaks – I also wanted to get to know Bosnian Serbs and Croats, although I realized that this might not be an easy task in light of war-time grievances.

### Surprising findings

The findings of nearly four years of research made me review my initial assumptions to a considerable degree. The Bosnian diaspora, if there can be talk of a single diaspora at all, identifies with Bosnia and Herzegovina almost exclusively among the Muslim communities. For this reason, without ignoring the actual size of the population of Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Serbs in the immigrant community (less than a fourth of the whole population of immigrants from Bosnia and Herzegovina), I could conclude that both

and the refugees who left Bosnia in the 1990s for fear of ethnic cleansing. The same holds true for Croatia and Scandinavia, which are nonetheless characterized by a distinct division into the well-assimilated and respected community of intellectual and artistically-minded Bosniaks in Croatia, Norway, and Sweden, and the largely marginalized community of workers in Denmark. My key finding was that the socio-economic profile of a given diaspora affected the activity of a specific community and its sense of unity almost in the same way as the emigration policy pursued in a given country.

One of my most surprising findings was the clear ghettoization, invisibility, and by the same token also radicalization of Bosniaks in Slovenia, which is not favorably disposed to Bosniaks, despite their linguistic, geographic, and cultural closeness. Stories about Muslim names being changed into ones that did not reveal a person's origin and a denial of Bosnian roots for fear of possible job-related and social consequences were the common refrain in the statements of my interviewees, who did not use the Bosnian language on a daily basis. I was likewise surprised by the considerable degree of integration between the Bosniaks and the Albanian, Kosovar, and Turkish population in Macedonia. Common religious practices, leisure time spent in the Muslim district in downtown Skopje, and mixed marriages were still part of religious solidarity. In Macedonia, strong political tensions between the Orthodox Christians and Muslims have been felt since the late 1990s and early 2000s. Another surprising finding was that the Serbs and Croats of Bosnian origin who lived in Scandinavia, Germany, Austria, and Slovenia were extremely unlikely to identify with Bosnia and Herzegovina, chiefly for reasons related to politics and war-time grievances. Consequently, they did not function in the Bosnian and Herzegovinian diaspora determined by the Muslim religious community (*jamaats, maktabas*), Bosnian cafés and restaurants with clearly oriental profiles, and cultural centers whose programs gravitated toward the Bosnian and Muslim folklore. It was interesting to conclude that this exclusion – or strictly speaking self-exclusion – of the Serbs and Croats from the Bosnian diaspora was compensated by the inclusion of representatives of Muslim Serbs from the autonomous district of Sandžak (who often called themselves Bosniaks) and representatives of the Kosovar diaspora, the Muslim-Macedonian diaspora (the Torbeši, Macedonian Turks), and even the Albanian diaspora, chiefly as part of the religious community and based on religious identification.

### Separation

The ongoing migration crisis, growing tensions, and Islamophobic sentiments have additionally aggravated the distance between Bosnian Serbs and Bosniaks.

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memories of Bosnian origins, language, culture, and traditions as well as their clear impact on identity were fostered chiefly by Bosniaks, in other words Bosnian followers of Islam (whether they are indeed practicing Muslims is another thing).

Individual communities of the Bosnian diaspora in Europe vary greatly, a situation that is attributable to numerous factors. In my opinion, the most important of these factors are historical in their nature. The core of the oldest diaspora in Turkey, Montenegro, Serbia, and Macedonia is formed by descendants of the Muhajirun, or Muslims, chiefly from bey families, who fled from the Austro-Hungarian colonization of Bosnia to the regions that were still parts of the Ottoman Empire in the late 19th and early 20th century. In Switzerland and the United States, that is chiefly the political diaspora after World War II, often with roots in the Ustaše and/or anti-Yugoslav groups. In the German-speaking countries and in Slovenia, there is a workers' diaspora from the times of Yugoslavia

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On the other hand, they have led to the development of closer relations between the communities of the Muslims from the Balkans, as native, autochthonic, and therefore “safe” European Muslims. My initial assumption that the Bosniaks who had emigrated from their home countries integrated for example with the Turkish diaspora (in Berlin) or the Moroccan diaspora (in Vienna) was based on the conclusion I made in my doctoral dissertation, namely that since the end of the civil war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995, we had witnessed a slow yet increasingly evident radicalization of Muslims along with their growing conservatism and attachment to Islam, increasingly manifest in the public sphere (grand celebrations of Islamic holidays, changes in dietary and dressing habits among Muslims, Bosnia’s economic and cultural opening up to collaboration with Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and Malaysia). I concluded that the communities of Bosnian Muslims living abroad would be characterized by similar phenomena, namely the Bosniaks would define their identity in the context of religion.

That hypothesis proved only partially correct, and I was forced to review it by the circumstances caused by an escalating immigration crisis, a civil war in Syria, waves of refugees coming to Europe, growing social unrest, increasingly loud and radical Islamophobic sentiments, and finally a series of dramatic terrorist attacks in France, Belgium, and Germany. First of all, my hypothesis that the life of the Bosniak emigrants centered around the symbolic triangle comprising mosques (or strictly speaking prayer halls called *jamaats*), cafés, and cultural centers, with particular emphasis on the former as the place where the consolidation of the emigrant community takes on a special form. I mean the nurturing of native religious practices, the joint celebrations of Ramadan and the Greater Bairam, care for the native language culture, for example courses in Bosnian run as part of *maktabs* for children born outside their homeland as well as organized reading rooms, libraries, and cinema rooms. However, the hypothesis that the Bosniaks would share their spiritual space with other representatives of the Muslim ummah proved wrong. Bosniaks did not pray together with non-Bosnian Muslims in any of the nearly twenty *jamaats* I visited.

The only exception is Slovenia, whose government has maintained a consistently unfavorable policy towards Muslims since the 1990. Bosniaks as well as Albanians, Chechens, and Turks waited for their place to pray for over forty years – until 2017, they would gather in a private house on the outskirts of the capital. Muslim religious scholars in local prayer houses in Austria, Germany, and Scandinavia confirmed my observation that the religious life of immigrants in the largest European communities had gradually broken

up into smaller religious and national communities over the past decade. Turks, Bosnians, Moroccans, Algerians, Iraqis, and Iranians as well as representatives of other Muslim nations predominantly pray separately in their own mosques/jamaats.

## Attachment

On the other hand, rapidly changing sentiments related to the immigration crisis and terrorist attacks in Europe have forced representatives of the Bosniak diaspora to react. I can see certain ambivalence here: on the one hand, they highlight their Europeanness (for example, female Bosnian immigrants rarely wear head scarves); on the other one, they feel the need to cultivate their Muslim or Bosnian identity and set the boundaries of their own community, also among second- and third-generation immigrants. All of my interviewees stressed their attachment to their country of origin and declared that they remained in touch with the friends and relatives that had stayed there.

Members of the Bosniak diaspora on the one hand highlight their Europeanness, while on the other they feel a need to cultivate a Muslim identity and set the boundaries of their own community.

All of the representatives of immigrant communities I interviewed shared a model I call “11/1” – eleven months in their new country, a month of vacation or holidays in Bosnia.

Consequently, it appears that despite the growing individualization of life and the breakup of great clans, tribes, and communities into ever-smaller units, people do still need communities and a sense of community. A community of people who share the same language, religion, and origin still plays a considerable role, especially in uncertain times and circumstances. Does this mean that the postmodern, hybrid, and eclectic identity does not exclude a yearning for roots and a sense of belonging?

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This is the English translation of an article approved by the author in the original Polish version.

