



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

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Democracy, Nationalism, and Political Culture: The Social Construction of Political Meaning in Bosnia-Herzegovina

Topic of research

This ethnographic research focuses on citizens' experiences of democratization in relation to development projects implemented by local civil society and municipalities in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In particular, I trace how various local actors employ their own visions of democratic politics and community in order to achieve project goals—and ultimately to influence the construction of what they deem to be an acceptable political society. Bosnia-Herzegovina is an exceptionally interesting place in which to study variations in the concept of democracy, as emergent political life here is directly being influenced by a number of complicating factors; on the one hand are those factors considered to be sources of democratization, such as a multi-ethnic history, a wide range of international organizations within the country and political engagement by the European Union, on the other hand the country's divided ethnic politics, territorial partition, and war-strained community relations pose challenges to state consolidation and liberal democratic ideals. By working with a small number of community organizations and municipal authorities, I have targeted the intersection of several of these important political forces in Bosnia-Herzegovina. While my focus remains on Bosnian citizen's actions in a small town context, most of the projects which they implement are initiated and conceptualized by international organizations, and only later reshaped in the local context. I look at the ways in which civil society and government

interact, what goals they set with projects and why, and how they articulate and implement their plans. The setting of Bosnia-Herzegovina, which constantly challenges straightforward community identities through its divided institutional structures and tense political atmosphere, provides a constant backdrop of questions about what it means to be a citizen of the state or a resident of a particular place, who has the right to make political decisions, and what are the limits of sovereignty in a divided state.

Relevance and contribution to field

With this research I hope to contribute to our practical understanding of how local-level democratization operates, and also to theoretical debates about the varied ways in which democratic forms take shape in society. The topic of democratization and transition has dominated research in Eastern Europe since the collapse of communism. While Bosnia-Herzegovina was often excluded from analyses seeking to develop general theories about democratic transitions because of its war and ethnic divisions, recent experiences of difficult democratic transitions, particularly in Iraq, hint that the types of struggles currently ongoing in Bosnia-Herzegovina may actually be closer to the norm than the relatively peaceful political consolidations that took place in much of Eastern Europe. Regardless of what is the norm, it is clear that democratization is a far more complex journey than was once assumed, and that much can be learned from these challenging cases, particularly relating to citizens' experiences of political transformation. It is interesting that although democracy is celebrated in terms of 'the people' and the individual, little analytical attention is paid to non-elites' role in forming political communities. My research will challenge the idea that democracy is a destination to 'transitioned' to, but will show how democracy is enacted in varied ways in different contexts.

Anthropological and sociological work on democratic politics has recently concerned itself with the ways in which people understand and relate to democratic politics, often through categories of belonging and exclusion, such as citizenship and nation. During the twentieth century, democracy rapidly spread across the world, and since 1989 has only increased its reach, quickly becoming the only current political form which can claim broad legitimacy. Because of this, it now occupies an important place in social science research not only in terms of its the practices and institutions, but as a lens through which people orient themselves in relation to politics. My research will look at how state-building/state-breaking occurs through the promotion of democratic politics, and particularly at how these practices are used to mediate ethnic community divisions. The tracking of how civil society projects are implemented will provide insights into the how individuals can manipulate democratic forms to different ends, while at the same time demonstrating that these ideas still depend ultimately on certain authoritative political discourses, often drawn from international actors and elites.

A concise summary of your approach and research methodology

My research centers on the activities of civil society organizations and their municipal counterparts as they organize and implement projects aimed at political reform and/or community-building. My approach was to focus on projects and their implementation, which in turn provided me with a sample of research participants drawn from the Bosnians who were taking part in these projects. I spent an initial two months in the capital city of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sarajevo, conducting interviews with national and international organizations who implement projects related to democracy promotion,

such as USAID and OSCE. The purpose of these interview was to investigate the ways in which international organizations conceptualize their role in the democratization of Bosnia, to document the different types of NGO projects around the country which touched on citizens' relationship to the state, and to assist me in identifying the most appropriate research sites for in-depth investigation. For the remainder of the research period I lived in the town of Jajce in the Central Bosnian Canton of the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. I chose Jajce due to the presence of several well-established non-governmental organizations in the town, the active participation of the municipal government in a number of reform initiatives led by international organizations, and a multi-ethnic population structure, with the population roughly split between Bosniaks and Croats, as well as a small number of Serb returnees. The location of Jajce also allowed me easy access to nearby Mrkonjić Grad, as well as Banja Luka, for comparative perspectives from Serbs living in the Republika Srpska. I conducted interviews with employees of civil society organizations, volunteers of these organizations, local government representatives, and members of the community. I also attended public events set up by civil society organizations, public meetings and tribunals of the city government, city council meetings, and meetings organized by international organizations relating to development projects. Periodically I followed up with representatives of international organizations at their main offices in Sarajevo and other nearby cities. On a daily basis, I spent longer amounts of time following the work and internal dynamics of two primary civil society organizations, which focused on youth and women's issues. The majority of my research was conducted in Jajce, supplemented by trips to Mrkonjić Grad and Banja Luka for interviews and political events, as well as NGO conferences around Bosnia-Herzegovina. I am still in the field conducting research and am now shifting focus to these comparative cases in the Republika Srpska for the remainder of my research.

A summary of your research findings and preliminary conclusions

My research on democracy in Bosnia-Herzegovina was often met with skepticism by Bosnians, who were quick to (jokingly) tell me that democracy did not exist in their country. This response is just one of many that early on signaled to me the deep dissatisfaction which many Bosnians have with the current political situation in the country. During the course of my research, the country experienced what was described by some as the worst political crisis since the end of the war, beginning with a political standoff between the High Representative and the Prime Minister of the Republika Srpska. This coincided with a dramatic rise in the costs of certain basic food necessities across the country, and in some places people began stockpiling these food supplies. The crisis, food costs, and the debate over whether people were stockpiling food because of prices or because of fear, quickly escalated into talk of a new war breaking out in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Eventually a deal was struck and the crisis dissipated almost overnight. Commentators stated that the crisis never had any real basis behind it but was simply manufactured and manipulated by politicians. Yet after seeing the fears and tensions provoked by this 'fake' crisis, many were led to ask, what would a 'real' crisis look like? In truth it seems that Bosnia-Herzegovina is still a fragile state, and perhaps much more fragile than had been believed in the past several years. My study in Bosnia has sought to examine how some of these tensions in the fragile state structure are negotiated by ordinary Bosnians as they participate in political practices.

My research reinforces the view that civil society is a realm where one can reliably locate democratic political practices. I have found that civil society groups tend to be sensitive

to the difficult economic and ethno-political situation in the country, and often seek to find ways to overcome these problems, or to remain neutral when it comes to issues of ethnic division. They articulate their efforts in the language of rights and norms, and have constructed alternately fluid and rigid conceptual models of the state in order to accommodate the contradictions of Bosnian society into a single framework. I have not found, however, evidence that civil society is a necessary 'pre-condition' for democracy. Such a perspective inadequately presumes that there are general 'conditions' for democracy, rather than different pathways to different types of democracies. Civil society should not be simplistically regarded as a fertilizer for democracy whose mere presence speeds up the process, but should rather be investigated for what effects it does and does not have on society, and what kind of politics this contributes to. For example, I have found that the actions of civil society organizations, their interactions with local government were not always conducive to cooperative or effective politics. Additionally, international organizations often conceptualized particular roles for civil society which were at times beyond the capacity of these organizations, leading to failed project implementation.

As stated above, I encountered resistance to an identification with the concept of democracy. Behind this dismissal was the disappointment which many citizens have with their current economic and political lives. This led some to blame the 'importation' of the Western capitalist-democracy for the breakdown in society. As with many things, however, these dismissals were contradictory, as the same individuals might readily then make political claims in terms of transparency, rights, and legitimacy. The variable ways in which people chose to adopt some democratic concepts and not others highlights the fact that the process of democratization is not evenly distributed and hinges on individuals' social and economic conditions, not just bare political sensibilities. As expected, I have found in my comparative work that a major factor contributing to differing views of democracy is the ongoing struggle over the structure of the Bosnian state, and one's relative position within the state, particularly which entity one lives in, frequently had a strong effect on how people identified as citizens and where they located democratic legitimacy in the state. These debates over state structure influence the local sense of community as well as the national sense. Although ethnic political parties continue to dominate, participants in local development projects implementation often demonstrated nuanced and layered identifications of community. As my research is still continuing, over time I plan to identify more cohesive patterns in how democratic forms are utilized in the contexts of projects, and why conceptual certain elements seem to have more purchase than others.

Suggestions for future research

The complicated political field in Bosnia-Herzegovina provides the opportunity to examine how democratic politics develop under conditions often-cited to be detrimental to democracy. Even if the democratic institutions of the country were to soon be consolidated, the social foundations of democratic politics are certain to developing for a long time. It will be interesting to track how political participation changes over time, and how it has already changed—linking past practices with current understanding of political behavior. I would suggest that further research be conducted on issues such as the differing political engagements of youth and older citizens. This is becoming especially interesting as youth are coming of age who did not experience the war as adults, and who also have no experience with socialism.

Recommendations for the US policy community

I believe that the US has the ability to positively affect Bosnia-Herzegovina on two different levels; through an increased diplomatic role at high levels, and also through the use of different tactics by development agencies to influence civil society in the country. At the political level, the US continues to be involved in the politics of Bosnia-Herzegovina through international development agencies, support of the Office of the High Representative, and directly through its embassy. The uncertainty of the future, along with limited work options and restrictions on travel, contribute to the lack of motivation and apathy of the youth in Bosnia. With the political situation so unsettled and complicated, and the US should use its still considerable political credibility in the country to aid in defining a clearer vision for the country's future, particularly in relation to the European Union. It is disappointing to see the gradual withdrawal of funding and support for the development of the country. This withdrawal may have the most damaging effect on civil society organizations in smaller towns across Bosnia, since much of the international expertise and funding has become concentrated in Sarajevo, and often does not reach the places where it could have direct impact. International development and funding organizations should focus on capacity building of NGOs outside of the capital in order to provide substantive training in NGO management and fund raising. Substantive training should be more than roundtables and training sessions, of which there are already enough and have only a limited effect, but should really provide local organizations with the knowledge they need to effectively apply for outside project funding and appropriately manage their projects.