

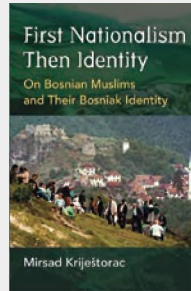
## First Nationalism then Identity: On Bosnian Muslims and Their Bosniak Identity

By Mirsad Kriještorac

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In *First Nationalism then Identity: On Bosnian Muslims and Their Bosniak Identity*, Mirsad Kriještorac undertakes an ambitious exploratory study to test the relationship between two key social science concepts, nationalism, and identity, focusing specifically on how a population's exposure to elite-driven nationalist projects affects the likelihood of a strong ascription of the elite-desired national identity. Kriještorac is primarily concerned with determining the direction of interaction between nationalism and identity (p. 146) and for that he examines in depth the case of Bosnian Muslims. They are a rare historic instance of "an autochthonous and distinct ethno-religious Balkan group that is at the stage of emergence into a full-fledged European nation" (p. 146), a process that has been going on for the past three decades. Based both on participant observation of Bosnian Muslim diaspora members in the U.S., and on statistical analysis of 670 surveys he collected from a sample of them between August 2013 and May 2014 (p. 93). The author found that "nationalism *is not* triggered by a strong sense of pre-existing identity among a particular group" (p. 175; italics in original), rather it is the other way around. It was the elite-driven Bosnian Muslim nationalist project, developed in itself in response to the aggressive Croatian and Serbian nationalists of the early 1990s, that eventually increased the possibility of the acquisition



and strong ascription of the elite-desired *Bosniak* identity among the Slavic-speaking Muslims of former Yugoslavia. Furthermore, the author found that the likelihood of a strong ascription of the Bosniak identity is affected by the sense of the strength of nationalism in an individual (with the important caveat that the correlation scores observed in this regard are low to moderate) but *not* by the type of nationalism that an individual possesses (conceptualized by the author in binary terms as civic or ethnic nationalism) (pp. 168-171).

Empirically rigorous, methodologically rich, and overall convincing, this book makes an important contribution to scholarly debates on the relationship between nationalism and identity in comparative politics. Just the focus on the case of Bosnian Muslims is a very important empirical contribution in itself I would say. Indeed, an in-depth study on the emergence and eventual adoption of "Bosniak" as a distinct national identity among Bosnian Muslims has long been overdue given the obvious academic importance of the Bosnian Muslim case and its policy relevance. It has always to be recalled that we are dealing with the history of a people who were deliberately and systematically targeted with genocide and expulsion from their autochthonous lands in the heart of Europe just three decades ago. That is why the sec-

ularization of identity that came along by adopting “Bosniak” as the new elite-desired national identity and by giving up “Muslim” as a subethnic category (not a religious one) is so important for the Slavic-speaking Muslims of former Yugoslavia. Self-identifying as Bosniak does not only acknowledge the existence of a distinct and fully-fledged national group among the Slavic-speaking people in the Balkans, it also undercuts the derogatory allegations of Serb and Croat extremists who make use of the “Muslim” category to refer to the Bosnians as “Turks” (or “*Poturica*”), aiming to “undermine Bosnian Muslims’ claims on the territory in which they live, calling them by a name that indicates an outsider in Europe.” (pp. 28-29; 210-211). Finally, the author is academically correct in acknowledging several limitations of the data and his study, such as lacking a point of comparison in time for his survey (as known as “snapshot fallacy” in survey research), relying on a single case study, and the reported low to moderate correlation scores among the variables (pp. 145-147).

Despite the obvious strengths and merits of the book, a more substantive consideration of a few points would have made the argument presented here more compelling. First, the time period when the surveys for this study were distributed and collected was “immediately before, during, and after the first post-war census in BiH, taken in November 2013, when Bosnian Muslims for the first time in their history had a chance to identify themselves as Bosniaks in an official way” (p. 93). This fact in itself makes it “most-likely” to observe a high correlation between nationalism strength and a strong ascription of the elite-desired Bosniak identity because this was the period when both the homeland and diaspora Bosnian Muslim population were exposed to the most intense nationalistic campaign.

However, the author finds only low to moderate correlation scores. To be sure, as already mentioned above, the author acknowledges that low correlation scores constitute a limitation of his study. However, what seems to be more important, having low correlation scores even in the “most-likely case” of exposure to active nationalistic campaign of a diaspora population (and diasporas in general also display more nationalistic tendencies than homeland populations as can be evidenced by the stances of Armenian, Greek or Macedonian diasporas in the West) shows that the author’s main argument about the link between nationalism strength and the likelihood of strong ascription of a new identity should be treated with caution. Second, given its direct relevance to the topic, the author should have engaged Chip Gagnon’s influential work *The Myth of Ethnic War* (2004), but surprisingly this work is not even cited in Kriještorac’s book. I believe that the findings of this book in general complement Gagnon’s influential argument that violence in Bosnia was imposed from outside (by conservative elites in Serbia and Croatia), to radically alter the social reality on the ground and, most importantly, to force a change in the way people identified and to the meanings they attach to those identifications. Kriještorac also conceptualizes the emergence of “Bosniak” as a new, elite-desired national identity as a reaction to the aggressive (and essentialist) Serb and Croat nationalism projects during the Bosnian war. The original survey data collected by the author might also be of potential use to offer some insights on Gagnon’s other main argument that violence was so horrific in Bosnia because it was relatively the most ethnically mixed and tolerant Yugoslav space. According to Gagnon, the more tolerant the interethnic relations in a locality, the more violence is needed to alter the social reality there. Given that the majority of the par-

Participants from Kriještorac's diaspora sample consisted of Bosniaks who had lived during communism in Bosnia, the author's data might shed some light on the pre-war state of interethnic relations in Bosnia. However, the evidence here is mixed. On the one hand, the author's data "challenges the notion of BiH as a country with many mixed marriages" (p. 129); and on the other hand, the author finds that religion is definitely an important but not a restrictive factor for Bosnian Muslim nationalism given that more than half of the respondents from his sample maintained that

a Catholic or Orthodox Christian could also be a Bosniak (pp. 131-132).

All in all, *First Nationalism then Identity* is an important work providing a refreshing view of the interaction between nationalism and identity by focusing on an academically fascinating case study. It will be of interest primarily to comparativists of ethnicity and nationalism and historians and it is indispensable for understanding the current ethnic trajectories in Bosnia and in the broader post-Yugoslav space.