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Wine, dogfood and Bosnia clichés – why they matter



What we savour depends on what we expect

Dear friends of ESI,

Since 1999 ESI has published 27 reports on Bosnia and Herzegovina: analysing politics and society, challenging misperceptions and making policy proposals. Some reports have created heated debates. Some have influenced policy.

Travails of the European Raj (2003)

Making federalism work - a radical proposal for practical reform (2004)

The worst in class (2007)

Houdini in Bosnia. How to unlock the EU accession process (2013)

Bosnia as Wunderkind of Doing Business (2015)

Protests and Illusions – How Bosnia and Herzegovina lost a decade (2014)

Escaping the first circle of hell or the secret behind Bosnian reforms (2016)

Today we publish a new report on Bosnia, bias, clichés and the damage they do:

**Wine, dog food and Bosnian clichés
False ideas and why they matter**

Confirmation bias

In 2001, Frederic Brochet, a researcher from Bordeaux, asked 57 oenologists to evaluate two glasses of wine. What the experts did not know: it was a set up. "The wines were actually the same white wine, one of which had been tinted red with food coloring. But that didn't stop the experts from describing the 'red' wine in language typically used to describe red wines. One expert praised its 'jamminess,' while another enjoyed its 'crushed red fruit.'" Brochet concluded that "you taste what you are expecting to taste. They were expecting to taste a red wine, and so they did." Studies reviewed by the American Association of Wine Economists confirm that much of what we savour is in our heads. And what was found to be true for wine also holds for mineral water and dog food.

In blind tasting experiments people failed to distinguish dog food from expensive pâté. One research paper concluded that "even if dog food is safe for human consumption, it must overcome considerable prejudice. *Part of the barrier is the perception that dog food is unpalatable.*"

The link between wine, dog food and politics is the notion of *confirmation bias*. Expectations shape what we perceive. In the case of Bosnia, analysts generally expect that they are dealing with dog food, not pâté.

Bloodshed and fanaticism

The dominant clichés are that Bosnia is riven by ethnic hatred; that therefore political stability can only ever be fragile; that the constitutional arrangement which ended the war in 1995 reinforces communal tensions; and that the country remains perpetually on the verge of violent collapse. Many accounts conclude from this that Bosnians are fanatics and pose a threat to the rest of Europe.

In 2008 the former High Representative Paddy Ashdown warned that "there is a real threat of Bosnia breaking up again ... even a brief spell of wrong-headedness can quickly become the prelude to enduring tragedy." In 2011 Ashdown warned the EU that unless it acted decisively, "bloodshed will return to Bosnia." In 2013 two US-based analysts warned that Bosnia remained "at war" and that "the dynamics of war-era polarization still rage, captive to venal leadership and a defunct constitutional order." In May 2015 an article in Foreign Policy argued that Bosnia faces "deeper and nearly irreparable injury." In November 2015 Ashdown warned about "things going to become worse", with the "potential for a dangerous and even tragical situation."

Don't let them in: As Bosnia bids to join EU, experts say ex-Yugoslav state is now 'breeding ground' for terrorism

EXCLUSIVE By DAVID WOODING, Sunday Political Editor

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The Sun's view of Bosnia

As an article on 10 April 2016 in the British daily *The Sun* put it, the ex-Yugoslav state has become a "breeding ground" for terrorism. It claimed that it is "home to three million Muslims" (which is wrong), on "the way to become a full [EU] member after 2020" (wrong), and that Bosnian weapons "were used in the 2015 terror attack on the Charlie Hebdo magazine offices in Paris" and in "the Bataclan theatre massacre." (The ammunition used in the first attack was produced in Yugoslav Bosnia in 1986, and the rifles used in the second in Serbia.). The paper continued:

"Brexit campaigners have also warned that UK taxpayers will have to send millions of pounds to prop up Bosnia's struggling economy – cash which could fall into the hands of terror groups."

This is, alas, what one might expect from a British tabloid on the eve of the Brexit referendum. However, too many serious commentators and publications use similar language and images when it comes to Bosnia today.

In our report we discuss six clichés we hope analysts and media will be more hesitant to repeat in the future:

Ethnicity is central to daily life
 Bosnian politics is all about ethnicity
 Bosnian politics is dominated by three ethnic parties
 Bosnia has too many politicians
 In Bosnia elections change nothing
 The master cliché: Bosnia is uniquely dysfunctional

The best way to respond to these is to take a look at realities in Bosnia 22 years since the end of the war. Here are a few striking facts:

Ethnic keys in the administration

The state-level law on civil servants prescribes that "the structure of civil servants within the civil service shall generally reflect the ethnic structure of the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina in accordance with the last census." However, public employees are *not* required

to declare their ethnicity when they apply for a job or when they are hired: "Ethnic declaration of civil servants shall be based upon *voluntary declaration* in accordance with this law."

Ethnic Self-identification

In March 2015 Milan Dunovic, the (Serb) Federation vice-president opposed the formation of the new Federation government, arguing that there were too many Serb ministers proposed: four, although there should have been only three. It turned out that the confusion was due to the proposed minister of labour Milan Mandilovic, who responded that he was not even aware which ethnicity he represented. Having worked as a doctor in Sarajevo during the siege, he told the media: "I do not know why my party declared me as a Serb." He changed his declaration to Other. This solved the problem and he became a minister.

Multi-ethnic government of the "Serb" entity:

The RS government has 16 ministers: 8 ministers have to be Serb, 5 Bosniak and 3 Croat. The prime minister can nominate an "Other." Today the government of Republika Srpska, the "Serb entity", includes the following non-Serb ministers:

Zlatan Klokic (Bosniak), Minister of Economic Relations and Regional Cooperation
 Lejla Resic (Bosniak), Minister of Administration and Local Self-Government
 Srebrenka Golic (Bosniak), Minister of Spatial Planning, Civil Engineering and Ecology
 Jasmin Komic (Bosniak), Minister of Science and Technology
 Jasmina Davidovic (Bosniak), Minister of Family, Youth and Sports
 Anton Kasipovic (Croat), Minister of Justice
 Predrag Gluhakovic (Croat), Minister of Trade and Tourism
 Davor Cordas (Croat), Minister for Refugees and Displaced Persons

Key positions and ethnicity in the "Bosniak-Croat" federation

Prime minister: Fadil Novalic (Bosniak)
 Chairman of the House of Representatives: Edin Music (Bosniak)
 Chairman of the House of Peoples: Lidija Bradara (Croat)
 President of the Supreme Court: Milorad Novkovic (Serb)
 President of the Constitutional Court: Vesna Budimir (Croat)
 Federal prosecutor: Zdravko Knezevic (Serb)

The "three ethnic parties" myth

A dominant cliché about Bosnia is the hold on power of "three ethnic parties" representing three cohesive ethnic communities. In fact, in Bosnia power is decentralised far more than in any of its neighbours.

Bosnia has the smallest state legislature in Europe, with 42 seats in its House of Representatives. This small lower house contains 12 different parties, which makes it one of the most pluralist parliaments in Europe.

Political Parties represented in some directly elected lower houses 2017

Country	Number of parties
Dutch House of Representatives	13
Bosnian House of Representatives	12
Belgian Chamber of Representatives	12
German Bundestag	7

Since 2014, 24 different parties have been represented in ten cantonal assemblies, up from 18 parties after the 2010 elections. Following the 2014 October elections there are two dominant parties in the Federation: the SDA and the HDZ. However, these two together captured only 42 percent of the cantonal seats. In 2010 they had 36 percent of these seats.

Bosnia has too many politicians?

One common cliché is that Bosnia has too many politicians. As High Representative Valentin Inzko put it: "There are 150 ministers and 14 prime ministers. People think this is simply too much." But is it?

The Bosnian state parliament has a lower and an upper chamber with 42 and 15 seats, respectively. The Federation parliament has two chambers with 98 and 58 seats. The RS has two chambers with 83 and 28 seats. The ten unicameral cantonal assemblies have 289 seats. This means that Bosnia has 613 "parliamentarians". This sounds like a lot for a country of fewer than 4 million people.

But is it? The US state of New Hampshire (1.3 million people) has 400 councillors and 24 senators, per head twice as many as Bosnia. Switzerland is the European federation that most resembles Bosnia's cantonal system. The Swiss half-canton Appenzell Innerrhoden (population 16,000) has a 50-member cantonal assembly. This is a larger assembly than Tuzla's (population 445,000) with 35 members. Altogether the cantonal assemblies of the 26 cantons and half-cantons of Switzerland boast 2,609 councilors. Add to this the two chambers of the Swiss federal parliament (200 and 46 members) and you arrive at 2,855 parliamentarians.

Table: Parliamentarians in Bosnia and Switzerland

Level	Bosnia	Switzerland
State	57	246
Entity	267	—
Canton	289	2,609
Total	613	2,855

In Bosnia elections change nothing?

In Bosnia there have been seven general elections since the end of the war: in 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2006, 2010 and 2014. The clichés is that these elections have changed nothing and "wartime leaders" have remained in control. Paddy Ashdown noted after the 2014 elections: "I see that nothing has changed much. We continue to see that *the faces from wartime* are ruling the situation."

What is the evidence for this? There is no evidence. These claims are wrong. Compared to every other country in South East Europe, Bosnia has had many alternations in power, in all positions and at all levels, with different coalitions taking control. This was particularly true in 2014.

Federation post-war Prime Ministers

Name	Party	Period
Izudin Kapetanovic	SDA	January 1996 – December 1996
Edhem Bicakcic	SDA	December 1996 – January 2001
Dragan Covic (acting)	HDZ BiH	January 2001 – March 2001
Alija Behmen	SDP BiH	March 2001 – February 2003
Ahmet Hadzipasic	SDA	February 2003 – March 2007
Nedžad Brankovic	SDA	March 2007 – June 2009
Mustafa Mujezinovic	SDA	June 2009 – March 2011
Nermin Niksic	SDP BiH	March 2011 – March 2015
Fadil Novalic	SDA	Since March 2015

Federalism and decision making



*Team Bosnia and Team Switzerland (2016)
Photo: Getty Images Sport / Philipp Schmidli*

Finding agreement in a complex federation remains a constant challenge even in one of the world's most prosperous democracies, Switzerland. A classic book about the Swiss political system (Jonathan Steinberg's *Why Switzerland?*) noted in 1996 that the Swiss "cellular political system allows ethnic and other particularisms to flourish side by side." Where other systems strive to generate a powerful majority which can govern, "the Swiss opt for complex

formulae that produce coalitions". The system requires constant consultation. "Any Swiss bill goes through a tortuous process of consultations ... the outcomes emerge slowly, if at all, from such processes."

Similar to Bosnia the Swiss constitution declares that "the cantons are sovereign, in so far as their sovereignty is not limited by the federal constitution, and exercise all those rights, which have not been transferred to federal power." And yet, despite the need to consult widely and a political system based on committees and weak executives Switzerland has become, over time, one of the most successful and prosperous societies in the world. In the end it is the quality of decisions, and their legitimacy, that matters most. Steinberg notes that "Switzerland is still intact long after the totalitarian dictators with their centralized and unified states have strutted off the stage."

Time to rethink and look again

The last decade saw many dramatic events in and around the European Union: 2008 saw the outbreak of war between Russia and Georgia. In 2011 the Arab spring shook the foundations of politics in North Africa and the Middle East. In 2014 there was a referendum on Scottish independence. Mass protests changed the regime in Ukraine and triggered a war between Ukraine and Russia. In 2015 new fighting erupted in Turkey's South East. In 2016 the British voted for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, and Turkey experienced a military coup attempt. In 2017 the Catalan parliament declared independence from Spain.

By comparison to the dramatic politics of North Africa, the Middle East, Turkey, Ukraine, the Caucasus and even the British Isles Bosnia appears a model of stability. And yet, the categories with which Bosnia is being analysed have hardly changed as a result.

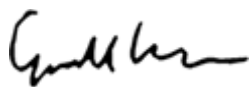
It is high time to set aside these clichés: that in Bosnia ethnic and religious hate has been growing for years; that politics is rotten; and that the constitution poses an insurmountable obstacle to any progress.

In fact, Bosnian elections matter. New parties are often successful at entering assemblies. Cantonal and local politics matter, too, given how much is decided at this level. It should be possible to form reform coalitions at different levels of the state and to focus on what needs to be reformed there, from Dobož municipality to Sarajevo city, from Tuzla Canton to Brčko district.

Neither ethnic diversity nor Bosnian federalism are excuses for inaction when it comes to reforms. Bosnian society faces serious problems, but this does not make it unique. It is the common fate shared with its Balkan neighbours and indeed with all democracies, young and old.

As always we are looking forward to your comments and reactions,

Best wishes,



Gerald Knaus

Read more

This report is the first in a series of upcoming ESI publications on Bosnia, the Western Balkans and the EU accession process. On this see also Adnan Cerimagic - European Western Balkans, "[Ćerimagić: We need EU accession to be beneficial for WB states today](#)" (23 October 2017)



ESI analyst Adnan Cerimagic

"What would need to change in the accession process itself?"

Adnan Cerimagic: The whole language of EU accession is a bit surreal. Esoteric even. A country is a potential candidate, then a candidate, then a chapter is opened. Ask even parliamentarians how it helps citizens of a country concretely to have "a chapter opened", and I wonder what you would hear. Most would struggle to explain what it means, and they would be right: it means very little.

We need a different language. It must become obvious that EU accession is about safer food, better air quality, more investment, less corruption, better education – a better life – and not in a distant future, but now.

Can you give a concrete example?

AC: Yes. Let me take a very concrete example: the number of people dying in traffic accidents. In the Western Balkans this is much higher than across the EU. In recent years EU member states cut the number of fatalities by half.

Now imagine that the European Commission prepares a simple list of all EU measures that the countries in the Western Balkans would have to adopt in this area. And then do a regular annual update on the progress countries make.

This would empower politicians interested in reform. It would also help the media and public to pressure those governments to implement those reforms. It would motivate civil servants. And it would not be abstract talk about EU standards and chapters, but a debate on how to save lives."

"Bosnian Clichés" in the media



Dnevni Avaz (4 and 5 November 2017)

4 November - Bosnian daily Dnevni Avaz on ESI's report: **"U poređenju sa mnogima, BiH je vrlo stabilna država"** ("Compared to many other Bosnia-Herzegovina is a very stable country").

1 November - The Economist published a piece on **"Why hasn't Bosnia collapsed?"**

2 November - Face TV (Bosnian TV), **"The Economist izvršno analizirao BiH i zašto se država nije raspala"** ("Excelent analysys of Bosnia and Herzegovina by The Economist on why the country did not break up")

2 November - TV1 (Bosnian TV), **"Britanski Economist - Zašto se BiH nije raspala!?"** ("British The Economist - Why Bosnia and Herzegovina hasn't collapsed!?")

1 November - Vecernji list (Bosnian daily), **"Zašto se Bosna i Hercegovina nije raspala?"** ("Why hasn't Bosnia and Herzegovina collapsed")

1 November - Nezavisne novine (Bosnian daily), **"Economist: Zašto se BiH nije raspala?"** ("The Economist: Why hasn't Bosnia and Herzegovina collapsed")