

Memory and the Enemy: The Challenge of Representative Democracy in BiH

Eldar Sarajlić

Memory

The recent marking of events in the former Dobrovoljačka Street in Sarajevo once again brought to the forefront the essence of Bosnian-Herzegovinian politics: the acute production of crisis as a key generator of pre-election dynamics. Indeed, the commemoration of events in Dobrovoljačka Street by a few Serb politicians does seem strained and without any other purpose except to remind the differentiated *electoral bodies* about the ethnic structure of BiH politics and the necessity of homogenising ethnic collectives.

What came to the forefront of the commemoration certainly was not an attempt at reconciliation or dealing with the past with empathy. The very manner of this “performance” was crystal clear in indicating that its sources resided within the structures of parties in power (in this case Serb representatives) and not in organisations or family members of the killed JNA soldiers. If this had been a family or group initiative of a number of families who had lost their sons, there would have been nothing contentious about it. Although the “rookie” soldiers who lost their lives in Dobrovoljačka Street in May 1992 were victims of political manipulations of Milošević’s government and the unquenchable desire for Greater Serbia, rather than of hostile citizens of Sarajevo, at the level of personal emotion, it is possible to sympathise with them and even initiate a commemoration of their deaths. However, the fact that the group that gathered at the site where these soldiers were killed, in today’s Hamdija Kreševljaković Street, mostly consisted of suited and theatrically disposed representatives of the Republika Srpska government and Serb representatives from the BiH Parliament says enough about the nature of this commemoration and thus probably also dictates the moral response of liberal citizens of Sarajevo towards the event.

The event itself, of course, is not discrete from political developments in the country or the current priorities of those parties and politicians in power. It only goes to show that, although officially still being prepared, the election campaign is actually well under way. What is at stake is clearly a race for the sympathies of a lobotomised *electoral body* and efforts to maintain the current relations of power, influence and benefits. It is not at all difficult to conclude that the commemoration of events in Dobrovoljačka Street was created to generate and maintain ethno-nationalist power following the elections in October this year. Every even moderately knowledgeable analyst of BiH politics will easily arrive at such a conclusion.

Body

However, there is something indicative in the analysis of this event, including the character of the discourse and the terms used. “Electoral body” is one of the most frequently used phrases that, albeit unintentionally, reveals the register of BiH politics. This register implies that Bosnian-Herzegovinian ethnic communities are separate corporeal beings, creatures of flesh and blood controlled by the ethno-political elite as the “head” or “brain” of the entire organism. Such analogies are not uncommon in ethno-nationalism. After all, its basic principle is an organic definition of community where culture and society are seen as tissues that receive their blood supply from the dominant ideology of ethnic unity. Within such a register, disagreement with the mind that controls the body or dissent are impossible – how can an arm revolt against the head or act independently?

It is paradoxical, but no less true that such a system is based on a very defined logic deemed to be rational. Only revolt is irrational, it is an indicator of illness in the organism or of a viral infection. It is interesting that in this sense, there is an absolute unity of the masses and the political elite in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is, in fact, an indication that citizens do not exist as such, but only as a mass that sees itself organically connected to the political elite. The politicians, of course, benefit from this sort of symbiosis. For it is only in such circumstances that all interaction will be one-sided, and responsibility for political actions will merely be an abstract thought of political analysts.

Enemy

The body analogy and the case of Dobrovoljačka Street reveal another dimension of Bosnian-Herzegovinian politics. This dimension is structural in nature and it permeates the social and political being of this country like no other. Following the previous election campaign for general elections in BiH, I described the relationship between Milorad Dodik and Haris Silajdžić by way of an earlier analogy of likening politics to the production of the enemy and the certain possibility of conflict. In the context of Dodik’s and Silajdžić’s symbiotic relationship, the adversarial nature of politics came out in all its glory.

Not much has changed since. The political subjectivity of every actor in Bosnian-Herzegovinian politics, be it an individual or a group (party), is constructed primarily by defining the *enemy*. The ethnic enemy pervades the very structure of BiH politics, it is easy to determine and very often the enemy determines itself.

Spectacle

Producing the enemy and generating political power in BiH are dependent on the process of producing political spectacle, a phenomenon written about a few years ago by the American political scientist Murray Edelman. The manifestations of political spectacle are clearly visible in everyday Bosnian-Herzegovinian political discourse. In the language of spectacle, the Dobrovoljačka Street and similar performative acrobatics

in BiH could be presented to the public as “powerful symbols to draw public attention away from preoccupation with welfare to constructed events.” In this way, the lobotomised masses, instead of focusing on the structural problems of Bosnian-Herzegovinian society – such as acute poverty, unemployment, the financial collapse and lack of rational economic planning – focus instead on construed events whose importance does not go beyond the symbolic.

This is the context in which to interpret the majority of political “events” from the past few years, from constitutional reform negotiations to the construction of memorial centres, monuments, churches and mosques. Symbols exhaust the purpose of BiH politicising, while solving concrete problems is left to individuals and individual initiative. This is where the roots of corruption become visible: left to fend for themselves when it comes to vital problems such as medical care or employment, individuals are forced to find and use alternative non-systemic ways to overcome the daily challenges of life.

That, then is the overall character of post-Dayton politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina that is conducted exclusively on the level of symbols and does not address solving vital problems for the BiH population. Ethno-politics as a whole is a symbolic and abstract politics, because its effects on the welfare of communities for whose benefit it purports to fight are minimal. This fact is confirmed by the quality of life for members of all three ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The ultimate effect of ethno-politics becomes most explicit when we compare it to the monthly income of an average family in Lukavica for example. However, the democratic election procedure legitimises such a situation, because it is precisely the voters who, year after year, keep choosing symbols and the symbolic over concrete and effective politics. It seems the October elections will only confirm this rule once again.

Democracy

There is, however, a certain structural conditionality of this situation. Apart from the fact that the Dayton constitution makes a political outcome the norm through consociational arrangements, the same is achieved by the very character of representative democracy as such. By stipulating voting in elections as the ultimate form of civil participation in politics, representative democracy indirectly suppresses all other means and ways of civil influence on the government.

In developed Western democracies where civil participation developed alongside capitalist patterns (as described by the British sociologist Thomas H. Marshall) and evolved to a degree where it is compatible with representative democracy, such limitations did not develop. However, in transitional societies such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, where civil participation was historically repressed and replaced by the domination of a political elite, representative democracy poses more challenges than it provides solutions.

In that sense, the upcoming elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the pre-election campaign that, by all accounts, has already started (and has, in fact, been going on since the end of the war) will not be much different than before. The problem of Bosnia and Herzegovina is not in the absence of an individual political option that would break the vicious cycle of ethno-nationalism, but in the structural limitation dictated by each individual outcome. Therefore, there are not many options capable of successfully changing things in this country. One potential way out would be to gradually improve democracy by introducing and popularising direct democratic methods, as well as civil activism to break up the elite domination over politics and introduce the principles of political accountability by those chosen to represent the citizens in the government. However, the key issue following directly from this statement is: does BiH possess a critical mass of liberal citizens prepared to take action and unlikely to become prey to party rhetoric?