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Book Review: Xavier Bougarel (2018).
*Islam and Nationhood in Bosnia-Herzegovina:
Surviving Empires.*
London-New York: Bloomsbury Academic

Abstract

The review of the latest book by Xavier Bougarel focuses on the main concepts of the work: the notion of empire as a methodological and theoretical framework, the relation between Islam and the national idea, and the process of Bosniak nation-building.

Keywords: Islam, Bosnia, Bosniak, empire, nation-building, Xavier Bougarel.

The book *Islam and Nationhood in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Surviving Empires* by Xavier Bougarel is a slightly modified translation of the French original published in 2015. It is another important publication in the author's scientific output concerning Bosnia-Herzegovina and the local

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specificity of Islam. It confirms his deep interest in Bosnian sociopolitical life, while his rich experience has been documented with numerous papers, conferences and monographs, sanctioning Bougarel's position as one of the most important scholars in this domain.

The content is clearly defined by the title, and lucidity precisely is one of the best qualities of Bougarel's work. The book focuses on the formation of the Bosniak national identity, understood above all as a political project. Furthermore, the relation between Islam and the idea of a nation has been chosen as a crucial guideline throughout the whole narrative. Indeed, among other factors having their part in the nation-building process of the Bosniaks, Islam seems privileged for many reasons. Bougarel shows, however, how far that relation was ambiguous.

Political Imagination

The main explanatory concept is based on the idea of the empire as the framework of Bosnian Muslims' political imagination and political practice. The notion of political imagination, although not used by Bougarel, could describe the field he analyzes the most accurately. The book covers the whole period from 1878 to the end of the 2000s; during such a long time, the symbolic and political practices of the Bosniak elites changed dramatically. At the time the Austro-Hungarian monarchy took control over Bosnia, Muslim leaders had been formed mostly within the conservative society of an Ottoman province, struggling both against reforms launched by the Ottoman ruling center and against any influence of their Christian neighbors. It would be risky to see the decisions made by Bosnian Muslim leaders at that time as being based on any clearly defined political ideas or ideologies which would shape the concept of a political Bosniak nation; the French author shows this clearly in the opening chapter. After 1900 the process of adopting European political practices and political strategies began, continuing after 1918 in a more dynamic way. In the last two decades of the 20th century, the political context in the Yugoslav Bosnia-Herzegovina forced Bosniak elites again to redefine what it meant to be a Bosniak. These examples show how complicated and multi-contextual data Bougarel had to tackle. In the book he uncovers not only ideas expressed by Bosniak leaders in more or less evident ways, but the sociopolitical imagination, in the Foucauldian sense of the notion. The most interesting contribution of the book seems to be precisely this in-group perception of the political landscape of Bosnia and the broader region, and the place of Muslims within it.

Search for an Empire

From 1878 onward, borders and administrative entities changed, as did the social background of Bosnian politics, but still, as the author claims, that idea of belonging to an empire, and the conviction that the empire would be a guarantor of Muslims' autonomy, continued to predominate. For a small group of political elites during the Habsburg occupation, for the political circle of the Yugoslav Muslim Organization in the 1920s and 1930s, for Izetbegović's allies in the 1990s as well, a broader political entity should protect the Muslims' autonomy from the claims of other neighboring political communities.

An empire is also conceived as an operational concept. Bougarel relies on an interesting and still growing discussion on the empire as a specific form of organization of political and social life, and a possible alternative to the idea of a nation-state as a quasi-universal form of political sovereignty. At the beginning of Bougarel's narrative, two "real" empires, i.e. appropriate to the common definition of the notion, were present in Bosnia-Herzegovina: the Ottoman empire and the Habsburg monarchy. After the collapse of the latter, other structures followed: the unitarian Yugoslavia, then the federal one, and after the bloody war of 1992-1995, the quasi-federal Bosnia-Herzegovina under the protectorate of the European Union. For every case, the author retraces the similar structural relation between the Muslim political elites of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the centers of power of the entities of which the country was a part at a given moment. The legal sources of imperial power were not legitimated by any national idea, or any other ideology of exclusivity. For the Habsburg monarchy, the unifying idea relied on loyalty toward the dynasty and the state, and this was also true in the Ottoman case. In Yugoslavia, and the EU, a very similar legitimizing mechanism can be indicated: no nation or religious group could be allowed to be dominant, and national ideas were not promoted by the state. Such a relation can even be claimed for the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (until 1929: the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes), which presented itself as the nation-state of one "three-name" nation. All those structures encompassed different ethnic and religious groups, none of them having an absolute majority. All of them, the monarchical Yugoslavia aside, guaranteed extensive autonomy of the administrative units they comprised, creating two-level identification with politico-symbolic structures: crown estates (for the Habsburg monarchy) or republics (for the Yugoslav federation) at the lower level—more important for everyday practice and regional development, and the state, which stood (or was supposed to do so) over any particularity. The states/empires were based on legitimating

ideas sufficiently broad—i.e. dynastic loyalty, communism, antifascism—to integrate different groups, the Muslims as well.

Bougarel has built his narrative around the conviction that Muslim political elites in Bosnia-Herzegovina conceived their community through the idea of belonging to an empire. That position, as the author claims, could be attributed to the Bosniak leaders in a continuous way, despite differences of the sociohistorical context of modernity. This interpretation is convincing in the light of the sources and cases analyzed by the author. Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina were never strong enough to require their own political unit, given that they never lived within a compact territory but were dispersed throughout the country. The Serbian and Croatian nationalisms, growing in strength from the mid-19th century, constantly forced the Muslim elites to redefine their identity in terms of a nation. Nonetheless, the political, demographic and territorial situation, and the Islamic tradition as well, were not conducive to a search for political sovereignty. The imperial center of power, with its inclusive ideological basis, seemed a logical and the most adequate solution for the small community of Bosnian Muslims.

Islam and Nationhood

For readers from outside the (post-)Yugoslav experience, one of the crucial points considered by Bougarel is the intersection of Islamic views and background on one hand and European political modernity on the other. The same mechanism can be observed in the Bosniak case as in the Croat or Serbian context, or the Polish—mentioned by the author—although its influence was neither continuous nor obvious. In these cases, national identity was created on a confessional basis, and precisely confession became the main factor which determined the scope of a given national community: Roman Catholicism for the Polish and Croatian national narrative, and the Orthodox Christian faith for the Serbian. Bougarel shows that the formation of the Bosniak political nation, with the Islamic tradition as its main distinguishing factor, was not an exception but rather the realization of a pattern predominant in European modernity. On the other hand, as Bougarel suggests when writing about the 1990s, for the political elites of Bosnian Muslims, Islam was seen as the most efficient cohesive idea. Moreover, under the rule of Yugoslav communists it was precisely the Islamic Community, an official organization of Bosnian Muslims, that became a quasi-national institution for the Bosniaks, while other Bosnian institutions (the academy of science, university, local diet, etc.) strictly observed national quota and promoted the idea of Bosnia-Herzegovina as a shared territory of three communities: Muslim, Croatian and Serbian.

The second part of the book brings a possible explanation of this apparent paradox. Namely, Bosniak political leaders, related to the Islamic community and playing the Islamic card, have been strongly supporting closer ties with the European community and claiming access to the European Union as the main political goal in a long-term perspective. According to Bougarel's conclusion, this cannot be seen only as a contextual choice, providing that the EU stands as a guarantor of the stability and political unity of Bosnia-Herzegovina. In the author's view, in it we should see a logical continuation of the Bosnian Muslims' position. The European Union takes the place of an empire, fitting into the perception of the empire as it has been reconstructed for the political imagination of Bosnian Muslim leaders. As a supranational political organization, with a more universal set of ideas legitimating its existence and policy and confirming the rights of different national and confessional communities, the EU can play the same role as the Habsburg monarchy or the Yugoslav federation did before. For the Bosniaks, it could guarantee their position as an equal political agent with equal political status to the Croats and Serbs with whom they share the area. This could explain why Bosniak Islamic elites, characterized by a conservative attitude and attempts to recreate a society based on Islamic customs and views, opt for a secular and liberal European community. Moreover, the non-national superpower brings stability to the region and supports the Bosniak nation, which could hardly keep its sovereignty when concurrent nations claimed their right to the same territory and a shared past. Last but not least, belonging to an empire, as Bougarel shows, can help to preserve the very existence of Bosnia-Herzegovina as a political unit with guaranteed autonomy.

Sources and Readers

I have tried to summarize the main ideas and the contribution of Bougarel's book. The credibility of his interpretations relies on the author's competence particularly in two aspects: familiarity with Bosnian (and Bosniak) sources, and knowledge about the local variety of Islam. Every chapter has been supported by detailed references to sources of different kinds: from manifestos, newspapers, to not very easily accessible documents and memoirs. Some of them are unique, notably those concerning the early Habsburg period and the collaboration of some members of the Muslim elite with the Nazis during World War II. A large part of the book, two chapters of around eighty pages, exhaustively reconstructs changes in the political positions of Bosniak politicians and national leaders between 1990 and 1995. Moreover, it enters into a parallel discussion on the identity and

allegiances of the Bosnian Muslims in that hectic period. This whole part of the book was based on press reports and different manifestos or statements of Bosniak leaders. Bougarel's interpretation might be debatable, but it would not be easy to find another author competent and patient enough to undertake such a detailed analysis.

Another strength of Bougarel's narrative lies in his familiarity with so-called Balkan Islam or, more precisely, with its Bosnian variant. Owing to this, he has been able to avoid the trap of the easy, and thus often misleading, explanation that proposes Islam as the universal reason for Muslim politicians' decisions. Furthermore, their positions would frequently be qualified as "Islamist" only due to their ties with the Islamic confession or Islamic confessional organizations. Bougarel goes far beyond stereotypical explanations. We can find good examples of this strategy in the chapter dealing with the ideological conflict between the traditional Muslim elites in the 1930s and the new current of Islamic modernism. Another period when such sensibility for the local was crucial is surely the time of the last conflict in the 1990s and the struggle for Bosniak identity and allegiances.

The last question is who Bougarel wrote the book for. Firstly, it might be read as a kind of history of Bosnia-Herzegovina from 1878 onward. The narrative focuses on the title's question of the political nation, and the relation between the confessional community and the national idea. Nonetheless, it traces the history of Bosniak nation-building and shows how the Bosniaks have become a political agent. One strong point is that Bougarel takes into account the broader context of the region. The concept of empire forces him to go beyond the borders of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Moreover, writing about Islam, even its peripheral province, he showed the need to refer to discussions and divisions within the Muslim movements, echoes of which were noticeable in Bosnia. Secondly, this is a narrative deeply connected with the history of political ideas. Scholars interested in politics and its sociohistorical contexts will certainly find some fascinating material here illustrated with carefully chosen cases. Bougarel, writing from a position rooted in the field of political science, seems constantly to invoke social and cultural conditions, thereby inviting researchers with other scientific perspectives. Thirdly, the book will be equally satisfying to readers with an interest in Islam, especially its political dimension. Indeed, the position of Bosnian Islam seems particularly interesting to European readers, as we often hear the notion of "European Islam". Bougarel emphasizes the contextual difference between an Islamic community in Bosnia and in France or Belgium, and for non-Islamic readers this could also be an interesting reminder to be careful before using any stereotypes. Fourthly, it should be required reading for scholars interested in the concept of empire mentioned

earlier, for its methodological value as well as its theoretical reflection on political systems and their sociocultural impact.

Without a doubt, more target groups of readers could be specified. One thing seems certain: Xavier Bougarel's book on Islam and nationhood should become required reading for any scholar dealing with Bosnia-Herzegovina, and for readers eager to know more about complicated nation-building processes in the Balkans.

References

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Recenzja książki: Xavier Bougarel (2018).
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Recenzja najnowszej książki Xaviera Bougarela koncentruje się na najważniejszych kwestiach, takich jak: pojęcie imperium, będące ramą ideologiczną i teoretyczną dla interpretacji autora, relacja między Islamem a ideą narodową oraz proces definiowania narodu boszniackiego.

Słowa kluczowe: islam, Bośnia, Boszniacy, imperium, idea narodowa, Xavier Bougarel.

Note

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