

Liminal Temporalities of Hope in Bosnia-Herzegovina

Via [LeftEast](#)

The space where I live and work is described and prescribed by its past, by what it no longer is: *post-Yugoslav*, *post-socialist*, *post-conflict*, some even claim *post-colonial*. This world is rarely framed in terms of what it *is* or what it might *become*. Stef Jansen in his ethnography of residents in a block of flats in Sarajevo wrote of „yearnings in the Dayton meantime“ (Jensen, 2015), capturing a liminal space framed by a craving for the possibility of hope and the seeming impossibility of ‘returning to normal’ within the dystopian governance arrangements in Bosnia-Herzegovina deriving from the Dayton Peace Agreement of December 1995. In focusing on Bosnia-Herzegovina here, I reflect on the temporalities of (failed) external political engineering, the proliferation of (failed) projects and the performative practices of everyday life, refusing a deterministic narrative of the absence of hope without talking up the possibilities of repoliticisation.

The governance arrangements that have been in place in Bosnia-Herzegovina since Dayton, drawn up by a team of young United States lawyers, are at the centre of the problem. Somewhat successful as a peace agreement, albeit one that more or less froze the status quo and allowed the main ethno-nationalist political parties that had fuelled the conflict to continue business as usual, it makes governance of the state almost impossible. A recurring Bosnian joke is that everyone considers the constitution laid down in the agreement as unworkable but, of course, no one can agree on what to replace it with. Bosnia-Herzegovina is a sovereign federal state, with a three-person Presidency and a rotating President, based on what is referred to as “the ethnic key” with members elected from Serbian-Orthodox, Bosniak-Muslim and Croatian-Catholic

constituencies. It remains a kind of semi-protectorate with many powers vested in the Office of the High Representative, merged in 2009 with the EU Representative's office. It has a Central Bank that is carefully regulated and there are a small number of symbolic Ministries and agencies at Federal level albeit with very little power. Most power is vested in the two entities *Republika Srpska* and the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina – there is also an autonomous Brčko District (total population 93,000) with its own foreign administrator as the parties could not agree which entity the town should belong to. The Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina is itself divided into ten Cantons each of which has a Cantonal Governor and a full cabinet of Ministers. If we just take health and social policy as one example, there is no Federal Law, there are entity laws, and each Canton also passes its own Law. Furthermore, financing is a municipal responsibility so that rights can vary from one small part of the country to another. This means there are some 140 Ministries across the country, each with a Minister, a deputy, a couple of Assistants, a large staff, many advisors, and a large number of official cars.

Bosnia-Herzegovina remains something of a 'crowded playground' in which we find a proliferation of diverse actors – Sarajevo was often referred to as 'acronym city' as all manner of international organisations, NGOs, think tanks, agencies, consultants ('insultants' in local parlance) and policy entrepreneurs had a presence there (Stubbs, 2015). Indeed, as post-conflict aid money dwindled, the Sarajevo central office would usually be the last to close, existing on scraps from the donor table. Sometimes, as what became euphemistically known as an 'exit strategy', an international NGO would create its own FrankeNGO, a local spin-off, with no certainty as to what kind of monster might emerge. The distortions of an immediate post-conflict economy could be observed at both a macro-level (estimates of donor aid making up 15% of total GDP were being sprayed around a while ago) and at the micro-level.

You would be significantly better off as, say, a university professor if you could retreat to your weekend house full-time and rent your inner-city apartment to an NGO for an office or a flat for its staff. You could also make ends meet by receiving honoraria from all manner of agencies for writing reports, even those of questionable quality and originality. Still, today, the crowded playground is populated and dominated by all manner of flexians, in Janine Wedel's terms (Wedel, 2009), blurring boundaries between the public and the private, the national and the international, the state and the non-state, and more. In crowded flex land, it is the army of intermediaries, brokers, translators (literal and metaphorical), operating in the cracks and interstices of governance, and almost completely non-transparent, that possess the real power.

Central to failed futures is 'the project' as an organizational form; a managerial-bureaucratic process; a funding modality and a practice of governmentality. 'Projectification' is a peculiar assemblage of repertoires, processes and practices, drawing together material, human, and non-human resources, calculative logics, consisting of temporalised stages that, whilst highly contingent, serve to technocratise and depoliticise the lifeworld and, in mundane ways, reproduce the everyday techniques of neoliberalism (Scott, 2021). Projects operate at variegated speeds across multiple sites and scales. They also come in waves or clusters: in Bosnia-Herzegovina the first wave of 'stand-alone' projects was notable for their sheer arbitrary diversity, short time scales, and rapid shifts from one theme or target group to another. The second wave were 'pilot projects' – as I was told in the late 1990s "Bosnia has many pilots but no aeroplanes". 'Pilots' were meant to have the potential to be 'scaled up' and become sustainable; that is to become long-term or permanent features of the governance landscape. In a third wave, more explicit systemic reform was prioritised, through 'projects of strategic support', aiding

Ministries and agencies to plan, implement and evaluate reforms, and introduce new laws and regulations. Such projects were brought closer to centres of policy making whilst also keeping a distance through sub-contracting arrangements, a range of 'implementing partners' and, not unusually, the creation of new parallel agencies, often with a chameleon-like character, to 'drive reform' and 'bypass' those likely to stand in the way of 'progress'. A number of donors invested a great deal in agencies that, often, became empty shells, literally and figuratively.

Bosnia-Herzegovina is marked by the absence of the kind of statecraft that provides what Jansen refers to as 'grids', institutional frameworks that calibrate and order individual, household and community concerns, providing a modicum of basic orientation in terms of what to expect from the authorities. The state, along with the family, is 'semi-absent', with state practices highly uneven, often indifferent, or else over-punitive (Hromadžić, 2015). A study of mothers of children with disabilities points to the erratic, ambiguous, fraught, provisional, contingent, unpredictable, even 'mysterious' nature of care services. Surviving, for anyone reliant on state support, is a constant struggle to gain access to the right people who, if you are lucky, if all the pieces fall into place, might offer help that is as far away from a structured, system-based, 'right' as it is possible to get (Brković, 2017). One conceptual entry point here is the 'semi-periphery', a deeply contradictory space, promoting 'rapid modernization' in conditions of deindustrialization, desecularisation, repatriarchalisation and anti-intellectualism (Blagojević, 2009). Reforms are simultaneously accepted and opposed, imitated and rejected, in thin, degridded, structural conditions.

Quite deliberately, I want to end this essay in two alternative ways. In one, the longing for normalcy breeds a kind of passivity, a resignation if you wish, an erosion of

the capacity to aspire and, at best, an ironic dismissal of the absurdity of governing practices. The phrase *bit će bolje* can often be heard uttered by South Slavic speakers but it means the exact opposite of its literal translation – ‘things will get better’. This is captured in a quote from Ivo Andrić’s novel *Na Drini ćuprija* (The Bridge on the Drina), published in 1945, describing local responses to attempts by the Austro-Hungarian Empire to modernise the town of Višegrad in the late 19th century:

“The newcomers were never at peace; they allowed no one else to be at peace. It seemed that they were resolved with their impalpable but ever more noticeable web of laws, regulations and orders to embrace all forms of life ... and to change and alter everything ... Old ideas and old values clashed with the new ones, merged with them or existed side by side, as if waiting to see which would outlive which. ... The people resisted every innovation but did not go to extremes, for to most of them life was always more important and more urgent than the forms by which they lived.” (Andrić, 1995: 135)

Nebojša Šaviha Valha (2013) discusses the phenomena of *raja*, referring to one’s interlocking circles of trusted friends, often based around an activity (coffee raja, skiing raja, hiking raja, ...), where one can be oneself and practice *zajebancia*, enjoying oneself in an uninhibited way. For Šaviha-Valha, *raja* is seen by many Sarajevans, and Bosnians more generally, as that which was held onto against all odds during the conflict and subsequently becomes a kind of auto-ironic way of both critiquing the absurdities of the political elite but, in the end, resting on that critique and settling for *raja* as quotidian survival.

For my alternative ending, it is worth noting that as of 8 June 2021, [Bosnia-Herzegovina had the third highest rate of COVID deaths per million population in the world](#), behind only Peru and Hungary. The first wave of the pandemic was marked by

a corruption scandal in which a fruit-processing company with close links to political leaders secured a lucrative contract to import ventilators from China that proved to be deficient. Today's Bosnia-Herzegovina is also policing the border with the EU and is a major holding centre for refugees and asylum seekers held in appalling conditions, many of whom have been violently pushed back by Croatian and Bosnian authorities. Localised acts of solidarity with the asylum seekers do still occur but not on the scale of responses along the so-called 'Balkan route' in 2015, when a kind of inter-generational geopolitics of solidarity saw grassroots activities offering practical and political support to migrants from Libya, Syria and elsewhere.

These actions followed on from protests in February 2013, termed *bebalucija* when, after a law on personal identification numbers was declared unconstitutional, politicians from the major nationalist parties failed to reach agreement on a new law meaning that new-born babies could not obtain a passport nor a health insurance number. In a sense, it was precisely the absurdity of an impasse over personal IDs that triggered the anger of the protesters, reaching a crescendo when a three-month old child died in June 2013 because she was not allowed to enter neighbouring Serbia for treatment. Later, several days of rioting began in the industrial city of Tuzla in February 2014 when workers from several factories who had lost their jobs clashed with police outside the Cantonal Government building. The unrest spread to many other towns and cities, mainly in the Federation and, although widely reported to have 'run out of steam' they remain important for the experiment of direct democracy through plenums that lives on today across the post-Yugoslav space. I will not try to formulate some principles regarding the relationship between the everyday and the political in terms of which ending is more likely. As Stuart Hall remarked (Hall, 2007: 279), such things are always "open to the play of contingency".

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