

When non-nationalist voters support ethno-nationalist parties: the 1990 elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a prisoner's dilemma game

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(Received 15 July 2014; accepted 6 October 2014)

In 1990, according to polls, 7 out of 10 citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina were against ethnic parties. Yet, 75% of voters ended up voting for one of the three main ethno-nationalist parties. In no other post-communist country, including other former Yugoslav republics, did ethnic parties receive such large support in the first democratic elections. In Croatia, for example, in the 1990 elections the Croatian ethnic party *Hrvatska demokratska zajednica* gathered 42% and the Serb ethnic party *Srpska demokratska stranka* gathered only 2% of the vote. Were Bosnians and Herzegovinians already that much ethno-nationalistically oriented in 1990? The article rejects this thesis and purports to explain the voting behaviour of the Bosnian electorate by using the prisoner's dilemma theoretical framework. It concludes by arguing that the problem of collective action could have been addressed via a pre-electoral referendum on a ban of ethnic parties – a ban which had been actually adopted by the then-ruling Communist party, but was eventually overturned by the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Keywords: ethnic parties; nationalism; prisoner's dilemma; Bosnia and Herzegovina

Is Yugoslavia breaking up? [...] It does not have to end in tears. Yugoslavia has set out on an experiment that could, if it succeeds, prevent it turning into another Lebanon. It might even, some wishfully hope, make it a Switzerland-in-the-Balkans. [...] But, it would be fiendishly difficult to build a Balkan equivalent of Switzerland in a place torn by so many hatreds and rivalries. It's a long way from Belgrade to Bern.

– ‘Oh to be Swiss’, The Economist, 30 June 1990.

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This article has a long story. I wrote a first draft, in French, in the spring of 1997, during the first year of my undergraduate studies in political science at the University of Geneva. At that point I would have never dared to write a truly scientific essay without the enthusiastic encouragement of my professor of comparative politics, Hanspeter Kriesi, who later became the supervisor of my *mémoire de licence* and of my doctoral dissertation as well as a close friend. I dedicate this article to Hanspeter, today professor at the EUI in Florence, who is probably the most passionate and dedicated political scientist I have ever met. Later versions of the article were presented at conferences in Athens (1999) and Budapest (2014), as well as at a graduate seminar at McGill University, Montreal (2000). I thank Florian Bieber, Ioannis Armakolas and an anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments on the last draft of the article, and Julianne Funk for her careful editing. All errors are mine.

Nationalist parties appear poised to sweep the communists out of power after Sunday's election in Yugoslavia's melting-pot republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Early returns showed the electorate divided sharply along national lines. [...] [T]he strength of Bosnia's reaction took even the nationalist parties by surprise. Dr Radovan Karadžić, leader of the Serbian Democratic Party, said yesterday: 'It will be a great victory for democracy and for Bosnia'.

— J. Fish, 'Overwhelming victory in sight for Bosnia's nationalists', *The Guardian*, 20 November 1990.

1. Introduction

The revival of ethno-nationalism in the former Yugoslavia in the late 1980s and the early 1990s is still a controversial topic of scientific enquiry (see e.g. Finlan 2004; Caspersen 2010; Ramet 2010). Although no Yugoslav republic was fully spared from the wars that took place between 1991 and 2001, official figures on casualties clearly show that with a minimum of 96,000 deaths, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) has suffered most (Ball, Tabeau, and Verwimp 2007, 49). Today, this country is seen as the most unstable of the region and it is far behind all other ex-Yugoslav states (with a possible exception of Kosovo) with regard to integration into the European Union.¹

Against this background, the article focuses on the case of BiH and argues that in order to better grasp the special position of BiH in the broader post-Yugoslav context we need to explore a major 'critical juncture' in its recent history: the first post-communist free and democratic elections held on 18 November and 2 December 1990. In these elections, about three quarters of voters in BiH opted for the ethnic parties claiming to represent one or the other of the three main ethno-national groups – also known as 'constituent peoples'² – that is, the Bosniaks (called Muslims until 1993), the Croats and the Serbs.

Today, considering the overwhelming role that ethnic parties play in Bosnian politics, we might be induced to think that there is nothing surprising about that outcome. However, I do not agree for two main reasons. First, in no other post-communist country did the ethnic and explicitly nationalist parties receive such a large share of the popular vote in the first democratic post-1989 elections.³ Were Bosnians and Herzegovinians in 1990 more ethno-nationalistic than citizens of other post-communist countries? This is implausible. Second, various pre-electoral polls indicated that not more than two to three out of 10 citizens of BiH supported the ethnic parties (Andjelic 2003, 182). In urban areas (Banja Luka, Mostar, Sarajevo), a survey conducted in April/May 1990 indicated that about 70% of the respondents were in favour of the ban on ethnic parties. Even if we accept the standard objections as to the validity of such methods of social inquiry – especially in a context where most citizens were not used to freely express their political opinions – the discrepancy between the survey results and the actual outcome of the election is so deep that we can reasonably think that many citizens of BiH who were opposed to ethnic parties (i.e. to *all* ethnic parties) eventually ended up voting for the ethnic party that claimed to represent *their* ethnic community.

Therefore, the main goal of this article is to provide an analytical framework that might explain the extraordinary success of the ethnic parties in BiH. The main claim of the article is that in 1990 the citizens of BiH faced a typical collective action problem: the prisoner's dilemma. This well-known case within game theory is helpful insofar it explains the apparent paradox of how individuals, taken

separately, may act rationally yet produce a collectively harmful (and in this sense ‘irrational’) outcome. Stated briefly, my central argument is that a significant number of citizens of BiH would have preferred to vote for non-ethnic parties, but since they were faced with the fact that ethnic parties were allowed to take part in the election, they ended up voting for the ethnic party claiming to represent their interests. The reason is that most citizens were afraid of the possible outcome if most of those belonging to *their* ethnic group voted for non-ethnic parties, whereas the *others* opted for their respective ethnic parties.⁴

The article is organized into three parts. In Section 2, I situate my analysis within the literature on transitions to democracy: a general framework to which the political history of BiH in the early 1990s historically belongs. In Section 3, I put emphasis on one single event that had a significant and possibly decisive impact on the inter-ethnic relations in BiH: the founding 1990 elections. In this I follow the authors who have stressed the importance of the founding elections in the transition period (e.g. Linz and Stepan 1996; Elster, Offe, and Preuss 1998; Fortin-Rittberger 2012). In Section 4, I draw insights from the rational-choice approach in order to grasp the ethnic outcome of the 1990 elections in BiH. Section 5 concludes.

2. Transitions to democracy, formation of identities and cleavage theory

2.1. The stateness problem and the national question

Transitions to democracy occupy an important place in the contemporary comparative political science literature (for an overview see Bunce 2000). In this sub-section, I focus on three particular features of post-communist transitions to democracy that are relevant to my discussion: (a) the stateness problem, (b) the link between democratization and nation-building and (c) the chances for consolidation of democracy in multinational states.

First, there is the so-called ‘stateness problem’. It implies that we should not take for granted the existence of the state. This may have been viable in the contexts of Latin America and Southern Europe (although, for instance, the case of Spain was not unproblematic in this respect), but in many Central and Eastern European countries things were different (see Kuzio 2001). Linz and Stepan underline this aspect and explicitly include the problem of stateness in their analysis of transitions to democracy:

When thinking about transitions to democracy, many people tend to assume that what is challenged is the nondemocratic regime and that with democracy a new legitimate system is established. However, in many countries the crisis of the nondemocratic regime is also intermixed with profound differences about what should actually constitute the polity (or political community) and which demos or demoi (population or populations) should be members of that political community. When there are profound differences about the territorial boundaries of the political community’s state and profound differences as to who has the right of citizenship in that state, there is what we call a ‘stateness’ problem. (Linz and Stepan 1996, 16)

Second, there is the relationship between democratization and *nation-state building*. For Kuzio (2001, 169), the ‘national question’ – together with democratization, marketization and state-building – is the fourth important element that the literature on post-communist transition should take into account. Indeed, considering the specific problems related to nation-building in a number of post-communist countries,

he speaks of ‘quadruple’ transition. Linz and Stepan (1996, 25) also emphasize the fact that ‘in many countries that are not yet consolidated democracies, a nation-state policy often has a different logic than a democratic policy’. By nation-state policy, they mean the process in which ‘consciously or unconsciously, the leaders send messages that the state should be “of and for” the nation’.

Now states differ in the internal composition of their populations. Some countries are considered more homogeneous in terms of culture, religion or ethnicity. In such states, we may expect that the processes of transition to democracy will not encounter problems of nation-state building. Such was the case, for example, for Portugal, Greece, Poland, Chile, Uruguay and Argentina. On the other hand, the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia have dissolved into 23 states. Spain, Romania and Bulgaria also have substantial populations that are considered minorities. Hungary, on the other hand, is rather homogeneous although many Hungarians live outside its borders.

At this point one should ask, third, *what are the chances for consolidation of democracy in ‘multinational’ states?* Linz and Stepan’s hypothesis is as follows: ‘[I]n a multinational setting, the chances to consolidate democracy are increased by state policies that grant inclusive and equal citizenship and that give all citizens a common “roof” of state-mandated and enforce individual rights’ (1996, 33). The authors provide another interesting insight when they discuss the issue of political identities. They promptly exclude any ‘primordial’ characterization of political identities and underline that ‘if nationalist politicians, by the atmosphere they create (or social scientists and census-takers with crude dichotomous categories) do not force polarization, many people may prefer to self-identify themselves as having multiple and complementary identities’ (1996, 35).

In their final analysis, Linz and Stepan summarize their findings in a table with two variables (1996, 36). The first is called the ‘degree of presence of other “nations” besides titular nation in state territory’. It can range from ‘no other nation exists and there is little cultural and/or ethnic differentiation’ to ‘no group has sufficient cohesion and identity to be a nation builder’. The second variable is labelled ‘policies and actions of state-leaders of “titular nation”’. It ranges from ‘drives toward goal of nation-state’ to ‘no clear, or extremely weak state leaders’. The combination of the two variables produces different effects on democratic consolidation that range from ‘[a] democratic nation-state [that] can easily consolidate and be strong’ to ‘no state possible so democracy is impossible’.

In a more recent volume, Stepan, Linz, and Yadav (2011) further develop this argument. They maintain that if the political model and institutional structure of a state are purely ‘multinational’ and if there is a high intensity of political activation of multiple, territorially concentrated, sociocultural ‘national’ identities, then it is improbable that such a state can become democratic (see Figure 1).

The main problem with such arguments is that they look too deterministic. According to the first argument (Linz and Stepan 1996), BiH – where there was no ‘titular’ or majority ‘nation’ and no clear pan-state leader – should be immediately assigned to the extreme case of ‘no state possible so democracy is impossible’ (see also O’Leary 2001 on the importance of a *Staatsvolk* in multinational federations). According to the second argument (Stepan, Linz, and Yadav 2011), it is highly improbable that a country like BiH can become democratic, considering the fact that it is clearly multinational and there is a high intensity of political activation in its three ethno-national identities. Even though this *did* eventually happen, I will

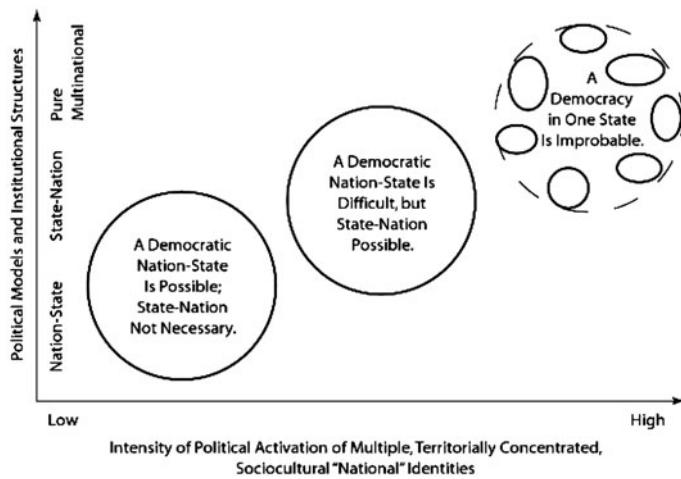


Figure 1. Democratically probable and improbable relationships between activated, territorially concentrated, sociocultural identities and political-institutional strategies.
Source: Stepan, Linz, and Yadav (2011, 10).

argue in the third and the fourth sections of this article that things could have developed differently.

A similar concern can be found in other state-oriented approaches. Laitin (1995), for example, discusses the issue of ‘territorial integrity’ and refers to various authors who had stressed the importance of national homogeneity as a pre-condition for well-functioning democratic institutions, such as John Stuart Mill and Robert Dahl. In the same vein, Rabushka and Shepsle underline the importance of elections in heterogeneous societies and claim that ‘the winner of an election in which each cultural group is promised political dominance is likely to so oppress the losers as to induce violence, civil war, and a breakdown of democracy’ (quoted in Przeworski 1995, 19).

The main problem with this kind of approach lies in the assumption that ethnic identity is the main constituent element of people’s identity. Of course, this so-called ‘ethnic identification assumption’ is quite problematic (Zuber 2013). It is much more appropriate to consider ethnic identity not as a given but rather as an outcome of the political process in which some human traits are sorted out while others – often no less relevant for one’s identity – are set aside (see e.g. Brubaker 2004; Mallon 2007). To be sure, this approach is dominant in today’s literature, so that Wimmer (2013, 2), for example, speaks of ‘the hegemony of constructivism’. While the constructivist approach should not be overstated, it appears clear, nevertheless, that we should better study the mechanisms that bring about the ethnicization of identity (see Chandra and Wilkinson 2008) in order to understand ‘how and why ethnicity matters in certain societies and context but not in others’ (Wimmer 2013, 2).

2.2. *The founding elections and the formation of political identities*

The formation of political identities, and not only the question of territorial integrity, is also very important in the debates on transitions to democracy in post-communist countries. Thus, let us have a look at the patterns of party formation in Central and

Eastern Europe and at the underlying cleavages. Both were quite different from the patterns of party formation in the countries of Southern Europe and Latin America during their transitions to democracy.

Elster, Offe, and Preuss (1998, 131) rightly point out that ‘[d]uring transitions from authoritarian rule, democracy begins with (more or less) competitive elections’. So, the *founding elections* are seen as a crucial factor in the process of transition (see also Fortin-Rittberger 2012). At the same time we should avoid the so-called electoral fallacy (Linz and Stepan 1996, 4), that is, the idea that free and competitive elections are a sufficient condition for democracy (see also Carothers 2002, 7–8; Mansfield and Snyder 2005).

In contrast to the countries of Southern Europe and Latin America, and also to some Western countries which returned to democracy after the Second World War (e.g. Austria, Germany, Italy), the countries of Central and Eastern Europe ‘had a *unique starting point*’ (Elster, Offe, and Preuss 1998, 131, emphasis added). They could not start off with pre-existing or re-democratized parties (except for the former communists). Thus, the overall context was a *tabula rasa*.

This point is essential for the analytical framework of the present article because it leads us to consider the *party system* that emerged in post-communist Europe and the *cleavage lines* along which the parties differentiated themselves in order to attract voters. Elster, Offe, and Preuss (1998, 147), for instance, point to three types of social conflicts that determine party creation: distributional, constitutional and categorical. *Distributional* conflicts relate to divisible goods: they are about ‘more or less’. *Constitutional* conflicts concern the basic norms and fundamental institutions of democracy and are mostly the domain of ideological struggle. *Categorical* conflicts are not about ‘more or less’ but about ‘either/or’. Ethnic and religious conflicts are well-known examples of categorical conflicts. But in what way do these conflicts influence a period of transition?

It is safe to assume that the prospects of political stability are most favorable where distribution conflicts predominate. The more marketization proceeds and social differentiation is fostered, and the more the countries are ethnically homogeneous, the more party competition will refer to conflicts about bargainable interests; hence it can be expected to be moderate. [...] Where ethnic divisions play a role and where the difficulties of political agency are still burdened with the additional problem of nation-state-building, then political polarization and uncivilized forms of political competition and struggle prevail. (1998, 148)

The authors suggest that Hungary and the Czech Republic belong to the first category and countries like Bulgaria and Slovakia fit into the second. As I will show later on, BiH also clearly falls into the second category.

2.3. Cleavage theory

It is taken for granted that in any political community the number of *potential* cleavages is fairly high. However, the vast majority of them are latent while only some become manifest. According to Bartolini and Mair (1990; see also Rokkan 1970), the presence of *three mutually enforcing elements* is necessary in order to have a *cleavage* in a given society.

First, there must be a *structural base* provided by factors such as religion, language, social class, ethnicity, age, gender, rural vs. urban setting and materialist

vs. non-materialist views on the world. Second, it is crucial that the members of the groups in question share a *conscience* of their collective identity and that they mutually recognize each other as well as the Others. Finally, such collective identity must find some expression at the *organizational level*. Political parties are the most common way to achieve this but it can also be a church, syndicate or any other organization that institutionalizes a given social difference. Thus, the structural base represents only a potential for the creation of a cleavage, but it remains latent if it is not expressed in the public space.

Bearing in mind this definition of cleavage we should observe that the arrival of democracy in a country in which there was a lack of political pluralism offers new potential political resources to social actors (e.g. the right to form political parties, free elections, freedom of speech and freedom of the media). Needless to say, such newly available resources may foster the organizational expression of a latent cleavage. Even though the utility of the social cleavage approach in post-communist countries has been contested in the literature (see e.g. Elster, Offe, and Preuss 1998; Lawson 1999), a consensus has emerged that it can be applied to analyse the party systems in Central and Eastern Europe (see e.g. Kitschelt 1995; Whitefield 2002; Raymond 2014).

But even if we follow the authors who are critical towards the utility of cleavage theory in post-communist societies, we come to the conclusion that the development of a party system based on identity conflicts is a major challenge to democratic consolidation. Elster, Offe, and Preuss (1998, 250), for example, stress the fact that socio-economic conflicts are easier to settle than conflicts between ideological proponents of different kinds of political regimes or, a fortiori, identity-based conflicts of an ethnic, linguistic or religious nature. They further stress that *identity-based conflicts are especially dangerous for the consolidation of democracy*. The parties involved in such clashes consider each other as mutually threatening, especially in cases where ‘such conflict is fueled not only by myths, memories, and anticipations representing the values of one’s own culture, but also by hostilities, threats, and humiliations that the culture has been exposed to in the past from other neighboring cultures’.

The accommodation of such conflicts is extremely difficult. Paradoxically enough, mobilization opportunities provided by democratization do not facilitate accommodation. Quite the contrary, they foster political articulation and public expression of categorical conflicts by providing the third necessary element for the formation of a cleavage. Moreover, political mobilization along ethnic, religious or linguistic lines – through the concomitant spread of fear, distrust, exclusion and repression – is in turn a powerful menace to the maintenance of a liberal democracy and to democratic consolidation in general. ‘In short: Democracy is good for ethnic mobilization, but not so *vice versa*’ (1998, 254).

Virtually all of these remarks apply to the case of BiH with the nuance that the ‘ethnic’ conflict was a result of, rather than a cause of, the creation of political parties on ethno-national grounds (see e.g. Burg 1997; Andjelic 2003).

3. Bosnia and Herzegovina’s first elections: November/December 1990

The first elections in BiH after the Second World War were held on 18 November 1990 and 2 December 1990. They followed the elections in Slovenia (April 1990), Croatia (April/May 1990) and Macedonia (11 November 1990), and preceded the elections in Montenegro and Serbia (December 1990). No elections, however, took

place at the level of the Yugoslav federation. Indeed, the very fact that the founding elections were held only at the level of the federal units probably had a significant impact on the eventual disintegration of the country. For example, Linz and Stepan (1992, 126) argue that ‘if a country has a stateness problem, it makes a critical difference whether the first elections are unionwide or regional. In Spain the first [1978] elections were unionwide. We believe that they helped transcend Spain’s stateness problem’. The electoral policies followed in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, on the other hand, ‘were virtually the *optimal* sequence to be followed if one wanted to disintegrate state and heighten ethnic conflict’ (1992, 131; emphases in original).

As for the elections in BiH, the first important aspect that we should underline is that there were no legal barriers to party formation. And yet in February 1990 the Parliament of BiH, at that time dominated by the Communist party, passed a law (*Zakon o udruživanju građana*) banning the formation of parties grounded on ‘nationality’, that is, on ethnicity (Bougarel 1994, 20; Andjelic 2003, 149–51). According to the law (art. 4, par. 2): ‘Associations based on national [i.e. ethnic] and religious belonging are forbidden, with the exception of legal provisions concerning the status of religious communities’⁵ (my translation).

Interestingly, on 29 March 1990, the Constitutional Court of BiH decided, on its own initiative, to review the constitutionality of the ethnic party ban. The legislative committee of the Parliament of BiH, in its opinion sent to the Constitutional Court, stated that allowing the principle of party formation on ethno-national grounds would create a legal basis ‘in a way that would be nationalistic in principle and would lead towards a destabilization of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the multi-ethnic relations in the country’ (2003, 123; my translation). On 5 June 1990, the Parliament confirmed the opinion of its legislative committee, but on 12 June the Court finally decided that the ethnic party ban was unconstitutional (see also Cohen 1995, 143; Andjelic 2003, 208; Bieber 2010, 312). The main reasons for invalidating the ban were (a) that the Constitution of BiH defined this Yugoslav republic as a country of three constitutional peoples, Serbs, Croats and Muslims and (b) that in other republics, especially in Croatia, the ethnic parties of Croats and Serbs had already been formed.

As a result, the three main ethno-nationalist⁶ parties were created (Burg 1997, 127–9): the Party for Democratic Action (*Stranka demokratske akcije*, SDA; in May 1990⁷), the Serbian Democratic Party (*Srpska demokratska stranka*, SDS; in July 1990) and the Croatian Democratic Community (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*, HDZ; in August 1990). They claimed to represent the interests of Muslims, Serbs and Croats, respectively. Together, these three communities had a population share of over 92% (see Kapidžić in this Special Section, Table 1). All three parties were clearly ethno-nationalist and ethno-religious in their objectives (Andjelic 2003, ch. 6), as they ‘mobilized and further politicized ethnic identities’ (Burg 1997, 129).

On the other hand, there were two major multi-ethnic and/or non-ethnic⁸ parties: The League of Communists–Socialist Democratic Party (*Savez komunista–Socijalistička demokratska partija*, SK–SDP) and the Alliance of Reformist Forces of Yugoslavia in BiH (*Savez reformskih snaga Jugoslavije BiH*, SRSJ–BiH). The former was the direct successor of the Communist party and the latter was created in August 1990 at a pan-Yugoslav level by the then federal reformist-liberal Prime Minister Ante Marković (and, thus, did not run in the elections held in April/May 1990 in Slovenia and Croatia). Two additional multi-ethnic/non-ethnic parties

Table 1. Electoral results, 18 November 1990 (Chamber of citizens^a).

Party	Votes (n)	%
SDA	700,729	31.3
SDS	585,784	26.1
HDZ	360,517	16.1
MBO	25,910	1.2
<i>Sub-total ethnic parties</i>	<i>1,672,940</i>	<i>74.7</i>
SKBiH–SDP	277,661	12.4
SRSJ–BiH	200,951	9.0
SSO–DS and EKO	40,112	1.8
DSS*	31,526	1.4
Other parties**	17,493	0.8
<i>Sub-total non-ethnic parties</i>	<i>567,643</i>	<i>25.3</i>
Total valid votes	2,240,583	100.0
Invalid votes	77,524	

Source: ZIPO, 27 November 1992; our calculation.

^aAs the proportional electoral system was used for the Chamber of Citizens, I propose to rely on the votes cast for this chamber of Parliament in order to measure the popular support for various parties. The second chamber – the Chamber of Municipalities (or Districts) – was elected according to majoritarian rules in two runs. In addition, note that numbers displayed in Table 1 diverge from those that can be found in other sources – e.g. Arnautović (1996), Burg (1997, 131), Tomic and Herceg (1999, ch. 6), Andjelic (2003, 189), Pejanović (2006, 53), Bieber (2008, 31). These authors draw percentages partly on the basis of the number of seats gained in the first chamber. I consider the present calculation – based on the original and unpublished database elaborated by ZIPO, an agency based in Sarajevo that was officially entrusted with the processing of the electoral results in 1990 (see www.erczipo.ba) – the most accurate and up to date.

*The DSS ran separately in all electoral districts except in the Tuzla district, where they ran with the SKBiH–SDP. I attributed these votes to the SKBiH–SDP. I also assigned to the SRSJ–BiH the votes received in the Zenica electoral district in which this party presented a list together with the Democratic party Mostar.

**The other parties, none of which had run in all electoral districts, were: *Stranka privatne inicijative* (Party of private initiative) in the Doboj electoral district; *Demokratska partija Mostar* (Democratic party Mostar) in the Mostar and, together with the SRSJ–BiH, in the Zenica electoral district; *Stranka Jugoslovena za BiH* (Party of Yugoslavs for BiH) in the Sarajevo electoral district; *Radnička demokratska stranka–Stranka federalista* (Labour democratic party–Party of federalists) in the Sarajevo electoral district, and *Demokratska stranka Tuzla* (Democratic party Tuzla) in the Tuzla electoral district. I consider all these parties as non-ethnic.

stemming from the existing (i.e. communist) political organizations (Pejanović 2006, 48) were the Socialist Democratic Alliance (*Socijalistički demokratski savez*, DSS) and the Alliance of Socialist Youth–Democratic Alliance (*Savez socijalističke omladine–Demokratski savez*, SSO–DS, which eventually presented a joint list with the ecological party, EKO). They were referred to as ‘civic parties’ (*građanske stranke*) in order to be distinguished from the three ethno-nationalist parties (called *nacionalne stranke*, the ‘national [i.e. ethnic] parties’).

It is debatable whether, within the camp of ‘civic’ political forces, the SRSJ–BiH could be considered as an *anti-communist* party, because most of its leaders had been active communists. This implies that we should not underestimate the role of ideology (and not only ethnicity) in the Bosnian 1990 elections: citizens who, for ideological reasons, disliked the communists did not really have the option of voting for a civic *and* anti-communist party. (Contrary to Croatia, e.g. where such parties had run in the April/May 1990 elections.) The ethnic parties were the only anti-communist option available (see also Bougarel 1992, 132, 137).

In the end, the ethno-nationalist parties won as much as 74.7% of the vote (see Table 1); the turnout was of approximately 75% (Pejanović 2006, 53). *In no other*

post-communist country, including the other Yugoslav republics, did the political parties that explicitly relied on ethnic differences obtain such a large popular consensus.⁹ In the April/May 1990 elections in Croatia, for instance, the HDZ and the SDS ethno-nationalist parties won, respectively, 41.8 and 1.8% of the vote (Cohen 1995, 100).¹⁰ It is true that the HDZ ended up gaining two-thirds of parliamentary seats (Sambanis and Shayo 2013, 316). But this was due to a majoritarian electoral system and conceals the fact that only a relative majority of Croatian citizens voted for this ethnic party, whereas only a small minority of Serbs – 13.5% according to Caspersen (2010, 59) – voted for the SDS. Therefore, Mann's (2005, 367) remark according to which the 1990 elections in the Yugoslav republics 'proved an ethnic census' applies certainly to BiH, but much less so to other republics.

While some have questioned the veracity of the very outcome of the vote, considering the fact that electoral fraud and pressure on citizens (especially in rural areas) by officials of ethnic parties probably did take place, this can hardly explain such a landslide defeat of the civic parties.¹¹ Therefore, we should ask why did nationalist parties obtain such a landslide victory in BiH? What were the consequences of that vote?

4. Explaining the outcome: the prisoner's dilemma game

The results of the 1990 founding elections in BiH could indicate a high degree of nationalist sentiment within the population of that country. This would match quite well the 'ancient hatreds' thesis often evoked as a straightforward explanation of the electoral outcome (e.g. Stojanović 1997) and, indeed, of the very brutality of the conflict that eventually broke out (e.g. Kaplan 1993). According to this thesis, the very existence of four religious groups (Muslim, Orthodox, Catholic and Jewish), that inhabited BiH at least since the sixteenth century, constituted a solid basis for distinct collective memories in which the misdeeds of the 'Others' were still present. For instance, it has been shown that in the former Yugoslavia, and especially in BiH, the Second World War was not simply a conflict against foreign occupation but also a ferocious civil war in which extremists of different ethno-religious groups engaged in massacres of the civilian populations belonging to other groups (see e.g. Bergholz 2010).

There are at least three reasons, however, to question the ancient hatreds thesis. First, pre-election polls suggested the opposite result, namely the victory of the civic parties or, at a minimum, a significant hostility of a majority of the population towards ethnic parties (Bougarel 1992, 133; Arnautović 1996, 47–86; Burg 1997, 130; Bieber 2008, 31; Caspersen 2010, 86). While care should be taken with regard to the reliability of such polls (see Bougarel 1992, 84), it is nevertheless striking that *none* of the five pre-election surveys published between 22 June and 4 November 1990 pointed to such an overwhelming victory of the ethnic parties (for an overview of all polls see Andjelic 2003, 182, based on Arnautović 1996, 57–8).¹² The support for the ethnic parties (SDA, SDS, HDZ) oscillated between 21.0% on 31 August and 29.6% on 4 November.¹³ In a previous poll from April/May 1990 – which was, however, limited to urban areas (Banja Luka, Mostar, Sarajevo) – approximately three out of four respondents supported a ban on ethnic parties (Andjelic 2003, 174). In another survey, conducted less than a year before the elections, 46% of respondents declared that they would vote for a socialist or social-democratic party, 20% opted for the Communist party, whereas 5% were in favour of a liberal party

(Bougarel 1992, 133). Only 21% announced a vote either for an ethnic party (17%) or for a religious party (4%). So around 70% of the respondents clearly expressed their preference for a *non-ethnic* party.

Second, as the articles by Kapidžić and Mraović (this Special Section) show, support for ethnic parties was much higher in municipalities with polarized or homogeneous ethnic structure, whereas cross-ethnic voting and support for non-ethnic parties was more present in heterogeneous places with a high ethnic fractionalization (see also Bougarel 1992, 125–35). The least we can say, thus, is that ethnic intermingling did not have a negative effect on the civic vote.¹⁴

Third, many studies show that the relations between ethnic groups in BiH had been traditionally harmonious and far less conflicting than usually assumed (see Donia and Fine 1994; Bringa 1995; Hardin 1995, 148). Even during the Second World War, a sense of ‘civic culture’ could persevere in BiH, especially in urban areas, so that ‘[a]t a time when other multicultural towns imploded under the pressures of war and nationalism, Sarajevo [...] retained a multicultural fabric’ (Greble 2011, 256).

In the following paragraphs, I propose a different explanation of the electoral results. The thesis is that a decisive portion of BiH’s voters was driven to vote for the ethnic parties neither out of excessive nationalism nor out of ancient hatreds, but rather because they ended up in a rational-cognitive trap which resembles the *prisoner’s dilemma game*. If we take the perspective of Voter A, his or her reasoning can be assumed as follows (Figure 2):

As a member of the ethnic group A, I have basically two options. I can vote either for one of the non-ethnic and/or multi-ethnic civic parties that aim at representing all citizens of this country, or I can vote for the ethnic party pA that aims at representing the specific interests of the ethnic group A. I am not an ethno-nationalist and I despise the populist rhetoric of ethnic parties. I am also afraid that the ethnic parties, if they win the elections, will turn this country in a bad and perhaps even dangerous place. Therefore, I have a clear preference for the non-ethnic and/or multi-ethnic civic parties. But I must take into account the predictable voting behaviour of the members of ethnic group B. Those that I am acquainted with are very good persons and will probably vote for civic parties. But what will other Bs do? I cannot be sure that they, too, will vote for civic parties. Now if it comes about that I and most other As vote for civic parties, while most Bs vote for their ethnic party pB, group A will be at a disadvantage. And if it is the other way around – that is, if most Bs vote for the civic parties and most As vote for the ethnic party pA – I would regret it, but at least I won’t be on the losing side. Therefore, the most rational thing to do is to vote for my ethnic party pA.

By analysing the choices that Voter A faces, we come up with a hierarchy of possible options: I > II and III > IV. It follows that the only rational individual choice

		Voter A	
		Ethnic vote	Civic vote
Voter B	Ethnic vote	I. Inter-ethnic tensions, perhaps war	II. pB wins. The B’s dominate the A’s
	Civic vote	III. pA wins. The A’s dominate the B’s	IV. Inter-ethnic harmony, peace

Figure 2. The 1990 elections in BiH as a 2×2 matrix.

lies in the vote for the ethnic party. This is a typical prisoner's dilemma game. Although the Pareto-optimal solution (the outcome that benefits all) lies in Solution IV, the Nash-equilibrium lies in Solution I. So, the analysis that I apply to the founding elections in BiH reveals 'what rational choice does best', namely it 'reveal[s] how intentional and rational actions generate collective outcomes and aggregate behavior; [a]lthough the choice of each actor may be intentional and individually rational, the results to all may be unintentional and socially irrational' (Levi 1997, 20). Furthermore, there are at least three additional elements that are specific to the case under examination and that increase even further the zero-sum game in the 1990 Bosnian context.

First, *no ethnic group was a statistical majority in BiH*. Thus, if the members of one group fully supported their ethnic party and the members of another group provided no or a very mild support for their own ethnic party, then the latter group would clearly be worse off.

Second, the political conflicts upon which the electoral campaign in BiH focused were 'categorical' rather than 'distributional' (Bougarel 1994, 25; Andjelic 2003, 171–87; see Elster, Offe, and Preuss 1998, 147). In other words, *the political conflict was about 'either/or'* whereas issues related to the socio-economic situation of the country were of lesser importance. Indeed, as an attentive observer of the electoral campaign has noted, 'less than two months before the elections, the rhetoric of blood and soil, of bright past and the spirit of ancestors prevailed' (Haverić 2009, 141; my translation). Another observer describes the electoral campaign as 'a state of general insecurity and citizens' fear with regard to the outcome of the then crisis of BiH society' (Pejanović 2006, 49; my translation).¹⁵ Other authors from BiH also claim that the ethnic parties created a sense of 'collective xenophobic fear' (Zgodić 2006, 241; my translation) and of 'general anxiety' (Marković 2012, 28; my translation).

Third, *the game was played for the first time in BiH*.¹⁶ The various actors could hardly rely on any cognitive indication in what way the other actors would behave. In such situations, as experiments with the prisoner's dilemma show, the results are more negative at the aggregate level. Indeed, one of the solutions to the prisoner's dilemma is to play the game multiple times (see e.g. Axelrod 2006). In the long run, the 'tit-for-tat' strategy may considerably improve collective outcomes.

Fourth, while the game in BiH was played for the first time, we could nevertheless postulate that the electoral outcome in neighbouring Croatia, won by the ethno-nationalist HDZ, might have had an impact in BiH that further reinforced the logic of prisoner's dilemma. This thesis might hold especially for a number of Serbs in BiH, as Croatian Serbs voted overwhelmingly for the reformed communists. In fact, as I already noted in Section 3, the Croatian SDS won only 1.8% of all votes, which, according to Caspersen (2010, 59), translates into around 13.5% of the Serb vote in Croatia. The victory of the HDZ 'was a shock to most [Croatian] Serbs and resulted in increased support for the SDS' (2010, 64), so that only *after* the election were the moderate Serbs in Croatia marginalized by the radical and ethno-nationalist SDS.

5. Discussion and conclusion

I shall now return to some of the analyses on transitions to democracy that I discussed earlier and try to see to what extent they can illuminate the case under

examination. Linz and Stepan's (1996, 36) hypothesis maintains that in the countries where there is no 'titular nation' which can provide for the nation-state-building process 'there is no state possible so democracy is impossible' (see also O'Leary 2001). This is, I believe, what eventually happened in BiH.

As a matter of fact, the 'stateness' problem proved to be more acute in BiH than in any other post-communist country. We should also note that it was the *only* country in Central and Eastern Europe where no ethnic group was in the majority and so there was no 'titular nation'. A comparison among 27 post-communist states clearly confirms this (Beyme 1996, 56–7).¹⁷ Only Latvia and Kyrgyzstan come close insofar as each of their majority ethnic groups made up 52% of the population.¹⁸ But, this is still some eight percentage points above the most numerous ethnic group in BiH (i.e. the Muslims/Bosniaks, according to the 1991 census). Thus, it is misleading to state that the fact that 'none of the three peoples of BiH had an absolute majority' is something that makes this country 'a typical model of a multi-ethnic, multicultural and multi-religious society' (Pejanović 2006, 45; my translation). Far from making it typical, this is precisely what makes BiH *atypical* and dramatically special in comparative perspective.

However, it would be a mistake to argue that civil war in BiH and, generally speaking, the break-up of Yugoslavia were pre-determined by its ethnic composition – that is, that they were 'caused by *underlying ethnic cleavages*, and [...] have little to do with political mobilization caused by economic liberalization' (Lijphart and Waismann, 1996, 236; emphases added). The ethnic cleavage was certainly an important factor that ought to be taken into consideration, but we should avoid overplaying its strength. Really, we cannot fully grasp the salience of the ethnic cleavage in BiH if we do not pay attention to the process of politicization of identities. Generally speaking, we should recall that institutional choices are often central in this respect as they may provide incentives for ethnocentric and centrifugal forces instead of promoting pro-democratic, centripetal and multi-ethnic patterns of political behaviour (Horowitz 1985). In BiH, the way in which the process of democratization culminating in free elections in November/December 1990 had been shaped provided the ethno-nationalist leaders with the necessary resources to rely on the latent ethnic differences in order to gain power. Thus, following Bartolini and Mair's (1990) cleavage theory, the third necessary element for the creation of a cleavage became available: the possibility to form political parties along ethnic lines.

Moreover, I argue that prior to the 1990 elections we should not take for granted the second condition for cleavage formation, namely that most citizens of BiH had a clear-cut sense of belonging to different ethnic communities. A significant number of them, especially those belonging to younger generations and living in urban settings, were hardly conscious and/or did not care about ethnic differences. For example, Bougarel (1992, 122) refers to a 1990 scientific study on 'citizens' opinion on interethnic relations in BiH' according to which as much as 65% of respondents from urban areas and 74% of those under the age of 27 (but only 42% of respondents above the age of 55) were in favour of the suppression of ethnic quotas that were used to regulate the distribution of positions and resources in various spheres of public life. The fact that ethno-nationalist parties *were* created and that they received sufficient advertisement and public presence during the electoral campaign (through electoral meetings, street advertisements, television debates, etc.) contributed, thus, to a 're-appropriation of consciousness' (Przeworski 1995, 20).

Finally, let me stress another important negative consequence of the cleavage formation in BiH. As the electoral results were made public, it is reasonable to expect that the *feeling of mutual solidarity and trust* – often seen as an important condition for a viable democracy (Putnam 1993) – among the citizens of BiH decreased significantly. Those who had voted out of fear – and not out of hatred – for their ethnic party became even more convinced that their choice had been the right one.¹⁹ Moreover, it was a further confirmation that they could not trust the other ethnic groups. On the other hand, citizens who had voted for civic parties felt disappointed, betrayed and insecure. Finally, those who had voted for ethnic parties out of conviction and/or had been actively engaged in the formation of ethnic parties gained political power at different levels of government and had more opportunities to promote their nationalist discourse in the public sphere.

The three ethno-nationalist parties were de facto obliged to form a coalition in order to govern, as none of them had an absolute majority in Parliament. But during the following 16 months, until the breakout of the war, they were unable and unwilling to seek consensus and compromise, apart from the agreement to distribute political power, jobs and state resources along ethnic lines in an effort that Bougarel (1994, 24–31) has described as ‘the communitarian dismantling of the state’.²⁰ Thus, only *after* the elections can we apply Linz and Stepan’s (1996, 36) hypothesis: there was no ‘titular nation’, therefore ‘[n]o state [was] possible, so democracy was impossible’. Indeed, every ethno-nationalist party aimed at becoming a titular nation on the portion of territory it claimed to control. This becomes evident if we consider the eventual creation of territorial entities such as the ‘Serb Autonomous Regions [*oblasti*]’ (in 1991, later united within the Serb Republic of BiH), the ‘Croatian Community of Herzeg-Bosnia’ (1991–1994) or the ‘[Bosniak dominated] Autonomous Province of Western Bosnia’ (1993–1995).

Throughout this paper, I have tried to examine and illuminate one specific event that belongs to a wider historical moment of transition to democracy: the 1990 founding elections in BiH. In the vast body of literature on Yugoslav disintegration, this event has been often neglected. Most authors have privileged long-term historical processes or emphasized the responsibilities of individual political leaders and advanced the thesis of elite manipulation (see e.g. De Figueiredo and Weingast 1999).

While I do not downplay the relevance of such approaches, I think that the 1990 elections were a *turning point* in the recent history of BiH. I further stress the rational-choice behaviour of individual actors (i.e. voters) who actually voted for the ethno-nationalist parties and their leaders: this cannot be explained by using the elite manipulation argument.

Rather, I explain their motivations not through the ‘ancient hatreds’ thesis or nationalism *tout court*, but through a game-theoretical approach, namely the prisoner’s dilemma. Historical and structural factors could have played an important role in fuelling the feeling of fear and uncertainty during the electoral campaign. But it does not make much sense, I think to explain today’s voting behaviour by referring to the battles that took place 50, 100 or 600 years ago. Indeed, the case of BiH brings to our attention the fact that democratization, and especially the shift from one party to democratic multiparty regimes, may provide incentives for politicians to play the ethnic card and to emphasize various levels of ethnic differentiation (Wimmer 2013, 92–3).

Finally, let me make explicit a question that has been implicit throughout this article: Wouldn't it have been wiser to ban the creation of ethnic parties in BiH rather than to allow full political pluralism? As we have seen, the Communist party did try to ban the formation of ethnic parties – by invoking even the very prospect of conflict – but the Constitutional Court of BiH declared such a decision anti-constitutional.

This said, the ban of ethno-nationalist parties need not have been imposed from above. A pre-electoral referendum with the question ‘Do you agree to ban the creation of political parties along ethnic lines?’ could have been a very elegant and democratic way to prevent Hobbesian dilemmas. In that case, voters need not have been trapped in the prisoner’s dilemma and their rational individual choice could have led to a rational collective outcome.²¹ As a matter of fact, in June 1990 such a proposal was on the agenda of the Communist party. As Neven Andželić, a very popular radio journalist in Sarajevo in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, recalls:

The Presidency’s proposal²² for a referendum to let the people decide whether to allow ethnic parties was the last step in defending the ban and a flirtation with a democracy. The Constitutional Court worked for several days before reaching its decision on 12 June 1990 that the ban was not legal and, therefore, should be lifted. The next step was supposed to be made by Parliament but it still hesitated and even tried to opt for a referendum, despite the Constitutional Court’s decision. The delegates, however, did not turn out for the session on 23 June and the decision was postponed. (Andjelic 2003, 151)

Of course, in retrospect, it is hard to imagine alternatives to the conflict that eventually broke out in BiH. In any case, if the right solution for the Bosnian mosaic remains unclear, there is no doubt that allowing the formation of ethnic parties was not that solution.

Notes

1. According to the Failed States Index (<http://library.fundforpeace.org/fsi>), in 2013 BiH had the highest negative score among the former Yugoslav republics and one of the highest in Europe, preceded only by Moldavia, Belarus and Russia.
2. For an excellent discussion on the concept of constituent peoples in BiH see Marković (2012, 330–60). See also Marko (2005), Hodžić and Stojanović (2011, ch. 6), and Woelk (2008, 98–9), as well as the landmark decision on constituent peoples of the Constitutional Court of BiH (case no. U-5/98-III, 1 July 2000, at <http://www.ccbh.ba>).
3. See e.g. the GESIS data base (Election Studies from Eastern Europe) at <https://dbk.gesis.org/dbksearch/GDESC2.asp?no=0088&DB=D>.
4. Bougarel (1994, 26), Mujkić (2008), Bieber (2010, 312), and Mujkić and Hulsey (2010) also suggest, without developing the argument much further, that the 1990 elections in BiH might have followed the prisoner’s dilemma scheme.
5. ‘Zabranjeno je udruživanje na osnovu nacionalne i vjerske pripadnosti, osim u skladu sa zakonom kojim se utvrđuje pravni položaj vjerskih zajednica’ (cited in *Službeni list SR BiH* [Official Bulletin of the Socialist Republic of BiH], 20 June 1990, pp. 479–80).
6. In this article, I use the terms ‘ethno-nationalist parties’ and ‘ethnic parties’ interchangeably.
7. It seems that the name of this Muslim/Bosniak party, which does not have any ethnic connotation per se, had been chosen precisely in order to avoid a possible ethnic party ban (see *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 12 October 1990).
8. Most authors speak of *multi-ethnic* parties in Bosnia (e.g. Andjelic 2003; Bieber 2010). Chandra (2004, 3), however, makes a clear distinction between multi-ethnic and non-ethnic parties, the former being ‘a party that also makes an appeal related to ethnicity central to its mobilizing strategy but that assumes a position of neutrality or equidistance

- toward all relevant categories on the salient dimension(s) of ethnicity', whereas the latter is 'a party that does not include or exclude categories mainly on the basis of ethnic identity, or that addresses ethnic demands but does not make such demands central to its political platform'. If we stick to this definition I think that the above-mentioned parties should be described as non-ethnic rather than as multi-ethnic.
9. For Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, see Elster, Offe, and Preuss (1998, 148–56). For Romania, Poland and Albania, see Banac (1992, 8–10). For other Yugoslav republics see Cohen (1995, 88–102, 139–62).
 10. The elections in Croatia were held in two rounds. The percentages show the average.
 11. According to Zgodić (2006, 242; my translation), the former communists were already in a growing state of decay so that the counting of the votes and the announcement of the final results was left to representatives of the ethnic parties 'who obviously fully profited from this opportunity to falsify the electoral ballots'.
 12. See also *The Economist*, 30 June 1990, and the report in *Le Monde*, 16 November 1990. According to the AP, '[n]o single party 1990 appeared likely to win a clear majority in Bosnia's 240-seat bicameral parliament. But opinion polls indicated the Communists, the Alliance and the Moslems were running ahead' (*The Associated Press*, 17 November 1990).
 13. In the poll of 22 June 1990, the SDA and the HDZ had, respectively, a support of 1.5 and 2.8% of respondents (Andjelic 2003, 182). The SDS was not included in that survey, probably because its Bosnian branch was officially constituted only in July 1990.
 14. A similar result was presented in Burg and Berbaum (1989) who found out that one of the variables positively correlated with the declaration of the supra-ethnic 'Yugoslav' national identity during the population censuses had been enhanced by interethnic contact and *not* by the lack thereof.
 15. Tarik Haverić and Mirko Pejanović, both social scientists, participated in the elections on behalf of two minor civic parties (the SSO–DS and the DSS, respectively).
 16. The last pre-1990 multiparty elections in BiH, for the parliament of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, were held on 11 December 1938. It should also be noted that from the 1960s citizens could express preferences for candidates – all belonging to the Communist party – in municipal and legislative elections. According to Bougarel (1994, 23) in the first years of this pseudo-democratic exercise candidates from different ethnic groups would compete for the same seats. The result thereof was a high degree of ethnic voting, so that the Communist party decided to allow electoral competition only between candidates belonging to the same ethnic group.
 17. O'Leary's (2001, 290) overview of 25 federations worldwide also confirms this claim. In only five federal countries – Ethiopia, India, Micronesia, Nigeria and Pakistan – the titular nation (also called the *Staatsvolk*) has a population share of less than 50%.
 18. The figures for Latvia and Kyrgyzstan, cited by Beyme (1996), stem from the 1989 Soviet census. About a decade later, the titular ethnic groups in both countries became more numerous. In 2000, the Latvian census shows an increase of ethnic Latvians (57.7%) and a decline of Russians (29.6%). Similarly, in Kyrgyzstan, according to the 1999 census, there were 64.9% ethnic Kyrgyz and 12.5% Russians. Calculations are based on official data from the Latvian Statistical Office (http://data.csb.gov.lv/pxweb/en/tautassk_tautassk_tsk2000/tsk_02.px/table/tableViewLayout1?rxid=75312b8d-bb43-4942-87cc-28cf5c6e12e5; accessed 11 August 2014) and the Kyrgyz Statistical Office (<http://www.stat.kg/stat.files/din.files/census/5010003.pdf>; accessed 11 August 2014).
 19. In a 1990 survey 34.8% of Serb respondents, 32.5% of Croats and 25.2% of Muslims (Bosniaks) declared that they feel more in security in an area in which their ethnic groups is in a position of statistical majority (Bougarel 1992, 141).
 20. A possible coalition had been evoked shortly before the elections, though. As a communist spokesperson told the journalist of *The Guardian*: "First they fought each other, and now they are kissing in public," one communist spokesman said, "because they know they are losing support. It is a great big con trick on the voters by so-called nationalists" (J. Fish, 'Nationalists complain of communist ballot-rigging', *The Guardian*, 19 November 1990).
 21. I am aware that ethnic party bans can be circumvented. In Bulgaria, for example, a Turkish party could emerge in spite of the ethnic party ban. This said, ethnic party

- bans can be institutionalised in ways that limit such practices, for example, by obliging the parties to open branch offices in various regions of the country or by imposing a multi-ethnic composition of their leadership. See Bogaards, Basedau, and Hartmann (2010) for experiences with ethnic party bans in Africa.
22. It is not clear what Presidency – of the Socialist Republic of BiH, of the Parliament of BiH, or of the Communist party of BiH – the author refers to in this passage.

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