

Bosnia-Herzegovina 20 years on:

Constructing National Identity

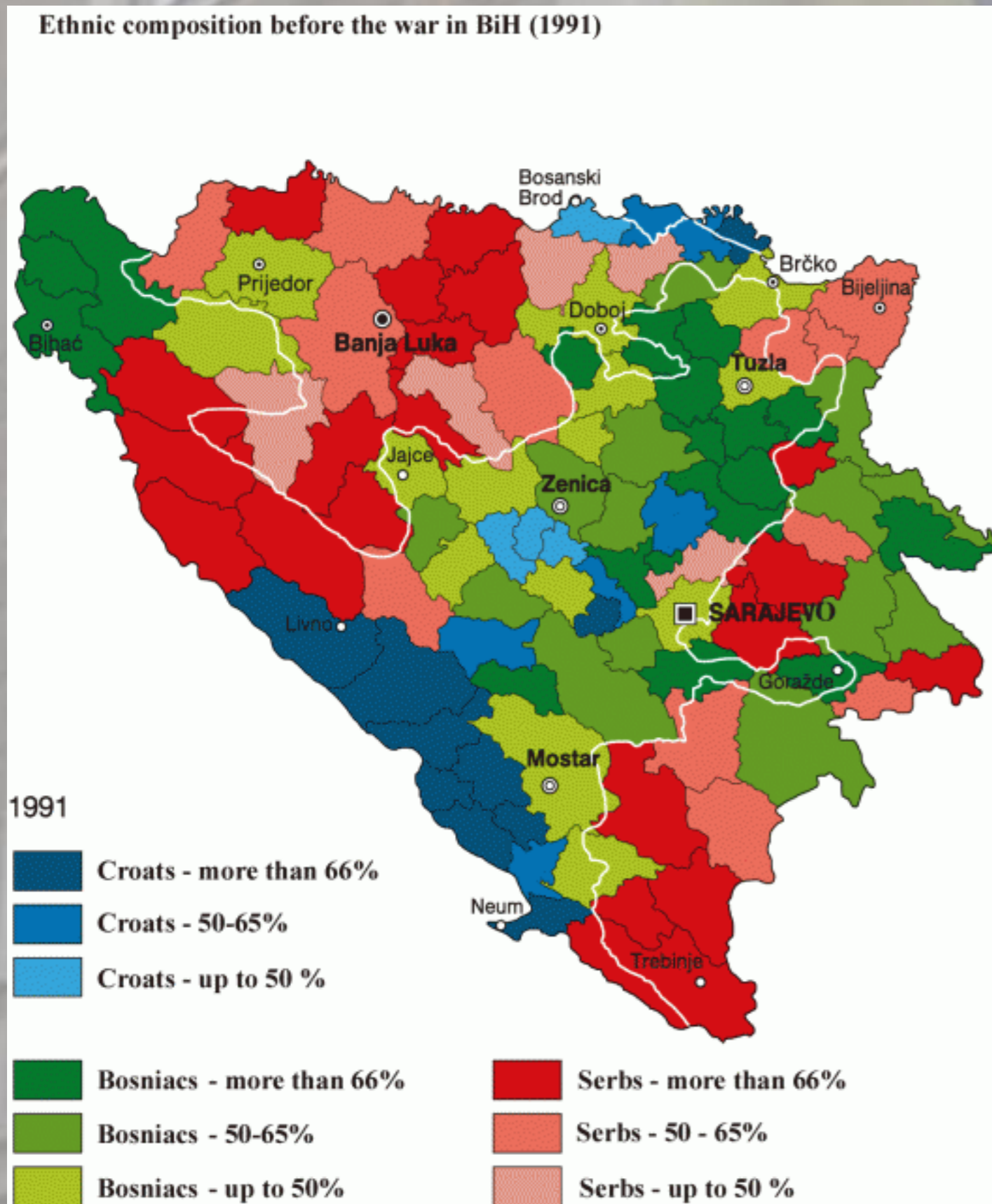
Oliver Kemp, 3rd Year Geography, Expedition 2012

Introduction and Context

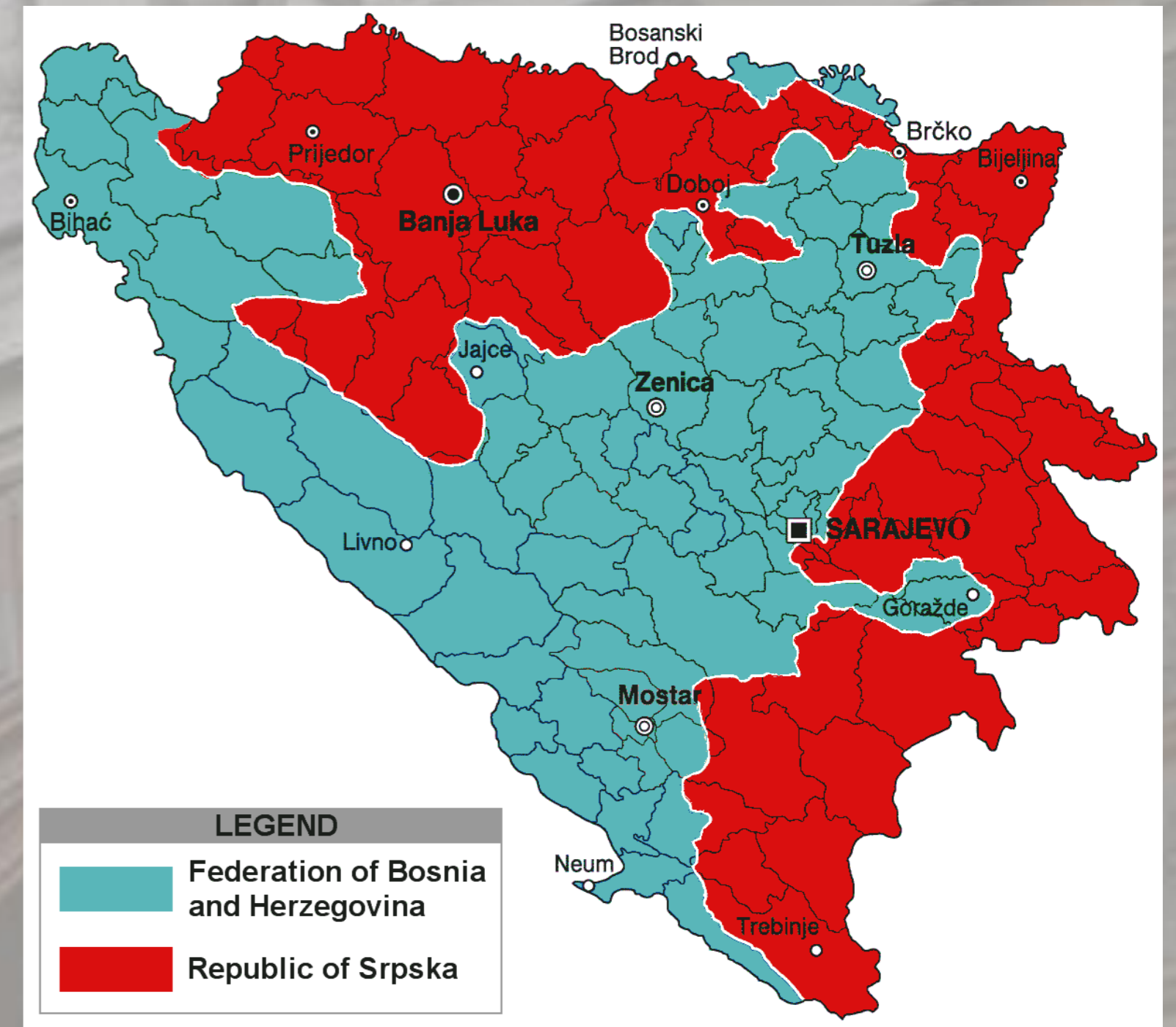
Formerly part of Yugoslavia, the state of Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) came into being in 1992. It was subsequently divided by the 1995 Dayton Accord into 2 autonomous entities (see map below) ending a bloody and bitter conflict. 20 years on, the country's society and politics still struggle to heal. This study aimed to explore the extent to which a new Bosnian identity has been and is being constructed in what is still a fledgling state, as opposed to multiple identities along ethnic lines; Bosnian-Serb, Bosnian-Croat and Bosnian-Muslim (Bosniak) - again, see below map.

Research Objectives - What did I aim to find out?

- What is the role of international and domestic politics in the ideas Bosnian people have about their country, and their relationship with it?
- How is the nation of Bosnia-Herzegovina presented in everyday spaces (or 'lived experience'), and to what effect?
- What are the attitudes of political actors in Bosnia-Herzegovina to unity? What are the implications of this for future development?
- How does the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina compare to that suggested by western press?



The maps the the right and left are an excellent visual representation of the issues facing BiH. The left shows an estimation of the distribution of ethnic groups at the last Yugoslav census (1991), while the right shows the administrative division imposed by the Dayton Accord of 1995. Observe both the highly complex nature of the situation and the seeming miss-match between the maps - how effective do you think this system can be, in the long term?



Research Techniques

My research combined two techniques:

1. Loosely structured interviews - appropriate in a wide variety of situations, these interviews allow a huge amount of information while also allowing discussion to flow toward areas most important to the subject.
2. Ethnography - A technique which some consider underused in geography, it uses various methods to acquire data from observation - this could be anything from visual imagery to anecdotal evidence and informal conversation. A powerful tool if used correctly, and especially relevant to my 'lived experience' research objective.

Above, 'Republic of Srpska' refers to the area of BiH now administered by the Bosnian-Serbs, while the 'Federation' area is under the joint control of the Bosnian-Croats and Bosnian-Muslims (Bosniaks).

Initial Findings of the Study

Perhaps inevitably the reality of the present in BiH is dictated in no small part by it's past. More intriguingly, the aspects of said past that are prominent are not perhaps what you would expect, and new issues are starting to surface which may affect the future.

While the war of 1992-95 is still very current, the Bosnian people almost without exception seek to emphasize more positive aspects of their country's past, most notably the 1984 winter Olympics - a great source of pride for Sarajevans, the majority of whom considered Tito's Yugoslavia a 'golden age of peace' - certainly not implying a predisposition to ethnic violence as suggested by western rhetoric on BiH. It is to these things that national pride is attached - seemingly not those which are a result of government efforts. In fact, among locals and political actors alike, there seems to be a considerable sense of frustration with politics; that it's workings (or lack of) within the separate entities are the main obstacle to unity.



Left: One of many examples of Sarajevo's scars
Above: The Bobsleigh track from the 1984 Olympics, a source of great pride.
Right: An alternative image of Sarajevo, in line with how the city wishes to represent itself.

Conclusions/ the future for Bosnia-Herzegovina

Within and beyond it's own context, the situation regarding national unity and identity in BiH is increasingly relevant. National symbolism abounds in public spaces, but equally pertinent are reminders of the past. It is to politics, and with the ways in which their country is exhibited to foreigners, that Bosnian people seem to attach most important when considering their own identities. In terms of political actors, the worry is that the factors holding BiH back from unity (namely self-maintaining ethnic political parties concerned chiefly with maintaining their own 'fiefdoms' under the divided system) may restrict development; there is little prospect of BiH joining the EU or similar bodies while still thus divided, and with trade partners such as neighboring Croatia set to join within the near future (2013 for Croatia) this will quickly impact Bosnian trade.

Overall it is felt that this study achieved it's aims, but further work is needed - perhaps surveying a wider area than Sarajevo as was the case here. Consider this - how can the west act differently in future conflict resolution to avoid similarly restrictive and problematic situations?



With special thanks to Newcastle University's Expeditions Committee

Oliver Kemp 101076476 Geography Bsc

School of Geography, Politics and Sociology (GPS)

o.j.kemp@ncl.ac.uk - for more information



Expedition 2012

