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# LGBT Rights in Bosnia: The Challenge of Nationalism in the Context of Europeanization

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## Abstract

Nationalism has been one of the domestic constraints to progress on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights, especially in the Balkans that are dealing with multiple postwar transition realities. Ethno-nationalist challenges, often influenced by religion, have been significant in Bosnia-Herzegovina given weak state identity and democracy, competing institutionalized ethno-national identities, and slow Europeanization. Through the lenses of gendered nationalism, the societal security dilemma, and political homophobia, this article analyzes how the politics and discourse of LGBT rights during the past decade in Bosnia reveal tensions between competing and multiple identities and narratives—European, multiethnic, ethno-nationalist, and religious—using the violent response to the 2008 Queer Sarajevo Festival as a key illustration. However, in the past decade, LGBT rights have progressed and antigay backlash to LGBT visibility (in addition to stronger external leverage and other factors) has resulted in stronger activism and change. The public discourse and response to the announcement of Bosnia's first Pride Parade represents another turning point in LGBT visibility that seems to reveal that ethno-nationalist challenges may be lessening as LGBT rights norms gain strength.

**Keywords:** LGBT rights; Bosnia-Herzegovina; nationalism; Europeanization

## Introduction

During the past 10 years, the Western Balkans have been in the thick of the European Union (EU) accession process, with Croatia as an EU member since 2013, Serbia and Montenegro as candidate countries, and Bosnia-Herzegovina (hereafter Bosnia) as a “potential candidate.”<sup>1</sup> One of the areas of concern and expected change during the process of adopting new European norms and standards has been human rights protections, and in particular LGBT rights.<sup>2</sup> This once invisible issue and community is now often at the center of political debate and activism in the region. All countries in the region have made some progress on LGBT rights, particularly in terms of legal changes and visibility, however serious domestic constraints have and continue to impede increased norm change and progress. Ethno-national and religious nationalism is one particular challenge that has served to both oppose LGBT rights and counter the identification with “Europe,” which, as an idea and identity, is perceived as synonymous with LGBT rights (Ayoub and Paternotte 2014). Nevertheless, despite these constraints, and in line with contemporary scholarship on LGBT rights change in post-communist Europe (Ayoub 2018), this article will also argue that the backlash to initial LGBT visibility and rights by nationalist antigay forces has, in addition to continued activist and international community pressure, led to greater LGBT visibility and empowerment.<sup>3</sup> This article will show, using examples from the discourse and responses surrounding key public LGBT activist events, the strength of the nationalist challenge to LGBT rights in Bosnia, but will also reveal

how the challenge has shifted and lessened during the past decade. Two cases will be examined and compared: the 2008 Queer Sarajevo festival and the 2019 Bosnian Pride Parade.

The nationalist challenge has perhaps been the clearest in Bosnia, given its multiple and competing ethnic and religious identities, the institutionalization of ethno-nationalism (consociational elements), its continued intransigence in the face of European norms and pressures for change, and its overall greater difficulty of maneuvering away from a postwar transition status. Of the Western Balkan states, it has the farthest and most difficult path to Europe, despite, one could argue, having the strongest connections with European institutions and transnational organizations in the region given Europe's role in governing and state building in the postwar state (Keil and Perry 2016; Tzifikas 2012; Zaum 2003). Decentralization, weak governance, and democratic standards are just a few of the roadblocks to EU accession, in addition to several weaknesses related to the EU strategy (Brljavac 2011; Mujanović 2018; Tzifikas 2012). Moreover, the ethno-majoritarian institutions of government and thus the institutionalization of ethnic identity can be argued to be inherently antidemocratic (Mujanović 2018), thus creating challenges for human rights given the strong correlation between liberal democracy and human rights, including minority rights. Additionally, Bosnia lacks a strong national identity (PRISM research 2015; Mujanović 2018; Robinson and Pobric 2005) and was the most devastated in the region by the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s in terms of human and structural loss.

Despite Bosnia's prominent role in the Balkans, especially in terms of scholarship on postwar peace building and nationalism, there is very little scholarly work specifically on LGBT rights in Bosnia (Pearce and Cooper 2013; Selmić 2016; Swimelar 2017) compared to work on other countries in the Balkans or the wider post-communist region. This article aims to partially fill that gap by analyzing how the politics and discourse of LGBT rights during the past decade in Bosnia reveal the tension and dynamics of competing and multiple identities and narratives—European, multiethnic (multicultural), ethno-nationalist, and religious. Additionally, it gives further evidence for how national identity and ethno-nationalism can be a key domestic constraint to human rights norm change and democratization (Freyburg and Richter 2012; Risse et al 1999), especially when those norms are connected to gender and sexuality. After examining the relationship and dynamics in Bosnia between multiple identities, nationalism, sexuality, and Europeanization and making the case for how and why ethno and religious nationalism has hindered LGBT rights, this article will look at the example of the Queer Sarajevo Festival in 2008. Halted due to violence from nationalists, this case strongly illustrates the competing identities and nationalist framings of LGBT rights within Bosnian politics. While LGBT rights progressed on the legal and policy front after this event, implementation has been and continues to be weak and activism was dampened (but has been increasing). In 2019, a little more than a decade later, the announcement of and response to Bosnia's first Pride Parade reveals the progress that has been made and the lessening role that ethno-nationalism *may play* moving forward. As this article shows, the discourse of the critical responses to the Pride Parade has framed LGBT visibility as less threatening than a decade ago, with "human rights" even being affirmed tepidly.

The main mechanism by which nationalism has been a challenge and a constraint to LGBT rights is through denying their legitimacy or visibility and presenting them (and the community) as a "threat to the nation." I apply the concept of a societal security dilemma to this case to show how attempts to promote alternative and marginalized non-ethnic identities in an ethno-national state, particularly when these identities conflict with traditional religious identities that have been reinforced since the war, has made the "threat to the nation" frame from homosexuality even more pronounced in this case. Moreover, I illustrate how state and religious elites make use of "political homophobia" as a response to challenges to authority, sovereignty, and as a way to reinforce postwar collective identities (Weiss and Bosia 2013). Finally, I give evidence of a practice of "identity divergence," a "mechanism by which domestic coalitions resist norms and rules of Europeanization and instead define the national community in contrast to Europe" (Subotić 2011, 310). The extensive intervention and oversight by European institutions and actors since the end of the war, the few rewards that people believe have come from the Europeanization process, and

the assumed relationship between “European identity” and “homosexuality,” have been fuel for antigay resistance and the narrative that homosexuality is a counter to and a threat to “victimized” ethno-national identities.

Through careful reading and analysis of the relevant secondary literature, in addition to non-governmental organization (NGO) reports on LGBT rights, the author uses an interpretive approach with a focus on discourse analysis<sup>4</sup> to link these sources with primary data to make claims about a single case study. Considering the topic of marginalized identities, critical discourse analysis in particular is important in that it examines “the ways discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power and dominance in society” (Van Dijk 2005, 353). In this research, the central primary evidence comes from 18 semi-structured interviews with top activists and representatives of the Bosnian LGBT community and several representatives of foreign embassies and the European Union. Most of these interviews were conducted in person by the author in late 2014 in Sarajevo and there have been important follow up interviews in 2015 and 2019 to capture the changing environment and new developments on the ground. Moreover, where available, and particularly for the events of the last year, the author also relied on and analyzed local Bosnian media sources to gauge public and media responses to LGBT activities and political debates. Finally, public opinion data from various sources during a 10-year period also provides additional evidence for the analysis, interpretation, and arguments.

### The Status of LGBT Rights in Bosnia

Prior to the wars of the 1990s, there was a nascent lesbian and gay community and movement in the former Yugoslavia, but this was mainly in the republics of Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia, not Bosnia (Đurković 2008). Balkan scholar Kevin Moss succinctly points out that “during the wars of [Yugoslav] succession, nationalist politicians on all sides invoked traditional patriarchal gender roles and demonized queers as traitors to the nation” (2014, 295). LGBT activism and visibility has only come after the war, and particularly in the mid-2000s, and primarily in the capital of Sarajevo, though there are recently created organizations in other large cities such as Banja Luka, Tuzla, and Mostar. The past decade has seen some progress, particularly in terms of legal protections, public visibility, civil society activism, and media coverage (see Table 1; also see Selmić 2016; SOC Pink Reports 2010–2018). This has been due to numerous factors in keeping with the literature on human rights norm socialization—the role of the European Union and Western states, increasing civil society visibility and mobilization, and some improvements in media coverage. For example, just in the last few years, according to interviews with representatives at the Sarajevo Open Center (SOC), Bosnia’s main NGO focused on LGBT rights, there has been open dialogue between government officials and offices and LGBT experts and organizations on how to better protect LGBT rights, particularly in line with European standards (Vasić 2015; Bošnjak 2015). Important, recent successes to highlight include an improved antidiscrimination law and hate crimes legislation; moreover, the parliament in the federation entity of Bosnia has agreed to form a committee to consider a same-sex unions bill (Telegraph RS 2018).

Despite some progress, scholarly research, survey data, human rights reports, and personal narratives from LGBT citizens in Bosnia reveal a precarious environment and continued evidence of systematic human rights abuses in numerous realms of society, from within the family to schools, workplaces, and public places (SOC report 2018). Despite the legal and socio-cultural progress in the 2000s, in its 2013 report, International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association (ILGA)-Europe confirmed that “experiences of homophobia and transphobia remain very common in Bosnia and Herzegovina with limited or no action taken by authorities to address such discrimination, harassment or violence.” In its most recent assessment, ILGA-Europe (2018) concluded that positive legislation has not been translated into making daily life safer for LGBT individuals.

There are also high levels of homophobia among the public, low levels of public knowledge about LGBT people, and discrimination against LGBT individuals. In May 2005, Prism Research in Bosnia

**Table 1.** Status of LGBT rights in Bosnia across different arenas.

Institutional/Legal Development:	Year Occurred
Same-sex activity legal	1998
Antidiscrimination law in employment	2009
Comprehensive antidiscrimination law	2009/2016 amended, improved
Hate speech law ( <i>or related incitement</i> )	2013
Hate crimes law	2010/2016*
Same-sex unions legal	Being discussed by Federation Parliament (2018)
Constitution defines marriage as between a man and woman	No mention
State Authority Development:	Year Occurred or Started
Police training and education program	2015
Pride Parade held	To be attempted Sept. 2019
Other key public LGBT events occurs peacefully, with police protection	Sometimes
State institution has written official report on LGBT community and rights	2016
Civil Society Development:	Year Started
LGBT org have held key meetings with political parties or government	2015
LGBT org have worked directly with state on legislation	2015
LGBT organizations active outside the capital	2014
Media – greater and more neutral or positive coverage of LGBT issues/rights	Improved since 2010

\**Republika Srpska* (RS) adopted in 2010 and State level legislation in 2013 includes sexual orientation and gender identity as categories for hate crimes or what is called “incitement of hatred.”; Brcko district in 2003; The Federation entity adopted this law in 2016.

found that 82% of those surveyed had a negative opinion about homosexuals; 47% believed that homosexuality is a chosen lifestyle; and 77% believed that accepting homosexuality in Bosnian society would be detrimental for Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) (Danish Institute for Human Rights n.d.). Survey research in 2015 by the US-based National Democratic Institute found that 51% of LGBT persons had experienced discrimination because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, and when respondents were asked what they would do if their child were gay, 44% (the top answer) said they would try to “cure” them (NDI poll 2015). Fifteen percent of LGBT individuals said they had faced physical violence due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (NDI poll 2015). At the same time, the Sarajevo Open Center believes that there is some degree of LGBT tolerance in society given that, in a poll from 2013, 90% of the respondents said they would *not* use physical or verbal violence against LGBT people and approximately 75% said they would help an LGBT victim of violence (*Sarajevo Open Centre*, December 19, 2013). The most recent survey data from Pew Research (2017) found that among all Bosnians, 13% said homosexuality should be accepted within society, while 82% said it should not. One can likely conclude that there has not been much change in public attitudes during the past decade.<sup>5</sup>

### Nationalism, Sexuality, Identity, and Societal Security

Nationalism can be understood broadly as loyalty or devotion to the concept of a collective nation and a conviction that national identity is or should be the most significant identity for a people or an

individual. It is also the political belief that the cultural/ethnic and political boundaries of a community should overlap. The nation as a constructed idea is seen as held together by an imagined community and by myths of common descent, common language, religion, cultural values, and often times common territory (Anderson 1983; Hobsbawn 1990; Hutchinson and Smith 1995). The process of nation building can be positive for a community, but as is clear from many global examples throughout history, it has strong exclusionary potential resulting in the construction of boundaries of who counts as inside and outside the nation and a vision for the future long-term survival of the nation (Bieber 2018; Gleason 1991; Marx 2002; Mudde 2016). The emphasis on a supposed historically embedded unifying national identity often *rejects alternative or competing identities* and sets up the likelihood that nationalism would resist LGBT rights perceived as representing contrasting identities that can undermine the nation, both as an entity and its long term reproduction (Peterson 1999; Nagel 1998).

Many scholars of nationalism argue that the concept of the nation is not neutral, but is gendered (Helms 2013; Mosse 1985; Parker et al 1992; Nagel 1998; Peterson 1999; Yuval-Davis 1997). The relationship between nationality and sexuality has historically been constructed in ways that support patriarchal relations, traditional gender divisions and roles, and heterosexual relations (Nagel 1998; Kahlina 2015; Sremac and Ganzevoort 2015; Yuval-Davis 1997). As the classic text by George Mosse made clear, we find examples in history whereby ideas about appropriateness and respectability especially surrounding the nation, have been linked with supposed “normal” (or non-homosexual) sexuality; he specifically found a relationship in Germany and England between nationalism, war, and notions of heterosexual masculinity, and provided insights into how anti-Semitism in Germany in part equated Jews with femininity (Mosse 1985). These notions can be seen in nationalist underpinnings of the wars in the Balkans that have linked homosexuals with being enemies to the nation in a time of war and fear. Masculinity and nationhood have also been connected in the assumption that homosexuality could serve to undermine not only the male bonding assumed necessary to forge and build a nation and defend it through war but also undermine the nation itself through a (supposed) lack of physical reproduction of the nation. Seeing war as a practice of (masculine) soldiers defending the nation is important to understand how Europeanization and nationalism have been deployed in LGBT rights discourse specifically in the Balkans and Bosnia where the wars of the 1990s still figure centrally in political discourse and reality (Swimelar 2018).

Religious nationalism in the Balkan region and specifically in Bosnia has been used as a collective identity marker in political debates and popular culture (Sremac and Ganzevoort 2015). Recent scholarship in this area has argued that, “religion and nationalism are intertwined to the degree that religion provides central elements of the symbolics of the nation, and nationalism functions as one of the key materializations of religious inspiration and morals. Religious nationalisms are usually held together by support for heteronormativity, patriarchy, masculinity, and a gendered order or society” (Sremac and Ganzevoort 2015). Thus religious nationalists undoubtedly connect homosexuality with a weakening and a denigration of both the nation and the family (Pavasović Trost and Slotmaeckers 2015).

Another key concept that I argue helps explain the relationship between nationalism, homophobia, and resistance to LGBT rights in Bosnia is the societal security dilemma. The concept of societal security, in contrast to state security, emphasizes how aspects of society, specifically in this case *identity*, can be threatened either from internal or external forces. Societal security can be defined as “[T]he ability of a society to persist under changing conditions and possible and actual threats. More specifically, it is about the sustainability within acceptable conditions for the evolution, of traditional patterns of language, culture, association, and religious and national identity and custom” (Waever in Roe 2004, 48). Survival and security for a society in particular is a question of identity because “this is the way a society talks about existential threats: if this happens, we will no longer be able to live as ‘us’” (Waever in Aggestam and Hyde-Price 2000, 280). The societal security dilemma thus occurs when attempts by one group to increase its societal

security and protect its identity lead to actions and reactions in a second group to do the same and thus makes the first group feel insecure (Roe 2004; Swimelar 2013). Therefore, attempts by LGBT individuals and their advocates to make their identity more *visible* and specifically to protect their *identity* and thus their *security* have often been interpreted by nationalists (and the state actors that support/represent them), as threatening to *their* identity and security, and a potential weakening of the strength of ethno-national identities more broadly. Since both LGBT actors and nationalists aim to assert and protect their identity and their security, this creates a societal security dilemma.

Complementing how societal security functions in this security dynamic is the role of threat perception vis-à-vis homosexuality. A prominent LGBT rights scholar has shown that “different perceptions of threat in distinct national contexts influence responses to international norms. The historical antecedents of the popular idea of the nation can open the path to religion to fuel the process of [anti-gay] counter mobilization” (Ayoub 2014, 338). Specifically, where religion is defined as more central to the construction of the national identity, the greater chance that homosexuality is constructed as a threat, and specifically a “threat to the nation,” in addition to the more conventional “threat to the family” frame (Ayoub 2014; Sremac and Ganzevoort 2015).<sup>6</sup> This applies to Bosnia where an important marker of identity difference among the three main groups is along religious lines.

Finally, another key concept that helps explain the nationalism-LGBT politics dynamic in Bosnia is “political homophobia” whereby a state uses homophobia (often in advance of or unrelated to specific local demands for rights) to claim political legitimacy and gain authority, particularly in the face of state crisis or challenges to state power (Weiss and Bosia 2013, 17, 21). This strategic and purposeful use of homophobia by state actors (that includes scapegoating) is a tool used to build an “authoritative notion of national collective identity and for impeding oppositional or alternative collective identities” (Weiss and Bosia 2013, 3). Significant here is that political homophobia is seen as part of a process of state building, thus relevant to Bosnia where in the absence of a centralized state or a strong state identity, the central ethno-national groups are engaging in nation-building as a way to seek greater power over the state.

### The Bosnian Context: The Relationship Between Identities, Nationalism, Europeanization, and LGBT Rights

This section provides a background discussion and analysis of contemporary Bosnia, its identities, and an examination of how ethno-national identities and nationalism have functioned as a way to challenge alternative identities related to sexuality and gender. This also provides the framework for examining and comparing the Queer Sarajevo Festival and the organization for the first Pride Parade. Conceptualizing Bosnia’s national and state identity is a complicated affair given the multitude of identities, cultures, and authorities that have influenced this territory historically – Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, Muslim, Catholic, Orthodox, secular, socialist, Yugoslav – that is, multicultural and multinational historical traditions and identities (Donia and Fine 1995). Within Bosnia itself, the diversity was quite stark with no ethno-national group having a majority on the eve of the war.<sup>7</sup> Of course the Yugoslav wars, even as they centered on conflicts over power and territory were fought on the basis of constructed identities and the security of those identities (Vujačić 2007).

#### The Fractured State of Postwar Bosnia

The war in Bosnia is critical to understanding contemporary identities, nationalism, Europeanization, and the role of LGBT politics in the country, specifically because of the links between masculine heteronormativity, war, and nationhood as discussed earlier. Of the wars in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s, the war in Bosnia (1992–1995) was the most destructive in terms of human life lost, the wounded, and the destruction of social and economic infrastructure. Postwar identity competition and nationalism have been based upon the context of the war, its

difficult outcome of partition into two ethnically-based entities, the occurrence and memories of atrocities among neighbors, in addition to the conventional rational struggle for political power explanations (Moll 2013). The widespread systematic use of violence, particularly against women, has left scars that many human rights activists today still see in terms of the persistence of violence in other forms, against different kinds of social groups, and in more subtle ways. In particular, the mass atrocities committed against Bosniaks, specifically the July 1995 genocide in Srebrenica where 7000 Bosniak men and boys were murdered by Bosnian Serb forces, has strengthened the identity and security concerns of Bosniaks, whose nationalists are more the focus in this article (Nettelfield and Wagner 2013).

The ethno-national dimension of the 1990s war and its crimes and the weakening of Communist ideology has meant that Bosniak, Croat, and Serb ethno-national identities became more infused with their respective religious affiliations. Bosnia lends supports to the broader quantitative data on the positive correlation between religiosity and homophobia in the post-communist region (O'Dwyer 2013, 2018). In Bosnia, there has been increased attention to Islamic practice, symbols, and more direct links between the main Bosniak political party (SDA) and the Muslim community (Babuna 2004); in short a Bosnian Muslim national consciousness was strengthened. However, many Bosniaks "preferred to stress the purely national character of the term Bosniak and its connection with the Bosnian territory and history, while others pointed to its Islamic content" (Babuna 2004, 420; Mujanović 2019a). Much of the contemporary debate in Sarajevo surrounding identity relates to the role of Islam in the identity and practices of Bosniaks, especially since the European character of Bosnian Muslims strongly differs from the form of Islam practiced in the Gulf states that have greatly influenced postwar Bosnian society, in terms of the building of mosques and financial support to Islamic communities (Babuna 2004). Many Bosnians are critical of the foreign "mujahadeen," former soldiers and religious activists, who have settled after the war (Stefansson 2007, 73). Additionally, the shifting demographics within Bosnia due to the war, especially in Sarajevo where many urban Bosnians had to flee from and where a significant number of (internally displaced) rural Bosnians have since settled, have also created new cultural attitudes and identities. Many Sarajevans are critical of what they claim are more backward and traditional attitudes and practices of their co-national newcomers. As one anthropologist notes, referring to the views of many urban (or "original") Sarajevans: "Pre-war Sarajevo and post-war Sarajevo seem to be two diametrically opposed cities, the former sophisticated cosmopolitanism being replaced by plagues of cultural primitivism" (Stefansson 2007, 70), meaning traditional, often religious, cultural attitudes, especially when it comes to gender norms.

The Dayton Peace Accords that ended the Bosnian War in 1995 created a new constitution that institutionalized ethno-national identities, politics, and representation in a way that is still keenly felt today in many areas of Bosnian political life and helps explain the link between state level nationalism and collective/community level nationalism (Bieber 2004, 2006; Mujkić 2008; Mujanović 2018). The "state" is comprised of two somewhat independent "entities," primarily based on ethnicity. The *Republika Srpska* (RS) comprises 49% of the territory and 82% identify as ethnic Serbs (comprising 31% of the total Bosnian population), while the Federation is 51% of the territory and is shared by Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) (70%)<sup>8</sup> and Bosnian Croats (22%).<sup>9</sup> Each entity has its own constitution, president, prime minister, parliament, numerous ministries, and thus overlapping authority and responsibility in multiple areas of governance. The Federation is further subdivided into 10 cantons, most of which are dominated by one ethnic party or the other. At the federal level of Parliament, there is a 42-member House of Representatives and a 15-member House of Peoples (upper house) where each ethno-national (or "constituent") group has five representatives whose goal is to ensure that legislation has the support of all groups (thus they have veto power as they can block laws that might harm any of their "vital national interests"). There is also a tripartite rotating presidency (reflecting the three constituent ethno-national peoples). Moreover, in the Sejdić-Finci case, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the Dayton constitution (and its electoral system) is discriminatory since it reserves power exclusively for ethnic Bosniaks,

Croats, and Serbs (thus biased against anyone not identifying with these groups) (EU Parliament 2015). Ethno-nationalism has also been institutionalized within electoral and party politics. The parties that have governed since the end of the war (except for a brief period) are ethnic-based and conservative (Zuvela and Sito-Sučić 2018). None of the main ethnic parties support LGBT rights in any form.<sup>10</sup>

### The Bosnian “Ethnopolis” – Nationalism and Contested Identities

One prominent Bosnian political scientist has described the state as an “ethnopolis” given the intransigent role that ethno-national identity has played institutionally and societally in the post-war fractured, decentralized state, as described earlier (Mujkić 2008). Bosnia’s weak democracy is tied to its nationalist elements, revealing that both are challenges to LGBT rights since human rights and liberal democracy are strongly correlated. As one Balkan scholar has argued recently in a book on democracy in the region, “Nationalism has been an instrumental and constitutive element of the Balkan elites’ elastic authoritarianism. In these states [Balkan, including Bosnia] the essential and exclusive ingredient of social cohesion is ethnicity and thus it is the only relevant category of identity. Despite the overt trappings of liberal democracy, there is no meaningful concept of a social contract that extends beyond or supplants banal invocations of blood and soil” (Mujanović 2018, 10).

Illustrating how a sense of belonging and identity is connected to one’s ethno-national group, public opinion research from 2013 shows that a strong majority of Bosnian citizens in each entity are “proud” of their declared ethno-national group: 92% of those in the RS while 94% of those in the Federation were proud (with similar numbers when respondents were asked about religious identity) (Prism 2013)<sup>11</sup> Also unsurprisingly, citizens in the RS do not identify as “citizens of Bosnia” at nearly the same rate as citizens in the Federation do (53% compared to 85%) (Prism 2013). In a 2015 poll with similar questions, while ethnic identity pride was high among all groups (above 90%), identification and pride as a “citizen of Bosnia” was even more divergent than two years prior – 92% for Bosniaks, but only 47% for Bosnian Serbs (Prism Research 2015).

The way that nationalism has functioned among the main ethnic political parties is primarily to instrumentalize ethnicity and religion in order to keep alive the societal security dilemma that has existed since the war ended. Manipulating ethno-national identities has also been a tactic of political elites to prevent popular mobilization around other identities, specifically class-based (Mujanović 2018, 24; Mujkić 2015), but also those based on gender and sexuality. Homosexuality adds another external layer of this fear and manipulation since conservatives and nationalists frame LGBT individuals or rights as attempts to break down, counter, and/or broaden one’s ethno-national identity. Identities are seen as mutually exclusive in the societal security dilemma so choosing an LGBT identity means for nationalists that one is denying their Bosniak/Croat/Serb identity. Significantly, embracing an LGBT identity sends a message to elites that different ethno-national groups can cross lines to collaborate and forge new identities, since the LGBT community is a diverse community where one’s ethno-national identity is usually seen as less important or irrelevant (Causević 2014; Đikić 2014; Vasić 2015). This could be compared to recent efforts by Bosnians across ethnic lines to come together to protest economic conditions and other social problems, revealing that ethno-national domination is not absolute (Mujkić 2015; Touquet 2015). In short, as one Bosnian political scientist said illustrating these points above, “the queer category is really and truly a point of resistance to nationalism. Nationalism [in Bosnia] wants to appropriate all institutions, so queer theory [and the movement] is a good point of protest and resistance to the overwhelming nationalization [of society]” (Mujkić 2014). That is, not only are political institutions beholden to nationalism, but other institutions are as well, such as education (Swimelar 2013), soccer (Cooley and Mujanović 2014), and even firefighting (Higgins 2018); thus LGBT individuals and issues that cut across ethnic lines represent a challenge to nationalism. However, not everything is defined along ethnic lines; as scholars of Bosnia have illustrated, there are examples of



“post-ethnic mobilization” in Bosnia whereby groups have formed around common social and economic goals as citizens or *građani* (Touquet 2011; Mujkić 2015). The LGBT community and the links it has built with women’s and other civil society organizations illustrates this notion.

Understanding the links between the Bosnian War and contemporary narrative and identity contestations is key to understanding LGBT rights, as alluded to earlier. The re-traditionalization that occurred during the nationalist 1990s emphasized patriarchy and masculinity in defending “our” nation from the enemies’ nations (Shauble 2009). As Causević argues, in relation to Bosniak identity, “anything other than the heterosexual Muslim norm is considered an offense to the victimized image of the Bosniak nation” (2010, 34). The war produced a “cult of masculinity, heroes, and *šehids* [Muslim martyrs],” echoing the notion of heterosexual masculinity in service of defending the nation from external and internal weakness and attack and seeing LGBT people as outside the nation (Causević 2014). An excellent example of this is when the small Sarajevo LGBT organization Okvir published an article linking violence against LGBT people and war crimes during the war, they were attacked in SAFF, the conservative Islamic newspaper, for having “faggots destroying Bosniakhood,” an idea often echoed by religious nationalists (Causević 2014). Moreover, when citizens in 2013 wanted to march and memorialize the war crimes committed against Bosniaks and other non-Serbs in Prijedor (RS), the mayor stated that this event would be a “celebration” and a “gay parade” (Vijesti 2013). This discourse can be interpreted as an attempt to make a direct link between the ethnic identity of the “enemy” during the war with a gay identity. These examples reinforce the notion that homosexuality, for nationalists, must be repudiated as an external and immoral intervention into a mythical and pure traditional ethno-national space.

Bosnia, as part of the so-called Balkans, is in a liminal state in terms of its identity in relation to Europe more broadly which illustrates the role played by LGBT rights and politics in the contestation between narratives of ethno-nationalism and Europeaness or European identity. The Balkans more generally have a complicated relationship with Europe, being seen as both part of Europe and as Europe’s “other,” thus making “Europeaness” a potential foil against local and more supposed traditional identities (Bjelić and Savić 2002). The Balkans have consistently played the role of a negative “Other” to help define a more positive European identity and this view was reinforced during the wars of the 1990s (Bjelić and Savić 2002; Hammond 2004; Todorova 1997). Within the Balkans itself, we can find a process of “nesting orientalism,” a form of nationalism within Yugoslavia and its neighbors (Bakić-Hayden 1992) whereby in the traditional east/west dichotomy context, Bosnia would be considered “other,” or “eastern,” by traditional West Europeans, but Bosnians may see Serbia or Albania as “other,” more “eastern” and less advanced. Thus there is a desire among many in Bosnia to be seen as “European” and to abandon the pejorative Balkan identity marker (Stefansson 2007, 62). This can be taken one step further in terms of an urban/rural divide that aims to emphasize a European and even cosmopolitan identity compared to a more traditional or religious identity, for example in Sarajevo as discussed earlier. This ties into attitudes toward LGBT rights given its linkages with Europeaness and European identity.

In terms of Europeaness as an aspect of a Bosnian *state* identity or as a component of national identity, it is difficult to discern a particular pattern of identity convergence with Europe or divergence away from Europe (Subotić 2011) since the relationship to Europe *in part* depends upon which ethno-national group or leadership one refers to. While Bosniaks tend to be relatively more pro-European and support the idea of a unified, multiethnic “Bosnian” identity (Mujanović 2019a; Nettelried 2010; Prism 2013, 46–47), Bosnian Serbs are less so due to, *inter alia*, the negative relationship with Europe and the West during and after the war and their desire for increased authority of the RS entity.<sup>12</sup> However, when it comes to those who use ethno-national or religious nationalist discourse, as analyzed below, we find identity divergence with Europe since Europe is equated with the imposition of “foreign” values such as homosexuality and LGBT rights, in addition to more progressive views on gender perceived as countering traditional values (Sremac et al 2015). Looking at the population’s support for European Union membership, which could be related to a sense of Europeaness or European identity as part of a national identity, there is strong, but

declining support among the general population (Balkan Barometer 2017). In a public opinion survey from 2010, 78% of citizens said they “felt like Europeans,” which gets at the question of identity relevant to this research, however, there is a lack of data on this topic (Directorate for European Integration 2010).<sup>13</sup>

### **LGBT Visibility, Rights, and Contested Identities in Action: Queer Sarajevo Festival (2008) and the First Pride Parade (2019)**

Two specific cases demonstrate and illuminate the main themes related to nationalism and identities vis-à-vis LGBT rights: The 2008 Queer Sarajevo Festival (QSF) and the announcement of Bosnia’s first Pride Parade in 2019. Analyzing the first major LGBT event and the most recent event allows for a comparison to examine potential change in nationalist public discourse and response to LGBT visibility. The Queer Sarajevo Festival was a key flash point for the LGBT community and illustrates the contested identities and strength of ethno-nationalism in the mid/late-2000s surrounding LGBT visibility. Activists and participants at the event were violently attacked by nationalists, specifically Wahhabi Muslims and football hooligans.<sup>14</sup> As detailed below, the government response and public discourse to the violence was weak and homophobic. As the first major LGBT public event in Bosnia, this event is significant to analyze because, according to activists, it was a decisive turning point for the visibility of the queer community and their increased fears and security/identity concerns; the event also led to reduced activism. This incident was also important for its major coverage and debate within the media for at least a month prior to the festival, with scores of articles being published on the event, its aftermath, and the controversies about its wider meaning.<sup>15</sup> The Queer Sarajevo case reveals how religious ethno-nationalists sought to use the festival and attack as an example of the abandonment of traditional values and Bosniak and Muslim identities, threats to their nation and identity, and the elevation of foreign, imported, and “dangerous” norms and identities related to homosexuality. This narrative was countered by those who emphasized the European, multicultural, and cosmopolitan identity of Sarajevo and Bosnia and the desire to support tolerance for all identities regardless of their ethno-national affiliations.

Just more than a decade later, after many other successful smaller public LGBT events, important legal and policy changes for LGBT rights, and increased European pressure, the LGBT activist community decided that they and the environment were ready for the first Pride Parade. Given the dominant narrative that Pride Parades symbolize a litmus test of LGBT rights and Europeaness, and that Bosnia was the only European country not to have attempted or held a successful one,<sup>16</sup> the recent announcement of Bosnia’s first Pride Parade reveals another key moment in LGBT visibility and the politics of LGBT rights. Additionally, analyzing this event provides a window into the contemporary strength of the nationalist challenge specifically via elite and public discourse and response. As argued below, this event reveals that the nationalist challenge may be changing and lessening in terms of the threat perception of LGBT rights. A more conventional antigay “threat to the family” frame is being used instead of hate speech and claims that homosexuality is directly opposed to ethnic identity and community. Nationalists are trying to nuance their claims to show minimal support for freedom of expression and human rights, albeit while still opposing LGBT equality and visibility.

#### ***The Queer Sarajevo Festival Attack and Response***

As the first public expression of LGBT rights that ended in violence, the QSF was framed through several identity discourses: Europeaness, Islam, multiculturalism, and nationalism. The event is an excellent example of the conceptual points laid out in this article – the relationship between nationalism and homosexuality, the societal security dilemma, high levels of threat perception from religious leaders, and the use of political homophobia. While deep analysis and interpretation

of this event is significant to warrant a focus on it, this case study also has relevance for today's understanding of the relationship between ethno-nationalism and LGBT rights and politics given that: (1) It was and remains the high water mark of Bosnian LGBT activism and given the violent response and shutdown, it had a chilling effect on activism thereafter (Đurković 2015; Vasić 2019); (2) Looking at today's more empowered activism and the legal/political progress made on LGBT issues (plus other public events and current planning of a Pride Parade), the QSF festival represents a good point of comparison for seeing the historical shifts and progress during the past decade, illustrating that while ethno-nationalism is still a challenge, it may be softening; (3) The ethno-national and religious narratives and rhetoric from this period persist into the present (Higgins 2018; Mujanović 2018, 2019a) and recently have been seen as quite concerning, in terms of increased nationalist rhetoric and actions by the RS leadership that is increasing the security dilemma between ethnic groups in Bosnia (PBS 2018; Hajdari and Colborne 2018; Radio Sarajevo 2019; Mujanović 2019b; UN 2017).

Organization Q, Bosnia's first registered LGBT organization (from 2004), spent at least one year planning the multicultural arts event at the Academy of Fine Arts in central Sarajevo, a four-day festival that aimed to bring public visibility to LGBT people and issues and provide an opportunity to showcase filmmakers and artists. As one of the festival participants and a longtime activist said, "It was meant to be the first turning point when it comes to the collective coming out of the community, of increasing visibility of community. It was not a parade [the way the media said it would be]" (Đikić 2014).<sup>17</sup> She added that, at the time, the government was silent on LGBT issues or rights, and the idea was that this event could spark some kind of action. The organizers coordinated and made sure that effective private and public security forces would be present and available. Many activists, journalists, and artists traveled from abroad. On the first night of the QSF festival, a group of Wahabbi Muslims and other protestors stood across the river from the festival site and yelled insults at the participants.<sup>18</sup> Some shouted "*Allahu Akhbar*" (God is great) and yelled homophobic statements. The demonstrators then physically attacked participants, injuring eight of them, including two journalists and a police officer. Despite the violence, the police did intervene to prevent the attackers from getting closer to the main event site (Đurković 2015). There was also poor collaboration between the state security forces and the additional private security forces that the organization had to hire. The participants' fear did not end with this attack since many of them were followed as they bolted into taxis and avoided going to their homes and some participants were also attacked on their way home (Đurković 2015). One of the organizers, who had already received online death threats prior to the festival, said she rarely felt safe after the attack and always had to keep a focused watch on her surroundings (Đurković 2015).<sup>19</sup> One of the leading conservative Bosnian newspapers, *Dnevni Avaz*, published the names and dates of birth of all the participants who were injured and taken to the hospital ("Gay film festival...").

Tensions were already evident weeks before the event took place and the media coverage revealed that the festival was being viewed through the lens of competing identities, religious nationalism, and new LGBT identities. The conservative and more religious media outlets consistently verbally attacked the founder of Q and her co-leaders (and any journalists appearing to support or cover the event as well) and one could also find a good deal of antigay commentary in social media (blogs, forums) prior to the event (Đurković 2015; Vasić 2014). Organization Q advertised the upcoming event with rainbow graffiti around town, which was crossed out and replaced with "death to faggots" (Đurković 2015). Sarajevo was covered with posters and leaflets promoting "fascist, racist and xenophobic ideology directed against homosexuals" and media coverage could be considered hate speech (Schrag 2010, 57)).

The conservative Islamic newspaper SAFF and *Dnevni Avaz* used their platforms to put forth standard religious nationalist arguments against the event, both before and after. For example, *Dnevni Avaz* published two articles with the headlines: "Who is imposing the gay gathering upon Bosniaks during Ramadan?" and "Mufti Smajkić: Freedom should not be used as a promotion of that garbage from the West" (Pavasović Trost and Sloomaeckers 2015, 168). The latter article

notes that Smajkić refers to the “spirit of Bosnia” where Western imported ideas have no place (Pavasović Trost and Sloodmaeckers 2015, 169). SAFF explicitly linked the event to Europe blaming the EU for the “gay evil” threatening Bosnia, and then imagining a future Bosnia in the EU where the “European Muslim” will need to, in addition to “consuming pork, also support faggots, if he wants to achieve anything in the Christian hierarchy” (Pavasović Trost and Sloodmaeckers 2015, 169).

Illustrating the European-nationalist tension, the more liberal media best represented by the weekly *Dani* (that had the most coverage of QSF with 60 articles) generally provided support to the event and saw it as a litmus test for the notion of Sarajevo as a modern, multicultural metropolis (Kajinić 2010). I argue that one can read “modern” and “multicultural” as terms signaling “European,” in contrast to identities *perceived* as non-European – traditional and nationalistic. In fact, the liberal and conservative media “explicitly link[ed] the discourse of human rights and ‘queerness’ to ‘Europeanness’ and modernity, but with very different results” (Kajinić 2010, 66). A content analysis of media articles on the Queer Sarajevo Festival by Kajinić reveals that the articles in *Dani* “provide an insight into the ‘battle for Sarajevo’ – a discursive struggle on the meaning of ‘tradition’ in Sarajevo and Bosnia fought between the ‘tradition’ of tolerant multiculturalism and the ‘tradition’ of conservative, heterosexist ethno-nationalism” (Kajinić, 2010, 79). As scholars examining Bosnian identity remarked about Sarajevo:

Cosmopolitanism respects diversity, different religious practices and conditions that maintain their co-existence. However, it can be argued that attempts to retain diversity in Sarajevo exist alongside a much narrower nationalism that seeks to claim ownership of the city for Bosnian Muslims: an instance of one imagination, constructed identity or historical interpretation competing with a different version (Robinson and Pobric 2006, 240).

The controversial debate in the weeks following the festival and the attack centered on the standard gay tropes related to religion and tradition, but it also had an ethno-national component. Svetlana Đurković, who was one of Bosnia’s first LGBT activists, the founder of Organization Q, and who was targeted for her visibility and activism, explained how in the one month run-up to the 2008 Queer Sarajevo Festival (QSF), the conservative media consistently attacked her and her group along traditional religious antigay lines (Đurković 2015). Some antigay opponents specifically invoked ethno-national identity arguing that Đurković and another main organizer, who have Serb names, should go “back to Serbia” (they are both from Bosnia)<sup>20</sup>; they were also called “Četniks.”<sup>21</sup> This illustrates the way in which ethnicity and nationality are mobilized to critique both other ethno-national groups and homosexuality by linking them together, as Đurković (2015) explains: “Anything that is LGBT is not something that is theirs—it belongs to their neighbor nation. In Croatia, they [nationalists] say it [homosexuality] came from Serbia, in Bosnia, they point the finger to another group. ‘This thing can’t possibly be part of us’ [they would say]” (Đurković 2015). Scholars who have examined media coverage of the event also found direct invocations of ethno-nationalism even beyond religion (Pavasović Trost and Sloodmaeckers 2015).

Additionally, the fact that Organization Q did not realize that they scheduled the festival during Ramadan (the Islamic holy month) was fuel to the fire for the antigay activists who claimed that this reinforced the foreignness and antireligious aspects of homosexuality in general and the festival in particular (Anonymous 2014). This scheduling was not intentional, but an oversight (Đurković 2015; Anonymous 2014). The organizers, however, said that any date would be wrong for “queers” in Bosnia (Kajinić 2010, 63). The religious backlash and the threats to LGBT activists illustrates the societal security dilemma given the association made between claimed foreign threats by “opposing” ethno-nationals and homosexuality. The conservative Islamic view can be interpreted as perceiving the public visibility of LGBT people and their identity as a security threat to the Islamic (and Bosniak) identity within Bosnia. This identity is seen as under threat not only due to the war (and its memory), but also present-day politics of the increased claims to

sovereignty and potential secession of *Republika Srpska* and the continued electoral ethnic competition for power.

In terms of a public response, political and religious elites expressed homophobic views, some sympathy for the antigay demonstrators/attackers, and framed the conflict in terms of the West and Europe against national and religious values and identities. For example, the mufti<sup>22</sup> of Mostar condemned the festival and its “propagation of ‘degenerate ideas and that garbage imported from the West’ that puts in danger the values of ‘free society (...) the healthy ideas and healthy life’ of Bosnian normality” (quoted in Kajinić 2010). Other Islamic religious leaders also condemned the event and painted it as foreign and an evil, secular threat to the nation (Causević 2010, 55–57). Bakir Izetbegović, leader at the time of the main Bosniak political party (SDA), said in a television interview about the festival, “We do not need this. This is not something to popularize or show as harmless. This is something that can spread if you allow it to. This should be kept private (‘within four walls’). I know this is a conservative stance, [and] yes we are a conservative party, therefore we have to protect our traditional values” (Jahić 2011). Most significantly, Izetbegović also used the occasion to instrumentalize the suffering of one’s ethno-national group – that is to paint Bosniaks as vulnerable and the *victims* of the LGBT community instead of seeing LGBT individuals as the victim of violence and discrimination: “Muslims in Sarajevo, who have experienced great suffering, are afraid of perversity and afraid that this perversity will become normalized” (Jahić 2011). A Bosnian EU delegation representative reported that he sees religious leaders as staying silent or vocally speaking out against gay rights and that he does not have the impression that they feel they are a part of a “European nation” (EU delegation 2014). These political and religious responses provide evidence for the use of political homophobia, whereby political elites scapegoat sexual minorities as a way to garner and consolidate political authority, especially in the face of threats to sovereignty and security, as in this case of the perspective of the Bosniak nation within an ethnically and territorially divided Bosnia.

Nationalist perspectives that countered LGBT rights and equality also drove another aspect of the government response. The Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees said nothing about the protection of vulnerable groups or minority rights and according to the Sarajevo Open Centre, the Ministry only responded and condemned the attack *after* their organization requested them to make a statement (Vasić 2014). According to an activist with the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, illustrating the nationalist challenge to LGBT rights, the Ministry was “just trying to remain quiet, because in every legal aspect, they were supposed to fight against that violence and discrimination. They are mostly [made up of] of representatives from nationalist parties, and they are very aware that if they do what their task is, they will lose all their support from their national parties” (Schrag 2010, 34). This same sentiment has been echoed by observers from outside the government, such as a human rights officer with the US embassy (US Embassy 2014).

A key activist and coordinator at the Sarajevo Open Center made the link between national identity and societal security directly:

[Imagine you have a] nice Bosniak family, there is the fear of assimilation – [they say] ‘if we don’t fight for our own, they will assimilate us and we will lose our identity.’ You can see on Internet portals the arguments about losing our birth rate and how God created women and man to have children, and that is deeply connected to nationalism – family and ethnic group are the main thing, as it was done in war. We are in the era of primitive nationalism where you have to reproduce to maintain your own. We are still close to the war (Vasić 2015).

In late 2014, the Constitutional Court of Bosnia ruled that the freedom of assembly of LGBT activists at the QSF in 2008 was violated and fines were to be paid to the organizers (Bošnjak 2015). Moreover, another high profile attack occurred on February 1, 2014 when 14 hooded men stormed the Merlinka Film Festival during a panel discussion and assaulted three people (Jukić 2014; Human Rights Watch 2014). While police protection had been secured weeks in advance, and they had been

informed on the day of the event of a Facebook page threatening the festival directly, the authorities were not there when the attack happened (SOC 2014). In this case as well, the Constitutional Court later ruled in late 2018 that freedom of assembly had been violated by the state (SOC 2019). These are two key victories for the LGBT and human rights community. Referring to the 2015 festival, LGBT rights leader Bošnjak said, “They [the police] learned a lesson from last year and resulting from our work with them, they did everything to protect us” (2015). The Merlinka film festival has since been successfully held annually and illustrates the increasing visibility of the LGBT community, however the event still does not carry the same symbolic and public weight that a pride parade or march would have.

### New LGBT Visibility and Rights: Bosnia’s First Pride Parade

A little more than a decade after the first major miscarried attempt at LGBT visibility and rights protection, the environment for LGBT rights and the relationship between the government and the community has improved (as noted earlier concerning legal and status changes). The recent announcement of Bosnia’s first pride parade set for September 8, 2019, is a good point of comparison to QSF and it illustrates another key turning point in LGBT visibility and the politics of LGBT rights; moreover, it gives us a glimpse into the state of the nationalist challenge specifically via elite and public discourse and response. In LGBT rights literature, pride parades have been perceived by external actors and some activists in Europeanizing states (such as neighboring EU candidate state Serbia) as an important litmus test for democracy, human rights, and LGBT rights progress (despite debate about this standard) (Ejdus and Božović 2016; Sloopmaeckers 2017). In Bosnia specifically, Vladana Vasić, a longtime activist, advocacy coordinator for SOC, and one of the pride organizers, considers it a litmus test for “democracy and freedom of assembly” given the continuing violations of this right for multiple marginalized communities including the LGBT one (Vasić 2019). Having a successful pride parade is even more important in Bosnia, since it is the only country in the wider region to *not* have attempted or successfully held one.<sup>23</sup>

There was great media coverage surrounding the Bosnian Pride announcement and some in the media drew explicit comparisons between the 2008 QSF festival and pride, for example, the headline “The first Sarajevo Queer Festival was brutally squashed in 2008, everyone is asking what will happen now (or this time)?” (Beganović 2019). Another columnist noted, “10 years after the crushed Queer Festival, one can say, finally, it’s about time!” (Bazdulj 2019). A member of the Pride Organizing Committee also sees a key connection to 2008: “This event shows how far activism has come and how far the community has come in resisting violence and discrimination and not letting it scare us” (Vasić 2019). Moreover, Vasić sees a legal connection since the Constitutional Court, as noted above, ruled twice against the government on LGBT freedom of assembly:

These two events are the foundations we are basing the Pride Parade on. Violence happened then and given how the police acted and how they were then fined and held accountable, this has made Pride possible today. They recognize they will be held accountable by their own institutions and also by the international community if they don’t support it. They understand now that freedom of assembly is a human rights issue (Vasić 2019).

This important point also gives support to the argument within the LGBT rights literature and in this research that nationalist backlash and antigay resistance by both the public and officials can paradoxically encourage, over time, stronger activism and improve norm visibility (Ayoub 2016; O’Dwyer 2018; Swimelar 2017). The goals of pride are many: to empower the community and raise awareness, speak out against violence, build better connections with other marginalized groups, demand equal access to public spaces, promote better discussions with the government, and to show people [from the LGBT community] that they are not alone (Bazdulj 2019; Vasić 2019). For the LGBT community itself, this event is one of the most important of their activism and also should be seen as an explicitly political event that could contribute to faster political changes (Krajišnik 2019).

An important example of the arguments presented here is how the LGBT community and the queer identity represent a direct attempt to resist the ethnicization of Bosnia. The 15-member organizing committee is comprised of individuals from all groups and parts of Bosnia, and while this was not intentional, and the members are already from many different activist sectors in the country beyond LGBT, Vasić, one of the organizers, makes clear that the aim is to make pride multiethnic, civic, and inclusive. “Our Pride is called Bosnia and Herzegovina Pride (not Sarajevo Pride); it is Pride for the whole country not tied to any city or one entity. We want to use it as a unifying factor - there is enough division in BiH [Bosnia] and this parade can at least show the community from all the parts [of the country]” (Vasić 2019). She also ambitiously sees pride as having broader political and social goals for Bosnia’s nascent civic social movement sectors that aim to cross ethnic lines and resist ethnic politics:

Our movement can be the unifying factor for human rights. [It will be] unique because of our diversity and inclusion. We want to make a statement that this is one country, our country, and we don’t want to get involved in entity politics. Usually when you have social justice movements, they happen in two entities separately. We believe BiH can be better together. Pride doesn’t have to always be in Sarajevo, [it starts here because it is the biggest city], but next year maybe Banja Luka or Tuzla, somewhere else, but the same pride every time.

The proposed event has been praised by the European Union, reminding Bosnia of their European obligations on freedom of assembly and LGBT rights, and by some commentators in the *Oslobodjenje* newspaper (“Delegacija Evropske Unie” 2019), but Vasić is clear to state that pride is not funded or organized by outsiders, a key point since nationalist critics often lambast the LGBT movement as “foreign” and “imposed” (Vasić 2019). The public discourse and debate surrounding the pride parade can be analyzed and compared to what we saw a decade ago. Importantly, compared to the time of the QSF festival where no public institution came to the defense of the LGBT community, at this pride announcement, Bosnia’s Human Rights Ombudsmen released an official statement of support of LGBT rights, in particularly calling out the rights to freedom of assembly and expression (Ombudsmeni osuduju 2019).

In terms of negative responses, the most important summary point is that while the expected conservative, religious, and nationalist actors expressed their dislike or opposition to pride, their discourse either aimed to balance and soften it with supportive human rights language or their opposition fit the more traditional “threat to the family” frame and less the “threat to the nation” frame as argued earlier. For example, the main conservative ethnic Bosniak ruling party in Sarajevo, SDA, began by asserting that every citizen in Bosnia must have the same rights regardless of sexual orientation, but then went on to state that “in a society like ours that believes in fundamental values to preserve the family, LGBT public parades should not be organized because they will deepen the gap between people who have different understandings and this will not help human rights gain any new value” (SDA 2019). Chairman of the Sarajevo Canton Assembly Elmedin Konaković stated that he didn’t support the parade because he was “brought up in a traditional way, in the spirit of faith,” but that he was against violence (BBC News 2019). Furthermore, Sarajevo Imam Velić warned on social media networks that if pride participants have the ability to take over public space, the next step will be that they enter private spaces and target children and take them for their partners (Buturović 2019).

The most widely covered negative public response was by a member of the Sarajevo Canton assembly, Samra Cosović-Hajdarević, who said on her Facebook page (which was subsequently blocked and then deleted) (Vasić 2019) that LGBT people should seek their rights somewhere else and that, “Everyone has the right to live how they want and we have the right to choose with whom we want to live. I wish people like these would isolate and remove themselves as far as possible from our kids and our society” (“Nakon što” Avaz, 2019). Finally, former SDA leader and President Bakir Izetbegović, compared to a decade ago, toned down his opposition saying that while he does not

know why pride is necessary, everyone's rights should be supported. According to pride organizer Vasić, this is a huge shift from 2008 and something that they can "work with" (2019).

While these public responses are still negative, they are notably different and less nationalist than the discourse from a decade ago. Political parties and leaders are asserting and reinforcing the *human rights norms* of LGBT people, even if at the same time they condemn their actions. One might not see this as much progress, but in the constructivist literature on human rights norm socialization, this is significant since it shows increased norm empowerment through discourse argumentation even if the comments are negative (Risse et al 1999; Swimelar 2017). Pride organizer Vasić made this clear:

The way people are talking about pride, the response is less hateful, no one is disputing that these are human rights; they say, 'I am religious and moral and I'm against it,' but no one is using rhetoric against human rights and no one is saying 'these people are not from here,' (as we saw a decade ago). [In general] there is a lot less of them [nationalists] and the media doesn't cover them as much (Vasić 2019).

A prominent and well-respected Bosniak political commentator, for example, said on television that while he is religious and against pride, he is also for human rights and freedom, and that if Muslims want their freedom, then LGBT people should also have theirs (Vasić 2019). Even the conservative Bosniak *Dnevi Avaz* surprisingly published a commentary by a Bosnian writer who supports the Pride Parade and says this will help Bosnia become a "normal society," which I argue can be interpreted to mean a normal European society (Isović 2019).

Despite the positive shifts in discourse, the sampling of negative responses still fits a familiar religious and nationalist frame outlined here with the emphasis on "our society" or our faith which speaks to a particular identity group and that does not encompass all identities within Bosnia. The emphasis on "traditional family values" and other common homophobic arguments and tropes are familiar across the region and globally. When it comes to the level of perceived threat by homosexuality, I argue that these nationalist discourses today may indicate more use of the more traditional "threat to the family" frame more than a "threat to the nation" frame (Ayoub 2015; Swimelar 2018). Given that antigay arguments focused on perceived threats to children and family are more common among ethno and religious nationalists of all types, this may be one surprising area of commonality. However, it is too early to conclude based on the one announcement of a major event that the nationalist challenge to LGBT rights has significantly waned, given the continued strength and institutionalization of ethno-nationalism in Bosnia (and continued related security threats). Nevertheless, there is some evidence that perhaps nationalist leaders are at least strategically downplaying more extreme homophobic discourse like we heard during and after the QSF.

## Conclusions

This article has contributed to the literature on nationalism and LGBT rights through an analysis of how ethno-nationalism functions as a challenge to LGBT rights in Bosnia given Bosnia's conflicted postwar identity, weak democracy and state identity, institutionalized ethno-nationalism, and its complicated relationship to Europe. This research also has added value by applying concepts such as the societal security dilemma, political homophobia, and threat perceptions of homosexuality to the Bosnian case. If sexual minorities assert visibility and security of their identity, then this may be perceived by ethno-nationalists as a threat to their identity and hence they may seek to enhance their own identities. This fear of loss of security and identity is particularly salient for Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks) given their post-war trauma of a victim identity, and the continued use of fear, separatist rhetoric and policy proposals, and even questioning the facts of the Srebrenica genocide by Serb nationalist leaders in the RS. (Kovacević 2018; Mujanović 2019b; Sito-Sučić 2018). This continues a societal security dilemma between ethnic groups, which reveals that nationalism is still a force.



The main mechanism by which nationalism has been a challenge and a constraint to LGBT rights is through denying their legitimacy or visibility and presenting them as a threat to the nation and a threat to the family; this is specifically illustrated in antigay nationalist attacks on two public LGBT festivals, and the nationalist public discourse and weak government action in response analyzed in this article. The weak Bosnian central state, weak civic national identity, and the power sharing between ethno-national political elites and their respective political parties has served to make human rights issues that do not have an ethno-national component, and LGBT rights in particular, somewhat irrelevant and often violated in practice. As argued here, and in support of LGBT rights scholarship, ethno-nationalists used a “threat to the nation” frame infused with religious elements regarding homosexuality.

The case study of the Queer Sarajevo Festival and the attack was a flashpoint and turning point that illustrates the competing identities and nationalisms within Bosnia, specifically in Sarajevo. It provided a good starting point to examine contemporary LGBT activist attempts at visibility and the competing identity discourses between nationalism and Europeaness or European identity. This case revealed that religious ethno-nationalists sought to use the festival and attack as an example of the abandoning of traditional values and Bosniak and Muslim identities, threats to their nation and identity, and the elevation of foreign, imported, and “dangerous” norms and identities related to homosexuality. This narrative was countered by those who emphasized the European, multicultural, and cosmopolitan identity of Sarajevo and Bosnia and the desire to support tolerance for all identities regardless of their ethno-national affiliations. The backlash and media debate revealed that the LGBT community and issues were gaining in public visibility, but that the strength of ethno-nationalism was a constraint that activists, policymakers, and even the European Union hoping for increased progress had to confront.<sup>24</sup>

While nationalism has presented challenges to norm visibility and empowerment, its effects should not be overstated or seen as deterministic since there has been progress and increased LGBT norm empowerment in Bosnia, especially since 2015 when the government first started communicating directly with the LGBT NGO sector, the antidiscrimination law was amended, and new hate crimes legislation was adopted in the Federation. Another key development is that in late 2018 the Federation government agreed to form a committee to examine and create a bill for same-sex unions (Telegraph RS 2018). This stemmed from both the Europeanization process, pressure from NGOs such as SOC, but also because regular citizens themselves tried to register their marriages (from abroad) and were denied (Telegraph RS 2018; Vasić 2015).

As the case of the recent pride parade announcement illustrates, the nationalist challenge may be changing and lessening in terms of threat perception of LGBT rights whereby a more standard “threat to the family” is being used instead of discourse of hate speech and claims that homosexuality is directly harming one’s ethnic identity and community. Discourse centers on traditional values, morality, and concern for children, rather than more hateful discourse about the survival and harm to the nation more broadly. The pride case reveals that nationalists may now be using creative discourse strategies and arguments to still show their opposition to LGBT visibility, yet at the same time to claim support for human rights. From the perspective of one of the central LGBT activists, this is an important shift and evidence of relative progress (Vasić 2019). This strategy is not surprising as it fits the constructivist human rights norm socialization literature regarding the power of argumentative discourse and framing mechanisms (Risse, Ropp, and Sikink 1999). We find similar tactics and trends occurring in Serbia and Croatia regarding the relationship between nationalism and LGBT rights (Swimelar 2018). Despite recent shifts and improvements in the public discourse on this issue, and given that it is too early to make definitive conclusions, I maintain that the institutionalization and strength of ethno-nationalism (and, *inter alia*, weak democracy) still presents constraints to LGBT rights, is resistant to alternative non-ethnic identities, and makes civic social activism a difficult long term political project (especially since entity and ethnic identity politics do not show signs of abatement, as noted above).

Future research would benefit from examining other local or regional expressions and dynamics of ethno-nationalism vis-à-vis LGBT rights, specifically in the Serb Republic and Bosnian Croat

majority areas and to continue to examine LGBT communities as they change and progress, particularly in the light of the much anticipated pride parade. We would also benefit from looking at cases beyond the Balkans to compare trends over time related to ethno-nationalist challenges. Additionally, fruitful research exists in investigating how activists can frame and develop strategies for future activism based on contested identities and unique nationalist challenges. Bosnian nationalism has been and continues to be a thorn in the side of LGBT rights and visibility, but it is not an insurmountable obstacle.

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## Notes

- 1 Bosnia finally was able to submit its formal application for membership in February 2016, but they are still waiting to hear an official response from the EU.
- 2 Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. This article uses the acronym “LGBT” due to its widespread usage by the European Union, governments in the region, and NGOs and activists themselves even though this research mainly speaks of visibility of gays and lesbians in Bosnia.
- 3 EU leverage and conditionality upon Bosnia as a potential candidate country has played a positive role in LGBT norm empowerment in Bosnia and in other candidate and potential candidate states, but that is *not* the focus of this article. See O’Dwyer 2018 and Swimelar 2017.
- 4 Discourse analysis can be understood as “the qualitative and interpretive recovery of meaning from the language that actors use to describe and understand social phenomena” within a specific socially constructed context (Abdelal et al 2006, 702).
- 5 While negative opinions about homosexuality seem to have been holding steady, it should be noted that these public opinion surveys cannot be directly compared as they were done by different survey research organizations that may have been using different methodologies and questions.
- 6 For example, in Serbia, where we see LGBT rights framed more as a “threat to the nation,” (in addition to the family), Kahlina (2015) has revealed how *Dveri* has used the “white plague” argument of an existential threat to the nation in terms of reproduction, which they claim the state is ignoring in favor of “taking care of one aggressive minority group.”
- 7 The Census in 1991: 43.5% of Bosnia’s then 4.4 million people declared themselves Muslims, 31.2% Serbs and 17.4% Croats. More than five percent said they were “Yugoslav.” See <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bosnia-census/in-first-census-since-war-bosnias-others-threaten-ethnic-order-idUSBRE98Q0DT20130927>.
- 8 Bosniak (or Bosniac) is a term with a mostly secular meaning to refer to the national group of Bosnian Muslims who consider themselves as a distinct nation.
- 9 2013 Bosnian Census: <http://popis2013.ba/popis2013/doc/Popis2013prvoIzdanje.pdf>.
- 10 The only political party in Bosnia to officially support LGBT rights is the small progressive civic oriented post-ethnic *Nasa Stranka* (“our party”). See Touquet 2011.
- 11 Out of the total population, 92% of Bosnian Serbs live in the RS, while 88% of Bosniaks and 91% of Croats live in the Federation. Official census data: <http://popis2013.ba/>.
- 12 Moreover, many Bosnian Serbs identify more with Serbia where identity divergence with Europe is more part of Serbia’s state identity. See Subotić 2011.
- 13 In this same survey, 88% of the citizens supported EU membership and 86% had a positive opinion about the EU.  
In terms of cooperation with EU standards and laws, a surprising 93% believed that it was necessary to implement EU reforms for Bosnia’s integration.
- 14 This case study features the tensions between Bosniak ethno-nationalism or more specifically religious (Islamic) nationalism given that the Q festival took place in Sarajevo, a strong Muslim

- majority city where it would be unlikely for Serb or Croat (minority) nationalists (groups or leaders) to be central to a public debate of this kind.
- 15 Kajinić (2010) stated that, “the Queer Sarajevo festival might easily be the most passionately discussed and the shortest-lived festival in Bosnian history.”
  - 16 This is aside from North Macedonia where the first attempt was cancelled due to violence and the second is slated to take place June 29, 2019.
  - 17 Another major problem was that the media misrepresented the festival as a “pride parade” which even today, is widely seen by activists and international community representatives as something that Bosnia is not ready for.
  - 18 According to one of the event organizers, the conservative Islamic newspaper SAFF was involved in the coordination of the protest by the religious nationalists/Wahabbis.
  - 19 Đurković moved to the United States a couple years after the attack partly due to the difficulties and fear of being such a public LGBT activist.
  - 20 This semantic ethnic cleansing has been common where people with Croat or Serb names who are Bosnian are often told to leave the country even though they are not from Croatia or Serbia.
  - 21 “Četnik” is the derogatory term used for nationalist Serbs during the Balkan wars.
  - 22 An Islamic legal expert or jurist empowered to give rulings on religious matters.
  - 23 This is aside from North Macedonia where the first attempt was cancelled due to violence and the second is slated to take place June 29, 2019.
  - 24 The arguments in this article should not be taken to mean that attitudes toward Europeanization, Europe, and the form and levels of ethno-nationalism are static. They can change and vary over time and in relationship to the calculation of political and social costs and thus provide different potential challenges to LGBT rights or wider human rights norm diffusion.

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