

M. A. Thesis Evaluation

Milena Aćimovac: Domination of Ethnic Identity in Post-Dayton Bosnia and

Hercegovina, M. A. Thesis, International Political and Economic Studies - Charles University – Faculty of Social Sciences, Prague 2012, 67 pgs.

František Šístek, M. A., Ph. D.
(thesis supervisor)

The M. A. thesis of Milena Aćimovac focuses primarily on the petrification and reproduction of nationalist identity discourses in contemporary Bosnia and Hercegovina. The fact that Bosnian society has been deeply divided along ethnic lines since the Dayton agreement, or rather since the outbreak of the war in 1992, is well known and has been repeatedly documented by scholarly literature. However, when it comes to contemporary demonstrations of ethnic identity and nationalist bias in public discourse or the mindset of the youngest generation which grew up in the post-Dayton period, there is definitely a need for further research and evaluation. In this respect, the topic of the thesis was well-chosen.

In the opening pages of her work, M. Aćimovac outlines the sources and methodology (pgs. 20-30). She tackles some of the key notions which will be further used throughout the text (ethnicity, nation-building, primordialism vs. Instrumentalism, media discourse theories). In each sub-section, she mentions some important authorities in the field and their works, however, her selection seems somewhat random and it is not altogether clear why she chooses some authors and their theories, while omitting many others, whose work could be potentially also relevant.

Further section of the text is dedicated the description of the pre-war situation, the period of armed conflict (1992-1995) and the Dayton Peace Agreement. It is always difficult to summarize the main issues which contributed to the present-day situation in the turbulent period from the late 1980s until the late 1990s, let alone the numerous claims, counterclaims and subsequent scholarly explanations of the ethnic conflict in Bosnia and Hercegovina, in a space of a few pages. When it comes to the sources of the conflict which are relevant for her own topic, the author failed to mention the relatively rigid tendency towards proportional representation in most spheres of political and public life of the republic during the socialist era. Strong emphasis on the “just“ and “equal“ representation of Muslims, Serbs and Croats in state institutions in post-WWII socialist Bosnia and Hercegovina certainly helped to enforce the importance of ethnic identity more than some other phenomena mentioned by Milena Aćimovac, such as the concept of the neighborhood (*komšiluk*), coffee drinking culture etc.

The thesis of Milena Aćimovac is more convincing when she finally focuses on the discourse analysis of the two public TV channels (the official state channels of Republika Srpska and the Bosniak-Croat federal entity) in January 2012. The chosen period of one month is relatively short, but has nevertheless provided valuable material due to the culmination of important events and anniversaries whose interpretation tellingly illustrated the differences between the dominant media discourse in both entities. The careful, detailed analysis of the mutually exclusive images of the past and stereotypical representations of the other, including not only the “textual“ message but also secondary non-verbal messages such as facial expression of the presenters, arguably represents the best part of the thesis.

The last section of the thesis provides a very different attempt at capturing the main features of the long-term national polarization, this time through questionnaires. The author claims that she distribute 100 questionnaires to young people from both entities and that all three major ethnic groups were represented. However, relatively limited space is provided for the analysis of the results and only a few voices are heard out of the alleged one hundred questionnaires. This is somewhat disappointing, since the several voices she cites do provide an insight into the mindset of the young generation growing up in post-Dayton Republika Srpska. Overall, the survey was well-intended, but the final results have not been sufficiently analyzed and presented.

In the final conclusions, M. Aćimovac inevitably presents a picture of an internally divided country where national polarization continues to influence the media discourse, politics as well as thinking of individual citizens. As a possible means of overcoming the current situation of a permanently frozen conflict, she believes in the power forgetting over time and most importantly in a possible solution through economic progress, which has a potential to unify the people more than political discourse.

Overall, the thesis of Milena Aćimovac is strongest in the detailed analysis of the media discourse. She has demonstrated a knowledge of both foreign and local secondary literature, however, the criteria for choosing some relevant authors while ignoring others who might be equally relevant for her topic remained unclear. It is regrettable that her M. A. thesis did not, due to time-management during the research and writing period, receive more time to “ferment“, which could certainly result in improving the weaker points and developing some arguments and sections to a more satisfactory level. On the other hand, the resulting work, with above stated objections, does meet the standards required for an M. A. thesis.

Recommended grade: C

František Šístek, Ph. D., Department of Russian and East-European Studies, FSV UK

Prague, August 13, 2012