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Navigating Exclusion as Enemies of the State: The Case of Serbs in Croatia and Croats in Serbia

Dustin Tsai 

Geography Graduate Group, University of California, Davis, California, USA

ABSTRACT

Since the break-up of Yugoslavia, Croatia and Serbia have emerged as nationalist states that serve the political interests of ethnic Croats and Serbs, respectively. Despite these regime shifts, historical communities of Croatian Serbs and Serbian Croats still remain within these states. This paper sheds light on the experiences of these minority groups who embody ideological threats to their regimes' nationalist goals. I argue that Serbs in Croatia are heavily marginalised by dominant political narratives that have cast them to bear the brunt of the state's post-war grievances. As a result, they experience institutional discrimination that limits their range of economic and social opportunities. Conversely, Croats in Serbia face less explicit prejudice, though post-war stigmas have pushed many to redefine their ethnic affiliations. Both minority groups are experiencing a steady population decline as the rise in nationalist rhetoric has dissolved their rootedness to these territories. This paper examines a majority-minority dynamic in the context of the literature on modern 'ethnocratic' states and presents a case study for how ethnic minorities navigate through social prejudices and find ways to negotiate access to participation in everyday society, given the structural exclusion from institutions they face as communities deemed hostile by their state.

Introduction

Ethnic Serbs who live in Croatia (known as *Croatian Serbs*) as well as ethnic Croats who reside in Serbia (known as *Serbian Croats*) comprise minority groups in two nationalistic states reconstituted only in the last few decades after the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Both communities experienced a demotion of political status following Yugoslavia's collapse with their successor states – Croatia and Serbia – having reclassified them as 'new' national minorities (i.e. *narodni*) rather than the federally-equal constituent peoples they formerly were under the socialist state's model (Woelk 2012). Language policies reflect this change as the once-standardised Serbo-Croatian language has long been removed in favour of local dialects, such as Croatia's adoption of *Shtokavian* as its basis for a modern Croatian

CONTACT Dustin Tsai  dysai@ucdavis.edu  Geography Graduate Group, University of California, Davis, California, USA

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language (Bugarski 2004). While the governments of Serbia and Croatia have introduced elected national minority councils meant for minority representation (Korhecz 2019), dominant groups within both states still view these communities with suspicion as their political allegiance and motivations are often questioned in post-war politics (O'Loughlin, 2010). Serbs in Croatia and Croats in Serbia face structural hurdles in citizenship and political rights, where they have become all but invisible in the wake of Yugoslavia's transition from a federal republic to contemporary ethnocratic successor states (Koska, 2012).

Prior to its declaration of independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, Serbs once accounted for nearly 15% of Croatia's population. Viewed as a threat by nationalists to the future and stability of an independent state, their numbers plummeted following the violent ousting they endured during Croatia's war for independence (Blitz 2005). Serbs today only comprise around 4% of Croatia's population, and their community figures have veritably declined as a result of the conflict (BBC 2013; Tatalović 2006). The Serbs who remain live at the margins of Croatian society, having been relegated to a position of non-belonging as ethno-religious 'others' in a post-war Croatian identity largely built around Catholicism (O'Loughlin, J. 2010). Croatian Serbs face notable prejudice, fuelled by fresh memories of the war coupled with state-sanctioned revisionist portrayals of Serbs as 'historical aggressors' to which Croat nationalists fought against in 'self-defence' (DellaVigna et al. 2014; Pavlaković 2014; Sokolić 2017).

Serbian Croats, prior to the war, comprised one of the oldest established minority communities in northern Serbia, having settled in the Vojvodina region from as early as the 17th century (Kovacevic et al. 2010). Similarly to how Croatian Serbs experienced systematic expulsion, approximately half of Serbia's Croat population was driven out as the conflict in the 1990s also brought violence and harassment to their communities (Guzina 2000). Today, they represent fewer than one percent of Serbia's population, though their presence in the north (Vojvodina) remains slightly higher at around 3% (Kovacevic et al. 2010). Many Serbian Croats who remain have chosen to ethnically identify as *Bunjevci*, a medieval sub-group of Croats, in order to distance themselves from the modern Croatian nation (Todosijevic 2002). This identity shift has made it difficult to discern the true number of Croats remaining in Serbia, as many Bunjevci reject all associations with Croatia while, prior to the conflicts, they may have solely identified as Croat in Yugoslavia's census (Purger 2012). The increase in Bunjevci identification showcases the prejudice Serbian Croats face as newfound minorities in a post-war Serbia (Simkus 2007). In the span of a few decades, this historical community has also faded in visibility, accelerated by the disappearance of viable Croatian-language institutions in a post-war Serbia (Kovacevic et al. 2010).

The Issue with Governing Heterogeneity

As the modern state has become much less coterminous with the traditional 'nation-state' paradigm, contemporary states today are faced with questions concerning how to properly govern their internally diverse populations. Barring exceptionally homogenous cases such as South Korea or Tunisia, most contemporary states grapple with having to balance the interests of an ethnically and/or linguistically diverse population. India and Ethiopia, for instance, have governments that preside over a hundred different ethno-linguistic groups each. Both have structured federal systems that, while democratic, highly privilege a dominant group. Hindi-speaking groups have ruled India since its partitioning (Jaffrelot 2017) as have the Amharas in Ethiopia, whose eponymous language serves as the state's official lingua franca (Mehretu 2012). Ethnically diverse states often contend with issues of inequality that persist between their internal groups (Keller 2002).

The geographical literature identifies a dynamic in states where a dominant group views certain ethnic minorities within its borders as being 'hostile' towards its goals. Oren Yiftachel (1999) calls these states 'ethnocratic' regimes – a distinct type that, being neither democratic nor authoritarian, seeks to promote the *ethnicization* of contested territory using a hegemonic core. Sociologist Sammy Smooha (1990) similarly identifies 'ethnic democracies' as a type of governance that combines democratic institutions with an ethnic group that maintains a distinct hegemony over all others. While what constitutes as 'democratic governance' varies between the two ideas, both theories highlight a pattern of states that disproportionately serve the interests of a single ethnic group at the expense of marginalising others. Minority groups within these states are viewed as ideological threats to the ethnic majority served by the state apparatus. Israel's treatment of its Arab minority, for instance, serves as an archetypal case for this dynamic – one which has been abundantly scrutinised (see inter alia Berent 2010; Harel-Shalev and Peleg 2014; Peled 2005; Peled and Scham 2005; Yiftachel 1992). Others have co-opted this model for exploring the hegemonic structures of Nepal (Hangen 2009), Malaysia (Wade 2009), and post-Soviet Estonia and Latvia (Graham 1996). Institutional inequities faced by minorities in ethnocratic states include being barred from holding public office (Sautman 2004) or enterprising in business matters (Howard 2012), and the literature continues to identify many of the legal and economic hurdles these groups face across various regional cases from Hong Kong (Ip 2015) to post-Soviet Kazakhstan (Senggirbay 2019).

Ethnocratic states are sophisticated in their implementation of exclusionary policies towards minority groups, oftentimes in highly paradoxical and contradictory ways (Kulavkova 2018). These policies create and sustain inequalities between ethnic, religious, or linguistic groups that foster resentment – oftentimes violent in nature – which only serve to reinforce these inequities

(Houle 2015; Stewart 2008). Simply put, an ethnocracy is a system of governance in which one ethnic group preeminently rules at the expense of others (Yiftachel 1999).

The Rise of Ethnocratic Governance in the Post-Yugoslavia Landscape

Croatia and Serbia today are paramount examples of modern ethnocratic regimes: both states fit the description of promoting the interests of a dominant ethnic group (e.g. Croats within Croatia, Serbs within Serbia) while also bearing a democratic façade. Akin to Israel's archetypal case as a Jewish nation-state, both Croatia's Catholic Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church are inextricably intertwined with the political institutions of both states. Yugoslavian ethnic minorities are either excluded from these nation-states' branding or viewed as threats, with Serb and Croat minority communities posing the largest ideological challenges to Croatia and Serbia's ethnocratic regimes, respectively.

During Yugoslavia's collapse in the 1990s, an abundant amount of literature sprung up to document the plight of these minority groups amidst the precarities of war (see *inter alia* Bowman 1994; Budding 1997; Greenberg 1996; Varady 1993). After the war, various works arose documenting the refugee resettlement process, such as Croatia's repatriation policies against Serbs who sought to return and the policy hurdles they faced in reintegrating (Blitz 2008, 2003; Djuric 2010; Kibreab 2003). Other works have included discussions on how Croatian Serb refugees have assimilated into Serbian society (Dragojević 2013; Koska 2015; Mesic and Bagic 2010). Outside of a thematic focus on displaced populations, very little has been written on the Serb and Croat minority communities that have remained in Croatia and Serbia, respectively, long after the war. What has happened to these communities in the decades since the war and how has regime change impacted their everyday lives?

The experiences of Croatian Serbs and Serbian Croats who still remain in their pre-war spaces are quite understudied in the post-war ethnic literature. Moreover, a comparative framework that contrasts the contemporary experiences of Croatian Serbs to Serbian Croats, as minorities in ethnocratic states, is noticeably absent in the literature. What makes these two minority groups worth comparing are the temporal parallels in which they were historically established and later displaced. They are both centuries-old communities that suffered ethnic cleansing during a war whereby nationalists on both sides sought to pawn them for the spaces in which they occupied. Those who persisted in their homelands after the war experienced parallel regime changes that have relegated them to a minority status within ethnocratic governments. Because these groups have been reciprocally stigmatised by their new states, juxtaposing the experiences of Croatian Serbs to Serbian Croats provides

a compelling comparison for how Croatia and Serbia (two states born out of the same conflict) have evolved as ethnocratic states.

Furthermore, most of the theoretical examinations of ethnocratic regimes are framed at a structural level without much discussion paid to how minorities face processes of social exclusion on a day-to-day basis. Longva (2005) has enriched the literature in this way with her qualitative work on the social alienation foreign migrant workers face in Kuwait, though her contribution specifically informs the immigrant-citizen dynamic. For the non-immigrant minorities that the ethnocratic literature describes, there exists a need for a closer examination of the types of social exclusion they face. This complements the ethnocratic state literature with an understanding of how the various patterns of state-sanctioned exclusion imposed against a single group, as detailed in the literature, play out at an interpersonal scale between individuals. How does the ethnocratic exclusion of minority groups shape how these groups – in turn – interact with their state majorities? Do these individuals find ways to negotiate inclusion or do they seek outright separation from the dominant society? Understanding the behaviour of these groups advances the literature from its current view of ethnocratic minorities as passive groups acted upon by the state to understanding how they navigate through these exclusions as active agents of society. This also, in part, helps us better understand why these groups persist in their spaces and the methods behind how they adapt within a seemingly hostile political environment. This paper utilises a comparative case study between the prejudices Croatian Serbs and Serbian Croats face to shed light on how two ethnocratic minority groups manage their social exclusions in myriad ways.

Methodology

Documenting social exclusion requires a thorough understanding of the everyday lives of those afflicted. The most effective way to assess this is through in-depth interviews that shed light on specific anecdotal experiences. Extended interviews also allow individuals to actively share and reflect on their experiences in an unrestricted format that is conducive to inductive data collection. One primary consideration behind my research design was how to conduct the initial recruitment of individuals to interview. Croatian Serbs and Serbian Croats not only account for fewer than 4% and 1% of their respective state populations but are also highly stigmatised minority groups. This makes traditional probability sampling for these groups difficult due to their overall lack of visibility in addition to representing very small numbers relative to the general population. Using non-probability sampling in this case is more practical for hidden or hard-to-reach populations where membership may involve some form of stigma (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). This type of sampling is regularly employed when dealing with sensitive populations,

such as illicit subgroups in public health (e.g. drug users) or public policy (e.g. undocumented immigrants) (Heckathorn 2011; Semaan et al. 2009; Sudman and Kalton et al. 1986). I therefore utilised a Respondent-Driven Sampling method (RDS) which involved the convenience sampling of initial subjects followed by snowball sampling – using initial contacts as ‘seeds’ through which subsequent subjects were then recruited (Heckathorn 1997). Since Croatian Serb communities are clustered in the Lika region of central Croatia and Serbian Croats are mostly found in the Vojvodina region of northern Serbia, I recruited the majority of my participants by travelling within these two regions. I subsequently tapped into a network of Croatian Serbs scattered all throughout the country, while all the Serbian Croats I spoke to lived solely in the Vojvodina province, where their percentages mirror that of Croatian Serbs (3% and 4% respectively). Outside of Vojvodina, Serbian Croats comprise fewer than 0.3% of Serbia’s population (Kovacevic et al. 2010) and are therefore not represented by this paper.

Through this fieldwork, I interviewed a total of 14 Croatian Serbs and 10 Serbian Croats – many of whom live precarious lives and are wary of being socially ‘outed’ as ethnic minorities. Most are able to ‘pass’ as a part of the majority in both accent and everyday speech due to their socialisation and upbringing; their names and religious affiliations, however, are much more difficult to conceal, and many live peculiar double lives of embodying one group while performatively acting as another. The immense data I collected from these interviews provides a glimpse into the politically sensitive lives of Croatian Serbs and Serbian Croats – some of whom live lives free of discrimination while others remain socially isolated and ostracised. This data brings to light the experiences of minorities who remain subjected to social stigma within ethnocratic regimes and the various methods of coping many employ in order to negotiate their participation in a hostile society.

Croatian Serbs (i.e. Serbs Living in Croatia)

Straddled along Croatia’s western coast is the city of Rijeka, the country’s principal seaport. Given its long maritime history as a central port, the city attracts a large number of regional labourers, drawn to work on its dockyards and shipbuilding industries. Among these, I encountered a 30-year-old Croatian Serb dockworker, who grew up in central Croatia (Lika) and moved to the coast for construction work five years prior. Despite his years spent living in the city, he has yet to ‘out’ himself as a Serb to those around him. He cautiously disclosed this to me in secret while on a lunch break one afternoon:

“I moved here five years ago for work and nobody knows that I am Serbian. I am afraid to tell anyone, because I don’t want them to judge me ... I have friends here that I work

with for years. We cook together, drink together, we are good friends, but I cannot ever tell them. I don't know what will happen if I do – maybe they had a parent or somebody die during the war ... I am always afraid of thinking about how others will look at me, so I am afraid to tell other people ... it is scary.”

Surprised by his candour, this young man divulged to me an ethnic identity he believed would create negative social backlash around him, despite his own upbringing in Croatia and never having set foot personally in Serbia. His own cautiousness about his identity demonstrates the weight ethno-religious affiliation has over how others perceive him, despite his own upbringing in Croatian society. Croatian Serbs have long inhabited the region for centuries, yet in his mind, others perceive ethnic identity as more important than his own personal rootedness to Croatia, reflecting the social and political changes the conflicts of the 1990s has had on shifting centuries-old feelings of belonging.

“My parents speak Serbian, but I speak Croatian. I grew up here – I speak like a Croatian. I don't know nothing about Serbia – I have never been [there] – this is my country. But you do not know what it is like to live in a country that rejects you, that never accepts you ... before during Yugoslavia, it was fine, we had no problems here. My family has been here since 1600s, almost 500 years we lived here, but the war changed everything. It suddenly made us different here ... part of a place that we do not belong to ... growing up here was so difficult ... they never accept me as part of the country, so I don't really belong anywhere and it's a terrible feeling.”

Being from a small village of predominantly Serbs, this man grew up being able to regularly alternate between Serbian and Croatian dialects depending on who he was in the presence of. This method of ‘code switching’ has enabled him to live within two worlds that he feels stuck between. Despite being performatively Croatian in every way, the cognitive dissonance of knowing one's own personal identity in contrast with one's outward identity is difficult to mitigate, as he suggests. The identity crises throughout his upbringing subsequently made him choose to hide his Serb identity when he moved to Rijeka as an adult. While this has allowed him to evade discrimination in his new city, the sheer burden of having to conceal oneself has created a deep internal rift in how he views his personal relationships with others.

“They cannot tell that I am Serbian based on my name because I have a typical Croatian name and a surname popular in Dalmacija. But I am Orthodox, I was raised Orthodox – it is a big part of my identity ... I have to lie about being sick every year to take time off for Serbian Christmas. The Catholic Christmas is 25 of December as you know, but our Christmas is in January. Last year, I said I wasn't feeling well and I need a few days off. Every year I do that, because it is better to do that than to tell them that I am Serbian.”

One thing that set this man apart from others I encountered was his ability to pass as a Croat in any way he chose to. While some names are quintessentially Serb or Croat in origin, others are more ambiguous and not easily differentiated by ethnicity. Based on these conversations, the ability to pass off as

another group by name alone allows some Croatian Serbs the privilege of selectively choosing when to invoke their identity and when to obfuscate it. This man's religious identity, however, has pushed him to take more drastic steps in avoiding detection, including regularly feigning illness in order to take time off for Serbian Orthodox holidays.

“I have a friend from my village who got a Ph.D. and now works for a good firm, but he cannot ever move to the highest level positions because he is Serbian and they will not give him the top-most positions. Government jobs are impossible for us ... if I apply as a regular citizen for a government job, there is no way they would give it to me ... War changed everything. Before we were all equal [he gestures two hands at the same level] ... after the war, we became something like second class citizens – much lower in society.”

Fear of workplace discrimination based on anecdotes from other Croatian Serbs has driven this man to steadfastly conceal his religious identity. Government jobs, however, he acknowledges are out of reach altogether due to his inability to hide his ethnic status as a minority from the purview of state-level positions. While ‘equal protection’ guarantees are codified into Croatia's constitution, the reality is that Croatian Serbs navigate additional levels of social discrimination that make upper level jobs difficult, if not outright unattainable, to most.

“Even with football, I support the national team but people don't even believe my support – they will think I am faking it, doesn't matter that I grew up here. So, Serbs here are either pushed to learn to not care about anything at all and get used to not belonging, or they will try to be more Serbian and identify with Serbia and more extreme, even though we live in Croatia and are Croatian. In Serbia, they don't accept us. Here, they don't accept us either.”

Sporting teams are strongly linked to national and regional identities in Croatia (Tsai 2021). Calling into question his own patriotism in national sports is an example of the *suspicious gaze* in which ethnocratic state majorities view ‘hostile’ minority groups (O'Loughlin, 2010). These types of social exclusion exemplify the implicit ‘suspiciousness’ Croatian Serbs feel faced with, a situation that makes many feel compelled to *prove* their allegiance in more meaningful ways. As he states, the predicament of being viewed this way drives many Croatian Serbs to either come to terms with their non-belonging or push to affiliate with a Serbian identity that is wholly foreign to them. In Zagreb, I met a 26-year-old Croat engineer who described to me a similar pattern he observed growing up with a close Croatian Serb friend:

“I have a Serbian friend that I grew up with here. His name is Serbian so people know automatically that he is Serb ... growing up, he was bullied, people made fun of him always. But he speaks perfect Croatian and even won a Croatian language competition. His Croatian is better than most Croats but people still treat him this way ... I know a Serbian that fought for Croatia during the war, and still I have an uncle who says ‘oh he

is a Serb' and blah blah ... if he was willing to fight for Croatia, how can we treat him bad?"

The pressure to compensate for the lack of social acceptance pushes many Croatian Serbs to pursue outward displays of allegiance. These displays may fall on deaf ears, as even the most patriotic of Croatian Serbs are often dismissed as being disingenuous. This type of blatant prejudice is even cast upon those who fought in the Croatian army, as a general distrust for ethnic minorities often supersedes their own individual qualities. In Croatia's eastern Slavonia region, I met a 34-year-old Croatian Serb who detailed some of the internal decisions he has had to make regarding his own identity:

"I did get discriminated a little growing up, but I learned to just hide it. When I lived in Zagreb for a few years, I just hid from people that I had a Serbian background ... one day, I told my father that I was born here in Croatia and I feel Croatian and that was it. It's harder for my parents to understand, but I feel Croatian more than anything. I don't feel Serbian, I have never ever been to Serbia, my life and my home is all here."

For this man, the sheer burden of discrimination pushed him to outright reject his ethnic identity early on in favour of embracing a Croatian national identity that has helped mediate his own sense of belonging. Young Croatian Serbs often feel the predicament of living as a minority as too overwhelming given the prejudices that come attached with it. This is especially difficult during adolescent years when schools are rife with bullying. In comparison, I spoke to many Czech, Hungarian, and Ruthenian minorities in the same region of Croatia who reported experiencing little to no prejudice at all in their upbringings as fellow minorities. Serbs in Croatia are subject to a unique hostility framed by vestiges of a war that has antagonised their group. For those who can 'pass' by name alone, choosing to hide their identity becomes the path of least resistance in being able to live a life free of social discrimination. This structural prejudice has driven many Croatian Serbs to unaffiliate altogether with a Serb identity, further obscuring the visibility of an ethnic group that has had centuries-old roots to the territory of Croatia.

Serbian Croats (i.e. Croats Living in Serbia)

Serbia's population of Croats represents a much smaller community than the prevalence of Serbs in Croatia. The present-day populations that remain post-war nearly all reside in Vojvodina, Serbia's most culturally diverse province in the north. Ethnic Hungarians and Slovaks have well-established linguistic communities within Vojvodina, while Croats remain much fewer in number and lack the same language institutions other minority groups have. For those I encountered, some preferred the *Bunjevci* distinction while others spoke more freely about their identities as Serbian Croats. In the northern city of Subotica just south of the Hungarian border,

I interviewed a 26-year-old programmer who shared with me his background as a Croat living in Serbia:

“I am a Croatian . . . born and raised in a village about 60km from here . . . my village is very mixed with lots of Hungarians and Montenegrins . . . my great-grandfather was from the Dalmatian region [of Croatia] . . . but when [my grandparents] moved to Vojvodina, they quickly took Serbian culture, they spoke the language and took the customs. The only thing they never gave up was religion, and we are still very Catholic to this day . . . in the villages, things are more tight so there is some tension, but in the town here in Subotica, nobody cares.”

This man, like many Serbian Croats, affirmed a much more open outlook in regard to being a minority in Serbia. For the most part, his ethnic identity did not appear to play as much of a hindrance on his own life the way Croatian Serbs I conversed with professed. He spoke rather openly and candidly about his own ethnic identity and made no mention of having to conceal it under certain circumstances. The large communities of ethnic Hungarians in northern Serbia, most of whom are Catholic, have also normalised the presence of Catholicism for practicing Croats. This allows Catholicism to not be as readily linked to being a Croat in the same way Serbs in Croatia feel ‘outed’ by their Orthodox religious affiliation. This man did recall one incident during his childhood that made him cognisant of potential prejudice others might hold against him for his ethnic affiliation:

“There was one time when I was in primary school where I remember I was on the train going from home to school, and there was another kid from my village who said – ‘Toni, that’s a Croatian name, right? Are you Croatian? If you are a Croat, then I should stab you.’ And I said back to him, ‘yes, I am a Croat, so stab me then,’ but he didn’t . . . my family has been here more than one hundred years, but that kid’s father fought in the war, so he grew up being brainwashed by hate that his father was feeding to him about Croats.”

While this incident made a formative impression on him early on, he noted that living in Vojvodina has made his being different feel much less magnified, given the mixed backgrounds of many of his other peers. Moving away from his village to a larger and more diverse town also eased many of these issues, as ethnic clustering in Vojvodina occurs most visibly at the rural level. Villages in the region are more likely to be organised by ethnicity, whereas those in cities and towns experience greater everyday exposure to outgroups, reducing the overall tension reported by minorities. Along Serbia’s border with Croatia in the town of Sombor, I met two Serbian Croat women, ages 28 and 29, who noted very minimal hostility against their ethnic identities. These two women grew up on adjacent farms, one working as a schoolteacher while the other on her father’s farm. I asked them to expand on their experiences as minorities in Serbia, to which they both replied in agreement. One stated:

“I have never experienced anything negative or discrimination growing up [in Sombor]. We all speak the same language, live the same lives, nobody can tell the difference and nobody really cares to. Those negative feelings towards Croats, I think, are only in places like Novi Sad and Belgrade . . . Belgrade has a lot of those people, but not here at all.”

Tolerance for the Serbian Croat minority corresponds mostly to the ethnic diversity of Serbia’s north, in which many lay claim to multiple identities due to the increased prevalence of mixed marriages. Geography plays an important role in shaping tolerance, as the perceived foreignness of non-Serbs is less substantial in the country’s more ethnically heterogenous regions. This explains the lingering, albeit dwindling, population of Croats in Vojvodina who still remain after the war. Outside of this region, Serbian Croats are almost non-existent in the rest of Serbia, comprising negligible populations of less than a half percent in the rest of the state. Cities like Belgrade and Niš to the south are veritably more ethnically homogenous, making them conducive environments for Serbia’s burgeoning nationalism that leaves little room for the acceptance of Serbian Croats. I interviewed a 27-year-old Bunjevci woman whose family had shed the Croat label after the war. She spoke of how little remained of her own community within Serbia, including her own brother’s decision to permanently leave.

“I am a Bunjevci . . . a minority but we have been in this region for a long time. I think Serbians [in the south] are weird and too different from us. Their culture is very different, and I think it is better for us to separate . . . people are leaving, my brother went to Austria a few years before and changed his papers and erased all traces of him ever being from Serbia. I cannot leave because I cannot imagine leaving my family behind, I am the only one left that my grandparents have . . . but there is not much left for us in Serbia.”

For those who still hold on to a Croat or Bunjevci identity, post-war Serbia offers little rootedness or feelings of cultural belonging. Post-war census data in Serbia reflects this downward trend in Croat and Bunjevci populations, both of which are ageing considerably due to the outward migration of younger generations (Kovacevic et al. 2010). Some have chosen to assimilate with other minority groups (e.g. Hungarians, Romanians) while others have permanently migrated abroad for work, as was the case for this woman’s brother, who left with no plans of returning. Serbia’s geopolitical tensions with Croatia have accelerated this decline, as Croats who remain have few communities and infrastructural support to rely on. All the while, Serbia’s increasingly nationalistic political rhetoric has made them invisible at best and enemies at worst in a land that no longer provides a space for their communities to thrive.

Interpersonal Dynamics with Outgroups

Thematically, many interviews veered into the realm of interpersonal relationships, as many individuals spoke at length about their personal frustrations.

Some brought up their own experiences in the process of dating and the difficulties that emerged from romantic relationships with outgroups, who often viewed them in a hostile manner. The range of reported experiences certainly differed across a wide spectrum. For the most part, the Serbian Croats I spoke with had fewer problems engaging in inter-ethnic relationships with Serbs. However, Croatian Serbs often cited heavy discrimination and social backlash associated with their relationships with Croats. As a result, most Croatian Serbs I spoke with chose to solely court other Serbs, while those who had pursued relationships with Croats shared experiences of prejudice, often from the family and wider community. One 30-year-old Croatian Serb narrated to me his own recent experience:

“I had a [Croat] ex-girlfriend for four years. When her father found out she was dating a Serbian, he was very angry. Her father fought in the war – he would tell her that he fought for nothing and that she betrayed him. Anyone who is okay with Serbs or friends with Serbs, old people or their parents will say they are betraying them . . . I never felt comfortable or accepted by my girlfriend’s family. I never belonged and that was one of the reasons why I finally broke off with her . . . they could never accept me after even four years . . . finding a wife is so difficult for me.”

Croats who date Croatian Serbs are often at odds with their own family, who perceive these relationships as an affront to their own losses suffered during the war. The stigma remains high for many families, despite the high number of crossover marriages documented in pre-war Yugoslavia. Many youth who grew up in a post-war environment do not carry the same prejudices against outgroups as older generations. The socially punitive consequences, however, are usually enough to discourage them from entertaining these relationships. Because family and the social acceptance of communities play a strong role in relationship success in the Balkans, many simply avoid the burden of dating outgroups for fear of animus from their own family. This distinction primarily applies to Serb-Croat relations, as I found inter-ethnic marriages with other minority groups far more likely to be tolerated. In eastern Croatia, I met a 31-year-old Croatian Serb woman who married a Croat despite her in-laws’ expressed disapproval of her:

“Well, my husband, when I met him, always hated Serbs . . . when he first met me, he changed. But his family has not at all. His mother hates me because I am a Serb . . . when she first discovered he was dating me after two weeks we were together, she told him he was better off dating a gypsy whore than a Serb like me. That is the mentality . . . but we are not religious so we don’t believe any of that.”

Depending on the individual, religious differences can present additional hurdles that further complicate the general precarity of these relationships. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the few successful Serb-Croat relationships I witnessed through my fieldwork generally involved one or both parties being unaffiliated with religion. Yugoslavia’s violent dissolution left a legacy

that continues to have an inter-generational impact, with the post-war youth having inherited spaces of social segregation and deeply embedded ethnic divides. In the town of Knin one afternoon, an 18-year-old Croat student shared with me the social burdens she inherited as the daughter of a former Croatian army general:

“My parents are okay with us to have Serbian friends, but not for anything more serious than that. There is no way they would ever accept me with or to marry a Serbian guy, that is just not a possible thing . . . my father fought in the war here, it would really kill him, I cannot imagine it . . . I cannot imagine anything more bad than that.”

These pressures have transferred from one generation to another, socialising young Croats into viewing Croatian Serbs with a similar hesitation, if not outright hostility, as their parents. For this young student, although she feels no personal animosity towards Serbs, she has come to terms with the implicit boundaries she must maintain in her social relationships, given the gravity of her own family’s relationship with the conflict.

Implications

The data from my fieldwork show that, among those I interviewed, Croat hostility against Serbs living in Croatia remains more intense than the inverse. Croatian Serbs are subject to a social animosity within Croatia that is unmatched by the experiences of their counterparts (i.e. Serbian Croats) in Serbia. I attribute this to the conditions surrounding the dissolution of Yugoslavia, as very few military clashes took place in Serbia compared to the conflicts waged in Croatia and Bosnia (MacDonald 2018). Apart from those conscripted by the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) to fight in these wars, most Serbs living in Serbia saw little direct conflict with Croats in their vicinities. Croatia, on the other hand, bore the brunt of a conflict that took place almost entirely on its soil. Those within Croatia found themselves closer to conflict and generally experienced more intimate trauma, which plays an important role in shaping their post-war prejudices. These prejudices are more overtly pronounced in Croatian cities that experienced this disproportionate trauma.

Vukovar, straddled on the Croatian side of the border with Serbia, suffered a three-month siege in 1991 that ethnically cleansed the region of its non-Serb population. There, I spoke to a 31-year-old Croat whose personal proximity to the conflict veritably shaped his own hostility towards the Croatian Serbs still living in his town:

“Of course we are more nationalistic than Serbs. They didn’t have a war on their lands and in their homes. We were forced to fight on our land. Every family here lost somebody – an uncle, a cousin – of course our people are going to be more forward with our nationalism, what’s wrong with that? . . . after what [Serbs] did, they are lucky to live here still.”

Vukovar's unique history as a battleground during the war has shaped post-war tensions much more explicitly than in the rest of Croatia. Croatian Serbs in Vukovar comprise more than a third of the population, yet their highly visible presence has not led to the type of inter-ethnic tolerance present in Serbia's Vojvodina region. Instead, a de facto segregation persists, with many Vukovar residents choosing to patronise their own ethnic establishments. As one 36-year-old Croat resident of the town explained to me:

“Our spaces are separated, we go to different churches, we do different things. This is just a way of life for us now. I have many, many Serbian friends, I just do not talk politics with them because Serbs and Croats here believe very different things. They are minorities, so they are always asking for more and more rights. They want special status as citizens, because they don't like to be minorities. They already tried to separate from Croatia once, the way you see Kosovo separated from Serbia . . . the ones that are not okay with it are back in Serbia.”

Croatian Serbs in Vukovar comprise a share of the population large enough to have their own economic spaces; those in other parts of the state do not have the luxury of segregated sustenance and therefore live much more socially precarious lives. Vukovar represents, however, a more extreme case of Croatia's negative treatment of its Serb minority due to the violence that occurred there. This is especially evident among those who experienced some form of direct trauma, such as this 35-year-old Croat father of two, who continues to harbour intense feelings of prejudice against Croatian Serbs.

“Don't believe anything you read that tells you conflict is over. This divide between Serbs and Croats will be here to stay forever. My father was killed by Serbs during the war – my uncle too. My family was here during the war and we didn't leave . . . I was here as a child of only ten years when this city fell to the Serbs. Do you know what they did to us after? They sent me away with the children and women and took all the men away. They took my father and my uncle away, and they are now gone. I am so angry . . . how can [Croatian Serbs] expect any of us not to remember this?”

Croat nationalists often symbolically use the 1991 siege of Vukovar to propagate historical narratives of Serb aggression. These wartime anecdotes lead everyday Croats to believe that the violence which took place during the war was one-sided, a justification for many of their prejudices. However, tens of thousands of Croatian Serbs fell victim to many of the same atrocities their state majority accuses them of. For instance, one Croat man from Dalmatia in his 30s, who was a child at the time of the war, recalled to me how he saw violence against Serbs unfold in his own town:

“We had some Serb families in my village during the war. My parents would cover my eyes during news reports, but I know that they ran from here and I know we burned their homes . . . A neighbor of us was one Serbian guy who left and his house was shelled and burned . . . I know that Croats did bad things to Serbs here locally, but most people don't research that to learn about the truth. Our town, Imotski, was not attacked at all by

Serbs . . . most of the crimes were performed by us to the Serbs who ran. They don't talk about that.”

This perception of unilateral victimhood propelled by Croat nationalists has effectively steered public attitudes against Croatian Serbs, who are politically scapegoated for the state's losses suffered during the conflict. Croatia's ethno-cratic regime regularly employs this dominant narrative for its nation-building efforts and attempts to promote Croat nationalism. This political rhetoric excludes Croatian Serbs altogether from the identity of modern Croatia, pushing them to the periphery into ambiguous spaces of belonging. As the post-war generation of youth on both sides come of age, they are inculcated by these narratives that only further reproduce division, forcing Serbs to either discard their identities for the sake of assimilation or to leave their cultural homelands altogether. In the post-war societies of Croatia and Serbia today, little room remains for the historical communities of Croatian Serbs and Serbian Croats who have inhabited these spaces for centuries. Yugoslavia's dissolution had its largest impact on minority groups who were forcibly reconstituted into newly formed ethnocratic states. Those who live outside of their ethnocratic states face structural and social prejudices that perpetually disincentivize them from staying. This explains, in part, the shrinkage of these communities as ethnic tribalism and nationalism pervade in these increasingly homogenous 'ethno-states.'

Conclusion

This paper sheds light on the conditions of exclusion Serbs in Croatia (i.e. *Croatian Serbs*) and Croats in Serbia (i.e. *Serbian Croats*) presently face as minority groups residing in two parallel ethnocratic states. Both communities suffered ethnic cleansing during Yugoslavia's dissolution in the 1990s, and for those who have remained nearly three decades later, a newfound identity as a minority in an ethnocratic state has brought about substantial obstacles. Through hours of extended interviews, I examined and presented data showing the ways in which these two groups experience social prejudice in their everyday lives and how they circumvent these obstacles.

In Croatia, the establishment of an ethnocratic Croat state following a sanguinary war for independence has resulted in very little social tolerance for the Serbs who still remain within its borders. Croatian Serbs face explicit discrimination largely due to dominant political narratives that deem them as ideological threats – scapegoating them for the country's losses suffered during its war for independence. This has created a widespread social rejection that makes interethnic relationships considerably difficult. Many Croatian Serbs conceal their ethnic identity in order to pre-emptively evade discrimination in

their everyday lives. While some are able to performatively ‘pass’ as Croats on a day-to-day basis and choose whether to invoke or obfuscate their ethno-religious identity, others have chosen to reject their ‘Serbian-ness’ outright as they feel little rootedness to what a modern-day Serbia represents. General fears of institutional discrimination have made Croatian Serbs feel pressured to balance their ‘otherness’ with excessive displays of national pride. These compensatory actions denote the deep pervasiveness in which prejudices against Serbs still linger in post-war Croatian society.

In Serbia, the post-war shift into an ethnocratic Serb state following very little actual fighting on Serbian soil has made Croats more widely accepted in Serbian society, relative to Serbs in Croatia. This tolerance is aided by the overall ethnic diversity of northern Serbia (Vojvodina), where the large majority of the country’s Croats reside. For the Serbian Croats I interviewed, most did not cite feelings of social exclusion in their everyday lives to the same extent as their counterparts. Those who did experience prejudice noted rare, isolated incidents that did not significantly impact their outlook or push them to modify their behaviour. This is not to say that Serbian society is devoid of prejudices against Croats – rather, the discriminatory behaviour against Serbian Croats is much more implicit, relative to the inverse. Even so, Serbia’s Croat and Bunjevci populations are still emigrating due to a lack of a community for them in post-war Serbia, as supported by the census data. Very few Serbian Croats remain outside of Vojvodina, and their communities continue to age as youth opt to migrate abroad in search of better economic prospects.

By comparing the disparate experiences of Croatian Serbs to Serbian Croats, this research provides a comparative case study of how social marginalisation within ethnocratic states can operate in different forms and to varying degrees. Most of the literature up to this point has focused on the structural and systemic ways in which ethnocracies operate in privileging a single group, with much less attention towards the day-to-day effects these structures have on minorities in the way of social prejudices. Ethnocratic states, of course, do not all operate in a singular manner, and the historical context of the majority-minority dynamic certainly plays a role in the extent to which marginalisation occurs and *where* it manifests more deeply. In this case, the geography of where armed conflict took place between Serbs and Croats has played a role in the severity of how two similarly constituted ethnocratic states have framed their relationships with minority groups. For Croatia, the intimacy of war has made Serbs easy targets for state-sanctioned discrimination among other ‘othering’ processes, while Serbia’s farther proximity to the war has made Croats a more abstract adversary. As minorities in modern ethnocratic states, Serbs in Croatia and Croats in Serbia have become invisible at best and enemies at worst in a post-war setting largely defined by nationalistic tribalism. In just the span of a generation, these centuries-old communities have

been pushed to the margins, facing decline within a post-Yugoslavia landscape where ethnic identity, above all else, subverts any notion of historical rootedness or belonging.

Going forward, this paper furthers the idea that ethnocratic minorities are neither supine nor do they lack agency in their everyday lives. For some, inclusion is granted through acts of assimilation that stress sameness, rather than difference, between themselves and dominant groups. Obfuscation is one such strategy whereby individuals of a minority choose to obscure their ethnic affiliations outright in order to evade social exclusion. For those unable to mask their identity, some utilise performative displays of allegiance to the state as a way to seek access to inclusion by broader society – though this may not always be successful. Ethnocratic minorities have crafted myriad ways of coping in the face of structural prejudices codified against them by the state. For this, the literature should reposition its focus of these groups away from viewing them as simply inert individuals acted upon by the state, to a gaze of seeing them as actors who actively seek ways to negotiate for access and inclusion in everyday society.

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ORCID

Dustin Tsai  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3261-0762>

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