

CONTESTED NATIONALISM

Ethnopolitics

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Nina Caspersen

Contested Nationalism

Serb Elite Rivalry in Croatia and Bosnia in the 1990s

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DPB:	Democratic Patriotic Bloc (Demokratski patriotski blok)
DS:	Democratic Party (Demokratska stranka)
DSS:	Democratic Alliance of Socialists (Demokratski socijalistički savez)
DSS:	Democratic Party of Serbia (Demokratska stranka Srbije)
FRY:	Federal Republic of Yugoslavia
HDZ:	Croatian Democratic Community (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica)
HSP:	Croat Party of Right (Hrvatska stranka prava)
HVO:	Croat Defence Council (Hrvatsko vijeće odbrane)
ICTY:	International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia
JNA:	Yugoslav People's Army (Jugoslovenska narodna armija)
JSDS:	Yugoslav Independent Democratic Party (Jugoslavenska samostalna demokratska stranka)
JUL:	Yugoslav United Left (Jugoslovenska ujedinjena levica)
LS:	Liberal Party (Liberalna stranka)
NDH:	Independent State of Croatia (Nezavisna država Hrvatska)
RS:	Serb Republic (Republika Srpska)
RSK:	Republic of Serb Krajina (Republika Srpska Krajina)
SAO:	Serb Autonomous Region (Srpska autonomna oblast)
SDA:	Party of Democratic Action (Stranka demokratske akcije)
SDP:	Social Democratic Party (Socijaldemokratska partija), earlier SKH-SDP/SK-SDP
SDF:	Serb Democratic Forum (Srpski demokratski forum)
SDS:	Serb Democratic Party (Srpska demokratska stranka)
SDSS:	Independent Democratic Serb Party (Samostalna demokratska srpska stranka)
SFOR:	Stabilization Force, in Bosnia and Herzegovina
SK-SDP:	League of Communists – Party for Democratic Change (Savez komunista – Stranka demokratske promjene)
SKH-SDP:	League of Communists of Croatia – Party for Democratic Changes (Savez komunista Hrvatske – Stranka demokratskih promjena)
SK-PZJ:	League of Communists – Movement for Yugoslavia (Savez komunista – Pokret za Jugoslaviju)
SNS:	Serb National Party (Srpska narodna stranka)
SNS:	Serb National Alliance (Srpski narodni savez)
SNSD:	Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (Savez nezavisnih socijaldemokrata)
SNV:	Serb National Council (Srpsko nacionalno vijeće)

SPO:	Serb Renewal Movement (Srpski pokret obnove)
SPRS:	Socialist Party of Republika Srpska (Socijalistička partija Republike Srpske)
SPS:	Socialist Party of Serbia (Socijalistička partija Srbije)
SPS:	Serb Party of Socialists (Srpska partija socijalista)
SRS:	Serb Radical Party (Srpska radikalna stranka)
SRSJ:	League of Reform Forces of Yugoslavia (Savez reformskih snaga Jugoslavije)
SSS:	Independent Serb Party (Samostalna srpska stranka)

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INTRODUCTION

‘Only unity saves the Serbs’ is the famous call for unity in the Serb nationalist doctrine.¹ But even though this doctrine was ideologically adhered to by most of the Serb leaders in Croatia and Bosnia, disunity characterized Serb politics during the Yugoslav disintegration and war: divisions between leaders, between competing Serb parties and eventually also between leaders in the Serb statelets and in Belgrade. Nationalism was, thus, contested and nationalist claims to homogeneity did not reflect the reality of Serb politics.

The call for unity is not only found in Serb nationalist discourse, but is an integral part of nationalist ideology: the claim that the nation is, or should be, a unitary actor with a single goal. However, the reality in situations of national and ethnic conflict is often contrary to such claims: it is not a question of unitary nations in a conflict solely spurred by conflicting group needs and interests. As Milton J. Esman argues, ‘Factional conflict is inherent in ethnic politics’.² Intra-ethnic leadership rivalry should be expected and this not only contradicts the nationalist claim to homogeneity and unity, but also affects the political positions adopted by leaders and thereby the development of the conflict. Examples of such internal leadership rivalry are plentiful and by no means confined to the former Yugoslavia. The conflict in Israel/Palestine has not only been influenced by Israeli–Palestinian relations but also by internal politics, by the changing balance of power between Hamas and Fatah on the Palestinian side and between Likud and the Labour Party on the Israeli side, as well as by intra-party struggles. Similarly, in the case of Northern Ireland, the Ulster Unionist Party faced continuous outbidding from the more radical Democratic Unionist Party, while the rapprochement between Sinn Féin and the Social Democratic and Labour Party helped the movement towards peace in the 1990s.

Without the recognition of such divisions there is no understanding of more moderate voices, of hardliners breathing down the neck of incumbent leaders, of processes of outbidding. Intra-Serb rivalry was pervasive in both Croatia and Bosnia and this significantly affected the positions adopted by

1. ‘Samo Sloga Srbina Spasava’: the so-called *ocila* can be traced to St Sava who, in the twelfth century, called for Serb unity in an independent Orthodox Church.
2. M.J. Esman. 1994, *Ethnic Politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 248.

the victorious Serb leaders and parties. This intra-Serb competition constituted an important dynamic in the Yugoslav conflict but it has, nevertheless, been afforded little attention in existing literature. The same lack of attention is characteristic of the theoretical literature on ethnic conflicts: while intra-ethnic elite rivalry may be recognized, it is very rarely made the object of analysis and the effect of divisions *within* groups on the relations *between* groups is genuinely under-analysed. The decisive role of elites in national and ethnic conflicts has, on the other hand, long been acknowledged: they are the sine qua non of conflict resolution and will, furthermore, often have had more than a little to do with causing the conflict in the first place. But, however powerful these elites may be, they will rarely be monoliths: competition is the norm and this can either emanate from within the leader's own ranks or from competing political parties and movements. Such competition, or even the anticipation of its potential emergence, will significantly affect the positions in the conflict that a leader is willing and able to take. The dynamics of internal competition, therefore, ought to be an integral part of the study of ethnic conflict but, in reality, very little theorizing exists. Nevertheless, one theoretical assumption is often adhered to: intra-ethnic competition will foster radicalization based on elite appeals to mass extremism. But this assumption requires further analysis: how will leaders react to challengers? Are popular attitudes decisive in internal competition?

This book undertakes an in-depth analysis of Serb elite rivalry in Croatia and Bosnia with a view to improving theorizing in this relatively undeveloped area of conflict studies;³ it presents fresh, primary research in a new conceptual framework. The book is not primarily focused on *why* elites choose a certain position but analyses *how* the political positions adopted by Serb leaders were affected by internal rivalry. The analysis, moreover, asks how more moderate forces were marginalized and why hardliners proved victorious. Serb leadership rivalry in Croatia and Bosnia represents an underdeveloped, but important, aspect of the Yugoslav disintegration that should be included in order to fully understand the development of the conflict, the outbreak of war and the persistent rejection of peace settlements. The increasingly strenuous relations between local Serb leaders and the Serbian president, Slobodan Milošević, are frequently cited in the literature and conflicts among local Serb leaders are also mentioned, but mostly in passing. Actual analysis of the effect of intra-Serb rivalry is decidedly lacking. This book analyses

3. Or, in the words of Arend Lijphart, to 'develop theoretical generalizations in areas where no theory exists yet'. A. Lijphart. 1971. 'Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method', *American Political Science Review* 65(3), 692.

the extent of Serb disunity and its impact on the positions adopted by Serb leaders, their acceptance or rejection of compromise solutions and the use of peaceful or violent means. It also critically assesses the widely held assumption that Milošević was always able to control Serb leaders in Croatia and Bosnia. The empirical findings depart from existing theoretical assumptions of outbidding and they are used to suggest a new way of theorizing about intra-ethnic competition.

The analysis centres on a number of particular questions. How does intra-ethnic leadership rivalry affect the dominant position in a conflict? What influences whether or not it fosters radicalization? To whom do the elites direct their competition; whose support is crucial? How is this influenced by the transitional situation, the ethnification of politics and the outbreak of violence? The dependent variable is the position of Serb leaders in Croatia and Bosnia: is the leader or the dominant party willing to accept inter-ethnic accommodation and compromise? Or do they insist on maximalist demands and violent strategies? The independent variable, and the main focus, is intra-ethnic elite competition: rivalry between Serb parties and leaders over power and policies.

When analysing rivalry among Serb elites, three audiences should be included. These audiences are significant in all phases of the conflict, although their relative importance varied greatly. Their significance stems from the resources they supplied the rivalling elites with: resources that were needed to emerge victorious from the competition, such as economic and coercive resources. Some of these resources can also be regarded as goals, in particular the economic resources, but their primary function is as means in the competition. The first audience is found within the party/movement or linked organizations, and resources include party membership, party structures, financial resources, media access and control of the military. Secondly, what will be termed the kin-state should be considered. Belgrade exerted considerable influence over Serb politics and it is even often argued that the influence was so great that local Serb leaders should not be regarded as independent actors. Intra-ethnic competition differs from conventional political competition since claims are made on behalf of the ethnic group and the kin-state leader is, consequently, afforded at least symbolic importance and can, furthermore, supply valuable resources. Finally, the general population is an important audience to the competition, and popular support can prove a powerful resource for competing elites. In existing theorizing, outbidding is about 'mass responsiveness to playing the ethnic card',⁴ but the general

4. T. Sisk. 1996. *Power Sharing and International Mediation in Ethnic Conflicts*, Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 17.

population is not the only audience of importance for rival elites. The relative importance of these three audiences varies in different phases of the conflict and this affects *inter alia* the significance of the 'other side': does the politically relevant audience have to be convinced that the nation is under threat? Was Serb radicalization primarily a response to the wider Yugoslav context?

As a significant addition to existing literature on the Yugoslav disintegration, the empirical analysis presented here points to the very high level of Serb disunity throughout the conflict and war. This disunity, at times, included the inability of Milošević to control local Serb leaders. It is concluded that the dominance of hard-line Serb forces, which proved so important in the development of the conflict and the outbreak of war, was not based on the overwhelming power of ethnicity, it was not based on elites successfully playing the ethnic card. Resources other than popular support proved crucial and intra-Serb rivalry was largely decided by control of coercive resources. The theory of outbidding holds that radicalization is the preferred response to intra-ethnic challenges but the analysis proposed here finds that radicalization or defeat were not the only options available to challenged leaders: intra-ethnic competition can also have no effect on the dominant elite position or can even lead to relative moderation. Furthermore, the effect of the position of 'opposing' ethnic leaders is found to vary considerably in different phases of the conflict and intra-Serb competition was never only an epiphenomenon of inter-ethnic relations. Finally, it is argued that the dominance of the ethnic cleavage was the result of a political struggle, not an almost automatic outcome resulting from a largely voter-driven process. It was not inevitable, but depended, in particular, on the distribution of resources between ethnic and non-ethnic parties. The empirical analysis, therefore, demonstrates the importance of intra-Serb competition for the development of the Yugoslav conflict and its findings question or add to existing theorizing in the field, in particular the widely held assumption of outbidding based on elites playing the ethnic card.

Existing theorizing on intra-ethnic elite competition is briefly reviewed and discussed in Chapter 1 and illustrated with examples from a number of different cases, such as Israel/Palestine, Northern Ireland, Nagorno Karabakh and Rwanda. Based on this discussion, a framework for the subsequent analysis is developed. The framework centres on the different audiences to which rival elites must direct their appeal: party/movement forces, kin-state leaders and the general population. The empirical analysis begins in Chapter 2 with a brief overview of the conflict in Croatia and Bosnia, a discussion of the literature on the Yugoslav

disintegration and an analysis of background events and factors. The main empirical analysis in Chapters 3 to 6 is structured according to the different phases of the conflict, prewar and wartime, and each phase is analysed in terms of the different audiences to which the competing parties and leaders addressed their appeals.

Chapter 3 analyses how the Serb Democratic Party (Srpska demokratska stranka, SDS) became dominant in the Serb community in the prewar period, despite having only won a minority of the Serb vote in the Croatian elections. It furthermore analyses the process of outbidding and the victory of hardliners within the party. The chapter finds that the victory of the SDS's hard-line faction was not based on greater popular support, but rather on the control of coercive resources and support from Belgrade. Chapter 4 focuses on the SDS's sister party in Bosnia, which was a much more cohesive party; this is partly explained by a stronger organization but it also depended on a continuous radicalization of the party and on Belgrade's lack of support for challenging factions. There is no evidence to suggest that the party's radicalization was voter-led: the SDS had significant control of the Serb population and alternatives had been marginalized.

Chapters 5 and 6 analyse the wartime period in which a temporary closing of ranks was followed by intensified competition. This period saw the emergence of competition between Serb parties often based on issues other than the war itself, in particular war profiteering. Increasing autonomy from Belgrade also characterized the period and Milošević was not always able to dictate developments in the Serb statelets. The analysis finds that radicalization was not the preferred response to rivalry from outside the party/movement, and relative moderation even resulted in the Bosnian case in 1995. The competition was overwhelmingly dominated by coercive resources, and the growing rift between civilian and political leaders proved of particular importance. Chapters 7 and 8 conclude on the findings of the previous chapters, briefly track post-war developments in both cases to identify change and continuity, and discuss implications for conflict analysis. By analysing intra-group politics in terms of politically relevant audiences and resources it is possible to further refine well-known concepts such as 'spoilers' and conflict 'ripeness'. The empirical findings are used to suggest a new framework for analysing intra-ethnic leadership rivalry that goes beyond an automatic assumption of outbidding based on appeals to mass extremism.

CHAPTER ONE

Ethnic Elites and Internal Competition

The importance of elites in the Yugoslav conflict and war is widely acknowledged, and political leaders such as Slobodan Milošević, Franjo Tuđman and Alija Izetbegović were often portrayed in the media as synonymous with the people they vowed to represent. The underlying media assumption of homogeneous, monolithic communities was a convenient myth rather than reality, but the great significance of elites nevertheless remains and it is generally accepted in the academic literature on the Yugoslav disintegration.¹ In the theoretical literature the crucial role of elites in conflict resolution is likewise emphasized and there is also increasing evidence of elite initiated conflicts.² But even though they are crucial actors in situations of conflict, these leaders are rarely unconstrained: they will more often than not find themselves constrained by competing elites or by the fear that such rivals will emerge. Serb leaders were, in both Croatia and Bosnia, constrained by competition from oppositional elites, who frequently perceived radicalization as a fast track to power, and this consequently limited the positions that the leaders could take without jeopardizing their hold on power. In order to study the development of the Yugoslav conflict, and inter-ethnic conflicts in general, one therefore needs to analyse these dynamics of intra-ethnic competition and the ways in which nationalism is contested by both more moderate and more extreme actors.

The framework for the empirical analysis of intra-Serb rivalry in Croatia and Bosnia adopted here has a fairly open and general character, and the theoretical discussion is used to identify dimensions of analysis and hypothesized variables of importance. Due to lack of theorizing on

1. See, for example, N. Andjelić. 2003. *Bosnia-Herzegovina: The End of a Legacy*, London: Frank Cass, 27.
2. B. Reilly. 2001. *Democracy in Divided Societies: Electoral Engineering for Conflict Management*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 177.

intra-communal rivalry in ethnic conflicts, the framework is developed using inputs from a variety of different theories such as theories of party competition, democratic transition and conflict regulation. Firstly, however, this chapter addresses some preliminary issues: what is meant by elites, how is intra-ethnic elite competition addressed in existing theories, and which overall dimensions of analysis should be included in the framework?

By now I have already entered into a minefield of contentious concepts such as 'ethnic' and 'elites' and before proceeding any further, I should make my usage clear.

- *Ethnic*: The term 'ethnic' does not signify anything inherent or permanent. What is decisive are the labels used, the way in which the conflict is legitimized. For example, if the dominant discourse is one of a conflict between Croats and Serbs, then I will characterize it as an ethnic conflict regardless of whether its actual causes are found elsewhere and/or it lacks majority backing. Especially in early phases of a conflict, a great degree of fluidity in ethnic identities is to be expected, but as conflicts intensify there is a tendency for ethnicity to become reified: its proponents seek to make it static and rigid, thereby lending it a homogenizing quality that it did not possess to begin with. What is 'ethnic' and, therefore, what is 'intra-ethnic' should not be regarded as static: it is likely to change with the course of the conflict and may very well reflect the interests of sub-groups within delineated ethnic groups.
- *Ethnification*: When politics is ethnicized, the dominant cleavage in political competition is a national or ethnic cleavage and this takes precedence over all other cleavages. For example, a process of ethnification had taken place in the first Bosnian multiparty elections in November 1990 and the dominant cleavage was an ethnic one, whereas the Croatian elections six months earlier were primarily fought on the issue of Yugoslavia's future.
- *Intra-ethnic elite competition*: This is defined as elite competition over dominance within an ethnic group. It encompasses competition both within and between political parties/movements, as well as competition with non-ethnic parties over the definition of politics.
- *Dominant elite position in ethnic conflicts*: By dominant elite position is meant the position adopted by the leader of a community or the strongest party; that is, the winner of the intra-ethnic elite competition. This position should be seen as the standpoint taken on the ethnic conflict: are they willing to accept inter-ethnic accommodation which

entails some form of compromise? Or do they insist on pursuing maximalist goals using all possible means? In both cases a process of radicalization took place. Initially the dominant Serb leaders adopted a relatively moderate position and were willing to accept compromises, whereas the wartime, radical leaders insisted on joining the territory under their control with Serbia and were willing to use military means to achieve that goal.

- *Elites*: The actors of importance in intra-ethnic competition are characterized as elites, or leaders. These are actors who have significant influence over policies directly affecting the development of a conflict.³ Non-incumbent elites are encompassed insofar as they constitute a threat to the current leaders or possibly a potential threat in the case of a significant change in position. The elites most important to ethnic conflicts are found in the political and possibly the military realm. National and ethnic conflicts are primarily cast in terms of political goals – which state is the territory to be part of? how do we protect our identity? – and the conflict will primarily be fought in the political or military arena. Both cases in this analysis are offspring of a communist system which was characterized by the dominance of politics over all other spheres of social life; however, the army in the former Yugoslavia was accustomed to relative independence.⁴ Civilian leaders may lack full control over military leaders who can, consequently, act as effective veto holders when it comes to issues of peace and war. The dominance of politics should be regarded as a variable, especially following the collapse of the state and the outbreak of war. As we will see in the empirical analysis to follow, the rival elites were highly dependent on coercive resources and their links with military and paramilitary leaders were, therefore, crucial for the outcome of intra-Serb competition. An additional group of actors that can be termed sub-elites should also be considered since their support is often crucial for a leader's hold on power. Such actors include party officials and higher-ranking military officials, actors who are not leaders but who form part of an audience to which the competing elites must appeal. As Timothy Sisk argues, these actors can be of great importance in conflict development.⁵

3. This definition, with its focus on political power, does not mean that the broader conception of elites, which also focuses on societal position, is without relevance. Serb leaders in Croatia and Bosnia were 'new elites' who lacked the societal position of the 'old elite' which may have fostered insecurity and affected their political behaviour. Thanks to Eric Gordy for this insight.
4. J. Gow. 2003. *The Serbian Project and its Adversaries: A Strategy of War Crimes*, London: Hurst, 53.
5. Sisk, *Power Sharing and International Mediation*, 84.

Intra-ethnic Rivalry and Ethnic Conflict

Although intra-ethnic rivalry constitutes an underdeveloped aspect of conflict studies, it is not completely absent from the literature. Elements are found in theories of conflict dynamics and conflict resolution, and the importance of internal politics is frequently mentioned in more empirically-focused studies. A basic assumption is often adhered to: the assumption of ethnic outbidding. The argument is that radicalization will result from internal disputes based on elites playing the 'ethnic card'.

The position adopted by ethnic leaders is crucial for the success of conflict regulation, but conflict regulation theories usually overlook the impact of intra-ethnic competition, beyond some general assumptions. This is especially the case in one of the most influential theories, Arend Lijphart's consociational democracy. The consociational approach argues that given elite willingness to cooperate in a power-sharing government, mass antagonisms and polarization can be overcome and stability can be fostered.⁶ Consociational theorists therefore assume that elites are driven by motivations that differ from those of their more radically inclined mass publics.⁷ However, despite the importance afforded to elite motivations, consociational theory lacks a theory of these motivations. And not only that: it tends to assume that leaders are entirely voluntaristic actors, unconstrained by competing elites or by the general population. There is a working assumption of monolithic representation and deferential masses, and the theory therefore overestimates the latitude enjoyed by leaders in situations of ethnic conflict.⁸ In Donald Horowitz's words, 'compromisers can readily be replaced by extremists on their flanks'.⁹

Other theorists acknowledge the importance of intra-ethnic elite competition and regard such competition rather than the ethnification of politics as the main barrier to moderation: if the elites were monolithic within their own ethnic groups, then an ethnic party system need not be debilitating for the prospect of conflict regulation. As Paul Mitchell argues, 'ethnically exclusive but *stable* party segments could be the building

6. See, for example, A. Lijphart. 1977. *Democracy in Plural Societies*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
7. G. Tsebelis. 1990. *Nested Games: Rational Choice in Comparative Politics*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 162.
8. D. Horowitz. 1985. *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 574. B. Barry. 1975. 'Review Article: Political Accommodation and Consociational Democracy', *British Journal of Political Science* 5(4), 500.
9. D. Horowitz. 1997. 'Self-determination: Politics, Philosophy, and Law', in I. Shapiro and W. Kymlicka (eds), *Ethnicity and Group Rights*, New York: New York University Press, 439.