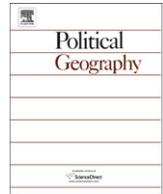




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Localizing geopolitics: Disaggregating violence and return in conflict regions

Gearóid Ó Tuathail

School of Public and International Affairs, Virginia Tech, National Capital Region, Alexandria, VA 22314, United States

A B S T R A C T

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Critical geopolitics began as a critique of Cold War geopolitical discourses that imposed homogenizing categories upon diverse regional conflicts and marginalized place-specific structural causes of instability and violence. This critique is still relevant. Implicit within it is the promise of a more geographical geopolitics that, arguably, has not been realized by research. Using Bosnia–Herzegovina as an example, this paper examines the challenges of developing a critical geopolitics grounded in the study of contested geopolitical regions and places. Reviewing anthropological and other place-sensitive studies of violent population displacement and post-war returns in Bosnia–Herzegovina, the paper considers some conceptual dilemmas and questions raised by attempting to create a grounded critical geopolitics.

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In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist strikes the Bush administration launched a ‘global war on terror’ (GWOT) that propelled the United States and its allies into high stakes interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, territories marked by state failure, insurgent militias, sectionalized politics, and contraband capitalism. Predominating through terrorist and military spectacles, the GWOT became a powerful geopolitical discourse, apocalyptic in its tone and polarizing in its effects by relentlessly downscaling the world of international affairs into a martial struggle between antagonistic camps. Mobilized for political purposes, terrorism, fear and ‘wars of choice’ inevitably produce a stark and simplified world. Yet almost immediately the daily projection of television images and journalistic dispatches from Afghanistan and Iraq bore witness to an unruly and intricate world far beyond that conceptualized by GWOT discourse. Newspaper dispatches and a now considerable library of current affairs books testify to the power of localized geopolitical actors and dynamics in shaping the outcomes of Western interventionism: histories of coercive power, geographies of ethnic engineering, longstanding political factionalism and armed formations, networks of kinship and identity, and the ambitions of aspirant political groupings and violent entrepreneurs. The legacies of earlier engagements, the diversity of Islamic militancy, and the fierceness of inter and intra-ethnic factionalism mocked the simpliminded categories of the GWOT. Coming to terms with the stubborn power of these ground-level complexities is part of the geopolitical chastening of our time. As is now well

known, the failures of the US and its allies in Iraq and Afghanistan spurred the development of a new war fighting doctrine based on the ‘anthropology of counter-insurgency’ and a ‘granular knowledge of the social terrains’ of conflict (Gregory, 2008; Packer, 2006). Insurgencies, according to now ascendant military thinkers, need to be ‘disaggregated’ (Kilcullen, 2009). The GWOT, to critics that are slowly forging a new consensus within national security circles, requires downsizing, differentiation and boundedness. More than at any moment since the end of the Cold War, there is an awareness within certain factions of the Obama administration that US power capacities are limited and geopolitical discourses require grounding in geographical specifics not moral absolutes (Toal, 2009).

It can be argued that the traditional geopolitical imagination has long been antithetical to the study of localities on their own terms. Associated with grand strategy and global vision, it has instead offered a means of affixing and calibrating the meaning of the local within a global whole. Not much empirical content from that local was required, however, for its meaning was often overdetermined by preconceived categories dominant among the major powers, their geopolitical cultures, and the small cabal who occupied the inner sanctums of such states. Kissingerian geopolitical discourse, for example, frequently analogized international relations to a game, like a chess match, with major players moving around local pawns on a global board. In this parsimonious discourse, singularly represented local actors were not readily allowed the possibility of internal diversity, autonomous actions and parochial interests. Instead, more often than not, they were rendered as ‘puppets’ or ‘proxies’ (though Kissinger’s analytical elaborations modulate the degree of complexity permitted

E-mail address: toalg@vt.edu

depending upon whether it served his immediate interest or not). Cold War culture was replete with formal, practical and popular versions of the Kremlin as headquarters of a global conspiracy storyline. North Korea, for example, was a probing arm of the Communist monolith testing the Free World's resolve when it invaded South Korea in June 1950. Cuba after 1959, Chile after the election of Allende, and Nicaragua under Sandinista rule were represented similarly. Disaggregation was rarely admitted as a possibility for the political purpose of such geopolitical discourse was to present threats, in the infamous words of Dean Acheson, in a manner 'clearer than truth' (Acheson, 1969).

For the last two decades, critical geopolitics has exposed the homogenizing, downscaling anti-geographical qualities of this prevailing mode of geopolitical discourse. My first foray in the field was a critique of the Soviet-obsessed over-simplifications of Ronald Reagan and his first Secretary of State Alexander Haig which led the US state to support military dictatorships, death squads, and terrorist militias in El Salvador and Nicaragua (Ó Tuathail, 1986). Simon Dalby's exhaustive analysis of the production of the Second Cold War through far right discourses of Sovietology, power politics, geopolitics, and nuclear war (conceived as 'winnable' by some) exposed how these discourses filled the planet with superpower rivalry and little else (Dalby, 1990: 172). Throughout these and later works, it was argued that hegemonic forms of geopolitics were based on a refusal of geographical particularity not its acknowledgement. In a paper first written two decades ago Agnew and I observed: "The irony of practical geopolitical representations of place is that, in order to succeed, they necessitate the abrogation of genuine geographical knowledge about the diversity and complexity of places as social entities...A complex, diverse and heterogeneous social mosaic of places [in this case the Soviet Union] is hypostatized into a singular, overdetermined and predictable actor" (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992).

In recent discussion of critical geopolitics, there has been little debate on the alternative geopolitics implicit in its critique, namely a more geographical geopolitics that disaggregates rather than homogenizes actors, and, by implication, localizes rather than globalizes analysis and explanation. The reasons why those practicing critical geopolitics have arguably failed to develop this alternative are numerous.¹ Critical geopoliticians, myself included, largely saw the approach as a critique of geopolitics as an irredeemably imperialist practice and not as an alternative form of geopolitics (Dalby, 2008). There was an understandable reluctance to play the old game of 'advice to the prince' ('geography as an aid to statecraft') yet, at the same time, critical geopolitics was deeply critical of actually existing foreign policy and had normative commitments (Megoran, 2008). The point of critical categories of analysis was to suggest alternative categories of practice in the culture at large if not within the corridors of power. In spite of itself, critical geopolitics is a form of geopolitics. Second, the work of deconstructing the formal, practical and popular forms of hegemonic geopolitical discourse was absorbing and consuming in itself. Analysis tended to stick at the same macro-level of analysis as the object of critique; discourse was at the level of the global and general. To the extent that critical geopolitics could localize itself, it could only do so around the closeted world of decision makers, a largely secret world only available at a distance through public statements, journalistic treatments and insider books. Third, any serious effort to develop a more geographically responsible geopolitics requires the supplement of regional expertise and fieldwork. Two distinct forms of intellectual labor had to be connected, that of 'big picture' foreign policy analysis and that of 'regional expertise' based upon in-depth knowledge of a particular region or state, its scholarly literature, and its contemporary affairs. While early versions of critical geopolitics studied intellectuals

who claimed such expertise – Simon Dalby's study of Sovietologists like Richard Pipes, for example – it itself did not seek to match this claim to in-depth regional expertise. This is understandable in that the name of the initial critical geopolitical game was the critique of power/knowledge. Nevertheless, in eschewing the regional fieldwork found in some earlier forms of political geography, critique was largely reactive, theoretical and political instead of also being empirical, regional and geographically embedded in the places preoccupying decision makers in major power centers (Agnew, 2002).

As new scholars are demonstrating, critical geopolitics can deepen its critical practice by grounding itself in regional research. Over the last decade I have undertaken fieldwork on the dynamics of conflict and post-conflict resettlement schemes in two complex regions, the former Yugoslavia and the Caucasus, which are frequent arenas of competition between major powers. This research has provided a geographically grounded perspective on the relationships between geopolitical knowledge production at the center about conflict regions and geopolitical processes occurring in particular localities in those conflict regions (Ó Tuathail, 2008). These relationships are complex and multifaceted, as others who have undertaken similar research know. In this article I want to reflect on some of that complexity and the theoretical questions involved in developing a critical geopolitics based on field research in contested places. Using Bosnia–Herzegovina as illustration, I reflect first on developing a field research project in Bosnia, and then on some issues with the available literature disaggregating violence and return in Bosnia–Herzegovina. I conclude with skepticism about the promise of a more geographical geopolitics.

Researching peace implementation in Bosnia–Herzegovina

Research on the micro-dynamics of nationalism underscores the fact that nationalism works itself out in everyday life in local places. Locality studies are reminders of the incomplete and contingent achievement of nationalism, how the nation as an imagined community does not smoothed away the enduring power of historic, geographic and socio-demographic specifics on the ground in particular places. In *Politics and Irish Life, 1913–1921: Provincial Experience of War and Revolution (1977, 1998)* the historian David Fitzpatrick provides a detailed account of a tumultuous period in Irish history – from immanent Home Rule to the First World War, the 1916 rebellion and the 'war of independence' which finally culminated in the Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 1921 – but grounded in the experience of residents of County Clare, an overwhelmingly rural county in the south west of Ireland (Fitzpatrick, 1998). Fitzpatrick's study shaped my BA thesis in History on the rise of Sinn Féin in my home county of Monaghan. Analysis of the confidential monthly Royal Irish Constabulary Inspector General and County Inspector reports from 1916 to 1919 revealed how the catalyzing event in the rise of Sinn Féin in Monaghan was not the shocked reaction to the public execution of the leaders of the 1916 rebellion but initial and accumulating resistance by small hold farmer families to the personal threat of conscription for an 'imperial war' that was going badly in France (Toal, 1982). Because the Irish Parliamentary Party, the leading Irish nationalist party supported the war effort and had initially urged young Irish men to go fight in France, it was swept aside by Sinn Féin in the parliamentary elections of December 1918. Fitzpatrick's work on the geography of Irish nationalism 1910–1921 underscored the importance of local political economy and organization in the variable success of Sinn Féin (Fitzpatrick, 1978).

During the summer of 1981 I briefly travelled through Yugoslavia including the city of Sarajevo. This was not personally significant until the breakup of Yugoslavia and the outbreak of war in Croatia and subsequently Bosnia–Herzegovina. Like many

spectators from afar, I was horrified at the violence associated with ethnic cleansing and the failure of the international community to confront the perpetrators. My initial research on the conflict was through an examination of how US geopolitical culture was making sense of the crisis and war, and how the UN failed at Srebrenica (Ó Tuathail, 1996, 1999a, 1999c, 2002). During a sabbatical in the Fall of 1999, I attended a conference in Dubrovnik and from there visited Medjugorje, a Marian apparition site that has long attracted many Irish Catholic pilgrimage tourists. That winter I wrote a US National Science Foundation grant to study the process of population return in three distinct Bosnian communities. The initial research conceptualization, motivated by a desire to move beyond the deconstruction of US government policy scripts, highlighted geographical disjuncture and geopolitical contradiction. The disjuncture was between Bosnia's international 'peace settlement' and its locally experienced war. How was the General Framework Agreement negotiated at Dayton Ohio through pressured US diplomacy upon war perpetrators, written solely in English, and signed by only one Bosnian faction going to be implemented thousands of miles away in a denied country,² a post-genocidal land of ethnically cleansed territories, bitterly divided localities and diverse geographic places? The disjuncture between foreign policy discourse about Bosnia-Herzegovina in international capitals – the Clinton administration's promise that the NATO implementation force IFOR would only have a one-year duration and a purely peacekeeping role for example – and what Bosnia had experienced seemed enormous. The contradiction concerned the Dayton agreement and my sense from Irish experience that localized power structures were likely to be more powerful than normative imperatives emanating from the international community in Washington, DC, Paris, Brussels or from the Office of the High Representative (OHR) in Sarajevo. Remember that the Bosnian Serb Democratic Party (SDS: *Srpska Demokratska Stranka* lead by Radovan Karadžić) did not directly negotiate at Dayton and were deeply critical of the 'concessions' made by Milošević on their behalf. The Croatian Democratic Community party (HDZ: *Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica*) in Bosnia and the Bosniak Party of Democratic Action (SDA: *Stranka Demokratska Akcije*) had their complaints too. The proposal stated that research would "addresses a nascent contradiction in the Dayton Peace Accords which, on the one hand, pledged to reverse ethnic cleansing but, on the other hand, sanctioned a segregated Bosnian political geography created by ethnic cleansing and ruled by local authorities committed to ethnonationalism" (Ó Tuathail, 1999b). Nowhere did this contradiction seem more manifest than in the pledge of the signing parties to Annex VII of the Dayton Accords whose article I paragraph 1 stated: "All refugees and displaced persons have the right freely to return to their homes of origin."³ The likelihood of this happening when perpetrators of ethnic cleansing were entrenched in power, and, in many instances, living within and using stolen property, at the local level seemed remote. From press dispatches, OHR documents, and International Crisis Group reports, it was apparent that implementation of Annex VII was a 'hot potato' and a major source of tension and friction in certain parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina (ICG, 1997, 1998, 1999). The initial research questions, therefore, were two. First, how would the international community try to reconstitute formerly mixed nationality Bosnian places that had been ethnically cleansed by implementing Annex VII? Second, how would the overwhelmingly ethnonationalist local authorities elected in the (flawed) elections of 1996 mediated this policy process? The general goal was to understand how the territorial visions conceived in international peace agreements, like the Dayton Peace Accords, are mediated and thereby transformed by the local contexts of their implementation.

The initial conception of research was to study peace implementation and an anticipated power struggle between international actors and embedded local ethnonationalist authorities over population returns. This implicitly plotted 'noble international' (helping victims return home) versus 'obstructionist local' (protecting newly purified homelands and ill gotten gain) faceoff got much more complicated when fieldwork began in May 2002. My fieldwork collaborator (Dr Carl Dahlman) and I soon realized that we needed to confront the larger war and its regional dynamics of displacement to understand the localized struggles over return on the ground. Local struggles could not be grasped in local terms; the broader Bosnian, Yugoslav, European and global context was necessary. Second, the varieties of displaced person suffering on the ground and widespread ambivalences about return challenged a moralized story of white hats against black hats. We learned to carefully distinguish the different factions on the ground and their shifting alliances. Intra-ethnic divisions were significant while antagonistic ethnonationalist parties often cooperated in a division of the spoils of war and peace. Displaced persons were symbolic weapons to all. International organizations often worked at cross-purposes and it took these groups quite a while to build a locally based decision-making power structure with the capacity to push the agenda on Annex VII returns. The nature of ethnonationalist power structures varied from municipality to municipality and as financial bankruptcy, the Kosovo war, and the fall of Milošević forced change, the strategies of ethnonationalist engagement with internationally run structures evolved.

In working out a grounded localized critical geopolitics, our work looked to already published studies and proceeded as relevant new studies were published. Anssi Passi's study of Karelia and the making of the Russo-Finnish border stands out as exemplary in its connection of locality to broader geopolitical developments and processes; indeed this is a work that manages to localize geopolitics in instructive ways (see also Kaiser & Nikiforova, 2006; Paasi, 1996). For sociologists and other social scientists Michael Billig's *Banal Nationalism* boosted research on the quotidian ways in which national identity makes claims on our lives and becomes a series of embodied practices which shape what it is possible to feel and think politically (Billig, 1995). Rogers Brubaker, whose work has moved from study of the sweep of twentieth century European history to microanalytic work in the Transylvanian town of Cluj, has deepened this research in important ways, as have geographers underscoring the place-mediated nature of nation-making processes and elite/ordinary member relations (Brubaker, 1996; Brubaker, Feischmidt, Fox, & Grancea, 2006; Jones, 2008). This work reveals how nationhood and ethnicity are contingent events, how they work or do not work amidst discursive and other performances by political entrepreneurs in particular places. A disaggregating method, Brubaker's critique of "groupism" foregrounds not only performance but place. "Groupism," for Brubaker, is "the tendency to take discrete, bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis." It is the way in which Serbs, Croats and Muslims are treated "as if they were internally homogeneous, externally bounded groups, even unitary collective actors with common purposes" (Brubaker, 2004: 13). Brubaker challenges the prevailing common sense primordialism that reduces violent conflicts, like those spawned by the breakup of Yugoslavia, to 'ethnic conflicts' between supposedly clearly bounded antagonistic ethnic groups. This requires scholarly analysts to avoid falling into the trap of 'groupism' and accepting the available language of conflicts particularly that promoted and used by the protagonists of conflict themselves (Campbell, 1998). Despite the availability of other narratives, the Bosnian war was relentlessly framed as a primordial ethnic war by its ethnonationalist political parties and

their armies, frames that were taken up by the media, international officials and, it needs to be said, by most ordinary Bosnians themselves after years of war (Mueller, 2000). “Organizations, not ethnic groups as such, are the chief protagonists of ethnic conflict and ethnic violence,” writes Brubaker (2004: 16). Grasping the competing organizations and their spatial networks and entrepreneurs in particular places is vital (see the contrast between Cluj and Târgu Mureş in Brubaker et al., 2006). The most important organizations in Bosnia–Herzegovina were the big three ethno-nationalist political parties (the SDS, HDZ and SDA) and the competing armed forces – the VRS (*Vojska Republika Srpska*), the HVO (*Hrvatsko Vijeće Odranne* – Croat Defense Council) and Bosnian government army (ARBiH, *Armija Republike Bosne i Hercegovine*). None of the big three parties were fully and only Bosnian: all had complex geographies of origin, control and financial support. The SDS, for example, was founded on the initiative of Belgrade-based intellectuals and had close ties with the Serbian Interior Ministry and its counterpart party in the Krajina. From its founding there were important tensions within the party between Sarajevo (later Pale) and Banja Luka which later resulted in a split. Under Karadžić’s leadership the SDS created *Republika Srpska*, a state dominated by him personally. Despite his close ties to Milošević, Karadžić managed to assert a degree of autonomy of action during the Bosnian war, most notably rejecting the Vance-Owen plan in 1993. The HDZ represented an alliance of Zagreb-based anti-Communist nationalists like Franjo Tuđman and the Croatian diaspora. Tuđman treated the Bosnian party as a mere appendage of the Zagreb HDZ (though, significantly, the latter featured prominent diasporic Herzegovinians like Gojko Šušak, born in Široki Brijeg in 1945). Tensions between western Herzegovinian and central Bosnian HDZ Croats ran deep. The SDA was founded in Sarajevo but had close ties with Muslim businessmen from the Sanjak region of Serbia and Montenegro. Two of its leaders, Alija Izetbegović and Fikret Abdić, soon split, with Abdić creating his personal fiefdom around Velika Kladuša in northwest Bosnia into a state-like district that survived through collaboration.

Beyond the need to deconstruct prevalent groupist frames is the need to problematize ‘ethnic and nationalist violence’ (Brubaker & Laitin, 1998). Brubaker and Laitin (1998) object both to the all-too-cavalier framing of violence as ‘ethnic’ or ‘nationalist’ as well as the failure of some to specify the variety and forms of violence (which can be arranged as a spectrum from genocide and ethnic cleansing to mob riots, lynchings, gang assaults, mass rape, terrorism and individualized assassinations and assaults). They reiterate the importance of distinguishing physical violence from conflict more generally. “Even where violence is clearly rooted in preexisting conflict, it should not be treated as a natural, self-explanatory outgrowth of such conflict, something that occurs automatically when the conflict reaches a certain intensity, a certain “temperature.” Violence is not a qualitative degree of conflict but a qualitative form of conflict, with its own dynamics” (Brubaker & Laitin, 1998: 426). This argument is also made by Peter Hart’s history of the Irish Republican Army and its foes in County Cork from 1916 to 1923 (Hart, 1998). Hart constructed a data set of those killed in attributable political violence during the period of the Irish ‘revolution’ which he defines as the period from January 1917 to June 1923 when a unilateral IRA ceasefire on 30th of April brought the brief but bloody Irish civil war to an end. Following in the footsteps of Fitzpatrick and others, he argued that to “understand the origins and outcomes of the revolution, and the sources of its violence...we must understand its geography” (Hart, 1997: 143). His spatial data set revealed that the highest concentration of victims was southern Munster, particularly in county Cork. The Cork brigades of the IRA were responsible for 28% of all of the IRA’s victims during this period (Hart, 1997: 146). Hart’s book is a gripping account of the often intimate and localized dynamics of this violence.

While historians and sociologists have led the way with detailed case studies, some Political Scientists have made the disaggregation of violence and civil war a new research frontier. Nowhere is this more thoroughly pursued than in *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Kalyvas, 2006). Combining an exhaustive literature review with his own micro-level fieldwork on the Greek civil war, Kalyvas begins with two of four puzzles which are innately geographical: why is violence concentrated in certain places and not others and what accounts for the disjuncture between the macro-level causes of war and the micro-level patterns of violence? As he puts it: “[T]he game of record is not the game on the ground” (Kalyvas, 2006: 5). Kalyvas describes his method as two fold. First, he develops abstract theoretical conjunctures and demonstrates their plausibility through illustrations drawn from scores of case studies of civil war over the last two hundred plus years (thus one has the war in the Vendée – 1793–1796 – and the American Civil War in the same case study set as the Vietnam war, contemporary Iraq and Afghanistan). Though “contexts may differ, mechanisms recur” (Kalyvas, 2006: 10). Second, he follows a strategy of disaggregation which he specifies as three distinct “levels of analysis.” “The first level focuses on interactions between unitary (state and nonstate) political actors; the second level deals with the interaction between political actors and the populations they rule; and the third level concentrates on interactions within small groups and among individuals” (2006: 10). It is his interactional level of analysis approach that he believes distinguishes his work from that of others. Unlike other work, his theory “stresses the *joint* character of civil war violence, entailing an interaction between actors at the central and local levels, and between combatants and noncombatants. This interaction is informed by the demands of irregular war, the logic of asymmetrical information, and the local dynamics of rivalries” (2006: 6).

Kalyvas’s study proffers a theory of irregular war and a “micro-foundational theory of violence” which he subdivided into indiscriminate and selective violence. The ‘microfoundational’ conceptualization is a clue to the bounded rational choice modeling scenarios favored by Kalyvas (a graduate of the University of Chicago). Even in some of the most extreme, fearful, cruel and emotional scenarios imaginable, Kalyvas finds ‘rationality’ through the identification of two microfoundations of violence: collaboration and denunciation. The latter is likely to produce a much more intimate violence and Kalyvas uses it to capture dynamics that would seem difficult to encompass within rational actor modeling: revenge, feuds, envy, etc. In the inimitable language of such modeling Kalyvas describes the scenario thus: “Individuals have strong incentives to exploit the informational asymmetries of civil war in order to reap all kinds of benefits, including settling accounts with personal and local enemies” (2006: 14). Initially interested in the process through which political subjects became radicalized and move to violence, Kalyvas relates how he grasped two important points after initial fieldwork: “first, the local dynamics were of fundamental importance and, second, violence appeared to be less the result of powerful political identities and deep divisions and more their cause” (2006: 14–15). This led him to turn his initial causal pathway (identity radicalization leads to violence) on its head and to treat violence as his new dependent variable, with peasants as opportunistic and bounded rational actors negotiating fluctuating local regimes of control.

Ostensibly, then, locality and context are absolutely central to Kalyvas’s argument. But his commitment to universalist generalizations and positivist conceptions of causality (evident in the ‘logic of title’) produces explanation that ultimately marginalizes geographical, anthropological and culturally grounded forms of analysis even as it draws upon such research by himself and others. His book is a constant engagement with geographical and localized

geopolitical problematics but its commitment to the 'parsimony' of game theoretic modeling leads him to abandon thicker speculation on the difference place and space make beyond his abstracted model of zones of territorial control and logics of collaboration, defection, denunciation and violence. Somewhat surprisingly given its salience in the 1990s, the Bosnian war hardly features in his analysis: the index features just five references to what it terms the 'Bosnian Civil War'.⁴ This imperfect frame – the Bosnian war was never only or simply a 'civil war' – and the substance of these references reveal a less than complete grasp of the conflict. This is apparent in another publication which not only renders it a 'civil war' but implicitly as an 'ethnic war' (the March 1992 independence referendum, for example, is termed 'the Muslim referendum for independence') (Kalyvas & Sambanis, 2005). To be fair, this essay appears as part of a World Bank project organized around 'testing' the Collier-Hoeffler model of civil war onset. Yet the rubric reveals poor reflection upon the limitation of the categories of analysis used in research and their relationship to categories of practice in conflicts. Some of the disaggregating civil war literature in Political Science is overly reliant on available census categories, quantitative spatial data, and the groupist categories produced by antagonists to the conflict itself. A conflict may be statistically disaggregated but not conceptually so, its frames and descriptions reliant on disciplinary or groupist categories not critical ones.

Localizing ethnic cleansing in Bosnia

Was the Bosnian war a 'civil war' or 'an international conflict'? V.P. Gagnon's *The Myth of Ethnic War* trenchantly challenges these and other popular frames within Political Science. He argues that the violence that accompanied the breakup of Yugoslavia "was part of a broad strategy in which images of threatening enemies and violence were used by conservative elites in Serbia and Croatia: not in order to mobilize people, but rather as a way to *demobilize* those who were pushing for changes in the structures of economic and political power that would negatively affect the values and interests of those elites" (Gagnon, 2004). War was the continuation of politics by other means with violence used as a deliberate strategy to induce political conformity and marginalize those pressing for genuine democratization and reform in Serbia and Croatia. Gagnon casts this process as part of a long-term struggle between competing conceptions of political space across former Ottoman lands. The Ottoman form of political space recognized relational networks, multiple communities and multiple forms of political authority whereas a nationalist European form sought a territorial order based on the principle of one space, one community, one authority. Tito's Yugoslavia represented a compromise between these forms; the breakup of SFRY re-opened the possibility of reorganizing space around more exclusivist principles. Confounding the fantasy of separate ethnic homeland states, however, was the actuality of Yugoslavia where people with different ethnic allegiances and people with little commitment to ethnicized identifications lived together in common social and political spaces. Though alternatives were possible, Gagnon argued that the Milošević regime deliberately chose to use violence to reconstitute Yugoslavia on its terms. The strategy reduced the discourse of politics to that of war. Instead of authoritarian conservatives and liberal reformers, an ethnicized friend/enemy ("us" versus "them") distinction became the primordial axis of political life and downward spirals of insecurity and violence tore formerly peaceful Yugoslav communities apart. Radically polarizing, the shocking violence of ethnic cleansing offered ethno-territorial visionaries the possibility of creating new demographic 'facts on the ground' and of geopolitically engineering an enlarging national homeland at the expense of neighboring polities. The ultimate goal of ethnic

cleansing, Gagnon (2004: 9) writes, is "not so much ethnic homogenization as it is the construction of homogeneous political spaces" that can only be ruled by ethnonationalist forces. "The homogeneity being sought is thus a political homogeneity..." Ethnic cleansing was only the opening moment of violence and politics-as-war. Terror and enforced political conformity followed as ethnic cleansing led to the promulgation of authoritarian ethnocentric political structures dominated by those implicated in the violent reorganization of political space.

Gagnon's emphasis on the way in which state elites in Serbia and later Croatia choose violence as a deliberate demobilizing political strategy leads him to develop a largely externalist interpretation of the Bosnian war. The Serbian leadership initially sought to incorporate Bosnia-Herzegovina into a re-organized Yugoslavia governed from Belgrade. Gagnon (2004: 77) writes that the "conflicts in Bosnia were the result not of ethnic hatreds, but rather of purposeful attempts by the Serbian regime to foment conflict as a way of imposing a conservative leadership that would allow a recentralization of the federation."⁵ Later, when the Serbian state under Milošević chose the violence of ethnic cleansing, it attacked the most ethnically heterogeneous regions where there was "little indication in the years prior to the war that such violence would take place" (Gagnon, 2004: 44). Throughout his work, Gagnon asserts that the violence of ethnic cleansing was imposed 'from outside' the communities that were attacked, "through the policies of a minority of political elites in Zagreb and in Belgrade" (2004: 44, 51, 112). Ethnic cleansing was "not the expression of grassroots sentiment in the sites of conflict" but, rather, "the violence was imposed on plural communities from outside of those communities by political and military forces from Serbia and Croatia as part of a broader strategy of demobilization" (Gagnon, 2004: xv). He goes further in the conclusion asserting the operation of a deliberate geopolitical logic concerning the sites of violence: "looking in detail at the places where wars were actually fought – places with the highest pre-war levels of positive coexistence – the violence almost without exception was imported into those communities as the result of strategic decisions on the part of leaderships in Belgrade and Zagreb" (Gagnon, 2004: 179). This argument is similar to that made by the Bosnian government during the war and since, its assumptions underpinning the case brought by the Bosnian government against the Serbian state in the World Court at The Hague. Yet, while asserting the non-local nature of the violence of ethnic cleansing, Gagnon's asserts the crucial significance of localized processes in explaining the unfolding of dynamics of conflict and violence. He writes of the need for much more research to be done on "the interaction between local levels of party and economic power in the period both before and after 1990, and how local-level party officials...used their control over local resources, their connections to center of power, and social networks to accomplish their goals." He adds that evidence "indicates that this local level is a hugely important part of the overall story" (Gagnon, 2004: 188).

Existing anthropological research on Bosnia bears out Gagnon's claim about the significance of the local but challenges his emphatic externalization of the violence. For instance, Tone Brंगा's reflections on the ethnic cleansing that swept over the mixed Croat and Muslim village in Central Bosnia where she conducted anthropological research conclude:

In the end what was so painful to most Muslim villagers and to many of their Croat neighbors was that the attackers were not only "outsiders." When HVO started shelling and killing Muslims and burning their houses in the village, some of the Muslims' Catholic Croat neighbors joined in, although the attack had been planned and initiated by people far from the village.

Starting out as a war waged by outsiders it developed into one where neighbor was pitted against neighbor after the familiar person next door had been made into a depersonalized alien, a member of the enemy ranks (Bringa, 1995).

Halpern and Kideckel's collection is structured around this familiar trope of 'neighbor against neighbor' but, while acknowledging the 'often intensely local' nature of the Yugoslav wars, only a few of the essays examine the dynamics of violence at a localized level (Halpern & Kideckel, 2000). Mart Bax's account of the *mali rat* (little war) that enveloped the Bosnian pilgrimage village of Medjugorje demonstrates what this 'often intensely local' means (Bax, 2000a). Kinships network rivalries and struggles over control of the pilgrimage trade mattered most in defining the axis of antagonism within the village while long-standing rituals of escalation and revenge explain the ensuing spiral of violence that lead to the destruction of graves, attacks on livestock and then clan elders, the murder of families and the mutilations of bodies, and finally to a massacre and the 'cleansing' of a once powerful clan from the village. Intensely local, of course, does not mean exclusively local for the intra-Croat clan feud over Medjugorje is played out within the context of international flows of pilgrims, regional battles between ethnicized armies, the disintegration of local state authority, and the rise of marauding militias seeking opportunities for plunder and pillage.⁶ Bax's work underscores the poverty of the available and familiar language used to describe the Bosnian war: 'ethnic cleansing' when it is never simply or straightforwardly 'ethnic,' 'local' or 'external' sources of violence when it is a variable compound of both, and 'top-down' or 'bottom up' when what takes place is a (con)fusion of both.

This important latter point is underscored by Bax's account of the second wave of localized warfare in southwestern Herzegovina between July 1992 and March 1994 (Bax, 2000b). In a social world cluttered with historic resentments and longstanding animosities, the collapse of the state and the rise of local war entrepreneurs created a range of new opportunities to overturn 'historic wrongs' and establish facts on the ground that would consolidate the power of newly ascendant clans, warlords and Franciscan priests. Bax's thick description of a series of moments in the violent ethnic homogenization of south west Herzegovina leads him to question interpretations of ethnic cleansing as "the result of a political policy carefully orchestrated from above and systematically carried out." Incidents that do not conform to this, he argues, are generally viewed as eruptions of primitive Balkanism, age-old tribalism, pointless and absurd violence, the acts of bandits and organized crime. These interpretative frames "reflect an uncritical acceptance of a central or national leader perspective, dismissing as deviant everything that does not go according to plan and denying the significance of specific local and regional circumstances or at any rate failing to problematize and examine them" (Bax, 2000b: 28). In counter-distinction to these interpretative analytics, Bax asserts the significance of "vendetta between local communities or sections of them that might well have been carefully planned but were not ethnically founded, and that were often carried out in the same lines as the longstanding conflicts between Franciscan friars and diocesan priests." He concludes:

This case illustrates that a systematic study from below is crucial to a better understanding of the dynamics and the developmental logic of processes of ethnic cleansing. Rather than being political oppositions, in the social sciences 'from above' and 'from below' are interrelated and consequently supplementary perspectives on how people live together (2000b: 29).

Ethnic cleansing, in sum, can be a misleading and concealing conceptualization. What is known as 'ethnic cleansing' across

Bosnia–Herzegovina may be quite varied in circumstance, inspiration and 'developmental logic,' conjunctural coalitions of power formations that are non-local and local, that operate 'from above' and 'from below.' Ethnic cleansing may indeed have been the consequence of an attack 'from outside' the local community by armies and militias directed, funded and staffed by personnel from neighboring republics. The evidence for this is overwhelming. But it also must be seen as involving a considerable degree of agency on the part of local warlords and their violent formations, and, furthermore, as having an ad hoc and free lance quality on occasion even if the resultant ethnically homogenized landscape gives the impression that a systematic social and spatial engineering logic was at work at all times (for works that capture the complexity of politics in wartime Bosnian towns see Andreas, 2008; Armakolas, 2006; Donia, 2006; Duijzings, 2005).

Localizing population returns

The effort by the international community to 'reverse' the violent homogenization of ethnic cleansing through the implementation of Annex VII leads to a similar set of problematics involving identities, oppositions and interpretative frames that require critical refinement. The 'international community' is a convenient fiction for it refers to a vast complex of institutions that had great difficulty acting together in a coherent manner. The major Euro-Atlantic powers, through the Peace Implementation Council, exercise the greatest influence over its operation and goals in Bosnia. In the returns process, one key actor was not a separate institution per se but an inter-agency body: the Reconstruction and Returns Task Force (RRTF). Formed through the initiative of a member of the Office of the High Representative, RRTF inter-agency meetings across Bosnia brought together the major players in the international community with the capacity to shape returns policy. In our research we found that it was a particularly significant mechanism for envisioning, coordinating and implementing the returns process (Dahlman & Ó Tuathail, 2005). This mechanism helped produce the 'international community' as a powerful political force with real capacities and sanctioning power in negotiations with ethnonationalist run local authorities. This proved extremely important in advancing the possibility of returns.

What 'return' meant, of course, was more problematic than it appeared. The dominant 'property rights' conceptualization the international community eventually decided upon after two years of incoherence and organization – return policy meant giving those violently displaced from their homes the opportunity to reclaim their property and the choice to return to their property – understandably placed the experience of 'ethnic cleansing' at its center. Yet, this understated fundamental ambivalences. Annex VII's 'the right freely to return to their homes of origin' language was qualified by the principle of non-refoulement, the right of the displaced not to return if they think it would compromise their safety and health. Chapter 1, article I, paragraph 4 stated: "Choice of destination shall be up to the individuals or family, and the principle of the unity of the family shall be preserved." Yet this rhetoric of 'choice' was constrained by institutional resources, political decisions (to emphasize 'minority returns,' for example, above 'local integration') and an implicit sedentary discourse that naturalized the link between people and place in the refugee and return policy process. 'Getting families back to their homes' was ambivalent when, as was the case among many Bosnians, they had scattered homes related to their place in the life cycle (many men were gasterbeiters and many youth were students not living at home), they were sometimes traumatically displaced from 'homes' that had lost that status to them, and they had aspirations to stay in relatively well

resourced urban locations of displacement or to go abroad (particularly true of semi-urban or rural families with young children). More profoundly, a 'return' to their pre-war political status was not possible for the playing field of citizenship and identity had changed profoundly in Bosnia–Herzegovina as a result of the war and the resultant ethnoterritorialization of space. Put simply, before the war Bosnian places had three constituent peoples and various small minorities (mostly Roma). After the war, Bosnian places had a majority people; all others were small minorities.⁷ Because its space was now territorialized as ethnic homelands, Bosnian home and homecoming would never be the same.

Many studies of the dynamics of refugee and displaced person returns are macro-level data and institution driven studies that are based on limited or no fieldwork (Stedman & Tanner, 2003). The difference geography makes is not explored in these works, though some do note geographical dilemmas like how the notion of 'home' is problematic for refugees given the trauma of ethnic cleansing and the relative safety of displacement for many (Black, 2002). Much of this work is valuable but some works are hostile to the international governance structures in Bosnia, reading the Office of the High Representative, particularly its acquisition and use of the power to remove 'obstructionist' officials and impose state-wide laws (termed the 'Bonn Powers' after the PIC meeting that authorized them) as a form of liberal imperialism. For example, Chandler argues that the international community is guilty of 'faking democracy' in Bosnia and single-handedly ruling the country in an anti-democratic and authoritarian manner, one that denies Bosnian state bodies their 'sovereignty,' the Bosnian people a genuine 'democracy,' and the displaced basic 'choice' over their lives (Chandler, 2000, 2005). Knaus and Martin argue that the OHR is like a 'European Raj' setting the agenda, imposing it and punishing with sanctions those who refuse to implement it (Knaus & Martin, 2003). Some of the neoliberal assumptions the international community used to reconstitute Bosnia and structure its return process deserve critique (Jansen, 2006). But some critiques tritely reduce the complex politics of Bosnia to an oversimplified contrasts between unaccountable, bureaucratic, and imperialistic international governance structures, on the one hand, and a supposedly thwarted authentic Bosnia, on the other hand.

This impoverished analytical frame finds expression in an otherwise fine overview by Heimerl on the returns process in Bosnia (Heimerl, 2005). She contrasts a 'humanitarian or voluntary' approach to returns during 1996–1997 to a 'coercive' approach from 1997 to 2000 which prioritized minority returns. The binary is disingenuous and it leads her to affirm Chandler's (2000: 107) claim that "return for the international community has become less a matter of choice, to be decided by individuals or negotiated between community representatives and more a matter of international policy-making." This latter contrast is ignorant of the law, the structures of power the RRTF sought to challenge, and the variable power struggles across Bosnia's municipalities. Individual 'choice,' as we have noted is indeed acknowledged in Annex VII of the Dayton Peace Accords and conditioned how the UNHCR operated. But liberal norms of 'individual choice' in war zones are often fictional constructs given local power structures. When the international governance structures in Bosnia prioritized 'minority returns' and made reconstruction aid available to those who chose to return to their former homes in areas controlled by a different ethnicized political party, they were expanding the range of what it was possible to think and do within Bosnia. The ethnicity of the 'minority' and 'majority' did not matter: all 'minority returns' received priority funding. They did so within contexts where, in most cases, locally embedded ethnonationalist parties were using municipal resources to aid 'majority relocation' designed to consolidate the demographic results of 'ethnic cleansing.' These

so-called 'local integration' schemes utilized the language of choice but their goal, in many if not most cases, was to consolidate localized ethnocracy. The process of returns generated many power struggles and they are not reducible to one between the 'international community,' on the one hand, and 'community representatives,' on the other hand. Rather, variably powerful political actors – ethno-political parties, charismatic leaders, local thugs, war veterans, displaced person associations, international agencies, OHR officials, IFOR commanders, local police – pushed and shoved to advance diverse geopolitical visions and agendas using the legal, financial and coercive means at their disposal. Critiques of the 'coercive' nature of international administered returns fail to capture these localized power struggles.

Where macro reviews reveal limits in their understanding of the localized politics of returns, place-based studies of the returns process can provide corrective accounts of the importance of local power contexts and dynamics (Bougarel, Duijzings, & Helms, 2007). International non-governmental organizations like Human Rights Watch and the International Crisis Group produced first draft accounts of local geopolitical dynamics across Bosnia from 1996 onwards, reports that are of variable quality but are invaluable starting points for research conceptualization. Academic studies of the returns process at the local level have been few in number and also somewhat variable. Belloni considers the relatively successful case of refugee returns to Prijedor and, using another disingenuous contrast, argues that "success is more due to the determination of Muslim DPs than to the international peacebuilding strategy" (Belloni, 2005). Yet, as his account of the well documented case of Prijedor confirms, the key moment in the breakthrough to returns was when British NATO troops killed Simo Drljaca, the police chief and Milošević regime agent who supervised the ethnic cleansing of the Prijedor area, while attempting to arrest him and another accused war criminal for trial before the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in the Hague. (For a discussion of Prijedor's experience with ethnic cleansing see Wesselingh & Vaulerin, 2005.) The local exercise of power by the international community changed the political climate in the municipality and produced a greater openness to the RRTF strategy of 'minority return' which empowered organized Muslims DP associations to return to their pre-war homes. Belloni is correct in concluding that "peacebuilding is a political process that needs the support and participation of people on the ground to turn international policy declarations into achievable ends" (Belloni, 2005: 446). What he neglects to acknowledge is that it also requires the active exercise of power at the local level by international forces and institutions to bring about successful returns. International power must be localized (for works, based on extended ethnographic fieldwork, that convey the complexities and ambiguities negotiated by returnees and non-returnees in their new contexts see Armakolas, 2007; Jansen, 2009; Stefansson, 2003, 2007; Wagner, 2008). Life for returnees is full of hedging behavior and ambivalences about home; as Jansen notes, one has 'degrees of return' with families. "[K]eeping one foot in the other Entity limited exposure to the risk associated with minority return, and it allowed the maintenance of networks and engagements built during displacement" (Jansen, 2009: 56).

Both the literatures on the localized dynamics of ethnic cleansing and returns navigate a series of popular interpretative binaries: internal versus external, top-down versus bottom up, the international versus the local, authoritarian versus democratic, bureaucracy versus community, the non-Bosnian versus the Bosnian. The best of these works move beyond the appealing yet confining order produced by these binaries to acknowledge how preexistent scalar relations and variable power geometries confound any convenient delimitation of the geopolitical dynamics found in Bosnian localities. Local authorities within Bosnia

functioned within republican and federal structures yet had considerable autonomous power (a foundational feature of the local state *opstina* structure designed in Ottoman times to be relatively self-sufficient). When Yugoslavia went into crisis, the scalar relationships of Bosnian localities were thrown into confusion. Some localities remained embedded within Yugoslav networks while others were cut adrift or connected to the emergent power center of Zagreb. Flows of arms and money from beyond Bosnia sustained the war and buttressed localized ethno-ocratic power structures. After the fighting ended, new lines of power and authority had to be built to challenge those set down by the war. To have a possibility of implementing Annex VII of the Dayton Accords, the internationally funded Office of the High Representative had to use its Bonn Powers to impose uniform laws governing housing and the returns process across Bosnia, overriding the authority of the electorally legitimated ethnocratic local authorities. It needed to have the capacity of exercise its power within these localities by having international officials operate on the ground across Bosnia. To provide the possibility for its work to be sustainable (for nominal returns to become actually return), it needed to create state structures and laws that would be seen as legitimate. It is questionable whether this has actually occurred (Ó Tuathail & Dahlman, 2010). Understanding this complexity requires research that goes beyond the confining binaries and conventional nostrums of geopolitical discourse to engage the situated messiness of places and the relational networks of power within which they function.

Conclusion: a more geographical geopolitics?

While the development of ground-level expertise about conflict regions is undoubtedly a worthy expansion of critical geopolitics, a series of practical and ethnical questions require examination. First, how is ground-level expertise to be acquired and what are the ethics of the research methods employed? Megoran has argued for the importance of ethnographic research but these methods require significant intellectual labor investment (Megoran, 2006). While extended fieldwork and local language competence are undoubtedly desirable, full time academic employment does not necessarily allow this. Other methods, like survey research, elite interviewing and focus groups, are important also and can enable comparative research and analysis (O'Loughlin & Ó Tuathail, 2009). The issue of research ethics is extremely important and can only be underscored here. The admonition 'do no harm' is a useful starting point but certain conflicts and situations require clear moral situatedness and normative principles transparently expressed. Second, is there anything distinctive about a grounded critical geopolitics compared to, for example, research in Anthropology or Political Science? This question cannot be answered here but I would argue for a ground-level critical geopolitics focused on the disjunctures and contradictions in the relationship between the grounded local and the foreign policy discourse and practices of the major powers. A grounded critical geopolitics could also focus on how localized conditions, structures and power struggles mediate and subvert international interventionist practices. This specification immediately raises the question of the relationship of the research to the practices of international actors and local agents. Should grounded critical geopolitical research seek to inform and change policy practices (from non-governmental organizations to the various agencies of the United Nations)? Moral and normative commitments should provide a situated answer. Cliché admonitions against 'advise to the prince' can sometimes be expressions of political quiescence and retreat from a world making difficult moral demands upon us. The American Association of Anthropologists's statement of disapproval of the

Human Terrain Systems project embedding anthropologists in counter-insurgency US army units in Iraq and Afghanistan is correct but what about non-combat situations where reconstruction and humanitarian assistance is desperately needed? (AAA, 2007; within Geography see Kearns, 2010). Finally, while critical geopolitics should recognize itself as a form of geopolitical discourse, its promise of a more geographical geopolitics needs to be approached with skepticism. US geopolitical culture is antithetical to disaggregated geographical knowledge for longstanding structural, communicational and political reasons. It was not for lack of geographical knowledge, or even grasp of the nationalist dynamics and political economy of Vietnam within the State Department, that the US government made the horrendous strategic blunder of fighting a costly winless war there. Critical geographical knowledge that went against the grain of prevailing geopolitical dogma and debate at the time was systematically shut out from the inner sanctums of power. Similarly, it was not for want of understanding of the local causes of social revolt in Nicaragua and El Salvador within the US foreign policy bureaucracy or within Congress that the Reagan administration sponsored the destabilization of Nicaragua and the shoring up of a brutal military government in El Salvador in the name of anti-Communism. US Presidents tend to act militarily abroad to project strength and out of fear of being charged as 'weak' in the face of actions by the US's enemies. Presidential administrations often ignore internal expertise and even secretly plot against their own bureaucratic structures (a feature of the Nixon and George W. Bush administrations). They make blatantly domestic political calculations about foreign policy and its discourse. Also conflicts are frequently downscaled by mass media networks to a matter of masculinist performance by a President. These tendencies persist and arguably partially explain the Obama administration's recent 'surge' policy in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, it may be that what is most likely to produce change is not geographical enlightenment (through practices of critical geopolitics) but presidential and widespread political experience with the harsh realities of the limits of US power.

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Endnotes

¹ I use the word 'arguably' to signal an important caveat. It can be argued that some scholars have indeed delivered on the promise of a more geographically grounded geopolitics with impressive archival and fieldwork research (among some examples see Hyndman, 2000; Jeffrey, 2006; Megoran, 2007; Nevins, 2005; Secor, 2001; Tyner, 2008). Yet, the dominant conception is that critical geopolitics is about discursive critique not fieldwork, and that geographically grounded fieldwork on political issues is political geography not critical geopolitics.

² I use this phrase because for radicalized Serb and Croatian nationalists 'Bosnia–Herzegovina' was a territorial polity they now denied. While visiting the center of Mostar in September 1999, I was refused Bosnian currency – marks – at the Hercegovacka Banka because, the teller with the Virgin Mary statues behind the counter explained, 'this is Croatia.' I was given Croatian kunas instead. The bank

was raided by SFOR in April 2001 and later shut down because of its role in funding a Herzeg-Bosna separatist movement in the area.

³For the full text of the 'General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina,' see http://www.ohr.int/dpa/default.asp?content_id=380

⁴Kalyvas defines 'civil war' as "armed combat within the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity between parties subject to a common authority at the outset of the hostilities" (2006: 17). The Bosnian war does not fit within the terms of this definition. Further, any forms of political violence could be classified as civil war including insurgent violence against colonial occupation. The reason for Bosnia's marginalization in Kalyvas appears to be that his model applies to 'two-sided' civil wars whereas the Bosnian war featured many more armed factions.

⁵Kalyvas and Sambanis' analysis also rejects the 'ethnic hatreds' explanation and like Gagnon emphasizes the power of the violence itself. "Rather than translating deep divisions into violent conflict, the anecdotal evidence suggests a situation of rapid "ethnification" of violence *once the war began*" (2005: 215, emphasis in the original). In his book Kalyvas cites Noel Malcolm's observation that people felt bewildered by the violence and that the transformation of neighbors into enemies seemed to have no basis in their previous experience (Kalyvas, 2006: 82).

⁶In my visit in September 1999, I chatted with some Irish pilgrims (transported on 'Paddy Tour' buses from Dubrovnik) who were oblivious to the fact that they were in Bosnia–Herzegovina. They were in a fully affirming Catholic spiritual space.

⁷Legally the 'constituent nation' principle lingered and was the basis for a Constitutional Court decision in 2000 that led to the introduction of localized forms of consociational governance across Bosnia (with mixed results) (Bieber, 2006).

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