Edith Saurer Funds Award 2025

Dr. Øyvind Hvenekilde Seim:

Rural-urban dimensions of social inequality and cultural-ideological exclusion in pre-war Bosnia and Herzegovina: *Exploring the political consequences for the 1990 elections and pre-war nationalist mobilization*

Project abstract:

This research project explores the political consequences of the emergence of a socially stratified Bosnian society towards the end of communism. It discusses the impact of social inequality emerging from the uneven rural-urban development in pre-war Bosnia for the victory of the nationalist parties in the 1990-elections and for the subsequent nationalist mobilization ahead of the war in 1992. A question asked is if Bosnia and Herzegovina's "failed modernization" was among the preconditions for its "failed democratization" from 1990, or whether it was tied to the ideological and cultural marginalization of rural areas and social strata during the communist era.

Project background, research questions, and the main research objectives:

At the University of Vienna in 2023, I successfully defenced my interdisciplinary PhD dissertation "*The Road to War in the Bosnian Municipality of Kotor Varoš in 1992 – A Microhistory.*"[1] Here I studied the pre-war nationalist mobilization and failed democratization in Bosnia and Herzegovina (now labelled Bosnia), using a case study approach. For the post-PhD phase, I aligned with RECET in Vienna and with the research cluster "In/equalities in the context of social transformation processes (focus on Southeast and Central Europe)" at the Dimensions of Europe Program of the University of Graz through a short-term Visiting Fellowship at Center for Southeastern Europe (CSEES). I initiated the exploration of pending working hypotheses identified in the dissertation, one of which is about the rural-urban dimensions of social inequality in pre-war Bosnia and its political impact during Bosnia's first multi-party in 1990 and the subsequent descent to war in 1992. This research track is promising because, as identified in the dissertation, in the 1990-elections the newly-formed nationalist

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[1] Dissertation abstract of Hvenekilde Seim 2022: *The road to war in the Bosnian municipality of Kotor Varoš in 1992: a microhistory* at utheses.univie.ac.at/detail/64820

parties relied on the rural-provincial areas and neo-urban social layers with rural roots for their election victories, while non-nationalist parties were strongest in urban areas and industrial hubs.[2] The election patterns underscore the need for assessing the role of social tensions, social inequality, regional growth disparities, and "rural uprooting" in pre-war Bosnia in inciting nationalist polarization. This research project is now enabled realization by the Edith Saurer Funds Award.

During communism, Bosnia went through one of the fastest and most radical modernization processes in a European perspective in the second half of the 20th century, but this also created imbalances and uneven development. While industrialization was the mantra in Bosnia's modernization and development programme, the agricultural sector was not adequately supported. This research analyzes the political effects of the uneven modernization processes and failed agrarian policies during communism, which spurred a significant "flight" to urban areas and thus played a pivotal role in shaping Bosnia's socio-spatial dynamics.

Another dimension was of cultural origins. This project is analyzing the slow cultural transformation of the rural-rooted social layers in Bosnia.[3] This group consisted of the more nationally conservative peasants in rural Bosnia, which in communist ideology were treated as retrograde or regressive. It also encompassed the rural-rooted neo-urban social layers that emerged in major towns. I discuss the hypothesis that ideological/cultural marginalization of the rural-rooted social layers during communism was an impacting factor for Bosnia's "failed democratization." The project therefore examines whether nationalist mobilization was also driven by socio-economic inequality and exclusion, and to what extent it reflected experiences of cultural and political (ideological) marginalization of rural-related social groups during the socialist period. In both cases, it addresses a lacuna in the research: the experience of socialism from the perspective of the rural-related social layers. Here, one can add the observation that nationalist parties won the elections in 1990 to the surprise of the ruling communist-associated elites, among other because these rural-related social layers had been culturally and politically muted in the socialist system and were out of sight for them.

An attempt is done to locate social discontent, ethnic conflict hotspots, and nationalist mobilization spatially. It compares the populations across distinct urban and peri-urban environments: the historic old town with its autochthonous city dwellers, the socialist-built urban areas, the suburban townships, and the semi-urban/semi-rural transition zones with their

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[2] Andjelić 2003.
[3] Hvenekilde Seim 2022: 32-35, 152, 266-68, 329-33.

mix of socialist-built social housing and "wild" privately-built housing of rural migrants. While public housing in Bosnia was ethnically mixed and tended to foster civic values of secularism, multiculturalism, and Yugoslavism, in contrast the privately-built, semi-urban housing zones were more mono-ethnic, thus reflecting a continuation of rural segregation dynamics within the urban landscape. However, this spatial approach could not be properly investigated in the smalltown of Kotor Varoš due to its limited urban core, as concluded in the dissertation.[4] The phenomenon is believed to be particularly pertinent to Sarajevo, but also to be observable in most other major towns in pre-war Bosnia. Sarajevo can showcase how rural ethnic segregation patterns and collectivist values could be reproduced in the new urban areas where rural migrants settled.

Thus, the project will be assessing the pre-war political and electoral impact of the rural-rooted, neo-urban population in Bosnia's failed democratization in 1990-92. As suggested in my dissertation, from 1990 "these segments were mobilized by and united with nationalist politicians, the political dissidents, and the awoken bourgeois nationalist intelligentsia, which also included pragmatic ex-communists changing uniform to strategically appropriate nationalism as a social base for continued rule. (...) These were social layers empowered in the 1990-elections." A proposition that emanates is that "the emergence of a socially stratified Bosnian society towards the end of communism [seems] to be relevant to the overall analysis of Bosnia's political disintegration in 1991-92."[5]

Current state of research and applied source material:

While there is an abundance of literature about Bosnia's political disintegration from 1990 that is centered on political elite actors, this novel research project explores socio-cultural aspects and the less-privileged social layers (or of classes in the "classless" society). Pending hypotheses will be framed by a deeper dive into and re-examining of relevant sociological literature from the period and beyond it, like that of John Allcock and domestic authors Nijaz Musabegović, Slobodan Antonić, Mladen Lazić, Sreten Vujović, Jovo Bakić, Pavel Gantar & Srna Mandić, Ognjen Čaldarević, Dijana Pleština.[6] This literature is complemented by newer works from authors like Goran Musić and Rory Archer.[7] Allcock treats rural-urban differences in Tito's Yugoslavia, with the tendencies to economic, social, and political exclusion of the

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[4] Hvenekilde Seim 2022: 333.
[5] Hvenekilde Seim 2022: 332.
[6] John Allcock 2000; 2002 and domestic authors Musabegović 1997, Antonić 2002, Mladen Lazić 1995; 2011, Vujović 1997; 2000, Jovo Bakić, Gantar & Mandić 1991, Čaldarević 1991, Pleština 1992.
[7] E.g., Archer & Duda & Stubbs 2016.

rural population, as one more pre-war factor for social and political conflict. Yet, social inequality was a rather taboo topic during communism, leaving significant gaps in the scholarly discourse. My doctoral dissertation is a commenced pre-study, before this Edith Saurer Funds supported work can aid further elaboration with these preliminary analytical suggestions.

I will critically engage with the literature claiming that the war, with the massive shelling of many towns, was a "revenge of the countryside" (*seljačka buna*) or a rural-urban confrontation.[8] This is sometimes expressed in ethnic terms, with the stereotype about rural-mountainous Serbs bombarding urban and civic Sarajevo. I propose that attention should be given to challenges in the urban receiver areas in the towns, rather than to focus on identity issues or social problems embedded in the mono-ethnic rural highlander departure areas. Instead, ethnic dichotomization appears triggered from the cultural clash and reciprocal identity subscription, with ethnic boundary activation, including identity crises and social mobility struggles of uprooted rural migrants. A research hypothesis is that such tensions could emerge when populations from mono-ethnic villages interact more closely in urban settings.

I will also be adding sources through additional fieldwork and qualitative interviewing from socially stratified environments, including in the mentioned urban/suburban/rural population zones. I might also (still) reach to decision-makers, complementing a few already conducted interviews with former communist functionaries, such as higher police officials and executives in the cultural sector and during the 1984 Sarajevo Olympics. Because of the inability of the socialist regime to facilitate for a controlled rapid urbanization in Bosnia, one interview was conducted with a company director in UNIS, who was responsible for Sarajevo's urban development and city planning. I can also draw on interviews with three domestic sociologists in Sarajevo and one in Banja Luka. Pre-war social surveys will be useful, as well as voting data from Bosnia's first multi-party elections in 1990.

Methodology:

I build on Neven Andjelić's argument when suggesting that social layers in pre-war Bosnia could be defined both from professional profiles and residential patterns (urban, semi-urban, rural), which often were interconnected.[9] The endeavor of looking at social layers spatially in the search for ethnic hotspots is innovative and constitutes a rather untouched research field

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[8] As discussed in Hvenekilde Seim (2022: 267), among other with relation to critically outlines by Bougarel 1999 and Allcock 2002: 105-7.
[9] Andjelić 2003: 33, 134.

with regard to understanding the war in Bosnia. While the precise link remains open to debate, the broader cognitive connection between social conflict and spatial-residential inequality is common.

In addition to be studying existing sociological and ethnological literature and relevant sources, I will by conducting own interviews in Bosnia and employ microhistorical approaches, such as oral history and fieldwork-based interviewing, which enable bottom-up perspectives. The Edith Saurer Funds Award will help me to carry out additional interviews in new research locations, in particular Sarajevo, but also other cities and areas of Bosnia, as a certified translator/interpreter of Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian language. Interviews are interesting and valuable not only because of their intersubjective character, but also because they capture experiences and perspectives that are at risk of being lost due to the advanced age of many informants. My doctoral dissertation demonstrated the analytical potential of oral history and showed that the inter-subjectivity in the interview encounter should be regarded an opportunity rather than a methodological drawback.[10]

Interdisciplinarity as method:

In line with my academic research profile, I apply an interdisciplinary analytical framework to identify the crossing points of social-cultural phenomena with the political analysis of historical developments. Historians are generally freer to move across disciplinary boundaries and to draw on the social sciences, as historical epistemology is inherently broad and integrative. It is at such disciplinary intersections that synergies and methodological innovation emerge. So, as a historian I am incorporating impacts of geography and settlement patterns, alongside insights and methods drawn from ethnology and social anthropology. I apply qualitative interviews and oral history, and make links to systematic social sciences like sociology, political sciences, and economics. Such a political history, or cultural political history, might lean towards Peter Burke's historical anthropology and towards the wider tradition of cultural history.[11]

The attempted interdisciplinarity, micro-macro proclivity, attention to geography, and empirically oriented focus on socio-cultural trends and trajectories within a political history also makes it worthwhile to compare with Fernand Braudel.[12] This interdisciplinary profile aligns with RECET (Research Center for the History of Transformations) with which I am

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[10] Hvenekilde Seim 2022: Chapter 5.

[11] E.g., Burke 2008: chs. 3-4. Among other, of interest is linking the anthropologists' broad concept of culture and the study of rituals and symbols to the cultural rules of everyday life that social historians are exploring.

[12] On my interdisciplinary profile, see Hvenekilde Seim 2022: 36-37.

associated. Compared to the RECET manifest, I "take a long-durée perspective on transformations," I put "emphasis on the interdisciplinary connections to sociology, economics, and cultural and social anthropology," I work on "social history," the impact of multiple temporalities, and "on the connection between macro- and micro-level research."[13]

Project outcome:

The Edith Saurer Funds Award will enable travel, field research, library and archive work, and scholarly networking primarily in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but with probable visits to Serbia, Croatia, North Macedonia, and Montenegro as well. One or a few articles can be finalized, some as direct results of the funding and within its research period, others indirectly stimulated by this research period but finalized beyond its timeframe. Even one associated topic can find some elaborations, that of the search for the historical continuities and discontinuities between the prewar and the post-war period both regarding current EU-attitudes in Bosnia and the political consequences for postwar election patterns that have reinforced ethnic segmentation in Dayton Bosnia. Beyond its historical contribution, this line of analysis might have relevance for understanding contemporary political trends, including the growth of populist political parties in Central and Eastern Europe.

The study of rural migration to socialist towns in pre-war Bosnia and its impact on electoral patterns and nationalist mobilization in the early 1990s encompasses various aspects of social inequality, such as gender, class, ethnicity, religion, and lifestyles that the Edith Saurer Funds maintain a key research focus on. This study, with its search for social classes "in the classless society," takes socio-economic inequality seriously through its attempts to locate the core of social discontent spatially.

Beyond the work also comparative and transnational concepts can be pursued where there were noticeable rural-urban ethnic dimensions in demography, such as in Ukraine, Moldova, Romania, Lebanon, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. These are conflict settings I have had direct professional or academic relation to the last decade.

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[13] Research | Research Center for the History of Transformations (RECET) [en] : www.recet.at/research

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