

## **"Going with one's people": Narrating collective ethnonational agency in East Sarajevo**

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### **Abstract**

How do self-identified Serbs who left Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina) just before and just after the 1990s siege of that city, and who settled in "Serbian" Sarajevo, from where that siege was executed, narrate agency in that displacement? How do their narrations position them in relation to post-war Serbian ethnonationalism seeking to interpellate them? This article traces how a totalizing ethnonational modality of agency in their vernacular accounts of departure renders their experiences appropriable by Serbian ethnonationalist counter-historiography. This modality chimes with the latter's moral emphasis on victimhood and sacrifice. More fundamentally, I argue, it reinforces the postulation of an ontological order inhabited by ethnonations, and thus retrospectively constitutes the very collective subject posited by that counter-historiography: "the Serbian people in BiH".

KEYWORDS: agency, ethnonationalism, displacement, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

On the night of 30<sup>th</sup> October 2023, the communications tower on Mount Trebević, rising above Sarajevo and adjacent East Sarajevo, was bathing in horizontal bands of red, blue and white light. Like most people in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), I was initially alerted to this through media reports. These included links to a proclamation by the mayor of East Sarajevo that the "Trebević tower in the pan-Slavic colors of the flag of Republika Srpska is the new lighthouse of East Sarajevo and Republika Srpska".<sup>1</sup> Built into it, he wrote, were the souls of fallen soldiers and civilians, and of those who "had to leave their age-old hearths in Sarajevo and create new lives by building our East Sarajevo". The mayor continued:

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<sup>1</sup> Svjetionik na Trebeviću u bojama srpske zastave, RTRS, 30/10/2023. All translations are mine.

Perhaps the lighthouse will be met with disapproval by some. May they, and people like them, know that it is part of activities to create a culture of memory and remembrance with the intention that we know who we are and how long we have existed here. Much longer, and at least as long as others who have different flags. May East Sarajevo and Republika Srpska live and grow!

When the lighthouse intervention did indeed elicit disapproval in the other war-produced "entity" of BiH, the "Federation of BiH", officials from Republika Srpska (RS) joined the mayor to express surprise.<sup>2</sup> A government minister urged everyone to "get used to living alongside each other—to accept the fact that each (nation) has its history and culture". A presidential advisor complained that the "current inhabitants" of Sarajevo seemed to expect "the Serbian people", who had been "expelled" from that city, to "seek permission for everything" from their mayoress and from "newly minted Sarajevans". Like the mayor's original message, these statements conveyed that Serbs, as a collective, had been violently removed from Sarajevo and that non-autochthonous others had usurped their place. They also abounded with constitutional affirmations of RS sovereignty and of the tower's location on the RS side of the Inter-Entity Boundary Line (IEBL).

The inauguration of the lighthouse—which has broadcast its message every night since then—was not the first such intervention by the East Sarajevo authorities. Four months earlier, city workers had installed new welcome signs at six entry points into East Sarajevo, including at the four major ones used by those arriving across the IEBL, from Sarajevo. In Serbian Cyrillic and in English, they said:

Welcome! City of East Sarajevo. The city of 157,000 Serbs who had to leave Sarajevo.

The mayoress of Sarajevo denounced these signs as an attack on the truth about the war and sued her counterpart in East Sarajevo for inciting hatred. The mayor of East Sarajevo justified them as routine replacements of traffic signage but also as "a further step in strengthening the identity of East Sarajevo".<sup>3</sup> In any case, he said, the signs simply stated the truth, which (current) Sarajevans were unable to handle.<sup>4</sup> The mayor declared that the signs actually repudiated false theses propagated in Sarajevo, such as a plaque commemorating that "Serbian criminals" set fire to the library ("generalizing", the

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<sup>2</sup> Sarajevu smeta trobojka u Srpskoj, *Nezavisne novine*, 01/11/2023, 5–6.

<sup>3</sup> Tabla o 157000 Srba koji su morali napustiti Sarajevo posvađala Karićevu i Ćosića, *Nezavisne novine*, 30/06/2023, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Karić: Ćosić raspaljuje mržnju. Ćosić: Karićevu boli istina, *Nezavisne novine*, 15/07/2023, 5.

mayor said, and accusing Serbs "as a people") and signs stating that the city had been "1425 days under siege" (rather than "divided", as the mayor claimed, into "areas held by the Army of the Republic of BiH [*Armija Republike BiH*, ARBiH] and by the Army of RS [*Vojska Republike Srpske*, VRS]").<sup>5</sup> Of the 157,000 Sarajevans that had declared Serbian nationality in the 1991 census, he stated, "there were none left" and East Sarajevo was now "the home" of all Serbs who had had to leave Sarajevo out of "fear for their safety". The mayor specified two waves of departure: one in 1992, before the war and in its earliest phase, and one in 1996, on the eve of the post-war reintegration of certain VRS-held areas into Sarajevo, as stipulated in the Dayton Peace Agreement. He had participated in the first wave as a child. The second one, he declared, had been "the biggest peacetime exodus ever recorded in the world".<sup>6</sup>

In this article I reach back to vernacular accounts of these displacements by persons whose experiences these 2023 interventions claim to represent: inhabitants of East Sarajevo who had fled Sarajevo. In a discursive constellation where, in the words of their mayor, Sarajevans and "people like them" tend to associate them most readily with the perpetration of siege, how did these self-identified Serbs narrate their agency in those 1992 and 1996 departures? Recent studies of such vernacular accounts call on us to acknowledge the complexity of motivations for leaving (e.g. Žíla, 2021; 2022; 2023) and of subjectivities involved (e.g. Golubović, 2019). Extending such analyses, I explore the *consequences* of such narrations: I inquire not into their formation, but into what can be done with them by interpellating interventions in post-war RS such as the lighthouse and welcome signs. I detect a totalizing ethnonational modality of agency in these accounts that effectively renders wartime experiences appropriable by Serbian ethnonationalist counter-historiography. It is consonant with the latter's moral emphasis on victimhood and sacrifice, and it reinforces a particular ontology that retrospectively constitutes the very collective subject posited by that counter-historiography: "the Serbian people in BiH".

### **A Serbian ethnonationalist counter-historiography of the war over Sarajevo**

The origin story of East Sarajevo communicated by the RS lighthouse and the welcome signs reaches for common components of ethnonationalist claims to place, such as perennial residence, legitimate possession and righteous victimhood. Yet

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<sup>5</sup> Table im nisu smetale sve do natpisa o prognanim Srbima, *Nezavisne novine*, 14/07/2023, 2–3; Ćosić ponovo postavio tablu o 157.000 protjeranih Srba, pa pomenuo Karićevu, *Glas Srpske*, 19/07/2023.

<sup>6</sup> Saga sa spornim tablama se nastavlja, *Oslobođenje*, 22/07/2023, 2.

straightforward invocations of such tropes quickly run aground here because of the glaring contingency of the genesis of this city. East Sarajevo's roots are exceptionally shallow: its name, its boundaries and most of its population resulted from 1990s politics, warfare and diplomacy, and from ongoing geopolitical supervision. Moreover, mobilizing the suffering of East Sarajevans for this origin story requires engagement with a moral economy of victimhood (Golubović, 2021) in which legitimate victim status is already predominantly claimed by others: by inhabitants of what many in RS insist on calling "Muslim" Sarajevo.

The lighthouse and the welcome signs were therefore explicitly *reactive* interventions. Since Sarajevo's population is five times greater than that of East Sarajevo, the audience of the Trebević tower, which rises above both cities, predominantly lives across the IEBL.<sup>7</sup> Most welcome signs also face that way. As we saw, officials in RS implied that "current" Sarajevans falsely claimed innocent victimhood in the 1990s war. Moreover, they suggested that such lies had spread from these people "with different flags" (read: "Muslims") to "others like them". This probably refers to foreigners, including visitors to Sarajevo, who are seen to be beholden to the same distorted account of the war. That account attributes key responsibility to a proactive ethnonationalist campaign to establish a separate Serbian-inhabited and -ruled polity on BiH territory and, as part of that, holds that VRS besieged Sarajevo. It is corroborated by evidence collected by the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY), which found leading figures of that sovereignty project, including RS President Radovan Karadžić, RS Assembly President Momčilo Krajišnik and VRS Commander-in-Chief Ratko Mladić, guilty of crimes against humanity. It also holds that the RS sovereignty project in BiH played an important role in creating the conditions in which most Serbs departed from the city in 1992 and in 1996.<sup>8</sup> Dominant in historiography, in media and artistic production in, for example, most of Europe, Japan, North America and states with large Muslim populations, that account is what the 2023 lighthouse and welcome signs reacted against.

These interventions fitted into broader affirmations of a counter-historiography of RS (see Čolović, 2025). One Sarajevo-focused instance of this was the report of the RS government-sponsored *Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Suffering of*

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<sup>7</sup> In the 2013 census 94.21% of East Sarajevo's inhabitants declared Serbian nationality. In the City of Sarajevo, 80.74% declared Bosniak nationality. Since 1993, Bosniak is the preferred ethnonational term of self-designation by Bosnians with Islamic socioreligious heritage.

<sup>8</sup> In 2023, this inspired counter-messages sprayed over the new welcome signs: "Krajišnik forced us" and "Radovan forced me".

*the Serbs in Sarajevo between 1991 and 1995* (Israeli, 2020). Published in Serbian, Russian and English, this report described a symmetrical "civil war" in which VRS never besieged Sarajevo but defended "Serbian" parts of this "divided city" from ARBiH offensives. The departure of Serbs in 1992 was blamed on a "calculated policy of ethnic cleansing" by "the Muslims", headed by the Bosniak ethnonationalist Party of Democratic Action [*Stranka demokratske akcije, SDA*] (Israeli 2020, p. 652). As for the 1996 exodus, the report stated that Serbs

spontaneously and unanimously decided to leave the city because they had no other choice, since the Dayton Accords allotted these neighborhoods to the Federation of BiH and cut them off from the territory of RS. They were given no instructions to leave and no help. (Israeli 2020, p. 954)

Like the lighthouse and the 14 words on the bilingual welcome signs, the 1,400 pages of the trilingual Commission report affirmed truth claims that had long circulated in RS and in Serbia (e.g. Bojić, 1995) and now also broadcast them to external audiences. It is their reactive phrasings—e.g. RS authorities played *no* role in the departure of Serbs from Sarajevo, which their army did *not* besiege—that leads me to speak of counter- historiography.

### **Vernacular Accounts of Departure**

In 2010, to provide background to my ethnographic study of yearnings for "normal lives" in the Sarajevo apartment complex of Dobrinja, I engaged two researchers to conduct twenty interviews with a cross-section of their fellow-residents of East Sarajevo, just across the IEBL.<sup>9</sup> With a thematic check-list on pre-war, wartime and post-war routines, spatial practices and hopes that I devised, they spoke with eleven women and nine men, all adults identifying as Serbs. Fourteen had moved to East Sarajevo from Sarajevo in the 1990s—four of those had participated both in the 1992 and the 1996 departures. It is on those fourteen interviews that I draw in this article, focusing exclusively on narratives of departure from Sarajevo. These accounts closely reflected conversations I had had ten years earlier, in an ethnographic study of home-making, with self-identified Serbs from Sarajevo in Northeast RS and in Serbia. Yet for lack of space, I do not include that older material here.

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<sup>9</sup> I thank Jelena Ostojić and Mirjana Ostojić. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and pseudonymized. Again, all translations are mine.

So how did these participants in the "Serbian exodus" from Sarajevo narrate their departure? Let us look at excerpts about 1992 and 1996 in turn.

### **1992 Departures**

An unusually detailed recollection was provided by Mrs Pejić, a divorced 60 year-old, who had been 41 in 1992. Mrs Pejić's husband had been employed in the Yugoslav People's Army. With their daughter, he had already left for Serbia, where both of them had been born. Like many, Mrs Pejić commenced her description of pre-war events in her outlying neighborhood with references to "provocations":

there were ugly words [...] mostly on a national basis. They said "there's no place for Serbs in Sarajevo, they can move", "what is this Serbian child doing here?", some ugly things.

Untypically, Mrs Pejić also mentioned other events. She recalled how one neighbor threatened to kill another one, a Serb from Serbia. She described the secret delivery of weapons to Muslim neighbors. All Muslims in her building had been armed, Mrs Pejić emphasized, "before the war had even started", before "Serbs had even put up their first barricade". Despite being encouraged to leave by a neighbor who had already departed for Croatia, Mrs Pejić initially stayed put. In late April 1992, she said, she witnessed "Muslims" entering a tram and checking passengers' IDs. They ordered "all Serbs, children, women" off the tram, Mrs Pejić said, and "they already had a prison". Soon after that her boss warned her to stop coming to work. Later, she stated, she was arrested "by the Muslims", "by Alija's Army" [Alija Izetbegović, then SDA president of the presidency of BiH], "only because I'm a Serb". During five hours of interrogation

they tried to catch me out; they wore me out so much that I couldn't take it anymore psychologically. Then my neighbor told me that they were going to take me to Viktor Bubanj [ARBiH prison], that they were going to rape me, beat me, that I'd have to confess to all kinds of things I didn't do. Then I decided to flee too [...] I ran away through a minefield. It was a short line and I got to the Serbs.

Soon after Mrs Pejić continued to Montenegro. In 1996 she settled in East Sarajevo.

Mrs Pejić's account is exceptional in its relatively thick description of events that preceded her escape. This is partly due to the timing; other interviewees fled considerably earlier, in early Spring 1992, before full-scale war engulfed Sarajevo. Mrs Jovović, a technician and mother of one, 32 at the time, focused on provocations in that period in her peripheral neighborhood:

I found four 'S's written on my door [a Serbian ethnonational symbol], I was so terribly angry, I knew someone from the neighborhood wrote it and I knew they were Muslims [...] Do I need a Muslim to tell me that I'm a Serb!? Does he know better what I am and who I am, when nationality was never important to me!?

Soon after, in an atmosphere of "unrest" and "unsafety", Mrs Jovović went to congratulate neighbors on "their" holiday and saw armed men keeping guard. She too emphasized that "the Muslims" were the *first* to carry arms, even when "there was no talk of war yet, none at all". Mrs Jovović took her children to her mother's. She recalled barricades, loud Islamic music, talk about politics, bragging about SDA and "Alija". She recounted how "the Muslims" held secret meetings and conducted surveillance on Serbs. At work, Mrs Jovović said,

I remember their lies about Četnici<sup>10</sup> shooting. [...] they provoked me at work, the boss and three or four others [...], and then some Muslims in the plant complained to me about the Serbs, I mean, what irony! And then they went somewhere, [so] I was left alone in the office. I don't know what they talked about there, how they have their get-togethers, how they come up with all kinds of things and how they pass it on to each other. I think it continues like that to this day, because you hear a story from one person, and then you hear the same from everyone [...] They said "There, the Četnici are shooting from Ilinjača", they mentioned parts of the city. Yet there was no shooting [...] but lies had already been launched on television, I remember.

Mrs Jovović stopped going to work and soon left for the mountain town of Pale. By 2010 she was divorced and worked as a carer, partly for elderly patients across the IEBL in Sarajevo.

Mrs Kovačević, a nurse and in 2010 also a carer, was of similar age. She had lived in a hillside quarter with her Muslim-identified husband and their son. She too spoke of "barricades, the secret arming of the Muslims, their guards". Then, she recalled, all Muslims had suddenly left, secretly. After the arrival of "Serbian units", who, Mrs Kovačević said, only disconnected their phone, her husband joined his mother downtown, while she stayed "to take care of the house". But soon she and her son left for Pale. Her account of that departure is vague: "We left; there was no room for us there anymore".

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<sup>10</sup> In the 1990s some Serbian political and military formations revived this name of Serbian royalist-ethnonationalist forces in WWII for themselves. Mrs Jovović refers to its pejorative use by others.

Mrs Stupar, a 35 year-old administrator, married with one child, had been 16 year-old in 1992. With her father, a policeman, her mother and brother, she had lived centrally. Like Mrs Jovović, she recalled how others had forcibly made her Serbianness an issue:

Suddenly we were somehow singled out as if we had scabies, like Jews in Germany at the time, only they didn't put yellow stars on us [...]. Then, at work, my parents started to experience a whole series of inconveniences and were demo-ted. My dad, for example, was mistreated at work, he even had to change his workplace because of that, he and several fellow Serbs, and it was more than obvious that we were treated differently, and it was not at all a pleasant place to live, believe me.

On 4 April 1992, the Stupars departed for Pale.

All these interviewees framed their recollections around a threat posed by "the Muslims", who knew things and conspired to do harm to Serbs. In contrast, the speakers themselves, and by extension "the Serbs", knew nothing and prepared nothing. As Mrs Bijelić put it: "We weren't organized, but they were". An administrator, married with two children, she had been 41 at the time and recalled how her non-Serbian colleagues failed to turn up for work in the Ilidža quarter. "Everyone left". Soon after, her family used the cover of night to flee from their neighborhood to Ilidža: "We had to leave, naked, and barefoot, to save our bare lives". These tropes of refuge were not accompanied by references to any events or actors that made departure from that quarter imperative.

Similar silences characterized all other interviews. Many recollections of departure revolved predominantly around evocations of an anti-Serbian atmosphere. Mrs Kovačević, the nurse, described the pre-war situation as follows:

Very bad. It could be felt in the air, that intolerance, it could be felt in the clinic where I worked. To me all patients were always the same, but suddenly I was afraid also of patients, suddenly they too started looking at the doors what someone's name was. I felt insecurity, I felt that the Muslims were closing ranks, that when they talked and I entered a room they would withdraw, be silent. They shared food amongst themselves.

Like Mrs Jovović, Mrs Kovačević expressed anger at being associated with "Četnici" allegedly shooting from the hill and preparing to lay siege to Sarajevo. This is how she recounted her final day at work:

I worked in an office with a doctor who was Orthodox. Everyone is onto him, alleging he is training Četnici, and I know that he was a wonderful man, a

sportsman, a musician, and then there was that pressure and he didn't come to work that day, and then they deliberately, to provoke me [...] that day when the doctor didn't come, they started harassing me. "Where is your doctor?", "Did he climb up the hill?", this and that. I think that day the Muslim military police also came to look for him. I left and told myself "You'll never go to work again", because I could not bear that psychological, psychological pressure. You see, to me that's worse than all words, the ugliest, that psychological, just don't kill me psychologically, and that was them, that was their tactic, in Sarajevo, to goad you into leaving so that later they can call you a Četnik. Well, that's what happened. So, psychological killing. No one beat me, no one did anything to me, but they killed me psychologically, non-stop calling my people Četnici, Četnici. Even an old woman was a Četnik who shoots from the hill [...], a sniper. I mean, they talked such rubbish and if you defend them, then it turns out that you're also a Četnik and that you're also shooting; and if you remain silent, it turns out that you approve, why don't you also talk like them, and that's how this psychological pressure on the Serbs drove them out of Sarajevo and nothing else.

Some months after her departure to Pale, Mrs Kovačević's husband, now an ARBiH soldier, was killed by a sniper, "by the Serbs". On the same day, she recounted, her mother, in VRS-held territory, was also killed by a sniper, "by the Muslims". By 2010 Mrs Kovačević's job, like her son's, took her across the IEBl into Sarajevo on a daily basis. She was in a relationship with "a Muslim from the Federal part". Of her prewar neighbors she said:

They stayed in the city. I very often thought of them, even sent packages. However, when I heard what they called me, that I'm a Četnik, then all contacts between us ended [...]. When I first turned up I was traumatized, they still want to beat me [...] because they believe I'm a Četnik. Because I didn't want to stay there to die, to stay for them to slaughter me. But they wouldn't slaughter me; they'd kill me psychologically.

All the accounts mentioned so far came from women. Men's narratives of departure contained even fewer events or actors; they referred almost exclusively to anti-Serbian *talk*. Mr Golijanin had fought in the Yugoslav Army in Croatia in 1991. Upon his return to the Sarajevo outskirts, when he was 19, he recalled people badmouthing Serbs:

That we're like this, that we're like that, terrible [...]. I couldn't believe that these were people with whom I grew up, that they told me such stories at that moment. So I resolved, I decided, I went to Ilidža and joined, at the time it was

not VRS but some Serbian Territorial Defense. I went with my people and that's that.

Mr Golijanin's family spent the war years in Ilidža. After their departure their house, in disputed territory, was destroyed. Mr Golijanin was the only interviewee who emphasized his "resolve" to leave in 1992 but also the only one who said that he had been "expelled".<sup>11</sup> By 2010, now an informal trader, he said he only crossed the IEBL when he "had to".

All remaining interviewees narrated their departure in general, matter-of-fact terms. For example, Mr Koroman, who had been 13 in 1992, recalled how his family decided to leave their settlement as follows:

Shooting started, shells started falling, and that was a sign. Dad said: "We need to go to Lukavica, because there are mostly Serbs there." He said that there were Serbs there, that the former army was there, on the side of the Serbian people, that we should go there, to leave our settlement, and one day we made that decision and left our apartment and sought refuge [...]. I didn't even think about it; I just accepted it as it was. No longer brotherhood and unity; we can't live together [...]. I saw that these nations were separated and that we could no longer go to the same school. I will only be able to go to my school if the Serbian army liberates that settlement and I return to my flat, then to school.

Mr Koroman spent the war at his grandmother's in a peripheral neighborhood. He never returned to his flat or his school, but by 2010 he commuted to work in a ministry in Sarajevo.

### **1996 Departures**

The November 1995 Dayton Agreement stipulated the post-war reintegration of certain VRS-controlled parts of Sarajevo into the city (and thus into the Federation). All interviewees living in those areas recalled shock as they learned this news through the media. Mrs Bijelić, who had fled to Ilidža in 1992, mentioned explicit threats of violence prior to her 1996 onward departure:

Threats from the side of Alija Izetbegović that if they found even the smallest child in Ilidža in a crib, they'd slaughter it. Yes, there were warnings on TV to us

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<sup>11</sup> He used the passive voice, not identifying an expelling actor: "ja sam protjeran".

in Ilidža, so we all left at the same time. Well, that turned out to be, more or less, a collective exodus, nobody organized it but the people organized themselves.

All other interlocutors evoked security concerns in general terms, stating or implying that the unexpected allocation of those areas to the Federation rendered staying impossible. Again it was Mr Golijanin who infused his recollections with the strongest degree of resolve. After serving in VRS throughout the war

I knew 100% that I was leaving Ilidža and that I wouldn't stay to live under Muslim-Croat rule. [...] Not a hair on my head considered staying in a place where these executioners were arriving, those enemies who hunted me for four years to destroy me—me, my place, my nation, to stay there and to wait for them to deliver something good. Of course I didn't even consider it! I left without thinking about it, I and my fellow fighters, 99.99% [...]. All of us resolved: "We're going" and that was that.

Mr Koroman had been 17 in 1996 and explained that they "heard that Serbs were departing" from his grandmother's VRS-held area and that "they had to leave once more":

because we didn't want to live where the government is Muslim, where the police are Muslim [...], we left; we didn't want to live in their state.

Mr Lukić, in his 50s at the time, had served as a driver and instructor in the Yugoslav Army in the war in Croatia in 1991, and later in VRS barracks near Sarajevo, occasionally visiting his family flat. His wife had left for Serbia. On the eve of reintegration in 1996 VRS provided transport for him to move into his parental house on the Trebević foothills. Like others, he emphasized the self-initiated nature of his departure:

We left, but not on someone's order. By our own decision.

This, Mr Lukić indicated, was also informed by others doing the same:

I decided to leave since the majority had moved out, so I had no reason to stay either, and those who moved out also had reason to do so.

Younger interviewees retrospectively detected how their parents had reasoned at the time. In 2010 Mr Govedarica studied in Sarajevo. He had spent the war in his family house in a VRS-held area and remembered leaving as a 9 years old:

First I was sorry that the part where I lived was now allocated to another people, so I had to move out. I mean, officially I didn't have to, I could've stayed, but

probably it was unnatural to think, at that time, of staying because you don't know who'll come [...]. It was natural that there existed some fear of the environment if you stay on your own. So I went to RS, of course. As they moved the border, I moved with it [...]. I went with my parents. They were probably afraid of staying, which is completely natural. If I were thirty years old, for example, and I happened to be a Serb in a part of town that is not proclaimed to be Serbian anymore, then it would be really uneasy to stay there if you know that many people will move in, people against whom you have waged war until a few days before that.

In 2010 Ms Stanišić commuted to Sarajevo for her studies. She remembered her family's departure from their flat in Ilidža in 1996, when she was 12, as a "collective exodus, but on an individual level". "We felt pressure to leave, whether we wanted to or not", she said. This was hard, but there was also "a kind of relief, because you go to live with your people".

It was felt that Serbs were not welcome there. And after all, when Dayton was signed, when the Serbs started to move out, all the schools, hospitals and the municipality, everything that was under our authority until then started to move out, and you know, when you have nowhere to send your child to school, when you have nowhere to go to the hospital, you realize that you cannot live there at all.

We shall return to the issue of services and infrastructure. Here I note that Ms Stanišić, like Mr Lukić and Mr Govedarica, evoked the self-perpetuating dynamic of the exodus.

In what follows, I detect a modality of agency that runs through these vernacular accounts of departure from Sarajevo and analyze it in light, first, of Golubović's call for the acknowledgment of "complex victimhood" (2021) and, second, Žižka's tracing of a sacrificial motif (2023). Then, beyond identifying moral complexity in the making of these accounts, I extend the analysis into their ontological effect.

### **Victimhood and Agency**

In her work on self-identified Serbian women in post-war Sarajevo, Jelena Golubović (2021) urges us to abandon the "zero-sum moral economy" of "pure victimhood". Instead of postulating victims as necessarily innocent, helpless and passive, she argues, we should acknowledge their agency, including its "darker sides". I agree. Yet, as Golubović notes, her interlocutors *did* position themselves precisely as "pure victims", which

required "bracketing out the broader context and asymmetry of the conflict" (2021, p. 1355). This, she shows, is how they pursued recognition for suffering that remained largely unregistered by the dominant account of siege.

Similarly reactively, the 2010 East Sarajevo interviews above insisted on symmetry: foregrounding the ordeal of Serbs, interlocutors stressed that they *too* had suffered in a "civil war" in which VRS had "defended" parts of "divided" Sarajevo from attack by "the Muslims". Only one interviewee—a priest who had spent the war years in Serbia—mentioned the term "siege": he denied it ever took place. Like in other research amongst East Sarajevans (Armakolas, 2007; Dražeta 2021, pp. 345–384; Žila, 2021; 2022), all interlocutors framed their predicament in the register of victimhood. In this these vernacular accounts correspond to two of the three dimensions of what Golubović detects as a conception of "pure victimhood": innocence (Serbs were blameless; nobody mentioned any harm done in their name to others) and helplessness (they left because the actions of others left them with no other choice). Yet regarding the third dimension, lack of agency, these 2010 interviews add a further layer of complexity.

A recurrent phrase through which interlocutors narrated their departure was "going with one's people" [*ići sa/za svojim narodom*]. We saw that Mr Golijanin insisted on his resolve to do so. But all other uses of this phrase entailed a different modality of agency: they cast mirroring displacements as part of a semi-naturalized process of ethnonational unmixing. In 1992 Mrs Minić temporarily left her house near Ilidža with her two children before she returned as VRS consolidated control there. Meanwhile many of her neighbors had gone:

A lot of them went to the federal part and where they came from, I mean these people of other nationalities... other people came... so... everyone went with their people.

Explaining her own 1996 departure from her family house in another VRS-held area at 16, Mrs Mijović, now a police officer, said:

To put it conditionally, it's a folk proverb, "each bird flies to its own flock". It's logical, if you shared the war fate of your people, that you go with your people, because it wasn't safe for us to stay in our houses, because if it had been safe, there wouldn't have been a war.

In this totalizing ethnonational framing, evoking a centripetal magnetic force within "peoples", the agency propelling movement emanates from those "peoples"—and

individuals enact it. This allows self-positioning of blameless and choiceless victims who nevertheless claim agency. In the interviews, this fed into two notable patterns.

First, despite a self-positioning as victims, there were very few references to concrete events or actors that had made one leave, and none at all to violent expulsion. Interlocutors spoke little of what "the Muslims" had done to them but hinted at what they *would have done*, had safety not been found first. They recounted leaving pre-emptively. Regarding 1996 this reflects the fact that they had left before the UN-accompanied arrival of police and civilians from the Federation. Unusually, Mrs Mijović included a retrospective dimension too: "if it had been safe, there wouldn't have been a war". Framing the war as a confirmation that ethnationally mixed residence *per se* is dangerous, the necessary choice of going with one's people can thus be broadened to prewar 1992 conditions. This entails evocations of a general atmosphere marked by a "Muslim" threat, again constituting a reactive inversion of the standard Sarajevo account in which ethnonationalist triumphalism, ostentatious religiosity, selective allocations of firearms, provocations, surveillance, secret meetings and unannounced absences are predominantly ascribed to *Serbs*, or at least to the "Četnici" amongst them (Golubović, 2019, 2021; Maček, 2009; Sorabji, 2006). In that account it is Serbs who had privileged access to information and who engaged in all those things *first*. Their departure is then seen to have been motivated by advance knowledge about the siege by Serbian ethnonationalist forces who sought to end common life in the city. So this account, largely incorporated in the dominant historiography of the war in BiH by "others", locates important responsibility for creating the conditions in which Serbs left Sarajevo in the ethnonationalist RS sovereignty project.

Here lies a second pattern regarding the question of agency in the interviews. Interlocutors emphasized lack of choice, but insisted, in Mr Lukić's words, that they had *not* left "on someone's order". This, too, is clearly a reactive phrasing: the implied "someone" consists of RS institutions. It is not just that; with their totalizing ethnonational modality of agency, these vernacular accounts of displacement absolved these institutions of responsibility for departure; they hardly acknowledged their existence in the first place. For example, not one of these recollections of the 1990s mentioned the Serbian Democratic Party [*Srpska demokratska stranka*, SDS] even once. Therefore, it is I who must fill in some of the institution-shaped holes in these interviews.

## **(Silence on) RS Institutional Agency**

**1992**

Having won around a quarter of votes in the 1990 BiH elections, SDS presented itself as the institutional vanguard of a Serbian ethnonationalist sovereignty project in BiH throughout the decade to come. Already in 1991, as its Croatian and Bosniak ethnonationalist coalition partners in the anticommunist government started to push for BiH independence from what was left of Yugoslavia, it launched measures in the name of "the Serbian people in BiH": it established a BiH-wide Assembly and municipal Crisis Staffs and Assemblies; it organized a plebiscite with differentiated ballots for Serbs and for non-Serbs; it founded first "Serbian Autonomous Regions" and then, on January 9<sup>th</sup>, 1992, the "Republic of the Serbian People BiH".<sup>12</sup> Article 1 of that Republic's proclamation claimed "Serbian ethnic entities in BiH, including territories on which the Serbian people became a minority due to the genocide in WWII". Article 2 affirmed that it was a federal unit of (now reduced and Serbia-dominated) Yugoslavia and Article 3 specified that "territorial bordering with the political communities of the other peoples of BiH" would be subject to future "agreement".

On February 28<sup>th</sup>, 1992, on the eve of the referendum on the independence of the Republic of BiH, which it boycotted but which gained support of 62.68% of eligible voters, the RS Assembly suspended BiH government laws on the territories it claimed and stepped up preparations to militarily prevent BiH sovereignty over them. At that time self-identified Serbs constituted just over 30% of the country's population and slightly less than that in Sarajevo. Given residential patterns in BiH, any "agreement" that could produce a compact territory with a homogenous Serbian population would therefore require migrations by Serbs and by others. During the following three months all interviewees who lived in parts of Sarajevo where BiH government institutions held some sway had moved out. As we saw, many of them narrated their displacement in matter-of-fact ways: "everyone went with their people". The departure of non-Serbs from the RS-claimed areas that they moved to was explained in the same way. The single hint that the latter movement had not been entirely self-initiated came from Ms Stanišić, who was only 8 at the time:

There was an increasingly Serbian population in Ilidža. A couple of Muslim families disappeared overnight or moved out on their own. No matter how many good people there were, and there were plenty of good Serbs, there were always a couple of individuals who thought they were in charge and forced

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<sup>12</sup> Later referred to as *Srpska Republika BiH* and, from August 1992, as *Republika Srpska (RS)*. I use RS throughout.

people and let them know that they didn't belong there. Those Muslim and Croat families were simply informed that they did not belong there, that they should leave.

Even here, coercive agency is attributed to "individuals who thought they were in charge", not to institutions that *were* in charge in Ilidža. The only glimpses of the latter in these vernacular accounts of 1992 came in implicit acknowledgments of armed actors ("barricades", "some Serbian Territorial Defense", the "Yugoslav Army", the "Serbian Army", "Serbian units", people "shooting from the hills"). These were never attributed any active role in the displacement of Serbs or of others.

By April 1992 SDS-affiliated armed formations and the Yugoslav Army (to become VRS) fought SDA-affiliated units and BiH government police forces (to become ARBiH) in Sarajevo. The latter were concentrated in the central parts, from where most interviewees had departed just before that. In negotiations, policies and, most forcefully, in military operations, SDS-dominated RS institutions, in close collaboration with the Yugoslav Army and the government of Serbia, indefatigably acted to consolidate RS as a separate Serbian-inhabited and -ruled polity. In May 1992 the RS Assembly confirmed this to be the "First Strategic Goal of the Serbian People in BiH", a pre-emptive measure against "being a minority", which would put it in a "genocidal position" (Donia 2012, p. 53, 55). To implement this principle in Sarajevo (the Fifth Strategic Goal), RS President Karadžić insisted on its division into "Serbian and Muslim parts":

We said before that if there were a war, it would start in Sarajevo and end in Sarajevo. The first part of this prophecy has come true, and the second part will come true the moment we have a map of Sarajevo. (Donia, 2012, p. 55)

In what RS institutions call "the defense of Serbian Sarajevo from ARBiH offensives", VRS systematically shelled the city, including from "hills" like Trebević. VRS failed to expand control in central Sarajevo, but, due to the military supremacy it inherited from the Yugoslav Army, by Summer 1992 it held some 70% of the territory of BiH. These areas were largely cleansed of their non-Serbian inhabitants and received Serbs expelled or self-evacuated from areas controlled by ARBiH and other armed formations.

Over the following three-and-a-half years RS officials continuously emphasized the absolute priority of the First Strategic Goal: "the Serbian people in BiH" had to be separated into its own polity, even if this required territorial concessions and resettlement of Serbs (e.g. Donia, 2012, p. 43, 65, 67, 177).

## 1996

In November 1995, the Dayton Peace Agreement affirmed the 1992 upgrading of the Yugoslav borders of BiH to inter-state borders, and thus BiH's statehood. It also stipulated foreign supervision and two "entities" separated by the IEBL. The entity called RS was to recover some territories that VRS had recently lost and to relinquish some others, particularly in the Sarajevo valley. The President of Serbia had effectively signed away swathes of wartime "Serbian Sarajevo" and later compelled Karadžić to initial the agreement (Sell, 2000, pp. 180–183). RS officials organized a referendum in which almost all voters rejected this reintegration (Žíla, 2021, p. 974). Their media told inhabitants to stay put but, simultaneously and more forcefully, stirred up panic about the transfer of jurisdiction and, in some cases, provided advice on how to set fire to accommodation left behind (Golubović, 2021, p. 1352). Initially RS officials sought modifications to the Dayton Agreement in UN-sponsored negotiations (Žíla, 2021, p. 976) but, already on December 17<sup>th</sup>, 1995, RS Assembly President Krajišnik reverted to prioritizing the territorial separation of "the Serbian people in BiH" over all other concerns:

The task of this republic and its first strategic goal is for us to separate from the Muslims and Croats, and no one has the right to create a strategy whereby Serb Sarajevo remains in a common state. Therefore, any danger or wish for connection and solution for Sarajevo is excluded. We do not remain with Muslims and Croats. No one can now create a new solution to stay together, nor do people in [Serbian] Sarajevo want it, namely the people, nor does the leadership in [Serbian] Sarajevo [...]. In the end, the best solution for [Serbian] Sarajevo is to move out and to find locations to accommodate people, and that we finally separate [...]. That solution will not lead us to the creation of a union but to dissolution, because that is our first strategic goal. (Donia, 2012, pp. 67–69)

Between February 23<sup>rd</sup>, and March 19<sup>th</sup>, 1996, most of the (Serbian) "Sarajevo" that Krajišnik referred to—estimates range from 50,000 to 80,000 persons—did indeed "move out" from the areas to be reintegrated. This included all interviewees living there at the time. As Mr Govedarica said: "they moved the border; I moved with it".<sup>13</sup>

While interviewees reactively emphasized that their departure had *not* been instigated by the authorities, once again Ms Stanišić, who had been a child, indicated that RS institutions had not been passive either. As we saw, she said that the transfer of health

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<sup>13</sup> Apart from boundaries, official naming changed too: from *Serbian City Sarajevo* from March 1993, over *Serbian Sarajevo* from April 1996, to *East Sarajevo* after a 2004 decision by the BiH Constitutional Court.

care, education and municipal services from her native Ilidža across the newly-fixed IEBL rendered staying impossible. The only other interviewee to mention this was fellow Ilidžanka Mrs Minić:

Most people left... because of that belonging to their people, because of that and because of work, because the school from Ilidža moved here, to East Sarajevo, where it continued to function.

For Mrs Minić, a school psychologist, staying put would have meant losing a "Serbian" school for her children and her job. RS institutions were now implementing Krajišnik's "best solution": (Serbian) Sarajevo, both its human and non-human manifestations, was being "moved out".

In a detailed witness account published on an anarchist website, Goran Maljukan (1996) described the conditions in his Ilidža neighborhood on the eve of reintegration. In light of contradictory messages from SDS, he wrote, people who lived in their own property weighed up whether to stay or not. Eventually, most left. 2010 interviewees did not speak of this process, only of the conclusion. Nor did they mention the mass transfer to RS of industrial equipment, which had been concentrated in those parts of the Sarajevo agglomeration. In the wake of the organized removal of entire factories into RS, Maljukan explained, many families also dismantled the accommodation in which they lived:

Everything is removed, torn apart, unscrewed, broken up, and carried to somewhere else, "just so it doesn't fall in the hands of the Turks".

Maljukan described a burgeoning market for packaging, transport and storage space in RS, as well as dis-interments and people setting fire to the empty shells they left behind.

### **Victims and Martyrs: Sacrificial Agency?**

The silence on RS institutions and their pursuit of territorial separation—and the denial of their role in encouraging departure in 1992 and in 1996—has important implications in terms of the agency narrated in the interviews. I have devoted a full section to describe some such institutional activities, not for the purpose of historiographical correction, but in order to offer insight into what can subsequently be done with these accounts. Without minimizing the suffering of Serbs who left Sarajevo, or of those who stayed, this allows me to specify Golubović's analysis of the agency of "complex victims". The totalizing ethnonational modality of agency in these vernacular accounts of displacement must be understood in light of SDS institutional undertakings. This is

not resistant agency; it does not differentiate the enunciating subject from a higher-ranked or more encompassing acting subject (see also Jansen 2016). Instead, it entails inscription of the former into the latter: stating that they "went with their people" interlocutors melted their agency into that of "the Serbian people in BiH". So, framing narrations of pre-emptive escape in this totalizing ethnonational modality of agency renders these accounts consonant with, and appropriable by the counter-historiography of subsequent RS authorities, as propagated, for example, in the 2023 interventions by the mayor of East Sarajevo and the 2020 Commission Report.

Beyond authorizing victimhood, the modality of agency narrated through accounts of "going with one's people" also prefigures another dimension of official RS counter-historiography. Here too, the moral dimensions of agency are at stake. As Žiła (2023) has shown, the mid-2010s saw a shift in commemorations of the 1996 exodus, now under the aegis of the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (*Savez nezavisnih socijaldemokrata*, SNSD), the party that had taken over the mantle of self-proclaimed vanguard of the Serbian ethnonationalist sovereignty project from SDS. Maintaining representations of departing Serbs as victims, here the exodus is additionally framed as sacrifice for freedom. Sarajevo Serbs, the argument goes, built much of modern-day Sarajevo before "newly minted Sarajevans" usurped it. In 1996 they gave up their city to move to RS, thereby co-constituting the latter as a Serbian homeland. It is freedom *as Serbs* that Serbs are after, and in BiH such freedom can exclusively be found in RS. As we saw, the SNSD mayor of East Sarajevo evoked the sacrificial narrative when hailing his RS lighthouse. Earlier, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1996 exodus, he had stated:

Sarajevan Serbs have lost the most in the service of the creation of RS, and we have to constantly repeat that because of our children who must know how the leadership of RS together with the people took the decision that 120,000 Serbs set out from Sarajevo into uncertainty and pay the price for the creation of RS.<sup>14</sup>

Žiła (2023, p. 1016) points out that victim-based and sacrificial renderings of the 1996 exodus are complementary for the purposes of RS legitimacy claims, but that they entail contradictory representations of how and why people left Sarajevo. Were they victims who escaped "Muslim" terror? Or were they martyrs who willingly paid the price for the establishment of RS? We have seen that the mayor, like Krajišnik in December 1995 and like the 2020 Commission Report, resolved this contradiction through the evocation of a seamless ethnonational subject—embracing "the leadership" and "the people"—that pre-emptively escaped existential threat and that enabled Serbian freedom by

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<sup>14</sup> Ćosić: Sarajevski Srbi platili najveću cijenu za Srpsku, *Nezavisne novine*, 16/03/2021.

concentrating the "Serbian people in BiH" into RS. Permeating Serbian ethnonationalist political, clerical and artistic representations, this counter-historiographical account of the genesis of East Sarajevo postulates "the Serbian people" as victim and martyr in a long line of such foundational departures, particularly from Kosovo in 1690 and in 1740.

The vernacular accounts of departure from Sarajevo in the 1990s that I discuss in this article did not employ the martyr framing. Only Mrs Mijović came close. Asked about her reaction to the Dayton allocation of her settlement to the Federation, she said:

Individuals fought in vain. Not now, I think this will sound too harsh, they did not fight in vain. *We got our republic*. I mean the Sarajevan Serbs, who moved out.  
[italics added]

While interviewees did not frame their departure as sacrifice, their totalizing ethnonational framing of "going with one's people" went some way to neutralize, or at least circumvent, the tension between passive victimhood and active martyrdom. Maintaining silence on RS institutions, and absolving them from responsibility for the exodus, interlocutors kept a distance from them. Nevertheless, they exclusively narrated their own war-time agency in terms that were *compatible* with the thesis that Serbs can only find security in ethnonational majority and self-government, and they largely framed the displacement required to realize the First Strategic Goal of RS, including their own, as a matter-of-fact necessity. Not quite disavowing agency, they melted their actions into the undifferentiated collective agency of "the Serbian people in BiH" in narrations of departure as being in accordance with a semi-naturalized centripetal force within ethnonational flocks. In "going with their people", they implied, they had acted *as Serbs*, and thus contributed to the creation of RS.

The sacrificial motif can also be retrospectively applied to 1992 departures. Again, this entails the deployment of the totalizing ethnonational modality of agency, rendering vernacular accounts of those departures appropriable by Serbian ethnonationalist counter-historiography. This is crucial for RS authorities. Contrary to the BiH constitution, RS officials relentlessly insist that their republic was "born" on January 9<sup>th</sup>, 1992, not in 1995 at Dayton. In such counter-historiographical representations, the "creation of RS"—that is, the *effective* territorial separation of "the Serbian people in BiH"—required two founding acts. First, by proclaiming RS in January 1992 "the Serbian people in BiH" staked a future anterior claim of separation to pre-emptively defend itself from existential threat. Maximalist territorial claims were mitigated by a willingness to negotiate the polity's topographic boundaries. The second founding act, therefore, was to establish territorial correspondence between such boundaries and residence patterns.

Ethnonational unmixing through displacement was key to wartime military operations. In this respect the Dayton Agreement delivered what RS officials had pursued all along, including a map of a divided Sarajevo with a negotiated IEBL. Yet if the topography of the boundaries of RS had always been considered negotiable, the composition of its population wasn't. RS was envisaged as encompassing a maximally ethnonationally homogeneous population—as many BiH Serbs as possible and as few others as possible. Serbs staying put in the Federation in 1996 would blur the ethnonational unmixing achieved in the war. It would also weaken the claim that only a separate Serbian—inhabited and—ruled polity could guarantee their survival. RS had to be the homeland of *all* Serbs in BiH.

### **Constituting "the Serbian People in BiH"**

The totalizing ethnonational modality of agency thus renders vernacular accounts of 1992 and 1996 departures from Sarajevo appropriable by RS counter-historiography, as exemplified, for example, in the 2023 lighthouse and the 2020 Commission Report. So far, elaborating on the work of Golubović and Žiža, I have shown how the interviews cast narrators' agency within officially sanctioned categories of both victimhood and, less so, sacrifice. Thus, these vernacular accounts operate at the level of representations to reactively categorize actors in moral terms. But affirmations that Serbs had to leave Sarajevo, and that in doing so they created RS as the necessary guarantee for freedom, not only offer themselves up for mobilization for the ongoing legitimization of this polity in such moral ways. On a more fundamental level, the totalizing ethnonational modality of agency also does more ontological work: it posits a "national order of things" (Malkki, 1995, p. 55, 104) as an irreducible organizing principle of the world and of the delimitation of actors in it. In that way, largely implicitly, it retroactively *constitutes* the very subject that is said to have initiated the RS sovereignty project through a pre-war claim to self-determination: "the Serbian people in BiH".

Importantly, this "ontological" consequence of these vernacular accounts of departure does not require any particular depth of felt ethnonational belonging, let alone traumatic identification, amongst interlocutors. None of the interviewees invoked the WWII genocide of Serbs. Nor did anyone emphasize commitments to Serbian roots or traditions. On the contrary, interlocutors overwhelmingly presented their actions as those of Serbs exclusively once they had established that they were targeted for imminent victimization as Serbs. Many offered positive appraisals of common life in Yugoslavia as oblivious to questions of ethnonationality and criticized "Muslim" (and

Croat) ethnonationalism for ending it. Nobody positioned themselves as a proactive proponent of any Serbian ethnonationalist political cause and nobody displayed explicit support for RS authorities. Instead interlocutors systematically melted their agency into that of "their people", framing it as *Serbian* agency. Naturalizing ethnonations, and territorial division, this was compatible with the RS sovereignty project.

Note that rendering their experiences thus appropriable by Serbian ethnonationalist counter-historiography required far-going silencing, and not only of the role of RS institutions. Interlocutors did not mention the suffering of others—say, besieged Sarajevans. Yet, in principle, they could acknowledge it, as long as it was part of (reactive) symmetrical representations of victimhood. What their totalizing ethnonational modality of agency could not acknowledge—what it fundamentally needed to silence—was any non-ethnonational excess. Thus, the interviews conceive of one collective ethnonational subject amongst others—"the Serbian people in BiH"—as a totality in which all elements are articulated such that they draw their meaning from that totality, a final "suture" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 88). No excess is imaginable. These accounts of 1990s departures failed to register any agency by self-identified Serbs—even suffering—that can be understood other than as agency *by Serbs*.

For example, none of the interviewees mentioned that in Spring 1992 rising tensions incited tens of thousands of Sarajevans of *all* ethnonational backgrounds to leave the city in search of safety. They focused exclusively on Serbs who fled to what was being established as "Serbian" Sarajevo. Also, not one single interviewee mentioned any Serbs who did *not* "go with their people". Estimates suggest that at least 10,000 self-identified Serbs remained in Sarajevo during the VRS siege and that an additional 10,000 stayed on in the reintegrated parts of Sarajevo after the Dayton Agreement (Sell, 2000, p. 196). The modality of agency conveyed by the notion of "going with one's people" cannot account for these persons' experiences. Its totalizing ethnonational logic posits that Serbs act in a Serbian way; and if they don't, that means they're not Serbs. Hence the mayor's claim that of "157,000 Serbs" there were "none left" in Sarajevo. From that perspective, already in 1992, the only possible legitimate justification for Serbs to remain in Sarajevo was an *inability* to leave. This fed into the counter-historiographical thesis that the wartime "Muslim" authorities forcibly kept Serbs in Sarajevo as "ethnic hostages" (Israeli, 2020, p. 747). To be clear, many Serbs who remained in Sarajevo did suffer suspicion and various degrees of mistreatment on ethnonational grounds (Čengiđ, 2017, pp. 106–115, 144–149; Golubović, 2019; 2021; Moll 2022; 2024; Pejanović 2002). Some were targets of violence by SDA-affiliated formations, and, of course, all of them *also* shared the conditions

imposed by the VRS siege. Yet, for the RS sovereignty project, only testimony of their suffering *as Serbs* at the hands of "the Muslims" can redeem having stayed as a legitimate Serbian experience. Self-identifying Sarajevan Serbs who do not respond affirmatively to interpellation by that project, particularly if they name the role of RS institutions in the making of their predicament, can only be registered as traitors, opportunists, or gullible idiots. East Sarajevan interviewees refrained from such slights, instead maintaining silence not only on any RS institutions but also on any non-ethnonational excess. Most had spent the war inside the RS sovereignty project, in areas from where VRS had besieged Sarajevo. That project's First Strategic Goal of territorial separation of a Serbian polity has been achieved and been ratified in Dayton. Without requiring any explicit moral affiliation with Serbian ethnonationalism, the ontological effect of their accounts of departure *de facto* offers their experiences up for appropriation by the latter's counter-historiographical claim that there is only one place for Serbs in Dayton BiH: in RS.

## **Conclusion**

This article has investigated how vernacular accounts of 1992 and 1996 departure from Sarajevo by self-identified Serbs in East Sarajevo position them in relation to the Serbian ethnonationalist counter-historiography that interpellates them. Elaborating on recent studies of complexity in the genesis of such accounts, I turned the spotlight onto their consequences. I detected a totalizing ethnonational modality of agency allowing moral representations of agency consonant with officially sanctioned categories of victimhood and sacrifice as presented in ethnonationalist counter-historiography. Then, extending the analysis from the moral into the ontological realm, I traced how narrations of "going with one's people" inscribe accounts of displacement into the retrospective constitution of "the Serbian people in BiH" as a collective actor in a "national order of things". Silencing the role of institutions—but not deviating from their programmatic pursuit of separation—and excluding any non-ethnonational excess, they thus effectively offer up experiences of displacement for appropriation by Serbian ethnonationalist counter-historiography of the genesis of East Sarajevo, such as the 2023 lighthouse and welcome signs interventions. Narrating departure as an act of Serbs *as Serbs* they retrospectively reinforce the totalizing ethnonationalist framing of the RS sovereignty project in BiH and the legitimacy claims of whoever currently manages to position themselves as its vanguard.

## AI Disclaimer

The author has not used any AI technologies to write this article.

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## **Povzetek**

Kako se samooklicani Srbi, ki so Sarajevo (v Bosni in Hercegovini) zapustili tik pred obleganjem mesta v devetdesetih letih in tik po njem ter se naselili v "srbskem" Sarajevu, od koder je bilo to obleganje izvedeno, v svojih pripovedih odzivajo na vprašanje lastne vloge in delovanja v tej razselitvi? Kako jih te pripovedi umeščajo v razmerje do povojnega srbskega etnonacionalizma, ki skuša nanje učinkovati in jih nagovoriti kot svoje? Članek pokaže, kako totalizirajoča etnonacionalna oblika pojmovanja tvornosti v njihovih vsakdanjih pripovedih o odhodu omogoča, da si srbsko etnonacionalistično proti-zgodovinopisje njihova doživetja zlahka prisvoji. Ta oblika dobro sovпада z moralnim poudarkom tega proti-zgodovinopisja na procesu žrtvovanja in vlogi žrtve. Še bolj temeljno pa, kot trdim, utrjuje domnevo o ontološkem redu, v katerem obstajajo etnonacije, ter s tem naknadno vzpostavlja ravno tisti kolektivni subjekt, ki ga to proti-zgodovinopisje postulira: "srbsko ljudstvo v BiH".

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