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Nationalism and Patriotism in  
Serbian Political Discourse:  
Medieval, Modern,  
Contemporary

Proceedings of the  
Conference held on 30–31 May 2024  
at the University of Belgrade,  
Faculty of Philosophy

*Edited by*  
*Smilja Marjanović-Dušanić*  
*Aleksandar Z. Savić*



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Smilja Marjanović-Dušanić  
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## THE FEELING OF BELONGING IN MEDIEVAL BOSNIA: FROM LOCAL TO STATE IDENTITY

Among historians, there is still no consensus regarding the character and statehood of medieval Bosnia, as primary sources are relatively scarce, and the burden of contemporary political connotations is ever-present. The aim of this paper is to examine the development of Bosnia as one of the rare Slavic states of the Middle Ages that arose on a territorial basis and, despite its gradual expansion, remained composite while still building a central state identity. The scarcity of information from reliable historical sources does not allow the reconstruction of the beginnings of medieval Bosnia. At the moment when it was first recorded as a political entity, in *De administrando imperio* of Constantine Porphyrogenitus, Bosnia is mentioned in the chapter on the Serbs as a small land (χωρίον), within Serbia and surrounded by it. The sources are not sufficiently explicit to clarify the origins of this entity within the then-existing Serbia. Historians' opinions are divided: some believe that Bosnia was a separate *sclavinia* before being integrated into the Serbian state, others that it was a territory given by the Franks to the Serbs as allies. There is also an opinion that early Bosnia was a periphery of the Croatian state that, after turmoil in Croatia, became part of Serbia, and yet others see a distinctive Bosnia already recognizable in Porphyrogenitus' account. What is unequivocal is that Bosnia existed from the outset as a geographical concept, referring to a region named after a major river. Compared to the names of other Slavic political entities, this indicates that its origin is not ethnic but territorial.

The frameworks from the 10th century already implied a territory of the rank of a land, encompassing the area of the upper and middle course of the Bosna River, stretching from Sarajevo to Zenica, as well as



regions gravitating toward this territory, including the *župas* (districts) formed around the rivers Miljacka, Prača, Lepenica, Krivaja, and perhaps even Lašva. The center of this entity was undoubtedly in Visoko and its surroundings, forming the original *župa* of Bosnia. Neighboring *župas* – Trstivnica, Brod, Lepenica, Vidogošća, Vrhbosna, and Lašva – gravitated toward the *župa* Bosna, constituting the aforementioned Land of Bosnia and the nucleus of the future state. The temporary strengthening of the Croatian state and relocation of the Serbian state's center to Duklja, as well as the influence of Hungary as the dominant political force from the 12th century onward, all contributed to Bosnia's independent development. In the work of John Kinnamos, Bosnia was identified as an entity separated from the rest of Serbia by the Drina River, not subordinated to the Serbian Grand Župan, and characterized by a unique way of life and governance.

As a state, Bosnia was composite throughout its entire development. The original Land of Bosnia demonstrated a significant capacity for expansion into the peripheral regions of other neighboring Slavic states (primarily Serbia and Croatia, but also parts of Hungary inhabited by Slavic populations). The political idea of Bosnia's "ideal" borders from the time of Ban Kulin emerged in the early 15th century, reflecting both a culture of memory and the construction of a strong Bosnian state identity. The actual borders during Kulin's time likely only slightly exceeded the Land of Bosnia from the 10th century, extending into the Vrbas Valley (the land of Donji Kraji) and the area from Sarajevo Field toward the Neretva River. This expansion likely also encroached on the border area of Croatia. It is challenging to speak reliably about expansions into Usora and Soli, as well as the area of Belin (modern Semberija), the areas with Slavic populations that early on came under Hungarian control. For centuries, Hungarian authorities attempted to establish a suzerain-vassal relationship with Bosnia, marking Bosnian state identity, which was built either with Hungary's support or in resistance to it. However, Bosnia was never an integrated part of the Hungarian state.

As it was composite, Bosnia also remained a land governed by uncodified customary law, where patrimonial estates formed the basis of political legitimacy and economic power. The ruling Kotromanić dynasty may have been of foreign origin, although theories on this issue are inconclusive and represent a phenomenon documented only at the beginning of the 15th century. Judging solely by the rulers' titles in Bosnian documents before Ban Stjepan II, one might gain the impression that, despite territorial expansion, the state identity developed early and was closely tied to Bosnia, as the rulers were referred to exclusively as bans of Bosnia. However, there are only few available documents. In its early phase, it is evident that the ethnic-linguistic separation of Bosnia from Serbia was



a prolonged process that incompletely concluded only in the 14th century during the reign of Stjepan II. He played a pivotal role in integrating the Bosnian state as a strong political entity through a syncretic vision that incorporated elements derived from Hungary and Serbia, and envisioned close collaboration with the Hungarian Angevins, maintenance of the domestic church organization, and connections with the Roman Curia and Catholic monastic orders. Seemingly paradoxically, Stjepan, who dramatically expanded the Bosnian state and strengthened its collective state identity, was also the ruler whose era provides the most evidence of the composite nature of the state and its local identities. The greater availability and diversity of documentary sources from Stjepan's time allow for the coexistence of unity and division within the Bosnian state to be examined during his reign.

For example, while Ban Ninoslav, between 1235 and 1249, referred to his subjects as Serbs and to the inhabitants of Dubrovnik as Vlachs, Ban Stjepan II, in 1332, spoke of Bošnjani (Bosnians) and Dubrovčani. Nevertheless, Bosnian rulers consistently referred to the Nemanjić dynasty in the 13th and 14th centuries as rulers of Raška (Rascia). Later, Serbian, Rascian and Bosnian lords were mentioned as the ancestors of Bosnian kings. Mentions of the Serbian language in Bosnia, although rare, persisted until the first decades of the 15th century. It has been shown that, in documents issued to foreigners, unity was emphasized, while in charters addressed to domestic recipients, the composite nature of Bosnia was highlighted. For instance, in the charters for local addressees there are mentions of representatives of the social elite, referred to as "good Bosnians", as well as "good Usorans". Additionally, witnesses were often listed according to the lands comprising Bosnia. Stjepan's reintegration of Donji Kraji brought forth interesting examples. It is noted that the *župa* of Banica abandoned the Croatian lord (Mladen II Šubić) and the Babonić family. Another example comes from the *župa* of Zemunik, where a local property ruling mentions an assembly of noblemen emphasizing the connection of their *župa* with Bosnia, but also referring to a local *knez*. The charter concludes with a sanction stating that anyone who violates the provisions "is not a man of Zemunik".

Mentions of the *stanak* (assembly) of "all the lands of Bosnia and Donji Kraji and Zagorje and the Land of Hum" (1354) are intriguing, as are references to the principle that "no nobleman can be condemned until his case is reviewed by Bosnia and Usora" (1367). Over time, these composite designations evolved, and by the end of the 14th century, they had been simplified to the *stanak* of "all Bosnia". In Hum, certain peculiarities were recorded for the longest time. Around 1360, Sanko Miltenović em-



phasized that prices should not be set for him as they were for any Vlach, man of Primorje, or man of Hum, while Stjepko Čihorić insisted that the legal dispute he was involved in be resolved according to the customs of Hum, rather than Hungarian, Croatian, or Dubrovnik law. In 1453, Duke Stjepan Vukčić Kosača mentioned a judgment of “the court of Hum”. The status-based division of the population into Serbs and Vlachs in Hum persisted and is documented in the charters of the noble families of Kosača, Nikolić, and Hrvatinić-Vojšalić, as well as of the Ottomans.

The expansions of Stjepan II into the Slavic regions of Hungary, and parts of Serbia and Croatia necessitated a strategy of preserving certain local specificities (customary law, social divisions, and property rights), as imposing changes would have been counterproductive. At the same time, it required fostering a degree of cohesion through a dynastic narrative about the Kotromanić family and the cultivation of the cult of St. Gregory. Bosnia’s perception as a state-based rather than ethnically-based entity is evidenced not only by its composite nature and the geographical origin of its name but also by how it was viewed by its immediate neighbors. In a charter of Serbian Emperor Dušan’s from 1349, Bosnia and the Land of Basarab are distinguished from other states named after ethnic communities (e.g., Hungarians, Bulgarians). Bosnia’s expansion and economic growth eventually led to the emergence of a class of court nobility who increasingly tied their identity to the state. This class included figures instrumental in Bosnia’s territorial expansion during the reign of Ban and King Tvrtko, such as Hrvoje Vukčić, Pavle Radenović, Sandalj Hranić, and Batalo Šantić. From the late 14th century come the first mentions of the terms *Bosnian rusag* and *all Bosnia* as alternative names for the state and the assembly. However, even within this layer of the nobility, local identities were evident. While the Sanković family maintained an awareness of being successors to the lords of Hum, the Kosača family, only turned to a local identity after Stjepan Vukčić became a Duke. At that point, Hum, Primorje, and the Drina region, along with the cult of St. Sava, were incorporated into Kosača’s title and ideology, while he also retained the title of Bosnian Grand Voivode and the association of the Kosača domain with the Bosnian Kingdom. References to Hum west of the Neretva were a hallmark of the Radivojević-Vlatković nobility, who, by the late medieval period, began to identify as “Humski”, practically adopting it as a surname.

Despite these centrifugal tendencies, the Bosnian state identity appeared to be complete. Foreigners referred to the state in its entirety as Bosnia and its inhabitants as *Bošnjani/Bosnenses*. Neighbors treated Bosnia as a polity with the rank of a state (*regnum*). In relation to the Serbian state, distancing was evident. Despite Tvrtko’s proclamation as King



of the Serbs in 1377, the political reality and the nobility promoting a Bosnian identity gradually diminished the Serbian element, reducing it to a component of the Kotromanić dynastic identity. The Serbian Despotate, particularly after border conflicts and the Catholic orientation of the Kotromanićs during the final phase of both states' existence, harbored mistrust toward Bosnia and Bosnians, even referring to them as *inoplemenici* (foreigners).

Interestingly, the collective Bosnian identity temporarily disintegrated quickly after the fall of the Bosnian Kingdom, reflecting its dependence on the state, dynasty, and territory. With the establishment of Ottoman rule, the absence of a state formation and legitimate claimants to the throne, combined with migration processes and the construction of *krajišta* (borderlands), brought to the forefront more enduring identity traits – ethnic, religious, and social. Ultimately, the concept of Bosnia was preserved primarily by two factors: the Bosnian Eyalet, established in 1580 by the Ottomans as an administrative unit, and the persistent organization of the Franciscan Province of Bosna Argentina, alongside its already entrenched place in European geography.

**Keywords:** Bosnia (medieval), South Eastern Europe, Middle Ages, župa, land, polity, belonging, identity