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What is a homeland to people in no man's land? Exploring National Identity in the Complex Context of Bosnia and Herzegovina: A Case Study of Brčko District

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Abstract (deu)

Nationale Identität ist nicht nur eine Frage individueller Zugehörigkeit, sondern auch ein relevanter Faktor für das Funktionieren postkonfliktueller Gesellschaften. Diese Arbeit untersucht den Fall des Brčko-Distrikts in Bosnien und Herzegowina, einem Land, das häufig als tief gespalten und von starken ethnischen Identitäten geprägt dargestellt wird. Sie untersucht, inwiefern der institutionelle Rahmen des Brčko-Distrikts, der ethnische Identitäten zugleich institutionalisiert und interethnische Zusammenarbeit durch Mechanismen wie ein gemeinsames Schulsystem und proportionale ethnische Repräsentation fördert, die Identitätsbildung junger Menschen beeinflusst, die innerhalb dieses institutionellen Rahmens geboren und aufgewachsen sind. Ausgehend von der Debatte zwischen primordialistischen und konstruktivistischen Ansätzen und aufbauend auf Brubakers Konzeption von Nationhood sowie Barths Theorie ethnischer Grenzen untersucht die Studie, wie Individuen im Kontext erzwungener multikultureller Governance zwischen staatsbürgerlichen und ethnischen Identifikationskategorien navigieren, wobei der Rolle gemeinsamer Bildung besondere Aufmerksamkeit gewidmet wird. Die qualitative Analyse basiert auf fünf Fokusgruppen mit Schüler:innen an weiterführenden Schulen. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die nationale Identität junger Menschen im Brčko-Distrikt überwiegend ethno-religiös geprägt ist, dass ethnische Grenzen verhandelbar und kontextabhängig sind und dass die Bedeutungen der Identitätskategorien individuell variieren. Der Fall des Brčko-Distrikts verdeutlicht sowohl die Grenzen als auch das Potenzial inklusiver institutioneller Arrangements in postsozialistischen und postkonfliktuellen Gesellschaften und leistet einen Beitrag zu breiteren Debatten über Identitätsbildung und Versöhnungsprozesse nach Konflikten.

Abstract (eng)

National identity is not only a question of individual belonging but also a relevant factor in the functioning of post-war states. This thesis examines the case of Brčko District in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a country often portrayed as deeply divided and marked by strong ethnic identities. It explores whether the institutional framework of Brčko District, which simultaneously institutionalizes ethnic identities and promotes interethnic cooperation through mechanisms such as a joint school system and proportional ethnic representation, influences the identity formation of young people who were born and raised within this governance framework. Drawing on the debate between primordialist and constructivist approaches, and building on Brubaker's conceptualization of nationhood and Barth's theory of ethnic boundaries, the study examines how individuals navigate civic and ethnic categories of identification in the context of enforced multicultural governance, with particular attention to the role of joint education. The qualitative analysis is based on five focus groups conducted with high school students. The findings indicate that national identity among youth in the Brčko District is predominantly ethno-religious, ethnic boundaries are negotiable and context-dependent, and the meanings attached to the identity categories vary among individuals. The case of Brčko District demonstrates both the limits and the potential of inclusive institutional arrangements in post-socialist and post-war societies, contributing to broader discussions on identity formation and post-conflict reconciliation efforts.

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1. Introduction

Nations are dual phenomena, constructed essentially from above, but cannot be understood unless also analyzed from below. (Hobsbawm, 1990, p. 10)

When we are questioned on who we are, our responses usually start with personal details like our first and last names and our professions. They may also include social identifiers such as marital status, place of origin, or national affiliation. These personal and social levels of identification not only define who we are, but also shape our relationships with others. National identity, which can often be complex and heavily dependent on context, plays a significant role. Whereas to some, it is very important, to others, it is less so.

National identity is a prominent and often debated issue. In a post-war country like Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) national identity has become a significant social and political force. When asked the question "Ko si ti?" ("Who are you?"), people in BiH mostly respond by declaring their ethno-national identity. Several research studies (Hjort & Frisé, 2006; Oppenheimer & Midžić, 2011; Mulalić & Malanović-Adilović, 2018; Pečković, 2024) indicate that the issue of national identity is a dominant aspect in the lives of individuals in BiH. Having a complex history and diverse population, this Southeastern European country illustrates the obstacles of navigating national and ethnic identities in post-socialist and post-war contexts. Traditionally, identity is associated with both ethnicity and religion, and there is a strong identification with the state of BiH only among Bosniaks (Klemenčić, 2000; Guzina, 2007; Lavić, 2012; Majstorović & Turjačanin, 2013; Hromadžić, 2015/2017; Mulalić & Malanović-Adilović, 2018). In the literature BiH is traditionally seen as marked by strong ethnic identities and divisions. While some authors emphasize cultural and religious divisions and war experience as a reason for this (see e.g. the overview in Hatzopoulos, 2003), other scholars (Guzina, 2007;

Mujkić, 2007; Moll, 2013) stress the role of institutions in reproducing the salience of ethnic identities.

However, Brčko District, a self-governing administrative unit in northeastern BiH, offers a unique case of an internationally designed, multi-ethnic governance model that aims to foster inclusion, coexistence, and reconciliation. An established balance among ethnic groups, a joint school curriculum, and a unique governance style are some of the reasons why Brčko had been called a successful story of postwar coexistence in a deeply divided country. However, works of Clark (2010) and Troncotă (2011) claim that praising its success was based on a top-down approach, looking at its institutions and laws, overlooking the realities of everyday life. Clark (2010) portrays Brčko as a deeply divided city, where people only professionally cooperate but do not aim for deeper reconciliation. The local author, Pečković (2022), however, sees the bonding potential between youth and deeper cooperation between people of different ethnic backgrounds. He argues that the institutional framework of Brčko reduces ethnic distance.

What remains largely unexplored is how Brčko's residents experience and perceive their identities within this framework and whether this governance model promotes civic identity and strong belonging to the state of BiH.

1.1. Research Question and Rationale

The primary goal of this study is to fill this empirical void and to challenge the imbalance between theoretical and empirical exploration by presenting the research question: **"How do individuals perceive their national identity and the sense of belonging in the context of enforced multiethnic governance?"** Using a qualitative method, focus groups, I explore how residents perceive and articulate their national affiliations, looking at both ethnic and civic perspectives. This helps to understand whether there is a shared national identity and how it

complements or conflicts with ethnic identities. Moreover, the thesis analyzes the role of Brčko's institutions and governance structures in shaping those identities.

Drawing on the theories of Brubaker (1996, 2004) and Barth (1969), this thesis explores how national identity in the context of enforced multicultural governance operates as both a category and a boundary. Brubaker argues that we should avoid treating groups as homogenous and fixed units, while Barth views ethnic boundaries as context-dependent. The findings confirm elements of both approaches. While ethnic identities among youth are strong, some participants expressed more flexible or civic perspectives. Moreover, young people draw boundaries in some contexts while crossing them in others. Both identity and boundaries are negotiated in everyday life.

Therefore, the broader theoretical insight of the thesis is that institutional arrangements can influence the intergroup relations. Multicultural governance fosters cooperation, yet when combined with the institutionalization of ethnic identities, it does not reshape the deeper layers of identity. The findings show that identities in post-socialist settings remain resilient not because of primordial *ancient hatreds*, but because institutions continuously reproduce ethnic categories. At the same time, the study shows that not only institutions, but also primordial ties shape how people understand their belonging. In this sense, the thesis contributes to the debate between primordialist and constructivist perspectives by demonstrating that identities are simultaneously constructed and inherited.

Therefore, I argue that Brčko should be seen both as a model and as a warning. It demonstrates that institutionalized multiethnic governance can foster cooperation, but it does not necessarily transform identities or create a shared sense of civic belonging.

1.2. Personal Motivation

This research was also motivated by a personal reaction to the way Brčko has been portrayed in academic literature. As someone who grew up in Brčko, I found it difficult to recognize my own city in studies that displayed deep ethnic divisions, a lack of cooperation, and narratives of ancient hatred. While not denying the presence of ethnic divisions, I have observed everyday practices of coexistence and collaboration that challenged these dominant narratives. This thesis is an attempt to explore those lived realities and provide a more nuanced understanding of national identity and belonging in the Brčko District.

1.3. Relevance

Understanding identity in Brčko is crucial for democratization and peacebuilding efforts not only in BiH, but also in other post-war regions. The development of a stable and inclusive political community is a key factor for lasting peace and stability. The equal representation of ethnic groups and institutionalized cooperation have contributed to interethnic coexistence. However, the same mechanisms also reinforce ethnic boundaries in daily life. This study follows the assumption that civic identity is essential for democratic consolidation (Gaber, 2006), and its absence weakens citizens' loyalty to the state, which is crucial for lasting peace. This should serve as a lesson for future peacebuilders that the immediate success of a peacebuilding model does not mean that further steps are unnecessary. For long-term development of the state, not only stability but also positive peace is needed.

1.4. Structure of the Paper

In addition to the introduction, this thesis consists of seven chapters. Chapter 2 examines literature on national identity in general, followed by an exploration of major debates concerning its nature. Furthermore, the chapter presents contemporary perspectives on national

identity, discussing the challenges of globalization. Afterwards, the literature on national identity in post-Soviet states, BiH, and the Brčko District is explored.

The theoretical framework is examined in Chapter 3. This thesis adopts a constructivist stance, viewing national identities as socially constructed, flexible, and continuously evolving. The framework is further supported by complementary insights from Rogers Brubaker and Fredrik Barth, who conceptualize identity not as a fixed attribute but as a product of social and institutional processes. Brubaker's notion of nationhood as category, institution, and event, and Barth's analysis of ethnic boundaries, provide a lens through which identity can be examined as situational and socially reproduced.

Chapter 4 addresses the chosen methodology of the research. It discusses the selection of methods used for data collection and data analysis, the target groups, my positioning as a researcher, and the ethical issues that accompanied the research process.

In Chapter 5, the context of the case study is examined. To understand national identity in the Brčko District, it is necessary to situate it in the broader context. Therefore, the chapter outlines the nation policies in the SFRY, followed by an explanation of how ethnic identities are institutionalized in post-war BiH. It then discusses the emergence of Brčko and its contemporary governance framework. Finally, the chapter situates the case study within the current political context, illustrating Brubaker's notion of *nationness as event*.

The findings of the empirical part of the study are presented in Chapter 6. The data are organized into five overarching themes that emerged from the coding process: interethnic relations, categorization, national symbols, state belonging, and national identity. Each theme is described and illustrated with selected participant quotes.

Finally, in Chapter 7, the research question is answered, and findings are positioned within the literature.

In the final chapter, the conclusion, the research is summarized, and the limitations and implications of the study are discussed.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Concept of National Identity

2.1.1. *Defining National Identity*

What constitutes national identity? National identity provides an answer to the question, “Who are we and who are they?” much like any other form of collective identity (Vanderwerf, 2009, p. 4). Due to this differentiation, people ally themselves with those they perceive to be the same and differentiate themselves from the different ones. According to Vanderwerf (2017, p. 5), national identity is “the collective sense that individuals within a nation have of who they are.”

According to scholars, national identity can be understood as an individual experience and a social construct rooted in an institution and culture. As David and Bar-Tal (2009) indicate, the national identity operates on two interrelated levels, namely, the micro level, which is the psychological identification of individuals with the nation, and the macro level, which is the shared norms, symbols, institutions, and historical narratives that people share as a group.

The dual nature of national identity is also highlighted by Fukuyama (2018). He posits that national identity involves not only official political institutions like laws, language policy, and school curriculum, but also shared cultural narratives. These include collective memory, founding myths, and community values.

Parekh (1995) specified four participating variants of national identity: a difference from others; a self-conception; a series of core values and commitments; and several organizing principles that serve to influence a polity's institutions and beliefs. All of these dimensions demonstrate that national identity can extend far beyond citizenship or legal belonging, also capturing the symbolic and affective attachments individuals hold to a political community.

The individuals are the ones who make sense of national identity. It acquires meaning only through individuals' imagination, negotiation, and their interactions with others (Putri et al., 2017, p. 178). While it can be constructed by elites, its reproduction in everyday life is what gives national identity meaning (Putri et al., 2017, p. 179).

The functionalist explanation of national identity emphasizes its psychosocial function of providing individuals with a sense of community and belonging (Smith, 1991; McCrone & Bechhofer, 2015, p. 10), which can be particularly important during the crisis times.

Furthermore, national identity plays an important political role. Smith (1991, p. 144) argues that national identity dictates the nature of political regimes and provides legitimacy to its political and administrative practices. Similarly, Gaber (2006, p. 35) sees national identity as “the glue that holds together a political community and legitimizes democratic decisions”. Depending on its inclusivity, the nature of national identity within a state can either hinder or foster democratic consolidation (Gaber, 2006, p. 35). This raises the question of inclusivity, which is often explained through the dichotomy between civic and ethnic conceptions of the nation.

2.1.2. Civic vs. Ethnic Dichotomy

Due to the conceptual and linguistic ties between the term national identity and the concept of the *nation*, the term needs to be reflected upon. The *nation* is a concept that is quite complex as well as ambiguous; hence, it has different definitions. It would be impossible to reach a consensus on such a politicized and complex issue. Although it is complicated, and Rogers Brubaker advises against defining the concept of a nation, this literature review engages with the key debate and definitions for the purposes of context and clarity.

Scholars often make the distinction between the civic and ethnic conceptions of the nation (Brubaker, 2004, p. 133.). Philosopher and historian Hans Kohn popularized this dichotomy in the 20th century (Shulman, 2002). The civic conception of the nation includes such things as a national territory, the existence of a common system of laws and institutions, legal equality, and a civic culture. This perspective goes beyond one's ethnic, religious, linguistic, or tribal identity (Lavić, 2012, p. 13). The nation, therefore, is defined as a purely political community (Yack, 1996, p. 103) rather than a kinship one.

The ethnic conception of the nation focuses on ethno-cultural and historical unity. It sees the nation as an extended kinship group, fitting within the primordial framework. The main criteria for inclusion are ancestry, culture, and often religion. The option of choice is excluded. One is born into a nation and remains a member of it, regardless of their citizenship or place of residence.

2.1.3. Critique of the Civic vs. Ethnic Dichotomy

It is not uncommon that the division between civic and ethnic conceptions of the nation is unjustifiably attributed retrospectively to a supposed split between Western and Eastern perspectives (Smith, 1991; Bringa, 1993; Yack, 1996; Sokolović, 1997; Brubaker, 2004; Milošević-Đorđević, 2007). Although distinctions such as ethnic vs. civic or blood-based vs. territory-based nationalism have traditionally been seen, for instance, as difference between German and French models of national identity, scholars often misattribute the ethnic definition of the nation to an Eastern understanding and the civic definition to a Western one.

The main critique of the civic vs. ethnic dichotomy is its ethnocentrism (Yack, 1996, p. 105). Often, the Western model is unfairly represented as inclusive and liberal, while the Eastern model is seen as illiberal and exclusive (Brubaker, 2004, p. 133). However, two models are both inclusive and exclusive; it is the criteria for inclusion that differ (Brubaker, 2004, p. 141).

While the Western model is often praised for its commitment to individual rights and diversity (Yack, 1996), in practice it excludes migrants, stateless persons, and minorities without citizenship. The Eastern model, on the other hand, excludes based on different ancestry, but it can bind together people across borders.

Moreover, the Western model is often linked to its voluntarist aspect, as illustrated by Renan's idea of a *daily plebiscite* and Anderson's concept of the *imagined community* (Džihic, 2009, p. 51). These conceptualizations underscore the constructive nature of a nation and the willingness of people to be part of it. Nevertheless, in addition to the voluntarist aspect, Renan emphasizes the importance of historical memory and emotional attachment to the nation, reinforcing the idea that the nation blends both civic and ethnic aspects; that it is "given as well as chosen" (Brubaker, 2004, p. 138). The idea of free choice of civic identity is nothing more than an illusion, or as Shulman (2002, p. 559) points out, "civic identity is less choice of individual, more choice of state". Civic identities are, in most cases, acquired by nativity, whether through place of birth or parental citizenship (Yack, 1996, p. 105). Therefore, they are no less inherited than ethnic ones.

The division of national identity into ethnic and civic represents a simplification of a multifaceted concept. Smith (1991) argues that modern national identities are never purely ethnic or civic. Instead, they combine elements of both dimensions. According to Smith (1991, p. 14), national identity is composed of five essential attributes that reflect this dualism. First, national identity is linked to a specific historical territory or "homeland", which may not necessarily be the land of origin or the current place of residence. Second, national identity is preserved through myths and historical memories, passed down through generations. The third feature is mass public culture, which is produced through the educational system and the mass media. Fourth, it includes legal rights and duties for all members. Finally, it presupposes a

common economy. Based on these features, national identity fulfils territorial, economic, and political functions, while also shaping individual self-identification and processes of socialization (Smith, 1991, pp. 16-17).

Division between Eastern and Western models is strongly criticized by Stephen Shulman (2002), who, through a quantitative study, found that citizens in Eastern and Western countries exhibit elements of both civic and ethnic identities. Which one they will emphasize depends on the context and issue discussed. He even came to the finding that in some Eastern European countries, civic elements of national identity were more valued than in Western Europe.

Consequently, the critiques suggest that the national identity cannot be seen as merely civic versus ethnic, as it is a multi-layered idea incorporating much more than just belonging through political or ancestry reasons.

2.2. General Debates

One of the central debates on the nature of national identity is between primordialism and constructivism. While primordialists argue that the national identity is something natural, inherited, ascribed, and fixed, constructivists see it as something socially constructed and subject to change (Milošević-Đorđević, 2007, p. 386).

2.2.1. Primordialism

Primordialists have been advocating for a long time that ethnic identity is fixed and ascribed. They argue that the feeling of belonging to an ethnic group is natural and inherited from “family, religion, language, and cultural traditions” (Geertz, 1963, p. 106). According to this view, a nation is just a “form of extended kinship...linked to a certain territory” (Hronesova, 2012, p. 27).

American sociologist Edward Shils, who developed the concept of primordial attachments, claimed that assumed blood ties, race, language, and religion make individuals feel like an inherent part of their group. These attachments create strong bonds within the group and sharp distinctions from out-groups, as they are perceived as natural ties. They are more powerful than the ties formed through social interaction (Connor, 1978, p. 377; Džihic, 2009, p. 53) and can evoke a sense of loyalty, pride, and a willingness to sacrifice lives (Geertz, 1963, p. 106).

Primordialism is not a monolithic theory, and within its framework exist several different views. For instance, the sociobiological perspective argues that ethnicity is determined by kinship, while culturalists consider that common language and religion are more important determining factors than common ancestral bonds (Yang, 2000, pp. 42-43). Primordialism has developed over the years, and it has been influenced by other theories, particularly constructivism. Newer primordialists, such as Van Evera (2001), agree with the constructivist stance that ethnic identities are indeed social constructs, not something natural, but argue that these identities were constructed in the distant past, and today they are rigid, almost impossible to transform (Van Evera, 2001, p. 20). They are deeply rooted in emotions and history, which makes it hard for an individual to detach from their ethnic group, regardless of its surroundings. They become even more ingrained after the conflicts (Van Evera, 2001).

2.2.2. Constructivism

Primordialism has been the subject of sociological critique since the 1970s, when constructivism emerged as a contrasting perspective. Constructivists argue that national identity is not natural or fixed but is instead socially constructed and continuously evolving (Vanderwerf, 2009, p. 3). Identities are shaped by social, political, and economic processes, changing as individuals gain new experiences and adapt to their environments (Chandra, 2001, p. 7).

Significant contributions in this shift of thinking were made by Frederik Barth, who argued that ethnicity is not primarily about cultural traits, like language, religion, or traditions, but rather a social phenomenon (Hronesova, 2012, p. 25), and the traits that actually matter are the ones people themselves find meaningful (Eriksen & Jakoubek, 2020).

The important constructivist argument is that national identities are not conditioned by actual, objective facts, but rather by beliefs and emotions (Grgić, 2009; Yang, 2000), or imagination as seen in Benedict Anderson's (2006) concept of *imagined communities*. Constructivists argue that nations are created by the state and the people, which contradicts the primordial claim that nations are natural phenomena.

Constructivism furthermore challenges the primordialists' claim that hate and wars between different ethnic groups are inevitable and natural since ethnic differences cannot be overcome (Filić, 2021, p. 107). Instead, they propose looking at deeper political and economic changes that could cause conflicts, rather than oversimplifying them as ancient hatreds. Primordialism cannot clarify whether ethnic hatred was a result of the state's collapse or its cause, nor can it explain how different ethnicities coexisted peacefully for 70 years in Yugoslavia and some of them collaborated even during the war (Filić, 2021).

There are not many scholars who still defend initial primordialism today. Since the emergence of constructivist thought, constructivism has prevailed in social science, offering a more dynamic understanding of identity.

This thesis adopts the constructivist stance that identity is socially constructed and malleable. However, it also takes a partial stance with newer primordialists, who argue that ethnic identities are deeply rooted in emotions and history and are difficult to change. Nevertheless, they are not impossible to manipulate, institutionalize, or adapt. These debates are particularly relevant for this case, since Brčko demonstrates the importance of a hybrid theoretical

approach, highlighting the significance of ethnic identities, ancestry and religion, together with the role of institutions and everyday interethnic cooperation. While the findings do show the persistence of strong ethnic identities, the thesis also explains the role institutions play in their preservation. Moreover, the findings support constructivist thought regarding the contextual nature of ethnic boundaries and the possibility of multilayered identity.

2.3. Contemporary Perspectives: National Identity in the 21st Century

In the 1960s and 1980s, social scientists were predicting the downfall of the importance of the nation-state and national identity, particularly identifiers such as religion or ethnicity (Grotenhuis, 2016, p. 126). Forecasts were made that the 21st century would be marked by the replacement of nation-states by transnational organizations (Mahler, 2024). Globalization was supposed to soften ethnic boundaries and make identities more malleable.

Joseph Nye was one of the political scientists who argued that the global reach and mobility of multinational corporations might overshadow nation-states. In 2013, some transnational corporations surpassed the GDP of entire countries (Mahler, 2024, pp. 295-296). However, despite their economic power and global reach, nation-states continue to play one of the most important roles in the international arena (Mahler, 2024).

Not only have nation-states persisted, but national identity has also remained resilient. The paradox of globalization is what makes this possible (Petkova, 2006; Putri et al., 2017). International mobility has increased contact between different cultures and raised *cosmopolitan consciousness*. At the same time, it has also strengthened national self-awareness (Putri et al., 2017, p. 179). Rather than being replaced by a new form of collective identity, as postmodernists predicted, national identity became more multidimensional (Putri et al., 2017, p. 179). They did not take into account that cosmopolitanism can reinforce national belonging as a pushback to the globalizing processes (Petkova, 2006, p. 260).

Moreover, migration rarely transforms one's national identity. While individuals may adopt new traditions or languages in their daily life, they often retain their core values, behaviors, and self-understanding, since identity is often strengthened through processes of contrast and othering (McCrone & Bechhofer, 2015, p. 6). For example, moving from France to Austria may not make someone feel Austrian. Instead, their French national identity may become even more salient than it was at home.

Particularly with the rise of right-wing populism, issues of identity, race, nationality, religion, and ethnicity are becoming part of everyday political and public discourse. Revisionist histories and myth-building are employed to construct a new, *stronger* national identity, while migrants from other cultures are portrayed as an existential threat to national identity. National identity remains the most fundamental collective identity, mostly because of its ubiquity and pervasiveness (Smith, 1991, p. 143).

Overall, contemporary perspectives suggest that while globalization has changed the conditions under which national identity is formed, national identity has not disappeared. Instead, its significance in the modern world is undisputed. Its presence in everyday life makes it appear as something self-evident. Thus, it is often taken for granted. From today's perspective, it is striking that at the beginning of the 20th century, awareness of national identity was very limited, particularly among the lower classes (Billig, 1995/2009, p. 117). National identity under globalization has adapted, becoming even more multilayered and context-dependent, but it has not lost its importance.

2.4. National Identity in Post-Socialist Societies

National identity formation in Eastern European and post-socialist states followed a different trajectory from that in Western Europe. While in Western countries the redistribution of resources and redefinition of identity were separate processes, in Eastern Europe they took

place simultaneously (Troncotă, 2011). BiH is one of many examples of states that emerged from this historical constellation; therefore, understanding national identity in such a context requires a broader regional perspective.

The post-socialist context was shaped by the collapse of communist regimes, state-building, economic and democratic transformation, and, in several cases, violent conflicts. The primordialist versus constructivist debate has been translated into the study of post-socialist states and societies, with authors examining the emergence of nationalism and new national states in the Eastern European region. The cause of the breakup of the USSR and the SFRY, and the fall of the communist rule in general, has been portrayed by the media and public narrative through the prism of ancient ethnic hatreds. This simplified explanation that “the end of communism took the lid off ancient hatreds” (Verdery, 1996, p. 83), and the idea that distinct ethnic boundaries and even ethnic violence are inevitable in the Eastern European region, was advocated in the early literature, and especially among Western journalists (Hatzopoulos, 2003; McConnel, 2018).

On the other hand, the newer scholarly literature rejects these primordialist interpretations. Authors, such as Brubaker (1996), Verdery (1996), Bunce (1999), and Filić (2021), argue that nationalism and ethnic mobilization in the region are the product of the organizational principles of socialist federations, the institutionalization of ethnicity, and elite competition. From this perspective, ethnic boundaries in post-socialist societies are understood as politically constructed by the socialist regime. “The regime repressed nationalism, of course; but at the same time ... it went further than any other state before or since in institutionalizing territorial *nationhood* and ethnic *nationality* as fundamental social categories” (Brubaker, 1996a, p. 17). In the SFRY and the USSR, ethnic identity was treated as an obligatory category, not as an optional or voluntary status (Brubaker, 1996a, p. 18).

After the fall of communism, similar practices continued. Brubaker (1995) uses the term *nationalizing state* to describe post-socialist states of Eastern Europe. These states perceived themselves as nation-states of one particular ethnocultural nation, and in order to become *fully national*, they used institutions, laws and symbols to promote the language, culture and dominance of that nation, while marginalizing minority groups. Minorities were formally recognized as citizens, but symbolically marginalized, except for Estonia and Latvia, where the non-Estonians and non-Latvians were even denied citizenship rights (Brubaker, 1996b, pp. 431-432).

Nationalizing states also promoted the language of the titular nation, restoring its prestige, while the language of minorities was removed from the public sphere. For example, in many post-Soviet countries, governments, administration, media, and courts switched from Russian to the titular language, and Russian was also gradually excluded from schools (Brubaker, 2011).

Bosnia and Herzegovina reflects a complex variation of this model. While it is the only post-socialist country in Eastern Europe without a titular nation, the three ethnic groups each act as such locally within their respective territories. Moreover, citizens who do not belong to any of those three ethnic groups are marginalized and denied key political rights. As is the case with other nationalizing states, in BiH, education, holidays, and symbols serve to promote the interests and narratives of particular ethnocultural groups.

Such state policies prevent the emergence of a shared civic identity. Even today, in most post-socialist states, citizens do not hold rights as individuals, but as members of ethnic communities (Verdery, 1996, p. 89). Gaber (2006, p. 35) argues that such fragmentation of national belonging hinders democratic consolidation in this region.

Divisions can be seen in any aspect of national identity. For instance, in these societies, national symbols do not serve to unite the nation as is the case in older states (Kolstø, 2006, p. 678). On the contrary, in divided states, symbols are usually contested by at least one ethnic group.

Division extends beyond symbols into other aspects, such as collective memory, education, and language. One of the central aspects of the redefinition of collective identities that took place in East Central Europe during the 1990s was the re-evaluation of historical memory (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014, p. 8). Competing interpretations of the past emerged as different groups constructed divergent narratives of the former regime, its actions, and the meaning of regime change (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014, p. 3). These divisions became particularly visible during national holidays and commemorations, which are often highly politicized. For instance, in several Eastern European states, the anniversaries of the “breakthrough” of 1989 and 1991 became an instrument of “political recrimination”, as politicians used them to blame the rival groups for past wrongs (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014, p. 8).

Overall, the literature on post-socialist societies shows that national identity in such contexts is usually contested and tied to ethnicity. Instead of playing the uniting force, it reinforces divisions. Bosnia and Herzegovina, and by extension the Brčko District exemplifies these challenges, as it combines the post-socialist legacy of institutionalized ethnicity with the post-war fragility. Moreover, the positive perception of coexistence among youth and their interethnic friendships challenge the notion of ancient hatreds. This thesis contributes to the literature by showing how young people in Brčko navigate and negotiate ethnic boundaries within a post-socialist context.

2.5. National Identity in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The national identity of the population in BiH has attracted scholarly attention during its socialist past and within its contemporary institutional framework. The early literature had

primordialist assumptions, and the idea that ethnic hatred is inevitable in BiH was advocated in the early literature on the Balkans, and especially among Western journalists, most notably by Robert D. Kaplan in his book *Balkan Ghosts* (Hatzopoulos, 2003; McConnel, 2018).

However, constructivist approaches dominate contemporary scientific studies of national identity in BiH. Oddie (2012), for instance, argues that constructivism could be applied to the study of BiH, as ethnicity in Bosnia and Herzegovina is a product of prevailing circumstances. Nevertheless, while recognizing the constructed and contextual nature of national identity, authors also stress the important role that certain inherited identity markers play in national identity in BiH (Hronesova, 2012; Oddie 2012).

Most studies on national identity in BiH focus predominantly on empirical findings, with limited engagement in the primordialist versus constructivist debate. This thesis contributes by explicitly linking empirical insights to these theoretical discussions.

The empirical studies argue that the majority of BiH residents define their national identity in ethno-religious (Bringa, 1993, 1996; Klemenčič, 2000) or ethno-national (Hronesova, 2012; Majstorović & Turjačanin, 2013; Hromadžić, 2015/2017; Mulalić & Malanović-Adilović, 2018) terms.

Bringa's (1996, p. 22) prewar research of identity in Central Bosnia shows that people refer to the term *nacija* (*nation*) specifically as tied to ethnoreligious identity. She attributed this to the three ideological legacies: the Ottoman millet system, which organized population based on religious communities; the Wilsonian doctrine, which promoted the right to self-determination; and ethnic definition of a nation, previously discussed (Bringa, 1993, pp. 84-85). Additionally, nation policies in Yugoslavia institutionalized ethnic identities by formally recognizing specific ethnic groups as the *nations* of the federation. This established ethnicity as the primary

political category, leaving a legacy that continues to shape contemporary understandings of nationhood and belonging in BiH.

Similarly, other studies (Klemenčić, 2000; Hronesova, 2012; Majstorović & Turjačanin, 2013; Hromadžić, 2015/2017; Mulalić & Malanović-Adilović, 2018) confirmed that Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats define themselves mostly through religious affiliation (Islam, Orthodoxy, and Catholicism, respectively), regardless of whether they actively practice their religion.

The population in BiH is not united, but rather divided into three distinct communities, which hinders the democratization process within the state (Klemenčić, 2000; Guzina, 2007). National identity is characterized by its thick concept, exclusiveness, high loyalty to in-group members, and a strong mistrust of ethnic others (Guzina, 2007, p. 231). Boundaries between different groups are high and rigid (Hronesova, 2012; Majstorović & Turjačanin, 2013; Hromadžić, 2015/2017).

Moreover, Klemenčić (2000) arrived at the conclusion that Bosniaks stand as the exclusive demographic fraction attributing their identity to the state of BiH, in contrast to Serbs and Croats, who orient their sense of identity toward their respective kin-states (Klemenčić, 2000, p. 70; Džankić, 2015).

Other research studies (Guzina, 2007; Lavić, 2012; Hromadžić, 2015/2017) have confirmed that identification with the land and the state of BiH is strong only among Bosniaks, while Croats and Serbs see BiH only as a country of residence, showing loyalty exclusively to their kin-states. Additionally, among Serbs, there is a high level of attachment to the entity of Republika Srpska (Majstorović & Turjačanin, 2013).

Notably, Klemenčić (2000, p. 70) asserts a forecast in which the term *Bosniak* is expected to develop into an inclusive identity, thereby encompassing all citizens of Bosnia and

Herzegovina. Nevertheless, research studies (Hronesova, 2012; Lavić, 2012; Majstorović & Turjačanin, 2013; Hromadžić, 2015/2017; Mulalić & Malanović-Adilović, 2018) show that after a lapse of 25 years, it becomes apparent that the term *Bosniak* continues to signify the Muslim community exclusively. The envisioned supranational Bosniak identity, as predicted by Klemenčić, has not materialized.

Importantly, a nuanced shift in the identification patterns has been found by Hronesova (2012). While the affiliation with the state of BiH remains relatively low among Serbs and Croats, being primarily associated with Bosniaks and individuals from mixed marriages, Hronesova's (2012) findings indicate variation based on geographical location. For instance, her study demonstrated that Serbs from two towns in Republika Srpska, Pale and Bijeljina, prioritize their identity as Bosnian-Herzegovinians before identifying as Serbs or Orthodox (Hronesova, 2012, p. 82). She highlights the potential “for gradual change among the young generation” (Hronesova, 2012, p. 95).

Due to her sampling method, a potential bias might exist. Respondents in the study were people who actively participated in the work of NGOs, and therefore often cooperated with people from other ethnic groups and different municipalities, which could have an influence on their identity building.

A more recent quantitative study by Mulalić and Malanović-Adilović (2018), however, shows that today's Bosnian-Herzegovinian society is still organized along ethnic divisions. People most commonly identify themselves by their ethnic affiliations rather than as citizens of BiH. The sense of belonging to the state of BiH is associated only with the Bosniaks, while Croats and Serbs are emotionally attached to Croatia and Serbia, respectively (Mulalić & Malanović-Adilović, 2018; Džankić, 2015).

2.6. Brčko District in Scholarly Literature

In the early 2000s, Brčko began to attract increasing interest from scholars due to its specific institutional arrangements, which promote inclusion, coexistence, and reconciliation. Its model of governance is based on a balance among ethnic groups, a joint school curriculum, and a low degree of formal power-sharing (Bieber, 2005). In Chapter 5, the institutional and legal arrangements of Brčko District will be discussed in more detail.

While political elites described it as a great success of international peace-building, scholars were more cautious about reaching premature conclusions. Notable contributions to the study of Brčko's institutions were made by Bieber (2005), Jeffrey (2006), and Dahlman and Tuathail (2006). The authors acknowledge the relative success of Brčko, but they refrain from making any long-term predictions about its sustainability.

To illustrate the success of the District's institutions, Brčko is often compared to Mostar, because of their similarity in multiethnicity, but different approaches to peace-building employed by the international community. Brčko was created as a united self-governing administrative unit, with a low degree of formal power-sharing. On the other hand, in Mostar, separate administrations of Bosniaks and Croats were formed with a high degree of formal power-sharing (Bieber, 2005). In his work, Bieber (2005, pp. 427-429) shows that Brčko's model has been more successful and stable, and its institutions have been praised for avoiding the marginalization of any of the three ethnic groups and fostering interethnic coalitions.

Subsequent studies by Clark (2010), Troncotă (2011), and Pečković (2022) researched social distance between three dominant ethnic groups in Brčko. Troncotă (2011) notes that praising the success of Brčko's model is based on the research of institutions. However, institutions should not be analyzed without society. The real question that should be posed is how this institutional framework influenced the relationship between the groups (Troncotă, 2011). She

employs a constructivist theoretical framework to examine the interethnic relations in the Brčko District and argues that boundaries between ethnic groups are rigid.

Moreover, Troncotă (2011) notes that identity in Brčko is contested, negotiable, and linked to factors such as religion, history, territory, and language, all contributing to the delineation of the Self against the Other. Notably, Troncotă (2011, p. 10) argues that national identity in Brčko is more adaptable due to the mixed population. This distinguishes the District from other regions in BiH.

However, Troncotă's research is primarily theoretical. It lacks empirical data to confirm her hypothesis. She acknowledges the necessity for measurable indicators and empirical evidence to further validate the proposed hypotheses.

Studies by Clark (2010) and Peres (2018) similarly concluded that there are strong psychological boundaries between ethnic groups. Clark's (2010, pp. 73-74) bottom-up approach reveals that interethnic trust in Brčko is low and reconciliation is superficial, as its scope is limited to institutional and professional levels. Therefore, there is a strong division between the groups; people do not visit the same public spaces, they do not socialize with out-group members, and do not wish for deeper reconciliation. They consider the lack of war and cohabitation as sufficient. Clark (2010, p. 75) argues that Brčko does not differ from the rest of the country, and its reputation as a success story relies heavily on the viability of its institutions.

While Clark's research is significant as the first qualitative study of interethnic relations in the Brčko District, no definitive conclusion can be drawn based on a small sample size. Clark (2010) emphasizes the importance of further investigating ordinary people in the Brčko District, because of its potential to serve either as a lesson or as a model for other parts of BiH, but also peace-building in general.

A recent study by the local author, Pečković (2022), offers a different, more positive perspective. His primary focus was on examining the impact of NGOs on youth's attitudes toward other ethnic groups, but he found that there is a bonding potential between different ethnic groups in the Brčko District, regardless of participants' involvement in NGOs (Pečković, 2022, p. 87). His study shows that young people in Brčko eagerly engage with out-group members. They display a strong openness to making friends with different ethnic backgrounds.

However, the boundaries persist when it comes to romantic relationships. Most of the participants decline the possibility of interethnic marriage. They attribute this mostly to the condemnation from their parents. Pečković (2022) furthermore argues that in comparison to other parts of BiH, youth in Brčko interact freely and openly, but some divisions still persist.

These findings, which present a contrast to the study of Clark, suggest that there is a potential for change among the youth of Brčko. The discrepancy in ethnic distance between Brčko and the rest of BiH, where ethnic boundaries are still rigid, shows the importance of investigating national identity among Brčko residents, which remains a significant literature gap. This research fills this gap by exploring how high school students in the Brčko District (re)produce national identity, the meanings they ascribe to ethnic and civic categories, their relations to national symbols, and their perceptions of interethnic relations.

3. Theoretical Framework

Following the works of Connor (1978), Yang (2000), Brubaker (2004), Ting (2008), and Grgić (2009), national identity in this paper is viewed through a constructivist prism, as a mental construct. It represents a belief in facts that elicit specific emotions. These facts may, but do not necessarily, have to be true (Grgić, 2009).

Understanding national identity requires examining not only the beliefs individuals hold about their own nation but also about *others*. As Triandafyllidou (1998, p. 599) and Troncotă (2011) suggest, beliefs about *us* are equally important, as are beliefs about *others*, because the *us* gains meaning only if there is the *other* to differentiate from. Notably, the fear of *others* contributes to the unity and solidarity of the group members (Hobsbawm, 1992; Triandafyllidou, 1998).

3.1. Constructivism vs. Primordialism

The theoretical framework of this thesis adopts a constructivist approach to national identity. It challenges the traditional primordial perspective that nations are natural, pre-existing entities and instead accepts the notion that nations are the product of modernization (Gellner, 1983; Anderson, 2006; Hobsbawm, 1992).

However, the primordial prism remains valuable for understanding how people feel about their identity. Although anthropologists reject the idea of a nation as a kinship group, the belief in a common ancestor remains a key element of national identification (Connor, 1978, p. 380). Individuals often perceive their identities as primordial and fixed. Identification with distant ancestors and their often-glorious history stimulates solidarity with the present in-group members.

Therefore, primordialism can explain subjective perceptions, while constructivism explains how those perceptions are shaped by historical and political processes. Aligning with

Horowitz's (1985) insight, this study recognizes the profound significance of ethnic ties. Horowitz suggests that for the majority of people, ethnic identity is inherited, though it can sometimes be a choice of the individual. While a switch of identity is hard, it is not impossible (Horowitz, 1985, p. 52).

The theoretical framework is further supported by complementary insights from Rogers Brubaker and Fredrik Barth, who conceptualize identity not as a fixed attribute but as social and institutional processes. Brubaker's notion of nationhood as category, institution, and event, and Barth's analysis of ethnic boundaries, together provide a lens through which identity can be examined as situational and socially reproduced.

3.2. Brubaker's lens

American sociologist Rogers Brubaker presents a challenge to the group-centric focus in the study of ethnicity. Brubaker (2004, p. 2) critiques what he calls "*groupism*: the tendency to take bounded groups as fundamental units of analysis". Instead of treating identity and ethnicity as independent variables, Brubaker suggests conceptualizing them as an explanandum (McCrone & Bechhofer, 2015, p. 15).

Instead of focusing on nations as real groups, we should focus on nationhood and nationness, on nation as practical category, institutionalized form, and contingent event. Nation is a category of practice, not (in the first instance) a category of analysis. (Brubaker, 1996a, p. 7)

Following Brubaker, I treat national identity as dynamic, situational, and context-dependent. I analyze each individual independently, not as an element of group. I do not presuppose their identity or level of groupness, but rather analyze it through their statements and views. The

level of salience, the matter of identification, and meaning attached to the categories are treated as an empirical question, not as an analytical starting point.

In the findings, when I label participants by a national identification, this label reflects their own self-ascription expressed during the discussion, rather than any assumption based on their name, surname, or religion.

Brubaker's *nation as practical category* is applied to examine how high school students reproduce the nationhood in everyday practices, and how they use and negotiate categories. While the initial studies on the Breko District focused only on its institutions, this concept focuses on the daily experiences and practices of regular people.

This is further developed by the influence of Billig's idea. In his book, Billig (1995/2009) examines how media and politicians reinforce national identity by *banal nationalism*, for instance, how words like *we*, *our*, *they*, and *home* are used in newspapers. Although Billig's work is a top-down approach, I apply his framework to ordinary people to explore their unnoticed practices of national identity in their everyday routines, paying special attention to the boundary markers participants use and how they construct *others*.

Moreover, the concept of the *nationhood as institutionalized form* is addressed primarily in Chapter 5, where I analyze the institutions of the Brčko District, but also in the findings through the perspectives of participants. I examine how nationhood is formalized through laws, official narratives, public institutions, education, commemorations, and symbols. Through the focus groups I analyze the influence of institutions and particularly symbols on national identity, and whether they serve as a unifying or a divisive factor.

Finally, following *nationness as event*, I contextualize national identity within political events that might temporarily heighten the level of groupness among participants. Nationness as event

highlights the context-dependent nature of national belonging. Brubaker (2004, p. 41) argues that identities are not constant but fluctuating, becoming more or less salient depending on events. The intensity of national sentiment does not continuously increase like a cauldron on the fire (Brubaker, 1998). Instead, in-group identification and nationalism reach their maximum during conflicts, crises, or political mobilization. In those events, solidarity with other members of the group is highest. In everyday interaction, this *groupness* recedes (Brubaker, 2004, see Figure 1). This concept highlights that the findings should not be seen as fixed, but interpreted within the current context.

To sum up, instead of reifying the nation, Brubaker proposes to investigate how ordinary people perceive the nation and how they use discourses connected to the nation in everyday life. Moreover, Brubaker suggests taking into consideration how nations are formalized politically and culturally, through mechanisms such as constitutions, flags, and education systems. Finally, Brubaker claims that *groupness* is situational and context-dependent. Therefore, this framework enables me to shift the focus from group-based analyses and instead examine how individuals reproduce, challenge, or negotiate national categories in their everyday talk.

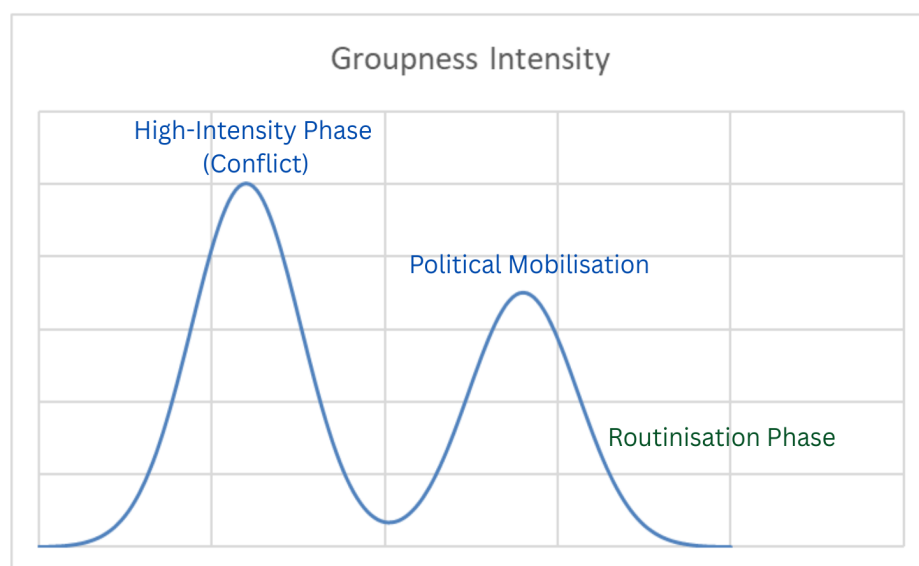


Figure 1. Curve of groupness

3.3. Ethnic Boundaries

Similar to Brubaker, Fredrik Barth conceptualizes identity as situational. Barth (1969, p. 17) attributes a superordinate status to ethnic identity, claiming that it is not just one role among many, but something that constrains all roles and behaviors an individual may take. While Brubaker focuses on national identity itself, Barth introduces ethnic boundaries as the central analytical component.

Barth argues that boundaries are highly subjective and that they endure despite interaction. This makes his framework particularly relevant for analyzing the Brčko District, because it helps explain how ethnic boundaries persist even in a context of an intense multiethnic cooperation. His core argument that boundaries are subjective, socially produced, and maintained despite contact helps explain why young people in Brčko form interethnic friendships and cooperate daily, while still preserving some ethnic boundaries. Persistence of boundaries despite the contact does not imply that relationships across boundaries are not formed. Instead, these boundaries provide an important framework for interaction. This is visible in Brčko's political structure, where representation is structured around the existence of three constituent people.

To analyze this dynamic, I use Barth's concept to examine how participants differentiate between in-groups and out-groups, and how they negotiate boundaries in different contexts. Stable interethnic relations, as Barth (1969, p. 16) argues, require "prescriptions and proscriptions" that regulate those relations. They allow crossing ethnic boundaries in some contexts while discouraging or even prohibiting it in others. This is particularly evident in the thesis, since participants relax boundaries when it comes to friendships, but reassert them when it comes to marriage. According to Barth (1969), this selective structuring of interactions keeps the overall system stable, enabling coexistence and cooperation without dissolving the

boundaries. The mutual interdependence, where each plays a complementary role within the shared system, keeps the system stable without requiring cultural assimilation.

In line with Barth's argument, I assume that boundaries are not just automatically maintained, but actively produced and reproduced by individuals and institutions through categorization and other social practices. Moreover, the established boundaries between the groups guide and structure how people behave toward each other.

In line with this, I focus on how participants themselves define which differences matter in everyday interactions. The features they choose to emphasize as similarities or distinctions are those that they consider significant (Barth, 1969, p. 14). Some traits can be minimized or ignored, while others are highlighted or even exaggerated. Objective differences, such as language and culture, do not matter. What matters are self-identification and external ascription. Even if members of a group behave differently, as long as they claim they belong to the group, they are part of it.

Barth's theory is highly relevant for analyzing contexts such as the Brčko District, where both interethnic cooperation and ethnic identities are institutionally enforced. Hronesova (2012, p. 93) argues that in post-war BiH, the rigidity of ethno-national identities stems from the lack of contact between the groups. Barth (1969), however, demonstrates that even where cooperation occurs, ethnic boundaries are continually reproduced through categorization, institutional rules, and symbolic practices. His framework is essential for my argument that the Brčko District fosters cooperative interethnic contact, yet boundaries remain meaningful and are selectively reproduced by both individuals and institutions. It allows me to show that youth identity in Brčko is neither rigid nor boundaryless. Although boundaries are less rigid than in other parts of BiH, they are not absent. Instead, they are negotiated situationally. By combining Brubaker

and Barth, this framework allows me to capture micro-level of everyday negotiation of identity and the macro-level of institutionalization of identity.

4. Methodology

This study examines national identity and the sense of belonging through the interpretations of participants. The focus of the fieldwork was on participants' perspectives of themselves and others, and their attachment to the country. To capture the participants' attitudes, the study employs a qualitative research method. The following chapter outlines the research design and describes the process of data acquisition and data analysis.

4.1. Research Design

In order to answer the research question: "How do individuals perceive their national identity and the sense of belonging in the context of enforced multiethnic governance?", this study adopts a qualitative case study approach. Earlier studies on national identity in BiH have used quantitative (e.g., Mulalić & Malanović-Adilović, 2018) and qualitative methods (e.g., Clark, 2010; Hronesova, 2012; Pečković, 2022). I share Hronesova's (2012, p. 16) standpoint that the sense of belonging is highly subjective and cannot be interpreted through scales and measures. The emotions and reactions of participants can be best captured through a qualitative approach.

4.1.1. *Choice of Case Study*

In Chapter 5, I explain the significance of Brčko District, as the only administrative unit in BiH with its own autonomous governance. According to Bryman's (2012, p. 70) typology, this case study falls under the category of extreme or unique cases. He defines the extreme case as the phenomenon that outlines the most unusual variations. The extreme case serves to understand and explain the generalized context, and even points to broader solutions. In the context of BiH, but also broader post-socialist and post-war context, Brčko's institutional design is the valuable variable that makes this case extreme. It is the only administrative unit with explicitly multiethnic governance that relies on low degree of power-sharing and includes a unified public

administration, and a joint school system. This case stands in sharp contrast to the rest of the country, but also other post-socialist states, where institutions are majoritarian, and in some cases, there is a divided education system.

The institutional arrangement of Brčko provides a good ground for observing the effects that inclusive institutions have on shaping the national identity. Positive results can suggest that the model of Brčko can be adopted in other post-war regions, whereas negative results can point out what to avoid. Since the District's governance structure represents the most far-reaching attempt in BiH to promote interethnic cooperation, if such institutional incentives have any effect on identity perceptions and softening of boundaries, they should be observable here most clearly.

I choose to explore only the case of Brčko, as a single-case study, for three reasons. First, the national identity in other cities in BiH is already well documented in the literature, which provided me with a good comparative basis. Results from this study are compared to the broader context in the discussion. Second, this has allowed me to conduct in-depth qualitative study. Adding more case studies would be more time-consuming and I would not be able to fully explore the identity processes in Brčko. Third, my aim is not to test variance across multiple cities, but to understand how one extreme institutional arrangement is experienced and reproduced on the grassroots level.

For these reasons, Brčko functions as a rich case study that enables the investigation of identity formation in an enforced multiethnic governance setting.

4.1.2. Choice of Method

In order to understand the national identity and how rigid ethnic boundaries between youth are, it was necessary to examine not only the perceptions of individuals but also to explore the

interaction between them. Therefore, I chose a method of focus groups. This way, I could talk with more individuals simultaneously and observe their interrelations.

The choice of method was also led by Bryman's (2008, p. 475) argument that focus groups can bring more realistic data than interviews, since there is a high chance that participants will challenge each other, force each other to think deeper about the topic, and even modify their initial remarks.

4.1.3. Choice of Target Group

The chosen target group for this research is high school students. These are young people who were born in the 2000s, when multiethnic governance was already established. They were born and raised in a post-war, divided country, but in a model that nurtures reconciliation. Their self-perception and perception of *others* were created in an ethnically heterogeneous municipality, where contact with individuals of different ethnic backgrounds is part of their daily life. By choosing this target group, I could see the influence that Brčko's political and legal arrangements have on national identity, sense of belonging, and interethnic relations.

4.2. Access to the Field and Sampling

To gain access to the field, I contacted the Ministry of Education of the Brčko District. The Ministry allowed me to conduct five focus groups in two high schools, namely *Gimnazija Vaso Pelagić* (a general academic secondary school) and *Tehnička Škola* (a technical secondary school). The rest of the organizational process was coordinated directly with the school staff.

The second step in this process was introducing school pedagogues to the topic and the focus group procedure. The pedagogues then organized the classrooms and selected participants. I requested groups with mixed ethnic backgrounds, with 6 to 10 students per group.

However, the empirical part of the research was conducted near the end of the school year, and many final-year students were preoccupied with important exams and university-related presentations. Most of them were unable to participate; therefore, mostly students from the third year or younger took part.

4.3. Data Collection

4.3.1. Configuration of Focus Groups

In the end, I conducted five focus groups, each with a different number of participants. The first three focus groups took place at *Tehnička Srednja Škola*, with more than 10 participants in each group. All three groups were ethnically mixed.

Two other focus groups were conducted at *Gimnazija Vaso Pelagić*. The first one had eleven participants of diverse ethnic backgrounds, and the second one had five students who identified as Serbs.

I had no influence over the selection of participants. I would have preferred a more balanced representation across ethnic groups, but unfortunately, this was not possible. Only three participants identified themselves as Croats, while the number of Serb participants was the highest. Gender representation was more balanced, with 28 female and 23 male participants. The participants' ages ranged from 16 to 20.

4.3.2. Language Choice

Focus groups were conducted in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian. This is the native language shared by myself and the participants. This way, I could capture culturally specific expressions and humor, which otherwise could have been lost in translation.

Focus group No.	No. of participants	F	M	Ethnicity	Serbs	Bosniaks	Croats
1	13	11	2	mixed	5	6	2
2	11	2	9	mixed	5	6	0
3	12	9	3	mixed	7	4	1
4	10	4	6	mixed	7	3	0
5	5	2	3	Serbs	5	0	0

Figure 2. Configuration of Focus Groups

4.3.3. Focus Group Guide and Facilitation

The focus group guide included key topics and open-ended questions. This allowed me to be prepared for the discussion while leaving space for organic conversation.

Each focus group started with the positionality exercise. I asked the students to stand on an imaginary line from 0 to 10, where 0 represented complete disagreement, and 10 complete agreement with the statement: “Brčko is the best city in BiH”. This opening activity allowed us to start the conversation on a light note. When asked to explain their position, participants could freely raise any topic. In some cases, this naturally led to the multiethnic character of the Brčko District, and I could easily continue with questions more related to the topic.

In certain groups, discussions flowed very smoothly with minimal intervention from my side. However, in other cases, participants discussed topics irrelevant to the research, or the discussion became too heated, which required my intervention and redirection of the focus to the themes of belonging and identity.

The main topics discussed included the multiethnic character of the Brčko District, identity, state belonging, interethnic relations (including friendships and marriages), and national symbols. The focus group questions were a mixture of questions developed specifically for this research and questions adapted from previous studies on identity, particularly from the study of Majstorović and Turjačanin (2013).

4.4 Ethical Considerations

During the empirical research, special attention was given to ethical considerations, in accordance with the standards and guidelines at the University of Vienna.

The research topic and focus group procedure were introduced to both the Ministry of Education of the Brčko District and the pedagogues of the participating high schools. I informed them that focus groups would be audio-recorded and explained how the data would be used and stored. The pedagogues then relayed this information to the students and obtained oral consent from the parents of underage students who agreed to participate.

During this process, some students who initially agreed later withdrew their participation. In some cases, students were uncomfortable with being recorded. In other cases, their parents did not approve of their participation. While this is a common challenge in research with minors, parent's disapproval might have created some bias in my sample. Identity and interethnic relations remain sensitive topics in BiH, and some parents may have been cautious because of the topics. This could mean that they are more conservative and have stronger ethnic

boundaries. On the other hand, the parents who agreed for their children to participate in the focus groups might have been more open-minded and have more flexible ethnic boundaries.

Nevertheless, focus groups and the participants showed a diversity of views and opinions and developed lively discussions about the topics. Therefore, the participants were not only students with a cosmopolitan view, but the sample was rather diverse.

When the pedagogues formed the focus groups, they introduced me to the students and then left the room. This way, students were able to speak freely without the presence of authority figures who might influence their responses.

I introduced the broad topic of the research to participants and explained how the recorded data would be used. The students were informed about the voluntary aspects of their participation, and I explained that their responses would be anonymous. Students had the possibility of withdrawal at any moment, but none of the participants chose to do so.

The biggest challenge was the sensitivity of the topic, especially in groups with participants from different ethnic backgrounds. All participants were familiar with each other, and I was mindful of the potential consequences that certain discussions might have on their relations. For this reason, I intervened in situations when discussions became too heated, prioritizing the comfort of participants over data collection.

To ensure the confidentiality of participants, all names were anonymized in transcripts. In the findings chapter, in direct quotations, each speaker is coded by the focus group number, gender, nationality, and sequence number (e.g., FG1–MSI, FG2–FC2).

4.4.1 Researcher Positionality

An additional ethical consideration relates to my positionality as a researcher. I come originally from the Brčko District, and even though I paid special attention to keep my personal opinions out of the research process, potential biases may have influenced my overall research design and the preparation of the focus groups. I approached the research with a heightened awareness of my own assumptions, and my aim was to let the empirical data guide the findings rather than my personal experiences.

On a positive note, being from the Brčko District made it easier to build a connection with participants. They felt understood and could be forthright. Nonetheless, my ethnic background could potentially have influenced participants. Although I did not openly share my ethnic affiliation with participants, they could have assumed it based on my name and surname. This could potentially have restrained members of other ethnic groups. However, participants appeared comfortable expressing their views in my presence, even when we discussed sensitive topics.

However, I felt that my assumed ethnic background was an advantage in the monoethnic group where all participants identified as Serbs, since they spoke more freely and openly, considering me an in-group member. It is possible that if I had conducted monoethnic focus groups of Bosniaks or Croats, they might have been more guarded in their responses.

4.5. Data Analysis

The audio recordings of the focus groups were transcribed using the MAXQDA Transcription Tool. However, since the recordings were in B/C/S, and in some instances, participants spoke over one another, the automated transcripts could not adequately recognize the speech. I carefully reviewed and edited each transcript, especially in sections where speech overlapped

or the software misrecognized regional accents. The excerpts quoted in the findings chapter were translated with the help of AI.

The coding process followed in the original language, so that informal speech, jokes, and linguistic nuances would not be missed. Before beginning the data analysis, I thoroughly read all transcripts and the memos taken during the focus groups. The principles of grounded theory (Glaser, 1998) guided the analysis. I followed Charmaz's coding recommendations discussed in Bryman (2008). I approached the data with open, line-by-line coding. This resulted in a large number of codes, which I reviewed to identify similarities. In line with Brubaker's (1996) distinction between categories of practice and categories of analysis, I coded participants' own identity labels as emic categories rather than predefined analytical units.

Afterwards, similar codes were grouped into axial categories. These categories were then organized into five themes: interethnic relations, categorization, national symbols, state belonging, and national identity. Each category is thoroughly explained in the findings. The manual coding was time-consuming, but it allowed me to remain closely engaged with the material and work at a more reflective pace.

Led by the principles of grounded theory (Glaser, 1998), the themes, categories, and later theories that emerged during the research were guided by the data itself.

4.6. Methodological Limitations

There are several limitations to the chosen methodology. Qualitative research does not aim to be representative, and the full diversity of experiences and opinions among youth in the Brčko District can hardly be captured by only five focus groups. Moreover, this study provides only a cross-sectional view. To understand whether national identity changes through time, a longitudinal study would be necessary.

In the course of my empirical research, I became aware of two other limitations. The first concerns the limited time available for each focus group. Building trust between the researcher and participants requires time. In most focus groups, approximately ten minutes were needed before the conversation began to flow naturally. Therefore, the 45-minute sessions were too short to collect all relevant information. This was particularly evident in larger focus groups. In the groups with over ten participants, it was harder to facilitate a productive discussion and make sure that everyone could contribute to it.

The second limitation relates to group composition. Students in the monoethnic focus group were noticeably more open to discussing sensitive topics, since they could speak more freely without fear of being judged by the significant *Other*. Future research on similar topics should consider forming more monoethnic focus groups to encourage openness. However, multiethnic focus groups also provide valuable data, as they allow researchers to see the interethnic dynamics in practice.

Overall, this methodological approach ensured that the voices of participants were represented authentically while allowing for the emergence of themes central to identity formation in Brčko. The following chapter presents the empirical findings that emerged from this analysis.

5. Context of the Case Study

Following Brubaker's (1996a) conceptualization of nationhood as an institutionalized form and as an event, this chapter examines the historical and political context in which national identity in the Brčko District is constructed. Although Brčko differs from the rest of the country due to its institutionalized cooperation, it is still part of BiH. State- and entity-level policies, media, and dominant political narratives continue to influence residents of the District. Brčko is therefore a unique institutional setting that is nonetheless influenced by wider BiH dynamics. The local institutional practices simultaneously differ and intersect with national level institutions and discourses.

Therefore, this requires situating Brčko within the broader historical trajectory of BiH. This chapter will outline the nation policies in SFRY and contemporary BiH and afterwards discuss the emergence of Brčko and its contemporary governance framework. Finally, the chapter situates the case study within the current political context, illustrating Brubaker's notion of *nationness as event*.

5.1. National Identity During the Socialist Period

Nation policies in Yugoslavia were influenced by Stalin's doctrine, where ethnic communities were officially recognized as *narodi* within their state (Bringa, 1993; Vanderwerf, 2009, p. 2). The term *narod* has multiple meanings and it is context-dependent (Bringa, 1993; Hromadžić, 2015/2017, p. 159). In a literal sense, it translates to *people*, and is closely akin to the German term *Volk*. In Western literature, however, it has been translated as both *nation* and *ethnic group* (Bringa, 1995, p. 25), which oversimplifies the term. Confusion with the meaning of the term was no exception for either Yugoslav literature or everyday use. In Yugoslavia, it had the meaning of all Yugoslavs, encompassing individuals of all nations, nationalities, and entities

(Hromadžić, 2015/2017, p. 160). However, it also carried the meaning characteristic of the Western understanding of the nation.

There was also the term *narodnosti*, which is often translated as *nationalities*, but has a meaning of ethnic groups (Bringa, 1993, p. 85). These terms were often conflated and, in everyday language, were most commonly used as synonyms. For example, in Klaić's *Dictionary of Foreign Words* (1985 edition), the terms *nacionalnost*, *narodnost*, and *ethnic* are equated (Mrđen, 2002, p. 81). Moreover, in the census, residents were asked to declare their affiliation, but none of the census guidelines included explanations of the terms *narod* (people/nation), *narodnost* (nationality/ethnicity), or *nacionalnost* (national identity), nor the concept of an ethnic group. Interpretation of terms was left to respondents (Mrđen, 2002, p. 81).

After 1971, when Muslims were granted the right to declare themselves as *narod*, in Yugoslavia, 6 groups belonged to the category of *narod*: Serbs, Croats, Muslims, Slovenes, Macedonians, and Montenegrins. *Narodnosti* were Hungarians, Russians, Italians, and others, i.e., those who had a homeland outside of Yugoslavia. Ethnic groups were considered to be those who did not have a state based on kinship, such as the Roma, for example. However, today the term *narod* is most commonly used to define an ethnic group (Hromadžić, 2015/2017, p. 161).

Similar to the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia institutionalized ethnic identities through constitutional, administrative, and cultural policies, as well as territorial alignment. The territory was demarcated into ethnonational divisions. The 1974 Constitution granted equality to nations and minorities (Filić, 2021, p.108). Although this was supposed to resolve national tensions, it actually contributed to their preservation (Brubaker, 2006, p. 53).

At the same time, the socialist regime in SFRY sought to create a unified, civic-based Yugoslav identity through the concept of *bratstvo-i-jedinstvo* (brotherhood and unity). This identity was

actively promoted mostly in the 70s and 80s, but census data indicate that even then, the majority of people continued to identify with their ethnic groups. Yugoslav identity was mostly embraced by people from mixed marriages, national minorities, or young urban residents (Sekulić et al., 1994, p. 83).

As a result of the fact that Yugoslavia's attempt to promote a common identity coexisted with the institutionalization of ethnic identities, ethnic identities overshadowed the broader Yugoslav identity. The common identity never gained widespread acceptance. At its peak, only 5,3 % of the population identified as Yugoslavs in the 1981 census. The number in BiH was also low, with only 4% of the Bosnian population declaring themselves as Yugoslavs (*Popis Stanovništva 1991 – Federalni Zavod Za Statistiku*, n.d.). The constructed identity did not completely alter the ethnic affiliations of the masses, but it did influence some individuals. In the municipality of Brčko, Yugoslav identity reached its peak in 1981, with 10,08% of residents affiliating with it (Dedeić, 2021, p. 18)

The tendency to identify with ethnic groups rather than embrace civic affiliation was exacerbated during wartime and the uncertainty of the post-socialist transition (Bringa, 1993, p. 88). Ethnic identities became important sources of security and solidarity amid instability. During the state dissolution, a *defensive* identity emerged. The fear of losing dominance and being dominated by others was profound. Under such circumstances, pressure to conform to ethnic identity is intensified (Gusfield, 1996, p. 56). Ethnic identities were reinforced by conflict and violence (Van Evera, 2001, pp. 20-21; Sokolović, p. 88). As a result, today, they are taken as substantially given both by the law and by the people.

5.2. Institutionalizing Ethnicity in Post-War Society

The socialist legacy of institutionalizing ethnic identities, together with the war of the 1990s, shaped the state-building process of contemporary BiH. The Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA),

which also serves as the country's constitution, further legitimizes the institutionalization of ethnicity. The DPA designated three constituent nations, namely Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs, with equal rights and obligations. Simultaneously, other ethnic groups residing in BiH were marginalized and denied the right to hold state-level positions. As a result, civic identity has been effectively suppressed.

Originally, the DPA was intended to serve as a peace agreement and a temporary constitutional framework for the transitional period (Klemenčič, 2000). However, thirty years after it entered into force, it remains the valid constitution of BiH.

As Mujkić (2007, p. 111) critically notes, the DPA constructed “democracy of ethnic oligarchies rather than a democracy of citizens”, which puts the rights of ethnic groups above the rights of individuals. This was clearly demonstrated in the *Sejdić-Finci vs. Bosnia and Herzegovina* case, when members of the Roma and Jewish national minorities turned to the European Court of Human Rights due to their inability to run for Bosnia and Herzegovina's Presidency and Parliament. Despite a favorable ruling, BiH has never implemented the decision. Sixteen years after the verdict, only members of the three constituent nations possess the right to be elected for high office.

From the perspective of Rawlsian justice, the constitutional system of BiH is deeply unjust. Rawls (as cited in Mujkić, 2011) argues that every person must have equal basic liberties and that inequalities are only acceptable if they benefit the least advantaged members. The legal system in BiH treats three constituent peoples as the privileged members of society, while all others, including also those identifying as Bosnians, are treated as second-class citizens (Mujkić, 2007). The injustice of such a system becomes even more striking if we take into consideration that many of the excluded citizens were born and raised in BiH and have deep ancestral roots in the country. Their lack of political rights is not the result of migration,

foreignness, or lack of integration, but rather of a constitutional structure that prioritizes ethnicity over equality. Moreover, DPA is often invoked by politicians in BiH to legitimize their ethnopolitical agendas.

Furthermore, with the DPA, BiH was divided into two entities: Republika Srpska, which is predominantly populated by Serbs, and the Federation of BiH, considered to be a Bosniak-Croat unit. The territorial division into two entities, both of which are more or less ethnically homogenous, brings the spatial segregation of identities. Schools, political parties, and media operate largely along ethnic lines, deepening the sense of belonging among citizens to their respective entity rather than to the country as a whole. The sense of belonging to the entity, but not to the whole state, is particularly strong among Serbs in Republika Srpska (Majstorović & Turjačanin, 2013).

Education policy and memory politics also reinforce the ethnic division. There is no unified memory politics within the country capable of uniting the three groups. Instead, three distinct and often conflicting visions of the past and future coexist, each playing a significant role in national and political identity formation (Majstorović & Turjačanin, 2013, p. 15; Moll, 2013).

This dynamic is especially visible in public commemorations, holidays, and monuments. For instance, recent controversies surrounding public holidays in the two entities illustrate the depth of division. The Federation of BiH commemorates March 1st as Independence Day, marking the 1992 Referendum on Independence. In contrast, Republika Srpska celebrates January 9th as its Day of the Republic, celebrating the 1992 proclamation of the Serb Republic of BiH. Political leaders and victims' associations from both entities have recently called for the holidays celebrated in the opposing entity to be declared days of mourning. Thus, a day celebrated as a victory or moment of pride by one ethnic group often symbolizes loss and grief for another, further reinforcing ethnic divides.

Furthermore, there is no centralized education system. Instead, each entity develops its own curriculum, which is strongly ethnically oriented (Pečković, 2017, p. 23). Ethnic narratives are introduced already in primary schools, particularly through history and geography classes. For example, in Republika Srpska, geography classes emphasize the entity itself, whereas Croat students in Mostar are taught more about the geography of Croatia than that of BiH (Hromadžić, 2015/2017).

The situation becomes even more complicated when it comes to the teaching of history. While examining how important historical events are presented in the history textbooks, Pečković (2017) found a pattern of victimizing one's own ethnic group. In contrast, other ethnic groups are usually portrayed through processes of *demonization* or *othering*.

Particularly when it comes to the past wars, as well as their heroes and victims, historical narratives are differently portrayed in history books written by Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks (Głowacka-Grajper, 2018). These narratives often support the nationalist rhetoric of political elites, rather than aiming to present facts objectively. War crimes committed by one's own ethnic group are frequently minimized or justified, while the victimhood of the in-group is emphasized. The competing historical narratives additionally foster ethnic boundaries (Głowacka-Grajper, 2018).

The curriculum remains heavily ethnicized, and history is taught from the perspective of the local ethnic majority. Once again, Croats and Serb students are taught more about their kin-state than about the country they live in. Therefore, the broader context of the case study is characterized by rigid boundaries, both socially and symbolically.

5.3. The Emergence of the Brčko District

As already mentioned in the previous section, after the 1992-1995 war, BiH was divided into two entities: the Federation of BiH and the Republika Srpska. Due to its strategic and economic significance, the municipality of Brčko, located between these two entities, became a disputed territory.

Brčko was a major port on the Sava River and one of the wealthiest areas of BiH before the war. Brčko's trade network was once among the best organized in SFRY, with connections to Sarajevo, Belgrade, and Zagreb through road, rail, and river transport (Dededić, 2021, p. 21). The municipality possessed significant potential in the agricultural sector, food processing industries, and textile industry. After the war, Brčko became an important nexus linking eastern and western parts of Republika Srpska, but it was also important for the Federation due to its border with Croatia. Therefore, both entities wanted Brčko under their authority.

Moreover, the demographic structure of the town radically changed during the war. Many Bosniaks and Croats were forcibly displaced from the town, and Serbs from the Federation of BiH fled to Brčko. This has transformed Brčko from a predominantly Bosniak area into a multi-ethnic municipality (Refworld - UNHCR's Global Law and Policy Database, 2024). This shift was an exception in post-war BiH, where ethnic cleansing resulted in ethnically homogeneous cities (Bieber, 2005). There was a lingering fear that conflict might resurface in Brčko, which made the arbitration process even more challenging.

In 1999, international arbitration resolved the Brčko dispute by granting it a special status as a self-governing administrative unit, now known as the Brčko District. The Final Award that established the District developed a unique governance model, intending to create a new political framework based on multiethnicity and eliminate the ethno-nationalist politics typical

of BiH's two other units. It was intended to serve as an example of successful multi-ethnic cooperation for the rest of the country (Pečković, 2022, p. 66).

5.4. Political and Legal Arrangements

The Final Award gave the District complete autonomy from the entities. The District's administration is entirely self-governing and under the direct sovereignty of BiH. For the international community, it was important to prevent the entities from exerting any influence over the District, in order to preserve territorial and political balance among them (Stjepanović, 2015).

Furthermore, it was important to create a balance among the three ethnic groups. This was made possible by ethnic quotas in employment, which are preserved until today. In all public and state institutions, as well as in the political and administrative bodies of the Brčko District, employment is based on an ethnic key. Specifically, there is a precisely defined quota for how many Bosniaks, Serbs, or Croats should be employed in public institutions. Important decisions can be made only with a three-fifths majority, and there is no veto right (Bieber, 2005). This way, a balance between groups is maintained and stability is preserved.

The municipality was under international supervision until 2012. It would not be incorrect to claim that Brčko functioned as a protectorate of the international community, led by the United States and the EU. The supervisor for Brčko held extensive authority, including the veto right, the right to impose or annul laws, and the right to dismiss local officials. In the early years of its existence, many decisions in the District were enforced by the international community, but were not truly supported by residents.

While the political and legal framework succeeded in maintaining peace and institutional balance, it also shaped the way national identity is constructed within the District. Beyond

institutional design, national identity in Brčko is shaped by both internal and external pressures. Internally, the District is home to three ethno-national groups, who often perceive each other as rivals. Externally, these groups face pressure to preserve strong ethnic identities by political elites from two Bosnian entities as well as from neighbouring countries, Croatia and Serbia.

Both Croatia and Serbia maintain strong political and cultural ties with their respective ethnic kin in BiH. Sometimes, this is reflected in interference in the internal affairs of BiH in order to protect *their* people. Such influence is exercised through financial support, dual citizenship policies, and cultural initiatives. This external involvement further complicates national identity in BiH.

5.5. Education System

One example of an enforced decision by international supervision is the introduction of the joint school system. In 2001, a decision was made to abolish nationally homogenous schools, requiring all ethnic groups to be taught under a unified joint school curriculum in the same classrooms. The teaching process required the use of all three languages and two alphabets. The display of national and religious symbols in schools was prohibited. This decision was opposed by Serbs, and to a lesser extent, by other ethnic groups. To ease tensions, provisions were made to include national subjects, such as mother language, history, and religious education (Bieber, 2005).

The joint school system was the most significant step toward reconciliation. It created opportunities for daily interethnic interaction and cooperation among youth, laying the groundwork for a peaceful and inclusive future. However, certain compromises have once again drawn ethnic boundaries.

Mother tongue classes, Bosnian, Serbian, and Croatian, are segregated and emphasize language differences, focusing on the literature written by members of specific ethnic groups. Paradoxically, nearly all pre-war authors from BiH declared themselves as Bosnians, writing in Bosnian or Serbo-Croatian. Yet, their religious affiliation has become a decisive factor in determining their inclusion in mother language classes. As a result, students with different ethnic backgrounds who attended the same primary and secondary schools possess distinct knowledge of Balkan literature. Moreover, in primary schools, history classes are also divided between ethnic groups.

Therefore, education system simultaneously connects and draws boundaries between ethnic groups, insisting on seeing a single language as three distinct languages and reaffirming three distinct memories of the past (Peres, 2018, pp. 20-21). Thus, Brčko does not have a completely unified education system. This in-between system is unified enough to promote everyday interethnic cooperation but divided enough to reinforce the *us* vs. *them* mentality and preserve societal structures shaped by ethnicity.

5.6. Identity Politics through Symbols and Memory

Progress was made in other areas as well. With the assistance of the international supervisory authorities, the safe return of refugees was enabled, with numbers nearly double the BiH average (Jeffrey, 2005). While other cities in BiH became almost mono-ethnic after the war, Brčko preserved its multi-ethnic demographic structure through the return of refugees.

An important aspect of reconciliation politics was *symbolic neutralization*, which included erasing ethnic symbols from public life and imposing neutral symbols oriented on Brčko or BiH (Jeffrey, 2005). All streets that carried names of controversial actors or events from the 90s war were renamed in neutral ways, promoting freedom or integration. Flags of ethnic

groups, which were actively used in the war, were changed in all public buildings to the BiH flag.

Moreover, the Supervisory made Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian official languages of the District (Jeffrey, 2005). Today, Brčko is a town where all signs are trilingual, written in Cyrillic and Latin script. Unlike other areas in BiH, Brčko recognizes Catholic, Islamic, and Orthodox holidays equally, considering them all national holidays. While Statehood Day and Independence Day are celebrated in the Federation of BiH, and Republika Srpska marks the Day of its establishment, entity holidays are not officially recognized in Brčko. Instead, March 8th is celebrated as the day of the District's proclamation. This decision has been made to avoid the controversies surrounding entity-specific holidays.

Although the flag of BiH is displayed at all official locations where legally mandated, the authorities avoid excessive display of the flag. This reluctance to prominently display the BiH flag became evident in 2020, when a youth organization placed BiH flags in the city center ahead of BiH Independence Day (March 1), which is not officially celebrated in the District. The then mayor, a Serb, opposed the act and requested the prosecution of those involved. While the official reasoning cited procedural violations, the strong reaction suggests that the presence of the BiH flag in public spaces remains politically and ethnically charged. Interestingly, only a few people noticed that most of the flags had been placed upside down.

Furthermore, in the town center, three distinct monuments honor Bosniak, Croat, and Serb participants of the 1990s war. Efforts by the OHR to build a single memorial for civilian victims were unsuccessful. Three distinct monuments once again underscore the divisions between ethnic groups.

However, unlike in other parts of BiH, where monuments and ethnic symbols are often targets of vandalism, these memorials in Brčko remain untouched, free from graffiti or any signs of

desecration. Moreover, every May, Brčko holds a peaceful commemoration for non-Serb civilians who suffered during the war, with no incidents reported. While signs of war-related or religious tension sometimes appear briefly in the form of graffiti or symbols, these are quickly removed, allowing a seemingly harmonious coexistence among the three communities.

5.7. Current Political Context and Nationness as Event

The present context of this qualitative study is shaped by the new state crisis, triggered by the verdict against the President of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, for not applying and implementing decisions of the High Representative for BiH. The verdict has been used by Dodik and his close allies as a tool for political mobilization, particularly to promote secessionist ideas. Media outlets and political leaders have described the current situation as the “most severe crisis since the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995” (Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2025).

As the crisis unfolds, statements from Republika Srpska officials to reconsider the status of Brčko have pushed the District into the spotlight of political tensions. Therefore, the context of this study is characterized by heightened political mobilization, a period when, according to Brubaker (2004), the intensity of groupness rises, though it has not yet reached its peak. Since there are no existing studies focusing specifically on national identity in the Brčko District, it is not possible to do a comparison with phases of routinization or high-intensity groupness. This suggests an opportunity for future research.

6. Findings

This chapter presents the main findings from the five focus groups. The data are organized into five themes that emerged from the coding process: interethnic relations, categorization, national symbols, state belonging, and national identity.

6.1. Interethnic Relations

Interethnic relations in the Brčko District have been the subject of previous studies (Clark, 2010; Pečković, 2022). However, portraying the findings from the conducted focus groups on this topic is an important part of the overall conclusion.

6.1.1. *Positive Experiences of Coexistence*

Participants from every focus group embraced multiethnic coexistence in the Brčko District. They found that Brčko provides them with the opportunity to learn about *others* and to build friendships across ethnic lines. They talked about going out together, visiting each other for holidays, and generally spending time together.

The focus groups showed that participants who were born and raised in the city and had more frequent contact with members of other groups made friends with them more easily. Some participants from surrounding villages testified that during their primary education, they were surrounded only by in-group members. Upon entering high school, the participants claimed that getting to know people from other groups broadened their perspectives. One participant said:

I come from the Federation ... and I was used to being surrounded by people of one nationality. Since I transferred [here to school], I have somehow broadened my

horizons ... And now that I hang out with everyone, I simply see that we are all the same. (FG4–FB2).¹

The multiethnic environment broadened their horizons and gave them the opportunity to learn more about each other: “I find it very interesting to hear information about other religions. And I like sharing when they ask something about my own religion” (FG3–FB1).²

When comparing it to the other parts of BiH, they described interethnic relations in Brčko as the “healthiest” and “most normal”. One participant shared an experience from a school project on a state level that happened in Sarajevo. She recalled that students from the Federation of BiH were almost exclusively Bosniaks, while her own school delegation from Brčko was ethnically mixed. She claimed that peers from these monoethnic environments reacted with surprise and even ridiculed their interethnic friendships:

They made fun of us and somehow challenged us on how you can hang out with them ... They somehow get it into their heads that they are Muslims-Bosniaks, and the others are somewhat smaller. Here in Brčko, we are somehow more harmonious and tolerant toward each other. It didn't bother us at all. I didn't mind, for example, that I was with Anastasia in the room. I don't mind that she is Serb and what she believes in. (FG1–FB5).³

This participant made two important statements here. First, she claims that ethnic coexistence in Brčko is harmonious, and tolerance between groups is higher than in the Federation of BiH.

¹ Original in BCS: “Ja dolazim iz Federacije..I ja sam navikla da sam okružena ljudima jedne nacije..Kako sam se prebacila [ovdje u školu], nekako sam proširila svoje vidike ...I sad kako se družim sa svima jednostavno nekako vidim da smo mi svi isti.”

² Original in BCS: “ Meni je npr jako zanimljivo da cujem informacije o drugim vjerama. I volim da podijelim kada oni nesto pitaju o mojoj vjeri.”

³ Original in BCS: “Oni su nas podsmijavali i nekako izazivali na to kako se vi mozete družiti s njima ... Oni su oni nekako utvrljeni u glavu da su oni Muslimani-Bošnjaci i svi ostali nešto su manji. Mi smo ovdje u Brckom nekako svi složniji i tolerantniji jedni prema drugima. Nama nije smetalo uopće. Meni nije smetalo, recimo, što sam bila sa Anastasijom u sobi. Meni ne smeta to što je ona Srпкиnja i u šta ona vjeruje.”

Other participants also pointed out that they find Brčko less divided than the rest of the country. They got this impression from travelling around BiH or meeting people from two Bosnian entities.

Secondly, the participant, FG1–FB5, talks about the negative reaction of peers from monoethnic surroundings. This shows that normalized multiethnicity in Brčko is not universally accepted, but rather questioned or mocked by others.

6.1.2. Ethnic Boundaries

Participants from every focus group stated that they have friends from different ethnic groups. However, some admitted that it is easier for them to make friends with members of the same ethnic group. They explained this partially by circumstances, such as “Most of my friends are Serbs. I grew up in Ilička, which is the part of the city where only Serbs live” (FG5–MS3).⁴

Although Brčko is a multiethnic city, the suburbs and villages within the Brčko District municipality are mostly monoethnic. In some cases, students from monoethnic suburbs or villages change their circle of friends in high school; in other cases, they do not.

Another explanation for having friends mostly with the same ethnic background was that it is simply “easier”. Participants claimed that with out-group members, some topics remain taboo, such as war and war commemorations. They feel the need to hold back in conversations when talking about the past in BiH, which could potentially be a reason to choose friends of the same ethnic background. Some participants stated that they often feel pressure to justify themselves and be cautious in expressing themselves: “In Brčko, we have gotten used to constantly having to justify something. We always approach things with a certain reserve. And we are careful

⁴ Original in BCS: Većina društva su mi Srbi. Odrastao sam na Ilićki, koji je baš dio grada gdje su samo Srbi.”

about what we say” (FG5–FS2).⁵ Another participant added: “When we talk to them, we are careful about what we say, and they are careful about what they say” (FG5–FS1).⁶

While interethnic friendships are positively accepted among the youth, the boundaries exist when it comes to romantic relationships and marriage. Some participants stated that ethnicity is not even a topic among friends. However, it becomes a problem in romantic relationships.

In some cases, participants claimed that although they do not see ethnicity as playing an important role in romantic relationships, they would not choose a partner from a different ethnic background because of their parents.

In other cases, participants saw religion as an obstacle in interethnic marriage:

That is more of a religious perspective. As a Muslim woman, I am not allowed to marry someone who is not of my faith. In terms of nationality, I could. I could marry an Albanian, a Serb, a Croat, as long as he believes in the same things I believe in. His nationality is not important to me. It is more about religion. (FG1–FB5).⁷

While some would consider a romantic relationship, marriage is where they draw the line: “Marriage is a problem, because then someone has to change their religion” (FG2–MS5).⁸

Participants expressed concerns about the future of the children from mixed marriage, saying that: “The child will not know who they are” (FG2–FB1).⁹ They worried that each parent would pass on different values and beliefs, which could make their child confused: “It is difficult

⁵ Original in BCS: “Mi u Brckom smo navikli stalno da se nesto pravdamo. Sa nekom rezervom uvijek pristupamo. I pazimo sta pricamo.”

⁶ Original in BCS: “Mi kad pričamo s njima pazimo šta ćemo reći i oni paze šta će reći.”

⁷ Original in BCS: “To je više religijski pogled. Ja kao muslimanka, ne smijm da se udam za nekog ko nije moje vjere. Nacionalnosti bih mogla. Mogu se ja udati za Albanca, Srbina, Hrvata, sve dok on vjeruje u isto u šta ja vjerujem. Nije mi bitno koje je on nacionalnosti, više religijski.”

⁸ Original in BCS: “Brak je problem, jer onda neko mora mijenjati vjeroispovijest.”

⁹ Original in BCS: “Dijete neće znati ko je.”

when a child does not know where to stand, when one parent is pulling in one direction and the other in the opposite” (FG5–MS1).¹⁰

Only four participants were open to interethnic marriage, but all said their parents had issues with it. The negative attitude toward romantic relationships is mostly transferred from the parents. While older generations, particularly parents, do not forbid interethnic friendships, their perspectives are different when it comes to marriage. This was a case among participants of all ethnic backgrounds. Even participants who have family members of different ethnic backgrounds said that their parents would be against interethnic marriage: “Even though my grandmother is Muslim, my dad really would not like it if I were with someone of a different religion” (FG5–FS2).¹¹

Boundaries are furthermore activated through the narratives of blame. One participant described his experience of confrontation with a stranger who accused *his people* of past crimes. The narratives of collective guilt were also mentioned when talking about commemorations. The observed boundaries between participants appear symbolic and emotional.

6.2. Categorization

This theme is divided into three categories: categorization among participants, external categorization, and institutionalization of categories. Categorization among participants explains how high school students use categories in their speech, while external categorization describes their perception of how people from other countries view citizens of BiH.

¹⁰ Original in BCS: “Nezgodno je kada dijete ne zna da se oprijedeli. Kada jedan roditelj vuče na jednu stranu, a drugi na drugu.”

¹¹ Original in BCS: “Iako mi je baka muslimanka, kod mene tata, baš ne bi volio da budem s nekim druge vjere.”

Institutionalization of categories refers to students' perceptions of policies that reinforce ethnic identities.

6.2.1. *Categorization Among Participants*

The focus groups showed that ethnic categories are constantly employed in everyday speech. Although participants spoke positively about interethnic friendships, claiming that ethnicity “does not matter”, they almost always identified friends or classmates as *Croats*, *Serbs*, *Bosniaks*, or *Muslims*. Participants frequently drew boundaries between in-group and out-group members. They often used typical boundary marker words, such as *we*, *they*, *us*, *them*, *our*, etc. Traces of *othering* were observed in all focus groups.

One participant talked about “the newly-composed Bosniak nation, where *they* now appropriate everything *we* have abandoned” (FG5–MS3).¹² The statement reflects everyday nationalism, expressed through pronouns such as *we* and *they*. Moreover, by referring to Bosniaks as a *newly-composed nation*, the participant implied a hierarchy of authenticity. He suggests that *we* are historically older and therefore more legitimate. The remark also implies that the cultural symbols associated with the Bosniak identity originally belonged to *us*.

Even when describing tolerance, participants framed it through banal nationalism: “When *we* talk with them, we are careful about what we say, and *they* are careful about what they say” (FG5–FS2).¹³ However, the *us* vs. *them* distinction was not that straightforward. Respondents used these boundary marker expressions even when referring to people of the same ethnic background but from other parts of BiH. They distinguished between *us*—the tolerant multiethnic Brčko, and *them*—nationalist individuals from Republika Srpska or the Federation

¹² Original in BCS: “Te novokomponovane bošnjačke nacije, gdje oni sad sve što mi odbacujemo, oni to prisvajaju.”

¹³ Original in BCS: “Mi kad pričamo s njima pazimo šta ćemo reći i oni paze šta će reći.”

of BiH. Even Serb participants who identified with Serbia as their external homeland employed *us* vs. *them* distinction when speaking about Serbs from Serbia, describing them as people who viewed Serbs from BiH differently and often associated them with Bosniaks.

They routinely engaged in ethnic categorization, often unconsciously. Participants, identifying as Serbs, repeatedly used the term *Muslims* when addressing *Bosniaks*. However, some participants appeared aware that the term could be perceived as offensive. They occasionally corrected themselves or were corrected by others, also Serbs.

Banal nationalism extended to the name of the language. Findings suggest that language serves simultaneously as a mechanism of inclusion and as a boundary marker. In FG2, students argued that Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs differ in language. In other groups, participants insisted that the language is the same; what differs is the accent. Naming the language is context-dependent and varies among participants. One student explained: “I like to say *our* language, especially when there are members of other nationalities present, so that no one would feel offended. But I have no problem saying *ours*, yet I still consider it the Serbian language” (FG5–MS2).¹⁴

Some participants associated an accent with identity. In FG2, respondents stated that there is no difference between Bosniaks and Serbs, but Croats “have a different accent”, and “can be spotted immediately.”.

Participant FG2–MS3 remarked: “If he speaks in Croatian, he has that Croatian accent, I consider him a Croat ... If a Croat from Zagreb comes here, I will realize that he is a Croat, because he speaks the Croatian language.”¹⁵ Another participant added: “Well, we Bosniaks and Serbs, in fact, do not really have differences in words. But Croats have some of their own

¹⁴ Original in BCS: “Ja volim reći *naš* jezik, pogotovo ako su tu pripadnici drugih nacija, pa da se neko ne bi našao uvrijeđen. Ali nemam problem ni reći *naš*, ali opet ja to smatram srpskim jezikom.”

¹⁵ Original in BCS: Ako on priča na hrvatskom, ima onaj hrvatski akcenat, ja smatram da je on Hrvat. (...) Ako Hrvat iz Zagreba dođe ovdje, ja ću shvatiti da je on Hrvat, jer priča hrvatski jezik.

words” (FG2–MS4)¹⁶, while the third one commented: “Croats really try to have a different language” (FG2–MB1).¹⁷

The group (FG2) did not include any Croats, and participants previously noted that they are a minority in the school. In this case, *othering* was directed toward the group perceived as more distant.

Stereotypes were less present. In the same group, the participant admitted to miscategorizing a peer based on his physical appearance:

I thought he was a Croat ... Because of his blond hair. He looked like a Croat to me, because that is how they usually look to me. I do not know why, just a habit. And somehow he is really short, and that is it. Just because of that ... Only because he was fat, I thought he was a Bosniak. (FG2–MB2).¹⁸

Yet this type of stereotyping based on characteristics of physical appearance was an isolated case. Other participants disagreed with him, and in other groups, such stereotyping did not appear.

6.2.2. External Categorization

External categorization played an important role for participants identifying as Serbs. They expressed frustration at the fact that BiH is mostly seen as a state of people of the Islamic faith, both regionally and globally. They mentioned situations in which people from other countries immediately categorize them as *Bosnians*, *Bosniaks*, or *Muslims*: “When we say that we are

¹⁶ Original in BCS: “Dobro, mi, Bošnjaci i Srbi, faktički nemamo mi nekih razlika u riječima... Ali Hrvati imaju svoje neke riječi.”

¹⁷ Original in BCS: “Hrvati baš pokušavaju da imaju drugačiji jezik.”

¹⁸ Original in BCS: “Mislio sam da je Hrvat...Po žutoj kosi. Po tome mi je ličio na Hrvata zato što oni inače tako meni izgledaju. Ne znam zašto, navika. I ne znam, nekako je nizak puno i to je to. Samo zbog toga..Samo zato što je debeo mislio sam da je Bošnjak.”

Serbs, they say: ‘Oh, you are Bosniaks.’ I mean, yes, we are from Bosnia, but we are Serbs from Bosnia” (FG5–FS2).¹⁹ In those moments, they felt the need to specify their ethnic belonging or religious beliefs:

When I go to Serbia and say that I am from Bosnia, they do not see me as Orthodox, but as a Bosnian. And then I have to say: ‘I am not a Bosnian, I am a Serb, I just live there.’ (FG3–FS4).²⁰

Serbia was mentioned multiple times as a country where Serbs from Bosnia were being miscategorized:

For example, when we go to Serbia ... My two sisters studied in Belgrade, and whenever they said that they were Serbs from Bosnia, they were usually told: ‘Well, you are Bosnians.’ They do not accept us as Serbs the way they see themselves as Serbs. And we constantly try to emphasize that we are still Serbs. (FG5–FS1).²¹

External misrecognition led Serb participants to distance themselves from the Bosnian civic label, reaffirming ethnic identities.

6.2.3. Institutionalization of Categories

Participants discussed the role that institutions have in categorization and drawing boundaries.

When commenting on ethnic quotas in Brčko, one participant said: “These divisions are

¹⁹ Original in BCS: “Mi kad kažemo da smo Srbi, oni kažu: ‘A vi ste Bošnjaci.’ Mislim jesmo iz Bosne, ali mi smo Srbi iz Bosne.”

²⁰ Original in BCS: “Ja kad odem u Srbiju i kad kažem da sam iz Bosne, oni gledaju na mene ne kao da smo pravoslavne vjeroispovjesti, nego kao da smo Bosanci. I onda moram reći : ja nisam Bosanac, ja sam Srbin, samo tamo živim.”

²¹ Original in BCS: “Evo na primjer kad odemo u Srbiju ... Dvije sestre su studirale u Beogradu, bilo kada kad su rekle da su Srпкиnje iz Bosne njima je uglavnom bilo rečeno: ‘Pa vi ste Bosanke.’ Oni nas ne prihvataju da smo mi Srbi kao što su oni. A mi se konstantno trudimo da kažemo da smo i dalje Srbi”

constantly imposed. They do not have to have a negative connotation, but we are constantly under the shadow of these divisions somehow” (FG5–FS2).²²

Some students perceived ethnic quotas as a necessary equality measure, while others perceived it as a way of enforcing and promoting ethnic divisions. On the other hand, the national group of subjects (that is, the separation of students in school for language, history, and religious education classes) is regarded as positive.

6.3. National Symbols

The overarching theme of national symbols explores how participants perceive and relate to both state and ethnic symbols. National symbols serve to unite members and to provoke pride and patriotism (Mulalić & Malanović-Adilović, 2018, p. 94). However, as already discussed in Chapter 4, in post-socialist countries, they are often contested, and instead of unifying, they serve as a factor of division. This theme portrays the attachment of high school students to state symbols, holidays, as well as their use of national symbols in everyday objects.

6.3.1. National Anthem

Findings show that the national anthem is a weak integrative symbol among youth. Serb participants either ignored its existence, claiming that they had never heard it or had not heard it in a while, or even went so far as to deny its existence. One of the participants remarked, somewhat disparagingly, that the Bosnian anthem cannot be sung since it has no official text.

While participants identifying themselves as Serbs or Croats expressed identification with their kin-states' anthems, Bosniaks referred to the anthem of BiH as their own. One of the

²² Original in BCS: “Konstantno se nameću te podjele. Ne moraju imati negativnu konotaciju, ali non stop smo pod sijenkom tih podjela nekako.”

participants also mentioned that football fans had written lyrics to the anthem, which Bosniaks often sing.

6.3.2. *National Flag*

The national flag of BiH was addressed only in one focus group (FG5), consisting of only Serb participants. Other groups were not asked this question due to a lack of time. Therefore, the answers cannot be compared. Without pretensions toward broader generalization, insights from this monoethnic group are still valuable for showing how this particular group relates to this state symbol.

Participants of FG5 expressed indifference, rejection, or discomfort toward the national flag of BiH. They addressed it as a symbol imposed by foreign actors, which does not represent the identity of any of the BiH's citizens.

One participant stated: "I do not even like seeing it ... It makes me uneasy ... I do not perceive it or see it as my flag" (FG5–FS2).²³ Another participant added: "When I see the Serbian flag, I feel proud to belong to that flag and because I look at that flag. But when I see [the flag of] Bosnia, it feels like something insignificant" (FG5–FS1).²⁴

The identification of non-Bosniaks with the national symbols of their kin-states appeared as a recurring pattern throughout this research, and the flag is one more example.

²³ Original in BCS: "Ne volim je čak ni vidjeti ... Unosi mi neki nemir ... Ne doživljavam je i ne gledam je kao svoju zastavu."

²⁴ Original in BCS: "Kad vidim zastavu Srbije ja se ponosim time što pripadam toj zastavi i zato što gledam tu zastavu. A kad vidim [zastavu] Bosne, kao nebitna neka stvar."

6.3.3. Holidays

Due to the sensitivity of the topic, national holidays were discussed only in the monoethnic group, but religious holidays came up as a topic in every group, without a previously asked question.

In previous chapters, I wrote about the complexity of national holidays in BiH and Brčko District, where the Day of Independence is celebrated by only one ethnic group. Participants of FG5, who identify themselves as Serbs, confirmed this claim. They do not accept state national holidays, while some of them embrace entity holidays of Republika Srpska, such as January 9th. According to the participants' statements, war commemorations and national holidays are the point where they deeply disagree with out-group members. Nevertheless, they avoid discussing these topics in person with the significant *Other* to avoid conflict. Instead, they more often share these thoughts through social media posts.

In contrast to national holidays, religious holidays are viewed as a positive trait of coexistence. Participants across all focus groups embrace the religious difference, describing visiting friends of other religions during holidays and celebrating together. They show interest in each other's traditions and customs. Respect and understanding of religious differences were evident in all focus groups, suggesting that religious holidays, unlike national ones, foster pluralism rather than division.

6.3.4. Sport

Although not a state-produced symbol, sport can also be seen as a symbol of national identity. Games of national teams are often the moments when groupness is high, with a sense of pride and solidarity rising (Brubaker, 2006). However, the national team of BiH does not serve as a unifying factor for citizens.

Some participants were pragmatic, stating that they cheer for the team that plays better. However, in most cases, participants identifying as Bosniaks cheer for the national team of BiH, while Serbs and Croats support the national teams of Serbia and Croatia, respectively.

6.3.5. *Everyday Objects*

Everyday objects, such as keychains and T-shirts, are used to mark belonging to an ethnic group. One Croat participant has been teased by his peers because of his keychain with the Croatian checkerboard, and other car decorations with Croatian symbols. His peers admitted they owned T-shirts with flags or national heroes, but it is forbidden to bring them to school. In conversations with school pedagogues, they told me that, usually at the beginning of the new school year, students from monoethnic areas come to high school wearing ethnic symbols on their T-shirts, but are sent home by school staff to change.

These examples illustrate that students often express their ethnic belonging through ordinary items, but also how institutions attempt to regulate such situations.

6.4. State Belonging

The theme of state belonging portrays emotional attachment to the state and relationship to the country as a polity. Empirical findings on state belonging are not uniform; they showed divergent tendencies, from a feeling of statelessness, identification with kin-states, to emotional attachment to BiH. These are interrelated with participants' willingness to participate in political life, which will be elaborated in the section *Political (Dis)engagement*.

6.4.1. *Statelessness and Weak Attachment to BiH*

The feeling of weak attachment to BiH was found among participants identifying themselves as Serbs and Croats. Some participants openly stated that they do not feel any sense of

belonging to the state of BiH, and that they perceive it only as a country of their current residence. One participant argued: “I live in Bosnia because I have to ... But if I could choose where to live, it would not be Bosnia ... Anywhere else, just not Bosnia” (FG3–FS5).²⁵

One participant, identifying as a Serb, openly questioned his ability to identify with any state:

When they ask me which country is mine, I do not know what to answer ... I cannot say that Serbia is my country, nor that Bosnia is my country. I live in Bosnia, but if someone asked me, I honestly would not know what to say. (FG5–MS1).²⁶

The same participant added that sometimes he chooses to identify himself with the entity of Republika Srpska, since he has that entity's citizenship.

Some participants substituted national patriotism with local. While they do not identify with the country, they do feel attachment to the Brčko District, and could imagine living there, but nor in the rest of the country.

6.4.2. Orientation Toward the Kin-state

Participants identifying as Croats and Serbs showed strong identification with their kin-states: “When they ask me, I say that my country is Serbia” (FG5–FS2).²⁷ One participant, identifying as Croat, claimed she does not even possess the passport of BiH, and the only reason she will take one is to be able to get a driver's licence. Some participants equated identification with the state to their religion, arguing that they identify more with Serbia since they are Orthodox.

²⁵ Original in BCS: “Živim u Bosni što moram ... Ali ja da biram negdje gdje bih živjela, ne bih živjela u Bosni ... Bilo gdje samo da nije Bosna.”

²⁶ Original in BCS: “Kada me pitaju koja je moja država, ja ne znam šta bih odgovorio..Ja ne mogu reći ni da je Srbija moja država ni da je Bosna moja država. Živim u Bosni, ali eto, kad bi me neko pitao, ne znam šta bih rekao stvarno.”

²⁷ Original in BCS: “Mene kad pitaju ja kažem da je moja država Srbija.”

Orientation toward the kin-state is best seen in relation to state symbols. As already discussed in the theme of national symbols, participants identifying as Serbs and Croats do not identify themselves with national symbols of BiH, such as the flag and the national anthem, but rather with state symbols of Serbia and Croatia, respectively.

Another indicator of belonging to the kin-state is the fact that none of the Serb and Croat participants plan their close future in BiH. Most participants plan to study in their kin-states. Some of them intend to return to the Brčko District after their studies, but none expressed the willingness to move to other parts of BiH. In contrast, Bosniak participants mostly plan their studies in the Federation of BiH. This implies how weak the sense of belonging to the state of BiH among Croats and Serbs is. Identity is linked either to the kin-state or to the Brčko District, but not to the state of BiH. It could also imply that for Bosniaks, Republika Srpska is not seen as an option for living. Their sense of belonging is also conditioned by entity borders.

6.4.3. Positive Attachment to BiH

Emotional attachment to BiH is undeniably present among Bosniak participants. However, beyond Bosniaks, there are also Serb participants who identify more with BiH than with their kin-state. They embrace their multilayered identity:

I genuinely somehow feel that Bosnia is mine. And I am honestly glad that I live in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Somehow, I feel closer to Bosnia than to Serbia ... I am of Serb nationality, but I truly love Bosnia and Herzegovina. (FG5–MS2).²⁸

The same participant also expressed support for the division of BiH into entities. He believed that Republika Srpska plays an important role in safeguarding Serb interests. While he admitted

²⁸ Original in BCS: “Ja stvarno nekako osjećam da je Bosna moja. I iskreno mi je drago i da živim u Bosni i Hercegovini. Nekako sam bliži Bosni nego Srbiji...Ja jesam srpske nacionalnosti, ali stvarno volim Bosnu i Hercegovinu.”

that the current constitutional setup makes decision-making difficult, he expressed the wish for BiH to remain within its present borders.

Some other participants, identifying as Serbs, also showed an attachment to the state of BiH. While it is important for them to highlight that they are Serbs and Orthodox, they do possess a sense of belonging to BiH and, in some cases, a sense of patriotism. Their religious and ethnic identity coexist with their identification with BiH. One participant expressed sadness over the fact that many Serbs dismiss Bosnia and Herzegovina as their own state.

6.4.4. Political (Dis)engagement

State belonging is not only an emotional feeling of belonging, but also a relation to the country as a polity. Motivation to participate in shaping the country's future, for instance, through political engagement or voting, is one way of demonstrating this sense of belonging.

All participants expressed deep dissatisfaction and disappointment with the current political and economic situation in BiH. Trust in politicians, the system, or institutions is low among all participants. Moreover, some participants expressed fear of another armed conflict and many participants see their future outside BiH. Participants expressed three different attitudes toward the political life of BiH: belief in change, scepticism and political apathy.

Belief in change was seen among a small number of participants. They perceived political participation, particularly voting, as their civic obligation. For them success and the future of the country lie in the individuals. They blame the people who do not want to participate for the fact that change has not yet occurred.

Skepticism, which appeared more frequently than belief in change, was expressed by participants who criticized corruption. They saw the whole system as corrupt and, therefore,

did not believe that individuals could induce change. Some participants completely rejected political participation for that reason, while others said they would vote in exchange for money.

There were also participants who showed signs of complete political apathy, neither following the situation in the country nor wanting to be involved in political life at all. Participants expressed two reasons for not following the media: one was a lack of interest in political life in BiH, and the other was skepticism toward the discourse in the media. Some participants criticized the media for perpetuating divisions and hatred along ethnic lines.

6.5. National Identity

This theme is an overarching theme that deals with the perceptions of the national identity among youth. The analysis is not based solely on the explicit self-identification labels, but rather encompasses a broader range of indicators, such as relation to the state and political system, attitudes toward national symbols, sense of belonging and emotional attachment, linguistic identity, and implicit patterns of categorization in everyday speech. Combining previous themes and looking beyond the implicit labeling by participants themselves, I identified the patterns of strong ethnic affiliation and fragmented and rare civic identity.

This subchapter will first present the perspectives of young people on determinants of national identity, and afterwards present the patterns of ethnic and civic identity.

6.5.1. Determinants of National Identity

The participants articulated divergent perspectives on what determines national identity, reflecting both primordial and constructivist approaches. Many young people described identity in primordial terms, linking it to religion, birthplace, and descent. While some framed identity as an ascribed category, others understood it as a matter of personal choice. They perceived it as an act of self-determination, which should be accepted and respected by others.

One participant compared the question of national identity to that of religion, framing both as matters of individual freedom and personal choice:

When it comes to national identity, it is the same as with religion. People should be allowed to declare themselves in the way they want. That is absolutely someone's right and someone's freedom. We cannot influence that. Of course, it can be shaped by different factors, but I believe that every reasonable person, of sound mind and consciousness, should decide for themselves what to believe in, or whether to believe in anything at all, and in which way they will declare themselves and feel about it. (FG4–FB1).²⁹

For other participants, national identity was predominated by descent, birthplace, or place of residence. Some students argued that national identity is inherited and cannot simply be claimed. For example, they argued that it would be strange if a Mongolian, Chinese or African American declared themselves as Bosniak. Such claims were seen as acceptable only if supported by ancestry. Unconventional appearances or genealogies are not readily accepted as legitimate bases for national belonging.

Some students emphasized residence: “I live in Bosnia, so that means I am a Bosniak” (FG4–MS4).³⁰ Others explicitly linked national identity to birthplace:

If I was born in Bosnia, I cannot change my nationality to Serb or Croat, because I was born in Bosnia. Those from Serbia cannot choose to be Bosniak, because they were

²⁹ Original in BCS: “Po pitanju nacionalnog identiteta isto je kao i po pitanju vjere - ljude treba pustiti da se izjašnjavaju na onaj način na koji oni žele. To je apsolutno nečije pravo i nečija sloboda. Mi ne možemo da utječemo na to. Mislim naravno da to može biti uzrokovano različitim faktorima, ali ja smatram da svaka razumna osoba, zdravog uma i pri svojoj svijesti treba sama za sebe da odluči u što će te vjeruje i u koga, ili da li će uopšte u nešto da vjeruje i na koji način će da se izjašnjava i da se osjeća povodom toga naravno.

³⁰ Original in BCS: “Živim u Bosni, Bošnjak sam znači.”

born in Serbia. Where I am born, that must be my nationality. If I had been born in Austria, I would be Austrian. (FG3–FB3).³¹

This participant clearly conceived of national identity in fixed terms and rejected the idea, voiced by some peers, that national identity can be chosen. Overall, most participants approached national identity through a primordialist lens — as something fixed and inherited.

Moreover, many students perceived religion as the central marker of national identity. When asked about the difference between Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs, the respondents expressed some confusion, but most ultimately pointed to religion. Their affiliations were often reduced to a religious designation: “If I am Orthodox, I am Serb” (FG2–MS1).³² As elsewhere in the country, being Orthodox was equated with being Serb, being Muslim with being Bosniak, and being Catholic with being Croat. Many participants rejected the possibility of alternative combinations: “If [a person] is Orthodox, they can be Bosnian, they cannot be Bosniak.” (FG2–FB1)³³

At the same time, some participants declined this premise: “Novi Pazar³⁴ is full of Muslims, but they are all Serbs” (FG4–MS5).³⁵

However, some participants highlighted a distinction between the role of religion in the Balkans and the West. They recognized that religion carries a much greater weight in the determination of national identity in BiH. Even those maintaining that religion should not serve as a determinant of national identity acknowledged the complexity of identity formation in the

³¹Original in BCS: “Ja ako sam u Bosni rođena, ja ne mogu mijenjati nacionalnost, da sam Srbin npr ili Hrvat. Jer sam rođena u Bosni. Oni iz Srbije ne mogu birati da su Bošnjak, jer su rođeni u Srbiji. Gdje sam rođena, valjda mi je to nacionalnost. Da sam rođena u Austriji, bila bih Austrijanka.”

³²Original in BCS: “Ako sam pravoslavac, onda sam Srbin.”

³³Original in BCS: “Ako je pravoslavne vjeroispovjesti, može biti Bosanac, ne može biti Bošnjak.”

³⁴City in Serbia, predominantly populated by Muslims.

³⁵Original in BCS: “Novi Pazar pun muslimana, svi su Srbi.”

Balkans and conceded that, in BiH, religion remains a central identity marker. Most of them internalized this social norm, often concluding that in BiH “it is simply like that”.

Religion emerged as the strongest boundary marker among the participants. This was particularly evident in discussions about marriage and romantic relationships: “As a Muslim woman, I am not allowed to marry someone who is not of my faith” (FG1–FB5).³⁶ Beyond its role in defining group boundaries, many described religion as a highly important aspect of their life. They also emphasized the significance of tradition and religious customs.

6.5.2. Self-Identification

Among all participants, ethnic affiliation occupied a central place in their self-identification. The majority of respondents clearly identified themselves as Bosniaks, Croats, or Serbs. They proudly used ethnic labels to express their identity: “I am fully Croat” (FG1–FC1)³⁷, or “I always say [that I am] a Serb. I have never said that I am a Bosnian just because I am from Bosnia.”³⁸ Such statements often carried a defensive tone, especially when participants felt miscategorized.

Most participants linked religion to their national identity, and said they could not imagine an Orthodox Bosniak or a Muslim Serb. Although some participants debated about this exclusivity, they defined their identities in ethno-religious terms.

Several Bosniak participants, including those who identified primarily as Bosniak rather than Bosnian, insisted that all people born in Bosnia should be regarded as Bosnians. One student (FG1–FB3) criticized Croats and Serbs for rejecting this idea, describing it as illogical not to

³⁶ Original in BCS: “Ja kao muslimanka ne smijem da se udam za nekoga ko nije moje vjere.”

³⁷ Original in BCS: “Ja sam čista Hrvatica.”

³⁸ Original in BCS: “Ja uvijek kažem [da sam] Srbin. Nisam nikad rekao da sam Bosanac zato što sam iz Bosne.”

identify as Bosnians despite being born in BiH. Some Serb and Croat students rejected the label “Bosnian”, explaining that being from BiH does not automatically mean being Bosnian, and instead insisted on their ethnic origin as the most authentic identity.

While most participants emphasized their ethnic identity, a few mentioned a multilayered form of identification that included both ethnic and civic dimensions. For example, one student explained: “I am Muslim, Bosniak, Bosnian, from Bosnia” (FG2–MB4).³⁹ He further clarified that being from Bosnia was the most important part of his identity. Another participant from the same group explained that, for him, being Bosniak carried greater importance. A small group voiced inclusive perspectives, seeing nationality as a matter of personal choice, and questioning the discourse about national identity in BiH. Participants, mostly Bosniaks and some Serbs, who embraced both dimensions of their identity, also showed stronger attachment to the state of BiH. Purely civic identity was not found among participants.

For all participants, national identity was something important and almost sacred. Its importance was highlighted through the fear of losing it. This was particularly evident when they spoke about interethnic marriages, expressing concern that a child might “not know who they are.” Students spoke about the importance of maintaining traditions and continuity, reflecting an awareness that identity must be preserved and transmitted.

6.5.3. Inconsistency in labeling - Bosnian vs Bosniak

In spontaneous conversations, respondents almost never used the category Bosnian, while the categories Bosniak, Croat, and Serbs appeared constantly. When they spoke about their peers or neighbours, participants predominantly relied on ethnic labels. Additionally, in these

³⁹ Original in BCS: “Ja sam musliman, Bošnjak, Bosanac, iz Bosne.”

conversations, Serbs often used Muslim as a synonym for Bosniak. The category Bosnian remained almost entirely sidelined.

When asked directly about the difference between Bosnian and Bosniak, noticeable inconsistency and contradiction emerged in the answers. In some cases, Bosnian was understood as a label for anyone living in Bosnia, while Bosniak was defined religiously, as a Muslim. In contrast to that, some respondents understood the term Bosniak as a marker for citizens of BiH. In other cases, respondents identified Bosnians with people of Islamic faith.

Some respondents even changed their own ways of using labels through the same conversation. At one point, they explained that the term Bosniak was strictly tied to Islam, while only minutes later, the same respondent claimed that Bosniak could refer to anyone born in Bosnia. These oscillations exemplify Brubaker's *category of practice*, showing that the meaning of these categories is not stable, but situational.

6.6. Connecting findings

The findings indicate context-dependent ethnic boundaries and a strong correlation between ethnic and state belonging. Croats and the majority of Serb participants had a strong national attachment to Croatia and Serbia, respectively. While Croats explained their sense of belonging to Croatia through kinship or legal citizenship, Serbs mostly justified it religiously: as Orthodox, they felt a stronger attachment to Serbia. Participants who identified exclusively with their kin-state and their national symbols tended to reject civic identity and displayed limited interest in political or civic engagement in BiH. They plan their future outside of BiH, mostly in their kin-states or in the West. In contrast, a smaller group of participants embraced both ethnic and civic identities, demonstrating stronger attachment to BiH and a willingness to contribute to its future. These insights provide the basis for the following chapter, in which the

findings will be interpreted through the theoretical framework and compared with existing literature on national identity.

7. Discussion

McCrone and Bechhofer (2015, p. 7) pose the question of whether “national identity is simply a label, an empty box, which defines what is outside, rather than its contents.” My findings suggest that youth in Brčko actively fill this box with meaning. For them, national identity is an important part of self-understanding and often serves as a boundary marker. They link it with religious practices, traditions, and language. It influences their decisions about romantic relationships and shapes banal everyday practices, such as supporting a sports team or wearing objects that signal belonging.

7.1. Nation as practical category

The findings show that among all participants, ethnic affiliation occupied a central place in their identity. The majority of participants defined their identities in ethnoreligious terms, identifying as Bosniaks, Croats, or Serbs, confirming earlier studies on national identity in other parts of BiH (Bringa, 1993, 1996; Klemenčić, 2000; Hronesova, 2012; Majstorović & Turjačanin, 2013; Hromadžić, 2015/2017; Mulalić & Malanović-Adilović, 2018).

However, what distinguishes Brčko is the range of meanings attached to these labels. Identity was not expressed in a single, coherent manner but through a mixture of primordial and constructivist logics. Most participants perceived religion as the primary boundary marker and described national identity through a primordial prism, viewing it as something inherited, fixed, and linked to ancestry and religion. However, some participants aligned with the constructivist stance that identity is socially constructed and flexible, and described national identity as a personal choice and feeling.

This variety of views among participants challenges the tendency to portray ethnic groups as internally homogenous groups, or what Brubaker (2004) calls *groupism*. Even within the same

group, identity and state belonging were expressed in different ways. In some cases, strong ethnic attachment coexisted with the wish for a more inclusive civic identity; in others, with the rejection of civic labels and a strong connection with the kin-state.

Brčko largely repeats the pattern found elsewhere in the country, where Bosniaks identify with the state of BiH, while the majority of Croats and Serbs feel a stronger attachment to their kin-states and national symbols (Klemenčić, 2000; Guzina, 2007; Lavić, 2012; Majstorović & Turjačanin, 2013; Hromadžić, 2015/2017; Mulalić & Malanović-Adilović, 2018). However, this was not a uniform finding, since some participants who identified as Serbs expressed a stronger connection to BiH than to Serbia.

The civic dimensions of belonging appeared as a minority trend among some participants, who identified primarily as Bosniaks and Serbs. Statements such as “I am Muslim, Bosniak, Bosnian, from Bosnia” show that ethnic and civic dimensions of identity are not mutually exclusive, but can coexist. As Smith (1991) argued, national identity often merges cultural and political dimensions. In Brčko, this combination appears weak and exceptional but is nevertheless present. Such diversity supports Brubaker's warning that strong collective identification does not automatically mean internal homogeneity or fixed boundaries. Behind the same ethnic labels lie multiple individual meanings that can shift across contexts. Those meanings are daily negotiated by residents of the Brčko District.

Furthermore, participants showed confusion in using the terms *Bosniak* and *Bosnian*, using them sometimes interchangeably, sometimes as opposites. Such inconsistency reflects Brubaker's (1996) concept of the nation as a practical category, meaning that people use national labels flexibly and differently depending on the situation, rather than as fixed and clearly defined identities.

Moreover, the persistence of strong ethnic affiliation despite daily interethnic contact challenges Hronesova's (2012) argument that rigid ethnic affiliations are a result of a lack of contact or knowledge about others. In Brčko, continuous coexistence and cooperation have not dissolved ethnonational identities and boundaries, which can be explained by Barth's (1969) argument that ethnicity is maintained through contact. Interaction does not lead to assimilation or the breakdown of boundaries. Both ethnic identities and boundaries between groups persist as long as the *us* vs. *them* narrative is reproduced. Among youth in Brčko, these boundaries are visible in everyday speech, where ethnic labels are constantly used, banal nationalism is present, and conflicting topics are avoided.

The findings show that neither pure constructivism nor primordialism alone can explain the national identity in Brčko. Instead, a hybrid approach is needed. Views on the nature of identity differ among individuals, but their behavior, discourse and the categories they (re)produce display characteristics of both constructivist and primordialist logics. National identity, ethnic boundaries and students' relation toward them are simultaneously constructed and inherited, and undisputably contextual. Primordial traits are especially visible when discussing marriage, where ethnic boundaries are particularly rigid. Contrary to the common constructivist expectations that everyday interaction reduces ethnic salience, youth in Brčko maintain strong ethnic affiliations, though with context-dependent boundaries.

However, the acceptance of civic identity by some participants, and openness to interethnic friendships and cooperation among all participants, show that identity is not purely primordial either. The findings suggest that identity and boundaries can be negotiated, but that the institutionalization of ethnic identities contributes to the perceived givenness. Therefore, what appears primordial is produced and reinforced by institutions.

These findings also relate to broader debates on national identity in post-socialist societies. Scholars (Brubaker, 1996; Verdery, 1996; Bunce, 1999), argue that in Eastern Europe, institutional arrangements continue to reproduce ethnonational categories, preventing the emergence of a shared civic identity. Although BiH lacks a titular nation, its institutions privilege constituent ethnic groups and entrench ethnicity into education, holidays, symbols, and public administration, just as is the case in Brubaker's *nationalizing states*. In such a context, civic identity cannot supplant ethnonational identity, but it can emerge as an additional layer of affiliation.

7.2. Positive Effects of Coexistence

The findings reveal that interethnic coexistence in the Brčko District is described in positive terms. High school students have friends of different ethnic backgrounds, go out with each other, and visit one another for holidays. In contrast to the rest of the country, where the perception of the *Other* is unfamiliar and distant (Majstorović & Turjačanin, 2013, p.153), for youth in Brčko, the *Others* are close friends and family members. This is mostly possible because of the joint education system, which students praised for giving them an opportunity to meet peers of different ethnic backgrounds and learn more about other religions and traditions. For residents of Brčko, everyday interethnic relations are not an expression of ideological commitment to multiethnic coexistence but rather a routinized form of contact, or what, following Billig's (1995/2009) logic, could be named *banal interaction*.

The heterogeneity of Brčko's environment appears to reduce social distance, confirming Majstorović and Turjačanin's (2013) observation that youth in multiethnic environments display more open interethnic attitudes. Results also align with Pečković's (2022) findings, which highlighted low ethnic distance and bonding potential in Brčko. However, they diverge from Clark's (2010) research, which showed that society in Brčko is completely divided, and

people do not feel the need to cooperate on a private level. Her participants portrayed multiethnic governance in a negative light, as something imposed and not welcomed by people. In contrast, participants in the focus groups I conducted had positive attitudes toward it.

The discrepancy in findings could be explained in several ways. Differences can partly be explained by the choice of participants. Pečković and I both used high school students as the target group, while Clark interviewed people of different ages. Youth could be more open to forming friendships with people from different ethnic backgrounds. They were raised in a system that enforced cooperation daily and did not have direct memory of war. The results might be different if older generations were interviewed. Moreover, the high school students who participated in the focus groups already knew each other, and their answers could have been influenced by a desire to show themselves in a positive light. However, this could also indicate that, since 2010, not only the younger generation but people in general have changed. The time distance from the war could have reduced ethnic distance among all generations.

7.3. Ethnic Boundaries

Although youth in Brčko socialize freely, certain topics remain taboo, particularly when it comes to the past war. Clark (2010) refers to this phenomenon as *chosen silence*, which she describes as a means of maintaining social harmony by avoiding confrontation over the past. Participants emphasized the importance of coexistence and mutual respect, but they stated that they avoid discussing the events of the 1990s with peers from other ethnic backgrounds. According to Clark (2010, p. 72), such silence is unhealthy because it hinders deeper reconciliation and the building of a better future.

Furthermore, findings confirmed Barth's (1969) argument that ethnic boundaries are context-dependent, and repeated the pattern of boundaries in relationships observed in Pečković's (2022) research. While participants were open to interethnic friendships, most rejected the idea

of interethnic romantic relationships and marriages. Participants in my focus groups were mostly restrained by their parents, which was also the case in Pečković's study, as well as by religion. As Barth explains, the rules that regulate interethnic relations allow crossing ethnic boundaries in some contexts, while discouraging or even prohibiting it in others. Residents of Brčko are selective when it comes to these boundaries: they endorse friendships but reject, or even forbid, the possibility of marriage with individuals of different ethnic backgrounds. Barth (1969) explains this through the concept of the superordinate status of ethnic identity, an identity that is not just one among many, but one that constrains other social roles, influences behaviours, and relations. It is treated as a primary identity by participants, their parents, and the system. The importance of national identity for young people in the Brčko District is seen by their fear of losing through mixed marriage, or concern about the identity of future children.

The Barth's (1969) concept of context-dependent boundaries and Brubaker's notion of fluctuating groupness level can also be adopted for the flexible *us* vs. *them* distinctions. While participants used it often to describe the distinction between members of different ethnic groups, they also used it to portray the distinction between *us*—the tolerant multiethnic Brčko, and *them*—nationalist individuals from other parts of BiH. Even Serb participants who identified with Serbia as their external homeland employed a *us* vs. *them* distinction when speaking about Serbs from Serbia, confirming that groupness should not be presupposed.

7.4. The Role of Institutions in Identity Formation

Brčko's institutional framework plays an ambivalent role in shaping identity. On one hand, it was designed to ensure equality among ethnic groups through proportional representation, a joint school system, and the equal recognition of languages and religions. On the other hand, these same measures institutionalized ethnic identities and prioritized the rights of ethnic groups above individual rights.

The education system is the most immediate institutional space influencing young people. The joint school model exposes students to peers from different backgrounds and makes cooperation inevitable. Participants frequently described this as a positive experience that helped them learn about each other, reduce prejudice, and broaden their horizons.

The impact of Brčko's integrated schooling becomes clearer when compared with the segregated system in multiethnic Mostar, where Hromadžić (2012) found that students remained divided and displayed little willingness for intergroup contact. These contrasts suggest that institutional design, more than demographic diversity alone, determines whether coexistence will translate into genuine interaction.

Yet, the national groups of subjects continue to reproduce ethnic narratives, reminding them of inherited divisions. The differences among residents are also underlined by ethnic quotas in employment. While some participants found them necessary to maintain balance, others viewed them as a reminder of ethnic boundaries.

Therefore, while institutions in Brčko maintain peace and promote cooperation, at the same time, they reinforce the importance of belonging to one's own community. This mirrors Brubaker's (1996) notion of nationhood as an institutionalized form. Institutions do not simply reflect existing identities; they reproduce and sustain them. They also serve as a place where Barth's (1969) boundaries are simultaneously crossed and maintained.

7.5. Brčko as a Model and a Warning

Brčko has been portrayed as the success story within BiH. The banal interaction and its institutional framework made it an example of peaceful coexistence in a deeply divided country. But should Brčko serve as a model or a warning for other divided societies? The short answer is - both.

The joint school system has already been mentioned as the most important factor in connecting young people. They share classrooms, public spaces, and cooperate in ways that are rare elsewhere in the country.

Yet, the same institutional design that sustains coexistence also froze ethnic categories as a basis of political representation and social organization. This has stabilized divisions, rather than overcome them. People cooperate across boundaries, but still perceive themselves primarily through them. The result is a system that *simultaneously* promotes cooperation and division.

The system of institutionalized multiethnic framework fosters peaceful coexistence but not an identity transformation. Verdery (1996) and Gaber (2006) argue that a feeling of civic belonging is an indicator of long-term democratic consolidation. They warn that sustainable peace includes more than pure coexistence. The shared sense of belonging can increase democratic participation and trust in institutions. Peace-building efforts should not focus only on peaceful coexistence but aim for broader social integration, including a shared sense of belonging.

8. Conclusion

This thesis focused on the topic of national identity among youth in a divided, post-war society. Through the case study of the Brčko District, I tried to capture the influence of enforced multiethnic governance on identity and state belonging. The study answers the research question: "How do individuals perceive their national identity and the sense of belonging in the context of enforced multiethnic governance?" in an interpretative and descriptive way. By focusing on high school students, I analyzed the direct influence of the joint school system on their identity and interethnic relations. Beyond their empirical value, the findings also contribute to broader theoretical discussions on national identity in divided societies.

Capturing the whole story of national identity in BiH would require a longer and deeper study. Therefore, I provided a brief historical overview of how identities were managed in the SFRY and how they are managed in the post-war period. This was important for understanding the case study, as well as putting BiH in the broader context of post-socialist societies. The institutionalization of ethnic identities in the socialist period left a legacy that influenced not only contemporary BiH but also other Eastern European countries.

National identity in BiH has been the subject of numerous studies (Klemenčić, 2000; Guzina, 2007; Lavić, 2012; Hronesova, 2012; Majstorović & Turjačanin, 2013; Hromadžić, 2015/2017; Mulalić & Malanović-Adilović, 2018). However, these studies focused on monoethnic cities, with the exception of Mostar, which remains institutionally and everyday divided, despite its multiethnicity. The Brčko District was chosen as a unique empirical setting precisely because of its multiethnic composition and institutional framework, which distinguishes it from the rest of BiH. Its governance model allows exploration of how multiethnic governance influences the boundaries and everyday narratives of national identity.

The findings have shown that national identity among youth in the Brčko District is predominantly ethno-religious, as is the case in the rest of the country. Young people who participated in focus groups mostly defined national identity in primordial terms. Religion was the main boundary marker. Even the ones who saw national identity as a matter of choice still admitted that in the Balkans, religion is inseparable from national identity.

Moreover, in most cases, ethnic belonging determines the sense of belonging to the state. The strongest identification with the state of BiH and its symbols was among Bosniaks, who often accepted the civic label (Bosnian) as addition to their ethnic belonging. Croats identified strongly with their kin-state and its symbols, while results among participants identifying as Serbs were diverse. Perceptions of Serb participants could be divided into three groups. The first group had rigid ethnic affiliation, rejected the national symbols of BiH, and looked at BiH only as a state of current residence, despite being born there. Their relationship to BiH could be described as one of complete indifference and was characterized by an absence of willingness for democratic participation. The second group also had a rigid ethnic identity, but showed a stronger feeling of belonging to the state of BiH. Finally, the third group showed a more flexible approach to identity, accepting the civic label as an addition to the ethnic identity, and had the strongest attachment to the local and state community. Variations in all three previously mentioned groups were present.

These findings illustrate Brubaker's (2004) argument that ethnicity should be treated as a *category of practice*, and not as a fixed entity. The ethnic groups in Brčko are not homogeneous, and within each group, individuals hold different perceptions, opinions, and experiences. Their sense of belonging and solidarity with in-group members is not constant but fluctuates across situations. The findings suggest that *groupness* is most salient in symbolic discussions, particularly about war and national holidays, but fades in routines of everyday life.

Moreover, the way the participants perceive and negotiate national identity sometimes overlaps with, and sometimes diverges from, the institutional form. While institutions in Brčko do not recognize civic labels, forcing people into ethnic categories, some participants accept and embrace their civic dimensions of identity. This dynamic reflects Brubaker's view that institutional categorization does not entirely determine lived identification.

The findings also support Barth's (1969) hypothesis that ethnic boundaries are context-dependent and not a result of isolation but of contact. The boundaries among young people in Brčko are flexible and shift across situations. In everyday life, they are frequently crossed. For young people in Brčko, the *others* are not distant or unfamiliar but close friends and often family members. However, boundaries re-emerge in more intimate domains, particularly in romantic relationships and marriage choices. Most participants rejected the idea of interethnic marriage, explaining their stance through parental influence or concerns about losing identity.

Taken together, Brubaker's and Barth's approaches reveal that identities in Brčko are both fluid and bounded. Identities are fluid and negotiated in everyday life, but institutions, traditions, and social expectations keep certain limits on how far the fluidity can go. For young people, both ethnic coexistence and boundaries are routinized and taken for granted, or what Billig (1995/2009) would describe as a form of *banal nationalism*, in which national identity and ethnic boundaries are reproduced unconsciously through ordinary routines and interactions.

The research supports the idea that a multiethnic governance framework can improve interethnic cooperation and soften, though not erase, boundaries in everyday life. However, without the parallel promotion of a civic identity, part of society remains symbolically excluded from full belonging to the state community. While the current institutional framework in the Brčko District enables ethnic balance, it simultaneously reinforces ethnic categories and boundaries. In doing so, it overlooks civic forms of belonging and may hinder deeper

democratic consolidation. The study, therefore, suggests that peacebuilding efforts should move beyond maintaining a fragile peace and pay greater attention to fostering conditions for long-term stability.

There are several limitations to this study. As with all qualitative studies, the results cannot be generalized to the wider population. The findings represent a small snapshot of citizens at a single moment in time. For a more comprehensive conclusion, future research should include a larger and more diverse sample. Moreover, a longitudinal approach could capture how identities evolve over time and how Brubaker's *nationness as event* manifests in different contexts. While these factors do not undermine the validity of the insights, they suggest that the findings should be understood as context-dependent interpretations. Nevertheless, this study can be a useful basis for comparative research on national identity in similar or contrasting settings.

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