

Who Are We? Determining ‘Nationality’ and ‘Ethnicity’ in the Balkans

The question “Who are you?” or “What nationality are you?” is a relatively easy one for Americans to answer. Even when we talk among ourselves, our nationality is identical to our country of citizenship and is usually also the country in which we live. It doesn’t matter where we were born: we are American because we are currently citizens of the United States. Of course, if we were born in another country and speak English with an accent, we might specify that we are “Mexican-American” or “Iranian-American.” But there is always the last part, “American,” which matches what is written on our passport.

This is very different from the way that someone from the area of the former-Yugoslavia would identify themselves (except maybe when talking to foreigners). In that region, your nationality is something permanent, something you were born with and which never changes even if you move to another country. It is something entirely different from your country of citizenship. What makes it even more confusing to Americans is that the ‘national’ identification is often based on religion, even when the individual in question doesn’t *practice* a religion. (The idea came from the time of the Ottoman Empire when the Ottoman government classified people by religion.) Sometimes, however, one’s language is also a factor. Confusing, right? Let’s see how it works.

We’ll start with the part that’s easier for westerners to understand: classification by language. In the area of the former Yugoslavia, there are several smaller languages that determine one’s ‘nationality’: Slovenian-speakers are Slovenes, Macedonian-speakers are Macedonians, Albanian-speakers used to be called Albanians – that is, until recent times when the term ‘Kosovars’ was invented to indicate Albanian-speakers living in Kosovo. (Note that this causes confusion in the West since it obscures the close ties between ‘Kosovars’ and the Albanians of Macedonia or Albania.)

Most of the people of the former-Yugoslavia, however, speak some dialect of a language that used to be known as Serbo-Croatian. For these people, nationality is determined by religion as well as language. For example, let’s say that you are living in Bosnia and speak the Bosnian dialect of Serbo-Croatian. If your ancestors were Orthodox Christian (even if you yourself have never set foot in an Orthodox church), then you are labeled a ‘Serb.’ You are a Serb even though you don’t live in Serbia and might not have ever visited that country. (To be more specific, you may refer to yourself as a ‘Bosnian Serb.’) On the other hand, if your ancestors were Catholics (even if you yourself have never set foot in a Catholic church), then you are a ‘Croat;’ this is true even though you don’t live in Croatia. (You could also call yourself a ‘Bosnian Croat.’) A third scenario: you live in the same Bosnian town as the Serb and the Croat, but your ancestors were Muslims. Even if you have never set foot in a mosque, your ‘nationality’ is still ‘Muslim.’ But since that got really confusing to people, especially foreigners, during the war of the 1990s, you now use the term ‘Bosniak.’

This sounds very odd to Americans, but the separate identities are considered so important that tens of thousands of people died in Bosnia alone between 1992 and 1995 because

of national/ethnic differences. How did they tell each other apart since they look pretty much the same and often speak the same dialect? Sometimes because they knew each other, knew who was who. Other times, it was because of their names, of course. (Someone with the name Amir Halilbegović was obviously Muslim, while a woman named Marija Stojanović would definitely be a Serb.) And what if your father was one nationality and your mother a different one? (This was not a rare scenario since about 1/3 of Bosnian marriages were ethnically mixed.) It might have depended on your name, what part of the city you lived in, or the whim of whoever determined your fate.

What can you conclude from all of this? In order to understand fully the conflicts in the Balkans, you have to realize that their conception of 'nation' is different from yours. And in trying to understand the ideas of another people, you come to a greater awareness of our American values - and biases.