

Failed to Unite? Conceptualizations of Bosnian–Herzegovinian National Identity

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Identifying with superordinate identities can improve intergroup relations but sometimes it can backfire. Bosnia and Herzegovina offer a real-life context for studying social recategorization after violent conflict, which has not often been done in social psychological research. We applied Q methodology to explore the conceptualizations of Bosnian–Herzegovinian national identity, a category superordinate to ethnic identities of groups living there. Fifty participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina assessed to what extent each of the 48 statements depicting different national identity elements is characteristic for Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity. We identified three salient viewpoints of national identity. In the first viewpoint, national identity is idealized, including only positive elements, and rejecting all negative elements. We argue that this might be due to identity contestation and the self-esteem motive. In the second viewpoint, national identity is conceptualized as an imposed identity influenced by foreign powers, rejecting any positive intergroup relations and national symbols. This negation of Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity might reflect the categorization threat related to the country's political context. In the third viewpoint, formal attributes such as citizenship and geographical determinant are central to Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity, as well as patriotic elements and accepting the country's imperfections, with positive intergroup relations considered uncharacteristic. This might be a more realistic and critical conceptualization of the national identity in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We argue that different understandings of national identity in Bosnia and Herzegovina have different implications for intergroup relations and consequently for the development of society. The study contributes to the body of research on social recategorization in real-life contexts.

Public Significance Statement

This article explores how people in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) understand the concept of Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity. The differences in the conceptualization of national identity can serve to practitioners and policymakers to understand how (lack of) adopting the Bosnian–Herzegovinian national identity might be an obstacle for improving relations among ethnic groups in BiH. As identity issues are crucial in Bosnian–Herzegovinian context, this article can also serve to peacebuilders who want to tailor peacebuilding interventions.

Keywords: superordinate identity, national identity, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Q methodology, social recategorization

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The Dayton Peace Accord (DPA) signed in 1995 by (among other international community members) Croatia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), ended the 4-year-long armed conflict in BiH and granted it independence and sovereignty.

The BiH Constitution, annexed to the DPA, names three “constituent peoples,” that is, three ethnic groups that were previously in conflict—Bosnian Serbs, Bosnian Croats, and Bosniaks, as the bearers of power in the country. An equal share of power is

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provisioned, and equal participation in the state structures. Given that the groups remained within the borders of one country, although within independent entities—Republika Srpska (Serb majority), the Federation of BiH (Bosniak majority overall, Croat majority in the Herzegovina area), and Brčko District (mixed ethnicities), it has been of crucial importance to promote peace and reconciliation among them. One of the ways toward that goal could be the mobilization of a superordinate, supraethnic identity, the identity here referred to as the national identity of Bosnian–Herzegovinian. Similar processes have been observed in Rwanda where ethnic groups have been encouraged to recategorize themselves into a common Rwandan identity (Moss, 2014), and in Sudan, where a shared Arab identity is promoted (Moss, 2017). Although social psychology has put identity processes in the center of postconflict social reconstruction, superordinate recategorization has not been given extensive research attention in real-life settings (Moss & Vollhardt, 2016). With the present study, we aim to explore the process of superordinate recategorization in the postconflict context of BiH by exploring the content of the superordinate, national category, that is, the understanding lay people in BiH have about Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity.

Superordinate (Re)Categorization in Overcoming Intergroup Conflict

Political attempts to promote superordinate identities might be promising. Following the common ingroup identity model (S. Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000), identification with a superordinate, common identity helps shift the focus from distinctiveness to similarities between groups, thereby enhancing identification with the “new” ingroup (Dovidio et al., 2012). This can have positive effects on intergroup relations. For example, a common victim identity positively predicted peace activism (Shnabel et al., 2018) or readiness to forgive the outgroup (Van Tongeren et al., 2014). Likewise, a common religious identity predicted positive intergroup emotions (Baysu et al., 2018). However, some studies have also demonstrated that superordinate identification can increase the acceptance of intergroup inequalities in minority groups (Jaško & Kossowska, 2013) who might then also endorse collective action less (Greenaway et al., 2011) or frame the conflict in a way more similar to majority groups at the expense of dealing with their own suffering (Bilali, 2014).

The Downside of Superordinate Identification

For different reasons, groups can avoid or reject identifying with the superordinate identity. This can happen if groups are pressured to recategorize—they can experience categorization threat that emerges when people perceive they are forced to identify with a certain group against their will (Branscombe et al., 1999), which can sometimes lead to more conflict (Dovidio et al., 2009, 2016) and more ingroup favoritism (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). Another reason is perceived threat from reduced diversity in the superordinate category (Dovidio et al., 2009; Wenzel et al., 2007), especially if it is at the expense of one group more than the other. The ingroup projection model (Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999) posits that groups project their distinctive attributes onto a superordinate category, expecting these characteristics to be prototypical of the superordinate group. The outgroup is then evaluated with regard to these attributes, and the more they diverge from the

prototype, the less they are considered worthy of rights and resources (Weber et al., 2002). Perceived threat hence depends on whether the superordinate identity is constructed to also incorporate and represent differences between subgroups (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000; Neufeld & Schmitt, 2019). If it preserves groups’ distinctiveness, that will facilitate identification (Dovidio et al., 2009). However, if group members see primarily the outgroup’s attributes projected onto the superordinate identity and do not feel represented, they can feel excluded or pressured to assimilate (Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999; Wenzel et al., 2007). The content of the superordinate category is therefore extremely important for understanding why some groups might (dis)identify with it.

Superordinate Identification in Postconflict Settings

Very few studies investigated the content of national identity in real-life postconflict settings. One study explored how lay people react to policies of recategorization in Rwanda (Moss & Vollhardt, 2016) and revealed a set of different themes, for example, ethnic identities are false or imposed, superordinate identity suppresses differences to achieve country stability, cross-cutting identities between ethnic groups, and so forth. In Northern Ireland, members of different ethnic groups (i.e., Irish and British) and those identifying as Northern Irish attach different meanings to the Northern Irish identity: the Irish attach mythology, traditional music and dance, linguistic heritage, and the Tricolor; the British and Northern Irish are more focused on British symbols, the Northern Irish football team, and Loyalist parades (Furey et al., 2017). Depending on the meaning attached, there was either a bilateral acceptance of identities or one group considered the outgroup’s attributes to be the source of division. In another study, four different ways of articulating the Northern Irish identity were found: as a people, as an identity claim, as a political project, or as a banal indicator of place (McNicholl et al., 2019). Findings like these indicate that the nature of national identity is complex and that different conceptualizations can have different implications for identification with superordinate and subordinate identities but also for intergroup relations and policymaking. The studies in BiH are mostly focused on ethnic identities and intergroup relations, while national identity (where included) is merely assessed in terms of level of identification. Only a small number of studies explored Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity qualitatively. Turjačanin, Dušanić, and Lakić, et al. (2017) found that people’s ethnic and national identities are triggered in different ways depending on the situation, and that they have different strategies toward (not) incorporating national identity. Sorgenfrei (2020) explored how young people in Sarajevo, the capital of BiH, negotiate identification with Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity and found that national identification ranges from rejection to acceptance of this identity and that it is discouraged by the environment. Piacentini (2018) also showed that youth in Sarajevo tend to identify with the national rather than ethnic identity, acknowledging hard ethnic boundaries. However, to our knowledge, no studies explored *what people understand under Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity*, which could lead to explanations of why people identify with this category to a greater or a lesser extent, including total disidentification.

Identity in the Context of Bosnia and Herzegovina

In BiH, identity is crucial to many societal and political processes, which act as obstacles to creating a superordinate identity. The political

utilization of identity has been pervasive since it was manipulated to fuel the conflicts in the 1990s. The ethnonationalist politics and policies were embedded in the Dayton Constitution itself and have since hindered the country's and societal development. This omnipresent identity politics is problematic for creating the idea of community and trust (Dušanić et al., 2019), and affects every level of society (Karić, 2020). Ethnic identities¹ are institutionalized in language (Popadeva, 2021), media (Gengo et al., 2019; Penic et al., 2016), and education (Tolomelli, 2015; Stojanović, 2019).

The strategy to induce a common superordinate identity in the postconflict BiH and thereby improve intergroup relations has gloriously failed. Compared to Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats identify much less with the superordinate Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity (Karić, 2019; Tveit et al., 2014). Also, Serbs and Croats, compared to Bosniaks, consider the national, Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity to be not only least important to them but also have very low importance in general (Dušanić et al., 2019; Turjačanin, Dušanić, & Lakić, 2017). There are also remarkable differences in identifying and liking the national symbols: Serbs dislike the national anthem and the flag, disidentify from the national holidays but identify with the orthodox holidays and the Republika Srpska entity Independence day, while Bosniaks identify highly with the BiH national symbols (Karić, 2019).

The position of Serbs in the national context of BiH is complex. Although they are a vast majority in Republika Srpska (82% of inhabitants of Republika Srpska are Serbs²) and hold the most power, at the national level, they constitute around 31% of inhabitants, which makes them a minority. In case of unification, they would be a clear minority and easily overvoted. The power they have in their entity and at the national level, provided by the current Constitution, would be significantly threatened if the Constitution changes, which results in blocking any constitutional changes for over two decades (Kasapović & Kočan, 2022). Serbs do not see unification as a possibility they would agree to, while it is the opposite for Bosniaks—they even define reconciliation in terms of unification (Karić & Mihić, 2020). The genocide in Srebrenica committed by the members of the Serb forces adds to the complexity of their position in the national context: They had more power just before and during the 1990s war, backed up by the Serbian regime; this power facilitated committing genocide against the Bosniaks in Srebrenica in 1995. Now bearing the heaviest burden of the 1990s war, and being a minority at the national level, Serbs lost their powerful position. This shift in power has repercussions for intergroup relations.

Bosniaks suffered most human losses during the 1990s war (65% of total and 70% of civilian war victims were Bosniak; Zwiernowski & Tabeau, 2010), and the genocide in 1995 in Srebrenica when more than 8,000 men and boys were killed by the Serb forces. Although the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia ruled that what happened in Srebrenica constitutes a genocide, this qualification is heavily disputed by Serbs, although they admit that “a war crime” happened (Karić, 2020). This position comes with victim-group advantages such as support from third parties and the moral upper hand (Vollhardt & Nair, 2018).

The Present Study

The reasons behind differences in identification with the national identity can be complex in a postconflict setting such as BiH. The

understandings of the national identity, or the meanings attached to it, can be expected to differ to a certain extent among and within groups given the sociopolitical context. These differences—and similarities—can have significant consequences for intergroup relations and support to peacebuilding. In order to understand superordinate recategorization processes in BiH, we conducted a Q methodological study to explore the conceptualizations of national identity, addressing the main research question of *what is the content of the superordinate national identity from the perspective of lay people in BiH?* We believe that this study contributes to understanding how people make sense of social recategorization in real-life contexts, especially when the aim of recategorization is to reconcile ethnic groups previously in conflict (Moss & Vollhardt, 2016).

Method

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology of Philipps University Marburg (No. 2022-19k).

Design

Q methodology is a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches and is used to uncover socially shared viewpoints of complex issues (Stephenson, 1953; Watts & Stenner, 2005). The qualitative part helps researchers to answer the question of how people think and why, while the quantitative part, involving factor analysis, allows researchers to identify individuals with similar profiles, that is, opinions or viewpoints (M. Brown, 2004). Q methodology aims to explore alternative conceptualizations of multidimensional topics and does so across a broad spectrum of participants (e.g., Hanson & O'Dwyer, 2019) on small samples (McKeown & Thomas, 1988). Therefore, participants are selected to represent the breadth (rather than the distribution) of opinion in a target population (Webler et al., 2009, p. 9), without the aim of quantitative generalization. It also enables exploring differences between and within ethnic groups and identifying the psychologically more salient aspects of the concepts in question (McKeown & Thomas, 1988). Therefore, we followed an exploratory approach without hypothesizing what the content of different conceptualizations would be or for which sociodemographic groups each identified concept would be more salient.

Participants

Fifty participants provided Q sorts that were included in the analysis (see [Supplemental Materials](#), for recruitment procedure). The age of participants ranged from 19 to 61 years ($M = 33.9$, $SD = 11.3$); 58% were females, and 42% were males. Eighteen (36%) self-reported as Bosniaks, 12 (24%) as Serbs, 15 (30%) as Bosnian–Herzegovinian, and three (6%) as others (this category is used in BiH to describe citizens that do not identify with one of the three constituent peoples—Serbs, Bosniaks, and Croats). Two participants did not report their ethnicity/nationality. Additional sociodemographic data are presented in the [Supplemental Materials](#).

¹ In this article, we refer to ethnic identity when we speak about Serbs, Croats, or Bosniaks living in BiH, and to national identity when we speak about the superordinate, overarching identity of Bosnian–Herzegovinian.

² <http://www.statistika.ba/?lang=en>.

Materials

The materials for this study included 48 statements obtained from different sources: an open-ended question from a previous study in BiH asking “What does being a Bosnian–Herzegovinian mean to you?”; statements from two focus group studies in BiH on reconciliation (Karić, 2020) and social identities (Turjačanin, Dušanić, Lakić, et al., 2017), other studies on the content of national identity (e.g., Eckerle et al., 2019; Konur, 2021), and consultations with researchers familiar with the context. First, a list of 65 statements was created. After merging some statements due to similarities, and excluding or rephrasing those that were unclear, the final list of 48 statements was achieved. The statements referred to emotions, intergroup aspect, citizenship, stereotypical characteristics, patriotism, identity, peace, conflict, symbolism, as well as negative aspects and the negation of national identity (see [Supplemental Materials](#), for a complete list).

Participants were asked to sort the statements according to what they think generally means to be Bosnian–Herzegovinian, regardless of their personal opinion, that is, they were advised to think about how people in their surroundings understand the meaning of being Bosnian–Herzegovinian. With this, we wanted to reach socially shared representations of national identity rather than idiosyncratic views. After sorting the cards, participants filled out a short survey including their degree of personal identification with the viewpoint they generated, sociodemographic questions, and level of identification with their ethnic group (single item).³ Details on the data collection procedure are provided in [Supplemental Materials](#).

Positionality Statement

The first author is originally from Serbia, and although she disidentifies with her ethnic identity, she is perceived as a Serb by participants (due to her name and speaking in *ekavica* dialect). This could potentially lead to participants being wary about sharing their opinions, as the first author collected the data in one-on-one sessions. At the beginning of each session, special attention was given to explaining the position of the first author, and to providing as many details as possible about the study goals and how the data will be used, in an effort to build trust with participants. Spontaneous feedback by participants indicated that the ethnic barrier was not present; however, we can never be sure about the things participants did not share. During data interpretation, the first author made an effort to be as objective and unbiased as possible, while considering the possible influence her background might have had. The second author is German, with no immigration background, who is familiar with the BiH context, and could assess the data interpretation in a more unbiased way. We believe that this balance contributed to a fairly objective scientific contribution.

Results

The sorts were analyzed using Ken-Q (Banasick, 2018). We used Principal Component Analysis and Varimax rotation to obtain a clear factor structure. The number of factors to keep was decided based on interpretability, clarity, simplicity, and stability (participants loading on the same factor across different solutions), and distinctness (lower correlations between factors; Webler et al., 2009). We tested 3-, 4-, 5-, and 6-factor solutions applying Varimax rotation and decided to keep three factors. Factor loadings, flags, and

factor correlations are provided in the [Supplemental Materials](#). Thirty participants' sorts loaded clearly on one of the factors (15 loaded on the first factor, nine on the second, six on the third), seven loaded highly on all three factors, three low on all three, and the rest had other combinations of loadings (see [Supplemental Materials](#)).

In the following, we present the three viewpoints by focusing on the most and the least characteristic statements for idealized Q sorts. We also used factor differences (see [Supplemental Materials](#)) to support our interpretation using the so-called distinguishing statements, whose *z* scores for a particular factor are significantly different from those for any other factor (Akhtar-Danesh et al., 2008). Participant's statements are presented together with information about their gender (F = Female, M = Male), age, and self-identification (S = Serb, B = Bosniak, BH = Bosnian–Herzegovinian, O = others).

Viewpoint 1—Idealized Image of the National Identity

Regarding sociodemographics, eight participants representing this viewpoint self-identified as Bosniaks, three as Serbs, and four as Bosnian–Herzegovinian. Also, 11 self-identified as Muslims, three as orthodox, and one as atheist/agnostic. Other sociodemographic data are provided in the [Supplemental Materials](#).

In this viewpoint, all statements that can be considered relatively positive (positive intergroup relations, positive emotions) are grouped on the characteristic side of the sort, while all relatively negative statements (unpleasant emotions, conflictive intergroup relations, group divisions) are grouped on the uncharacteristic side of the sort. For this reason, we have named this viewpoint *idealized image*.

More specifically, in this viewpoint, patriotism (e.g., loving BiH, defending its sovereignty), positive intergroup aspects (tolerating and respecting other religions and ethnic groups, common future), and citizenship (especially being a citizen of BiH) are considered highly characteristic of Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity. In their comments, participants sometimes glorified the nation:

the land created from war, the fathers of all nations fought for freedom, and (we) should keep fighting (F27B),

and also claimed that regardless of the (imposed) divisions, the true Bosnian–Herzegovinian:

is a proven patriot, (who) fights and can live together in a shared society (M58B)

loves Bosnia (F26B)

has friends of all religions (F26B)

and cheers for the national teams (M37BH).

Participants in this viewpoint see unpleasant emotions (feeling hopeless, betrayed), the negation of the superordinate identity, and negative views (living bad, being poor) and characteristics (cunning, prone to nepotism), as well as the negative intergroup aspect of living in a constantly divided society as uncharacteristic of BiH identity. Additionally, participants consider positive emotions and characteristics, conflict-related identity attributes, and symbolic representations of identity to be relatively neutral or irrelevant to BiH identity. The negation of the existence of the

³ Social conservatism and quantity and quality of contact with other ethnic groups were also measured but are not considered in this article.

Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity is very strongly disputed, and it is related to the historical establishment of the state:

the concept of Bosnia has existed since the 9th century, and it does not make sense that a Bosnian–Herzegovinian is an imposed nation. (...) BiH has statehood since ZAVNOBIH⁴ and the charter of Kulin Ban, it cannot be said that it is an imitation (M37BH);

the state has existed since the 10th century, it has undergone suffering and ideological changes, but it has survived and it exists, 2nd session of AVNOJ⁵ and ZAVNOBIH. (It is the) division (that) causes identity to be lost. It should be imposed on all residents that they are Bosnians–Herzegovinians (M43B).

Participants whose sorts loaded on this factor provided particularly detailed explanations for their sorting compared to participants who loaded on the other two factors.

Viewpoint 2—Imposed Nationhood

Two participants representing this viewpoint self-identified as Bosniaks, four as Serbs, one as Bosnian–Herzegovinian, and two as *others*. Regarding religion, six are orthodox, two are Muslims, and one is agnostic.

As opposed to the first viewpoint, this one considers the negative influence of foreign powers, negative intergroup aspects (e.g., living in a constantly divided society), and negation of the superordinate identity to be central to BiH identity. Participants also consider citizenship-related statements to be characteristic of BiH identity. The focus of follow-up comments to the sorts is also on divisions:

we have historically been divided, there aren't many countries that are as divided as Bosnia (M29BH);

we live like that (divided) every day through politics and society, divisions according to socio-economic status, religions, nations, parties (M27O)

and the influence of foreign powers:

we live in an artificial society, dependent on foreign powers (M40S)

essentially, it is a fact when you look at it, the role of the international community is (...) beyond the limits of law and everything else (M45S).

The uncharacteristic elements in this viewpoint include symbolic representations of national identity, as well as statements related to patriotism and those related to the conflict that includes facing the past. Participants sharply deny the existence of the Bosnian language, for example,

it is an inexistant language, one should not say it exists (F35O)

and detach from the symbols:

they don't consider the (national) representation and homeland (to be theirs) (M40S).

Positive intergroup relations are also considered uncharacteristic of Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity:

incorrect (that people look at who a person is rather than their nationality), first they ask you about your name⁶ and then comes everything else (M29BH);

we hate everyone who is different on any basis (M27O).

Viewpoint 3—Formalization of National Identity

Three participants representing this viewpoint self-identified as Bosniaks, two as Serbs, and one as *others*. Religionwise, four are Muslims and two are orthodox.

In this viewpoint, most central to Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity are its symbolic representations and patriotism. This goes in hand with defining BiH identity in terms of formal citizenship. Additionally, participants consider that constant social divisions and dependence on foreign powers also shape the national identity. Participants see all positive intergroup aspects, the negation of a superordinate identity, as well as facing the past as uncharacteristic of Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity. Interestingly, neither emotions nor other (negative) elements such as suffering, poverty, or instability are central to this viewpoint. In the comments provided by participants, they describe the “formal determinants” of BiH (e.g., citizenship, symbols, considering it a homeland) to be the basic determinants of the Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity. They describe this structure by defocusing from identity, but rather focusing on “external” characteristics, claiming that the characteristic elements serve only to describe the belongingness to the geopolitical entity:

Bosnian–Herzegovinian is related to the state, it's not a nation (M30S);

and accepting the imperfection of this entity:

somehow, we all love it, although it's not great (F22S);

you're a patriot, you value (the country), to respect all ours although it's not the best, but it's ours (F34B).

The descriptions of the uncharacteristic elements also refer to accepting the imperfections and (not) focusing on common good. For example, participants state that:

people just want to contribute to themselves, it's important that (they) are well off, and what the society will be like is less important (F34B), or

there are more people who respect each other, (but) there is the other side on all three sides (Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats) that do not want to live with each other and contribute to the society (M29B).

Cross-Cutting Sorts

As previously mentioned, 30 participants loaded distinctly on one of the three factors, defining the three aforementioned viewpoints. The other 20 have a more nuanced and complex conceptualization of the Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity. Ten of these participants self-identified as Bosnian–Herzegovinian, five as Bosniaks, and three as Serbs (two did not respond). Three are orthodox, 13 are Muslims, and four are atheists/agnostics.

⁴ Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Bosne i Hercegovine (State Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Bosnia and Herzegovina) was convened in 1943 and was the highest representative and legislative body in the territory of BiH under control of the Yugoslav Partisans.

⁵ Antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Jugoslavije (Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia). At the second session of AVNOJ, ZAVNOBIH was established.

⁶ In BiH, it is considered to be relatively easy to distinguish among ethnoreligious groups by the names people carry.

Relationship Between Factor Loadings and Identification With Sorts

To explore differences between the viewpoints in terms of the extent to which they form the basis for identification, we calculated correlations between participants' factor loadings and their identifications with the sorts they produce, as well as mean levels of identification across factors (see [Supplemental Figure S1](#)). The correlation with the first factor was positive ($r = .527, p < .001$) and with the second and third negative ($r = -.439, p = .003$; $r = -.315, p = .035$, respectively). Participants who loaded on the first factor identified the most with their sorts and those who loaded on the second factor the least.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore how lay people in BiH conceptualize the superordinate Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity. To this end, we applied Q methodology, which yielded three shared viewpoints: the idealized image of national identity, the imposed nationhood, and the formalization of national identity.

Idealization of National Identity

Within the first viewpoint, participants described national identity as an ideal concept consisting of only positive elements and rejecting all negative elements. This conceptualization might reflect a response to Bosnian–Herzegovinian national identity contestation. Serbs in BiH not only disidentify from the national identity but they also identify strongly with the neighboring Serbia, and they do not feel the symbols of BiH represent them (Karić, 2019). At least this one *constituent people* contests the national identity, and this happens to be the group that has absolute power in their independent entity (as opposed to Croats). This hypothesis can be supported by the moderately negative correlation between the first and the second viewpoint (see [Supplemental Materials](#)), in which contestation of identity and the perception that national identity is actually imposed are in focus (even in the cross-cutting sorts, in the majority of cases the loadings on the first and second viewpoints were in opposite directions). Additionally, only three sorts by Serbs loaded on this factor; 12 were of Bosniaks and Bosnian–Herzegovinians (primarily Muslims). Identity contestation, its causes, and consequences have not been given much attention in literature. There are some studies focusing, for example, on racial contestation (e.g., Vargas & Kingsbury, 2016), the contestation of the Muslim identity (Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, 2004), or when it comes to national identity, contestation of Malaysian (Shamsul, 2001), Indian (Pye & Sen, 2006) or Scottish identity (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Hopkins and Reicher (2011) argue that all group identities can be disputed, but

whether such dispute actually arises depends on the identity's social significance: the more socially relevant (in terms of being consequential for people's imagination and behaviour), the more one should expect their definition to be contested (because the stakes involved in their definition are much higher) (p. 39)

In a postconflict context such as BiH, with continuous divisions among ethnic groups, it should not be surprising that the national identity, which is supposed to unite all groups, is contested. Thus, this idealized conceptualization of identity can be a response to that. Another (not necessarily opposing) explanation could lie in the self-

esteem motivation. Self-esteem is one of the key identity construction motives, which enables people to view themselves in a positive way (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). People tend to express different biases that help them maintain high self-esteem, and they consider the aspects of their identities that enhance self-esteem to be more central in their self-identification (Vignoles et al., 2006). Especially fragile self-esteem undergoes rigorous defense in the face of threats (Rosenberg & Owens, 2001). In this case, the very contestation of the validity of Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity could be considered a significant threat, in the light of which the idealized image appears as the defense line. Moreover, the more participants express this viewpoint, they more they tend to identify with it ($r = .527$), which could speak in favor of adopting those elements of identity that enhance self-esteem.

Imposed Nationhood

Not only can certain identities be contested, but they can also be exposed to counterconstructions by their opponents (Hopkins & Reicher, 2011). This can be well demonstrated by the content of the second viewpoint. Within this viewpoint, the national identity is described as imposed, all formal attributes are rejected, and the focus is on the influence of foreign powers and negative intergroup relations. The negation of the Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity is central to this stance. This viewpoint is explained as the “natural order of things” in BiH that has historically been present—social divisions. Thus, the overarching identity cannot unite the divided society. Moreover, it is also perceived as imposed and heavily affected by external actors, which adds to the validity of its contestation. It should be noted that most participants whose sorts loaded on this factor are orthodox, which is historically related to Serbs in Bosnia, although two of them self-identified as Bosnian–Herzegovinian. The heavy contestation of the national identity is a common narrative of Serb politicians in BiH, especially the most prominent one, Milorad Dodik, currently the President of Republika Srpska. Dodik's ethnonationalist political activity leans on undermining the Bosnian(–Herzegovinian) national identity and emphasizing the Serb identity, as well as bringing the BiH statehood into question (Beglerović, 2020). He also often refers to “Bosnian–Herzegovinian” as an imposed identity that constitutes a threat to the Serbs (Beglerović, 2020). These political narratives are important since people in BiH consider political factors, especially political leaders, to be the main obstacle to reconciliation and improved intergroup relations (Karić, 2020). Furthermore, these narratives of lay people about the obstacles to reconciliation that focus the most on political leaders' acting echo what those leaders present in the Parliament of BiH (Mochtak & Muharemović, 2022). Such narratives could be reflected in the second viewpoint in our study. When people perceive a threat by imposition of a certain identity on them, that is, when they feel the categorization is forced, they may refuse that categorization, especially if they perceive the category to be illegitimate (Branscombe et al., 1999), as is the case in the second viewpoint: the negation of the Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity is very strong. Moreover, the closer participants' views are to this viewpoint, the less they tend to identify with it, which is in line with Branscombe et al.'s (1999) expectations that imposed categorization discourages identification.

Formalization of National Identity

Within the third viewpoint, participants strongly reject the notion that Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity does not exist—it does exist, and it is understood primarily in terms of formal attributes including citizenship, geographical entity, and national symbols. However, this conceptualization also includes patriotic elements, especially related to loving BiH and considering it a homeland. In our study, special attention in participants' comments is paid to loving BiH “although it is not ideal,” due to societal divisions and the influence of foreign powers. Accordingly, participants do not see positive aspects of intergroup relations as characteristic of Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity. There is a moderate negative correlation between the loadings on this factor and participants' identification with their sorts, indicating that this more realistic and critical image of national identity does not invite high identification. The critical patriotic nature of this viewpoint might be related to *constructive patriotism* (Staub, 1990), although we did not measure the desire for positive change as a key element of constructive patriotism in any way in our study. However, constructive patriots perceive a greater discrepancy between actual and preferred aspects of the nation (Sekerdež & Roccas, 2016, p. 516), that is, they critically observe the flaws of their nation, which might be supported by this “realistic” view in our study.

The Cross-Identifiers

It also makes sense to look at the participants with cross-cutting loadings more closely. Forty percent of participants did not have clear factor loadings, suggesting more complex conceptualizations of the Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity, and half of them self-identified as Bosnian–Herzegovinian. Interestingly, for those participants loading highly on the first and second factors, their loadings on these two factors were almost exclusively in the opposite direction, and of the similar strength. This suggests these two viewpoints might, to a certain extent, be mirror images of each other. Those who consider Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity to be idealized do not consider it imposed, and vice versa. This would be in line with the contestation of identity explanation that we provided earlier: When an identity is contested, there might be a “backlashing” conceptualization that idealizes it and/or vice versa. In reality, people rarely have a clearcut understanding of identity; these construals are rather complex and in this case, they include elements of different factors that were extracted. This complexity might reflect the issues around Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity: some heavily contest it, others resort to idealization, and some understand it as “imperfect, but ours.” Many, however, combine these elements into their conceptualizations.

Superordinate Recategorization in the Aftermath of Intergroup Conflict

Although inducing superordinate identities might help improve intergroup relations after violent conflicts, there might be some pitfalls to this strategy. Additionally, inducing a common identity is more difficult in natural settings (S. L. Gaertner et al., 1993). Most studies measured levels of identification with superordinate categories without exploring their meaning for the group members. Bosnian–Herzegovinian identification is so high in Bosniaks and low in Serbs and Croats (Karić, 2019) for a reason. Some of the reasons might be

captured in the ingroup projection model (Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999), according to which the inclusive, superordinate category can bear more features of one of the subgroups (in this case, Bosniaks), which might discourage other groups from active superordinate recategorization due to identity threats. For that reason, and due to its significance for intergroup relations, it is important to study the process of superordinate identity building, and BiH provides a valuable real-life context. Our study supports the findings from other postconflict contexts such as Rwanda (Moss & Vollhardt, 2016) or Kosovo (Maloku et al., 2017), by showing that different subgroups define the superordinate category in different ways. Theoretically (and empirically supported in other contexts, e.g., Furey et al., 2017), this should have different implications for intergroup relations, which needs to be tested in further studies. We also extend the existing findings by providing data from another complex postconflict setting, thus contributing to the field of research outside of experimental studies, where short-term identity manipulations are different from long-term identity processes in reality. Postconflict societies pose a special challenge to recategorization as they are trying to unite ethnic groups previously in conflict under a shared identity (Moss & Vollhardt, 2016). Some viewpoints identified in our study broadly correspond to findings from some other studies. For example, Moss and Vollhardt (2016) identified the theme of external imposition of identity, albeit related to subordinate, ethnic identities in Rwanda. In Kosovo, the imposition theme is also present (Maloku et al., 2017). However, other identified conceptualizations of national identity in BiH are different from those in other studies. These are, however, responses to the sociopolitical processes in this specific context, and as such represent the context-relevant understandings of national identity. Thus, barely measuring the level of identification with the national identity scales is not enough to understand its relevance and impact on intergroup relations.

Limitations and Future Directions

First, no participant self-identified as a Croat or as a Catholic (religion historically related to Croats in BiH). Although we invested much effort in reaching and motivating Croat participants, our efforts did not result in their participation. Although the patterns of their identification are similar to those of Serbs (Turjačanin, Dušanić, Lakić, et al., 2017), their position in the political context of BiH is somewhat different (they do not have “their own” independent entity, they are a minority compared to the two other constituent groups). Including them in the study might yield additional viewpoints. Therefore, future studies should aim to include representatives of this ethnic group.

Second, the shortcomings of the Q methodology are similar to those of other qualitative methods. Its results cannot be considered representative and cannot be generalized to the whole population. However, the aim of qualitative research is not generalization, but better understanding of the concept in question (Braun & Clarke, 2013). To that end, this study provided insights into different conceptualizations of the Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity that are very relevant for intergroup relations in BiH. However, it cannot answer questions of how widespread these viewpoints are in the different groups in society, why identity is conceptualized in such different ways, what factors contribute to holding different viewpoints, and what consequences different viewpoints have for intergroup relations. The hypotheses that we have about why certain

groups identify and others disidentify from Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity could now be tested by using the findings of this study. Clearer narratives or conceptualizations of Bosnian–Herzegovinian identity based on our findings may be created following narrative evaluation approach (Danielson, 2009) and their position in the identity network of people in BiH, but as well as the effects these conceptualizations have for a range of intergroup outcomes, such as outgroup trust, orientation to reconciliation, conflict support, and so forth, may be explored. Future studies should also explore the role of perceived threat in adoption of different superordinate identity construals. It could be hypothesized that the first two viewpoints, the idealized image and the imposed nationhood, would both be results of the threats perceived by their holders: first due to identity contestation, and second due to the combination of outgroup attributes projection and categorization threat.

It would also be important to explore the influence of different national identity construals on political attitudes and support for policies that concern both the subgroups and the whole BiH population, such as constitutional changes or changes to the Election Law. The groups argue over every change at the national level, which blocks any progress and development of both the society and the political context and position of the country. In this regard, it would be important to investigate the role that different understandings of national identity have, so that, if meaningful, interventions and recommendations can be created to reduce conflicts and increase cooperation among groups.

Conclusion

Social reconstruction and peacebuilding after an intrastate armed conflict have to take into account what society members consider to be the roots of the conflict. In BiH, three ethnoreligious groups, powered by different foreign actors, participated in a 4-year-long bloodshed. Identity-fueled conflicts require identity considerations for the reconstruction of intergroup relations. Constant political disputes in BiH mobilize identity and identity threats to keep the status quo, which represents a serious obstacle to progress and development. The overarching national identity in BiH has been accepted as valid by some members of society, but disputed by others, and thus failed to unite the society. For this reason, “one solution for all” will not gain support from society members. Endorsing different conceptualizations of national identity can have different implications for intergroup relations. If these conceptualizations are irreconcilable, we could assume that would be reflected in continuous societal divisions, as is the case in BiH now. Any interventions to improve intergroup relations that include the questions of identity need to take these conceptualizations into consideration.

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