religions

MDPI

Article

Religious Factors in the Disintegration of Socialist Yugoslavia

Tímea Zsivity [1,*] and Zsolt Lázár [2]

[1] Europe Strategy Research Institute Eötvös József Research Centre, Ludovika University of Public Service, 1083 Budapest, Hungary
[2] Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad, 21000 Novi Sad, Serbia
* Correspondence: zsivity.timea@gmail.com or zsivity.timea@uni-nke.hu.com

Abstract

With the collapse of the post-Cold War bipolar world order, religious institutions regained their public role in the socialist and people's republic states of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe. Religion not only regained its social influence, but also once again became a decisive factor in shaping national identity. During the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, religion did not merely attempt to fill the ideological void left by the crisis of the socialist value system; it also actively contributed to the reconfiguration of national values, culture, identity and political discourse. This study examines the religious factors that contributed to the sacralisation of national identity; the consolidation of the 'Us', 'Them', and 'Us versus Them' narratives; and the justification of wartime violence during the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). In this context, 'Us' refers to the dominant religious/ethnic community of a given member republic, while 'Them' denotes the ethnic majority and their confessional affiliations living in other member republics. This mainly refers to the three largest religious/ethnic communities, Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats, and Bosnia and Herzegovina Muslims. The 'Us versus Them' confrontation escalated tensions and ultimately played a central role in the disintegration of the SFR of Yugoslavia. The study concludes that religion played a dual role: on the one hand, it supported the preservation of community identity and social cohesion; on the other hand, it fostered exclusion, the ethnicisation of loyalty, the political instrumentalisation of religion, and the legitimisation of war discourses on the other.

Keywords: SFR of Yugoslavia (SFRY); religion; nationalism; Catholic Church; Serbian Orthodox Church; Islamic Community; Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)

Academic Editors: Lóránd Ujházi and Ádám Darabos

Received: 2 January 2026
Revised: 20 February 2026
Accepted: 23 February 2026
Published: 25 February 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license.

1. Introduction

Research Questions, Hypothetical Framework and Methodology

Even after more than three decades, the collapse of socialist Yugoslavia is still in the focus of scientific research and academic debates. Despite the massive production of academic works on this topic (Ramet 2005; Radeljić 2009), it seems that knowledge is still not complete, nor are the interpretations exhausted. This paper starts from the point of view that internal factors had a decisive influence on the disintegration of the socialist federal Yugoslavia, and within that the activities of the republic's political elites, which over time strengthened the confederal elements in the federal state.

Churches and religious communities did not significantly influence that process. They are included when nationalisms in the republics have already initiated ethnic mobilization, so religion begins to "serve as an appropriate differentia specifica that perhaps more easily

 https://doi.org/10.3390/rel17030283

articulates much more complex reasons for the conflict, including warfare" (Vukomanović 2004, p. 131). As a symbolic and value system that encourages group identification, religion strengthens the sense of ethnic belonging and, in that sense, the war in the former Yugoslavia can be viewed as "an inter-religious conflict" (ibid.).

However, once involved, religion encourages a value-based division into "us" and "them", which in a conflict situation easily grows into exclusivity and an "us against them" situation (see Jovanov and Lazar 2017). Accordingly, this paper is based on two basic hypotheses: the first is that religion and religious institutions in the SFR Yugoslavia were not an autonomous source of conflict, and the second is that the two religions and the three largest religious communities in the former Yugoslavia have the capacity for a reconciliation process. The first hypothesis can be further specified through the assertion that certain social processes in socialist Yugoslavia led to the political instrumentalization of religion and made religious institutions actors of segregative securitization, which was already started by the political elites. In this context, in the article we deal with the following research questions: When and in what way did religious institutions and religiously framed narratives contribute to the disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia? Do religious institutions have the capacity for autonomous involvement in the reconciliation process and how can they contribute to post-conflict patterns of coexistence in Bosnia and Herzegovina?

The subject of research is socialist Yugoslavia and the post-socialist societies created by its disintegration, with a focus on Bosnia and Herzegovina, where inter-ethnic conflicts were the most pronounced, and the need for inter-religious dialogue in the post-conflict period is the most necessary.

Methodologically, the work employs a qualitative design, based on an interpretive approach and an understanding of the meaning and expectations that the actors attributed to their actions. It combines a historical analysis of political events and constitutional solutions in socialist Yugoslavia with a critical reading of existing scholarly works on ethno-clericalism, securitization and nationalism. Synthesizing these literature streams and engaging selected empirical examples from Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Sandžak region, the study aims to offer a conceptual framework for understanding the dual role of religion in the breakup of Yugoslavia and the ambivalent post-Dayton peace.

The importance of the work is reflected in the original critical synthesis, with the aim of contributing to the understanding of the consequences of the collapse of the socialist federal Yugoslavia.

2. Historical Context: Religion and Politics in Socialist Yugoslavia

With the declaration of independence of the Republic of Slovenia and the Republic of Croatia on 25 June 1991, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia effectively ceased to exist. The independence of the two western republics of the former Yugoslavia was confirmed by their admission to the United Nations on 22 May 1992, while the political-state leaders of Serbia and Montenegro declared the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia a little earlier (27 April), with the intention that the new state would be the legitimate successor of socialist Yugoslavia. Regardless of the specifics of Yugoslav socialism, its collapse and the disintegration of the federal state were undoubtedly part of a wider process of the weakening of the societies of the managed planned economy and the one-party political system in the countries of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe.

However, the case of the SFR of Yugoslavia differed significantly in one respect. Unlike the other two federal socialist states—the USSR and Czechoslovakia—whose peaceful disintegration was one of the consequences of abandoning the socialist social order, in the case of socialist Yugoslavia, the collapse of socialism was a consequence of the already started processes of economic and political independence of the republics within the

https://doi.org/10.3390/rel17030283

federation, processes that led to the confederation of the federal state and the weakening of its powers.

2.1. Constitutional Reforms and the Recognition of Muslims as a Constituent People

In the period of constitutional reforms in 1967–1971, a situation was already created in which the federation could only function with the consent of all republics, while "the Constitution of 1974 established a system that regenerates nationalism, giving impulses to the construction of the concept of nation states within Yugoslavia" (Petranović 1988, p. 416).[1] Accordingly, the disintegration of the SFR of Yugoslavia was induced by political actors and the circumstances in which they made decisions (Jović 2001),[2] that is, the political elites of the League of Communists in the Yugoslav republics (Flere and Klanjšek 2015, 2017; Flere and Rutar 2019, 2021).[3]

As part of the aforementioned constitutional reforms, there was also one change that would further affect the process of the disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia in the 1990s: citizens of the Islamic religion were granted the right to ethnic affiliation, on the basis of which Muslims (now with a capital 'M')—along with Serbs and Croats—became the constituent people of Yugoslavia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and at the same time the most numerous ethnic population in this nationally mixed Yugoslav republic. In accordance with the already mentioned main factor that induced the future disintegration of Yugoslavia, it is not superfluous to mention that the official initiative for the recognition of the Muslim ethnic community came no less than from the Union of Communists of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1968), and especially from Džemal Bijedić, a member of the Central Committee of the Union of Communists of Bosnia and Herzegovina, who at that time also served as the president of one of the councils of the Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Kamberović 2015). The recognition of the Islamic religion for ethnicity intensified the Islamization of the Muslim population in Yugoslavia, which increasingly turned to the ideological influences of the Arab world, denying its Slavic roots (Rusinow 1982). The immediate consequence of these events was the Islamic Declaration of Alija Izetbegović, which he wrote in 1970 and was first published in 1990 (Izetbegovic 1990). In it, he advocates the Islamization of Muslims on the basis of Sunni Islam, with elements of theocratic social organization of the Muslim population (Izetbegović does not explicitly mention Bosnia and Herzegovina in the declaration).

2.2. The Rise of Nationalism and the Return of Churches to Public Life

In this early phase, churches and religious communities did not play a more active role in that process of confederalization of socialist Yugoslavia, because after the Second World War the communist government built state institutions completely separated from religion.[4] However, that will change after the death of Josip Broz Tito in1980. The decade before the beginning of the breakup of Yugoslavia was marked by the growing nationalism of the constituent peoples of Yugoslavia. The federal state and the leadership of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia were no longer an integrative factor, because behind the emphasis on national interests now stand—tacitly or openly—the state and party leadership of the republics. The increasing economic crisis calls into question the Yugoslav variant of self-governing socialism, and the federal state and the socialist socio-economic system are considered obstacles to the economic strengthening and independence of the more developed republics, primarily Slovenia and Croatia.[5] More serious attempts at economic stabilization are blocked for ideological reasons,[6] and the program of fundamental reform of the economic and political system of the last Yugoslav government led by Prime Minister Ante Marković arrives too late.[7]

In the context of the above events and circumstances, churches and religious communities see a chance to return to active social and public life in a way that has already practically become legitimate, which is to support "their" people who are "threatened" by the inappropriate political activity of the federal state, or by the unitary or separatist aspirations of the leadership of other republics.

2.3. International Circumstances and "Ethnoclerical" Mobilisation

As far as international circumstances are concerned, they favored the Catholic Church and its activities above all. The turn from the post-war capitalist "welfare state" to neoliberal economic doctrine and practice was made possible, among other things, by the spread of neoconservatism, which advocates "the structural connection of modern late capitalist societies and religion in the function of legitimization and integration" (Vrcan 1986, p. 65). At the same time, secularization in socialist societies had "characteristics of a kind of "premature" and "too fast" secularization of social life, behind which there are no deeper corresponding historical, social and cultural transformations" (Vrcan 1986, p. 74), so national churches and religious communities regained their lost influence relatively quickly, especially if there were no serious obstacles to it.

Considering that they fit well into the already expressed tendencies of reaffirmation of national identity, the leaders of the socialist republics of Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia do not oppose the performances and activities of the Catholic Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church, which are directed towards the national mobilization of Slovenes and Croats on the one hand and Serbs on the other. The state and political (party) leadership of the federal state is aware of growing nationalism, but there is no serious reaction, except in the case of the trial of Alija Izetbegović for Muslim nationalism.[8]

Thus, the actions of a part of the clergy of the Catholic and Serbian Orthodox churches give the political divisions a confessional stamp, so, because of the policies they led (Serbia), supported (Montenegro) or did not openly oppose (Macedonia), the republics with a majority Orthodox population are perceived as unitarian, unwilling to accept the inevitable changes brought about by the fall of the Berlin Wall and unwilling to step out of the stalemate in which the federal state is; on the other hand, Slovenia and Croatia, republics with a majority Catholic population, were identified as separatist, which threatens not only the common state, but also the sovereignty and security of other nations.

2.4. Bosnia and Herzegovina as a Critical Case

In facing the problem of preservation or peaceful dissolution of the Yugoslav federation, Bosnia and Herzegovina found itself in a particularly delicate position, because it was not a national state of a certain people, as was the case with the other Yugoslav republics. Both Serbs and Croats and Muslims claimed it, but their interests were different: an independent BiH suited the Muslims the most, because disunification could lead to the division of BiH by Serbia and Croatia, and the Muslims would be left without a state. Accordingly, in the early 1990s, the president of the (then still Socialist Republic) of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Alija Izetbegović, directs his policy towards the international recognition of independent Bosnia and Herzegovina, which will be the immediate reason for the declaration of the Republika Srpska of the Serbian people in Bosnia and Herzegovina (9 January 1992)[9] and the beginning of the civil war.

In the last decade of the existence of socialist Yugoslavia, churches and religious communities, together with the nationalist policies of the republic's political elites, successfully carried out the process of "ethnoreligious realignment" (Perica 2002, p. 138). The bloody disintegration of the Yugoslav federation followed, in which ethnoclericalism would be the tragic contribution of the "Balkan case" to religious fundamentalism: "Key components of

ethnoclericalism are the idea of ethnically based nationhood and a "national church" with its clergy entitled to national leadership but never accountable for political blunders as are secular leaders." (Perica 2002, pp. 2014–15).

These political and constitutional developments, and the parallel rise of ethnoclericalism, form the structural background for the subsequent transformation of religion into a key instrument of nationalist mobilisation. It is against this backdrop that the instrumentalisation and securitisation of religious identities at the onset of the Yugoslav crisis must be understood—a process in which religious institutions helped to redefine national identity, legitimise violence and shape post-war patterns of coexistence.

3. The Instrumentalization of Religion and the Securitization of National Identity at the Onset of the Yugoslav Crisis

By the end of the 1980s, the ideological vacuum created by the crisis of the socialist system of social values was filled by nationalism, which was closely intertwined with denominational affiliation. The crisis of Yugoslav federalism and the near-collapse of the state-socialist economy had, by the mid-1980s, already paved the way for political strategies built upon national exclusivity and identity-based mobilization. In this context, religious symbols, rites, and language became instruments of political mobilization. Denominational affiliation primarily expressed not a commitment of faith, but rather served to demarcate the boundary between "Us" and "Them." This process was not a spontaneous social reaction, but part of a conscious strategy by the transitional political elites: its aim was the preservation of power, as well as the channeling of economic and social discontent into ethnic–national channels (Krausz 2009, pp. 16–19). In this period, nation and religion appeared as supreme, mystified values that promised to replace the community bonds lost in parallel with the disintegration of state socialism. Nationalism became a particularly destructive force where it served not the privatization of state assets, but precisely the preservation of control over old state property. In the case of Yugoslavia, the primary political stake was how the state assets accumulated over decades and the debt burden would be distributed among the individual republics (Krausz 2009, p. 20). Religion was thus not the cause of the conflict, but an instrument for legitimizing armed intervention and maintaining combat morale. This dynamic led to the political instrumentalization of religion.

3.1. The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina-Competing Visions and Securitised Identities

In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the crisis appeared particularly acutely. The three dominant political forces—the Bosniak SDA, the Croat HDZ, and the Serb SDS—represented incompatible political visions of the future. While Bosnia was historically a symbol of South Slavic coexistence, the strengthening of Serb and Croat nationalism fundamentally challenged the territorial integrity of the state. The Bosnian Serb and Croat parties increasingly aligned themselves with the political interests of their kin-states, while the SDA led by Alija Izetbegović sought to represent not only Bosnian Muslims but the broader South Slavic Muslim community, including the Muslim population of the Sandžak region (Serbia). This endeavor—regardless of whether it was religious or political in nature—instilled fears on both the Serb and Croat sides regarding the possibility of a unitary, Muslim-majority state (Juhász 2024, p. 145).

Applying the theoretical framework of securitization (Buzan and Waever 2003), the key elements of the processes that took place in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the period under study can be identified. The securitizing actors were primarily the political leaders of the three national parties (SDA, SDS, HDZ), as well as the intellectual and religious elites supporting them. The referent objects, which were presented as being under existential

threat in the discourse, were national survival, religious identity, and territorial integrity. The target audience was their own ethnic community, which was prepared for conflict through discursive acts—such as the demonization of the enemy and the emphasis on a "historical role of the victim." As a political consequence of this process, extraordinary measures, such as paramilitary mobilization and segregation, became legitimizable in public discourse. Subsequently, through the implementation or the creation of the possibility for extraordinary measures, the issue in question compels other states to take extraordinary action as well, thereby securitizing the issue at the international level (Gazdag and Remek 2018, p. 25). A specific case that can be mentioned is the Sandžak region in Serbia, but this and the development of the steps of securitization will be discussed in the following subsections.

3.2. Ethnoclericalism and the Legitimisation of Economic Transformation

In this context, religious institutions—primarily the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church, and the Islamic Community—acted not merely as sustainers of religious life but also as the "sole authentic" representatives of their respective nations. The literature describes this phenomenon as ethnoclericalism (Perica 2014, p. 17). After the fall of socialism, religious institutions became interested not in building civil society, but in the sacralization of national myths, thereby securing their own social influence (Perica 2014, p. 4). Religious language also became suitable for legitimizing the economic transformation. Perica's example illustrates the situation well. Certain ethnic nationalist political leaders used the theological concepts—such as the Christian doctrine of transubstantiation—to symbolically justify the privatization of socialist property (Perica 2014, p. 4). Thus, under the "sacred shield" of religion, not only was national ideology solidified, but so too was the class position of the new ruling elites, while the redistribution of socially owned property took place (Perica 2014, p. 4).

Overall, in the initial phase of the Yugoslav crisis, religion appeared not as an autonomous source of conflict but as a political instrument: through the securitization of identities, it contributed to social polarization, the legitimation of armed violence, and the obfuscation of power struggles over the state-socialist legacy.

4. The Struggle for Territory and the Strategy of Ethnic Homogenization (1992–1995)

As the Yugoslav crisis escalated into open armed conflict in 1992, it became increasingly evident that the actual political goals underlying the religious rhetoric were primarily aimed at territorial acquisition and the creation of ethnically homogeneous units. The war was not a consequence of theological or dogmatic disputes but rather unfolded along deeply rooted political and socio-economic fault lines. The "Us versus Them" narrative, which was also endorsed by religious leaders, served to justify the violence. Applying Noam Chomsky's theoretical framework, it becomes apparent that "manufacturing consent" played a significant role in the escalation of the conflict, wherein the media and the intellectual elite—including the clergy—demonized the enemy, thereby justifying aggression framed as preventive (Herman and Chomsky 2008, pp. 393–400).

4.1. Ethnic Cleansing and the Destruction of Religious Sites

The systematic attacks against religious sites—churches, mosques, and monasteries—committed during the war were not acts of religious warfare in the classical sense either. These actions aimed at the erasure of the cultural and historical presence of the opposing ethnic group and were integrally aligned with the strategy of ethnic homogenization. Ethnic cleansing constituted an integral part of the warfare. These acts cannot be interpreted as

inevitable byproducts of the chaos of war, nor as spontaneous outbursts of historical grievances. Juhász's analysis points out that these were organized, deliberately executed actions aimed at the ethnic homogenization of occupied territories and the definitive elimination of faith in any future possibility of coexistence (Juhász 2024, p. 149).

A concrete example of this is the destruction of the Žitomislić Orthodox monastery in 1992 (Vijesti.ba 2021) or the blowing up of the Ferhadija Mosque in Banja Luka in 1993 (International Court of Justice 2006), which were not military targets but served the destruction of cultural memory.

4.2. Religious Leaders, Military Chaplains and the Legitimisation of Violence

In this process, religious leaders and military chaplains played a specific role, often becoming the moral and symbolic pillars of paramilitary units. The blessing of weapons, the provision of religious rites for fighters, and the use of the language of "holy war" appeared—albeit with varying intensity—on all three warring sides. These forms of religious legitimation contributed to the normalization of violence and made wartime brutality acceptable within their own communities. In the Serbian context, the ritual blessing of the members and weapons of the "Scorpions" unit by the monk Gavrilo Marić exemplifies how ecclesiastical rites became a tool for the moral approval of paramilitary violence (Fetscher 2005).

The international dimension of the conflict further reinforced this process. Behind the intervention—or in many cases, the non-intervention—of Western powers lay clearly definable political and strategic interests, which often overrode human rights or humanitarian considerations (Juhász 2024, p. 152). The ambivalent attitude of the international community indirectly contributed to the warring parties perceiving territorial acquisition and ethnic rearrangement as legitimate and achievable goals.

4.3. Foreign Combatants and Transnational Religious Solidarity

One particularly notable phenomenon of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was the involvement of foreign combatants (Metodieva 2023). International jihadists joined the predominantly Muslim army of Bosnia and Herzegovina and were assigned special operations. A battalion of Russian nationalists came to fight on the side of their Orthodox co-religionists in Serbia. Serb media showed a Russian nationalistic writer posing before cameras while assisting a Serb artillery firing at the besieged Sarajevo (Perica 2014, p. 4). Croatians received diplomatic support from the Vatican and Germany and Croatian émigré militants who returned from Western countries to defend the homeland (Perica 2014, p. 4). All these examples indicate that during the conflict, religion functioned not only as a tool for internal mobilization but also as a legitimizing framework for establishing international networks of solidarity. From an analytical perspective, the presence of foreign fighters is one of the most important examples of securitized religious solidarity. This phenomenon represented not only military assistance but also the transnational extension of the religious legitimation of violence. Through transnational ethnoclericalism, the local conflict became part of a global religious struggle in the discourse, contributing to the internationalization of the war and the extreme securitization of religious identities.

5. Special Cases of Securitization: Sandžak and the Dayton Settlement

5.1. The Sandžak Region-Defensive Securitisation and the Role of the Islamic Community

When examining the religious dimensions of the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the Sandžak region, situated on the borderland of Serbia and Montenegro, and the situation of the Bosniak (and other Muslim) communities constituting the ethno-religious majority there deserve special attention. Their case provides a particularly illustrative example of

Buzan's theory of security, according to which a phenomenon or community becomes a security issue when it is perceived and framed as an existential threat.

The situation of the Bosniaks of Sandžak became particularly vulnerable after 1991. The community lived under the direct control of the Serbian state authority while being geographically located in a region immediately adjacent to war-torn Bosnia and Herzegovina. This dual predicament—political vulnerability and regional instability—resulted in intensified securitization. In the case of the Bosniak community, the role of religion in this context was fundamentally defensive in nature: the institutions of the Islamic Community became the primary frameworks for social self-organization, cultural survival, and identity preservation, especially when opportunities for formal political representation were curtailed.

5.2. The Dayton Peace Agreement: Institutionalising Ethnic Division

Although the Dayton Peace Agreement of 1995 formally ended the armed conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it paradoxically enshrined the territorial realities based on ethnicity and religion that had emerged during the war. According to scholarly interpretations, the agreement created a state structure that is in tension with the principle of civic equality, as it bases political representation not on individual citizenship rights but on collective ethnic—and thus religious—categories (Mujkić 2011, p. 124). Consequently, the role of religion has not receded from the public sphere but has acquired a new function: instead of wartime mobilization, it has become a tool for maintaining ethnic boundaries and institutionalizing social segregation. According to some interpretations, this system prioritized the institutionalization of collective ethnic rights over universal citizenship representation, a matter problematized by several international legal disputes and rulings of the European Court of Human Rights—particularly the case of Sejdić and Finci v. Bosnia and Herzegovina (European Court of Human Rights 2009)—pointing out that the constitutional structure excludes certain citizens from specific forms of political participation.

The Dayton system is often compared to the Swiss consociational model, yet the structural differences between the two cases are significant. While in Switzerland the dual identity of ethnic and linguistic communities, with a centuries-old history—the parallelism of cantonal and state loyalty—served as the basis for a stable state structure, in the South Slavic region, dual identity proved to be much more fragile. The parallelism of one's own national identity and Yugoslav integration existed for a historically short period and proved to be transitory in the crisis situation (Juhász 2009, p. 33).

The instability of the Dayton peace system is further exacerbated by the fact that none of the three dominant ethnic communities achieved their war objectives. The Serb and Croat political elites failed to realize unification with their kin-states, while the Bosniaks did not achieve the political integration of the predominantly Muslim-inhabited territories. Consequently, the peace, based on a ceasefire, is heavily dependent on the international peacekeeping presence. In the event of a reduction in external military presence, the risk of a resurgence of armed conflicts persists (Arday 2024, p. 274).

6. Conclusions: Peace and/or Trust?

In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the peaceful coexistence of religious and ethnic communities is not merely a theological issue, but a fundamental question of state structure, security, and sociology. This problem is particularly complex, as the practice of "two schools under one roof" still exists in parts of the country. While formally sharing a common institutional space, education actually takes place in a segregated manner, along separate classrooms, curricula, teachers, and narratives.

https://doi.org/10.3390/rel17030283

This institutionalized separation carries a clear social message: the possibility of coexistence is conditional and limited even in childhood.

The root of the problem is not primarily to be found in cultural or religious differences, but in the structural lack of trust. Trust is the foundation of every functional community. Without it, neither a healthy society nor a stable political order can be built. Basic trust is born from the experience of acceptance. It develops where individuals can experience their presence in the community not as a threat, but as legitimate participants (Kuburić and Zotova 2019, pp. 19–24).

One possible path for the reconstruction of society and reconciliation is the reference to the common foundations of religious traditions. The recognition that different worldview and cultural systems show overlap in certain fundamental values and foundational narratives may, according to some approaches, facilitate the establishment of dialogue. However, this religiously based opening is insufficient on its own if it is not accompanied by trust-building at the institutional and societal levels.

In this context, religious institutions can be understood as potential agents of peace whose contribution to social reconciliation is rooted in specific, proactive capacities. As Ujházi Lóránd argues, these essential functions include "inter-religious dialogue, participation in education, and inculturation", as well as a fundamental "willingness to assist those on the margins and to share a common destiny with them" (Ujhazi 2025, p. 955). This logic is equally applicable to the post-Yugoslav context: without an active, socially embedded engagement of religious actors in education, dialogue and solidarity with the most vulnerable, the normative language of peace remains detached from everyday realities.

It can be considered a hopeful development that on 3 November 2025, in Sarajevo, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the country's three dominant theological faculties—the Faculty of Catholic Theology, the Faculty of Islamic Theology, and Faculty of Orthodox Theology "St. Vasilije Ostroški" (OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina 2025). The goal of the joint interreligious and peacebuilding master's program is for future religious leaders to study, reflect, and work together, placing special emphasis on the fundamental human right of freedom of religion and belief (OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina 2025).

However, this higher education initiative stands in sharp contradiction to the ethnic segregation persisting in primary and secondary education. The practice of "two schools under one roof"—which Bosnian courts have ruled discriminatory, yet the implementation of these decisions remains pending to this day—highlights one of the fundamental paradoxes of the Dayton system: while the demand for dialogue appears, the institutional forms of separation survive (Zsivity 2025).

The social consequences of this process are particularly palpable among the younger generation. Research indicates that a significant portion of young people is contemplating emigration, primarily due to political and economic instability as well as constrained social mobility. The ethnic and religious separation maintained by the educational system not only hinders the formation of trust but also conserves divided political structures in the long term (Zsivity 2025).

At the same time, empirical sociological studies suggest that in the Balkans, trust is rooted primarily in everyday, direct interactions. The paramount importance of neighborly relations is also reflected in local wisdom, according to which "a near good neighbor is better than a distant brother," or "a good neighbor is better than a high fence" (Kuburić and Zotova 2019, p. 31).

The question of trust is closely linked to the concept of tolerance and the possibility of dialogue. Tolerance is the ability to listen to another person's opposing position on the

same issue in order to discover elements within it that can contribute to the convergence or supplementation of viewpoints, or to the formation of a formulation acceptable to both parties (Šušnjić 1997, p. 202). In this sense, the creation of a just peace must go beyond a mere ceasefire; it requires a transition from power-based dominance to genuine dialogue between equal parties. However, as Šušnjić (2004, p. 9) warns, in an asymmetrical social environment where relationships are based on superordination rather than mutual recognition of dignity, dialogue remains inherently vulnerable.

From the analysis of the sociological and institutional tensions presented above, the question arises as to what normative role the religious and educational spheres can play in crisis management.

A relevant conclusion from a policy perspective is that lasting peace is based not merely on institutional agreements, but on the rebuilding of trust within local communities.

As a normative reflection, it can be stated that the creation of a just peace goes beyond a mere ceasefire. It requires conscious interreligious cooperation capable of dismantling the walls of segregation. Without this, long-term political and social stability is inconceivable either in Bosnia and Herzegovina or, in a broader sense, in the Western Balkans.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, T.Z. and Z.L.; methodology, T.Z. and Z.L.; investigation, T.Z. and Z.L.; resources, T.Z. and Z.L.; writing—original draft preparation, T.Z. and Z.L.; writing—review and editing, T.Z. and Z.L.; supervision, Z.L. and T.Z.; project administration, T.Z. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

1. Open demonstrations of nationalism that called into question the basic principles of the state organization of the SFRY already took place in the 1960s in Croatia and Kosovo (see Petranović 1988).
2. For a more detailed critical analysis of various theoretical explanations of the causes of the collapse of the SFRY, see Bakić (2011).
3. Before becoming the president of Serbia, Slobodan Milošević was also a high-ranking party official and then the president of the Central Committee of the Union of Communists of Serbia.
4. Churches and religions in the People's Federative or Socialist Federative Yugoslavia were never banned, nor were believers persecuted by the state because of their religious beliefs. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1946) proclaimed a secular state, the church was separated from schools and state institutions, but religious communities were free to worship and take care of the religious life of believers. Nevertheless, the tensions between the new communist government and the religious communities were very acute in the first years after the war, because they lost the privileges they had in the previous state arrangements, as well as the possibility of active participation in the public and political life of the new state. Relations with the largest and most influential religious communities—the Catholic Church, the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Islamic religious community—were additionally burdened by the problem of the cooperation of a part of the clergy with the occupiers and Quisling regimes during the war, so their arrest and prosecution was perceived and portrayed as the persecution of priests and believers by the communist regime (Petranović and Štrbac 1977, pp. 67–71). The ideology of the Communist Party/Union of Communists of Yugoslavia was atheistic, but not anti-theistic.
5. The state and party leaderships of Slovenia and Croatia are also distancing themselves from the growing acute problems, and above all from participating in opposing the increasingly strong Albanian nationalism and separatism in Kosovo. The federal state failed to adequately deal with that problem, so mass and violent demonstrations in 1981 in Pristina and other cities in Kosovo were suppressed only by the involvement of units of the Yugoslav People's Army. On the genesis and complexity of ethno-religious relations in Kosovo, see Duijzings (2000).

https://doi.org/10.3390/rel17030283

[6] This was the case with the Long-Term Economic Stabilization Program developed by the so-called Krajger Commission (named after Sergej Krajger, a member of the Presidency of the SFRY from Slovenia, who managed the Commission); the program was adopted in 1982, but was never implemented.

[7] On 15 November 1991, the Council of Republics and Provinces of the Yugoslav Assembly voted no confidence in the government of Ante Marković.

[8] In 1983, Alija Izetbegović was sentenced to 14 years in prison for Muslim nationalism, but he was released in 1988 and soon politically rehabilitated, and in 1990 he became the president of the Socialist Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (until 1992). Izetbegović was already convicted after the Second World War and spent three years in prison for his membership in the pan-Islamist organization Young Muslims, which during the war supported the infamous Nazi SS division Hanjar (on Bosnian Muslims in the WWII see also Rusinow 1982).

[9] On that occasion, the Assembly of the Serbian People in BiH declared the Republika Srpska a federal unit of Yugoslavia. In response to that, on 25 January 1992, the BiH Assembly passed a decision on the referendum on the sovereignty and independence of BiH, which will be held at the beginning of March of the same year. The Serbs did not accept the referendum, and of the 63.4% of registered voters, over 99% voted for an independent Bosnia and Herzegovina. At the beginning of April 1992, the governments of the twelve European countries and the USA recognize the independence of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

References

Arday, Lajos. 2024. *Jugoszlávia és Utódállamai. A Délvidéki Magyarság*. Budapest: Könyvpont.

Bakić, Jovo. 2011. *Jugoslavija: Razaranje i Njegovi Tumači*. Beograd: Službeni Glasnik.

Buzan, Barry, and Ole Waever. 2003. *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Duijzings, Ger. 2000. *Religions and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo*. London: Hurst & Company.

European Court of Human Rights. 2009. Case of Sejdic and Finci v. Bosnia and Herzegovina. Available online: https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#{%22itemid%22:[%22001-96491%22]} (accessed on 12 February 2026).

Fetscher, Caroline. 2005. Massaker vor laufender Kamera-Zehn Jahre danach zeigt Belgrads Fernsehen Bilder aus Srebrenica—Überlebende und Täter sind erschüttert. Tagesspiegel. Available online: https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/massaker-vor-laufender-kamera-1226815.html (accessed on 12 February 2026).

Flere, Sergej, and Rudi Klanjšek. 2015. Construction and Reification in Nation Building—The Case of Yugoslavia. *Ethnicites* 16: 842–68. [CrossRef]

Flere, Sergej, and Rudi Klanjšek. 2017. *Da li je Jugoslavija morala da umre ili kako su etničke komunističke elite kontinuitetom svojih svađa dovele do neizbežnog kraha SFRJ*. Beograd: Dan Graf.

Flere, Sergej, and Tibor Rutar. 2019. The Segmentation of the Yugoslav Communist Elite. *Družboslovne Razprave* 35: 81–101.

Flere, Sergej, and Tibor Rutar. 2021. Raspad jugoslovenske političke elite 1962–1972. *Sociologija* 63: 500–25. [CrossRef]

Gazdag, Ferenc, and Éva Remek. 2018. *A Biztonsági Tanulmányok Alapjai*. Budapest: Dialóg Campus Kiadó.

Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. 2008. *Manufacturing Consent. The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. London: The Bodley Head.

International Court of Justice. 2006. Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Bosnia and Herzegovina v. Serbia and Montenegro). Available online: https://www.icj-cij.org/node/102776 (accessed on 12 February 2026).

Izetbegovic, Alija. 1990. *The Islamic Declaration. A Programme for the Islamization of the Muslims and the Muslim People*. Sarajevo. Available online: http://slobodan-milosevic.org/documents/islamic-declaration.pdf (accessed on 5 February 2026).

Jovanov, Dejan, and Žolt Lazar. 2017. Serbian Orthodoxy Between Traditional and Universal Values: Discourse Analysis of the Journal Orthodoxy. *Sociological Review* 51: 135–56. [CrossRef]

Jović, Dejan. 2001. Razlozi za raspad socijalističke Jugoslavije: Kritička analiza postojećih interpretacija. *Reč* 62: 91–157.

Juhász, József. 2009. A szocialista föderációktól az új nemzetállamokig. In *Az új nemzetállamok és az etnikai tisztogatások Kelet-Európában 1989 után.*. Edited by Juhász József and Krausz Tamás. Budapest: L'Harmattan.

Juhász, József. 2024. *A Nyugat-Balkán rendhagyó története. Tanulmányok a modern délszláv történelemről*. Budapest: L'Harmattan.

Kamberović, Husnija. 2015. Džemal Bijedić i afirmacija muslimanske nacije tokom 1960-ih i 1970-ih godina. *YU Historija*. Available online: https://www.yuhistorija.com/serbian/jug_druga_txt01c8.html (accessed on 11 January 2025).

Krausz, Tamás. 2009. Az új nemzetállamok Kelet-Európában: Az etnikai tisztogatás mint legitimáció? In *Az új nemzetállamok és az etnikai tisztogatások Kelet-Európában 1989 után.*. Edited by Juhász József and Krausz Tamás. Budapest: L'Harmattan.

Kuburić, Zorica, and Ana Zotova. 2019. *Uloga religije, porodice i obrazovanja u procesu pomirenja. Razlike u stavovima manjine i većine u Bosni i Hercegovini*. Novi Sad: CEIR.

Metodieva, Asya. 2023. The radical milieu and radical influencers of bosnian foreign fighters. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 46: 1725–44. [CrossRef]

Mujkić, Asim. 2011. Kad se narodi dogovaraju. Status br. 15. Available online: https://www.scribd.com/doc/173066819/Status-15 (accessed on 12 February 2026).

OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina. 2025. Promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief: OSCE Mission Signs MoU with Theological Faculties. Available online: https://bih.osce.org/mission-to-bosnia-and-herzegovina/600770 (accessed on 28 December 2025).

Perica, Vjekoslav. 2002. *Balkan Idols—Religion and Nationalism In Yugoslav States.*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Perica, Vjekoslav. 2014. *Religion in the Western Balkans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Petranović, Branko. 1988. *Istorija Jugoslavije—Socijalistička Jugoslavija 1945–1988*. Beograd: Nolit.

Petranović, Branko, and Čedomir Štrbac. 1977. *Istorija socijalističke Jugoslavije*. Beograd: Radnička Štampa.

Radeljić, Branislav. 2009. Two Decades of Academic Debate: Western Scholarship and the Collapse of Yugoslavia. *The Review of International Affairs* 61: 5–29. [CrossRef]

Ramet, Sabrina. 2005. *Thinking About Yugoslavia—Scolarly Debates About the Yugoslav Breakup and the Wars in Bosnia and Kosovo*. New York: Cambridge Uiversity Press.

Rusinow, Dennison I. 1982. Yugoslavia's Muslim Nation. *UFSI Reports* 8: 1–8.

Šušnjić, Đuro. 1997. *Dijalog i tolerancija*. Beograd: Čigoja.

Šušnjić, Đuro. 2004. *Ribari ljudskih duša. Ideja manipulacije i manipulacija idejama*. Beograd: Čigoja.

Ujhazi, Lorand. 2025. The role of institutes of consecrated life in the service of peace. *Estudios Eclesiásticos* 100: 395. Available online: https://revistas.comillas.edu/estudioseclesiasticos/es/article/view/21948 (accessed on 1 January 2026).

Vijesti.ba. 2021. Manastir Žitomislić duhovni centar pravoslavnih vjernika u Hercegovini. *Vijesti.ba*. Available online: https://www.vijesti.ba/clanak/533726/manastir-zitomislic-duhovni-centar-pravoslavnih-vjernika-u-hercegovini (accessed on 12 February 2026).

Vrcan, Srđan. 1986. *Od krize religije k religiji krize*. Zagreb: Školska Knjiga.

Vukomanović, Milan. 2004. The Religious Dimension of the Yugoslav Conflicts. In *The Violent Dissolution of Yugoslavia—Causes, Dynamics and Effects*. Edited by Hadžić Miroslav. Belgrade: Centre for Civil-Military Relations, pp. 129–32.

Zsivity, Tímea. 2025. Oktatás a béke és a megosztottság árnyékában. Bosznia-Hercegovina a daytoni békeszerződés 30. évfordulóján. *Ludovika.hu*. Available online: https://www.ludovika.hu/blogok/ot-perc-europa-blog/2025/12/12/oktatas-a-beke-es-a-megosztottsag-arnyekaban/ (accessed on 28 December 2025).

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.