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# WAR VETERANS IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA: FROM ETHNIC WARRIORS TO AGENTS OF INTER-ETHNIC COOPERATION. HOW TO EXPLAIN THE CHANGE?<sup>1</sup>

Šárka Waisová\*

## ABSTRACT

In this article, the attention is paid to the Bosnian war veterans' organisations. In the post-Dayton period, veterans' associations could be characterized as non-egalitarian structures with strong ethnic ascription reproducing ethnic cleavages and with wide patron-client bonds to the highest level of politics enjoying preferential positions in socio-political and economic life. Today, the majority of veterans' organisations can be characterized as civic oriented NGOs rather inclusive with decreasing importance of the ethnicity as the defining principle, limited preferential political treatment, and with the potential to mobilize across ethnic lines and building cross-ethnic contacts and relations. I searched for mechanisms and processes that produced alternations in the veterans' organisations role and behaviour. The tracing of the political, societal and economic context in and outside of Bosnia and in the population of veterans' organisations discovered the existence of twelve mechanisms which combination and interplay "produced" the change in veterans' organisation's role and behaviour.

**Key words:** Bosnia, war veterans, inter-ethnic cooperation, post-conflict reconstruction

## Introduction

In Bosnia and Herzegovina (herein referred to as BaH or Bosnia), the deep ethnoreligious cleavages of the society and persisting conflict between Muslim Bosniacs,<sup>2</sup> Catholic Croatians, and Orthodox Serbians are repeatedly mentioned as the main issues of concern in the country. Various analysis of

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<sup>2</sup> The name "Bosniac" (*Bošnjak*) is used here to designate the Slavic-speaking Muslims of Bosnia. The term should not be confused with the term "Bosnian" (Bosanac), which applied to all inhabitants of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

political development have evaluated BaH as complex, dysfunctional and made up of an ineffective state structure, lacking typical state competencies and enforcement mechanisms to influence the lower level of government ... and the ethnonational elites have no basic vision of the character and role of the state ... there are few strong internal voices ... able to generate substantive pressure for societal integration that crosses entity and ethnic lines" (BTI, 2016, p. 5 and 14). The Bosnian ethnic segmentation is over institutionalized, politically embedded and as a result getting rid of it is not an easy task. People can hardly escape the ethnic bonds since the latter is much stronger and cohesive than the class or social group.

The ethnic-religious segmentation remains an obstacle for societal development, peace-building, and ameliorating social capital. However, despite the fact that the ethnic segmentation in BaH is politically and territorially institutionalized coupled with the presence of ethnic tensions, the situation is changing. Since the beginning of the new Millennium, a number of protests, movements, groups, projects, and initiatives involving Bosnian ethnic groups all over the country have emerged. One of the significant agents of this interethnic cooperation are war veterans and their associations.

As demonstrated by several scholars (Humphreys, Weinstein, 2007; Söderström, 2015; Themnér, 2013), ex-combatants are a politically relevant group in the society and they are actors in many policy domains in the post-war contexts. The ex-combatants are politically relevant for many different reasons and not just because they can return to arms. They can work as intermediaries in the society as well as offer special interpersonal bonds. In the late 1990s, the war veterans' organisations in Bosnia could be characterized as voluntary organisations with some modernizing effect on the local level, but non-egalitarian, with strong ethnic ascription, wide patron-client bonds to the highest level of politics supporting political parties' nationalistic rhetoric and intolerance and enjoying preferential positions in the political, social and economic life. Their structure and activities cemented the ethnic division of the society and hindered the ethnic and societal reconciliation (Bougarel, 2006, 2007; Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2006; Kostovicova, Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2014; Morattii, Sabic-El-Rayess, 2009). In contrast, today a number of Bosnian veterans' organisations became liberal civic-oriented non-governmental organisations criticizing nationalistic rhetoric of political parties, participating on interethnic communication, organizing activities opened for all fellow citizens and mobilizing and building bridges across ethnic lines. This has been perceived as a

surprising and fundamental change in the deeply ethnically divided Bosnia.

In the country where interethnic contacts are weak, where state authorities have little trust and where people are apathetic, preferring emigration than the active membership in NGOs or protesting (O'Loughlin, 2010; Pickering, 2006; Puhalo, Vukojević, 2015), the interethnic communication supported and led by veterans and their associations could be a positive transformative force. To understand the changes in a deeply divided Bosnia could definitely open the floor for working with veterans' population and also involving them into societal and political transformations such as peacebuilding and reconciliation which is not at its end yet (Inzko, 2017).

The goal of this article is to investigate what – which particular processes and mechanisms – led to a change in behaviour and the role of war veterans and their associations in BaH.

This article will seek an answer in four steps. In the first part, I will offer an explanation for the choice of the method and the research method itself will be introduced. I have decided to use a strategy called within-case empirical process tracing explaining outcome. This method enables the opening of the black box of the interlocking mechanisms, intervening variables and causal processes and to discover how X changed to Y. In this case, "X" are the Bosnian veterans' organisations with strong ethnic ascription, wide patron-client bonds to the highest level of politics supporting political parties, nationalistic rhetoric and intolerance and enjoying preferential position in the political, social and economic life in the late 1990s. Conversely, "Y" shall represent the liberal civic-oriented veterans' organisations and their cross-ethnic cooperative behaviour (Table 1). In the second part "X" will be deeper introduced, particularly the structure, character, behaviour and the role of VOs in the post-Dayton Bosnia. The third part, shall demonstrate "Y", i.e., the evidence of cross-ethnic cooperative civic-oriented activities of the veterans' organisations. Lastly and more importantly, the strategy of process tracing will be employed to discover which processes and mechanisms led to a change in the veterans' behaviour and role. To organize and structure the scrutiny the framework for mechanisms' analysis offered by Tilly (2001, 2004) will be applied.

**Table 1: The research goal**

Empirical observation (X)	? What led to the change ?	Empirical manifestation of outcome (Y)
Veterans' organisations are patron-client on ethnicity based organisations with the preferential treatment in political and economic system and loyal to particular political forces	Mechanism a → mechanism b → mechanism c →	Veterans' organisations are civic NGOs without preferential status confronting assertively the government with the goal to bring attention for consequences of the contemporary politics; ethnicity is not the dominant ascription any more

Resource: Author

## 1 Methodology and Methods

The goal of this article is to open the “black box”, where the causal mechanisms and processes, which led to the change of the role and behaviour of war veterans' organisations (hereafter VOs) in Bosnia are hidden. It is not an easy task to identify the processes and causal mechanisms which led to the change. Despite being in possession of rich literature dealing with issues related to the post-Dayton Bosnia, ethnic conflicts and peacebuilding in ethnically divided societies and about ex-combatants in post-conflict environments, there is still a lack of a framework on how to grasp this particular topic. Currently, only little has been written about the role of social movements and NGOs in ethnically divided societies, particularly their cross-ethnic (or multi-ethnic) capacities (notable exceptions are Touquet, 2015 and Murtagh, 2016). Interestingly, almost nothing has been written about potentially integrative role of veterans' groups. While this research will be informed by existing analysis of ethnic conflicts and social movements, the search for processes and mechanisms which altered the behaviour and role of VOs in Bosnia would definitely need a different approach.

I have decided to employ the empirical process-tracing explaining outcome. It is an interactive research strategy that aims at tracing the complex conglomerate of systematic and case-specific mechanisms that produce the outcome in questions (Beach, Pedersen, 2012). Empirical process-tracing explaining outcome is used for the within-case research where no theory is available and when the building of a theory is not a goal. The process-tracing

explaining outcome works from the outcome to the beginning; the evidences witnessed show that some phenomenon changed during the time (X changed into Y) and the process tracing aims step-by-step to identify what led to what. Process-tracing explaining outcome is thus by nature an inductive and an interpretative methodology. Despite the method is relatively being complicated and risky (more see Schimmelfennig, 2014), it seems to be the most promising in an effort to open the “Bosnian black box” and to discover what led to the change in war veterans’ organisations behaviour and role.

To detect the whole complexity of the processes and causal mechanisms, a combination of several types of evidences are needed. The evidence gives us information about empirical manifestations of processes and each part of the mechanisms (Beach, Pedersen, 2012). When using process-tracing explaining outcome, it is always necessary to collect a lot of data, information, observations and contextual knowledge. For this study, the information and contextual knowledge were collected through a scrutiny of web pages of veterans’ organisations, written documents produced by veterans’ groups (e.g. newsletters), Facebook and interviews with war veterans and the representatives of their organisations. Interview materials were gathered between April and June 2017 in Dobož, Banja Luka (both with Serb majority), Travnik, Zenica (both with Bosniac majority), Tomislavograd and Siroki Brijeg (both with Croatian majority) and Sarajevo, and in February 2018 in Sarajevo and Tuzla. During two fieldtrips in Bosnia 19 representatives of veterans’ organisations and 11 representatives of local municipalities and cantonal institutions were interviewed. I was also privileged to speak to several people from the OSCE (Organisation of Security and Co-operation in Europe) mission in Bosnia and to debate the veterans’ issues with academic colleagues from several Bosnian universities. The interviews with the OSCE representatives and academic colleagues were mainly used to triangulate the information I got from veterans and to get a better contextual knowledge. Further information were found in the archives of local and international newspapers, in the documents and evaluation reports of international as well as Bosnian institutions working with war veterans (and more generally with civil society), in the official documents and press information of cantonal and federal institutions (particularly ministries for veterans’ issues), in the domestic and international reports mapping the transformation of Bosnian military forces and in the web-pages and documents such as newsletters or announcements of local municipalities. Nevertheless, providing answers and analyses to events that

unfolded in Bosnia and concerning the war veterans in Bosnia, its context, participating agents and effects was like putting together one-thousand-pieces of puzzle. The main reason is because the content of a lot of information on Bosnian war veterans has been influenced by “who is speaking to whom for what purposes”.

## 2 War Veterans’ Associations in Bosnia in post-Dayton Period

The VOs in the territory of the former Yugoslavia have a long tradition of existence. The first organisations emerged during the First World War and after the Second World War. However, the arrival of the Communist regime limited the plurality of associations in the country. Under the 1974 Constitution, only the Union of the Associations of Combatants of the Struggle of National Liberation of Yugoslavia (*Savez udruženja boraca narodnooslobodilačkog rata Jugoslavije*/SUBNOR) was allowed to exist. SUBNOR had eight associations – one in each federative republic and one in each autonomous region. After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, SUBNOR also disintegrated and in Bosnia two organisations were established: the Union of Antifascists and Combatants of the Struggle of National Liberation of Bosnia and Hercegovina (*Savez antifašista i boraca narodnooslobodilačkog rata u Bosni i Hercegovini*), currently working in the Federation, and the Union of the Associations of Combatants of the Struggle of National Liberation of the Serb Republic (*Savez udruženja boraca narodnooslobodilačkog rata Republike Srpske*).

Newer veterans’ associations exist next to SUBNOR followers. A wave of VOs emerged during the 1992-1995 war and many others after the Dayton Peace Agreement was signed. There are no official data on the exact number of veterans’ associations in Bosnia, however, based on estimates, there are about 1600 veterans’ organisations present in Bosnia today (Spaic, 2017).<sup>3</sup> There is a high diversity in VOs in Bosnia; some organisations were established based on specific military unit services (the Scorpions, the Green Berets, the Black

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<sup>3</sup> Veterans’ organizations may register on the level of municipality, cantons and of the entity, they even have the possibility to register on all three level in one time. Furthermore, next to organizations taking care of veterans, there is a number of organizations, which take care of wider issues, but their dominant constituency is veterans. Among these organizations we can find various sport and shooting clubs, associations of paraplegics or organizations lobbying for equal rights of handicapped persons.

Swans). Meanwhile, others were established based on specific ethnically based armies (the Army of the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina/*Armija Republike Bosne i Hercegovina*, ARBiH, the Army of the Serb Republic/*Vojska Republike Srpske*, VRS and the Croat Defence Council/*Hrvatsko Vijeće Obrane*, HVO). On the other hand, others were based on relationships with specific local communities (combatants from Krajina, veterans from Celinac), and battlefield (defenders of Sarajevo), while others were based on specific problematics (paraplegics, veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder). Furthermore, there existed VOs based on an occupational principle (the Bosnian railway section of the Unified Organisation of Veterans and the Serbian railway section of the Veterans' organisation of Republika Srpska). Some of the veterans' organisations are managed hierarchically – having local chapters, cantonal headquarters and entity main organisation, while others are fully independent, existing locally in a specific village.

The strongest nation-wide organisations are the Veterans' Organisation of Republika Srpska (*Boracka organizacija Republike Srpske*, BORS), the Unified Organisation of Veterans (*Jedinstvena organizacija boraca*, JOB), the Federation of Demobilized Combatants (*Savez demobilisanih boraca*), the Association of Patriotic War Volunteers and Veterans (*Udruga dragovoljaca i veterana Domovinskog rata*), the Association of Croatian Patriotic War Invalids (*Hrvatski vojni invalidi Domovinskog rata*, HVIDRA), and the Federation of Families of Patriotic War Defenders (*Udruga obitelji hrvatskih branitelja poginulih i nestalih u Domovinskom ratu*). The Veterans' Organisation of the Republica Srpska merged veterans from the VRS, JOB and the Federation of Demobilized Combatants united those from ARBiH and the Association of Patriotic War Volunteers and Veterans. HVIDRA and the Federation of Families of Patriotic War Defenders merged veterans who fought for the HVO.

Initially, VOs had lesser influence in the society. However, an increment in the number of veterans', discharged military personnel after 1995, ill-managed demobilization and reintegration, the organisations became important societal and political agents. They assisted to former soldiers and their families, provided sport events, took care of public places and offered therapy for veterans with handicaps and health problems. But their main positive social role was annihilated by their political engagement. As documented by several analysis (Bougarel, 2006, 2007; Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2006; Kostovicova, Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2014; Obradović, 2016; Poggi et al, 2002; TACSO, 2016), in the 1990s the leaders of VOs had close links to political elites and some political



parties even created their own veterans' organisations.<sup>4</sup> Veterans' organisations were used as "voting machines" (*glasačke mašine*) helping the nationalist political parties to get support during the elections.<sup>5</sup> As the reward and compensation for the political support veterans got flats and houses of refugees, guaranteed places in public administration, preferential access to jobs in kiosks and acquired vital positions in social security system. Veterans' preferential political and economic treatment was confirmed when their organisations got the public beneficial (*javni interes*) status ensuring them the preferential access to money from public budgets (TACSO, 2016).

In sum, veterans' associations in Bosnia in the late 1990s can be characterized as voluntary organisations with some modernizing effect on the local level, but non-egalitarian, with strong ethnic ascription and wide patron-client bonds to the highest level of politics enjoying preferential positions in political, social and economic life and cemented the ethnic cleavages (see Table 2).

### 3 Veterans and their Organisations Today

Since the 1992-1995 war, the ethnic segmentation has been visible everywhere in Bosnia. The domestically driven cross-ethnic activities emerged step-by-step and started in the local communities; there emerged the first multi-ethnic sports clubs for kids and handicapped and several multi-ethnic art camps and summer schools were opened to name a few. Couple of years back, some VOs started opening their doors as well. The key pioneers were mainly local indigenes. These groups collected members and assisted those in need based on their problems rather than on their ethnicity or former military affiliations. However, the activities of local (often one-municipality) organisations had limited

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<sup>4</sup> The (Muslim) Party Democratic Action (*Stranka demokratske akcije*, SDA) in 1998, created its own veterans' association – Federation of Demobilized Combatants. The new organization was intended to be the rival of JOB, which was established in 1994 and had a special relationship with the Social-Democratic Party (*Socijaldemokratska Partija*, SDP). On the local level, the relationship between veterans' associations and political parties is even more complicated: for example in Banja Luka Serb Democratic Party (*Srpska Demokratska Stranka*, SDS) established its local veteran organization (*Organizacija borarca*) to challenge the other local veteran organization (*Concord/Sloga*) which is closed to moderate nationalist parties (Poggi et al, 2002). There also exist local veterans' political parties (for example *Stranka socijalne sigurnosti srpskih boraca* in Baja Luka).

<sup>5</sup> The special relationship between political parties and veterans can be seen during each election; veterans are listed on the top of the parties' electoral lists and parties mobilize veterans as a keystone of their electoral base.

potentials to bring significant changes in relations across ethnic groups.

The transformative period seems to start since 2001. Between 2001 and 2008, the country witnessed its first coordinated veterans' protests and happenings. These events were like a snow ball – originally one particular event in one community emerged and another group of veterans repeated the event to support the fellow veterans and to express solidarity. Protests, particularly those from 2002, 2006 and 2008 lightened up conflicts between the veterans and the main political parties. The veterans protested with slogans targeting corrupt political representatives, the inability of the state to govern the country, checked the social benefits and lastly, they checked the ungratefulness of politicians to former combatants (Spaic, 2017). Despite these protests included diverse societal groups, they still had a limited multi-ethnic character; the joint action was rather rare and the cross-ethnic contacts in the veterans' population were still temporal and occasional.

The first wider action bringing together veterans from all the ethnic groups emerged after the 2010 elections. During this period, the political parties were unwilling to find consensus on the division of ministerial posts and the parliament decided to continue in the reduction of military personnel. The newly retired soldiers did not get any social supports, and consequently, the frustration of veterans' population exploded. As a result, the Federation decided to at least pay some temporal support to those concern. But the Serb Republic left veterans without assistance. In reaction to the situation, the veterans and soldiers from the Federation established a charitable collection of money to help their "comrades" (RFE/RL, 2012). All this was happening in a time when the economic situation in the country was particularly troublesome. Vast number of veterans were unemployed and many had serious problems covering their cost of living (K. Šalaka, personal communication, 2018). Regardless of all the obstacles experienced by the veterans, a significant change was seen when veterans won the support of other social groups: the labour unions, civilian victims, parents of new-born babies and even football hooligans. During the years that followed, a network of reciprocal support developed; the veterans supported the labour unions protesting against the failure of many companies to pay salaries and parents protesting against the inability of the state to accept proper legislations for new-born babies (Rudic, 2013; RFE/RL, 2012). The veterans payed attention to their new contacts across the ethnic lines and stressed their civic character. A lot was spoken about the historical paradox and many veterans protested with slogans on their ability to overcome the ethnic

gaps and the unwillingness of political parties to do the same (Radiosarajevo.ba, 2016).

A next wave of veterans' actions occurred in spring 2012. Veterans from all the ethnic groups united in protests against changes in the system of veterans' social benefits. The main issue was not related to pensions only. Rather it was related to benefits for those that had left the army after 2010, when one Bosnian army was established and a further reduction of a military personnel was decided). During the period, the perspectives of veterans were even more oppressive – the state's debt skyrocketed, prompting the international financial institutions to declare that no loans be offered to Bosnia without deep financial reforms. The central government, the governments of both entities as well as the cantonal governments began a transformation of public expenditures which also included the reduction of veterans' benefits. While the state authorities conceded that all the transformations were enforced by the international community, particularly the Internationally Monetary Fund, the VOs argued the main problem was the weakness of the state authorities and their unwillingness to effectively control the payments of social benefits. During this period, solidarity such as gifts to veterans without funds, joint cross-ethnic commemorative events, join friendly matches and sports games emerged alongside to joint protests (Borger, 2012; RFE/RL, 2012). During these transformative periods, the activities of anti-fascists veterans' organisations (the successors of SUBNOR) increased. Their representatives talked about a multi-ethnic Bosnia and they argued that the Dayton framework was not in conformity with the legacy of the Yugoslavian partisans (Radiosarajevo.ba, 2016). The anti-fascists in cooperation with the SDP, the only non-ethnic political party, and some VOs, organized multi-ethnic events such as joint demonstrations criticizing the human rights abuses in Bosnia or joint sports events (Avdukić, 2016; DEPO, 2017; N1, 2016).

Spring 2014 represented a key period of VOs transformation. Through the year, the veterans organized demonstrations protesting against the worsening of the economic situation, a new legislation reducing veterans' benefits, and against slow reactions of state's institutions on veterans' demands. Veterans were not left alone in such protests and actions. People throughout Bosnia protested against the unsatisfactory economic situation, corruption, the unwillingness of companies and state authorities to pay salaries and against reduction of social benefits (Murtagh, 2016; Touquet, 2015). One of the biggest protests were undertaken to support children of victims of ethnic cleansing and

kids of fallen soldiers. Veterans met parents of newly born kids, state employees, students, orphans, children of victims of the 1992-1995 genocide and labour unions. The country-wide protests resulted in the establishment of twelve democratic plenums in different parts of Bosnia, which discussed the political and economic problems including corruption at all levels of politics in the country. The plenums developed a strong and transformative pressure (called Bosnian Spring, Judah, 2014) which locally led to the resignations of cantonal governments. While the plenums did not survive the year 2014, a number of VOs got strong lessons learned and they also got societal acknowledgement as a solidary social force critical to the government and the political parties. The solidarity which resulted from the spring riots and demonstrations was rather strengthened by an emergency of a flood that occurred in May that year. During the flood, an unprecedented humanitarian assistance between safe areas and flood-stricken communities developed despite ethnicity divides (Bassuener, 2015; UN, 2015). While state authorities failed, the veterans played a significant role in this regard. The spring 2014 was specific for the following reasons (Judah, 2014; D. Šabič, personal communication, 2017):

- 1) a strong solidarity, cooperation and reciprocity between the veterans and their organisations across the country, between veterans' associations and other societal groups and organisations and across the ethnic lines developed,
- 2) the gap between veterans' organisations and political representatives deepened and
- 3) the division between local veterans' organisations and the entity's headquarters grew.

In 2016, the spring of 2017 and in February and September 2018 a joint protests and other cross-ethnic events organized by war veterans continued. During these protests' years, veterans' associations coordinated their activities, and organized themselves on the bases of solidarity in different parts of the country. They protested against the social politics and asked the government to establish one transparent register of war veterans arguing that too many people who benefit from veteran's social budgets never engaged in fighting (RFE/RL, 2018). On the contrary, the government argued that there were too many veterans in Bosnia and veterans' benefits were too generous (Spaic, 2017). Moreover, issues were raised in relation to the government's misinformation on the number of recipients of the veterans' benefits. The transformation of the

veteran's benefits including the strengthening of the transparency of the system were welcome issues that led to the improvement of relations between veterans and fellow citizens across all the ethnic groups. The growing joint actions were followed by activities such as joint veteran's sports games, joint protest camps, joint projects to safe public places or commemorative joint – cross-ethnic – marches (Borger, 2012; RFE/RL, 2012; DEPO, 2017; N1, 2016).

**Table 2: Comparison of the changes in the key features of veterans' organisations**

War veterans' organisations	The post-Dayton period	Today
Composition	Dominantly monoethnic	Predominantly but not exclusively monoethnic
The role of the ethnic identity	The ethnic identity of the veterans is salient and visible	The ethnic identity is visible and relevant but it does not represent the only mean of identification and it can eventually be surpassed
Support	Within the ethnic cleavages	Across the ethnic cleavages maybe even irrespective of ethnic identity
Level of inclusivity/exclusivity	Prone to ethnic exclusiveness	Rather inclusive
Interest/issues/conflicts they represent/engage in	Monoethnic	Common interests beyond the ethnic cleavages
Internal organisation	Based on individuals belonging to one major ethnic group	Predominantly based on individuals belonging to one major ethnic group with growing number of factions formed beyond the ethnic cleavages

Resource: Author

Based on the above evidences, between 2002 and 2018, the behaviour and role of veterans and their associations in Bosnia underwent profound changes. Despite these organisations still mirror the ethnic cleavages and some still with non-civic tendencies,<sup>6</sup> many are changing. They are changing from exclusive

<sup>6</sup> Despite the unprecedented collaboration between veterans during the protests, it was also clear there are big differences between veterans' associations. Organizations working in the Federation were more open to cooperation that the organizations from Republika Srpska, where the veterans' issues were seized by the biggest veterans' organization – BORS. Furthermore, the veterans'

patron-client organisations with non-egalitarian approaches, primarily based on ethno-territorial ascription with a preferential treatment at all levels of politics loyal to kindred nationalistic parties to civilian oriented NGOs with limited preferential treatment, confronting self-confidently political representatives with the goal to bring their attention to consequences of the contemporary policies, mobilizing across the ethnic boundaries and all the civic groups. In the past years, veterans' groups have not only contributed in resolving the immediate crisis, but they have also been involved in reforming the long-term social structures that fostered and perpetrated the ethnic forms of discrimination at the root of the conflict. Despite the fact that many VOs are overwhelmingly monoethnic, their willingness and potential to build bridging capital and cross-ethnic contacts are clearly rising (see Table 2). They are able to build and maintain working relations with each other, with other civic groups and across the ethnic lines.

#### **4 From Ethnic Warriors to Agents of Inter-ethnic Cooperation: How the Change Could be Explained**

The evidences demonstrated above indicate that in two decades, the behaviour and the role of many of the veterans' groups in Bosnia have undergone a significant change and their potential to build cross-ethnic relations and bridging capital have been elevated. The goal of this concluding scrutiny is to detect and debate the processes and mechanisms and their complexity which may help to explain the changes in the role and behaviour of war veterans' associations in Bosnia. To detect them the empirical process-tracing explaining outcome strategy will be used. But as noted by several authors (e.g. Schimmelfennig, 2014), empirical process-tracing is risky, because it can easily sink into storytelling. As a safeguard against it and with the aim to look for processes and mechanisms to keep the analytical social sciences work, I have organized a fourth part based on the useful template offered by **Tilly** (2001, 2004). Each change in politics and actors' behaviour, **Tilly** says, is growing from a unique combination and interplay of three sorts of mechanisms: environmental, cognitive, and relational. Environmental mechanisms are externally generated, influencing conditions affecting social life; cognitive

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organizations in the Serb Republic have different position in the social and political life – many of them have still special status, which ensure them the financial support from governmental authorities.

mechanisms operate through alterations of individual and collective perception, relational mechanisms alter connections among people, groups, and interpersonal networks (Tilly 2001). As a result, the analytical part will be structured into three sections, each searching for a particular group of mechanisms.

## **5 Environmental Mechanisms**

The basic idea behind the analysis of environmental mechanisms is that “context matters” (Tilly, Goodin 2006). Environmental mechanisms are externally generated and they have influence on conditions affecting social life, which are linking up macro and micro processes and events. They create the social context, which is understood as enabling/hindering changes and socio-political processes. In this present case, the question is, what changed outside the veterans’ associations themselves, what consequently influenced and changed the veterans’ behaviour and role? I will search for the environmental mechanisms outside Bosnia and within Bosnia.

When analysing the space outside Bosnia, two processes had the capacity to influence the change of behaviour and role of war veterans:

- 1) the growth of the international economic institutions’ pressure on Bosnia to reduce the public expenditures, and
- 2) the socio-political changes in the neighbouring countries.

Since 1995, Bosnia has been challenged with economic problems which have deepened during the world economic crisis. Bosnia was not able to bridge the problems without the assistance of the International Financial Institutions, which alone challenged by the world economic crisis pressured the Bosnian political representatives to reduce the public debt and implement wide economic reforms (Obradović, 2016). After years of domestic negotiations, reforms aimed at reducing the public expenditures including the social benefits for veterans were accepted and implemented (Prijedlozi ..., 2017). The reforms worsened the already oppressive economic situation of veterans’ population and veterans started to organize the country-wide protests which included VOs irrespective of their ethnic background. The decline in economic situation of the veterans was also linked to the political changes in the neighbouring countries – Serbia and Croatia. During the 1990s, Bosnian Croats and Serbs maintained close political and financial ties with Croatia and Serbia. These ties later fragmented after significant political transformations in both countries and BaH had to compete

for aid and investment, instead of relying on Belgrade or Zagreb for continued support (Dudley, 2016).

It should be noted that in the post-Dayton period, the VOs were pampered by political representatives in an exchange for their political support and their patron-client relationship was embodied and deeply institutionalized in the system and the political culture. This situation changed at the beginning of the new Millennium. The veterans' benefits were cut, many VOs lost their privileged status, and the highest political representatives largely ignored veterans' demands. This was not only due to the pressure from the International Financial Institutions to reduce the public expenditures. It was also due to the rapid rise in a number of veterans and retired soldiers after the unified armed forces of BaH were established in 2006<sup>7</sup> and the rise in disagreements among political parties (UNDP, 2009; PrismResearch, 2015). Based on the peace agreement, Bosnia was administered by the Office of the High Representative (OHR). The authority of the OHR has been step-by-step decreasing since 1995 and forwarding to the Bosnian institutions. 2006 was a year of milestones. During this era, the first phase of the constitutional reform finished and the OHR transferred a big package of its authority to the Bosnian institutions. In the second half of the 1990s, the political parties in Bosnia argued that all the problems Bosnia was facing had resulted from the OHR mismanagement. However, after 2006, it was clear that domestic politics was to blame for the problems. This was because political parties were incapable of building the government, the ministries were weak and slow and the governments hazarded with the state budget (BTI, 2016). All these led to a radical decrease in the trust of the population, in the state authorities and as a result a wide fatigue and frustration spread over Bosnia (UNDP, 2009).<sup>8</sup>

These years were especially hard for the veterans' population. While internally displaced persons, refugees and families of civilian victims of the war got a lot of support from the International Community, the veterans were

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<sup>7</sup> In 2003, the armies of the Federation and that of the Serb Republic had 18,800 soldiers. The new joint armed forces were planned to recruit 10.5 thousand people (About AF BiH, non-dated; World Bank, non-dated).

<sup>8</sup> As mentioned above, the trust in the political parties and the state authorities have been steadily decreasing in Bosnia since the middle of the 1990s. Public opinion survey organized from the periods just before the Bosnian Spring erupted indicated that, only 14 percent of the people believed the political parties, meanwhile, 25 percent believed the cantonal governments (PrismResearch, 2015). In 2017 82 percent of Bosnians did not trust the government (Balkan Opinion Barometer 2017).



abandoned and deprived from such benefits and many of them fully dependent on their families, the state and their municipalities (Bougarel, 2007; K. Nedžad, personal communication, May 10, 2017). Furthermore, many veterans suffered from health problems, massive unemployment, from the loss of societal recognition as a result of new cases of cheating with social benefits and veterans' pensions and from the loss of houses and flats gained from political parties in the post-Dayton period (this was based on the OHR new property law). Since 2010, there have been retarded pensions and social benefits payments and the state institutions were not able to take decisions for the support of newly discharged military personnel. Coincidentally, based on the Constitutional Court decision, the extensive power of entities was reduced and cantons and municipalities gained new authority including greater financial autonomy. Consequently, to decrease the public expenditures, a number of municipalities reduced their financial support to NGOs including VOs and decided to transform the management of local public affairs. These reforms included among others the reduction of a number of chairs for VOs on the municipal and cantonal levels. The reaction of veterans was surprising, many of them, particularly on the local level, decided to share their representatives in negotiations on the municipal and cantonal level and they coordinated their pressure and confronted the nationalist political parties (Ahatović, 2016; Boračka udruženja ..., 2016; Puhalo, Vukojević, 2015).

In sum, the outside-of-Bosnia processes combined with the situation in the country resulted in a new socio-political and economic situation for the whole of Bosnia; no significant political and economic support was delivered to particular ethnic or societal groups and the political as well as the economic situation of all the citizens was similarly frustrating. The protests since 2006 in Bosnia remind us that, the frustration and equality in poverty united and gave Bosnians the opportunities to experience the feeling of their social equality (Nikolaidis, 2014; Žižek, 2014). When people demonstrated in spring 2014, they held banners with these words "we are hungry in three languages" (Nikolaidis, 2014).

## **6 Cognitive Mechanisms**

A cognitive frame is a mental structure which situates and connects events, people and groups into a meaningful narrative in which the social world that one inhabits makes sense and can be communicated and shared with others. Within a cognitive frame, as Tilly (2001) notes, cognitive mechanisms operate through

alterations of individual and collective perception. Cognitive mechanisms are micro-foundation of our perceptions and social participation. Particularly in ethnic conflicts social-psychological perceptions, emotions and subjective experience play a central role. The perception of others is a powerful framework to understand a situation and the change of the perception of others as enemies and evils are seen as ways to change the pathologies in the society, cross cleavages between groups and open the door for reconciliation. How the perceptions of war veterans in the society and the perceptions of war veterans themselves did undergo the change, will be analysed here.

Bosnian combatants have assimilated into the war family. The practices and beliefs of the fighting faction, including violence and struggle have become a normal routine in Bosnia. Loyalty to the war family have been visible all around the veterans' population for years (Bougarel, 2006; Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2006). The former combat experience gave veterans the social status and voice within their own ethnic community. Conversely, in the post-Dayton years, the preferential status of veterans' associations, the patron-client relations between veterans and political parties and the rise in number of cases when ex-combatants (sometimes alleged) misused the social benefits, harmed the reputation veterans had in their communities. Around 2001, the perception of war veterans and their associations started to change. The growing dissatisfaction and frustration in the veterans' population resulted in the activation of local VOs and in unprecedented solidarity across the ethnic and social lines. The veterans' funds were established based on private donations mostly coming from fellow veterans. They coordinated their pressure *vis-à-vis* political representatives and started to confront the nationalist political parties (Puhalo, Vukojević, 2015).

Furthermore, the weakening of the state institutions and the reduction of public expenditures transformed the VOs into social service providers. In many municipalities, particularly in rural areas, veteran's associations became the only agents assisting former soldiers and their families offering e.g. therapy for those with mental or physical problems. These local bonds and the services provided in the name of the community gave rise to their strong local legitimacy and trust. Despite nationalism still being a dominant force in Bosnia, many local veterans' organisations have ignored the nationalistic logic (Spaic, 2017); despite not being multi-ethnic, they have often shown multi-ethnic experiences by practicing inter-ethnic contacts on a daily basis. The trust in the veterans' population rose when they criticized the excesses and corruption in veterans'

benefits and lobbied for one transparent register of war veterans (Obradović, 2016).

Moreover, news stopped showing veterans as warriors, war crime offenders, “voting machines” (*glasačke mašine*), corruptionists and party collaborators. Instead, veterans were rather shown as ordinary persons with many problems similar to problems of other citizens of Bosnia (see e.g. European News Monitor, <http://emm.newsbrief.eu>). Furthermore, VOs were seen as domestically driven grass-root groups. This was high value in the time when international projects and donor driven activities started to be criticized for their unequal approach to the different groups within the Bosnian society and consequently for cementing the ethnic cleavages (Pickering, 2006; Puhalo, Vukojević, 2015, p. 60-70). The improvement of veterans’ image also went hand-in-hand with an increasing interest of veterans in various non-veteran issues. The veterans supported the railway labour unions protests and that of parents of newly born kids without identification numbers (RFE/RL, 2012; Rudic, 2013).

In the new Millennia, VOs were (next to labour unions), the only ones capable of widely mobilizing the population and developing political pressure. They were well equipped with a bottom-up strategy, and had a stable social base. Concurrently, a number of veterans were able to get control of important positions including non-political jobs and roles such as in local communities (*mjesne zajednice*).<sup>9</sup> In Spring 2014, a positive public image of VOs was strengthened during the May flood emergency. The local veterans’ organisations and the AFBiH country-wide were the only bodies to provide assistance to the affected areas (Bassuener, 2015; UN, 2015). Additionally, in Spring 2014, local VOs had better reputation than corrupt politicians and incompetent state institutions (PrismResearch, 2015). People stopped viewing veterans as those having special profits and better positions within the society. Veterans were seen as the same losers as other Bosnians sharing demand for justice with other people within the country. The desire for a political stability and prosperity

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<sup>9</sup> While with the collapse of the communist system in Yugoslavia the influence of *mjesne zajednice*, as the basic structure of managing local communities, decreased, on the edge of the new Millennium they again won attention. Municipalities as well as international donors support the revival of *mjesne zajednice* as the basic working structure in dysfunctional and over-complicated post-Dayton political system. Consequently, the veterans’ activities in *mjesne zajednice* got new impetus.

became the dominant priority in the society (Nikolaidis, 2014).<sup>10</sup> The change in the public perception of ex-combatants may be connected to the change in attitude in the 1992-1995 war. The war history was drowning with the new experience of post-Dayton Bosnia and fundamental daily problems Bosnians had to cope with (UNDP, 2009).<sup>11</sup>

To sum up, the weakening of the privileged position of almost all VOs and their ability to reach consensus within veterans' community and with other groups in the society and their civic solidarity, helped veterans win public trust, improve their image and consequently, shifted their identity in order to empathize with those of other identities and united in joint action. Veterans defined themselves using civic criteria and made claims on behalf of their and whole society interest against the corruption, ethno-nationalistic political actors and ineffective state. For many veterans, the veterans' identity and the feeling of solidarity and equal citizenship became stronger than ethnicity.<sup>12</sup>

## 7 Relational Mechanisms

The last significant processes important for changes in the role and behaviour of actor can be found within the relational mechanisms. The relational mechanisms alter connections among people, groups, and interpersonal networks and changes social relations. In the post-Dayton period, the VOs were embedded in the political networks being clients and loyal partners of nationalistic political parties. Within their own ethnic groups, they were highly respected and seen as heroes having strong reputation based on the assistance to former soldiers, their families and local communities; but they were also criticized for their preferential status in the system of social benefits and their pro-ethno political, nationalist and anti-reconciliatory activities. But

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<sup>10</sup> While only 39 percent identified that nationalism of other ethnic groups as a challenge in 2014, 88 percent respondents believed that the most serious problems Bosnia was challenged with were the political elites and 66 percent believed it was due to a weak and corrupt justice system (PrismResearch, 2015; UNDP, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> While in 2005, more than 50 percent of the people believed the results of war influenced their daily lives and it is not possible to forget, three years later only 30 percent of people believed in this (UNDP, 2009, p. 44).

<sup>12</sup> The overall change is visible in all society, particularly among Bosniacs and Croats. For 82 percent of Bosniacs and 60 percent of Croats is being the citizen of BaH more important than to belong to their ethnic community. The different attitude can be observed by Serbs; while 11 percent of Serbs in BaH find the citizenship of BaH important, 65 percent believes the most important is to belong to the ethnic community (PrismResearch, 2015).

what can be observed and documented since 2001 is the step-by-step change in the relationships between veterans' associations on one hand, and ethno-political parties and society on the other hand; the previously autonomous patron-client connections were destructed, the relationship between veterans and political representatives broken up, and the local VOs empowered. These changes grew from the set of processes in the politics, society and within VOs themselves.

The veterans argued that the political parties left veterans and misused their issues (Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2006). After the 2010 elections, on the one hand a number of veterans' associations declared a break up of any connections with political parties, on the other hand some political representatives labelled veterans as subversive forces disrupting the social order (Obradović, 2016). Coincidentally, there was an absolute lack of any social networks in Bosnia and the VOs were in many municipalities the only ones capable of preventing the social exclusion of some groups or individuals. During a short time, the VOs became the rivals of the political elites on the local level. Many of them won the image of the only actor who reflected the need of the local population and who was interested in its daily problems (Puhalo, Vukojević, 2015). Local veterans' groups challenged the political parties as well as the big VOs and their headquarters. The veterans were associated with solutions of the everyday problems of the community, while the headquarters with high political games.

In the society, where politics is generally associated with dirt (Bosnians say "*politika je kurva*"/politics is the whore), the separation of VOs from political parties and political networks helped veterans to integrate into the broader social fabric. It is rather impossible to explain the divorce between the ethno-political parties, veterans and the empowerment of the VOs on considerations of political and economic frustration alone. Social surveys (O'Loughlin, 2010; UNDP, 2009) have indicated that, Bosnian men are more active in societal and associational life than women, older men have much wider social links and interethnic friendship than women or youth, are more optimistic about the future economic development of the country and are more open to building interethnic contacts. All this probably helped the veterans to open the door to participate in communal life.

The divorce between the political parties and the VOs was accompanied by the emergence of the new veterans' groups which did not want to be connected to political parties and veteran party politics of the past (e.g. the Veterans of the Serb Republic/*Veterani RS* in 2013). These organisations opened a debate on

the goal of VOs and their relations with the state authorities (Glassrpske.com, 2013; Pilipović, 2017). In sum, while nationalist parties rejected the multi-ethnic heritage of pre-war Bosnia, veterans' organisations became civic forces with wide relations across ethnic and social lines and participated on the cultivation of the image of "Brotherhood and Unity" (*bratrstvo i jedinstvo*).<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

As observed by scholars as well as conflict resolution practitioners (Humphreys, Weinstein, 2007; Söderström, 2015; Themnér, 2013), ex-combatants are a politically relevant group in society and the object of a lot of policy in post-war contexts. The significance of veterans and ex-combatants for the post-conflict reconstruction and sustainable development was widely considered and reflected within United Nations, World Bank, development institutions as well as within academic research. In this article, the attention was paid to the Bosnian war veterans and their organisations. The Bosnian war in the first half of the 1990s is considered as one of the most serious violent conflicts in the post-Cold war period and the brutal experience of ethno-religious hatred. In the 1992-1995 Bosnian war, three ethnic armies and several ethnically based paramilitary units, which captured several generations of men, fought each other. After the war ended, veterans became one of the most significant socio-political groups in Bosnia (Bougarel, 2006, 2007; Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2006; Kostovicova, Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2014). In the present research, I paid attention to changes in the role and behaviour the VOs in Bosnia underwent in the last two decades. While in the post-Dayton period, veterans' associations could be characterized as non-egalitarian structures with strong ethnic ascription reproducing ethnic cleavages and with wide patron-client bonds to the highest level of politics enjoying preferential positions in political, social and economic life and having support within their ethnic groups. Today, the majority of them can be characterized as civic oriented NGOs rather inclusive with decreasing importance of the ethnicity as the defining principle, limited preferential political treatment, and with the potential to mobilize across ethnic lines and building cross-ethnic contacts and relations (see Table 2). This transformation is not only interesting but it is important in the context of post-

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<sup>13</sup> "Brotherhood and Unity" was a popular slogan coined during the 1941-45 war by Yugoslavian partisans, later by Tito and by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. It evolved into a guiding principle of Yugoslavia's post-war inter-ethnic policy.

Dayton (re)construction of Bosnia. Bosnia still copes with ethnical cleavages, which handicap the everyday life, and the functioning of the state is paralyzed by ethnic disputes. Understanding the changes in the VOs role and their behaviour would increase our understanding of the transformations the contemporary Bosnia is undergoing and facilitate the work of the domestic actors in peace-building. In this article, I searched for mechanisms and processes that produced alternations in the VOs role and behaviour. The tracing of the political, societal and economic context in and outside of Bosnia and in the population of VOs discovered the existence of several – together twelve – mechanisms (see Table 3) which combination and interplay “produced” the change in veterans’ organisation’s role and behaviour.

**Table 3: The mechanisms that produced alternations in veterans’ organisation’s behaviour and role**

<b>Environmental mechanisms</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Economic decline and the rise in economic frustration in the society</li> <li>- Achievement of social and economic equality (“we are hungry in three languages” and “nobody gets anything”)</li> <li>- Political changes in neighbouring countries</li> <li>- Weakening of the state institutions</li> </ul>
<b>Cognitive mechanisms</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Change in reputation and public image of veterans’ organisations</li> <li>- Strengthening of veterans’ organisation’s local legitimacy and trust</li> <li>- Transversalism</li> </ul>
<b>Relational mechanisms</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Destruction of patron-client relations between veterans and political establishment</li> <li>- Divorce of veterans’ organisations and nationalistic political parties</li> <li>- Creation of shared representations of various veterans’ groups on the local level</li> <li>- Rise in social interactions and contacts across ethnic and social lines</li> <li>- Integration of veterans’ organisations into the wider social fabric</li> </ul>

Resource: Author

Within environmental mechanisms, I identified four mechanisms (see Table 3, second row), most of them working within Bosnia. Even when all of them are important and linked together, from those four I would consider the achievement of social equality and justification of social policy as the most important. The social equality and social policy in the Bosnian case means that there are no big economic gaps between ethnic and social groups (everybody is poor), all ethnic and social groups have similar (similarly poor) prospect for improvement of the

situation and nobody has a better access to the system of social benefits (the benefits are generally poor). While the achievement of social equality and economic justice as an important element in the post-conflict reconciliation and reconstruction was mentioned by several scholars and peace practitioners (Gurr, 2001; Collier, 2001), in the Bosnian case it has not been mentioned at all. The social and economic inequalities emerged in the system of post-war rewards: veterans rewarded by the political parties, refugees, internally displaced persons and civilian victims of the war supported by international donors. This system of favouring some groups over others maintained and recycled war and post-war groups characteristics: ex-combatants, civilian victims, survivors of the genocide, refugees etc., and fatally slowed the post-war reconciliation. The termination of the system would be one step to open the door for arise in the interactions across all groups and to eliminate a particular group identity.

Within the cognitive mechanisms three mechanisms were identified (see Table 3, fourth row): one within the veterans' population, two outside the VOs. In this regard, people have multiple and hierarchical identities. During the post-Dayton period, the most prioritized identity within the veterans' population was the ethnic affiliation. Nowadays, ethnicity is lower on the list, supplemented by the identity of the former combatant, men in need and citizen of BiH. "Transversalism" looks at what can be observed in Bosnia in the last years (Murtagh, 2016). It is a situation in which individuals and groups in a diverse setting unite for shared purposes, without forgoing their own distinct identities. Individuals remain rooted in their own identity and community background while being able to shift in order to empathize with those of other identities and unite in joint actions. The change in identities is linked to a change in values within the whole society with transformations of social relationships and institutional culture. The other two mechanisms work beyond the VOs, even when narrowly connected with them. Veterans' groups won trust across the society and image of those who care and are solidary. As already discussed by many (Pickering, 2006; Poggi et al, 2002), trust is a key element for a society to work smoothly and for the emergence of bridging social capital within a society.

The third groups of mechanisms include the so-called relational mechanisms. Five of them were identified as robust and decisive in the process of change of VOs behaviour and their role in Bosnia (see Table 3, sixth row). Two of them – destruction of patron-client relations between the veterans and the political establishment and the divorce between veterans and nationalistic



political parties – were decisive to open the floor for other changes in relations within society and for renegotiation of identities (more to the issue see e.g. Howarth, 2002). This was important for a change in the public image of the VOs and consequently for the increase in trust. The loss of preferential status, the divorce between veterans and political parties and transversalism opened the floor for veterans to cultivate the interactions and contacts across ethnic as well as other social lines and to integrate into the wider social fabric. Veterans did not draw their strength from cultural and historical bonds anymore, but from associational ones.

In sum, the tracing of the situation in Bosnia and of the war veterans' associations showed that the first impulse for the change in the role and behaviour of veterans' organisations in the social and political life of Bosnia came outside the veterans' populations – loss of the privileged political, social and economic status. It was the frustration from the new situation combined with other processes and new social context in Bosnia that triggered a transformative snowball process resulting in the change of war veterans. They changed from ethnic warriors to agents of inter-ethnic cooperation.

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