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**DEBATE ABOUT PERSONALITY AS A FACTOR
IN MODERN BOSNIAN HISTORY**
An Assessment of Historiography in Bosnia and Herzegovina*

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Abstract: This paper discusses three major political biographies published recently in Bosnia and Herzegovina about Mehmed Spaho, Džemal Bijedić and Alija Izetbegović. Author analyses their methodological approaches, sources, narratives and impact by combining his own views with critiques published in Bosnia and Herzegovina and abroad. By such an approach author offers latest insight into modern Bosnian historiography.

Key words: Modern Bosnian History, History of Historiography, Mehmed Spaho, Džemal Bijedić, Alija Izetbegović.

Apstrakt: Rad raspravlja o tri političke biografije objavljenje u skorije vrijeme u Bosni i Hercegovini o Mehmedu Spahi, Džemalu Bijediću i Aliji Izetbegoviću. Autor analizira metodološke pristupe, izvornu podlogu, narative i utjecaj navedenih biografija zajedno sa vlastitim, ali i drugim kritičkim osvrtima objavljenim u Bosni i Hercegovini i drugdje. Takvim pristupom autor nastoji ukazati na stanje u savremenoj bosanskohercegovačkoj historiografiji.

Ključne riječi: Savremena bosanskohercegovačka historiografija, historija historiografije, Mehmed Spaho, Džemal Bijedić, Alija Izetbegović.

When written and published in 1994 by Sakib Đulabić, a jurist and former secretary in the cabinet of Mehmed Spaho, a book called *Korijeni i budućnost savremenih Muslimana – Od Spahe do Alije (Roots and the Future of Modern [Bosnian] Muslims – From Spaho to Alija)*,¹ made no significant impact in

¹ *Conference paper presented at International Symposium “Bosnia and Herzegovina and Alija Izetbegović: from Past to Present”. Istanbul: FSMVU, May 10-11, 2018. Đulabić, S. 1994.

Bosnian historiography.² Nevertheless, the book itself opened up a new round of debates about the ongoing war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the question of survival of Bosnian Muslims thus exposing an interesting historical line from Mehmed Spaho, a key political figure in Bosniak political life during the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes/Kingdom of Yugoslavia to Alija Izetbegović, President of Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina at that time (during 1990-ies). Even though book is more like a historiographic pamphlet when juxtaposed to critical historiography, it made us think of an assessment of historiography in Bosnia and Herzegovina today.

Therefore, main goal of this paper is to add another aspect of valorization of historiography in Bosnia and Herzegovina and to debate furthermore the personality as a factor in modern Bosnian history. By doing so, I shall discuss a couple of political biographies treating important figures in modern Bosnian history such as Mehmed Spaho,³ Džemal Bijedić,⁴ or Alija Izetbegović,⁵ and their impact in Bosnian historiography in order to analyse and better understand the idea of leaders and/or leadership promoted in those biographies as well as to point out the idea of opposition to abovementioned figures. Namely, each of the abovementioned figures certainly had an alternative opposition figure during their political career so it would be extremely significant to analyse this aspect of their political activities in order to get more comprehensive view about those personalities in modern Bosnian history. Hence, this paper tends

² Bosnian historiography started its development after Second World War as main institutions (University of Sarajevo, Institute of History, Institute of Oriental Studies, etc.) were established in late 1940-ies and during 1950-ies. In order to understand the basic idea of this paper, one should know that modern Bosnian historiography until 1990-ies developed under the circumstances of communist rule in Yugoslavia and Bosnia and Herzegovina thus making majority of research dedicated to communist aspects of modern Bosnian history such as “development of working class“ in certain period in history, treatment of communists during interwar period, rule of communists in Second World War uprising etc. Nevertheless, during 1970-ies and 1980-ies Bosnian historians published cutting edge books about political life in interwar period of all political parties, including Communist party, but non-communist parties as well. For more detailed overview of development of Bosnian historiography see: *Savjetovanje o istoriografiji Bosne i Hercegovine (1945-1982)*.1983. Also see: *Referati podneseni na međunarodnom naučnom skupu* “Historiografija o Bosni i Hercegovini 1980.-1988“. 2000. 47-473.

³ Kamberović, H. 2009.

⁴ Kamberović, H.2012. Also see: Kamberović, H. 2017.

⁵ Mulaosmanović, A. 2013. Also see: Mulaosmanović, A. 2017.

to analyse importance of abovementioned political figures in history as well as impact of their historiographic biographies to overall contemporary Bosnian historiography.

I

In order to follow the abovementioned concept of selected biographies, I shall now present key points of biography of Mehmed Spaho written by Bosnian historian Husnija Kamberović, a book which had very positive reception in Bosnian historiography.⁶ Modern Bosnian historiography, regional as well, follows the pattern of a traditional approach when it comes to analysis of modern Bosnian history thus presenting a political biographies of prominent political figures as a tool for understanding major political paradigmes such as nation-building, war and peace making, political and economic development etc. By such an approach and with a detailed contextualization, always needed in situations like those, one can achieve an incredible results. By writing biography of a prominent political figure, historians also give an important input in historiographical understanding of a certain time and space. Therefore, political biography as an approach is very present, visible and to a certain extent highly desirable. This argument, for instance, explains how American historiography is well marked by writing biographies of US presidents and other prominent politicians thus making it a kind of a specific genre. The case of Bosnian historiography is even more specific as political biographies as a genre are not as present as one might expect it to be. More importantly, it is much harder to find research based and worthy biography. Nevertheless, by presenting some lately published examples, one could easily claim that even such hard position can be changed. Additionally, there are several other reasons why this Kamberović's book about Mehmed Spaho stands out with its significance. Within the system of disorted values in the social, economic, political, even academic life, or transitional times as it can be described as well, publishing research based books becomes truly valuable act. By writing a political biography of Mehmed Spaho, one of the most prominent Bosniak political figures during the 20th century, Husnija Kamberović applied a model hitherto used by some other historians within which "historical documents speak of the political activity of Mehmed Spaho".⁷ At the same time, we must

⁶ *Prilozi*, 38 (2009): 283-285. Also see: *Gračanički glasnik*, Year XIII, No. 28 (2009): 126-129.

⁷ Kamberović, H. 2009. 9.

say that there are other models of writing biographies as well, but a biography based on primary archival sources basically guarantees a product worth of historiographical assessment. This book about political activities of Mehmed Spaho is primarily based on archival sources kept in collections of archival funds from Sarajevo & Banja Luka, but as well as on the on-time press, among which we highlight *Pravda* – an official paper of his political party – Yugoslav Muslim Organisation (JMO). By such an approach, Husnija Kamberović managed to avoid unnecessary repetition of what has been known about Mehmed Spaho so far and opened a space for more profound understanding of key points in his lifetime. However, another thing related to this book seems to be very significant. Namely, it is a widespread belief among ordinary Bosniaks that “all of their major political leaders in the 20th century ended up their lives as victims of a certain type of conspiracy”.⁸ Additional debates on these topics not only contributed to more objective view of the historical facts, but rather very often to driving public’s attention in the wrong direction. For this particular reason, Kamberović decided to “offer a political biography based on proven sources” as highlighted in the Introduction, leaving the assumptions and unfounded romanticism beyond the scope of this book.

The book is composed of four major chapters each of them exploring four major “time bounds“ of Yugoslav history in the interwar period. Therefore, first chapter outlines political activism of Mehmed Spaho until the end of the Great War (1914-1918) where author Kamberović describes Spaho as a young politician who began working as a Secretary of the Chamber of Commerce in Sarajevo, after being educated in Vienna and his activity as a representative in the Sarajevo City Council where Spaho put together his political engagement and economic endeavours. An analysis of Spaho’s speeches held during City Council sessions points out his political talent and art thus showing a much larger political career ahead of him.

The uncertainty of the Great War, war problems in general, and the ongoing process of post-imperial state and legal frameworks for South Slavic peoples are actually difficult circumstances and the context in which Mehmed Spaho sparked his political skills. By 1920-ies, after joining newly formed Yugoslav Muslim Organization (1919) Spaho quickly became an undisputed party leader as can be seen in election results held in 1923. By advocating

⁸ Ibid, 10.

autonomous political position for Bosnia and Herzegovina within “its historical borders“ which was main political goal of his party along with the struggle for “Muslim interests“, Mehmed Spaho built well known political approach which defined him as an experienced political leader. Spaho held several ministerial posts in a couple of Yugoslav governments but used to resign from ministerial posts in certain occasions as a tactical move, either to extort approval for political projects he previously advocated or to silence inter-party opposition and additionally strengthen his position in the party. By such an approach Spaho developed representative political tactics which led his party to a position of the strongest Bosnian political option in the 1927 parliamentary elections in Yugoslavia.

During the dictatorship era in Yugoslavia, introduced by King Alexander Karađorđević in 1929, Mehmed Spaho reduced his political activities to minimum as all political parties or civil society institutions with ethnic, religious or territorial adjective were officially banned, but was very cautious for any attempt of political and public action seeking an opportunity for submission of his own views all the time keeping private contacts with political actors almost all over Yugoslavia. In post-dictatorial context, after 1934 when King Alexander was murdered in Marseille while paying official visit to Republic of France, Mehmed Spaho reactivated his political party and by joining a newly established political project – Yugoslav Radical Community led by future prime minister of Yugoslavia, Milan Stojadinović – Spaho became one of three major political actors in the Yugoslav government and remained politically active until he died in 1939.

As this book is not only directed towards parliamentary and governmental activities of Mehmed Spaho, Kamberović reflects also about his personal and social connections with Islamic religious community in Yugoslavia as well as about Spaho’s role in Sarajevo social life. As almost any other politician of his time, Mehmed Spaho also gained a sustainable social and political support by extending a network of his own relatives and political allies across political, social and economic spectrum not only of Sarajevo, but much broader than that. Still, an appointment of his brother Fehim Spaho to position of supreme spiritual leader of Yugoslav Muslims, that is to say to position of Grand Mufti (*rais-al-ulama*), brought him more opposition among potential voters thus leading to more visible political differentiation among Bosniak political landscape of that time. Leading figure of opposition

to Mehmed Spaho became Hakija Hadžić, a person who would become more known because of his role during the Second World War when Hadžić joined political movement within the Independent State of Croatia (1941-1945), a German puppet state in the Balkans.⁹

However, in spite of all circumstances, Spaho still remains the most important figure in Bosniak political life during the first half of the 20th century whose main political achievements could be described as trying to get the best possible for the community he was representing in given circumstances and book by Husnija Kamberović is an example how this idea of community leader is represented in historiography. Additionally, Kamberović argues that Spaho could be easily compared to Anton Korošec, a leader of Slovenian Peoples Party, who was also known to be wise and pragmatic politician. Speaking out of the position of a community leader, Spaho knew well that it was not possible to achieve all his Party's political goals and programs, but he also knew that a million votes he had behind was still a significant factor in political life and he knew how to use it. To sum up, with this book, besides having an excellent political biography, we are sure to argue that this could also be a kind of historiographical sign-mark to follow.

II

Second figure and a political biography I would like to present here is political biography of Džemal Bijedić by Husnija Kamberović, same author who wrote a couple of biographies thus becoming a "historian – biographer", as described in weekly press a couple of years ago.¹⁰ During 2017, when one hundred years passed since the birth of Džemal Bijedić (1917-1977) and forty years since he died in a plane crash near Sarajevo. For this sake, Husnija Kamberović published second and partly supplemented edition of his book about Džemal

⁹ For detailed elaboration about political relations in Yugoslav Muslim Organization during 1930-ies see: Hasanbegović, Z. 2012.

¹⁰ When first published, book about Džemal Bijedić recieved many positive critiques thus leading to second edition very soon after. For positive critiques see: *Prilozi*, 42 (2013): 268-272. Also see: *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3, (2015): 270-271. Nevertheless, second edition also had positive impact in Bosnia and Herzegovina but abroad as well. See: Duranović, A. 2017. 5-6. Also see: *Montenegrin Journal for Social Sciences*, Vol. 1, Issue 2 (2017): 255-259; *Radovi Filozofskog fakulteta (Historija, Historija umjetnosti, Arheologija)*, Vol. 5 (2018): 369-373.

Bijedić. One could easily praise this fact since Bosnian historiography lacks multiple-publishing acts of a single book. Interestingly, books which I am discussing here are a kind of exception. Bijedić's political biography was first published five years ago, had many public presentations and positive reviews thus foreseeing second edition to come. Additionally, author managed to conduct further research about Džemal Bijedić, especially about his role in post-Second World War establishment of communist rule in Bosnia and Herzegovina thus challenging narratives in Serbian historiography about Džemal Bijedić's "key role in establishment of post-war torture methods in prisons".¹¹ As it was the case for the first edition of the book, Husnija Kamberović once again proved to be a devoted research historian – whose presence in the national archives in all post-Yugoslav republics is visible in his papers and books.

Political biography of Džemal Bijedić in second edition kept the same chronological structure thus tracing back family roots of Bijedić family and Džemal Bijedić himself since he was born in 1917. Even though that majority of this volume is about Bijedić's political activism after Second World War, especially during 1960-ies and 1970-ies, a careful reader of this book can see Džemal Bijedić as "a ragged boy from Mostar in 1920-ies, a rebellious young man and communist during 1930-ies, soldier and officer during 1940-ies, post-war politician, world-known statesman, and at the same time ordinary man in shop, a pleasant interlocutor, a faithful husband, and above all, known to be 'our Džema' as he was nicknamed". This could partly explain the fact that this book, even though being strictly historiographical, is also popular among non-historians. All of abovementioned aspects of Bijedić's life are well funded and structured in a way that each chapter can be read a separate text as well. To sum up the structure, this biography is consistently and effectively presented story of life and death of Džemal Bijedić.

As mentioned previously, a larger part of the book is dedicated to Džemal Bijedić's political activism after Second World War, when he progressed from position of Communist party administrative official to become prime minister of Yugoslavia during 1970-ies even though this progress had certain opposition within the Communist party.¹² Bijedić's climb up in the

¹¹ Kamberović, H. 2017. 7.

¹² Kamberović, H. 2010. 115-134.

Communist party hierarchy is very often cross-referenced with his early and young days details thus exposing us a specific character which marked him until his death. Still, what Bijedić was best known to the general public is not his early age, but quiet the opposite, it is the time when he acted as an educated and mature man, a party official, politician and a statesman. This can be best shown in the last phase of his life when Bijedić practically became a world-known figure of Yugoslav politics, just a step behind undisputed Yugoslav leader, Josip Broz Tito.

Major collection of archival data about Džemal Bijedić brought together after years of research and narrated in this book gives us an opportunity to have almost a complete insight in all aspects of his political activities thus making this book a desirable to be read not only by historians, but also political scientists, sociologists, lawyers and, as mentioned previously, by much wider audience. Additionally, the book is enriched with a multitude of photos that follow the narration in a way which one just may wish to have, that is to say, we can see Bijedić in different situations, from early age to memory sites and statues devoted to him after his tragic death in plane crash during flight from Belgrade to Sarajevo in 1977. The last, but not the least, final chapter of this book is a collection of personal memories of Džemal Bijedić's closest relatives, collaborators, associates and friends. By bringing all those materials together author managed to offer a unique presentation of political biography of a truly unique personality. All the above mentioned thoughts and reflections on Džemal Bijedić as presented in this book could be summarized in just a few major sketches. Author Husnija Kamberović, know to be also historian – biographer, spent almost a decade collecting archival documents about Džemal Bijedić, exposed his ideas and dilemmas among professional historians, debated his arguments with students and peers and wrote a book, a consistent biography worthy of a personality whose name it has as a title.

Political scientist Hamza Karčić argues in his review that „Bosnian historian Husnija Kamberović's political biography of Bijedić is the most serious work to date about the life and politics of this Communist official. Kamberović conducted impressive archival research in Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia and has analyzed primary and secondary sources pertaining to the Communist regime in Yugoslavia“.¹³ Furthermore, Karčić claims that despite of not using some

¹³ *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3, (2015): 270-271.

foreign sources like “published volumes of the *Foreign Relations of the United States series*, Kamberović has done a commendable job of piecing together a narrative based on serious archival work”.¹⁴

III

Finally, as a third example in this paper, I shall now briefly present main structure, aims and goals of a book about Alija Izetbegović written by historian Admir Mulaosmanović. First presented as research project in the Institute for History in Sarajevo, and as PhD project in University of Zagreb, Croatia, it was published a few years ago and represents a first document – based historiographical elaboration on Alija Izetbegović by professional historian.¹⁵ Of course, some other authors have written and published popular, sociological, journalistic or even philosophical papers and books about Izetbegović, but Mulaosmanović’s book has historiographical approach and method and therefore should be taken into account in comparison with previously elaborated biographies. As it can be noticed, this book is partly different compared to previous ones as author focuses and discusses the most important decade in Izetbegović’s life, from 1990 to 2000, that is to say from winning chair in Bosnian Presidency until withdrawal from political life in 2000. Mulaosmanović claims that main objective of his work was to analyse political activism of Alija Izetbegović in this decade – “probably, one of the hardest decades in Bosnian history ever” and moreover, author wanted to analyse whether Izetbegović had “clear political ideas and goals or he had to manage the situations mostly created by neighbouring countries, Serbia and Croatia, and International community as well”.¹⁶ By doing so, Mulaosmanović offers Izetbegović’s views from Bosnian, regional, sometimes global, but also very local and inter-Bosniak perspectives depending on certain situation elaborated across the book. Book elaborates on Alija Izetbegović’s political actions concerning the dissolution of former Yugoslavia, independence of Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Izetbegović’s concepts of multi-ethnicity in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Having Izetbegović’s ideological background on his mind, Mulaosmanović offers dilemmas which Izetbegović certainly had ahead

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Gračanički glasnik*, Year XIX, No. 37 (2014): 248-250.

¹⁶ Mulaosmanović, A. 2013. 7.

of him, especially in the eve of brutal war against Bosnia and Herzegovina. Therefore, book consistently offers main political actions as a context where Alija Izetbegović acts or is forced to act, sometimes even against his own will. Hence, the dynamics of peace negotiations during the war and the role of International community towards Bosnia and Herzegovina, Izetbegović's position and claims during Dayton peace negotiations in 1995, as well as post-war Bosnian political and state architecture, are major chapters of this book, each of them elaborated and based on wide range of primary and secondary sources. In all of the abovementioned situations, Izetbegović is portrayed in the context of his motives, wishes and abilities.¹⁷ Book also contains details about inter-Bosniak debates between Alija Izetbegović and his closest collaborators and later opposition politicians, such as Adil Zulfikarpašić, Rusmir Mahmutćehajić or Haris Silajdžić. This aspect of book might be a starting point for more serious analysis of Bosniak post-communist politics even though some steps have already been taken.¹⁸

One of the main conclusions of Admir Mulaosmanović's book about Alija Izetbegović is that Izetbegović had to act from a "powerless position" thus making all his decisions very inter-debated and therefore Izetbegović acted as cautious politician during the elaborated decade. Hence Mulaosmanović claims that Alija Izetbegović was not able to perform his political vision substantially. Furthermore, author claims that Izetbegović is the most important Bosniak political figure in the 20th century despite all circumstances. His decade, Mulaosmanović argues, is still known for major achievements such as independence of Bosnia and Herzegovina, reintroduction of ethnonym Bosniak for Bosnian Muslims, overall freedom for Bosniak community and Muslims in general – at least in those territories where Izetbegović had effective rule.¹⁹

As mentioned previously, Mulaosmanović's political biography of Alija Izetbegović had positive critiques and within one of them, another Bosnian historian Adnan Jahić claims that "Mulaosmanović's book marks the beginning of a serious research and fills the gaps of Bosnian historiography about last decade of the 20th century". Jahić argues furthermore that Mulaosmanović

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Filandra, Š. 2012.

¹⁹ Admir Mulaosmanović, 2013. 8.

has successfully portrayed all aspects of Izetbegović's personality, from human-rights fighter to world-known national leader and a statesman as "Mulaosmanović has covered most of the relevant facts that explain Izetbegović as a personality, his ideas and ideals, vision, commitments and the context of his decisions and attitudes" whereby author often used Izetbegović's original speeches to argument his views. Even though the author himself has noticed that his book about Alija Izetbegović is not meant to be a "final thought" about Izetbegović himself, Jahić still claims that Mulaosmanović managed to give a "comprehensive book about Alija Izetbegović as a thinker, philosopher, politician and a leader" which should serve as a basis for future research of the same or similar topics.²⁰

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Having said all this and having future in my mind, as a historian I should claim that all of the books elaborated here are an important step in further development of Bosnian historiography. As it could be seen throughout this paper, Bosnian historiography is still developing methodological approaches in order to introduce a role model for better understanding of modern Bosnian history. Hence, each step taken in this road needs further assistance and additional remarks. Therefore, this paper could be understood as an added value to already existing models of research. As for the future, I argue that major step forward would be development of comparative studies on certain aspects of Bosnian history. For instance, comparison between Mehmed Spaho and Alija Izetbegović is not only possible, but needed as well. This becomes extremely important if we re-enact some models for comparison as both of the abovementioned leaders led major political parties in multi-party parliamentary systems, unlike Džemal Bijedić who was member of Communist party in a single-party communist Yugoslavia. Furthermore, both Spaho and Izetbegović were seen as "Muslim leaders" whose main political agenda relied upon positioning of Bosnia and Herzegovina within Yugoslav borders, or outside of Yugoslavia, as in case of Alija Izetbegović. Unlike them, Džemal Bijedić actively participated in less democratic but politically more stable circumstances when communist Yugoslavia was worldwide known leader of Non-aligned movement. Additionally, Spaho and Izetbegović acted during major global turbulences as Spaho became politically active in post-imperial

²⁰ *Gračanički glasnik*, Year XIX, No. 37 (2014): 248-250.

context and in the aftermath of the Great war, while Alija Izetbegović actively participated in Yugoslav political life during the collapse of communism in Europe and witnessed the winds of change of a global scale. More similar comparisons could be made for all three major political figures. Hence this paper should be viewed as an option for additional comparative research of modern Bosnian history.

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Sažetak

RASPRAVA O LIČNOSTI KAO FAKTORU MODERNE BOSANSKE HISTORIJE

Ogled o savremenoj bosanskohercegovačkoj historiografiji

Rad je zamišljen kao ogled o pojedinim pitanjima savremene bosanskohercegovačke historiografije prezentiranim kroz različite diskusije o faktoru ličnosti, pojedinca i njegovoj ulozi u savremenoj bosanskohercegovačkoj historiji. Polazište za ogled o ličnostima i načinima na koje su historioграфски elaborirani bilo je povezivanje značaja Alije Izetbegovića na kraju 20. stoljeća sa Mehmedom Spahom na početku 20. stoljeća, kako je to učinio Sakib Đulabić u knjizi bez naročitog historioграфskog odjeka. Otuda je autor ovim radom želio pokazati kako se, u drugačijem kontekstu i jasnom namjerom da se pojedine ličnosti detaljnije historioграфски obrade, mogu razvijati historioграфске diskusije i pristupi čiji krajnji cilj može biti razvijanje komparativnih pristupa u izučavanju, ali isto tako ukazujući na činjenicu da je neophodno prethodno provesti temeljita historioграфска istraživanja zasnovana na raznovrsnoj izvornoj podlozi, ali i različitim, zašto ne reći i netipičnim, autorskim pristupima. U cilju prikazivanja različitih mogućnosti, autor se odlučio uporediti političke biografije Mehmeda Spahe, Džemala Bijedića i Alije Izetbegovića te ukazati na pristupe, izvornu podlogu, metode te na to kakve su bile reakcije, prije svega, stručne javnosti izvodeći iz navedenog potencijalne smjernice za dalja komparativna istraživanja.