



ORIGINAL PAPER

## The Past in a Museum. Example of the Museum of Literature and Performing Arts of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo

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**Abstract:**

Public museums operate on behalf of public administration, both at the central and local levels. They perform many functions. However, the key area of their activity is education (historical, patriotic, etc.). Museum narratives are therefore a tool for memory politics. This is emphasized by the content and way of presenting information about the past. The article is the result of research conducted at the Museum of Literature and Performing Arts of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo in May 2023 as part of a grant awarded under the PROM Program – International Scholarship Exchange of Doctoral Students and Academic Staff. Based on narrative analysis and informal interviews, the text discusses the character of the content presented in this institution and draws attention to its political contexts.

**Keywords:** *past, memory politics, museum, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo.*

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## **The Past in a Museum. Example of the Museum of Literature and Performing Arts of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo**

### **Introduction**

The past is a key element of individual and collective identity. For this reason, history and the discourses related to it are popular areas of scientific research. As an integral part of everyday life, it evokes emotions that lead to discussions, disputes, and even conflicts. Most of them concern current memory resources and their interpretation. For these reasons, past continues to arouse interest among researchers representing not only the humanities but also the social sciences. The crisis of European democracies, which has been observed for many years, confirms the validity of the slogan "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past" (Orwell, 2021: 37). Although it describes literary fiction, it accurately illustrates politicians' attitude to history as an instrument for achieving their goals. It should be noted, however, that conducting the memory politics (also called politics of history) is also a form of implementing other types of policies – it is a part of them, intertwines with them, and uses their instruments. Museums are an example – their activities are a tool for implementing, among others: historical, cultural, scientific, and educational policy.

My research aims to explore the issues of memory politics not only in the theoretical but also empirical sphere. This is the purpose of choosing the case study method – the research concerns the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>2</sup> after the conclusion of the Dayton Peace Agreement (December 14, 1995). The research is accompanied by hypotheses: public museums operating in the state support the implementation of the goals of ethnic politics of history; institutions located in the Federation of BiH present a Bosniak<sup>3</sup> narrative, while those operating in Republika Srpska – a Serbian one; public museums serve selective and ethnic historical education; museums in BiH create/strengthen myths about martyrdom, which increases tensions in a multi-ethnic society burdened by the past. The presented text is the result of pilot research conducted at the Museum of Literature and Performing Arts of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo. Its goal was to prepare further parts of the research process. The pilot also allowed me to answer the following research questions: What events and people does the content presented in the Museum refer to? Does it present an ethnic interpretation of the past? If so, which group does this apply to? What is the purpose of the narrative – to unite or divide society? Does it involve referring to political and social phenomena? Which ones?

The following article indicates aspects of the past presented in the Museum and their connection with current discourses of memory. The most important part of the study was a query conducted in May 2023 as part of the PROM Program. It aimed to learn about the Museum's attitude towards the past, including the relations between the ethnic groups living in the country. During the stay in Sarajevo, the content of permanent and temporary exhibitions was analyzed, and a library search and interviews with employees were conducted, among others, with the director of the Museum, Mrs. Šejla Šehabović.

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<sup>2</sup> Administratively, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) consists of two entities – the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) and Republika Srpska (RS) – as well as the Brčko District (DB) established in 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Two similar adjectives are used in the text – Bosnian (referring to Bosnians, i.e. inhabitants of Bosnia and Herzegovina regardless of their ethnic and religious affiliation) and Bosniak (describing Slavic Muslims, one of the ethnic groups and a constitutional nation).

As mentioned, the past is a factor that has a huge impact on shaping our identity and, consequently, our social and political views. Public institutions constantly (re)interpret historical events and processes, controlling our knowledge about the past. It is based on the stories presented to us. Their structure affects how we perceive them and the extent to which we accept them as our own. The political potential of narrative as a tool for preserving knowledge (imaginings) about the past was interestingly described by Olga Tokarczuk. In her Nobel lecture, she pointed out that narrative is a factor that determines the survival of the memory of a given event. The lack of stories about it causes it to disappear. The narrative is therefore a source and tool of power for the one who creates it (Czermiński, 2020). Although historical events and processes are objective facts, the authorities always strive to obtain a monopoly on their interpretation and even (re)construction. Serbian anthropologist Srđan Radović pointed out that public space (e.g. urban space) is full of messages. They are transmitted by, among others, architecture, monuments, and museums (Radović, 2013).

The role of history in social life depends on political views – for conservatives, the past is the base of the community. According to Andrzej Nowak, the politics of history is a manifestation of the interest of the authorities of a given political entity in promoting a specific way of understanding its past. One of its tasks is to create national mythology – positive characters (heroes) most often appear in ancient times, while newer ones are shown negatively. In this way, the government emphasizes its efforts to restore the community's lost glory. Nowak noticed the educational role of memory politics, the aim of which is to shape citizens following the needs of the authorities. In his opinion, proper conduct of politics enables dialogue about the future, including objective discussion and exposure of historical distortions. However, people in power must be careful – the past may be a tool for manipulating society and spreading propaganda (Nowak, 2016). The risk of turning history into a political weapon is particularly high in the case of unstable states, with weak or façade democracy.

The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina is unique – some researchers call it a dysfunctional state – its authorities are unable to fulfill all the tasks set before them. At the same time, it is indicated that the state's activities are becoming politicized and have a nationalistic character. To some extent, Carl Schmitt's analysis of the state ↔ political relationship can be recalled here. He stated that elements of state activity overlap with the manifestations of social life. As a consequence, areas such as culture and education lose their neutrality, i.e. they cease to be apolitical. The state takes control over all areas of social life, which exposes them to politicization. The state itself takes on a total character (Schmitt, 2012). However, Bosnia and Herzegovina can hardly be considered a total state. On the contrary, the central authorities do not control the entire territory, its administration or scientific and cultural institutions operating there. Many responsibilities were taken over by entities (constituent parts of the state – the Federation of BiH and Republika Srpska) – which proves the weakness of the central government rather than its strength.

Internal divisions and conflicts have both political and social dimensions. This is reflected not only in the functioning of public institutions but also in the entire society. Everyday life in Bosnia and Herzegovina and relations with neighboring countries are still saturated with messages referring to historical memory, mainly related to the war of the 1990s. Narratives about the past are present in various aspects of social life. The past has a huge impact on the identity of the inhabitants of today's Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is constructed by politicians who use various tools to convince individuals that they

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belong to a given community. Building national (or ethnic) identity is based on martyrdom themes, which require the existence of spaces that preserve memory. These include cemeteries, monuments, plaques, and other forms of commemoration, which Pierre Nora described as "lieux de mémoire", or sites of memory. These are primarily places covered by the martyrdom narrative which serve to commemorate the victims. Another example of a site of memory that creates narratives about the past is museums.

It is assumed that a museum is a cultural and scientific institution focusing on researching the heritage of a given community. Its special feature is the non-profit principle, which means that the museum does not aim to make financial profit, but works for the benefit of the general public. The following consequences result from this: openness and accessibility for everyone, as well as participation in the promotion and introduction of an inclusive model of public institutions. The museum should operate without interruption. However, there are numerous cases of museums that have suspended their activities for objective political or economic reasons. The National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo operated despite the siege of the city but was closed in 2012 due to a lack of funding sources. The institution reopened after almost 3 years. Museums are widely recognized as exhibition institutions. However, their work is much more complicated, and presenting exhibitions is only one, not necessarily the most important of their tasks.

Concerning artifacts (objects included in collections), the main functions of museums are:

- to collect items,
- to store them,
- to classify and catalog them,
- to conserve them,
- to research them,
- and to expose and show them to the public (Kaczmarek, 2018).

Taking into account the above-mentioned criteria, it should be emphasized that

Museums are more than repositories of the past, with memories and objects both rare and beautiful. Museums are cultural, educational, and civic centers in our communities [...] museums increasingly serve as gathering places, as forums for their communities. The exhibitions presented and the range of materials incorporated into collections reflect the multiple voices, needs, and interests of individual communities (Pitman, 1999: 1).

The phenomenon observed at the end of the 20th century is still growing – museums are considered attractive spaces for spending free time. Visitors are attracted not only by exhibitions but also by lectures, workshops, and events such as the (Long) Night of Museums. Another important element of the new museology strategy is the digitization of collections and the extensive use of multimedia tools. Many museums have shops and cafes that encourage visitors to extend their visit and get to know the museum from a different perspective.

Museums are associated with the presentation of visual content. Its perception by the visitor is subject to automatic selection of his eyesight. Although he initially looks at the entire exhibition, he evaluates it and chooses elements that deserve special attention. The viewer does not skip the rest of the exhibition but gets to know it in a selective, even limited way (Mordyński, 2015: 143). Noticing this mechanism allows us to see how important the conscious process of constructing an exhibition and adapting it

to the viewer is. Museums strive to engage visitors more fully in learning about the exhibitions. Their narratives change. Curators abandon scientific vocabulary and add a whole set of elements that enrich the visitors' experience. The range of influence on guests has been expanded by telling stories through images, sounds, and even smells. However, new ways of presentation serve traditional purposes of museology, including education. Narrative museums still are used to conceptualize pride, fears, and trauma, and thus to shape collective memory. As Ljiljana Radonic wrote

The struggles over hegemony, attempts to install one's own narrative about the past as the history, shape the formation of memory, memory politics, commemorative trends, and museums, the latter being understood as a central mnemopolitical field. They unfold at all levels – from individual to collective memory, to national and international planes (Radonić, 2023: 130).

Such a wide use of museums in memory politics means that, despite social changes, they still serve to achieve political goals.

Olga Tokarczuk noticed that we tend to use proven, old narratives. She emphasized that we lack new ones that would better describe the world around us (Czermiński, 2020). Although her statement concerned literature, it can also be applied to museology. From the point of view of linguistics, visiting is about seeing and learning. Today's museum visitors want more. They expect not only information but also active participation in the museum experience (Niezabitowski, 2015). There is an ongoing dispute regarding the participation of visitors in the process of shaping museums. This is related to the growing conflict between the vision of the visitor as the recipient of the prepared message and its co-creator and interpreter. However, it seems that the future belongs to a museum created for and by visitors.

Marek Cichocki pointed out that the memory of the past is one of the foundations of the identity of the community and the state it creates. Both the past and the memory of it are political issues for which the authorities are responsible. This topic should also be present in everyday life as the basis of social discourse (Cichocki, 2005). The key importance of history for building and maintaining the community's identity makes it necessary to cultivate the memory of the losses and failures. Suffering shapes and unites members, therefore there can be no reconciliation with an aggressor who ignores it (Cichocki, 2008). All parties to the Bosnian War – Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats – to largely share a similar view. This is reflected, among others, in the content presented in the museums they run. Their narratives are strongly linked to the collective memory of the community, including mythology. Magdalena Rekšć noticed that the myth, although referring to the knowledge about the past, is not a faithful reflection of reality (Rekšć, 2010). For this reason, the politics of history is not so much an appeal to facts as a way of using the memory for political purposes.

The involvement of museums in political activities has many faces. They began to control our perception of reality and teach us about our identity. Museums show us who we are, but also indicate who we should not identify with. The involvement of museums in identity formation processes means that they are at serious risk of being politicized and manipulated by other institutions. This results both from their dependence on public administration bodies that supervise and finance them and from having too much autonomy. The ambiguity of legal regulations in Bosnia and Herzegovina causes the authorities to subjectively decide on supporting museum activities. The document of key importance for the functioning of the state – the Dayton

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Agreement – addressed the issue of cultural heritage only in Annex No. 8 regarding the Commission for the Protection of National Monuments. Art. VI indicates that both movable and immovable objects, such as architectural objects and works of art, may be recognized as monuments of national importance (Dayton Agreement, 1995). The functioning of museums is therefore regulated at lower levels of administration, e.g. cantons.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is sometimes described as a dysfunctional state. This is evidenced by the chaos in shaping collective memories, as there is no common state memory that all ethnic groups would agree with. Ljiljana Radonić stated that all participants in the war of the 1990s shaped their image as victims. Croats, Serbs, and Bosniaks accuse each other of crimes and deny the accusations of committing them. In this narrative, nations refer to the history of the Holocaust, in which a given ethnic group considers itself Jews while its perpetrators are compared to Nazis (Radonić, 2023: 130-131). Sarina Bakić pointed out that there are three main (ethnic) visions of the "truth" about history. The past still influences the functioning of the state, preventing it from overcoming social and economic difficulties. Development and "moving forward" require deep cooperation with other countries in the region – which is hampered by unresolved memory conflicts. However, museums are becoming important links in the reconciliation process. They operate in this field both independently and in cooperation with other institutions from the Western Balkans. Their task is to look critically at existing historical narratives, as well as to create new ones. This not only facilitates understanding of the past but also indicates values that better meet the requirements of reality and will be accepted in a post-conflict society (Bakić, 2021: 349-350).

The administrative and legal chaos prevailing in Bosnia and Herzegovina is manifested, among others, by activities of cultural institutions, including museums. The system of supervision and financing of this type of facilities by the central and local authorities is still unclear. In practice, museums seek support from every possible source. The fact is, however, that many of them have problems with maintaining accounting liquidity (e.g. payment of salaries). Therefore, cooperation with partners from abroad, mainly from European Union states, is an important support. It enables both the co-financing of projects implemented by museums and the promotion of their activities abroad. This is a huge opportunity that gives hope for increasing European interest in the issues of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as building a positive image of museums. They operate despite the difficult financial situation and extensive bureaucracy. It is worth noting here that the unclear form of linking museums with public administration bodies results in quite high autonomy and freedom of action. However, the lack of transparency and stability in these relationships creates the risk of future government interference. An important change regarding the most important cultural institutions in Sarajevo was the adoption of a special law in 2024, under which the Canton of Sarajevo will be responsible for their financing. The Museum of Literature and Performing Arts is among the nine distinguished institutions. Thanks to this, its existence is temporarily secured.

However, museums still face many problems. Sarina Bakić wrote that  
In the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, after a terrible war and post-war challenges, there are still no conditions for creating new cultural concepts, including policy on museums, especially from the point of view of treating them as the 'new educational institutions' (Bakić, 2021: 354).

The ethnic education system indoctrinates students following the national interest. Instead of respect and attachment to universal values such as justice, it appropriates them and considers them the property of a given ethnic group (Bakić, 2021: 354).

The Museum of Literature and Performing Arts of Bosnia and Herzegovina is a unique institution because it deals with fields that are relatively rarely musealized<sup>4</sup>. Unlike most museums dedicated to literature and theater, the Museum in Sarajevo is devoted not to a single artist or movement, but to the broadly understood history of literature and performing arts in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Museum was established in 1961. Soon, the scope of its interests expanded to include theater activities, thanks to which in 1977 it gained its actual name – the Museum of Literature and Performing Arts of BiH. The seat of the institution is located in the Skarić family house, built in the mid-19th century. The estate was then taken over by the Despić family. A characteristic element of the building's façade decoration is a bas-relief with a genre scene depicting birds drinking water. Its author, Iva Despić, is considered the first academic sculptor in the history of Bosnia, while the stylized image of the bas-relief is the Museum's logo. The facility aims to present the biographies and works of writers and theater artists. The mission of presenting the history of theater in Bosnia and Herzegovina was highlighted during the renovation of the permanent exhibition, which was carried out on the occasion of the 55<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the institution. The exhibition presents the profiles of 10 writers and 9 theater artists. Their diverse ethnic and religious origins depict the rich history of the lands of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is worth noting, however, that for most of its functioning, the institution did not attach particular importance to women's literary works (Šehabović, 2016).

The most famous figure whose life and work are presented in the Museum is the 1961 Nobel Prize winner in literature, Ivo Andrić (1892-1975). It is worth emphasizing that he donated it to the development of libraries in Bosnia and Herzegovina. One of the most valuable exhibits of the Museum is the manuscript of his novel *The Bridge on the Drina*. The writer Rodoljub Čolaković claimed that Ivo wanted it to become the property of the Socialist Republic of BiH (Šehabović, 2016). However, Andrić is a controversial hero – Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats consider him a compatriot and downplay his connections with other ethnic groups. Although the Museum of Literature maintains objectivity and neutrality, content about Andrić presents him as a Bosnian (common) writer. This is evidenced by the fact that his work is embedded in the history and culture of Bosnia.

Alenka Bartulović, however, pointed out that, according to many researchers, Ivo Andrić effectively adapted his work to the expectations of those in power. Moreover, he created an ambiguous image of his identity. Declaring belonging to different environments justified his different attitudes, enabling the author to have a successful literary career (Bartulović, 2017). The writer's behavior gives a wide scope for interpretation and assessment of both his work and his private life. Bartulović pointed out that some Bosniak nationalists accuse him of hostility towards Islam (Bartulović, 2017), which automatically removes him from the group of outstanding representatives

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<sup>4</sup> Examples of museums dealing with similar topics include the Adam Mickiewicz Museum of Literature in Warsaw (est. 1950), the Theater Museum in Warsaw (1957), the Museum of Romanticism in Opinogóra (1961), the Centre for Polish Scenography in Katowice (1991), the Pan Tadeusz Museum in Wrocław (2016), as well as the Bjørnson house in Aulestad (1934), the Frédéric Mistral Museum in Maillane (1944) and the Moomin Museum in Tampere (1987).

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of the Bosniak nation.

The structure of the permanent exhibition described above (as well as the topics of temporary exhibitions) confirms that the content presented in the Museum is dominated by narratives about heroes. These are selected representatives of the artistic and literary community. Their selection serves to emphasize the multicultural interpretation of the history of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is illustrated by the choice of Isak Samokovlija (1889-1955), with Bulgarian-Jewish roots, or Mak Dizdar (1917-1971), who referred to the history of medieval Bosnia in his works. An important element of the stories presented in the Museum is the idea of transformation. This is manifested both in the part referring to the history of the institution – the aspirations to establish a museum, expand its collections, create a part dedicated to theater – and in the noticeable transition from the idea of Yugoslavism (unity of the South Slavs) to patriotism in the Bosniak (ethnic) and the Bosnian (universal) versions. An important role here is played by the narrative about the power of culture as a factor that binds society together and allows it to survive the most difficult moments. A clear example of its use is a fragment of the exhibition telling the history of the Sarajevo War Theater. Operating since August 1992, this institution has become a valuable part of the cultural life of besieged Sarajevo. Its functioning confirms the psychological importance of art, especially theater, as a form of support for people experiencing the horror of war.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the high level of museums' independence is not due to the autonomy of science and culture but to the low interest of the central and local administration. The Museum of Literature and Performing Arts enjoys relatively much freedom from political pressure. The content presented in the institution is most often neutral. Moreover, the application of the Western European model of museology opened it up to new, previously overlooked topics. The Museum is paying more and more attention to the biographies and works of women. However, the observed increase in the popularity of feminist narrative is not intended to introduce any ideology, but to make up for the backlog in the study and presentation of women's literary and theatrical achievements. Another aspect emphasized in the Museum is the positive dimension of multiculturalism. In this context, exhibitions and publications contain manifestations of Yugonostalgia – a sentimental (often idealized) longing for Yugoslavia, in which Sarajevo stood out as an important cultural center. The influence of the Western approach to museology is also visible in the interdisciplinary nature of exhibitions and organized events. Openness to international cooperation is manifested in relations with foreign institutions – in 2023, cooperation with the Samokov Historical Museum in Bulgaria (research on Isak Samokovlija) and the Adam Mickiewicz Museum of Literature in Warsaw stood out.

### **Conclusions**

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a country with a complicated history that continues to shape political and social life. Carl Schmitt stated that nations and their states rise and fall. Some are powerful, while others are weak, fragile, and destined to be replaced by stronger ones. However, he added that the most important thing is to strive for internal unity. The philosopher was also aware that it is much easier to establish cooperation in the field of economy than in politics. Schmitt also noted that maintaining political unity requires an effort that societies are not always capable of (Schmitt, 2012). While his opinion may seem harsh and even aggressive, it can be applied to Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is a state divided both politically (into ethnic administrative areas called

entities) and socially (ethnically, religiously, etc.). Disputes and conflicts of memory are expressed in contradictory contents of history teaching programs and museum narratives. Internal relations are confusing and prevent the consolidation of society and the building of a strong and cohesive state.

In these circumstances, the activities of the Museum of Literature and Performing Arts of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo should be evaluated positively. It strives to be not only a center for the study of Slavic literature but above all – an inclusive nationwide exhibition institution. Most often, the content is presented objectively and neutrally. The narratives focus on the biographies and works of the most important literary authors, as well as people representing the theater community. The desire to show the richness of the state's multicultural heritage, which includes the achievements of representatives of different ethnic, religious, and political groups is visible. The content emphasizes the positive sides of the past – the most important is the sentiment towards Yugoslavia – Yugonostalgia. Previously ignored topics (including women's creativity) are also gaining importance.

In a few cases, the ethnic (Bosniak) character of the exhibition is emphasized. This is most clearly manifested in the context of Ivo Andrić's work and the circumstances of obtaining the manuscript of his novel *Bridge on the Drina*. The exhibition dedicated to the Sarajevo War Theater and the role of culture in the lives of the inhabitants of the besieged city is patriotic, although somewhat camouflaged. Although in the Museum of Literature, you can find elements talking about sacrifice and martyrdom during the Bosnian War, it should be emphasized that it is present in many museums throughout Bosnia. Sarajevo still bears traces of a several-year siege (April 5, 1992 - February 29, 1996). It is therefore not surprising that such an important and long event occupies a special place in stories about its past.

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