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Is It Always Us or Them: How Do Young Serbs and Bosniaks Perceive Intergroup Borders?

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Borders draw from the idea of distinctiveness. We are not what they are. We are the positive pole; they are the negative one.
(participant from Novi Pazar)

The region of the Western Balkans dwells in a long and lasting history of interethnic and interreligious conflicts, intolerance, and misunderstandings. Conflicts in the 1990s left vast and harmful consequences on intergroup relations in this region: ethnic and religious stereotypes and distance between different groups in the region, as well as ethnocentrism, although in a slight decline after the 1990s, have remained very high and prone to sudden changes (Bizumic, Duckitt, Popadić, Dru, & Krauss, 2009; Ivanov, 2008; Kalaba, 2013; Majstorović & Turjačanin, 2013; Petrović, 2004; Popadić & Biro, 2002; Turjačanin, 2004). Although formally supported by national laws and often recognized in the constitutions of the newly formed countries, ethnic minorities that continued to live outside of the country of their ethnic origin (e.g., Croats and Bosniaks

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in Serbia or Serbs and Bosniaks in Croatia) have typically remained unintegrated and discriminated against, as well as socially deprived with unequal access to resources (Bieber, 2004; Matković, 2006).

One of the major ethnic minorities in Serbia are Bosniaks, a South Slavic ethnic group defined by its historic ties to the region of Bosnia and Herzegovina, traditional majority adherence to Islam, common culture, and Bosnian language. According to the last census of population, there are more than 140,000 Bosniaks living in Serbia (Statistical office of the Republic of Serbia, 2011). They represent 2.02 percent of Serbia's population and its third largest ethnic minority after Hungarians and the Roma people. In Serbia, Bosniaks dominantly inhabit the Sandžak region in the south-west of Serbia, where they form a regional majority (Statistical office of the Republic of Serbia, 2011). The Sandžak region hosts the largest Bosniak population outside of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The town of Novi Pazar is the Sandžak region's capital and a cultural center for Bosniaks in Serbia.

The relations between the dominant Serb majority and the Bosniak minority remain complex more than 20 years after the violent conflicts in ex-Yugoslavia, and easily become fueled in the contexts that make certain identities salient. According to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), individuals can develop two principal identities: a personal self, which encompasses unique, idiosyncratic information about themselves, and a collective or social self, which encompasses information about the social groups, such as religious or ethnic, to which they belong.

The social self is one of the most important factors influencing intergroup relations, as it has been shown that the desire for positive social identity makes people evaluate one's own group (e.g., national, religious, or ethnic group) more favorably compared to other groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Furthermore, according to the social dominance theory (Pratto, Korchmaros, & Hegarty, 2007; Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), this "ingroup favoritism" and biases towards outgroups (e.g., idealistic perceptions of own group and derogatory image of others) are more likely to be expressed if an ingroup is dominant rather than subordinate, therefore deepening the gap between

majority and minority groups in a given context. These tendencies are also confirmed in the context of Serbia, where research considering the social distance between Bosniaks and Serbs in Serbia shows that young Serbs generally demonstrate a relatively large social distance towards Bosniaks, especially with regard to close social relations (e.g., Ivanov, 2008; Kalaba, 2013; Milošević, 2004; Radenović & Turza, 2007). For example, in a study conducted in 2003, 73.1 percent of Serbs reported that they would not marry a member of the Bosniak ethnic group (Milošević, 2004). Correspondingly, research studies on ethnic stereotypes in Serbia, following the end of the conflict, indicated that Serbs held negative stereotypes towards Bosniaks: they typically described them as primitive, dishonest, not fond of other ethnic groups, dirty, and rude. At the same time, Serbs described themselves in a highly favorable manner: as hospitable, proud, sensitive, brave, and fond of other peoples (Popadić & Biro, 2002). There was a black-or-white perspective: the majority members (i.e., Serbs) idealized their own group and perceived the minority group (i.e., Bosniaks) as extremely negative. Research also shows that there are different patterns of social identifications in majority and minority groups. For instance, several studies conducted in recent years in Serbia show that Serbs generally show strong identification with their country and ethnicity (e.g., Mihić, 2009; Milošević-Đorđević, 2007), while minorities who declared themselves as Bosniak showed moderate identification with Serbia (at that time the Union of Serbia and Montenegro) and strong identification with their ethnicity (Miladinović, 2006).

It is especially important to deeply explore the perspectives of young people living in Western Balkan societies today, since—for the most part—they were either very young or were born after the end of the interethnic conflict, so they did not witness its genesis nor were they actively engaged in the violent clashes. However, the impact of the conflict on youth extends beyond the cessation of violence. Maturing and developing in post-conflict contexts means maturing and developing in an environment overburdened with persistent tensions and divisions (Cummings et al., 2011). Therefore, it is important to explore how youth in post-conflict contexts construct the identities of Us and Them—as an opportunity or as an obstacle for developing a more inclusive society (Bodenhausen et al., 1995).

In order to understand the social identifications of young people living in Serbia today, we collected and analyzed data on different social identifications of young Bosniaks and Serbs living in Belgrade (capital of Serbia; $N = 102$) and Novi Pazar (a primarily Bosniak inhabited city in Serbia; $N = 94$). In addition, we conducted two focus groups with ethnic majorities at the local level: one with young Bosniaks living in Novi Pazar, and the other with young Serbs living in Belgrade. In these focus groups we explored in more depth the content of their social identifications and—more importantly—we investigated the factors that contribute to the rigidity of these identifications and those that encourage their flexibility. Through case studies of two young people who have already overcome the dominant ethnic and religious divisions and formed inclusive and flexible identities, we wanted to learn ways and strategies to encourage others to loosen the strict boundaries between Us and Them. We will first describe how our participants define their personal and social identities. Then, we will present our findings on the strength of identification with different social groups and compare the majority and minority perspectives. Lastly, we will focus on the factors that might help make the boundaries between Us and Them more permeable and redefine the identities of young Bosniaks and Serbs living in Serbia.

Portraying Us

Drawing on insights from the social identity approach (Tajfel, 1978; Turner, 1982) and with the aim of exploring the saliency of participants' personal and social identities, an elicitation task was introduced in the focus group discussions. Participants were given the following instruction: "During the next few minutes, think about yourself and try to answer the question: 'Who am I?' Write down ten key words that describe you best. You may begin with 'I am…'" The analysis showed that personal attributes prevailed in describing the self, for example, stubborn, persistent, ambitious, responsible, friendly (Fig. 5.1). Nevertheless, there were several social groups mentioned by participants as identity sources: student, friend, and different family roles (brother/sister, son/daughter).

Fig. 5.1 Frequency of identities mentioned in the elicitation task

Universal identities, such as human being and global citizen, were also mentioned by several participants. Even though they were pressured to comply with national, ethnic, or religious identification by other participants during the focus group discussion, they continued categorizing themselves as a members of a more inclusive category group. For example:

> *I wanted to say that for me the most important thing is to become a good person, no matter if you are disabled or if you are of a different nationality or anything else, I do not make distinctions based on that.* (Serb, female, Belgrade)

In alignment with empirical findings (e.g., Blake, Pierce, Gibson, Reysen, & Katzarska-Miller, 2015; Reysen & Katzarska-Miller, 2013), viewing oneself as a global citizen (or citizen of the world) seemed to be associated with an interrelated set of prosocial values (e.g., valuing diversity, intergroup empathy).

None of the participants spontaneously mentioned national, ethnic, or religious groups as important for describing him/herself, which could be due to the *distinctiveness postulate*. The distinctiveness postulate implies that what is salient in a person's spontaneous self-concept is the person's peculiarities, the ways in which one differs from other people in one's customary social environment (McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978). Since the focus group participants were homogeneous in terms of

national, ethnic, and religious affiliation, we could say that in this milieu, participants were less aware of their nationality, ethnicity, and religiosity, and therefore their identifications with these groups were less salient. At the same time, in the context of group similarity, personal beliefs, traits, and attributes took primacy in describing one's self, as a way to satisfy the need for distinctiveness.

However, during the focus group discussions and case study interviews, it was noted that ethnic, religious, and national identities easily become salient and that there is a dense network of identity markers in the wider social surroundings that aim to trigger these identities. For example, in the focus groups, following a discussion on who are the Us and the Them, participants were asked to complete a sentence expressing their immediate, uncensored associations. The participants' associations were mainly related to national, ethnic, or religious groups, suggesting that by altering the frame of reference so that different characteristics become distinctive, the participants' self-concept alters in predictable ways. For example: "*We are… Serbs*; *They are… Ustashe*;[1] *They see us as… Chetniks.*[2] *After the discussion, 'Serb' becomes my first association to myself.*" (Serb, female, Belgrade). These identity markers are usually tailored to the dominant ethnic majority and not inclusive of the minorities: for example, the national flag, which bears Serbian symbols, and the anthem with the chorus "God save the Serbian land and Serbian people." However, they trigger both the dominant and the minority ethnic identity at the same time, consequently making the borders between the groups more visible and stricter.

Although participants mentioned different social groups while describing their identities, they recognized that not all groups are equally important. Family and friends were mentioned as the most important ones. This is also supported with the results that we obtained through analyzing quantitative data. Quantitative data indicate that young people from Serbia generally demonstrate moderate levels of identification with different social categories such as ethnicity, religion, country, region, and so on (see Fig. 5.2). The family group and the group of friends, with which Serbian youth identifies more strongly than with other social groups, stand out from this pattern. Such a trend is not surprising, as other studies from this region also report that family identity typically prevails over

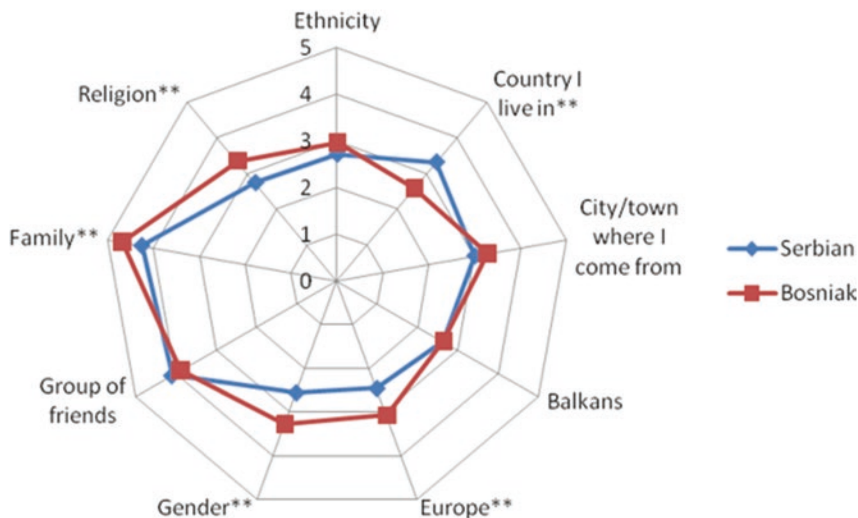

Fig. 5.2 Importance of identifications of young Bosniaks and Serbs with different social groups measured on a 5-point scale with poles 1 = of no importance and 5 = highly important. Note. Asterisk denotes statistically significant differences (*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$)

other social identities (e.g., Kalaba, 2013; Milošević-Đorđević, 2007; Stjepanović Zaharijevski, 2008). In addition, there is an abundant body of literature indicating the strong tendency of young adults to identify with their peer groups (for a review, see Sussman, Pokhrel, Ashmore, & Brown, 2007).

The trend demonstrated by the majority group (i.e., Serbs) was replicated in the minority subsample (i.e., Bosniaks); they both showed moderate levels of identification with almost all social categories except for the group of friends and family members. In general, family and friendship identifications seem to be the strongest and to prevail over other groups. Nonetheless, there were also observable differences in the levels of social identifications between the Serbs and the Bosniaks. First of all, the minority members (i.e., Bosniaks) in our sample generally demonstrated stronger social identifications with their own religious group, gender, and family, which is in line with previous findings in the Serbian context (Miladinović, 2006). This could be due to the fact that minority members

are typically more likely to perceive identity threat and to feel the need to put in more effort to maintain their identities, in order to avoid the assimilation pressure of majority members (e.g., Majstorović & Turjačanin, 2013; Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007).

Furthermore, Bosniaks were more prone to identify with the broader social instance of Europe in comparison to majority members. This finding, replicated on different ethnic minorities (e.g., Cinnirella & Hamilton, 2007; Mihić, 2009), can be explained through Soysal's (2000) view that the underlying values of multiculturalism formalized in some EU institutions led to the image of the European Union as committed to the preservation of human rights. Consequently, minorities are prone to endorse the concept of European citizenship as more multicultural and to create a perception of Europe as a context characterized by a wide range of possibilities for members of ethnic minorities. For example, the research of Waechter and Samoilova (2014), which included members of 12 ethnic minority groups from Central-East Europe, showed that youths in comparison to adults seem to identify more with Europe. The reason for that is—above all—because they believe that there are more personal (economic) advantages and better prospects for the future related to self-realization (such as educational possibilities) abroad.

On the other hand, young people of Serbian ethnicity were more likely to identify with Serbia (as the country they live in) in comparison to Bosniak minority members. This finding is in line with the documented asymmetry between ethnic minorities and majorities with respect to their feelings towards the nation-state (Cinnirella & Hamilton, 2007; Mihić, 2009; Milošević-Đorđević, 2007; Staerklé, Sidanius, Green, & Molina, 2010). Namely, minority groups may find it easier to relate to a supranational entity, such as Europe, rather than a nation-state, which is often based on an exclusive traits/conceptions group membership that is usually common for members of the majority group (Cinnirella & Hamilton, 2007).

Further analysis of the relationship between the strengths of identification with Europe and Serbia among majority and minority group members provided some interesting insights on the compatibility of these identities. There was a difference in the relation between national and European identity for our two groups of respondents—while Serb

respondents displayed a positive correlation between the strengths of identification with Europe and with Serbia ($r = 0.46$, $p < 0.001$), the correlation between these two identifications in the subsample of Bosniak respondents was not significant ($r = 0.09$, $p = 0.36$). In conceptualizing the different ways in which social identities might be associated with each other in the minds of individuals, we could use Hofman's (1988) terminology: national and European identities appeared to be "consonant" (i.e., compatible) for Serbian and "indifferent" (i.e., unrelated) for Bosniak respondents. Mihić (2009) explains the positive correlation between national and European identities through the tendency of respondents to construe Europe as a context that has shared values with their national culture. In line with this, we could assume that Bosniaks, as an ethnic minority, use a different framework of reference (e.g., ethnicity, religion) when evaluating Europe.

Similar to the findings of previous research in the region (e.g., Mitrović, 2004), identification with the Balkans was found to be the weakest when compared to identifications with all other groups, for both majority and minority respondents (M = 2.65, SD = 1.16). Mitrović argues that the weak identification with the Balkans comes as a result of the low saliency of the Balkans as a framework for discussing wellbeing and prosperity, both at an individual and a societal level. Even more prominently, dominant negative stereotypes of the region as a fragmented territory riddled with violence (hence the term "balkanization" with its negative connotations (Goldsworthy, 2002)) may hinder the identification of youth with the Balkans.

Nevertheless, we have demonstrated that it is not appropriate to assume that the construction of superordinate identities (in this case, Europe, Balkans, and Serbia) in a multicultural nation will be broadly similar throughout different ethnic groups. Having the abovementioned differences in mind, we could ask ourselves what is the path towards building more inclusive superordinate identity. Or, more specifically, is a relatively stable and strong national identity (i.e., identification with Serbia) a precondition for strengthening the Balkan and the European identity? Moreover, we have to consider which superordinate identities have the potential to become common ingroup identities for all members. We could argue that the development of a unifying superordinate

identity requires the different groups to have a shared understanding and consensual representation of the superordinate identity, allowing them to regard differentiations between the groups as legitimate. Finally, for the two groups to arrive at the point where they attribute valuable features to each other, they need to represent the superordinate identity in a way that allows both groups to be regarded as similarly prototypical and normative of the superordinate category (Wenzel, Mummendey, & Waldzus, 2007).

Us Versus Them: Construction of Borders

Despite the fact that drawing a border between Us and Them can lead to intergroup tensions and hostility (Brewer, 2010), the world of social interactions continues to consist of multiple division lines. Since individuals belong to multiple groups (e.g., sexual orientation, gender, profession), in each of these groups we probably have a member with whom we share one common characteristic, but not necessarily the others. However, if one of these identities becomes dominant and overarching, it can become the basis of intergroup hostility.

In order to explore outgroup attitudes or the rigidity of borders between Serbs and Bosniaks in Serbia, we used a social distance scale with four types of social relationships: living in the same neighborhood, working or attending university together, being close friends, and marrying or dating. Based on the results, we could conclude that the borders between Serb and Bosniak youth are still rigid. Namely, 70.2 percent of young Bosniaks from our sample did not agree with the statement "I wouldn't mind marrying or dating a Serb," whilst 43.9 percent of young Serbs would not accept the same relationship with Bosniaks.

In order to enhance the permeability of the borders between groups it is not just important to identify them, but also to understand which psychological functions they serve. According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), different social identities may serve different motivational needs. Group memberships provide people with a sense of who they are and satisfy their desire for positive distinctiveness by favorably differentiating them from relevant comparison outgroups. Likewise, social categorization brings about stereotypes and group representations

that tend to favor the ingroup over the outgroup (Fiske, 1998). The perceptions of our participants in the focus groups and case studies are in line with the abovementioned theoretical assumptions.

Within the mentioned process of categorization (social identity theory, Tajfel & Turner, 1986), individuals identify with different social groups and seek to construct a positive view of self, based on advantageous intergroup evaluations. Namely, as the following quotes illustrate, the identification with a specific group is guided by the pursuit of a positive social identity, which, in turn, is motivated by the need for positive self-esteem:

> *The system is bad, and therefore it is important for me to be a rebel against the system, so I can be a good guy*. (Serb, male, Belgrade)
>
> *Being a student means that we have higher self-esteem, since we are entitled to knowledge in a specific area*. (Serb, male, Belgrade)
>
> *It is in human nature to use the divisions to form group identities in comparison to outgroups. You have to think you're better than someone else*. (Serb, male, Novi Pazar)

Borders between groups are seen as a way to define ourselves using group memberships, to develop a sense of belonging to a group, and—most frequently mentioned—to defend our own group from outside pressures. For example:

> [Moderator 1: What is the function of these borders?] *Belonging. If there were no borders, everything would be erased, we would all blend with each other*. (Serb, female, Belgrade)
>
> *It is some kind of defense mechanism—DO NOT ATTACK ME AND WHAT IS MINE*. [Moderator 1: What do you mean under "me and mine"?] *My tradition, my religion, my family*. (Serb, female, Belgrade)

As research shows, borders easily emerge even in ad hoc made groups. For example, Tajfel's classic minimal group experiments (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971) demonstrate that even the categorization into groups that are void of history and prior meaning can instigate bias in favor of one's own group. However, some borders are a consequence of explicit or implicit messages systematically transmitted by prime agents

of socialization: parents, peer groups, schools, and the media (Reidy et al., 2015). In line with previous research in this area, our focus group and case study participants explicitly noted the influence of the above-mentioned agents on the construction of borders between Us and Them.

Focus groups and case studies revealed a belief in the importance of parents as agents of socialization. Participants often claimed that the exclusive identities of youth are a result of upbringing in the home, but—although less often—the family was also where they were encouraged to learn about different customs, cultures, and religions, as well as to respect them. For example:

> *Family is also a big influence. For example, I wouldn't be so familiar with religion if my parents were not so religious or if I was exposed to non-religious people more often*. (Serb, female, Belgrade)
>
> *My parents said that I should visit all places of worship, regardless of religion, that it could be another opportunity for learning*. (Bosniak, female, Belgrade)

Although some participants reported having discussions with their peers about topics pertaining to religion and ethnicity, these were rare examples. The peer group was also recognized as an agent who creates the environment in which individuals learn new behaviors and attitudes. For example:

> *When I was younger I would spend a lot of time in Tutin. And I would go to my sisters' to play, but at some moment they would go to mosque for prayer and I would stay alone. I didn't like to be alone so I started to go to mosque with them and to learn to pray and that is how I became interested in religion*. (Bosniak, female, Belgrade)

Participants also recognized borders as a product of history and of political myths, created and manipulated by cultural elites in their pursuit of advantages and power:

> *We should think about who benefits and who loses from the distinction between Us and Them as it exists now. It is doing us, the oppressed people, the most damage, but it is bringing profit to the rich. The poor are fighting some mythical*

> *fights, as miserable with miserable. At the same time, the rich are counting the money from the guns, while the oppressed are fighting, not marrying, not giving birth, but creating some stupid borders in their heads*. (Serb, male, Belgrade)

The pressure to comply with social norms was most obvious in the case of the more intimate and more lasting relations, such as interethnic and interreligious marriages. As previously reported, a high proportion of Serbs and an even higher proportion of Bosniaks from our sample would not marry or date someone from the other group. Data from the focus group discussions provide us with more detailed insights on the mechanisms lying behind such a decision. Not so much a personal choice, this decision draws upon the anticipated social pressure of the family and the wider social environment. As one participant stated:

> *I was thinking about this, and I believe that I couldn't be in a relationship with a Muslim, not because of myself, but because of the wider social context in which I live. I believe that my parents couldn't agree with that, it would produce major problems in the family, my social environment would react, and it would be hard for me to deal with it. [Moderator 1: What kind of reactions would there be?] Negative reactions. What others think is important for me and it affects me sometimes, it wouldn't be pleasant for me, I believe that I wouldn't like to live that way*. (Serb, female, Belgrade)

On the other hand, participants reported that they feel threatened by outgroup members and that they fear the other side would not respect their own religious or ethnic affiliation:

> *I admit, no matter how much I advocate for equality, I don't know how I would feel if… for me personally it is not so important that my children practice Orthodox Christianity, but, also, I wouldn't like to have a husband who would teach them about his tradition, the Muslim religion and customs*. (Serb, female, Belgrade)

It is important to mention that the findings from the focus groups and case studies suggest that young people with complex social identities—those with more tolerant worldviews and who are more open to others (e.g., children from mixed marriages, social or media activists, those

working in outgroup contexts)—are at risk of social exclusion. They seem to be stigmatized by their immediate social surroundings:

> *Everything that you do, and that is unusual for them [the locals], classifies you as a junkie, a lunatic, or a rocker.* (Serb, male, Novi Pazar)

Can Borders Be More Permeable?

Zeldin and Price (1995) noted that conducting narrative studies involving youth is one way to facilitate the shift to strength-based models of youth development. In line with this, we asked participants to give their recommendations on how the borders could be made more permeable or—in other words—how They could become part of Us. As potential mechanisms for making group boundaries more permeable, participants recognized the construction of superordinate identities, contact with members of outgroups, and changing the dominant narratives on others that are transmitted through means of political socialization, such as school and media. Here we present and discuss their suggestions in more detail.

The common ingroup identity model (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000) posits that re-categorization from separate subgroups into an inclusive superordinate group reduces intergroup bias. In other words, when individuals refrain from categorizing groups as Us versus Them, and instead categorize both groups as We, it can lead to positive intergroup relations (Reysen, Katzarska-Miller, Salter, & Hirko, 2014). We already addressed the potentials of European, Balkan, and national identity for the incorporation or alienation of minorities. In the qualitative part of the study, participants articulated the same mechanism, illustrating it with different superordinate identities:

> *I will say something stupid, and I am not sure if that will happen or not. But, let's say that aliens invade the planet, and that the existence of the human species is under threat. In that case, I believe that all borders would be erased and all humans would unite in order to survive and continue living.* (Serb, female, Belgrade)
>
> *I believe that the defining feature of us all should be the class we belong to, the material goods we possess.* (Serb, male, Belgrade)

As a host of research findings demonstrates (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008), contact with the outgroups is vital for changing the attitudes towards them (Allport, 1954). Our qualitative data indicate that young people are aware of this fact. In our quantitative study, we measured the quantity of contact by asking participants to report on a five-point scale (1 = never; 5 = very often) how often they have contact with their outgroups in different contexts (i.e., at university/work, in the neighborhood where one lives, in one's free time). The obtained data indicate that the frequency of contact was on average relatively low (M = 3.02, SD = 1.11) and, as expected, the minority group (i.e., Bosniaks) reported more frequent contact with the majority group (M = 3.21, SD = 1.04) than vice versa (M = 2.80, SD = 1.16; $t(174) = -2.41$, $p = 0.02$). There was a share of people who did not have any contact, in any context, with members of ethnic outgroups, especially among members of the so-called local majorities (Serbs in Belgrade-38.6 percent, Bosniaks in Novi Pazar-16.2 percent).

We also measured the quality of contact with outgroups by asking participants to rate on a five-point scale (1 = never; 5 = very often) how often they felt certain emotions (i.e., feeling pleasant, nervous, respected, looked down upon) while experiencing contact. The results indicated that the quality of contact, when it occurs, was reported to be relatively high (M = 3.93, SD = 0.69) and we did not find differences in the quality of contact between subsamples of Bosniak and Serbian youth ($t\,(162) = 1.48$, $p = 0.14$). As one respondent noted: "*We are together in the classroom. We spend time together, so we have a friendly relationship with them. We hang out together, go out for coffee*." (Bosniak, female, Novi Pazar).

In line with the important role of contact, participants emphasized the importance of the diversity of one's environment and experiences for improving attitudes towards members of outgroups. Getting to know different ways of life, customs, and norms, people start realizing that besides the ingroup's norms and customs there are other ways to evaluate the social world (Pettigrew, 1997). For example:

> *When you travel and meet different people, different cultures, listen to different languages… you start realizing that the difference between Bosniaks and Serbs is not the only one existing in the world, but that the world is in its essence diverse*. (Bosniak, female, Belgrade)

> *I would like to quote Alexander von Humboldt: "The most dangerous worldview is the worldview of those who have not viewed the world."* (Serb, female, Belgrade)

The third mechanism for making group boundaries more permeable articulated by our focus group and case study participants was changing the dominant narratives that are transmitted through different agents of socialization. Education was described as a mean for developing a perception of Us and Them through the formal curriculum, and also informally through experiences in the school environment. In line with literature on the topic (Mthethwa-Sommers, 2014), it was recognized by focus group participants that education could have a transformative potential through providing opportunities for students to interact with a world that differs from their own, while working on raising consciousness on diversities and different worldviews. As one participant stated:

> *I believe that education plays a significant role. I wouldn't dare to say that religious people are uneducated, but I believe that there is a correlation… because it supplies us with different facts and information, it enables us to question different attitudes… Through education, I was widening my perspectives, exploring different things.* (Serb, female, Belgrade)

Media exposure was also recognized as having a profound role in shaping one's views of self and others. Although the respondents in our study demonstrated a low trust in the media ($M = 1.77$, $SD = 0.99$),[3] our qualitative data revealed they still recognized the ways media shape public opinion:

> *I recognize the great responsibility of the media in creating and maintaining negative attitudes towards Muslims. In the media, Muslims are usually represented as terrorists and someone who mistreats women, and consequently that has become a common perception in the population.* (Bosniak, female, Belgrade)

On the other hand, if young people are skilled enough to critically analyze the media representation of "others," especially minority groups,

they can call into question the stereotypical views that are being promoted and suggest a different route (Scharrer & Ramasubramania, 2015). To this end, participants in our study recommended activating positive counter-stereotypes in the media, expecting that this would lead to more favorable attitudes towards outgroup members as a whole. Music contests, such as The X Factor, were mentioned, since these contests are the most accessible to youth and they usually enable the strategy of decategorization (individualization) to take place. Namely, the viewers of the shows do not see the contestants as members of adversarial groups (ethnic or religious), but rather focus on the other categories they belong to or on their individual characteristics, which have positive connotations (e.g., talents):

> *I would introduce more music contests like The X Factor… don't laugh, it has good effects; in these contests we have contestants from Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina… and, for example, one contestant is Muslim and he has a great voice, everyone would say: "Wow, great, regardless of the fact that you are a Muslim."* (Serb, male, Belgrade)

Obstacles in Redefining Group Boundaries and How to Address Them

Young people do not grow up in a vacuum; their identities are actively shaped by the social environment they interact with—from primary groups such as family and peers, to wider societal factors such as media and the education system. Our results go to show that young people recognize these outside forces and their influences, especially in fostering intergroup stereotypes and strengthening the borders between groups. They seem to be quite disillusioned with the role that institutions—both national and international—play in the everyday life of citizens (Fig. 5.3).

On average, young people trust political parties the least (M = 1.75, SD = 1.10), which might be due to the highly fragmented[4] and inefficient political system in Serbia. Correspondingly, our respondents display relatively high levels of political cynicism (M = 2.80, SD = 0.53).[5] The qualitative part of the research suggests that the youth in Serbia is not

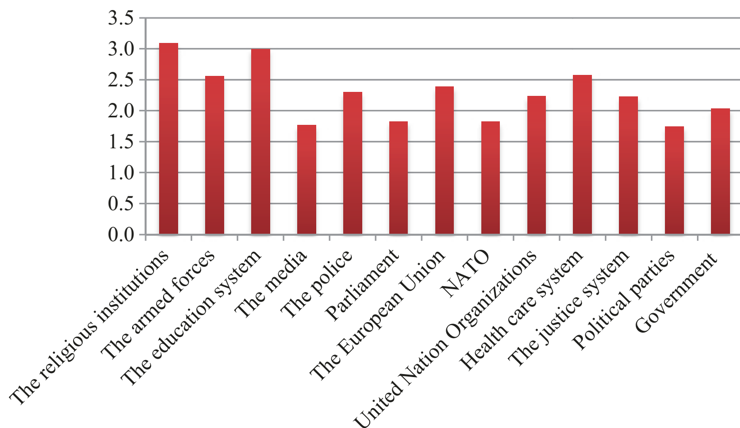

Fig. 5.3 Trust in institutions of youth in Serbia (1—*total lack of trust*; 5—*complete trust*)

simply indifferent to politics, but that they intentionally distance themselves from it:

> *I included politics in the collage* [representing the identity of the participant], *since I don't like politics in general, I believe that politics is a source of evil. I realize that we are all embedded in politics and that it is unavoidable, but I am not a member of any political party, nor will I ever be, I promised that to myself.* (Serb, female, Belgrade)

Low trust in institutions accompanied by extremely high political cynicism creates a vicious circle of inactivity and resignation.

However, research shows that distrust usually does not completely prevent young people's participation in public life, but it rather leads to unconventional modes of involvement (e.g., protests, volunteering) (Miller, 1974; Pierce & Converse, 1989). Therefore, empowering and connecting young people via non-institutional channels might be a good starting point. Making the youth more aware of their abilities—to shape the environment they live in, to make use of media (especially digital) to reach out to otherwise unreachable peers, to enroll in civic actions that address the common goals (e.g., environment protection, youth unemployment)—seems to be the way to go about it. Redefining rigidly shaped

identities would be a byproduct of these actions, and a very needed one, since identities are the driving forces of intergroup relations and the youth will be shaping intergroup relations in the region in the future to come.

Notes

1. Members of a Croatian extreme nationalist movement that engaged in terrorist activity before the Second World War and ruled Croatia with Nazi support after Yugoslavia was invaded and divided by the Germans in 1941. Serbs use the term as a derogatory name for Croats. Retrieved from www.oxforddictionaries.com/
2. Members of a Slavic nationalist guerrilla force in the Balkans, especially during the Second World War. Croats use the term as a derogatory name for Serbs. Retrieved from www.oxforddictionaries.com/
3. We measured the trust in different institutions, including media, by asking participants to rate on a five-point scale (1—total lack of trust; 5—complete trust) how much confidence they have in different institutions presented on a list.
4. According to the official webpage of the Ministry of State Administration and Local Self-Government of the Republic of Serbia, in 2016 there were 108 registered political parties.
5. The activism-cynicism scale that we applied in our study ranges from 1 to 5 and has been validated in previous research (Žeželj, 2007).

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