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## **The Myth of Global Ethnic Conflict**

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

## **The Myth of Global Ethnic Conflict**

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Much recent discussion of international affairs has been based on the misleading assumption that the world is fraught with primordial ethnic conflict. According to this notion, ethnic groups lie in wait for one

another, nourishing age-old hatreds and restrained only by powerful states. Remove the lid, and the cauldron boils over. Analysts who advance this idea differ in their predictions for the future: some see the fragmentation of the world into small tribal groups; others, a face-off among several vast civilizational coalitions. They all share, however, the idea that the world's current conflicts are fueled by age-old ethnic loyalties and cultural differences. <sup>1</sup>

This notion misrepresents the genesis of conflict and ignores the ability of diverse people to coexist. The very phrase “ethnic conflict” misguides us. It has become a shorthand way to speak about any and all violent confrontations between groups of people living in the same country. Some of these conflicts involve ethnic or cultural identity, but most are about getting more power, land, or other resources. They do not result from ethnic diversity; thinking that they do sends us off in pursuit of the wrong policies, tolerating rulers who incite riots and suppress ethnic differences.

In speaking about local group conflicts we tend to make three assumptions: first, that ethnic identities are ancient and unchanging; second, that these identities motivate people to persecute and kill; and third, that ethnic diversity itself inevitably leads to violence. All three are mistaken. **[End Page 3]**

Contrary to the first assumption, ethnicity is a product of modern politics. Although people have had identities—deriving from religion, birthplace, language, and so on—for as long as humans have had culture, they have begun to see themselves as members of vast ethnic groups, opposed to other such groups, only during the modern period of colonization and state-building.

The view that ethnicity is ancient and unchanging emerges these days in the potent images of the cauldron and the tribe. Out of the violence in Eastern Europe came images of the region as a bubbling cauldron of ethnonationalist sentiments that were sure to boil over unless suppressed by strong states. The cauldron image contrasts with the

American “melting pot,” suggesting that Western ethnicities may melt, but Eastern ones must be suppressed by the region’s unlikable, but perhaps necessary, Titos and Stalins.

Nowhere does this notion seem more apt than in the former Yugoslavia. Surely the Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians are distinct ethnic groups destined to clash throughout history, are they not? Yet it is often forgotten how small the differences are among the currently warring factions in the Balkans. Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians all speak the same language (Italy has greater linguistic diversity) and have lived side by side, most often in peace, for centuries. Although it is common to say that they are separated by religion—Croats being Roman Catholic, Serbs Orthodox Christian, and Bosnians Muslim—in fact each population includes sizeable numbers of the other two religions. The three religions have indeed become symbols of group differences, but religious differences have not, by themselves, caused intergroup conflict. Rising rates of intermarriage (as high as 30 percent in Bosnia) would have led to the gradual blurring of contrasts across these lines.

As knowledgeable long-term observers such as Misha Glenny have pointed out, the roots of the current Balkan violence lie not in primordial ethnic and religious differences but rather in modern attempts to rally people around nationalist ideas. “Ethnicity” becomes “nationalism” when it includes aspirations to gain a monopoly of land, resources, and power. But nationalism, too, is a learned and frequently manipulated set of ideas, and not a primordial sentiment. In the nineteenth century, Serb and Croat intellectuals joined other Europeans in championing the rights of peoples to rule themselves in “nation-states”: states to be composed of one nationality. For their part, Serbs drew on memories of short-lived Serb national states to claim their right to expand outward to encompass other peoples, just as other countries in Europe (most **[End Page 4]** notably France) had done earlier. That Balkan peoples spoke the same language...



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